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TEXAS DR

CEE
BOWERMAN

BOOK

LONESTAR
TERRACE
SERIES

TWO

2011 Texas Drive
Lonestar Terrace, Book 2

Cee Bowerman

CLBooks, LLC



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Texas Knights MC (completed)

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Forever Family
Lucky Forever
Love Forever

Texas Kings MC (completed)

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Sonny
Bird
Grunt
Lout
Smokey
Tucker
Kale & Terra (Novella)
John & Mattie
Bear
Daughtry
Hank
Fain
Grady
Stoffer
Luke
Clem

Conner Brothers Construction (completed)

Finn
Angus

Mace
Ronan
Royal
Tavin
Chess

**Rojo, TX
(completed)**

Rason & Eliza
Atlas & Addie
Jazmyne & Luc
Kari & Levi
Noah & Tallie
Nick & Cindy
Marcus & Reagan

**The Tempests
(completed)**

Wrath
Creed
Loki
Styx
Thorn
Freya
Sin

**Lonestar Terrace
(in progress)**

1005 Alamo Way

**Rojo PD
(in progress)**

The Dark Side

**Rojo Gems
(in progress)**

Emerald

Cee Bowerman's Stand Alone Series

Time Served MC (completed)

Boss
Hook
Chef
Preacher
Captain
Bug
Santa
Kitty
Rodeo
Stamp
TS in NY
Hammer
Soda

The Four Families (in progress)

Rico
Zach

Springblood (in progress)

One More Day
Fly Away with Me

The Donovans (in progress)

Drink It Up
Pull It Up

Pretty It Up
Curl It Up
Build It Up
Whip It Up

Mereu
(in progress)

Bear Witch Me

The Rojo, Texas Universe

In Chronological Reading Order

Home Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 1

Forever Family: Texas Knights MC, Book 2

Kale: Texas Kings MC, Book 1

Sonny: Texas Kings MC, Book 2

Bird: Texas Kings MC, Book 3

Grunt: Texas Kings MC, Book 4

Lout: Texas Kings MC, Book 5

Smokey: Texas Kings MC, Book 6

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Finn: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 1

Kale & Terra: a Texas Kings novella

John & Mattie: Texas Kings MC, Book 8

Angus: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 2

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Lucky Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 3

Daughtry: Texas Kings MC, Book 10

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Love Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 4

Rason & Eliza: Rojo, TX, Book 1

Ronan: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 4

Grady: Texas Kings MC, Book 13

Atlas & Addie: Rojo, TX, Book 2

Royal: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 5

Stoffer: Texas Kings MC, Book 14

Jazmyne & Lucius: Rojo, TX, Book 3

Wrath: The Tempests, Book 1

Luke: Texas Kings MC, Book 15

Tavin: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 6

Kari & Levi: Rojo, TX, Book 4

Creed: The Tempests, Book 2

Noah & Tallie: Rojo, TX, Book 5

Loki: The Tempests, Book 3

Styx: The Tempests, Book 4

Thorn: The Tempests, Book 5

Chess: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 7

Clem: Texas Kings MC, Book 16

Freya: The Tempests, Book 6

Sin: The Tempests, Book 7

Nick & Cindy: Rojo, TX, Book 6

Marcus & Reagan: Rojo, TX, Book 7

1005 Alamo Way: Lonestar Terrace, Book 1

The Dark Side: RPD, Book 1

Emerald: Rojo Gems, Book 1

Bear Witch Me: Mereu, Book 1

Reading Order for the Tenillo Guardians Crossover Series

Boss: Time Served MC, Book 1

Sin's Enticement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 1 by Ciara St James

Hook: Time Served MC, Book 2

Executioner's Enthrallment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 2 by Ciara St James

Chef: Time Served MC, Book 3

Pitbull's Enslavement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 3 by Ciara St James

Preacher: Time Served MC, Book 4

Omen's Entrapment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 4 by Ciara St James

Captain: Time Served MC, Book 5

Cuffs' Enchainment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 5 by Ciara St James

Bug: Time Served MC, Book 6

Rampage's Enchantment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 6 by Ciara St James

Santa: Time Served MC, Book 7

Wrecker's Ensnarement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 7 by Ciara St James

Kitty: Time Served MC, Book 8

Trident's Enjoyment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 8 by Ciara St James

Rodeo: Time Served MC, Book 9

Fang's Enlightenment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 9 by Ciara St James

Stamp: Time Served MC, Book 10

Talon's Enamorment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 10 by Ciara St James

Time Served In New York: Time Served MC, Book 11

Ares Infidels In New York: Ares Infidels MC, Book 11 by Ciara St. James

Hammer: Time Served MC, Book 12

Phantom's Emblazonment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 12 by Ciara St. James

Soda: Time Served MC, Book 13

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Thank you for joining me in Rojo again! You and I have known Leia for years now since she was first mentioned in John and Mattie's book, and then we got to know her in *Lucky Forever*. It's finally her turn for a happily ever after, and even though her story didn't go the way I originally planned, I like the way it turned out even better.

I'm so glad that you've decided to accompany me on this journey into the second generation along with the other books and series that I write. Thank you for sticking with me!

I've got many more stories left to come, and you'll get some insight into a few of them in this book. I can't wait to share them with you!

Happy reading,
Cee

PROLOGUE

TWENTY YEARS AGO

WAYLON

“I’ve got some news,” my attorney said the second the guard shut the door behind him, leaving me cuffed to the table in the meeting room with my poor little sweaty attorney who looked terrified that I’d hop over the table and maul him.

I probably could if I set my mind to it, but it would be a chore considering my hands were cuffed to a bolt in the middle of the table and that table was bolted to the floor. However, I didn’t think it boded well for the pitiful guy in his chosen profession if he was scared stiff by his clients. A healthy dose of fear might be good for him and would probably keep him safe, but he should at least learn to mask it if he ever wanted to convince a jury his client wasn’t a safety risk to the general public.

“They’ve decided to drop the charges and give me a medal for doing a public service,” I said.

He shook his head, not even getting a hint of the sarcasm dripping from my voice. “The DA has offered you a deal.”

“Why?”

“Probably because he doesn’t want to take this to trial.”

“What’s the deal?”

“Second-degree murder. Twenty years with no possibility of parole until 2023.”

“And if I get convicted on the first-degree charge, could they send me to the chair?”

“Technically, they don’t use the electric chair anymore. Executions are done . . .”

“I know that. It’s a figure of speech,” I snapped. I looked down at the table

when the lawyer shrank away from me, even more terrified since I'd raised my voice. "What do you think my odds are?"

"Their evidence is damning, and the fact that you readily admitted that you'd beaten the victim shows no remorse."

"Because I don't have any. What are my odds?" I repeated.

"Not good. If we go to trial, the DA has assured me he'll seek the maximum punishment of the death penalty. If the jury doesn't go for that, you're facing life. If that's the case, you could be eligible for parole in twenty-five years, barring any other charges you might catch while you're behind bars."

"What if the jury decides to convict me of second-degree murder instead?"

"They can still give you a life sentence, and in either case, even if you don't get the death penalty, they can stipulate that there should be no possibility of parole."

I sighed, weighing my options even though they were both complete shit. I was going to prison, that was a given, but it looked like this might be the only way I'd ever see freedom or my little girl again.

"Take the deal."



LEIA

"What did your girls say when you told them about this dickhead?"

"Well, they weren't nearly as nice about it as you're being."

Ripley laughed darkly and then replied, "I'm trying to be nice because I know how stubborn you can be."

"Well, Paul is about to realize how stubborn I can be too. I'm done. Finished. Over it. If he thinks he can tell me who I can and can't talk to, he doesn't know me at all."

"He's been doing it."

"That doesn't mean I've been listening," I retorted.

"You better listen to me now," Ripley snapped. "He's off his fucking rocker, Leia, and guys like that don't like to be told no. You need to watch yourself and pay attention to your surroundings."

"I will," I said as I searched for my keys. I always dropped them into my purse, knowing I'd have to dig through all the crap I carried around in there

to find them. “He’s not going to do anything, Rip. He’s too smart for that.”
“He’s an entitled asshole who hasn’t ever heard the word ‘no,’ Leia. Guys like him don’t give up that easily. I’m telling you . . .”

I had just found my keys and pulled them out of my purse when I heard footsteps on the gravel behind me. I looked over my shoulder and saw Paul running full speed, darting around cars to get to me. I didn’t even consider running since I knew he was much faster than I could ever be, and I didn’t have time to unlock my truck door and get inside.

“No, Paul!” I screamed right before he launched himself at me.

I was still screaming when I dropped the phone to put my hands in front of my face to defend myself, but I wasn’t making any noise by the time Paul was finished.

1.

WAYLON

“Thanks for picking me up and letting me bunk here, Ripley,” I said to my old friend as he pulled the key to his RV off the ring in his hand. “I wasn’t supposed to get out for another three weeks, but I wasn’t about to argue when they pulled me out of my rack this morning and told me to get the hell out.”

“I hear that,” Ripley said knowingly. “It’s not a problem, man. I was hoping to see you when you got out anyway but figured you’d be staying with your daughter for a while.”

“She had some sort of problem a few months ago that she’s been able to avoid telling me about so far, but that’s another story. Anyway, she’s back in my hometown.” Ripley’s eyebrows rose in question, and I nodded, not thrilled about that news either. “She’s been trying to find a place for me to rent in the town where she was living but wasn’t having any luck because of my record. We thought we had time and it wasn’t a rush, but here I am now, without a place or a plan.”

“I was lucky enough to have my family here when I got home, and this land was waiting for me too. And, lucky for you, I moved out of the RV a few weeks ago, so now you’ve got a place to stay. I managed to get a rental in the neighborhood right over there that borders my property, and I’ll stay there until I can afford to build a house of my own. You’re welcome to live here in the RV for as long as you want.”

“What’s the rent?”

“Oh, you don’t have to . . .”

“What’s the rent, friend?”

“Shit, I don’t know. Nothing if you’ll help me take care of the livestock. You’re actually doing me a favor. I’ll sleep better knowing that someone is close enough to hear my animals if there’s a problem.”

“I’ll do whatever you need done, but I’m not going to live here for free. I’ve

got money that's just been sitting there the entire time I was inside, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to have to work. My daughter said she'd help me find a position as a hand somewhere if any are . . ."

"You're hired."

"What?"

"You're hired. Simple as that. I need someone that can help move the herds, and that's going to require you to get a driver's license, but until then, you can ride with me while I show you the ropes. I've already got three guys living on site at different locations that are too far for me to check every day, but I need a few others to help with local projects."

"Business is that good?"

"Better than good. One of my old friends started a website for me, and Leia's been putting the word out with her clients. I've got thousands of people who devour my videos on social media. It's just blown up."

"That's great. How's your girl doing?"

"Scoot's good, obviously," Ripley said, misunderstanding my question as he glanced over his shoulder and saw that his daughter was still perched on the fence eating the apple he'd given her. There were two massive dogs laying nearby. I watched as she pulled a bite off the apple and then took it out of her mouth to toss at one of them. He caught it in midair. She did the same for the other dog before she took a bite for herself. "We've been steadily trucking uphill. I'm more than ready to reach the crest so we can have some smooth sailing, but that might still be a few years down the road."

"Did the information Tori sent you help at all?"

"It did. We've been sending emails back and forth for months now. She's one helluva woman to have on your side, I'll say that."

I smiled, knowing he was right. My daughter was a pistol, and even though I hadn't been there in person, I'd watched her grow up through the letters she sent. She'd been sending me mail since she was barely old enough to write, and I was more than proud of the woman she'd become. But, that aside, I hated to admit that I was dying to know the answer to the question Ripley hadn't answered.

"What about the other woman in your life?" When Ripley looked confused, I said, "Leia."

Ripley laughed. "She's great. She's been busier than usual, so I haven't talked to her in a few days. You'll see her around often since she boards her animals here."

“I look forward to meeting her. Seems like I already know her since you talked about her so much.”

“She was definitely a bright spot that kept me sane while I was in prison, that’s for sure.”

“She never stopped sending me cards for Christmas or my birthday. Not once, even after you got out. Hell, sometimes she’d send me a funny card just because.”

“That’s my girl. She’s the best.” Ripley unlocked the door and then whistled low as he turned to look at his daughter. She didn’t acknowledge him, of course, but the dogs both sat up and looked his way. He made a hand motion they seemed to understand, and one of them jumped up and planted his paws on the fence near Scoot’s legs, catching her attention. She turned her head, looking for her father, and he signed something to her before she nodded and went back to her apple. That taken care of, he turned back toward the open door and motioned for me to go in ahead of him. “Welcome home, Waylon. It’s not much, but it’s a damn sight better than where you’ve been.”



I took my time, looking around my new home, letting it sink in that I was free to come and go as I pleased. Almost as important was the fact that if I wanted to turn the lights off, I could. If I wanted to sleep with my door open, I could do that too. When I wanted to eat, not that there was much to choose from yet, I could have my fill and come back to it later without having to worry about someone stealing my food, fucking with it, or throwing it away. It was so quiet inside my new home that I wasn’t quite sure how to handle it. Early on during my incarceration, I’d learned to block out almost all the noise around me while staying alert for sounds that weren’t right. That had kept me safe, for the most part, and was a skill I’d probably never be able to or even want to lose.

Now, it was quiet enough to hear my own breathing, other than the occasional bleat of an animal out in the pens and pastures in what amounted to my front yard.

Holy shit. I, Waylon Voyles, convict extraordinaire, had a front yard. Even better than that, I could go out and walk around in it any time I got the urge. Like right now.

I got up from the seat where I'd been for the last hour since Ripley and his daughter left me here to relax and process all the newness. I walked across the short expanse to the front of the RV and the front door.

My front door.

Holy shit.

I stood on the concrete pad the RV was parked next to and looked out over the fields in front of me. The pens where the animals lived were a short distance away, close enough that I could see everything but far enough that their smells and sounds faded to the point that you could almost forget that they were nearby. Most of them were already bedded down in the small enclosures that were in each pen, but a few meandered around here and there, not paying any attention to me. I was experiencing something I'd lost sight of for a while.

Freedom . . . for the first time in more than twenty years.

In the last twenty-four hours since I had been released, all the new sights and sounds had been almost overwhelming. I wasn't completely in the dark about everything since I'd been lucky enough to have a television in my cell, but watching things on the little screen and seeing them live and in person were vastly different.

For instance, the phone in my pocket was a marvel of technology. Ripley helped me choose it when he and his daughter escorted me into the brightly lit store that wasn't far from where he'd picked me up outside of the prison that had been my home for most of my sentence. He'd pushed the cart that held his daughter, trailed closely by the dogs that he said rarely left her side, and helped me pick out a few things I'd need to start my new life.

I got things I had taken for granted before my incarceration like shampoo that didn't smell like drain cleaner, soap that didn't feel like sandpaper, and a full-sized toothbrush and tube of toothpaste whose packages swore I'd never have to worry about cavities again. I picked out new underwear: some colorful boxer briefs rather than the plain white free-ballers that I'd been wearing for twenty years. I happily grabbed a package of socks that I *knew* had never been on anybody else's feet and a pack of T-shirts that were so soft I wanted to cover my pillow in them.

While I was picking out jeans, Ripley realized that we wore the same size. He assured me there were several pairs left in the RV where I'd be staying, and he wouldn't mind at all if I used them since he had plenty more at home. Once I had the basic necessities, Ripley led me to the phones in the

electronics section. He tried to explain all the bells and whistles, but I finally told him I didn't care about all of that shit. I just wanted something I could use for calls so my daughter could get in touch with me whenever she wanted. We chose what he considered a simple one but what I thought was still a little advanced for my tastes, especially when it prompted me to use my thumbprint to unlock it.

I left a message for my daughter, letting her know that I'd been released early and was on my way to Rojo with my old friend. I hadn't heard back from her, but I didn't know her schedule or much about her daily life since it had changed so drastically just recently, so I wasn't worried quite yet.

My phone rang, and the shrill sound paired with the vibration of it in my pocket scared me so badly that I jumped as if I'd just been electrocuted. I was laughing at myself when I pulled the damn thing out of my pocket and then smiled when I saw my daughter's name on the screen.

"Pumpkin," I said softly the second the call connected.

"Oh my God, Dad! You're out!"

"I am. I've been a free man for a little more than sixteen hours now."

"I can't believe they let you out early. I was sure they'd keep you until the minute they . . ."

"Time served, babe. We weren't taking into account the time I spent in county after I was first arrested."

"Well, since neither of us have done this before, it makes sense that we'd miss a little detail like that, doesn't it?" I sighed, so glad to hear her voice and know that we'd only have to hang up when we wanted instead of being disconnected when the time was up. "Where are you staying again?"

"Ripley picked me up and brought me to Rojo."

"He's such a nice guy."

I laughed at that description because I knew the man well. Loyal, yes, funny when he wanted to be, also yes. But nice? That was debatable and depended on his mood, which would rarely ever lead anyone to describe the man as 'nice.' However, he'd been more than nice to me since we'd become friends and especially now that he'd not only given me a place to live but a job to boot. I knew that played more to the loyal streak the man had, and we'd been through some shit together while we were inside. I'd watched his back while he watched mine, and that could make for a lifelong friendship, which would be easier to cultivate since we were both on the outside.

"He's letting me stay in an RV on his land, and he's also gonna give me a

job.”

“Really?” Tori didn’t sound thrilled at the prospect, and after a few seconds, she explained why. “Is he . . . um . . . doing well?”

“You’re asking me if he’s a criminal through and through and wondering if the years behind bars didn’t teach him a damn thing.”

“Nailed it.”

“He’s good. He’s got a thriving business and a solid relationship with a good woman. Basically, everything I want for myself.”

“We’ll find a way for you to finish your degree, Dad. I know we will. You worked too hard to better yourself. There’s no reason that should be thrown away since you’re finally free to use what you’ve learned.”

“We’ll see what happens, Pumpkin. Now, if you’ve got some free time, let’s talk about what’s going on with you.”

“Well, I do have to be in class tomorrow morning, but other than that, we’re good.”

“So, tell me why you’re living back in town.”

“I’m not sure we have enough time for that, besides I’m sure there’s something you’d rather be doing instead of spending your evening listening to me complain.”

“Honey, there’s nothing more important to me than you, so I’ve got nothing but time.”

2.

LEIA

“Siri, answer the call,” I said, hoping that whoever was calling me at this time of night didn’t need my immediate help. I knew that if I didn’t answer, they’d just call over and over until I did. The call connected, and I said, “This is Dr. Lincoln.”

“Hey, are you busy?”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, knowing that Ripley wouldn’t be awake at this time of night unless there was an emergency.

“Are. You. Busy.”

“I am currently elbow deep in a cow’s twat, but my mouth is free, and I’m asking you what’s wrong.”

“Too much info.” I could tell by the sound of his voice that he’d just shuddered, getting a visual of exactly what I was going through. “I think Scoot’s got a fever, but I can’t find the box that has the bathroom stuff in it so I can take her temperature.”

“There’s a digital thermometer in the downstairs bathroom’s medicine cabinet,” I said as the calf I’d been helping finally made his way into the world. There was a sigh of relief and not just from me. I swear I heard the cow make an even louder one now that the pressure of her breech calf was gone. “Go get it, and I’ll be home soon.”

“I thought you were in the middle of something.”

“I was but the calf’s here now, so I’ve gotta let you go.”

“Peace.”

I pulled the glove off my arm and tossed it into the waste basket I’d had the rancher set off to the side of the stall door and then leaned forward and rested my hands on my knees as I tried to relax my muscles and work out the kinks in my back. I heard someone walk up beside me, so I pushed up to stand, irritated at myself for not paying better attention to my surroundings and

letting someone sneak up on me.

“Is she okay?” the rancher, a long-time customer of mine, asked.

“Mom and calf seem fine,” I said as I watched instinct take over as the cow cleaned her calf. “I’ll need to come back and do an exam in a few days to make sure everything’s in order, but just keep an eye on them for now and call me if you need me.”

“You’re the best, Dr. Lincoln,” Mack said with a relieved smile. “I was worried. Been at this a long time, but there are still some things I can’t handle myself.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” I assured him. “I’m going to use your shower to wash up before I head home.”

“Take your time. Thanks again, Doc.”

“Take care, Mack.”

“You too. I’ll holler at you later.”

I went into the small bathroom at the end of the corridor, having been here enough to know my way around. When I’d come in a few hours ago, I’d brought my bag inside with me, so I made quick use of the shower available to get clean before I put on fresh clothes. Once I had my wet hair twisted into a braid, I pulled my boots back on, picked up my filthy clothes, and put them in a trash bag so they wouldn’t dirty everything they touched before I got them into the washer.

Once I had everything together, I walked out of the bathroom and called out a final goodbye before I got on the road to go home. I had just pulled out of the drive onto the dirt road that would lead me to the highway when I got another call. Ripley’s name came up on the console screen, and I hit the button to answer.

“Did you find it?”

“Yeah. Her fever is too high. I’m taking her to the ER,” Ripley explained.

“I’ll probably be there for a while. Will you take care of the morning chores for me?”

“I’ll do those as soon as I get back to town, but I think you should call Amethyst and have her make a house call instead of taking Scoot in.”

“I don’t know about that,” Ripley hedged.

“You were just saying the other day that you’ve already got a mountain of medical bills. No sense in adding to them with another emergency room visit. I’ll call Amethyst and get her over to your house,” I told him. “Keep Scoot comfortable and have Amethyst call me if she gives her a prescription.”

I'll pick it up from that 24-hour pharmacy on my way home after I finish the chores."

"You're the best girlfriend a guy like me could ask for, Leia," Ripley teased.

"Ugh. You're gross," I grumbled. "I've gotta find you a woman so you'll quit saying shit like that to me."

"I noticed the other day that Jewel sure has . . ."

"She would eat you alive," I interrupted.

"But how much fun would I have before that happened?" Ripley teased.

"I'm gonna puke," I mumbled. I heard Ripley chuckle before I ordered, "I'll see you when I wake up, probably sometime this afternoon. Send Scoot over like usual."

"Peace," Ripley said before he hung up.

I called and woke up Amethyst, a member of my chosen family who just happened to be a pediatrician, and told her what was going on with Celia, Ripley's little pistol of a daughter that we called Scoot. She said she'd be happy to walk over and examine her young patient once she'd showered and gotten ready for her day. With that taken care of, I took the road that would lead me to Ripley's property rather than the one that would take me into my neighborhood and to my bed that was screaming my name.

Whenever I was this physically exhausted, it was hard to be thankful for my successful veterinary practice. Most of the time, my work could be accomplished during the day. However, I inevitably got an emergency call out in the middle of the night several times a month. I knew that ranchers would only call in outside help when they had no other choice since most of them had even more experience in the field than I did, so I took each and every call seriously. That was part of why my business had taken off the way it had.

My reputation as a large animal vet preceded me, and I was in high demand in our area and even beyond. So much so that I was almost always too exhausted to enjoy the fruits of my labor. When I had a spare moment to myself, it was usually spent napping, especially since when I did sleep, it was never for very long or even very restful. I yawned as I turned onto the short drive at the front of Ripley's property and then again as I got out of the truck and opened the gate to let myself in.

"I need an assistant just for gate duty," I mumbled as I pulled through the gate. I got out, shut it behind my truck, then hopped back in to drive the short distance to the barn so I could start the morning chores.

I didn't mind taking care of the stock at Ripley's place since he'd had to take over care of the animals I housed there many times when I was off working somewhere and couldn't get away. The animals recognized my truck and started making a racket to tell me how mistreated and starved they were the second I opened my door.

As if. These animals were Ripley's livelihood, and he treated them like they were family, making sure they had the best supplemental feed even when they were out doing what they loved while making him a mint in the process. The rest of the stock he sheltered on his property were animals I'd brought in for one reason or another, and he treated them as his own, just like I did his. There were more animals here than there should be, but I was a sucker for horses and had been all my life. Now that I had the means and Ripley was willing to let me use some of his space, I took in ones that might otherwise be put down. While I was growing up, my father had volunteered to care for abandoned or abused horses for Nichole, a family friend who was also a veterinarian. I inherited my love of all animals, not just horses, from him, and he and Nichole encouraged me from a young age to take that love and turn it into my profession.

"I hear ya!" I yelled, knowing that my voice wouldn't bother anyone since we were so isolated. I could see the streetlights of my neighborhood in the distance since Ripley's land shared our back fence. I let my gaze travel over the horizon, just now getting light as the sun started to come up in the east. "Don't get your panties in a twist, ladies and gentlemen. I'll get to you when I get to you. There's no reason to fuss in the meantime."

Taking care of the animals came as second nature to me. I'd done it so often that I didn't even have to think about the tasks at hand, so I let my mind wander to what I needed to accomplish today. First, I would have to go check on Scoot and make sure she was alright. In the process, I would have to make sure Ripley was okay, too, since his daughter was his only reason for living. He was probably beside himself with worry by now.

I had just pulled the large metal scoop off the wall when I heard footsteps behind me, and I turned to ask Ripley why he wasn't home with his sick daughter.

My pulse skyrocketed when I realized that it wasn't Ripley standing there but a man I didn't recognize. In a split second, I took stock of my position in the barn and could have kicked myself when I realized that I was backed into a corner with no way out other than past him. Without even thinking, I swung

the large metal scoop at his head. He tried to dodge it but wasn't quite quick enough, and there was a loud thud when it connected right above his ear.

The man crumbled to the ground in a dead faint, but I knew he wouldn't be out long enough for me to make my escape. I quickly dropped the scoop and grabbed one of the tie-down ropes hanging from a hook on the wall. I grunted as I flipped the man onto his stomach, making short work of tying him up so he couldn't escape and hurt me before I was able to get help.

I vaulted over his prone body and dashed out of the barn door into the yard. It was already brighter outside than it had been when I went in a few minutes ago, and I scanned the area to make sure that the man had been alone as I sprinted toward the truck. Once I was inside with the doors locked and the engine started, I pulled out the pistol I'd stashed in the console and set it in my lap.

I had just thrown it into Drive and was making a wide circle around the barn to cross the fields toward my neighborhood when my phone rang, and I saw Rip's name on the screen. I hit the button to answer, knowing he would spring into action the second I told him there was a stranger on his property.

"There's a man," I said, still trying to catch my breath from my exertions. "I got the jump on him and knocked him out. I'm safe but . . ."

"Shit!" Ripley shouted through my speakers. "I was calling to tell you that my old cellmate, Waylon, is staying in the RV."

I slammed on the brakes at the same time I yelled, "What?!"

"He needed a place to crash after he got released yesterday, so I put him up in the RV."

"Oh my God! I hogtied him and left him on the floor of the barn!"

"Fuck me," Ripley muttered. "I'm sorry, Leia. I was so worried about Scoot that it never even crossed my mind to tell you he was there."

"What do I do?" I asked, knowing without a doubt that the poor man would be spitting mad when he came to, if he hadn't already. "Is he going to . . . Would he . . . Shit."

"He won't hurt you, Leia. I know he won't. Let me wake up Scoot and . . ."

"No! Don't bother her. I'll go untie him and make sure he's not injured too badly."

"Shit." Ripley started laughing and said, "Talk about a way to say 'Welcome back to the free world!' I'm going to owe him big for this."

"And I'm sure you're never going to let me live it down either," I grumbled as I parked next to the barn so I could go inside and grovel.

“Nope. You’ll both catch shit forever. You got the drop on a hardened criminal, and he got taken down by a girl. That’s priceless.”



WAYLON

I came to gradually and had no idea where I was or what had happened. I didn’t open my eyes because they might leak out if I tried. I was fairly certain my skull was shattered. Those fucking rubber balls they used in their riot guns were getting harder every year. Pretty soon, they’d just say fuck it and start shooting marbles. When I tried to raise my hand to touch my head, I realized I was cuffed, but then all of my senses came rushing back and I knew it was more than that.

I’d been attacked and hogtied, and . . . I opened my eyes a fraction, barely to slits, and realized I was still inside the barn Ripley had shown me around last night. I knew where I was, but I wasn’t sure how I’d gotten there. I probably hadn’t been kidnapped by an armed gang of Russians intent on torturing me until I gave away all the government secrets I had in my arsenal, mainly because I didn’t have any. I hadn’t stumbled into the middle of a cartel meeting and been attacked by machete-wielding drug runners with murder on the brain because, well, I didn’t know where they had their get-togethers. Besides, I wasn’t exactly a social person to begin with, so walking into an ongoing party wasn’t really my thing.

No, neither of those scenarios had happened. I really needed to expand my reading library and stay the fuck away from cheesy reruns of MacGyver considering those were my first theories after remembering I’d been released.

Sadly, I had no choice but to admit that I’d been brought down by a woman who was half my size and then hogtied, very expertly I might add, and left on the floor of the barn where she’d been snooping around.

This was fucking awesome and a *great* way to start my journey into the free world, as the hostage of a brunette with a swing better than Ty Cobb had in his prime. Just fucking peachy.

I heard a vehicle speeding away outside and then heard it stop and idle some distance away. I kept listening but heard nothing else for a few minutes until

the same engine slowly came back in my direction.

Obviously, Bondage Betty realized I might not be dead and was coming back to finish me off. Yeah. That was it. She was coming back to beat me to death, and there wasn't a goddamn thing I could do about it. I was going to meet my end wearing nothing but a pair of boxer briefs. My only consolation was that they were at least clean. Surely, when the cops investigated my murder, they wouldn't laugh too hard, right? Convicted murderer taken down in his chones by a slip of a woman with dark brown eyes and freckles across her cheeks.

Just. Fucking. Perfect.

I heard footsteps on the gravel outside and then the wannabe Babe Ruth appeared in the open doorway. I twisted my body so that I could see her better and watched as she bit her lip and tried to figure out what to say.

"You better be here to finish me off, sweet pea, because I swear to God . . ."

"I am so so sorry, Waylon," the woman interrupted as she rushed across the barn toward me.

"How the fuck do you know my name?"

"Ripley didn't tell me you were here, and well . . . I got spooked when I saw a naked man."

"I'm not naked!"

She ignored my interruption as she dropped down beside me and continued, "I thought I was alone out here. I was in the zone getting shit done and then *poof!* Hot guy stranger appears out of nowhere."

"That's great. Now untie me."

"Ripley said you wouldn't hurt me, but I'm gonna need your promise to go along with that."

"Sure. I promise. Untie me."

"You don't sound very sincere."

"Please untie me. Is that better?"

"Well . . . um . . ."

I laid facedown on the floor and bumped my forehead against the concrete a few times as I tried my very best to rein in the urge to scream a litany of threats that would get me shunned in the farthest corner of hell, not very far from where I was at right this second but just a little warmer.

"Listen, I'm freezing my ass off, laying on the concrete with a dent in my skull. I can't feel my fucking fingers because you tied me up like a goddamn calf ready for branding, and if the cramp in my thigh gets any worse, the only

way to fix it will be amputation. Which I'm sure is right up your goddamn alley, but I'd prefer you just *un. Fucking. Tie. Me.*"

"Well, you don't have to be so cranky about it. It was an accident, and I already apologized," she snapped right before I heard the snick of a knife coming out of its sheath. Suddenly, the rope around my wrists and ankles fell apart, leaving me sprawled on the floor like one of those crime scene silhouettes. "There. You're free. Run away before the big, bad meanie attacks you again."

I sprang up from the floor, years of exercising on the concrete in my cell and protecting myself from the dangers of prison giving me reflexes I hadn't had before I was incarcerated. The woman shrank back, but then the fire in her eyes grew when she remembered that I was still half-naked and she was the only one holding a weapon. She put her shoulders back, and her face cleared of all emotion before she gave me a blinding smile and said, "Hello, Waylon. I'm Leia Lincoln. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Fuck. My. Life.



LEIA

I watched the man's chest heave, sure his heart was racing and blood was pounding from the same adrenaline I was feeling. I wasn't worried anymore, though. I'd seen crazy, and this man didn't have that look about him at all. He was upset, yes, but not out of control.

I felt like I'd known Waylon for years because Ripley had talked about him so often in the letters he sent while they were cellmates. I hated the fact that his first impression of me had been so horrible.

"Hello, Waylon. I'm Leia Lincoln. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The look on his face changed from frustration to shock and then to an emotion I couldn't quite place before he stuck his hand out and said, "Waylon Voyles. It's nice to finally meet you."

"So . . . that was a horrible way to introduce myself, but let me make it up to you. If you'll go inside and get dressed while I take care of the animals and then let me check the wound on your head, I'd love to treat you to breakfast.

Consider it the first step in me making up for, you know, physical assault and what basically amounts to kidnapping without the whole part where you get thrown into the back of a van.”

“Unlawful restraint.”

“Oh, right. That too.”

He stared at me for a second as he took a deep breath in through his nose and then let it out slowly. “Fuck it. Call Ripley, and tell him we’re going to breakfast.”

“I’m not telling him shit. When I got off the phone with him a few minutes ago, he was laughing so hard that I couldn’t understand a word he was trying to say.”

“Figures.”

“Go get dressed. If I don’t get the animals fed soon, they’ll form a committee and vote me off of the island.”

Waylon laughed softly as he shook his head. He winced and touched the spot above his ear and sighed before he padded softly toward the door on his bare feet. After he passed me, I couldn’t resist turning around to watch him go. I’d gotten to look my fill of his front side, and that was wonderful, all muscles and hard planes that made me want to tie him up again just so I could let my hands roam until that respectable package in his boxer briefs came to attention. But his backside surpassed wonderful and went straight to fantastic.

I could only imagine what the man would look like in faded jeans, sitting on either a horse or a Harley. Both of which were equally sexy in my book.

As I watched Waylon pick his way across the rocky drive toward the RV, I let my imagination run wild. The image of him on the back of a horse, the faded denim of his worn jeans taut against his thighs as they gripped the sides of the beast beneath him, a tight black T-shirt stretched across the muscles of his back with his biceps rippling as he held the reins . . . Damn. Just . . . damn.

“Shit,” I muttered. “He’s the one with the knot on his head, and I’m out here having hallucinations. I really need to get laid.”

3.

LEIA

“There are a lot of people in there,” Waylon said from the passenger seat as we pulled into one of the reserved parking places on the side of the building.

“Because the pancakes are to die for and don’t even get me started on the pies.”

When I saw Waylon’s hands ball into fists on his thighs, I looked at his face and noticed he had a sheen of sweat on his brow even though it was a chilly fall morning. The signs were easy to read. Waylon wasn’t just making an observation; he was having serious anxiety at the thought of going into the crowded diner.

“You know what? I’m not willing to wait for a table today,” I lied. I’d never waited for a table at Martha’s diner because there was a large private room in the back that was reserved for her family, and I was part of that family. I wasn’t related by blood to Martha, but I was part of her chosen family and had known her almost my entire life.

However, Waylon didn’t know a soul in that restaurant and didn’t seem like he was ready to interact, even if it was just a select group.

“I’ve got a better idea. My friends own a coffee truck, and they’ve always got a great selection of pastries,” I said as I put the truck in Reverse and backed out of the parking space. “There may be a line, but anything we get will definitely be worth it. If there’s nowhere to sit, we can just eat in the truck.”

When I glanced over at Waylon, I saw that he wasn’t nearly as tense anymore and felt good about the decision to go somewhere else. That was cemented when he blew out a long breath and said, “That sounds good.”

The drive to the park didn’t take more than a few minutes, and I was happy when I saw that the line at the truck wasn’t long at all. Since the workday had already started for most people, we’d missed the morning rush, but as

usual, there were still plenty of customers willing to wait to get their morning fix of caffeine and sugar.

“Flick That Bean?” Waylon asked before he burst out laughing. “Really?”

“I know, it’s brilliant isn’t it? Our friend Piper owns it, and she had to fight the city council over the name,” I explained.

“I’m trying to remember which one is Piper,” Waylon said. “It’s been a few years since I bunked with Ripley, but he always told stories about the people he grew up with, so I feel like I already know them.”

“You may not have heard of Piper because she was pretty young when Ripley went to prison, but you probably heard him talk about her parents, Tucker and Drea Martin. Before Ripley’s trial, Tucker and a few of the other men talked to him about what to expect if he was convicted and had to serve time since they’d all been to prison.”

“A few of the other men?”

“Some of my dad’s friends we grew up with,” I explained. “Ripley’s parents still volunteer at the apartments he lived in when he first moved to Rojo and . . .”

“The shelter,” Waylon interrupted.

“Yeah. New Horizons. Aunt Kari opened the apartments years ago, and we all help out whenever we can, even if it’s just taking part in fundraisers and stuff.” We got out and met at the front of the truck before I continued, “Horizons is really important to Mom and Dad because that’s where Mom and Lexi were living when they met.”

“You didn’t live there?”

“No, I’ve lived with my dad all my life. Mom and Lexi joined our family when we were almost 12.”

“Where’s your real mom?”

“The woman that shared my DNA was trampled by a horse.”

“No shit? You don’t hear about that happening very often anymore.”

“True. Most of the time it’s a horrible accident when it happens, but the horse that killed her is still living her best life. As a matter of fact, she’s your neighbor.” Waylon looked shocked, and I grinned before I winked at him, my voice mysterious as I joked, “Better make sure you behave yourself, or I may just introduce the two of you.”

I knew he had to be curious, but just like Ripley, he’d learned to contain his curiosity. It seemed like all of the men I knew who had been incarcerated at one point or another chose their words carefully and weren’t keen on sticking

their nose where it didn't belong.

Side by side, we joined the line of people waiting to put in their order, and I studied Waylon's profile as he looked at the menu posted on the side of the truck. When he glanced my way, I hurriedly turned to look around the park and then grimaced when I saw a face I recognized. Hoping that he hadn't seen me, I turned quickly so that I was facing the truck and unconsciously got a little closer to Waylon.

When he looked at me in question, I said, "Problem with living in a small town is that you know everybody."

"You think you do," he said cryptically before he looked around. "Which one's the problem?"

"Oh, it's not really a problem, but there's a guy over there who has asked me out a few times but just won't take the hint even though I keep telling him I'm not interested."

"He asked you out?"

"Yeah."

"You said it's a small town so everyone knows everyone else, right?" I nodded, and he asked again, "Then why would he ask you out?"

Without thinking, I blurted, "Why wouldn't he?"

"Does he know you?"

"Obviously, you and I started off on the wrong foot, but there's no need to be ugly about it. I apologized, *Igor*, and I'm even going to treat you to breakfast."

Waylon burst out laughing and sputtered, "Igor?"

"I might not be a supermodel, but I'm not exactly a troll either." Waylon was still laughing and it pissed me off almost as much as it hurt my feelings. "I'm a fucking catch, dammit."

"Wow. Listen to Princess Leia being extra," I heard a familiar voice say.

I looked up and realized we'd moved close enough to the window for my friends Piper and Frankie to hear our conversation. Judging from the smiles they wore, they were enjoying every second of it.

Frankie chimed in with, "You're a great catch if you can just work on the whole psycho serial killer stare and that shrill voice you get when you're yelling."

"If you two hadn't been such assholes when you were younger, I probably wouldn't have yelled as much," I growled, glaring at the younger women on the other side of the counter.

“I knew you were still pissed at me for the unfortunate bubble gum incident,” Piper said as she feigned a sad expression. “That happened years ago. Let it go. Live in the now.”

“I noticed that you didn’t call it an accident,” I snapped. “Give me my usual and shut up.”

Piper and Frankie gave me their best customer service smiles, and then Piper asked Waylon what he’d like to drink.

Apparently, Piper had seen me in line, so she already had my favorite drink made. Since Waylon’s order was just a black coffee, she was able to keep running her mouth while she prepared his cup before she slid them both across the counter toward us. “She starts to get twitchy when she can smell the beans but doesn’t have a cup in her hand. It’s called addiction, Lee. You and the other elders should seek treatment.”

Waylon smiled as he took a hesitant sip of his coffee, but he choked when I retorted, “It’s only an addiction if you’re willing to suck dick for it, and I’ve never gone that far.”

“You say shit like that and then wonder why you’re single,” Frankie chided as she slid the kolaches we’d ordered across the counter. She gave me the fake smile again before she said, “Now kindly go the fuck away. We’ve got real customers to serve, you know.”

“Piss off,” I said as I reached for the bag with our food. Waylon was still coughing, but he had pulled a card out of his pocket and was holding it out toward Frankie when I nudged his shoulder and said, “They’re not allowed to charge me since I make sure they’re current on their shots every year.” I looked back at the two before I said, “You’re both due for your rabies boosters soon, so you better be nice or I’ll use the big needle.”

Frankie ignored my jab and waved her hand toward the park, her attention already on the next customer as she gave her a genuine smile.

“We didn’t pay,” Waylon said as I motioned toward a picnic table nearby.

“I don’t ever pay here. I take care of their animals for free, and they feed my need for caramel macchiatos so I don’t turn into an animal myself. It’s a win-win.”

Waylon sat down across from me as he looked around the park just like I’d seen Ripley do a million times when we were out in public or in a new situation. I opened the bag of warm kolaches and handed him one before I took one for myself. He took a bite and moaned as his eyes closed. I couldn’t help but squirm in my seat at the sound, wondering if that would be

what he sounded like when he found something he liked other than food. Namely me. Naked on the bed in front of him. Or half-dressed and bent over the counter with my jeans . . .

Dammit. I really had to quit doing that. What was it about this man that threw my mind so far into the gutter that I got goosebumps while sweat broke out across my forehead? Doing anything with him would be a bad idea because I wasn't one to do anything half-ass, and that included my dating life. I was either all in or all out. No in between.

Going all in with a man like Waylon who had been released from prison only one day ago would be a horrible idea. When Ripley had been released, he'd fucked his way through half the population of Rojo before Cadence sunk her claws into him and forced him to settle down. I knew that Waylon would need plenty of time before he did the same, and I was not a claws kind of woman.

Unless they were sinking into his naked back while he . . . I lost my train of thought when I glanced up and saw Johnny, the guy who didn't understand the word "no," watching me over Waylon's shoulder. The dumbass couldn't fathom why I had zero interest in dating him since he was obviously God's gift to women. When we'd been matched online, I'd tried to give him a chance. I really had. But after three days of 'get to know each other' messages, I was out. He hadn't once asked a single question about me as a person. Instead, he'd told me all about himself, the knee injury that kept him from going pro, and his Jeep that he lovingly referred to as Darla.

The woman standing next to Johnny was obviously convinced he was the catch he imagined himself to be and was irritated that his attention was on anyone other than her. I knew that because she was currently trying to shoot lasers through my skull with her beady eyes and had been since she realized Johnny was more interested in what I was doing than whatever it was she was trying to say. From the looks of her, they seemed well-matched. Brand-name Barbie holding tightly to a bucket of shit wrapped in frat boy plaid and khaki.

Barf.

"What are you thinking about right now?" Waylon asked before he took another bite. This time he was able to control his reaction, but I could tell how much he was enjoying the food. So much so that he was taking small bites as if to savor it rather than enjoy it like there was easily more to be had. I knew my breakfast would be much more appreciated if he was the one

eating it. I pushed my kolache toward him before I wrapped both hands around my cup and answered, “Target shooting.”

Waylon chuckled before he asked, “Why the hell is that guy back there staring at us?”

“How did you . . .” I let my question trail off as Waylon pointed toward his eyes, letting me know he could see the reflection in my sunglasses. “That’s the guy who wants to be Mr. Right Now and can’t understand why I’m not interested.”

“Have you tried hitting him in the head with something heavy?”

I sputtered out a laugh and asked, “Are you ever going to forgive me for that?”

“Maybe when the swelling goes down.” I took a sip of my coffee and tried not to laugh but lost it when Waylon asked, “If that’s your go-to, it’s amazing that Ripley still has all of his teeth.”

“I didn’t punch you in the mouth!”

“You probably would have if I hadn’t pretended to faint.”

“Pretended? There were little cartoon birds circling around your head while I was tying you up.”

“Shit,” Waylon mumbled. “Don’t get too cocky, Slugger. I’ll have you know that . . .”

“I thought you were leaving town,” Johnny said as he approached the table, not caring that I was actively trying to ignore him and Laser Eyes.

“I was but . . .” I cleared my throat, trying to remember the lie I’d told him so he’d quit trying to get me to go out with him. I’d been sure that he’d see it for what it was and write me off as a total bitch, therefore never acknowledging my presence when I had the misfortune of running into him somewhere. Suddenly, the lie came back, and I jumped right into it, adding to the bullshit I’d already piled on him after the third time I turned him down. “The penguins had already flown south for the winter by the time I was able to schedule my trip so . . .” I glared at Waylon when he snorted and then cleared his throat, covering his mouth with the napkin to hide his smile.

“I’ll be going back to Alaska within the next few days to make sure that the male polar bear population has everything they need so they can hibernate through the winter with their families.”

“Their families?” Johnny asked.

I nodded. “You know. The wife and cubs.”

“Oh.” Completely ignoring Waylon’s loud chuff and Laser Beam Lucy’s

intense stare, Johnny jumped into the subject he loved most: himself . . . along with dear Darla, the woman in his life with which no mere mortal could compete. “I was watching something about the winter storms they have up north, and I found some great tires I think will work really well in the snow. Darla’s going to cut through those drifts like a hot knife through butter.” Since Rojo rarely ever got enough snow to necessitate that sort of equipment, I asked, “Are you and Darla moving up north?”

“No.”

“Oh.” There was a very uncomfortable silence for the next few seconds, so I decided to be personable, no matter how much it pained me, and said, “Well, it’s good to see you found someone.”

“Yeah. You too. Is this a new thing or . . .”

“Well, you know. We were back and forth for a while, but I finally decided to give it a go. He’s going to keep the home fires burning for me while I’m in Alaska with the penguins.”

“So, this is serious?”

“Oh, yeah. We even took the plunge and tied the knot last week. It was a rush ceremony. We thought he might be pregnant, but it turns out he was just constipated.”

Waylon had given up trying to hide his amusement and was laughing into his napkin now, tears pooling in his eyes as they crinkled with mirth.

Johnny tilted his head, sure he’d misheard me, but replied with, “Yeah. That’s cool. I started seeing Shanna . . .”

“Shawna,” the woman snapped, her wrath aimed at Johnny now.

“Well, good luck with that,” I said as I gathered the remnants of our breakfast and my coffee. I stood and smiled at Waylon before I asked, “You ready to go, Snookums? Mama had a long night, and now she needs a nap.”

“Of course, Pookie-Poo,” Waylon said as he stood up. He tipped his coffee up and drank the last of it before he thrust the cup toward Johnny. Out of reflex, Johnny took it, and when he looked down at it, Waylon said, “Y’all come back now, hear?”

We were both quiet until we got into the truck, then burst out laughing at the same time.

“What the fuck?” Waylon stammered. “Penguins? In Alaska? Really?”

“Stupidity shouldn’t be rewarded but putting up with it should be, so I treat myself now and again with a little sarcasm and a side dish of horrible bitch.”

“Holy shit. I haven’t laughed like this in . . . I don’t even know,” Waylon

said as he wiped the tears off his face. “After I met you this morning, I thought Ripley had dodged a bullet but . . .”

“He’s damn fast, that one, but I’ve been working on my aim,” I drawled, causing Waylon to burst out laughing again. “Hold on. You thought he dodged a bullet? Did you think Rip and I were together?”

“Yeah. You wrote him all the fucking time, so I thought you two had a thing.”

“Ugh. Gross.”

“He was always talking about you and telling funny Leia stories. What else was I supposed to think?”

“I am not now, nor have I ever dated Ripley Booker. I’ve thought about killing him, and I’ve even tried a few times, but I’ve never once considered dating him. Just so you know, he’d probably say the exact same thing about me.”

“So, you’re single?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because I’m apparently a glutton for punishment, and I’m thinking I should ask you out.”

“Interesting,” I hedged, trying not to let the excitement at the thought of spending more time with Waylon show.

“It’s probably the head injury talking, but I think you’re pretty fucking cool. You’re the funniest woman I’ve talked to in a while.”

“That’s not really saying much since you’ve been locked in a men’s prison for I don’t even know how long.”

“True. Maybe I should hold off. There may be someone better out there.”

“I doubt it. I’m quite a catch.”

“That’s what you keep saying. So, will you go out with me?”

“Sure. Why not?” I pretended to be vaguely interested, just to continue our little game. I was *very* interested, but there was no need for him to know that. A girl had to have her secrets, after all. “I think you may be the smartest man I’ve talked to today. Not that the bar was set all that high, but still, you rank right up there.”

“Thanks, Pookie-Poo. You sure know how to charm a man.”

“Right back at ya, Snookums.”

4.

WAYLON

“I want you to use the phone I gave you since it has everyone’s contact information and you’re going to be here on site at all hours,” Ripley said as he motioned toward the white board with names, phone numbers, and assignments. “Toss that prepaid piece of shit you bought and join the world of smartphones. If you need a tutorial on how to use it, ask Scoot, and she’ll show you anything you need to know. You can use the phone anytime as if it’s your own. Same with the blue truck. It’s yours to drive as long as you want it. Just know that you’ll be on call to take care of problems when I’m not available.”

The phone was a lot since it meant I wouldn’t have to pay for minutes like on the one I’d picked up, but the truck seemed a little extreme. “Are you sure, man? I don’t even have a driver’s license yet.”

“So, don’t get pulled over, and don’t get into an accident,” he said dismissively. He rolled his eyes and added, “But for insurance purposes, you should probably get your license anyway.”

“It’s been so long that I’m going to have to take the written exam along with a driving exam. Tori checked for me and is absolutely loving it.”

“When’s she coming to see you?”

I looked down at the floor as I shook my head, still angry about what I’d learned last night. “Something’s going on, and she moved back to our hometown.” Ripley winced, and I nodded. “Yeah. I wasn’t thrilled to hear that, but she’s a grown woman, so there’s not much I can do about it.”

“So, when are you going to go see her?”

“My little peacemaker has asked me not to because she knows there will be a shitstorm if I show up. And she’s right. If I step one foot into that town, they’ll be all over me, looking for anything they can find to send my ass away again if they don’t just go ahead and shoot me on sight.”

“She has a point there. So, now what?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. When I talked to her last night, she was . . . off. She might have just been tired or something, but I thought it was weird that it took her so long to return my call in the first place. When we did talk, it felt like she was holding back.” I thought about it for a minute and asked, “Do you think she doesn’t *want* to see me? I mean, she’s been to counseling over what happened and what she saw, but what if she’s not ready to see me in person?”

“That can’t be it. She came to visit you when you were locked up, so why wouldn’t she want to see you now that you’re not?”

“Maybe she’s nervous. Or maybe she’s afraid of me. When she visited in prison, there was always someone watching, but now that I’m out . . .”

“I don’t buy it. That can’t be it. She knows why you went down, and I’m sure more than a little part of her is glad you did what you did, whether she wants to admit that out loud or not. Anyway, if she didn’t want to talk to you, she would have stopped before now.”

“No. She’s not like that. She hates conflict and always has. She’ll bend over backwards to make people happy no matter how much it hurts her.”

“Where did she get that trait from?”

“Hell, I don’t know. She sure as hell didn’t get it from me.”

“I can’t imagine your kid being weak like that.”

“Oh, she’s not weak, she’s just kind-hearted. Push her too far, and her genetics will come to the surface, that’s for damn sure. It takes a long time to get there, though.”

“Still waters run deep and all that.”

“Exactly.”

“It’s killing me, man. I can’t hold back anymore,” Ripley said with what was as close to a grin as I’d ever seen on the man.

“Let it out.”

“You got knocked out by Princess Leia!” Ripley burst out laughing as he pointed at me. “You survived twenty years in the pen without getting your ass handed to you, but less than one day out, you got whooped by a girl.”

“Mmhmm. Keep ‘em coming. I know there’s more.”

“She not only kicked your ass, she tied you up like she was roping a calf. I wonder if she jumped up and threw her hands in the air when she was finished.” Ripley kept cackling. “I bet she did!” He shot up to his feet, his fists held up like Rocky and started cheering. “New record this morning at

the Booker Ranch, ladies and gentlemen. Leia Lincoln for the win!”

“I get it. Leia one, Waylon zero. Now sit the fuck down before you embarrass yourself.” I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and turned to see Scoot staring up at him like he’d lost his damn mind. The expressions on the dogs’ faces weren’t much better. She saw me looking at her and rolled her eyes before she went back to coloring like she’d been doing since we came inside. “Even your daughter thinks you’re ridiculous, and she likes you.”

Ripley was still smiling when he stomped his foot to get his daughter's attention. She felt the vibration in the floor and looked up sharply, watching Ripley sign to tell her what was going on. She smiled as she slowly turned her head to look at me and then burst out laughing. She glanced back at Ripley and he signed something else that caused her to laugh even harder, and even though I knew they were laughing at me, it was refreshing to see the quiet little girl take part in the fun.

She signed something at Ripley, and he chuckled before he looked at me and said, “Scoot thinks you’re a pussy too.”

I shook my head when she burst out laughing, realizing that she’d read his lips and knew what he’d said to me. Either way, she thought it was hilarious, and rolled over onto her side to lean against the white dog who was never more than a few feet away from her.

“Are we going to do some work today or what?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to drop Scoot off first. It’s time for another dose of her meds and she needs a nap anyway,” Ripley said as he reached over and picked his phone up off the desk. “Come on. You can ride with me. I’ll show you the easiest way to get to my house from here.”

He made a tsk noise and the dogs perked up, letting Scoot know she should look up again. Ripley signed something to her, and she signed back before she hopped to her feet, leaving her colors and book on the floor where they’d been when we got here. She opened the door and let the dogs outside before she followed them, and it shut behind her with a loud thud as I stood up and put the keys Ripley had given me into my pocket.

The drive across the field, following a well-worn path that I assumed he used often, took just a few minutes. As soon as Ripley stopped the truck, he honked the horn and Scoot jumped out of the bed where she had been riding with Rufio and Falcor. She ran to unlatch the gate before she pulled it open and then gave a wave worthy of a game show hostess to tell Ripley to go

through.

“It’s amazing how sarcastic she can be without using words,” Ripley mumbled as he drove through the gate. Rather than waiting for his daughter, he kept driving, turning right into the alley behind the housing addition I’d seen from my new front porch before he turned onto a gravel area beside the fence of the house on the far corner. “Home sweet home.”

“You haven’t lived here long?” I asked as I got out of the truck.

“Not long at all.” I walked toward where Ripley stood and let my gaze roam over the surrounding houses. He pointed at the house on our right and said, “Heath Forrester lives there. He’s one of the brothers that owns this addition and is getting it fixed up. His brothers, Adam and Joshua, live out here too.” He started walking down the fence line and then stepped onto the sidewalk before he pointed to the second house on the street. “Leia lives there, so if you ever come looking for me and my truck’s home but I’m not, it’s a good bet that’s where you’ll find me.”

“And the two of you aren’t dating.” I didn’t pose it as a question because Leia had already told me they weren’t, but I wanted to say it out loud to Ripley anyway to make sure I wasn’t stepping on any toes.

“Nope. She’s my backup girlfriend, though.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“If I have to go somewhere that requires a date, I take her. Or if I have to go somewhere I don’t want to be and need a good excuse to leave, I take her. She does the same thing with me. We’ve been doing that since high school.”

“So, you’re not into her like that at all?”

Ripley stopped suddenly before he turned up the sidewalk to his house and asked, “Why are you asking?”

“I asked her out on a date.”

“Why?”

“She’s a beautiful woman and . . .”

“Don’t fuck around with her. You break her heart, and I’ll break every bone in your body, friend or not.”

“Damn.”

“I know what I was like when I first got out, and let me just say, there are plenty of women around who are down for a quick fuck, but Leia’s not one of them.”

“I never thought she would be.”

“Good. And I meant what I said. Don’t hurt her, Waylon. I’m not the

scariest one who'll come after you if you do.”

“Noted.” I had seen Ripley angry before. I'd even seen him violent. We'd been cellmates for a long time, so I'd seen the best and the worst of the man, but I'd never seen him quite as intense as he was right now, and it was all because of his loyalty to Leia. “So, as long as I'm not in it for a quick fuck, you're okay with me dating her?”

He seemed to consider it for a second and then burst out laughing. “You're seriously asking me if you can date the woman who knocked you out and tied you up?”

“Yes. Obviously, you're protective of her, and I get that, but let's consider how she and I first met. That alone should tell you that she can take care of herself. Either way, I like her and I want to get to know her.”

“How fucking hard did she hit you?”

I burst out laughing before I asked, “Is she that bad?”

“Yes. She's horrible.” Ripley laughed before he shook his head and said, “She's not really horrible, but she's a handful. I'm not sure you're mentally or physically prepared to deal with all that is Leia Lincoln and the posse that surrounds her. She's a lot, but you haven't even met the rest of them. When you do, my guess is that you'll run screaming for the hills and none of us will ever hear from you again.”

“That bad, huh?”

“I've seen some shit in my life. I mean, you know. You were there for most of it, and you spent a lot longer in prison than I did.”

“What does that have to do with dating Leia?”

“Wait until you meet her friends. You'll understand.”

Scoot appeared on the porch in front of us with her dogs flanking her, and Ripley signed something to her before she launched herself off the top step into his arms. He laughed and kissed her cheek before he put her down, and then we watched her run across the grass to the house next door, her dogs bounding beside her.

“What did you tell her?”

“That she can go take a nap with Leia, and when they wake up, she can go play with her brother.” I watched Scoot enter a code on the panel above the door handle and then walk in. As soon as the dogs were in, she waved at her father and shut the door. “He lives right over there,” Ripley said as he pointed to a house with a motorcycle parked in the driveway. “Like I said earlier, if my truck is at my house but I'm not, I'll be around here

somewhere. Most of the time, I'll be at Leia's, but I've got some other friends around the neighborhood I'll introduce you to also."

"And they'll be okay having a very freshly released ex-con around?"

Ripley laughed as he walked up the porch steps. "I told you stories about most of them. Do you honestly think that matters? As long as you didn't go up for some unforgivable shit, they won't care. They'd have a problem if you had done something to a woman or a kid, but then again, so would I."

"Most people wouldn't care to be associated with a murderer."

"They don't have a problem with me."

"True."

"I think you're going to fit in here, Waylon, but I have to warn you that if things go south between you and Leia, it might get a little tense. She's a beloved and important member of this town. She's family to some very colorful people who belong to some very colorful families, and when I say families, I'm not talking about the Brady Bunch. I mean motorcycle club-types with members who aren't strangers to the prison system themselves."

"Good to know."

"Consider this conversation a neon sign that warns you to enter at your own risk because fucking up could cause you bodily harm or even death." Ripley chuckled before he added, "And that's just what her girlfriends will dish out. I'm not even talking about the rest of the family."



LEIA

I woke up in an oven with the temperature set to three degrees below the surface of the sun. I knew that if I didn't find a way to escape shortly, my skin was going to melt off. I laid there for a few seconds with my eyes closed but finally extricated myself from the pool of lava. As soon as I was out, I reached for my phone and took a picture of the child and animals that were taking up the majority of my bed. Once I sent it to Ripley and Charlene, I grabbed some clothes and went to shower. I took the time to pamper myself like I hadn't had time to do lately - shaving, exfoliating, and basically wasting more than my fair share of hot water. By the time I stepped out to towel off, I felt like a brand-new person.

I was so invigorated that I decided to take things a step further and blow dry my hair into an actual style rather than pull it back into the braid I usually wore. I even took a few seconds to swipe on some mascara, which rarely happened. I was so taken aback by the results that I couldn't help but stare at my reflection and wonder why I didn't do this more often.

I knew why. Animals didn't care if my skin was moisturized or if I was wearing makeup. But that led me to wonder why I was suddenly taking extra time in front of the mirror that could be spent doing chores that had fallen by the wayside because of my busy work schedule.

I didn't want to admit it was because of the handsome man I'd met this morning and the possibility of seeing him again. I probably wouldn't, and I was sure nothing would come of his invitation to take me out on a date, but just in case it did, I thought it was best to be prepared.

That also meant I needed to prepare myself mentally, not just physically. I wasn't a virgin by any means, but I wasn't really one to sleep around either. I'd had a few long-term relationships in my almost forty years on earth, and I'd dated a lot, but I had yet to find the man who would fit into the life of my dreams. I wanted a partner who would stand beside me through the best and worst of times. Someone I could tell my deepest secrets to. A man I could laugh with but would also brush away my tears and tell me everything was going to be okay and mean it. I wanted a love like my honorary grandparents had that would last the test of time. Sandra and Tink's love was timeless, just like Martha and Smokey's. Mom and Dad had the same thing, and I was lucky enough to have watched it progress from a chance encounter to a long-lasting marriage between two people who couldn't and didn't want to live without each other.

By the time I turned 30, my illusion of finding a love like that had faded, and I found myself falling into a depression at the thought of spending my life alone. But after a few sessions with Emerald, one of my best friends who just happened to be a psychologist, she helped me see the light ahead rather than the darkness I felt creeping up behind me. With her input and encouragement, I made a deal with myself that if I was still single at 40, I would explore other avenues to create the family I wanted, either by adoption or using donor sperm. I only had a few more months until it was time for me to take the leap alone, and I was looking forward to all that either of those situations may bring.

I was biding my time, keeping my heart and mind open to finding someone to

spend my life with when Ripley got full custody of Celia. Since he and I were so close and he was doing it all on his own, I was able to start the journey into parenthood by helping out with her as much as I possibly could. I had encouraged Ripley to move in with me when Celia came home with him and again after I bought my house, but he was a little too proud to consider it, even though I happily offered to let him foot all the bills. Luckily, he and Celia were never far away since they lived within walking distance of my back yard. Now that he was renting the house next door, it was even easier to juggle Celia. She was just as comfortable in my home as her own.

As if she knew I was thinking about her, Scoot appeared in the doorway, still groggy from her nap as she wiped the sleep from her eyes. She yawned as she stumbled toward me, and I squatted down to hold her close while she woke up, like I'd been doing since she was just an infant.

"How did you sleep, sweetheart?" When Celia didn't respond, I asked her again and waited for her to lean back so she could see my lips to figure out what I was saying. When she did, I gave her a knowing look before she touched her head on one side and then the other. I gave it a few seconds for her ears to adjust after she turned on her cochlear implants and then softly asked my question again.

When she started to sign, I reached up and put my hands over hers as I shook my head. She sighed and then finally said, "Good." She started to pull her hands away and then gripped mine as she carefully formed the words, "Go Koda play now."

"Can I go to Koda's house to play now?" I asked, reforming the sentence the way her therapist had taught us to do. She nodded, and I tilted my head, waiting for her to repeat the sentence out loud. Once she did, I smiled and said, "That sounds like fun. Let me do your hair first."

Celia nodded eagerly and then hopped onto the vanity and sat with her legs criss-crossed while she waited for me to gather everything I'd need to braid her hair. By the time I had all the tools at hand, Scoot was ready for her hair appointment. It took some time to get the knots out, and I made a mental note to get her an appointment with Opal Hamilton at Willow's salon for a trim. Once I was finished brushing out the tangles, I heard Celia let out a frustrated breath before she caught my eye in the mirror. I smiled at her and got started, smiling as I listened to the booming voice come from such a tiny girl as she did the vocal exercises we practiced together every day.

It didn't take long to get her hair braided, and Celia breathed a sigh of relief as she put her receivers back on. She hopped off the vanity and went to put on her shoes as I picked up the bathroom. Within just a few minutes, we were out the door, Celia skipping ahead of me since she was eager to play with her friend. I had just turned the corner that connected my street with Ruf's when Celia bounded onto his porch and rang the bell. She disappeared inside with her guardians following close behind, and then Brighten Duke appeared in the doorway to greet me.

"Hey, kid," I said with a grin.

"Ah, another of the elders has graced us with her presence," Brighten said with a mock bow.

"Which one's in there?" I asked as Brighten came outside and let the door shut behind her.

"Holly is in the back yard giving Ruf a list of stuff Simon's not allowed to do, as if he's gonna listen to her. She brought Simon over to play with Koda for a little while, and I was just dropping Griff off for a sleepover."

"Date night?"

"Yes. Hawk and I have dinner plans, and Crow got called into work."

"So, how's life?"

"You first."

"What do you mean?"

"A certain someone was seen with a hot stranger this morning, and I need details."

"So you can share them with the other children?"

"Of course," Brighten said with a grin. "Come on. I never get the good scoop."

"His name is Waylon."

"Sexy. And?"

"And what? We had breakfast."

"Breakfast after a wild night or . . ." Brighten let her voice trail off.

"Just breakfast."

"Hmm. The girls said he had that broody bad boy look about him. I never pegged you for that type."

"What type of man do you think would suit me?"

"You always go for the frat boys, but I think a bad boy would suit you much better."

"He's definitely a bad boy," I muttered. Although he could have reacted

much differently after our first encounter, he handled it better than most men I knew would have. Not that any of them would have reacted violently toward me, but I knew for a fact they would have been much more vocal about being hogtied and left on a cold concrete floor. As a matter of fact, the one I'd done it to before was still pretty bitter even after all these years. Those Forrester boys could definitely hold a grudge, that was for sure.

"Where did you meet him? He has to be new in town because there's no way any of us would have missed a guy who looks like that."

"How do you know what he looks like?"

"Piper and Frankie sent pictures of the two of you sitting together."

"Did they tell you we held hands on our way to homeroom?" I asked sarcastically. "I just know he's going to ask me to prom!"

Brighten laughed and asked again, "Seriously, he's not from here. How did you meet him? Was it that dating site? I knew that would work."

"It was not the dating app," I said as I rolled my eyes. "He's a friend of Ripley's."

Brighten tilted her head and seemed to consider what I'd said for a second before she surmised, "A prison friend."

"I know you won't be carrying tales, Brighten, considering everything that's happened with Hawk."

"Oh, definitely not, but anyone that hears that he's an old friend of Rip's is gonna know he served time with him."

"How?"

"Ripley's not exactly the most sociable animal." I burst out laughing, and she smiled when she added, "You're really the only one he talks to on a regular basis. He doesn't hang out very often, although he's gotten better since Scoot's older and needs to play with other kids her age."

"True, but getting him to let her do that was like pulling teeth."

"I believe it." Not to be deterred from getting the gossip she was seeking, Brighten asked, "So, you and this Waylon guy are dating now?"

"He asked me out, but I know that probably doesn't mean anything. I'm not sure how long he was locked up, but there are plenty of fish in the sea to choose from; I just happened to be the one swimming by at the time."

"Don't sell yourself short! You're a beautiful woman. Granted, you're old as dirt but . . ."

"Shut it, infant," I snapped.

"I had to get at least one jab in," Brighten said cheerfully. "It was great

talking to you, Leia. Bring Scoot over some time, and make sure to bring your bad boy hottie so I can get a look at him.”

“He’s not my bad boy hottie.”

“Ah, but you admitted that he is one. That’s a step in the right direction,” Brighten called out cheerfully as she walked down the steps to leave. “Go on through the house. Everyone’s out back.”

I walked through Ruf’s house, happy to see that it looked like he and Koda were settling in. The last time I’d been here, they were still living out of half-empty boxes, but it seemed that they’d unpacked everything now and were starting to make their mark on their new home. It was definitely a man’s house, but I could see hints that his mom and sisters, and probably even his grandmother, were involved in the decor. There were family pictures hung along one wall. I was sure those came from the women as did the comfortable throw blankets on the dark leather couch. The rest of the decor was all biker, including the partially disassembled motorcycle on a tarp in the middle of what should have been the dining room with a small dirt bike on another tarp in the corner.

I walked out onto the patio and smiled when I saw Scoot in the yard. She fit right in with the boys, Griffin and Koda Forrester, little cousins of the next generation of wild Forresters who looked so much like their fathers, Hawk and Ruf. It made me yearn to have a child of my own who could grow up wild and free like I had as part of the extended family of the MCs who were still a huge part of my life.

Holly Hamilton, one of my closest friends, was out in the yard with Ruf and the kids, right in the middle of the action with her boyfriend’s son Simon. I thought again about my future family and what it may look like. I knew that even if I did decide to parent on my own like my friend Holly had chosen to do until she met Damien and welcomed him and his two adopted children into our tribe, I’d have plenty of support from my friends and family.

Holly spotted me watching them and got up from where she’d been kneeling beside Simon and walked across the grass toward me.

“What are they doing?”

“Koda’s sick of having to follow Ruf’s rules, so he’s moving out.”

“Say again?” I asked, looking over her shoulder at the kids banging away on a wooden frame.

“Apparently, Ruf said something about following the rules while Koda lived under his roof, so he decided to build his own house.”

“Please tell me that the 5-year-old doesn’t have access to power tools.”

“I said the same thing, but Ruf assured me he’s using the same safety measures that Summer and Terra put in place years ago.”

“The locks?”

“Yeah, but you know that’s just going to force the new generation to learn how to pick locks just like their parents did when they were kids.”

I glanced over at the table saw situated at the edge of the patio and saw the shiny golden lock hooked into the end of the cord and smiled because it reminded me of so many others I’d seen over the years.

As a teenager, I’d taken care of the “Kings kids” as we called them, children of the men and women who belonged to the Texas Kings MC along with the Dukes who were part of the Texas Knights MC. There had been a population boom in Rojo as the men fell in love one by one and started families with the women who were strong enough to love them back. The children they had were wild and crazy, feral and half-naked most of the time. They were a babysitter’s worst nightmare. There were clusters of kids who had been together since birth, boys and girls who were equally as mischievous and learned to scheme together ridiculously early in life. And since there were so many of them, we were constantly outnumbered.

The parents had rules, even though they weren’t as strict as most, but since there were so many kids around, the adults had come up with some brilliant hacks to circumvent major disasters. One of those tricks was to put a small lock through one side of an electric plug so the sneaky little demons couldn’t plug in whatever they wanted and wreak havoc on the town. Hence, the small lock attached to the table saw. Thank God.

“Is it safe to let a Forrester have a hammer?” I asked as I watched Griffin, Brighten and Hawk’s son, pick up a hammer and then stand on his tiptoes as he tried to put a nail into the top of the wooden frame.

“It’s safer than a chainsaw,” Holly mused as she turned to stand beside me.

“Simon was begging Damien to let him come play with Koda, and when I resisted, Damien asked me what it could hurt since they’re just kids. I told him about the time John and Mattie’s twins had a duel with nail guns. He thought it was hilarious until he realized I was dead serious.”

“That was just a few years ago. It’s amazing they’re all still alive.”

“Survival of the fittest, and now my kids are going to jump into that pool.”

“Someday, mine will too.”

“Are you ready to start yet?” Holly asked, referring to my decision to become

a single parent like she had been until she met Damien.

“I don’t see a wedding in my future, so if I want kids of my own, I don’t really have any other choice.”

“Seems like you’ve had about as much luck with that dating website as I did,” Holly mused.

“I got a message this morning from a man who seems like a nice guy.”

“He’s probably a serial killer,” Holly said. She smiled wickedly and then added, “You could just skip the dating app and use your feminine wiles on the blonde hunk from this morning.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure why I’m ever shocked about how quickly gossip travels around here.”

“You shouldn’t be.”

5.

WAYLON

When I walked out onto the porch, I took a second to enjoy the cool breeze and sunshine on my face. I felt ready to tackle the world or this little corner of it, at least. Yesterday afternoon while I worked with Ripley, I had explained that I had a few tasks today that meant I wouldn't be able to work during the morning hours. He'd said it was fine to take today and the weekend off. That meant I had three full days to enjoy my freedom, make my own schedule, and roam to my heart's content, even though I'd probably be just as satisfied sitting right here enjoying nature and the peace it brought me.

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the urge to just stand in one place and marvel at the changes in my life after so many years with little to no hope for a future.

Right now, the future was so bright that it was giving me a fucking headache. It had taken way too long to figure out how to make a damn call from my new phone, and thank God the phone number of my bank was listed on the paperwork I had from the prison because I couldn't find a goddamn phone book *anywhere*. I'd searched high and low, but all I found were cords and little blocks that weren't attached to anything but plugged into the wall for some reason. Once I *finally* figured out how to dial the number on the touchscreen, I wasted at least an hour and a half talking to a computer who kept telling me to push this button and that button before I finally spoke to a human who transferred me twice before I got disconnected and had to navigate all of that bullshit again.

When I did finally talk to a person who could help me, every other word out of her mouth was something to the effect of, "It would be much more convenient to take care of your account through our mobile banking app." When I asked her why in the hell I'd want to drive all the way to the bank to

take care of something that could easily be done over the phone, there was silence for so long that I wondered if the call had been disconnected again. But then, little miss fucking smart ass gave a lecture to the old guy about apps and passwords and blah blah blah blah.

Now, all I needed to do was find the bank branch in Rojo to pick up my new card. "It's not a credit card, sir. It's a debit card." That smug voice grated on my every nerve, and when she snickered in response to my question about ATM locations, I damn near lost my shit. Maybe Ripley was right when he said Scoot could teach me everything I needed to know because technology had clearly passed me by while I was in prison. All the things I'd only seen on commercials were slapping me in the face right now, and I was getting a little touchy about it.

I took another deep breath of the brisk air and decided to give myself a fresh start. There were a lot of things I needed to do today, but the one I was most excited about was a visit to the grocery store. I wasn't going to have to light my new *'it's a debit card, not a credit card'* on fire myself because whatever machine I had to put it in to pay for the groceries I was anxious to get would combust while it was printing my mile-long receipt.

I had a list in my head of all the food I'd missed for the last twenty years, and I planned on doing nothing but eating for the next three days. By the time Monday rolled around, I'd be fat as a tick, and I didn't give a single shit. For lunch today, I planned to have no less than a gallon of ice cream, and I was going to eat a steak as big as my head for dinner. Tomorrow, I wanted to get reacquainted with one of my favorite women on the planet - Little Debbie. By Sunday, I *might* be ready to eat something green and crunchy, but I sincerely doubted it.

My mouth was watering at the thought of butter pecan goodness followed by some Rocky Road deliciousness with a side of pistachio bliss as I got into the truck, ready to get my shit taken care of so I could get to my junk food gluttony plans.

I pulled the key ring out of my pocket as I walked toward the truck, and when I looked down, I realized there wasn't a key there at all, only a fob.

"What the fuck?"

I got into the truck and flipped the visor down to find a key. When that wasn't successful, I got back out and started checking under the mats. While I was down there, I glanced up and saw a button that said, "Push To Start."

"Start what?"

I pushed the button, and the screen in front of the wheel lit up, telling me to put my foot on the brake. I got in and did that before I pushed the button again. As the truck roared to life, the A/C blasted cool air at my face, and my ears were assaulted with something that I thought *might* be music, but I wasn't exactly sure.

I was trying once again to recall some of that zen bullshit the counselor at the prison had spouted about over and over. I was ready to enjoy my first full day of freedom out on the open road when a song came on I recognized from years ago and helped put me into a much better frame of mind. Even though I had no idea where I was going other than the general direction of the lights I'd seen from my porch the night before, I was happy and free, and that was all that mattered right this second.

It didn't take as long at the bank as I thought it would, and I was meandering through the grocery store within the hour. Less than an hour after that, I was standing in the checkout line with a growling stomach and a cart full of deliciousness.

As the checker scanned my groceries, I let my eyes wander around the store and then took in the covers of the magazines on the rack beside me as I tried to ignore all the overwhelming sounds and keep myself from fidgeting too much. I heard the woman in the checkout line next to me apologizing for holding up the line behind her. I couldn't resist turning around to see what the drama was about and saw the checker in that line, a man not much younger than me, rolled his eyes before he huffed, "If you don't have the money to pay for all this, then we'll just put it back."

The woman let out a frustrated sigh before she said, "I have the money in my account, but my card isn't working."

"Likely story," the man snapped as he glared at her, watching her try the card again. "Just go, and I'll put all of this stuff back."

"There's no reason to be a dick about it," I commented pointedly. I stopped beside the flustered older woman as I glared at the man across from her.

"Run my card and pay for her things, and while you're at it, put a few extra dollars on there to buy yourself a new fucking attitude."

I pulled my new card out of my pocket and thrust it in his direction, and he took a step back with his hands up like I was trying to rob him. "You'll have to use the machine."

The lady put her hand on my arm and said, "You don't need to pay for my groceries. I'll just come back later after I've figured out what's wrong with

my own card.”

“Well, I’d hate to have to put Dick to all the trouble of returning these things to the shelves. Besides, you’ve probably spent way too much time in here already while you were picking all this out.” The checker pointed to his name tag to correct me, and I rolled my eyes. “Your name’s Dick as far as I’m concerned.”

The woman burst out laughing and said, “I think it suits him.”

“So do I,” I agreed as I stared at the machine in front of me. “You know how to use this thing?”

“Uh, yes,” she said as she looked at the machine and then back at me. “You don’t?”

“Nope. I’m new here,” I said vaguely, knowing that wouldn’t explain why I didn’t know how to work the latest banking technology. “Want to teach me how?”

“I would love to,” the lady agreed with a smile.

The woman insisted she’d pay me back, but I told her to just pay it forward another day instead. By the time she was checked out, the checker was finished ringing up my groceries, so I went back to use my newly acquired debit card skills to pay for my own purchases. Within just a few minutes, I was walking next to a pimply-faced kid who was excitedly babbling about how cool it had been to see me tell off his boss. I was more than ready to go home where it was quiet so I could enjoy my stockpile in peace.

I stopped at the truck and opened the back door for the kid to unload my grocery cart. As I started to get into the driver's seat, I saw the woman from inside the store standing next to a truck with a furious expression on her face. I watched her for a minute, trying to figure out why she was just standing there when she tilted her head back and let out a roar of frustration.

I couldn’t help but chuckle as I got out of the truck, but schooled my expression before I got close enough to ask, “Are you okay, ma’am?”

“Have you ever had one of those days where you just want to say ‘fuck it’ and burn everything to the ground?”

“I have.”

“Well, give me a match, buddy, because I’m there.”

“Are we starting with the grocery store, or do you have another target in mind? I’ve got a couple of bags of marshmallows in my truck. Give me a minute to find a stick or two, and then we’ll have a party,” I suggested. She cut her eyes to me, not quite ready to joke about whatever was going on yet,

so I asked, “What’s got your inner arsonist stirred up?”

“I set my purse on the seat and then walked back to make sure the tailgate was shut, and the wind slammed my door.”

“Keys in the purse?”

“And my phone.”

“Well, shit,” I muttered as I pulled my phone out of my pocket. “Want to borrow mine?”

“I’d love to, but I’ve become a victim of technology.”

“How’s that?”

“The only phone number I have memorized is my husband’s, and he’s out on a long ride with my boys so he wouldn’t be able to answer. The other key fob is in his pocket anyway. I guess I can call Duke’s Towing and see if one of them can jimmy the lock, but there’s no telling how long it might take for someone to get here.”

“No other family you can call?”

“I’ve got more family than you can shake a stick at, but right now, I just want to go home, take my shoes off, and get dinner started.”

“Well, if you’re comfortable with it, I’m happy to give you and your groceries a lift.”

“You’d do that?”

“Of course,” I said with a shrug. “As long as you don’t mind sharing some snacks with me while I drive. I’m starving.”

“Take me home, and I’ll fix you up right.”

I wasn’t sure about that idea, but I didn’t want to sound rude, so I kept my thoughts to myself and pulled open the tailgate to collect the woman’s groceries so I could drive her home. While we were on our way, she used my phone to call the towing company she’d mentioned. I was shocked when she suggested that they just drive her truck to her house when they got it unlocked.

Once that was done, she relaxed against the seat and sighed. “Well, since you’re my knight in shining armor twice over, I suppose I should at least know your name.”

“I’m Waylon Voyles.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Waylon. My name is Martha.”



“Now that you’ve got some food in your belly, tell me about yourself, Waylon,” Martha said as she sat down in the chair across the table from me and started peeling potatoes. I watched how easily she took care of her task and knew she’d probably peeled literal tons of potatoes over the years that the healthy-looking people in the pictures hung throughout her house had savored and enjoyed. “How long have you been back in the free world?”

I was stunned at her question but decided to be honest. “A little more than twenty-four hours.”

“No wonder you’re hungry.”

“How did you know I’d been locked up?”

“The only person in this day and age who can’t work a debit card has either been in a coma or behind bars for the last twenty years.”

“I’ve got a lot to learn.”

“I suppose you do. How long were you in prison?”

“Twenty-two years, one month, one week, and three days.”

“That’s quite a spell.” Martha glanced at me and smiled before she looked back down at the potato in her hand. “And what are your plans now that you’re out?”

“You don’t even want to know what I went in for?”

“That’s not really any of my business.”

“What if I’m a dangerous man?”

“Obviously, you’ve got the ability to be a dangerous man since they don’t put jaywalkers in prison.”

“That doesn’t make you uncomfortable?”

“A man who pays for a stranger’s groceries without any expectation of getting repaid isn’t someone I feel like should make me afraid.”

“What if I told you I was a murderer?”

“I’d tell you that some people just need killin’.” I burst out laughing and Martha grinned. “What brings you to Rojo?”

“I wasn’t scheduled to be released for another few weeks, so when they let me out, I didn’t have anywhere to go or even a ride to get there if I did, so I called an old friend of mine and he brought me to Rojo.”

“An old friend you met in prison?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I didn’t want to give her Ripley’s name since he was a

business owner and some people might not know about his history. “He was raised here.”

“Hmm,” Martha said thoughtfully. She looked at me for a second before she asked, “Hawk or Ripley?”

“Excuse me?”

“Are you friends with Hawk or Ripley? I would say Tucker or Sonny but the timeline doesn’t match, and it couldn’t be either of my other boys for the same reason.”

“How do you know Ripley?”

“I’ve known that boy since he was . . . Oh, goodness, it’s been a while. I’d say he was probably about 6 or 7 when I first met him.” Martha glanced down at my plate and asked, “Do you want another serving? There’s plenty.”

“I couldn’t eat any more if I tried,” I said as I looked down at the empty plate in front of me. “That’s the best food I’ve had in years. Maybe ever.”

Martha waved her hand dismissively. “Those were just leftovers, son. You can wax on once I feed you dinner.”

“I probably won’t be able to eat anything else for at least a day. Maybe two.”

“Pfft. You’ll enjoy dinner.”

“I think I’ve already imposed on you enough, ma’am. There’s no need for you to feed me again.”

“But I’m going to,” Martha said firmly. “My husband should be home with my boys soon, and I plan on feeding all of them, including whoever else happens to show up.”

I looked at the potatoes she’d already peeled and what was left in the bag she was pulling from before I asked, “Do you want me to help you get things started so it’s ready when they get here?”

“I’m finished with everything we’ll need tonight, and each of the girls will be bringing a dish. I’m making you some potato salad.”

“Me?”

“I saw the tub you bought at the grocery store and decided to make you some decent potato salad so you didn’t have to suffer through that slop.”

When we’d arrived at her house, she asked me to come inside for lunch, and when I argued that I had melting ice cream and other cold things in the back, she waved her hand and said, “I’ve got plenty of space for you to store all of it while we visit. Carry them inside with mine.” When I hesitated, trying to find a good excuse to leave, she said, “Tick Tock, Waylon. That ice cream’s going to be soup if you don’t get it in the house.” I recognized that tone and

knew better than to argue, so I did what I was told and carried my perishables in along with her groceries and then ate every bite of the food that was put in front of me.

And, apparently, I was going to be doing that again after her family got home.

The front door opened, and Martha didn't seem shocked at all when two men came sauntering in, one of them with her purse in his hand. They said hello, and she smiled and tilted her head to give them access to her cheek when they leaned down to kiss her.

The men were wearing matching T-shirts that had a logo with the words "K&K Retrieval" above it. After the dark-haired one kissed her cheek, he said, "Your truck's in the driveway, Gamma."

"Thank you, baby," Martha said before she nodded toward the kitchen. "Y'all can get a snack, but don't eat too much since we're going to have dinner soon."

"Yes, ma'am," the other man said before he walked into the kitchen.

"These are two of my grandsons, Jonas and Cooper. Boys, this is my friend Waylon," Martha said in introduction. "He has rescued me twice today, and now you boys have done it again."

"Thanks for taking care of her. I'm Jonas Dean," the dark-haired man said as he extended his hand across the table to shake mine. He looked at Martha and asked, "I get that you were locked out of the truck, but what was the other rescue about?"

"My debit card is on the fritz, and I couldn't pay for my groceries, so this nice young man footed my bill while he put that prick of a store manager in his place."

"The store manager gave you shit?" Jonas asked, his brow furrowing as he looked to me. "What did he say?"

"He was just being a tool," I told him. "I guess he thought she didn't have the money to pay for her groceries."

"And you didn't kill him?" Cooper asked as he walked around the counter with a plate full of cookies and a glass of milk. "Want me to?"

"No, sweetheart. If we killed everyone that's stupid, the world would be a lonely place."

"It would be a lot quieter, though," Jonas said as he passed Cooper to walk into the kitchen to find something to munch on.

"And our job would be a lot calmer. That's for sure," Cooper grumbled as he

sat down at the end of the table. “Where’s Papa Smokey?”

“He’s on a ride with the boys,” Martha explained. “They should be back anytime now.”

Cooper chose the chair to my right, and when Jonas came back to the table, he sat to my left. Martha and I made small talk for a few minutes, discussing my ideal potato salad - not too much mustard and chunks of potatoes rather than mashed, and then she asked what I planned to do now that I was out.

Neither of the men seemed shocked that the older woman was sitting at the table with an ex-con, nor did they seem interested in why I’d served time. I found that a little odd but realized it hadn’t bothered Martha in the least, so it almost made sense that it wouldn’t bother them either.

I had just finished telling Martha that I’d be working for Ripley when Jonas pointed his fork at me and said, “You’re the guy Leia had breakfast with yesterday.”

“You know Leia?”

“Of course,” Jonas said as if that were a given. Rojo was small, but I didn’t think it was *that* small. I changed my mind when he said, “She used to babysit me.”

“Me too,” Cooper said before he took another bite of the same leftovers I’d eaten - meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans with onions and bacon.

“She was always nicer than Jewel and a few of the others, but don’t get it twisted. That girl is tough as nails, and she’s got a mean streak.”

“I remember what all of you were like as children, and I have to say that I don’t blame her. I thought it was crazy raising my boys, but when I started getting grandbabies right and left, I realized four wasn’t a problem at all.” She looked at me and sighed before she said, “Try wrangling a dozen wild heathens all day, and then tell me that a stiff drink isn’t the only way to wind down.”

“We were angels,” Cooper argued.

“Lucifer was an angel once too,” Martha retorted. I wanted to redirect the conversation back around to Leia but wasn’t quite sure how. But then, as if she’d read my mind, Martha asked, “Did you enjoy breakfast with Leia yesterday?”

“I did. Do you know her through Ripley?”

“Oh no. I’ve known Leia since she was an infant,” Martha informed me. “She used to come over with her daddy all the time. I’d like to think I helped raise her along with my friend Sandra.”

“Where did everyone go today?” Cooper asked, changing the subject.

“They’re mapping out a benefit run,” Martha explained. “Not that it takes twenty men to do that, but I’m sure they’re having a good time.”

“Is it for Kari’s place?” Jonas asked.

“It is.” Martha looked at me and said, “Our friend Kari Duke has an apartment complex that helps people that have been abused feel safe as they find their way in the world.”

“Ripley lived there.”

Martha nodded. “That’s when I met him. Since then, my boys have become good friends with his parents, James and Charlene. My older grandchildren grew up with Ripley, but he’s always been closest to Leia.”

“He’s friends with some of the Connors too. I was out at their compound for a cookout and saw him there.”

Cooper nodded. “Yeah, his dad’s been working for Conner Construction since they moved to town.”

“I believe that’s where Addie found him a job while he was living at the apartments, and he’s been with the company ever since. He’s a good man, and I just adore his wife Charlene.” It was quiet around the table as Martha cut the potatoes she’d finished peeling, and after a couple of minutes, she asked, “Did Ripley introduce you to Leia?”

I laughed softly as I reached up and touched the sore spot on the side of my head. “In a roundabout way. She didn’t realize I was living on the property, and I spooked her while she was in the barn. She knocked me out and hog tied me before I had a chance to introduce myself.”

Jonas and Cooper burst out laughing as Martha crowed, “That’s my girl!”

When the men had stopped laughing, Jonas said, “She’s always been a pistol, that’s for sure.”

“She wasn’t always,” Martha said, a sad look clouding her face. “But she learned to be tough, even if it was after the fact.”

Jonas and Cooper both nodded, and I couldn’t help but ask, “After the fact?”

“That’s her story to tell, but you may have heard Ripley’s version of it already if you’re close friends.”

“I guess I don’t know.”

“Well, it goes back to what I said before. Some people just need killin’.”

6.

LEIA

“If anyone finds out how bad I am at keeping plants alive, they’ll never trust me with their animals,” I muttered to myself as I tugged on another weed, one of the million that had taken over my flower bed since the last time I had enough time to work outside.

“You know you can hire someone to have that done, right?”

I looked over my shoulder and frowned at my sister. “Are you looking for a new job?”

“Absolutely not,” Lexi said as she sat down on the porch steps a few feet to my left. I watched her study her nails for a second before she looked back at me and said, “I’m too pretty for manual labor.”

“Good try, hag. Everyone knows you’re the ugly sister,” I retorted as I went back to my work. “What are you doing out in the sunshine? Aren’t you worried about wrinkles and sunspots?”

“You’re just full of zingers this evening, aren’t you?”

“Sorry. Today was rough, but I shouldn’t take it out on you,” I admitted.

“You know what you *should* do?”

“Go inside and drown the little voice in my head that’s telling me I chose the wrong profession with a bottle of wine?”

Lexi burst out laughing. “You’ve always wanted to work with animals, and you wouldn’t be happy doing anything else.”

She was probably right, but I wasn’t willing to admit it right now. No matter how many animals I helped and how satisfying each win felt, losing an animal still hurt more.

“Leave the weeds to grow another day, and I’ll call Aspen and see if she’s got room in her schedule for another client. While I do that, you should take a shower and put on your dancing shoes so we can go eat some good food, listen to some live music, and drink a little too much while we dance ‘til we

can't feel our feet."

"I don't really feel like going anywhere, but I'm definitely not going to a bar, Lex."

"Neither am I. If you'd pay attention to what day it is, you'd know that there's a cookout tonight, and you're expected to be there."

"Oh shit," I mumbled as I sat back on my butt in the grass. I pulled my knees up, wrapped my dirty hands around my legs, and sighed. "I have to go and be sociable, don't I?"

"Nana and Gamma will be upset if you don't," Lexi reminded me.

"That's a low blow, even for you," I muttered. She was right, though. Nana and Gamma were our grandmothers, Sandra Marks and Martha Forrester, and they loved having all of their family members in one place, especially when they got to feed them and watch them have fun together.

"And you know Tinkie and Papa Smokey will want to dance with you."

"Stop," I said, drawing out the word. "Your guilt game is on point."

"That's because I'm a mother," Lexi said with a grin. "A good dose of mom guilt still works on Georgia even though she's a legal adult now."

"I haven't talked to her in a few days. How is she doing?"

"She's enjoying herself and her newfound freedom from all things Rojo," Lexi said sadly. "It terrifies me that she's so far away, but I feel a little better knowing she's living with other kids we can trust."

"I can see why you may be a little worried about her going off to college considering that's what you did and that's how she came to be."

"Shut it," Lexi growled.

"You can't tell me that hasn't crossed your mind - Georgia catching the eye of some hot professor and arranging for some clandestine meetings where they do the naked polka together while hiding their relationship from everyone for months and months."

"It's been almost twenty years, and you're still bitter about that?"

"A smidge," I said, holding my hand up with my finger and thumb about an inch apart. "Just a tiny little bit, but it's getting better."

"We've been having this conversation for two decades, Lee. Get over it."

"You know I had a crush on him when we were kids. I can never forgive you for stealing him right out from under me."

"You didn't even go to the school where he was teaching," Lexi argued.

"I've always had a thing for older men."

"You do realize how much it upsets Dad when we date someone older than

him, don't you?"

"Dad is barely thirteen years older than us, so it makes sense that this may happen occasionally."

Lexi giggled and then said, "I bet he was shocked when he found out who I'd been seeing."

"At the time, he was a little too busy worrying that you might die to give a shit," I reminded her.

"I was in a coma, so I luckily missed the majority of the drama," Lexi said sadly, knowing that she'd also missed the funeral of a beloved family member who had died in the crash that put her out for so long. She sighed and then smiled at me before she said, "Strolling down memory lane isn't going to do anything but make us later than we already are. Move your ass, Princess,"

I laughed as I stood up and said, "While I get ready, you can hire a kid who wants to make some money every week taking care of my lawn and flower beds." I wiped the dirt off my hands and then started brushing the grass off my butt as I said, "I give up."

"Your lawn thanks you," Lexi said as she looked at the weed-infested flower bed and the sad looking lawn. "I'm sure your neighbors will too."

"Have you walked past Margaret's house lately?" I asked with a mischievous grin.

Lexi lifted her shoulders and grinned as she let out a childlike giggle. "It stinks so bad!"

As I walked past my sister into the house, I laughingly asked, "I know, right?"

A few weeks ago I'd joined my "girl gang," as Ripley called them, to prank one of our neighbors who was a pain in the ass to everyone she met and had tried to get each of us in trouble with the HOA again and again. Just last week, she'd reported me to the HOA for letting Scoot's dogs walk without their leashes even though she knew for a fact that they were service dogs that behaved better than most humans and wouldn't leave Scoot's side for any reason, leashed or not.

Luckily, I was very good friends with the men who had built this neighborhood and were in charge of the HOA. They were three of the many Forrester kids I'd grown up with and just a few of the Forresters who lived in the neighborhood around me. They had learned early on not to take Margaret seriously, but that didn't deter her from being a complete nuisance every

chance she got.

I took a quick shower and then brushed out my hair to let it air dry, making sure I had a few ties on my wrist to put it up later if it started to annoy me. I didn't bother with makeup, just used my favorite moisturizer on my face and neck before I put lotion on the rest of my body. Once I'd dressed in a pair of old jeans that were so faded and worn that they were as soft as cashmere, a tank top, and a comfortable long sleeved flannel that I'd stolen from one of the guys more years ago than I'd like to think about, I pulled on my favorite boots and was ready to go.

It was a family cookout tonight, so there was no sense in dressing up. They probably wouldn't know what to say if I did, and I'd have to put up with endless teasing and questions about who I was putting the act on for anyway. Not that I'd dress up for him, but I did wonder what Waylon had been up to since I left him at the trailer yesterday morning after breakfast. He hadn't called me, but then again, I hadn't given him my phone number since I knew he could get it from Ripley if he really wanted it. I was sure that his offhand comment about taking me out on a date was just bluster since there were plenty of women in Rojo who would jump at the chance to spend time with a good-looking man like him.

I'd thought about him a lot today and tried to pretend I wasn't sad that I didn't get to see him when I went out to check on my animals this afternoon. I guessed I'd see him sooner or later since I went to the property at least once a day and spent hours working with my animals every chance I got.

He was probably out roaming around, enjoying the freedom he'd missed while he'd been in prison, just like Ripley had done for hours every day when he'd finally come home. I'd spent time with Rip every chance I got when he got out, listening to his stories about the things he'd seen while he was locked up and sometimes just enjoying the silence while I hung out with the man who had sacrificed so much of his life just to save mine.

I shook off those thoughts because I knew that if I let them consume me, I wouldn't enjoy a minute of the cookout I'd been looking forward to or the chaos and laughter that always took place when my extended family got together. I had managed to hold it together yesterday after my encounter with Waylon in the barn, but just barely. Even though I wanted to curl up in a ball and cry at the memories that assaulted me when I saw the large imposing figure looming over me yesterday morning, I hadn't done that. Instead, I'd defended myself even though what I'd done was a little extreme

for the circumstances, and I'd managed to get to safety like I hadn't been able to do before.

"You're not getting any younger, Princess Leia," my sister called out from downstairs.

I laughed as I grabbed my keys off the dresser as I walked out of the bedroom toward the stairs. I couldn't help but yell back, "Neither are you, Lex Luthor!"



WAYLON

"It's a lot to take in, isn't it?" a man asked as he sat down on the bench next to me. He tipped up the can in his hand for a sip, and I noticed he was drinking a soda rather than a beer like most everyone else. I was still trying to figure out a diplomatic way to get out of here without hurting Martha's feelings, so I wasn't quite sure how to answer his question when he laughed and said, "Generally, when you get a crowd this big acting wild, they start bringing out the bean bag launchers and riot gear. Do they still use the bean bags or have they moved on to pepper spray?" He laughed again and then answered the unasked question, "Before you ask, I would have known you were fresh out into the free world just by looking at you, but Martha told me and a few of the others that you may need a gentle reminder that no one here is gonna hurt you. You can relax instead of staying on defense as if your life depends on it."

"Not that I'm trying to hide it, but it may make it a little easier in situations like this if everyone didn't know I was in prison."

"Won't matter. A handful of us have served hard time, and more than that have done a few short stints in county over the years."

"Probably not for what I went down for."

"You'd be surprised, son."

"Waylon," I said as I stuck my hand out to shake his. "Waylon Voyles."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Waylon. I'm Tucker Martin."

"So, a few of you have your own club within a club, huh?" I asked, motioning toward the building beside us that proclaimed it the home of the Texas Kings MC.

“I suppose we do,” Tucker said with a slow nod. “It’s definitely not a club we want any of the next generation to join. There have been a few hiccups here and there.”

“Ripley told me about you.” Tucker nodded. “You and some of the others sat him down and told him what to expect and how to behave once he was inside.”

“We did. Did the same thing for one of our boys who went in a few years back. I guess it worked out for him because he’s home safe now. I understand you were a help to Rip when he was inside.”

“Cellmate.”

“You took him under your wing,” Tucker said simply. When I nodded, he smiled. “He’s good people. Said you are too.”

“I’d like to think so.”

“Hmm. I guess we’ll see.”

I burst out laughing before I asked, “What does that mean?”

“Everyone has the ability to be a violent person. Some are because they like it. Some are only when it’s necessary. Others will do everything to avoid it, but others seek out any little reason for it. Which one are you?”

I thought about it for a second before I said, “I don’t have a violent temper, but when pushed, I push back.”

“Was it violence that put you in prison?”

“It was vengeance and payment for something that was stolen that could never be replaced.”

“Like what?”

“My daughter’s innocence.”

Tucker raised his eyebrows before he asked, “Did you shoot him?”

“No. I beat him to death with my bare hands.”

Tucker's lips slowly tipped up into a smile, and he stuck his hand out. I put my hand in his, not sure why we needed to shake again but knew the answer when he said, “Welcome to the family, Waylon. You’re going to fit right in.”

“Why are you over here holdin’ hands with the new guy? Get your ass up and go play us a song,” another man ordered as he sat down on Tucker’s other side. “My old lady wants to dance, and we’re gonna need all of you to get busy so that can happen.”

“You know we don’t have to play anymore since the kids got started. They can play your song,” Tucker argued.

“Raven can’t do the harmonica part quite like you,” the older man argued.

“Get to it, boy. I’m not getting any younger.”

“Ain’t that the fuckin’ truth?” Tucker asked rhetorically. Another older gentleman walked our way, and Tucker asked, “Do you have a song request too?”

“You know the song I want. See if you can get Rain to sing with you.”

The second gentleman sat down on my other side and then turned to introduce himself, “I’m Hank. You must be Martha’s knight in shining armor.”

“I don’t know about all of that,” I said as I shook his hand. “Waylon Voyles.”

“The grumpy one over there is Grunt.”

The man didn’t say anything, just grunted, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Pleasure to meet you both.”

“You’ll get over it,” Grunt said. “So, what’s your story?”

“I moved to town yesterday, and I’m staying at my friend Ripley’s place.”

The men nodded, and I wasn’t sure what to say next. To fill the silence, I added, “I’ll be working for him too.”

“That’s good,” Hank said with a slow nod. “You married?”

“No.”

“Kids?” Grunt asked.

“One. Tori. She’s 27.”

“Cool.” Hank turned to look at me before he asked, “That’s one Bird and Summer never thought of when they were naming their girls.”

“What?”

“Bird and Summer,” Hank said as he pointed to a couple who were talking to Martha and her husband. “All their kids have bird names.”

“Okay,” I said, not sure where he was going with that information.

“Here he goes,” Grunt grumbled.

“Tori means bird in Japanese.”

The men and women who’d been sitting around strumming their instruments started playing, but I was too invested in this tennis match I was in the middle of to pay much attention.

“How the fuck do you know that?” Grunt said as he sat forward so he could see around me and glare at his friend. “Seriously. You don’t know Japanese.”

“So?”

“Her full name is Victoria,” I blurted, not sure where to go from here.

“Okay, genius, what does that mean in Japanese?” Grunt asked sarcastically.

“Nothing that I know of, but it’s the Latin word for victory. In Roman mythology, it was the name of the goddess of victory.”

“That all you got?” Grunt asked.

“The corresponding goddess in Greek mythology was named Nike, and that’s how the shoe company got their name.”

“Of course it was,” Grunt said as he leaned back again. He slowly shook his head before he added, “Fucker thinks he’s smart, but I bet his wife has to tie his shoelaces in the morning.”

“You’re so fucking old you can’t tie your own shoelaces without fear of throwing out your back.”

“I’ll show you old, asshole.”

“Bring it,” Hank retorted.

I leaned back against the table so it was easier to see the men bickering. I couldn’t help but smile as they started insulting each other’s manhood. I could tell by their easy banter that they’d been friends forever and wondered how they treated people they didn’t like if they spoke to each other this way. It was probably fascinating, and I had to admit it might be a little terrifying to be on the receiving end of their ire.

I heard someone call out Leia’s name and scanned the crowd of people to find her. I didn’t even think to say goodbye to the men who had been sitting with me. Instead, I stood up and started in Leia’s direction.

Behind me, I heard Grunt say, “Well, shit!” Hank laughed, and a few seconds later said, “Pay up, dickhead! I called it!”

I wondered what they had bet on, but I didn’t really care. Leia was just a few feet away now, and my heart was racing, only to stop on a dime the second her eyes met mine.

Without thinking, I reached out my hand and said, “Dance with me.”

7.

LEIA

I put my hand in Waylon's and let him lead me to the area where there were already a few people dancing. Since the band was warming up and testing out the waters with the other singers in the family who they didn't play with as often anymore, they started with a slow tune that was a favorite of Gamma and Papa Smokey. It always brought them out to the dance floor.

Rocky Forrester played the guitar riff as his cousin Memphis sang Vince Gill's song in his clear voice. Their fathers, Kale and Daughtry, joined in as they sang backup, strumming their guitars to accompany Rocky's lead. Scarlett and Raven, two of the Forrester girls, swayed to the music as they joined in with their instruments, the haunting sounds of their fiddles matching perfectly with Memphis' voice as he sang their grandparent's love song.

"Damn. They're good," Waylon said after he spun me around and then pulled me closer to his chest. "They play together often?"

"You could say that." I laughed softly before I said, "The kids have been listening to their fathers play together since they were born. When they got old enough, they started joining in and have turned it into a career."

"Are they just the house band, or do they play locally too?"

"I guess you could call them the house band. But they don't play locally much unless there's a wedding or a fundraiser they're asked to be part of."

"Why do I feel like you're making fun of me?"

"I'm not trying to, but it might feel that way."

"So, what am I missing here?"

"The older guys have been playing together for as long as I can remember, especially Sonny, Daughtry, and Kale. Tucker started playing with them when he moved to Rojo. The kids joined in gradually as they got older and then turned it into their profession when they were discovered playing at one of the bars the Kings own. They're called the Rojo Kings."

Waylon looked thoughtful as he listened to the music and then said, “I can tell they’re good enough to go pro.”

“Well, they did with some help from our friend London. She was a huge star and then . . .”

“London?”

“London Cunningham.”

“*The* London Cunningham?”

“That’s her,” I assured him with a smile.

“Holy shit.”

“Yep. She lives here in Rojo.”

“And she discovered this band.”

“A few years ago, yes.”

“So, they’re famous?”

“Very.”

“Holy shit.”

Waylon glanced at the musicians who were strumming their guitars as they discussed which song to play next. “I ate homemade cookies at the kitchen table with two of them just a few hours ago. I had no idea they were famous.”

“Well, it was their grandma’s kitchen, so they eat there as often as possible.”

“Tori is going to shit.”

“Who is Tori?”

“My daughter.”

Waylon twirled us around so that he was dancing backwards now and I asked, “How old is your daughter?”

“She’s 27.” I raised one eyebrow, and he added, “She was 5½ when I got locked up.”

“Where is she now?”

“She’s back in my hometown.”

“And you have a good relationship?”

“We do. We did.” He looked concerned when he added, “Something’s going on with her that she’s not ready to talk to me about yet.”

“How do you know?”

“I haven’t talked to her in person yet, just on the phone, but something’s off. If I could just see her face, I’d be able to tell what she’s lying about but . . .”

“How?”

“Everyone has a tell. That’s one of the first things you learn in business.

Figure that out, and they can never lie to you again.”

“Business?”

“Yes. I was a business owner before I went to prison.”

“That could mean all sorts of things. Be more specific.”

“Why does it matter?”

“I guess it doesn’t,” I said firmly, wondering why it was so important to me to know what he’d done in his past life when I knew he’d just gotten out of prison for a crime that had sent him to the same type of facility Ripley had been in for killing a man. Not that convicts didn’t mingle, but there were some places built for violent offenders, and that was where Ripley had served his time. That was also where he’d met Waylon.

“Obviously, it does. You think the business I was in may have been what led me down the path to prison.”

“Not really.” I thought about it for a second and then said, “It might have.”

“Condensed version: I worked on my family's ranch until I went to college and married my high school sweetheart. I earned my business degree while we rode the rapids of marrying young and having a baby. By the time we were out of college and back in our hometown, we never did anything but fight. She wanted to live in town, and I wanted to go back home to my family’s ranch. We divorced when our daughter was 2.”

“And then what happened?”

“I went back to work on the ranch, and she lived in town. Not long after we divorced, she married a man who was from town and quite a bit older than us. Everything seemed fine for a while, but when it all came to a head, I ended up in prison. He went in for a shorter stretch about a year after I did.” I narrowed my eyes, wondering why he was still being evasive even though I knew he’d been in prison for something that wasn’t exactly business-related. He could tell I wanted more information, so he finally explained, “My daughter was molested by her stepfather and his brother. I killed the brother and beat my ex-wife’s husband until I thought he was dead, but the paramedics got there in time to bring him back. My ex-wife stood by his side throughout his recovery, trial, and prison sentence. They’re still married to this day.”

“That’s just . . . oh, hell no. So, your daughter had to grow up with . . . “

“No. She lived with my parents. They made sure she got counseling, and she was never allowed to be alone with her mother or her husband again.”

“Is she okay now?”

“Tori doesn’t really remember what happened.”

“Good,” I whispered.

“As my parents aged, they stopped ranching and started using the land for other avenues of income instead.”

“What do they do now?”

“They died in a car accident seven years ago.”

“Oh no.”

“I had just seen them the week before, so I didn’t really get to say goodbye, but at least I will always have that visit to remember.”

I pulled him closer to me and hugged him as we danced, trying to give him comfort and ignore how good it felt to be in his arms. He’d done what my father would have done if anyone had ever touched me inappropriately, and I hated the fact that he’d spent so many years in prison for doing the world a service.

It was so hard to remember that he wasn’t the one for me. He needed to experience life in the free world, learn new things, and meet new people . . . not settle down and have babies, which is exactly what I wanted to do. The fact that he was exactly like the kind of man I could see myself falling for, handsome, smart, strong, funny - all the things I wanted in a partner, meant that I couldn’t get too comfortable around him.

I needed to guard my heart because I could fall for a man like Waylon, but I had a feeling he wasn’t ready for that. He couldn’t be. He’d missed so many things over the years, lost so much time with the people he loved, and was miles away from what I wanted in my life. I needed to get back to reality.

I stopped swaying and smiled up at him before I said, “Thanks for dancing with me, Waylon.”

“This song’s not over.”

“I know but I need to . . . well, I need to not be quite so comfortable, so I’m going to go walk barefoot on a bed of Legos and get a paper cut on the tip of my thumb.”

“Huh?”

I smiled at him and then pulled out of his arms. “I’ll talk to you later.”



WAYLON

I stood in the middle of the dance floor for a few seconds, confused about what had just happened and not quite sure what I had said that would make Leia behave so . . . oddly when a woman I'd never seen before walked up and took my hand.

"Dance with me, cowboy."

"Uh . . . sure," I said as she put her other hand on my shoulder.

"Do you like the band?"

"Yeah. They're great. Leia said some of them are stars."

"The world may see them that way, but they're just family to us."

"That's cool. I'm Waylon, by the way."

"I know who you are." I was about to ask her name when she said, "What did you say to Leia that set her tail feathers on fire and made her leave you standing out here alone?"

"I have no idea. I was just trying to figure that out."

"How old are you?"

"45."

"Hmm."

"What's your name?"

"Jewel."

"How are you related to . . . well, everyone?"

"Martha's my Gamma."

"I think she may be everyone's Gamma."

Jewel laughed and agreed, "She really is."

"Are you a Forrester or . . . What did that one guy call them? Kings' kids and Knights' kids? There was another name in there, too, but I can't remember."

"Probably Conner kid. Those are the ways we keep things separate even though there's quite a bit of crossover."

"Like marriages or . . ."

"Well, you're Ripley's friend, right?"

"Yes." I didn't even ask how she knew that because I guessed that in a family as close knit as this, word would travel faster than the speed of light.

"Ripley may be considered a Knights' kid since he was part of Kari's apartments, and his dad and Leia's dad are good friends, but then again, he may be part of the Conner kids since he grew up around that family. His father works for their company."

"Well, that's clear as mud."

"I'm a Kings' kid, and Leia is a Knights' kid, but we're all Martha's

grandkids.”

“Still a little murky.”

“My dad is Grunt . . .”

“I met him,” I interrupted.

“Well, he’s one of the Kings, and he’s also one of Papa Smokey’s best friends. He’s known Gamma and Papa since forever, and we were raised around all of the Kings. Leia’s dad is part of the Knights MC.”

“Got it.”

“So, when Leia has children of her own, they’ll be a little bit of everything.”

“Still mud, but sounds good.”

“Do you want children?”

Her abrupt change of topic threw me, but I answered anyway. “I have a daughter.”

“That wasn’t my question, but how old is she?”

“27.”

“So, that’s a no.”

“What exactly are you trying to ask me?”

“It’s not brain surgery, pretty boy. Do you want *more* children?”

“I’ve never really thought about it.”

“It’s good to know that you’re not completely opposed.”

“It is?”

“Sure,” Jewel said with a mysterious smile. She waved at a woman who had just sat down in a chair not far away. The woman set her wine glass on the table and then stood up. She walked out onto the dance floor, weaving around other couples until she made it to our side. Jewel took her hand off my shoulder and stepped back before she said, “It’s your turn.”

“That was quick.”

“It was like trying to fish in a chlorinated pool.”

The woman sputtered out a laugh before she put her hand where Jewel’s had been and smiled at me. “Ignore Jewel. She’s forgotten what it feels like to be punched in the face for running her mouth.”

Jewel walked off without another word, flipping us off over her shoulder as she went.

“Who . . . Uh . . .”

“I’m Emerald, and you must be Waylon.”

“I am.”

“Tell me about yourself, Waylon. What did you learn behind bars?”

I let out an uncomfortable laugh and asked, “What kind of question is that?”

“Depends on what kind of man you are. If you’re simple the answer is simple. If you’re complex then the answer will be too.” I didn’t say anything, and she smiled at me. “Which are you, Waylon?”

“I’d like to think I’m a smart guy, but I’m not a brain surgeon, if that’s what you’re trying to figure out.”

“We’ve already got one of those anyway,” she said vaguely. “So, talk to me. Tell me what prison taught you.”

I decided to throw her off with the truth. “That the next time I murder someone, I should hide the body somewhere it won’t ever be found.”

“Good call.” She didn’t even seem stunned by my answer. If anything, she seemed impressed. “Not that I’m condoning murder, mind you, but I do have to ask, what would it take for you to commit that crime again?”

“Looks like I dug my own hole on this one, didn’t I?” When Emerald was quiet, waiting on my answer, I sighed and decided to give her the truth. “I guess if someone hurt my daughter or someone I loved and respected, I might consider it, but I’d try to avoid full-on murder at all costs and just go with a beatdown before I made the rest of their life a living hell.”

“Oh. Vengeful *and* smokin’ hot. I like that.”

“This is the second weirdest conversation I’ve ever had.”

“I’m not shocked. Jewel usually wins that sort of competition.”

“Is that what this is?” I asked, confused about why these women had singled me out and why they were asking such intrusive questions. “It seems more like an interrogation.”

“You are smarter than you look.”

“I’m not sure why this is happening or even what exactly is going on right now,” I admitted.

“That’s okay, honey,” Emerald said as she patted my shoulder. “You’re pretty, so you don’t have to be smart too.”

“Shit,” I sputtered as Emerald stopped dancing and took a step back.

Another woman appeared next to us and lifted my hand out of Emerald’s before she spun around underneath my arm and then fit herself against my body as Emerald walked away.

“Hi, Waylon. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Is it?”

“How were your conversations with the others?”

I cleared my throat and then turned us to avoid another couple who were

standing still and swaying to the music. “I think Jewel wants to bear my children, and Emerald is going to call me if she ever wants help disposing of a body.”

“You’re going to work for Ripley, aren’t you?”

Another abrupt change of topic, but I was getting used to that. “I am. What’s your name?”

“I’m Holly.”

“So, we have a Jewel, an Emerald, and now a Holly. Why do I feel like I’m on an episode of Candid Camera?”

“Wow. You have been gone a while, haven’t you?”

I looked around before I asked, “Well, am I?”

“Nope. Are you going to keep your job with Ripley, or do you have other plans for the future?”

“Well, tomorrow, I’m going to sleep in and eat junk food all day.”

“So, you’re a lazy slob?”

“No!” I laughed at her directness and shook my head. The last fifteen minutes had been so confusing that my head was spinning. “I’m not a slob, but I’ve missed out on some things while I was away.”

“In prison. Did you take classes or learn a skill while you were there?”

“If you must know, I went into prison with a business degree and then earned a bachelor of science and got my doctorate in veterinary medicine.”

“Well, look at you,” Holly said, obviously delighted. “You’re a vet?”

“Not yet. I need to do an internship for two years and get experience in the field before I can apply for my license in Texas.”

“You’d need to do that under the supervision of an established vet, right? Kind of like a doctor?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. That’s interesting.”

“Why is that interesting?”

“Because Leia is a vet. So is Aunt Nichole. Leia did her internship at Nichole’s practice before she branched out and opened her own.”

“I’ve never met Nichole, and I had no idea Leia was a veterinarian.”

“Large animals are her specialty. Horses, specifically, but she works on cattle, too, as well as the occasional alpaca and llama. You know what I mean.”

“Of course.” When she was quiet for a few seconds, I asked, “Do you have any other questions for me, or is it time to pass me off to the next

interrogator?”

“It’s time to pass,” Holly said as peeked around my shoulder and nodded at someone. “You’re a good dancer, Waylon.”

“Thanks. I’m getting quite a bit of practice this evening. I never knew I’d be two-stepping as I ran the gauntlet and waited for my sentencing. It wasn’t anything like this when I dealt with the cops before I went to prison.”

“Because they were just doing their job and didn’t have a vested interest in the outcome of their interrogation.”

“Is that so? Why are all of you grilling me?”

“He’s all yours,” Holly said instead of answering my question as she put my hand in another woman’s and then tiptoed up to kiss my cheek. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Waylon. I hope to see you again soon.”

“I don’t know. I feel like I should change my name and go on the run now.” I looked down at the new woman in my arms as we fell into step with the rhythm of the song. “What’s your angle?”

“I’m Lexi.”

“Leia’s sister.”

“Yep.”

“Does she know that y’all are interviewing me for . . . I’m not sure exactly.”

“You think this is an interview?”

“Of sorts. I’m not sure if you’re feeling me out for Leia or trying to decide which one of you is going to use me as a human sacrifice.”

“It’s a little of both, I guess,” Lexi said honestly. “Does that scare you?”

“Not particularly. I’m either going to be devoured by four beautiful women or spending my life with another. Sounds like every man’s dream.”

“Which would you prefer?”

“Y’all are all beautiful, but none of you are my type.”

“What is your type? Warm and willing or . . .”

“I’m fond of girls with freckles.” Lexi’s smile grew until she was beaming at me. “Especially ones who are so fucking awesome that her friends would do anything for her.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“So, did I pass?”

“Well, Jewel didn’t make you cry, and Emerald didn’t stab you. Holly kissed your cheek, but that makes sense since she’s the nice one, and my vote is still pending.”

“What do I need to do to get your vote?”

“How would you feel about posing for a portrait?”

“Um. I guess I could do that.”

“Good. Now tell me something about yourself that no one else knows.”

“Like what?”

“Anything.”

“You want to know my darkest secret so you can hold it over my head?”

“I’ll be damned. You *are* smarter than you look.”

8.

LEIA

“Mind if we join you?” I looked up and smiled when I saw two of my mom’s good friends and women I’d known and respected my entire life, Nichole Grissom and Shannon Parker, come around the corner together. “We brought drinks *and* snacks!”

“Well, in that case, I don’t mind at all.”

Nichole plopped down on the other end of the bench I was sitting on and put her plate of food between us. Shannon sat on the ground in front of us and balanced her plate of food on her crossed legs. She opened the top of the thermos she’d been carrying and drank before she passed it to Nichole. I took it from Nichole when she was finished and lifted it to sniff the contents and realized it was some of Shannon’s famous margaritas.

They were famous because they were delicious and so strong that it didn’t take more than a glass or two to take a person beyond feeling a little tipsy straight into drunk territory.

“Why are you ladies hiding out behind the building instead of hanging out with everyone else?”

“Why are *you* hiding out back here?” Shannon asked before she took a bite of potato salad and then closed her eyes to moan in delight. “Martha did something different this time, and I’m loving it. Did you try the potato salad?”

“Not yet,” Nichole said before she picked up a fork full and studied it. “I wonder what prompted her to change her recipe.”

“I don’t know, but I like it almost as much as her usual one.”

“Why are you sitting out here all alone? This is our escape hatch.”

I laughed before I asked Nichole, “Do you guys sneak back here often?”

“God, yes,” Shannon said. “For years.”

“I’m sure the guys know where we are, especially since we’re not the only

ones who come back here. By now, Terra would usually already be back here with her book, Liberty would be chilling with her earbuds in, and Autumn would be doing some impossible yoga pose while she tries to find her zen after dealing with . . .” Nichole waved her hand over her shoulder and motioned toward the building and the parking lot beyond where the party was taking place before she continued, “All of that.”

“I’m positive they know since they’ve made it a little more comfortable for us over the years. We got these nice benches, they planted grass and keep it watered and mowed so it’s soft and comfortable for us, they put up this awning, and they even planted those trees over there so we could have some shade when the sun gets low enough that the awning doesn’t help.”

“The guys definitely know,” I confirmed.

“So, back to you. Why are *you* hiding out?” Shannon asked.

“There’s a guy . . .”

“Isn’t there always?” Nichole interrupted.

“I think I’m avoiding him because he scares me.” Nichole and Shannon both looked up with their brows furrowed in concern, but I shook my head with a laugh. “Not physically!”

“Good.” Shannon looked thoughtful for a second before she asked, “The new guy, right? Blonde, built, mysterious?”

“That’s the one.”

“He’s hot,” Nichole said before she took another bite of her burger.

“Where’d you find him, and why in the world are you hiding?”

“Hide-and-seek can be a fun game, but only when there aren’t too many mosquitos and you’re sure that no one else is going to find you,” Shannon said with a grin. Nichole just shook her head as I tried not to gag at the thought of Shannon and Grunt running around naked in their yard. “Don’t give me that look.”

“You guys better be careful. Elena likes to study on the patio, and if she ends up seeing something she shouldn’t, you’ll be the ones paying for her therapy.”

“Says the screamer who gets banged on her patio pretty regularly,” Shannon grumbled.

“No no no. Don’t . . . I can’t . . . Just no,” I said loudly as I shook my head.

“Remember that time she and Lexi heard you screaming and thought someone was being murdered? That was fucking hilarious,” Shannon said through her laughter.

“Those cops had no sense of humor,” Nichole muttered.

“What were we supposed to think? It was the middle of the night, and you were screaming like a cheerleader in a horror movie!”

“If you and Lex hadn’t been trying to sneak into your house after curfew, you’d have never heard us, so in essence, that makes it all your fault,” Nichole said with a fake smile. Shannon was laughing so hard, she could barely sit upright. I was so embarrassed, it felt like my face was on fire. “You knew it was your fault. That’s why the two of you avoided us for months after that fiasco.”

“I couldn’t look at you or Hank for months because I figured out what you were doing.” Nichole was laughing as hard as Shannon now, and I wanted to smack both of them. “If anything, you should be paying for *my* therapy.” After their laughter died down, Shannon asked, “Are you still as uptight as you used to be?”

“That may explain why she’s hiding from that virile specimen of deliciousness she was dancing with earlier.”

“What are you hens back here cackling about?” Terra Forrester asked as she rounded the corner with a beer in one hand and her e-reader in the other.

“Leia’s still whining about that time she thought Hank was killing me and got the cops involved,” Nichole explained.

“That was hilarious.” Terra started laughing and sat down next to Shannon on the grass. She set her book aside and picked up the burger that was left on the plate and took a big bite. “So, why are we talking about Hank railing Nichole when there’s a hot guy out front getting interrogated by your posse?” “What?”

“They’re taking turns dancing with him and giving him the third degree.”

“I thought they knew better than to play with their food,” Shannon muttered as she took her burger out of Terra’s hand. She shot her a glare and said, “Keep your nasty mouth off my burger, woman.”

“My mouth is not nasty.”

Shannon raised her eyebrow and asked, “Where did you and Kale disappear to earlier?” When Terra grinned Shannon shuddered and said, “That’s what I thought.”

“Are you avoiding Mr. Hot Pants so your girls can run him off?” Terra asked as she reached over and stole a bacon-wrapped jalapeno off of Shannon’s plate.

“No,” I said before I blew out a breath. “I’m avoiding him because he’s gorgeous and funny and I want to undo his zipper with my teeth.”

“That doesn’t . . . Okay . . . Why are you back here?” Shannon asked in confusion.

“He just got out of prison.” Terra raised one eyebrow in question, and I shook my head. “That’s not why I’m avoiding him.”

“Then what is it? Because I’d assume that if he’s been locked up for a while, getting your mouth anywhere near his zipper would be perfectly okay with him.”

“That’s exactly why. I’m not in the market for Mr. Right Now, I want to settle down and start a family. I’m not getting any younger and . . .”

“Shut it,” Shannon snapped.

“If you mention how old you are, then we’re gonna have to think about how old we are and beat you to death just to prove we still can,” Nichole threatened.

“Yep,” Shannon said at the same time Terra agreed, “Sure enough.”

“Let me get this straight. You want him, but you don’t want to play with him because you want forever. Right?”

“Yes.”

“And if you enjoy spending time with him, you’re afraid you’re going to get too close and he’s going to break your heart,” Shannon added.

“And you think he won’t want to settle down once he gets to know you?”

“I think I’m not willing to wait around for him to sow his wild oats so I can settle for sloppy seconds.”

“When did you meet him?”

“Yesterday.”

“And you’re already thinking about forever?” Terra asked incredulously.

“Bang him like a screen door, and if he doesn’t stick around, then everyone else will have to be content with *your* sloppy seconds,” Shannon suggested.

“Eww,” Nichole muttered.

“What? Men do it all the time, so don’t get me started on equality. That’s not just in the voting booth, sister, it goes all the way across the board.”

“You’re so old, you remember when women won the right to vote?” Terra asked with a grin. Shannon flipped her off, and after our laughter died down, Terra continued, “Honey, let me give you some insight into a prisoner’s mind.”

“You’d know,” Shannon mumbled. Terra licked her finger and touched the top of Shannon’s burger with a malicious grin, and I laughed at the look of disgust on her face. “Like I said, you’re nasty.”

“How he feels about his freedom depends a lot on what he was locked up for and how long he was inside. I’ll just say that worrying about where you’re going to live and how you’re going to support yourself is almost always at the forefront of a parolee’s mind, but second to that is how they want to spend their future. That goes toward what kind of man he was before because that doesn’t necessarily change while a person’s locked up.”

“What do you mean?”

“If he was a manwhore before he got locked up, then he’s probably still going to be. But if he was a steady family man before he went in, then he may still be in the market for that.”

“But you won’t know any of that unless you get to know him,” Shannon pointed out.

“What if I get to know him and he turns out to be an asshole?”

“Like all the other ones you’ve dragged around over the years?” Nichole asked. “There were some real winners in that pond you were fishing, sister. We all noticed.”

“You never got so close to them that it broke your heart when they went away,” Terra pointed out. “Why is this guy different?”

“I don’t know. There’s something about his eyes and the way he listens when I talk. He doesn’t just wait for his turn to talk. He actively *listens* to me.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“And he’s older. You know how I like older men,” I reminded them.

They laughed before Nichole pointed out, “I always thought you and Lex dated older men because of how irritated it made Rowdy when you introduced them to him.”

“That’s always hilarious.”

“I want a family,” I blurted.

“I did, too, and I got one even though Hank and I were probably about your age when we started.”

“His daughter is almost 30.”

“Honey, I had two sets of kids, the first of which were almost old enough to be the parents of the second. Age isn’t anything but a number, although, I will say that pregnancy gets more uncomfortable the older you get. It’s a lot harder to recover after pulling an all-nighter with a crying infant when you’re in your 40s than it is when you’re in your 20s.”

“What if he doesn’t want more kids?”

“Honey, you’re not dragging him down the aisle yet, you’re just getting to know him. And if you happen to do that after a few mind-blowing orgasms, all the better.”

“Talk to him, feel him out in more ways than one. If he’s not the guy, then hit the next button,” Terra said with a shrug.

“She says that, but she married the first man she encountered after she got released,” Nichole pointed out.

“You just made my point for me,” Terra said with a grin. “You never know what’s gonna happen, Leia. Take the bull by the horns . . .”

“Or the penis!” Shannon interrupted as she hefted her thermos in the air with a grin.

“If he’s not the one, then move on. But what if he is?”

“So, I should just go out and do all the naughty things I want, and in the process, get to know him and see if he’s a keeper?”

“She’s got it, ladies!” Terra cheered.

“You’re a scientist at heart. I know this because you’re a lot like me,” Nichole said with a serious expression. “Consider this as if you’re doing a scientific test. Set parameters. Stick to them. If you need to change the parameters later, do that, but don’t get lost in the process. Keep some distance so you don’t get hurt, but open your mind to what could be just in case it’s there in the details. See if you’re compatible. If you are, then work towards a solution that will get you the family you want. If you aren’t, then find another test subject. It’s as simple as that.”

“You make the rules, honey,” Terra reminded me. “You’ve got the cookie, and you get to decide who has the opportunity to enjoy it. While you do that, feel him out and see if he’s the man you want him to be. If he isn’t, then send him on his way.”

“Scientific,” I muttered to myself. I got lost in thought while the ladies talked about something else and then stood up abruptly when I made my decision.

“I’m going to do it!”

“Ride that cowboy off into the sunset?” Shannon asked.

“Yep. I’m old enough to know how to protect my heart while I let my body have what it wants, and if something comes of this, then that’s just a bonus.”

“Go get him, tiger!” Nichole cheered.

“Leave him limpin’, sweetheart,” Shannon yelled right before I turned the corner to go around to the front of the building.

I could hear them laughing and carrying on behind me for a few seconds

before the sound of the band starting back up covered up the noise. Once I turned the corner, I stopped to scan the crowd and saw Jewel dancing with Waylon in the middle of the floor.

From what Terra said, I assumed the other girls had already had their chance for interrogation and thought it was a good sign that Waylon hadn't run screaming for the hills yet, especially since he was dancing with Jewel. She could be . . . abrasive.

I walked right up to the couple and tapped Jewel's arm. She glanced over her shoulder and grinned at me before she said, "It's about damn time you got back out here, chickenshit."

"It's always a pleasure to see you . . . leave, Jewel," I said with a smile.

"Great dancer, good rhythm, easy banter, quick responses . . . he scored an eight out of ten on the Jewel test," she said as she took a step back.

"What questions did I get wrong this time?"

"This time?" I asked.

"This was my third round of questioning. The other girls got two each."

"And you're still here?" I asked incredulously as I glanced at Waylon's face.

"I should get a few bonus points for that, don't you think?" Waylon asked Jewel. She gave him a regal nod, and he smiled. "Awesome. I'll see you on Wednesday?"

"I'll meet you there at eight o'clock. Office opens at nine."

"Want me to bring you a coffee from that truck Leia and I went to yesterday?"

"White chocolate salted caramel mocha with an extra shot and whipped cream," Jewel said as she was walking away. "And pick out a good pastry for me while you're there."

"Yes, ma'am," Waylon said with a nod as he took my hand and pulled me closer. We had just started moving when he looked down with a wide-eyed expression and said, "She's terrifying. I've been through some shit in my life, Leia, and I have to tell you . . . the last thirty minutes or so ranks right up there with some of the worst."

"Sorry about that."

"No, you're not." He laughed before he added, "They're going to go compile their notes and then chant over the doll Holly is going to make with the hair she pulled out of my scalp while we were dancing. Either that or she's going to leave it at a crime scene. I'm not sure which scenario is scarier."

"She pulled your hair?"

“She said there was a bug in it but . . .” I burst out laughing as his voice trailed off. “I think the government should recruit them to teach cops about interrogation because I’ve had my fair share of run-ins with investigators, and they weren’t nearly as thorough as those women.”

“We’ve been through a lot together over the years, so we’re . . . protective.”

“Uh huh. They may not realize it, but their questioning gave me a lot of insight into you and what’s important.”

“Oh, really?”

“You’re not a one and done kind of woman, and you tend to bring in strays of the two-legged variety almost as often as you find ones with four. You hold on too long even when you know there’s no future in it because you’re soft-hearted, but you’re also a little afraid of what the man’s reaction will be when you break it off.” I felt my heart start to race at his insight because it was alarmingly accurate. “You work too much, play too little, and consider a solid nap the highlight of most days. You’re possibly anemic and should take a multivitamin, you think you’re stronger than you are and need to ask for help more often than you do, you’re a loyal friend who they can rely on no matter what problem they’re having, and someday you’ll make a great wife and mother.”

“Did you interrogate them or did they interrogate you?”

“You get the best information when the person you’re talking to doesn’t realize you’re fishing for it.”

“I’ll be damned,” I whispered. Emerald, Holly, Lexi, Jewel, and myself were known for being able to get information out of anyone when we worked together, each of us playing to our own strengths to glean details about whatever we were trying to figure out from our unsuspecting targets. We’d done this since we were teenagers and had never run across someone who learned as much about us as we did about them.

“You also think that I need some time to spread my wings, so to speak, and sleep with half the women of town to make up for all the sex I missed while I was locked up.”

“That’s what Ripley did.”

“But your friend Hawk didn’t do that, did he?”

“Um . . . no, but there were extenuating circumstances there that . . . He went to prison in love and came out just as in love but full of anger from a misunderstanding and . . . Why am I telling you this?”

“Because according to two out of four of your girls, I’m easy to talk to.”

I laughed softly and said, “Everyone knows they were grilling you, and now they’re watching us to see what happens.”

“Have you come to a decision about me or do I need to make myself scarce while you consult with the rest of your gang?”

I smiled and said, “If they had something horrible to tell me about you, they’d have already dragged me off to do shots somewhere alone while we plotted your demise.”

“That’s what I figured. So, what’s your decision? Are we going on a date, or are you going to dump me before I even get a chance to wow you with my conversation skills and charming personality?”

“I think I’d like to go on a date with you at some point, but first, I’d like to propose a different option.”

“What’s that?”

“We give this thing a time limit. No restrictions as to what we do during this set amount of time, and that will give you the opportunity to make up for some of the experiences you missed while you were in prison, scratch the itch that’s been bothering me for quite a while now, and also help us get to know each other in a different way.”

“Why the time limit?”

“Because if we know there’s a set ending, then neither of us will get hurt when it’s over.”

“Ye of so little faith,” Waylon mumbled. In a louder voice, he asked, “When do you propose this test run should start?”

“Well, I’ve got another vet taking after-hours calls for me this weekend, so we could plan to have our first date tomorrow.”

“I thought you said you wanted me to scratch an itch,” Waylon said with a grin. “Are you itching to be taken out to dinner or something more . . . personal?”

“I can buy my own dinner,” I sassed.

“So, you’re gonna sleep with me?”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“You’re not good for me. I’m not a one-night stand kind of woman, and you’ve just gained your freedom and need to spread your wings for a while before you settle down - if you ever do.”

“You think so, huh?”

“I do.”

“But you’re going to give me one chance at heaven before that happens?”

“As long as it’s within the parameters of the agreement, I think we’ll probably sleep together at least once.” A little voice in my head groaned and then yelled at me to shut up. I wasn’t sure if it wanted me to be quiet because I might interfere with seeing Waylon naked or because it was afraid that if I did sleep with him, I’d never be able to get past it.

“Well, that’s good to know. Any chance you’ll let me know when that’s gonna happen so I can be prepared?”

“What? Do you need to shave your legs or . . .” Waylon burst out laughing, and it was such a wonderful sound I had to hear it again. “I know what it is. You just want to make sure you’re wearing decent underwear so you’re not embarrassed when I rip your clothes off.”

He laughed again, and the little voice in my head that had been screaming at me for blurting out that I wanted to sleep with him was quiet for a second before it started encouraging me to keep this conversation going.

“Make sure you exfoliate and moisturize before this happens. No dry skin. It’s hell on a person’s tongue.”

Waylon started to sputter and tilted his head forward to rest against mine. The hand that had been between my shoulder blades slid farther down and pressed closer, giving me no choice but to mold our bodies together. Once I was close enough to suit him, he asked, “Since you’ve decided that you’re going to sleep with me, I need some details so I can prepare.”

“Like what?” I tried to suppress the shiver that his low voice so close to my ear caused but couldn’t mask it.

I heard him chuckle before he asked, “When you say at least once do you mean one time or one night because there’s a big difference there.”

“What’s the difference?”

Waylon hissed in a breath before he whispered, “If you don’t know how different those scenarios can be, I’m going to enjoy teaching you.”

“Teaching me what?” I whispered.

“If you tell me it’s just going to happen once, then that means I’ve got to make it last for hours. If you say it can last one night, then I’ll make sure you come over and over again, and I’ll be able to get off at least three, maybe four times before we go to sleep, then I can fuck you again when we wake up.”

Waylon nipped my earlobe with his teeth and suggested, “Or you could mean one weekend and that puts things into a whole different perspective.”

It was difficult, almost impossible, but I was able to get my brain engaged

enough to say, “I’ll have to take my time to decide which scenario it’s going to be.”

“You do that, Slugger,” Waylon murmured against my ear. “I’m content just like this for a while.”

“You’ve got to take me on a date first.”

“I can do that.”

“And you’ll have to kiss me when you drop me off. The kiss is going to weigh heavily in my decision-making process.”

“As it should.”

“Well, there you go. Nothing’s set in stone until I get that first kiss.”

“I’m not one to put off the inevitable,” Waylon said mysteriously before he quickly spun us around and then dipped me back over his arm and sealed his lips to mine.

I forgot that the only thing holding me up was his arm and that we were surrounded by friends and family. The only thing I was aware of was the fire his kiss ignited inside me. It was as if I’d touched a live wire and every nerve ending in my body started singing at the same time. My toes curled in my boots, my knees went weak, my hips shifted up as if seeking the prize they knew would be there if I just asked, and my hand wrapped around the back of his neck to hold him in place and make sure this feeling kept coursing through me for as long as possible.

That voice in my head was quiet, but I knew she was thinking that this man was a drug I couldn’t afford to get addicted to. But like any junkie, I told myself that once would be enough. Just a taste would tide me over. Just a nibble would get me through the lonely nights in my future while I waited for the right man to come along.

When the kiss was over, he didn’t lift me up again. Instead, he held me there, suspended over his arm as he stared down into my face.

“I don’t like rules, Leia, and I’m not good with deadlines, but if you’ll spend the weekend with me, I promise you that neither of us will regret it.”

“Just the weekend. It ends Sunday night.”

“Monday morning.”

“And then it’s over?”

“That’s going to be up to you.”

“When do we start?”

“Honey, neither of us were willing to admit it at the time, but we started when you came back to rescue me after you kicked my ass.”

9.

WAYLON

I leaned back in my chair and soaked in the laughter around me. The band had taken a break not long ago, and there was music playing over the speakers that blended with the sound of people mingling and a hundred conversations going on at once. It made a pleasant hum that you could almost feel in the air and made me feel as if I'd gone back in time to when my family had gatherings at our ranch, each woman arriving with a covered dish and the men pulling coolers full of drinks to share.

And just like back then, there were kids of all ages running around together, comfortable and safe in the relaxed atmosphere where all of the adults kept an eye on the children, whether they belonged to them or not.

I had already met so many people that there was no way I could keep all of their names straight. Even though they'd pointed out who their parents or children were, it was all a blur. I could tell that it didn't matter who belonged to who, though, because this was a huge family of people, whether they shared DNA or not.

Ripley had talked about gatherings like this, and over the years, I had heard stories about many of the people I'd met today, but there were as many stories as there were people, and I couldn't keep *them* straight either. I hoped that I'd get to know more of them over time. I knew that hinged on whatever happened between me and Leia. I'd shocked her with that kiss. Hell, I'd shocked myself.

It wasn't like me to make a spectacle of myself, especially in such a huge crowd of strangers, considering that I'd done my best to stay out of the spotlight for the last twenty plus years while I'd been locked up. But when I'd stood Leia back up and got back into rhythm to finish dancing to the song the band had been playing, it felt like every eye was on us, watching and waiting to see what would happen next.

I could tell by some of the speculative looks on the faces around me right now that my future in Rojo - and possibly my ability to breathe - hinged on how things with Leia and I played out. That didn't bother me nearly as much as the hope that was blooming in my chest. It was something I hadn't felt since I'd met my ex-wife, and we had a whirlwind romance that resulted in marriage and parenthood much more quickly than it should have. That romance had fizzled out for more than a few reasons, but mainly because she and I were too different, which was fun and exciting at first but was ultimately our demise.

I longed for what my parents had built together, a life on the ranch surrounded by family and friends, a place where our children could run wild and free like I had when I was a kid. She wanted a house in the city, not the small town where we'd grown up, and my reluctance to go anywhere else was part of what ended us. There were other factors, too, but that had been a nail in the coffin. I found it odd that she'd stayed there, not just after our divorce, but after everything had come to light about her husband and his brother. It hadn't been a secret why I'd gone after those men, and from what my parents had said over the years, life for my ex-wife wasn't very easy even though her family still lived there. After her husband was released from prison and had to register as a sex offender, life got even trickier, but I felt better knowing my daughter didn't have to be around them.

My parents had raised Tori a little differently than they'd raised me, not because she was a girl, but because they were in a different season of their life and weren't ranching anymore. Progress had given my parents the opportunity to have an easier and more dependable lifestyle that they enjoyed as they raised my daughter. Tori and I would benefit from their choices from now on, as would the generations after us.

But that meant Tori was much more pampered than I'd been as a child. The experiences she'd had growing up were different from mine, but we'd been raised by the same people and learned all the things that mattered most in life: love, kindness, loyalty, and family.

I'd always wanted a large family. Before my life blew up, I was sure I'd meet another woman, and we'd have children together. I had wanted a houseful of boys and girls who were close in age and would always have each other to rely on instead of growing up alone like Tori. Missing out on raising my daughter and giving her siblings who would be her best friends through the rest of her life was one of my biggest regrets.

But talking to Leia's girl posse had opened my eyes to the possibilities ahead. I had gleaned enough information from them to know that even though Leia was close to 40, she still wanted children. She intended to have at least two however she could, whether that was surrogacy, in vitro, or adoption. I'd also learned that when Leia made her mind up about something, she rarely strayed from her decision. That meant if I was going to get close enough to her to stick around, I'd have to be open to the opportunity of parenting again at my age.

The thought didn't scare me nearly as much as I'd have thought it would. Of course, I barely knew Leia, and I didn't have my life together enough to even think of bringing another child into the world, but it was now on my radar. Money wasn't a problem, so I could have a stable home as soon as I found a house that suited me. I wouldn't have to worry about being able to afford the expense of a child or two - or maybe even four, like I'd originally planned. However, I'd need a woman in my life to do that, or I'd need to choose another route like Leia.

But if the sparks of attraction between me and Leia turned into a flame of love that consumed us both, we just may be able to make that future together.

I was relaxing in my chair with my arm across the back of Leia's as I let my mind wander with thoughts of the future as I studied the people around me. As she leaned back, she pulled her hair out from behind her and flipped it over her shoulder. It whispered across my arm and tangled in my fingers. I held onto a lock of it, the silky softness something I hadn't felt in years. One of the million things I'd missed while I was in prison was softness - whether it was the material of the clothes I wore or the sheets where I laid down at night, nothing was soft. But then again, I'd never felt anything as soft and silky as Leia's hair, even before I went inside.

I was absentmindedly rubbing the strands between my fingers when I felt someone's eyes on me. That was a skill I'd honed in prison: the awareness I felt when someone's attention was on me. I looked around to see why my senses were tingling now. There were three men sitting at a table across the way, and I noticed they were studying me and my relaxed posture next to Leia. They didn't look aggressive, per se, but I sensed that they could be in an instant. They looked alike, and I assumed they must be brothers, most likely either members of the MC that was hosting tonight's get-together or family of someone who was.

Emerald and Jewel broke away from the small group of older people they'd been talking to, a group that included Grunt, the man I now knew was Jewel's father. They walked over to the table where the men sat and that took their attention off of me. The one who looked like the oldest reached up and pulled Emerald onto his lap. She laughingly pushed at his shoulder as she pretended to try and get away. He wasn't having any of that, though, and pulled her closer before he gave her a sound kiss that stopped her laughter and caused Jewel and the other men to smile at the couple.

I heard Leia sigh, and when I glanced at her, I realized she was watching the same scene play out.

"I take it that's Emerald's boyfriend? She wasn't wearing a ring so . . ."

"Yeah," Leia interrupted. "Those are some of the Forresters. Emerald is sitting in Adam's lap, and they're new."

"New?"

"Well, we all grew up together. Holly, Lexi, me, Emerald, and Jewel are the oldest girls in our circle of family, at least here in Rojo, and Adam, Heath, and Joshua are the oldest guys. So is Spruce, but he's not here since he's on call tonight. We were always thrown together at events like this, and we're very close. Adam and Emerald recently took things to another level, and they're together now."

"That's a good thing, right?"

Leia looked away from the group and smiled at me before she said, "That's a great thing. They've been best friends for years, and now they're even more."

"Have you ever dated any of them?"

"Not officially, no. There were times that it seemed like something might be growing between us, but life got in the way, and I'm glad it did. I wouldn't change how close I am with the guys for anything, and I know that trying to remain friends after dating takes a lot of work. Emerald's ex-husband is a member of the Kings' extended family, and so is Jewel's oldest son's father. That has made for some uncomfortable situations, but they've all worked through them. It makes me glad that I never had to do that."

"Since I got interrogated by your sister and the other women earlier, I guess I can expect another trial by fire from those guys too."

"Probably not directly, but it would be naive of me to think they'll leave you alone. You're in good with Gamma, though, and that holds a lot of weight."

"If the rest of these people decide I'm not worthy, what are you going to do?"

Leia laughed before she said, “Their opinions matter, but I’m my own person. I’ll admit that I’ve made choices that they didn’t agree with that I’ve ended up regretting, but I like you and I like what I know about you so far and that is more important than anyone else’s opinion.”

“You don’t know me very well yet, so I guess the jury is still out.”

“I know that you were very restrained in the way you reacted after we first met, and I appreciate that more than you know.” Leia looked thoughtful for a second before she said, “If Ripley hadn’t assured me that I was safe with you and you wouldn’t hurt me, I wouldn’t have gone back into that barn to untie you. I would have made you lay there until someone else could come.”

“I’m glad you were the only one to see me in that position.”

“Embarrassed you got taken out by a girl?”

“No. Impressed, but not embarrassed. However, I would hate for anyone else’s first impression of me to be half-naked and hogtied on the barn floor.”

Leia barked out a laugh and then sniffed as she put her hand over her mouth to try and hide her smile. “Go ahead and laugh. I’m sure it was quite a sight.”

“It was.”

“It gave me some insight into what I can expect if you get angry, so I guess I should mind my p’s and q’s.”

“You better,” Leia said with a grin. “Next time, I might leave you tied up for even longer.”

“Maybe I’ll tie you up instead.”

Leia shook her head as a haunted look came over her face. “No.”

“Okay,” I said softly, knowing instantly that I had hit a sore subject for her and immediately outraged at the thought of someone hurting her. “I won’t mention it again.”

“If we . . . When we . . .” Leia let out a rush of breath and then inhaled deeply through her nose. She held it in for a few seconds before she pursed her lips and slowly blew it out. I watched as she did that a few more times and didn’t move or say anything while she got herself together. Finally, she said, “I need to set some ground rules if we’re going to . . . be together.”

“And I’ll follow ‘em,” I assured her.

“Don’t put your hands on my neck or my mouth and . . . no spanking. Not even just a random slap on the ass when you pass by. And don’t hold my hands still or grab my wrists.” I slowly nodded as she took another breath in and then slowly blew it out. “Sometimes, I have nightmares, so it may be

best if you . . . um . . . When I wake up, I may not realize I'm safe."

"You'll always be safe with me, Leia," I said softly as I let go of her hair and rubbed my hand in circles on her back. While she was breathing, she'd sat forward and become so tense that her entire body was vibrating. I felt her slowly start to relax when I assured her, "I'll follow all the rules, and if I ever do anything that spooks you, all you've gotta do is tell me to stop and I will. Immediately. Okay?"

"I'm not broken, Waylon."

"Slugger, seeing your reaction to what I said and watching you pull yourself together tells me that you're the most put-together person I've ever met."

"Thanks, but it's really an illusion."

"I don't think so. But while we're getting things out in the open, I guess I should tell you some of my quirks."

"You mean I can't spank you either?" Leia asked with an uncomfortable laugh.

I could tell she was trying to lighten the mood but was still uncomfortable, so I gave an exaggerated shudder and said, "Nope. No spanking, and I'm not a big fan of small spaces. Oh, and considering my history over the last twenty years and what happened yesterday, I'd prefer not to be tied up either."

Leia burst out laughing, and I thought it was the prettiest sound I'd ever heard.

The band had started playing again while we were talking, and I wanted to lighten the mood even more. "Will you dance with me?"

"Are you gonna do that Rhett Butler thing over your arm again?"

"I'd like to."

Leia smiled. "I wouldn't mind it."

"You just want me to kiss you."

"Pfft. I just want to watch you throw out your back, old man."

"Old man, huh?"

Leia stood up and put her hand out toward me. "Come on, big guy. Show me what you can do."

I took her hand, but before I stood up, I flipped it over and kissed her knuckles. I watched her face as I did it and saw her smile before I promised, "I plan on it."



“Did you tell your friends we were leaving?”

Leia didn't answer with more than a growl of frustration since she was too busy trying to put on her seat belt. I'd been watching her try to insert the buckle into the latch for at least two minutes, and she was starting to get worked up. I couldn't help but smile at the look of concentration on her face as she worked but guessed she was near the end of her rope when she lifted the buckle up so she could glare at it before she tried again.

Once I helped her guide the pieces together, she let out a grateful sigh and smiled at me. “You're so cute, Waylon.” I burst out laughing as I put the truck in gear and glanced over at her once I'd pulled out onto the road to take her home. “You are, you know. Not in a teddy bear cuddly kind of cute way but in a manly way.”

“I didn't realize that manly and cute went together.”

“We're gonna go together. For a weekend. And we're gonna start that adventure as soon as you take me home. I'm gonna rip your jeans off with my teeth and . . . What is it about a good pair of Wranglers on a cowboy that's just . . . hmmm.”

“How much did you have to drink tonight, babe?”

“Not much.”

“Seems like you may have over-imbibed.”

“Imbibed. Imbiiibed.” Leia giggled. “That's a funny word. You know what else is a funny word?”

“Bumfuzzle.”

“Huh?”

“My grandma used that word to say she was confused.”

“I like that! I'm going to use that word from now on.” She repeated the word a few times and then asked, “You know what *other* word is funny?”

“Hit me with it.”

“Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia,” Leia said carefully. “It's the fear of long words. How fucked up is that? Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia.”

“That's a mouth full.”

“That's what she said,” Leia said with a giggle. “Get it? You get it, right?”

“Damn. You are drunk.”

Leia put her hands up in front of her and held them about six inches apart as she explained, “About this much.” She moved them a little farther apart and said, “No. Probably this much.”

“I’d say at least that much,” I agreed.

“I’m not so drunk that I’m gonna miss the opportunity to get you out of your pants, mister!”

“We’ll see,” I hedged. Leia was quiet for a few minutes, and I glanced over at her to see if she was still awake and found her studying my face.

“You’re a very handsome man, Waylon.”

“And you’re a beautiful woman.”

“Thank you,” she said primly. “I think you’re lying because you just wanna get laid.”

“I thought you were beautiful before you smacked me upside the head, so I don’t think that’s it at all.”

“I don’t do my hair. Ever.”

“If I were a woman, I wouldn’t waste time doing that shit either.”

“I only like comfortable clothes, so I’m not gonna wear some scratchy shit just because I want you to think I’m pretty. And I don’t do heels. I walk around like a drunk giraffe when I try. And I’m not wearing makeup either.”

“Good.”

“Why’s that good?”

“Because if you wore makeup, I wouldn’t be able to see those freckles.”

“Gah! Freakin’ freckles. They’re *everywhere!*”

She started muttering ‘freakin’ freckles’ over and over again, and I knew I’d lost her down another rabbit hole, but that was okay. I wouldn’t be able to add much to the conversation right now anyway because all the blood had rushed to my dick at the thought of running my hands over her smooth skin as I used my tongue to play a wicked game of connect-the-dots.

Leia yawned loudly before she said, “I need some coffee.”

“It’s after midnight, Slugger. I think you probably need to sleep more.”

“Nope. No sleep. We have a limited amount of time before this thing we’ve got going runs out. Hold on. Did I say that right?”

“Why the time limit?”

“Because I think you’re hot, and I’m not into sloppy seconds.” I burst out laughing, and Leia frowned. “You’ve been locked up for a long long time, and you’re gonna need to explore all the vaginas. All of ‘em. But I think you’re hot and the back of my knees tingle when you kiss me, so I want more of that before you get all used up and nasty while you make up for lost time.”

“You think that’s what I’m gonna do, huh?”

“Yep. Most likely.”

“I wasn’t a manwhore before I went to prison. As a matter of fact, all I wanted to do was settle down and raise a family; I just hadn’t found the right woman to do that with.”

“Well, I may not be much but . . .”

“Why do you say that?” I asked after her voice trailed off.

“Look around you, hot stuff. I’m not the prettiest girl in the room. I’m not even the funniest. Holly’s pretty and sweet. Jewel’s smart and . . . Well, she doesn’t seem sweet, but she’s just . . . she’s a jewel in the rough. That’s what she is.”

“She’s a lot.”

“Uh huh. And so is Emerald. She’s smart too. And gorgeous. Lexi’s beautiful and talented. You should see some of her paintings. She used to make such amazing art.”

“She doesn’t anymore?”

“Nope. Not since the accident,” Leia said sadly. She perked up and said, “Where was I? Oh, yeah. So, they’re smart, funny, and really beautiful. I’m not any of those things. I’m just me.”

“I think you’re all of those things.”

“Nope. I’m broken. Pretty things don’t have cracks like I do. You break the china, and no matter how hard you try to glue it together, there are always gonna be cracks.”

“Maybe those cracks give you character, kind of like your freckles.”

“Freakin’ freckles! Oh look! That’s my house!” I parked the truck in her driveway, and Leia threw open her door. She tried to get out of the truck but was still buckled in and couldn’t seem to understand what was keeping her from sliding to the ground. “What the fuck, Chuck?” I laughed as I walked around the truck and was still laughing as I reached around to unbuckle her seatbelt. “Damn thing’s broke!”

“Give me your keys, Slugger,” I said as I helped her out of the truck.

“Nope. There’s a code. 9125.”

“Not sure you should give that out to just anyone,” I said as I took her arm and led her up to the door. “Could be dangerous.”

“I’m dangerous! I’ve been trainin’ for years, you know. I could whoop your ass if I had a mind to.”

“Probably. I’m not one to hit girls, so I don’t think I’d give you much of a challenge.”

“Better not,” Leia slurred before she yawned loudly. She punched in the

code to unlock the door, and when her fingers fumbled trying to turn the knob, I took over. Once I pushed the door open, she staggered through it and then bounced off the door frame as she walked into the kitchen. She threw the refrigerator open and pulled out a bottle of water before she said, “Better hydrate, buddy. I’m ‘bout to wear you out.”

“I’m kind of hungry,” I lied. “Why don’t you sit down and let me make you something to eat before we get right on that.”

“A man that cooks.”

“A man that heats shit up is more like it,” I muttered as I studied the contents of her fridge. I decided that a grilled cheese wasn’t beyond my skill set, so I pulled out everything I’d need to make Leia a snack that might help sober her up or at least derail some of her hangover symptoms in the morning.

I turned around to set the butter and cheese on the island and realized I was too late.



I had just found a comfortable position and was drifting off to sleep when I heard a beeping noise before the front door flew open. I opened my eyes and was about to sit up when I saw one of the Forrester brothers I’d met at the cookout standing at the end of the couch.

“Where’s Leia?”

“She’s in her room.”

The man took off up the stairs, and I sat up and put my feet on the floor, pretty sure I had a good idea of what was going on. In less than a minute, he came slowly back down the stairs and then walked into the living room to stare down at me.

“We good?” I asked him.

“She didn’t tell us she was leaving, and her truck’s still at the clubhouse.”

“Do you want me to leave?” I asked.

The man looked at the stairs and then the front door before he said, “I guess not.”

“I’m not the kind of man that would take advantage of a woman like that,” I assured him. “Although, I get why you might think so, considering you don’t know anything about me.”

“Obviously, she wants you here from what she told the girls.”

“Shit. What’s your name again? I’m sorry. I met so many people today that . . .”

“I’m Heath.”

“Well, Heath, if it would make you feel better, I can go ahead and leave.”

“You can stay,” Heath said as he crossed the room and sat down in the recliner. “And so will I.”

10.

LEIA

I woke up to the sound of men's voices coming from downstairs and slowly rolled over onto my back as I cataloged my aches and pains. Of course, my head felt like I was a victim in a horror movie and the bad guy had left his ax embedded in my skull. My stomach was churning like it was the eye of a hurricane, which explained why it felt like the bed was rocking and spinning at the same time.

I realized that there was a good reason people my age didn't drink like I had last night. Not just because we were smarter, but because we had learned to fear the hangover and all it entailed. Everything hurt. I could feel my heartbeat in my pinky toes, and I felt like someone was stabbing my head with porcupine quills.

"If you move again, I will smother you with a pillow," I heard a muffled voice say from my left.

From my right came another threat. "If you don't shut up, I'm going to smother *you* with a pillow."

"I hate both of you equally right now," I mumbled. "Why are you in my bed?"

"We came to check on you last night," Lexi explained.

"We did?"

"You don't remember coming over here?"

Jewel snorted and then moaned. "I remember throwing up on the floorboard of . . . Who did we ride home with?"

"Forrester."

"Which one?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" Jewel retorted.

"You're a doctor. Fix me," Lexi moaned.

"I am in no condition to do anything regarding your medical care at this time

because I'm too busy dying my own horrible death." Jewel wiggled a little bit and then I felt her arm come up between us. Suddenly, the sound of a telephone ringing blasted around the room from the speaker on her phone, and I cringed at the noise. After a few torturous rings, Jewel's brother Spruce answered, and she asked, "Remember that time I took the heat for you when you set fire to the barn?"

"What do you want?"

"We're at Leia's, and we're dying."

"I highly doubt that."

"Spruce. You're my favorite brother and . . ."

"Take call for me next weekend."

"Done."

"Who else is there?"

"Leia and Lexi. Maybe Petra."

"Leia, I'll need you to watch Scruff for me next weekend."

"Absolutely," I assured him.

"Lexi, I'm gonna need a marker."

"Whatever. Fix me," Lexi moaned.

"I'll be there in half an hour."

After Spruce ended the call, I asked, "Will any of us be alive in thirty minutes?"

Jewel made a sound that reminded me of a wounded animal and then whispered, "I don't think I'm gonna make it."

Lexi sounded just as pitiful when she whimpered and said, "Shut up so we can all die in peace."



WAYLON

I woke up to a beeping noise, and when the front door opened, I lifted my head to see which friend was invading now. This time, it was a man I didn't recognize, and he had a dog with him. A very large dog.

Both of them stood in the doorway and surveyed the room. He tilted his head in question when he saw me on the couch but then shrugged and walked past

me. The dog, however, didn't follow him. Instead, he walked across the room and stopped about a foot from the couch and sat down, his big brown eyes assessing me the same way I was him.

"He wants permission to get on the furniture," Heath mumbled.

"What furniture?" I asked as I looked around the room.

Heath was in the recliner, his brother Joshua was sleeping on the other portion of the L-shaped sectional where I was laying, and a woman who had shown up a few hours ago was curled up in the corner at our feet.

"You're on it."

"So, I just tell him to get up?"

Apparently, my question included the magic word, so the dog took that as his invitation and hopped up to find a place to lay down, landing on my stomach before he walked his way down my body and shoved my legs aside so he could rest against the back of the couch. I was still trying to assess whether I had internal injuries from his assault when he started snoring peacefully near my feet.

"I will pay someone a million dollars to make a pot of coffee," Joshua mumbled without opening his eyes.

"You don't have a million dollars," Heath argued.

"Pretend I do."

"Fuck off," Heath grumbled before he pulled the blanket over his head.

The front door opened again, and I wondered why Leia even bothered having a lock installed as Ripley, his daughter, and her dogs walked into the house. There was a little boy with them, and he was apparently as comfortable here as Celia because he swaggered in like he owned the place and ran his hands down the dog's fur before he stopped and looked at me. He raised one eyebrow and said, "Who are you?"

"Manners," another man growled as he walked in behind Ripley and closed the door behind him. "Hey, will you guys watch the kids while Ripley and I go for a ride?"

The little boy's eyes narrowed, and he sighed before he sat down on the coffee table and stared at me, his direct gaze a little unnerving, especially coming from someone so young. Ripley's daughter sat next to the boy and frowned at me, which was almost as disconcerting as the little boy's stare.

"You're not taking them with you?"

"They're both grounded," Ripley answered Heath as he hung two leashes on a hook beneath the light switch next to the front door. "Where's Leia?"

“She’s upstairs with Spruce and the girls.”

“Hangovers?”

“You should have seen them last night,” the other man said before he ran his hand over his goatee. He laughed before he said, “They were all in fine form.”

The woman on the couch sat up and looked around for a second before she pushed my feet out of the way and stood up. She glared at each of us individually as she muttered, “Damn Forresters don’t have volume control.”

“Mornin’, Petra,” the man I didn’t recognize said cheerfully.

“Piss off, Ruf.” She shot him the bird and then walked between where I was laying and the coffee table, mussing Celia’s hair before she did the same to the boy’s as she passed. “Hey, terrorists.”

Celia smiled up at her and the little boy grinned before he yelled at the top of his lungs, “Good morning, Aunt Petra!”

All of us laughed when she winced and laughed even harder when she said, “Good morning, Forrester spawn.”

“We’ll watch the kids if one of you will make a pot of coffee,” Heath bargained.

“I’ll do it,” Ripley said as he walked toward the kitchen. “Did you have fun last night, Waylon?”

“I did,” I said as I pushed up to a sitting position and then twisted to put my feet on the floor. I motioned toward the spot next to me on the couch and the man I now knew was named Ruf, as weird as that sounded, walked over and sat down.

He leaned forward and waved his hand in front of his son’s face to get his attention before he said, “Look at me, son.” The little boy didn’t move his head but cut his eyes to his father. “You’re in deep shit. You know that, right?” The boy sighed and nodded. “Arson is a felony offense, and you, my friend, are gonna pay the price for it.”

“I didn’t play with fire.”

“What have I told you about puttin’ shit in the microwave?”

“But I didn’t use fire.”

“Boy . . .”

The little boy must have realized he was skating on thin ice because he pulled his lips between his teeth before he mumbled, “Sorry, sir.”

“You’re gonna have to do extra chores to earn the money to buy Ripley a new microwave, and you’re on house arrest for three days.”

“Three days?” the boy shouted in outrage.

“Five now.”

“Shit,” the boy mumbled.

“Keep pushing, and I’ll make it a full week.”

“Yessir.”

“Y’all go play in the back room. Don’t make a mess, don’t break anything, just don’t . . .” The man gave a tortured sigh before he let his head fall forward. He ran his hand over his goatee again and then looked back at his son before he said, “Please behave.”

“Yessir,” the little boy said before he stood up and put his hand out toward Celia. “Come on, Scoot.”

Celia smiled at Ruf and then me before she got up and followed the boy out of the room.

Heath waited until the dogs had followed the two down the hall before he asked, “What’d he cook?”

“A pie pan full of Pokemon figures.”

“What the hell for?” Joshua asked.

“Something about if they merge together, they make a somethin’ that’s more powerful.” Ruf sighed before he admitted, “Fucked if I know.”

“So, why is Scoot grounded?” Heath asked.

“She got out the pie pan and showed him how to use the microwave.”

I burst out laughing and then slapped my hand over my mouth. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

Joshua and Heath were laughing, too, but the poor man looked like he was at the end of his rope, and I couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for him. Finally, Heath asked, “Any damage to the house?”

“No. Scoot’s dogs went apeshit, so Ripley was able to take care of it before anything terrible happened. His house smells like burned plastic, but we left a few windows open to air it out.” He looked thoughtful for a second and then said, “I’ve been thinking that maybe I need to get a dog like hers as sort of an early warning system, you know?”

“Does he pull the same shit at his mom’s?” Heath asked.

Ruf shrugged. “I don’t know. She hasn’t tried to see him in a while. I think she moved.”

“Out of town or what?”

Ruf nodded. “Yeah. Child support stopped, so I guess she lost her job. I haven’t talked to her in almost a year. It’s been longer than that since Ripley

has heard from her.”

“Coffee’s perking,” Ripley said as he came into the living room.

“They’re brother and sister?” I asked as I glanced over my shoulder where the kids had disappeared down the hall.

“Yeah,” Ripley said with a shrug. “I didn’t even know she had a kid when I met her.”

“I think she forgot,” Ruf said as he stood up. “Anyway, we’ll be back in a little while.”

“Sounds good. I’m gonna get up and make breakfast,” Heath said as he put the footrest of his chair down. “The smell of bacon will either bring the girls back to life or make them wish they were dead.”

As Ruf and Ripley walked toward the door, I stood up and said, “I’m not much of a cook, but I take direction pretty well.”

“Coffee first. Food second.”

“Sounds like one helluva plan,” Joshua ran his hand over his face and said, “I’ll take three eggs over medium and as much bacon as you can fit on the plate.”

“Good luck with that. You know how Leia is about her bacon.”

“You’re right. I don’t want to lose an arm.”

“She’s got a thing for bacon?” I asked as I followed Heath into the kitchen.

“You’ll find that Leia’s particular about her food, and she doesn’t ever share.”

“Really?” I asked, remembering that she’d given me her kolache at breakfast.

“She’s like Joey from *Friends*. If you get too close to her plate, she’s likely to stab you with a fork, especially when there’s bacon involved.”

“That’s good to know.”



LEIA

“How long before this makes it go away?” Lexi asked Spruce as he put a strip of tape over the needle in her arm.

“It won’t make it go away completely, that will take time. It will make you feel less like the walking dead, though.”

“I’m so glad they let you graduate from medical school, Sprucie,” Jewel said,

her eyes closed and her free arm bent over her face to block out the light. “Your medical degree comes in very handy.”

“My GPA was damn near the same as yours, asshole,” Spruce growled at his sister. Under his breath, he muttered, “Let me graduate, my ass.”

I bit my lip to stop from laughing out loud. These two, along with their siblings, Petra and Terran, still argued like they had when we were kids. It didn’t matter that they were all professionals - three doctors and a lawyer, they still knew how to get under each other’s skin and did it all the time.

“You’re my favorite brother,” Petra said from the end of the bed where she was sprawled across our feet. “Wake me up when the hangover is gone.”

“Aren’t you all a little old for sleepovers?” Spruce asked as he started gathering up the trash from the supplies he’d used.

“We didn’t plan on it, but when we came up to check on Sleeping Beauty, she looked so comfortable that I couldn’t resist crawling into bed with her,” Jewel admitted.

“What was wrong with you last night?” Spruce asked.

“She got hammered at the party and then disappeared with the new guy,” Lexi explained.

“Speaking of, who *is* Mr. Hot and Growly downstairs?” Petra asked. “I should know his name since he kept putting his fucking feet on me.”

I laughed softly and then winced when it felt like my head was going to explode. “His name is Waylon. He’s a friend of Ripley’s.”

“And from what she was spouting last night, they’re going to do all sorts of wicked and immoral things to each other this weekend,” Jewel added.

“Hence, the reason we came to check on her. He’s a new guy we don’t know or trust, and she was way too drunk to make rational decisions.”

“I take it you were okay?” Spruce asked.

I winced again. “I made a complete ass of myself, but from what I remember, he was a total gentleman. He carried me up here while I explained all the plans I had for him in vivid detail.”

“Not smart, Leia,” Spruce chided. “You girls know better than to pull shit like that.”

“Ripley trusts him.”

“And I don’t think his trust is misplaced,” Jewel assured me. “When we got here, she was sleeping under the covers wearing everything but her boots. There were two bottles of water, two aspirin, and a banana on the nightstand. Hot Guy was downstairs, fast asleep on the couch.”

“I like him already,” Petra said.

“Obviously, he’s a real man and not a scumbag who would take advantage of a woman who is in no shape to be making any major life decisions. He’s got my vote,” Spruce said firmly. “Now, I’m going to go downstairs to have some of that coffee I can smell and get to know the newest member of the family.”

“I wouldn’t get ahead of myself, Spruce,” I warned.

“Princess, he rescued Gamma *twice*, and then he brought you home and poured you into bed without laying a paw on you. If you don’t snatch him up, I’m going to pay him to marry one of these old hags.”

“Hey!” Petra and Lexi yelled at the same time.

“I will have you know I can find a man on my own. I don’t need your help, Sprucie,” Jewel argued.

“Any man who willingly puts up with any of you should be paid well and under the table because, obviously, life is already fuckin’ him, so there’s no need for the IRS to do the same,” Spruce said with a fake smile as he walked around the bed to leave. “Besides, he’s gonna need the money for therapy once he finally escapes.”

“I’m a fuckin’ delight, Spruce,” Jewel yelled at her brother as he walked down the hall.

“You’re a pain in my ass!” Spruce retorted before we heard his footsteps on the stairs.

“Dick,” Jewel muttered. She suddenly got cheerful, which was a terrifying about-face if you knew her well. I cringed in anticipation. “Why do you look like you’re constipated?”

“Is that how you diagnose a patient with constipation?” Lexi asked curiously.

“I’m not a doctor, and I know the three of you are constipated because you’re all full of shit,” Petra mumbled.

“Let’s talk about the new guy,” Lexi interjected before the sisters started hurling insults at each other.

They did that constantly. People that didn’t know them thought they really disliked each other, but we understood it was their love language. Emerald called it aggressive nurturance, and when she explained what that meant, I agreed that she was spot-on in her diagnosis of the Parker kids, the Forresters, and . . . well, everyone in the family since that’s how we all talked to each other.

“Yes, let’s,” Jewel agreed. “He’s gorgeous, answered all our questions, and got a resounding, unanimous vote in from the crew.”

“Well, as irritated as I am that y’all interrogated him . . .”

“Whatever!” Lexi interrupted. “If it had been a guy one of us were interested in, you would’ve been first in line with questions.”

“True,” I admitted. “So, he passed with flying colors?”

“Absolutely. If you don’t snatch him up, I may,” Jewel warned.

“Hands off, hussy,” I snapped without even thinking. “Shit.”

“You *do* like him,” Lexi whispered. “I thought you said this was going to be a one and done thing.”

“I did.”

Jewel laughed before she said, “I’m still not sure I understand why that would be the case, but that’s more Emerald’s field of expertise, not mine.”

“I don’t need Emerald to psychoanalyze me.”

“Bullshit,” Petra said as she pretended to cough. I nudged her with my foot, and she laughed. “He’s nice, Leia. I talked to him, too, and found him surprisingly witty and intellectual.”

“Did you know he’s got a degree in veterinary medicine and just needs to intern somewhere so he can get his license?” Lexi asked.

“Really?”

Lexi nodded. “Yeah. He’s also got a business degree.”

“And he was a working hand on his parents’ ranch all through high school and then after college until he went to prison,” Jewel informed me.

“Do we know why he went to prison?” Petra asked.

“I do,” Lexi answered quietly.

“How do you know?” Horrified, I asked, “Did you come right out and ask him?”

“Nope. I googled him.”

“Oh, good Lord,” I muttered. There was silence for a few seconds, and then I couldn’t stop myself from asking, “What did you find?”

“I found out that when the men in the family realize what he went to prison for, they’re going to throw him a party and change his last name to Forrester.”

11.

WAYLON

“You’re just a sweetheart, aren’t you?” I asked the horse in front of me when she nudged my shoulder. “Why do they have you all alone?”

She didn’t speak, but I knew the answer already anyway. She was a very skittish horse and had paced me around her enclosure as I visited with the animals penned around her. I let her watch me and saw her reaction when other animals got too close to her fence line, so I knew she was probably a danger to them or herself if she was crowded.

I put my hands on either side of her neck and scratched her roughly and laughed when she started huffing in pleasure. Suddenly, she backed up and shook her head before she whinnied and started pacing. I heard hoofbeats behind me and turned to find a man approaching on horseback. He lifted his hand in greeting and then dismounted before he led the horse he’d been riding through an open gate. As I walked over to say hello, he made short work of taking off the horse’s saddle and blanket, tossing them on the fence before he opened a metal bin that was attached to it. While the horse drank from the trough nearby, he pulled out a brush to use on her and then leaned against the fence to wait for me to join him.

“You must be Waylon,” the man said as he stuck his hand out to shake mine.

“I’m Rowdy Lincoln.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” I said before I looked past him at the horse he’d been riding. It was obvious by the scars on her hindquarters that she’d been mistreated earlier in her life. “She’s a beautiful horse.”

“She’s looking pretty good,” Rowdy said before he made tsk noise and called the impatient horse over. “You know horses?”

“I do,” I assured him.

“Janis seems to have taken a shine to you, and that’s a miracle, so you must be doing something right.”

“She’s a little skittish.”

Rowdy laughed. “You should have seen her when she first came to us. I thought we’d have to put her down, but after a lot of work on my part, she finally realized she was safe.”

“That’s good. She’s a sweetheart.”

“She doesn’t let anyone ride her but my daughter. Most of the others do well if you’ve got experience,” the man said as he started to brush the horse.

“I won’t be riding until I get the all clear from Ripley on who’s who and which ones I should avoid,” I explained. “Do you work for Rip?”

“No, we’re just friends. He lets me keep some of my horses here so they can socialize and have a change of scenery. I stop by now and then to drop one off and take another home for some one-on-one time.” We were quiet for a few minutes before he said, “I take it you’re the new boarder who’s gonna start working for Ripley next week.”

“Yessir,” I said respectfully, even though the man wasn’t much older than me.

“I’ve heard about you.”

“From Ripley?”

“And a few of the others,” he said vaguely. “Did you have fun at the cookout last night?”

“I did,” I said as I walked down the fence line so I could scratch the skittish horse again. “So, you know everyone that was there last night?”

“Yeah. I grew up with them.”

“I bet that was an adventure. Those ladies were probably wild as sin when they were younger, and I don’t imagine that the men I met were much calmer.”

“We’ve had some adventures over the years, that’s for sure.”

We were quiet for a little while as I tried to remember the man’s last name. He’d just told me, but it had already slipped my mind. It was hard to place him, but I knew I’d heard his first name before since it was so unique. My guess is that Ripley had probably mentioned him.

The horse in front of me was happy to get more attention but couldn’t keep her eyes off of Rowdy, which told me that she didn’t just love his daughter but loved and trusted him too. “You said her name is Janis?”

“Yeah,” Rowdy said with a bark of laughter. “I tend to name my horses after musicians. That one used to scream all the time, and nobody does that better than Joplin.”

“One of the ladies at the cookout sang a Joplin song last night,” I told him. “She did it well too.”

“That was probably Rain. Our friends Hank and Nichole like to hear their song so much that they named their daughter Janis. She’s a pistol too.”

“I met quite a few of those last night,” I told him.

He laughed before he asked, “From what I hear, you got the third degree from a few of them.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” I muttered. “They’re thorough, I can tell you that. They probably know more about me than I know about myself at this point.”

“They’re a force, that’s for sure,” Rowdy said before he took the halter off the horse he’d been grooming and then walked through the gate. “I’m gonna go get this one some grain and then I’ll be back to saddle up another one for the ride home.”

“I’ll be here,” I told him as I climbed up on the fence to sit down. He’d been gone a few minutes when I heard an engine in the distance, and when I scanned the horizon, I saw a truck stopped at the entrance to Ripley’s neighborhood. When someone jumped out to open the gate, I smiled because even from this distance I could see that it wasn’t Ripley but Leia. I gave Janis one last scratch between her eyes before I got down to greet Leia.

I had plans for that woman, and I’d been waiting very patiently to follow through with them. She’d promised me the weekend, but that plan got derailed last night after she’d had too much to drink and again this morning when she had a houseful of people. I’d left her there with her friends and family a few hours ago in the hope that she’d make time to come see me today. Luckily, she had done just that.

I walked to the driver's side door and opened it for her as soon as she put the truck in Park. She hopped out and smiled when I asked, “Feeling better, Slugger?”

“I’m back to full strength. All it took was some IV fluids, half a pound of bacon, a nice long shower, and a nap.”

“Glad to see you’re back among the living.”

“I didn’t get to talk to you alone before you left, so I thought I’d come over and say thanks for last night.”

“Thank me? What for?”

“For being a gentleman. I know I talk a big game when I’ve been drinking, and I appreciate the fact that you didn’t take advantage of that while I was drunker than Cooter Brown.”

“I wouldn’t be much of a man if I had.” I reached up and tugged on the braid hanging over her shoulder before I asked, “So, when you told me I’d get a whole weekend with you, was that the alcohol speaking?”

“No,” Leia said shyly.

“You still want me to scratch that itch?”

“Maybe.”

“You don’t seem like the type to fall into bed with just any man, Slugger. I feel like you may need a little attention in other ways before we get to that.”

“Attention?”

“Cat got your tongue?” I asked as I stepped closer to her. “You seem to be speaking in one word sentences all of a sudden when the other day you were throwing out zingers right and left.”

“I’m nervous,” Leia admitted before she laughed uncomfortably. “I said a lot of stuff last night and . . .”

“And that won’t be held against you. I promise.”

“I’d like to start fresh.”

“So, I don’t get my whole weekend? That doesn’t seem fair.”

“I was a little out of sorts today, but I’m here now.”

“By my calculations, I think that means you owe me a day,” I said as I put my hand on her hip and pulled her closer. I ran my other hand up her arm and across her shoulder until it rested on the back of her neck.

As I rubbed her jaw with my thumb, she closed her eyes and said, “I’ve got to work on Monday.”

“So do I.” I kept rubbing her face with one hand and pulled her even closer with the other so I could wrap my arm around her waist. I rested a hand on the small of her back, waiting for her to open her eyes and look at me. “Since I’m losing a whole day, I’ll take two extra nights.”

“Two?” she asked as her eyes opened and looked into mine.

“At least. Unless you’re willing to give up this whole deadline bullshit and let this ride out the way it’s meant to.”

“I have a reason for that deadline, you know.”

“What is it again?”

“I don’t remember,” Leia whispered as my lips got closer to hers.

“Good.”

I touched my lips to hers in a soft kiss and then used my thumb to tilt her head to the side so I could deepen it. Just like before, I felt a zing of electricity the second our lips met like I’d never felt with anyone.

I pulled back to catch my breath and studied her face as she did the same thing. Those freckles I liked so much were scattered across her nose. I loved that she wasn't wearing makeup to hide them. Her skin looked so soft. I couldn't resist giving her a kiss on the apple of her cheek just so I could feel it against my lips. When I heard her sigh, I knew the kiss had affected her just as much as it had me. I smiled when her eyes fluttered open and she looked at me in wonder.

"Damn, Slugger," I whispered before I dropped a quick kiss on her forehead.

"I wish we didn't have company so I could have kept that kiss going."

"Company?"

"Yeah, one of Rip's friends is here with . . ."

As if I'd called him over, I heard the man clear his throat. Leia and I turned our heads, and he stared at us with a blank expression for a few seconds before he sighed and said, "Hey, Princess."

I felt my jaw drop when Leia answered, "Hi, Dad."



LEIA

"Want to go somewhere for dinner?" Waylon asked as we watched my dad ride one direction as Ripley and Scoot drove off in another.

Just a few minutes after my dad interrupted the kiss of a lifetime, Ripley showed up with Scoot to start sorting the animals that would be transported on Monday and prepping the pens for the animals that would be arriving. Without hesitation, my dad and Waylon stepped in to help, and between the four of us, with quite a bit of help from Scoot and her dogs, we got the work knocked out in a little less than an hour.

And now, once again, I was grubby and covered in dirt when all I really wanted to be was clean and sexy for once in my life. Just once. It wasn't a lot to ask, really, but it seemed like every time I got a few minutes alone with Waylon either someone or something interrupted us - like right now, both of us needed to shower before we even considered kissing.

"I'd love to, but I need a shower first."

"Is there a water heater in the barn?"

"No."

"Shit," Waylon mumbled. "The water heater went out while I was showering

this morning after I came home. Ripley called and ordered a new one, but it won't be here until at least Thursday."

"Bring your stuff to my house, and you can shower there."

"Are you sure you don't mind? I can take a cold one. As a matter of fact, I probably should anyway."

I smiled at him as I shook my head. "I've got a brand new water heater and two bathrooms. You're welcome to use one of them until yours is fixed."

"Give me just a few minutes, and I'll be right there."

"I'll leave the front door unlocked. When you come in, I'll probably be in the shower, so go ahead and make use of the downstairs bathroom," I told him as I walked toward my truck. I opened the door and then looked over to find that he was watching me walk, his heated gaze on my ass for a few seconds before it shot up to mine. Without giving myself a chance to overthink it, I said, "Pack an overnight bag too."

Waylon's slow grin was probably the sexiest thing I'd ever seen, and I felt my face flush, knowing we were thinking the same thing. "You owe me a few nights, Slugger."

"Then you better pack plenty of clothes," I told him before I got into the truck. He was still watching me with that wicked grin, and I couldn't help myself. I rolled my window down and smiled brightly at him before I said, "And you're probably gonna need some vitamins, old man."

"Me? You're the one who had to have a doctor make a housecall to help you with your hangover this morning, Slugger. I suggest you go home and hydrate because you're gonna need all the help you can get tonight."

Full. Body. Shiver.

I didn't know what to say, so I just rolled up my window and put the truck in Drive. Hopefully, I'd be able to pull myself together before I saw him again.



I took a little extra time in the shower, making sure I was smooth and moisturized, something I rarely ever paid attention to since I hadn't been remotely close to sleeping with a man in quite some time. But now, I had one downstairs who was eager and willing to take care of all the things I'd been missing.

I just needed to make sure that he understood this little adventure we were partaking in together had an end. I knew I'd have to keep reminding myself of that since every time he touched me, my brain went on the fritz and I forgot my own name. But it was important that I remember this wasn't going to go any farther than a few wild nights together before he moved on to greener pastures.

Honestly, I knew I was just setting myself up for heartache, but there was something about Waylon Voyles that I couldn't resist. Once he got established in the free world, he would probably want to explore, and being saddled with a girlfriend so soon after his release wasn't the easiest way to go about that. As long as I kept reminding myself this was only temporary, I wouldn't be hurt when Waylon moved on.

After I dried my hair, I reached for the drawer that held my meager makeup supplies and then pulled my hand back as if the knob had burned me.

"No, Leia. You're gonna be you, and if he doesn't like it, then he can go kick rocks," I told my reflection. "Don't change yourself for any man."

"Damn right."

I jumped, not expecting anyone to be near, and was still holding my hand over my chest trying to slow my racing heart when I backed up a step and looked into my bedroom.

Waylon was sitting on my bed with his shoulders resting on the headboard and his legs out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. He was shirtless, wearing a pair of faded jeans that were zipped up but unbuttoned, and his feet were bare. I couldn't help but admire the man, letting my eyes roam over his face before they moved to the rest of his body.

His hair was still wet, so it was a darker brown than the scruff on his face or the light dusting of hair across his chest. He wasn't cut with rippling muscles like some of the men I knew, but he was solid. Muscular without being so defined that his physique looked fake. Instead, he looked like a man who took care of himself to stay fit, not to show off. There was one tattoo on his right bicep and another on his left, but other than that, his body was free of ink, which was almost refreshing since the majority of the men I had been intimate with had been covered in tattoos.

Before I even realized I was moving, I was standing at the foot of my bed, and Waylon asked, "Are you hungry?"

"Starving," I blurted out as my gaze stuck on the little patch of skin above the zipper on his jeans. His abdomen clenched when he burst out laughing, and I

let my gaze linger there for a second before I looked up at his face. “You?”
“Famished.” He pulled his bottom lip in between his teeth, and I wanted to crawl up his body and nibble on it before I . . . “Are you on the menu, or have you talked yourself out of it yet?”

“I think I’d like to be dessert when we come back,” I hedged.

“Is pizza delivery still a thing?”

I laughed softly before I explained, “Now you can get anything delivered, not just pizza.”

“Can we eat in bed, or are you particular about things like that?”

“Eat what?” His eyes flared, and that slow smile started before I mumbled, “You can eat whatever you want in bed . . . or I mean . . . you can eat food in bed if you want.”

“Come here, Slugger,” Waylon said so softly that it was almost a purr. He lifted his hand and motioned with one finger, and I felt my body get even closer to the end of the bed as if he were pulling me on a string.

“Fuck it,” I whispered, more to myself than to him, before I unzipped my jeans and pushed them down over my hips. Waylon’s eyes got wide as he watched me. He was focused on my panties until I pulled my T-shirt off and tossed it aside.

I’d never been ashamed of my body, but I’d never been particularly pleased with it either. However, when I saw the heat in Waylon’s eyes, I felt like a goddess. I had a physically demanding job, and I was more muscle than fat, but I wasn’t a fitness model by any stretch of the imagination.

It didn’t seem like Waylon cared that I wasn’t a supermodel. I saw him swallow hard as he let his eyes linger on my breasts before they traveled down my stomach to study my panties again.

“Damn, Slugger,” Waylon murmured. His eyes slowly came up to mine, and he crooked his finger again before he asked, “Do you know what I want to do more than anything?”

“I have a few ideas.”

“Since the first time I saw you, I’ve wanted to explore your body and count the freckles with my tongue.”

“You think you can count that high?” I asked facetiously.

“If I lose count I’ll just have to start again, won’t I?” Waylon retorted.

“Crawl up here, and give me a kiss.”

“I thought we were gonna eat dinner,” I hedged, taunting him now.

“I’m a firm believer that you should always have dessert first.”

“By all means,” I whispered as I put one knee on the bed. I took in the hard length straining the zipper of his jeans before my heart dropped. “Shit.”

“What?”

“Do you have a condom?”

“Fuck,” he growled. His head fell forward and he sighed. “I wasn’t . . . Shit. I never even thought of that, or I’d be better prepared.”

I rushed over to where my T-shirt had landed on the floor and picked it up. I scrambled to get it on as I rushed through my bathroom into the closet. I yanked a worn pair of sweats out of the dresser before I hopped across the bathroom trying to pull them on. Once I had them up over my hips, I said, “Don’t move. Stay right there, and I’ll be back in a minute.”

“I’m not gonna let you go to the store for condoms, Leia. That’s something I should do.”

“I know at least half a dozen men within yelling distance of my front door who probably have stock in multiple condom companies. I’ll be right back.”

Waylon’s laughter followed me as I sprinted down the stairs and through the front door. I hopped off the porch, ran across the grass to Ripley’s house, and then barged into his living room.

He was relaxing on the couch, but the second he saw me, he sat up and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Condoms.”

“What?”

“I. Need. Condoms.”

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me,” Ripley said as he leaned back on the couch.

“Do you have any or not?”

“Not. You know I don’t bring women to my house, Leia.”

“Well, shit!” I said before I spun around and went back outside. I skipped the sidewalk and went across the grass again to Heath’s. I knocked on the door a few times and then tried the knob but knew better than to barge in. Instead, I called out from the doorway, “Heath, it’s Leia. Are you in there?”

“What’s up, buttercup?” Heath asked as he walked in from the kitchen. “You okay?”

“Do you have any condoms?”

“I’m not really sure I want to take our relationship to that level . . .”

“Shut up. Condoms?”

Heath chuckled. “Fresh out.”

“What is wrong with you people?” I yelled before I turned and jogged down the steps. I looked left and then right, assessing who the best target may be, and decided to try Ruf’s house next. I banged on the door a few times even though his bike wasn’t in the driveway. I knew he probably wasn’t home. Since I had the code to his door, I decided to take him up on the offer to come over anytime and make myself at home.

Nothing much was different in the ultimate bachelor pad. I darted around a pile of Legos on my way to the stairs before I sprinted up them and rushed down the hall to Ruf’s bedroom. It was a mess with the covers draped over the edge of the bed and a waist-high pile of clothes in the corner, but I didn’t care about any of that.

I hurried over to the nightstand and yanked the drawer open before I realized that there was a condom laying on top of a plastic sack from the grocery store. I picked it up and saw that the sack was full of them, so I snatched the entire thing off the dresser and took off back to my house.

As I ran across Heath’s lawn, I heard him laughing at me from inside his house, and when I jogged across Ripley’s, I saw him standing on the top step, leaning against the post.

“You sure you wanna do this, Princess?”

“I will pay you a thousand dollars if you make sure that no one - and I mean *no one* - knocks on my door for the next thirty-six hours.”

“I don’t want your money, but I’ll take a marker.”

“Done!” I shouted as I climbed the stairs to my porch. Right before I slammed my front door behind me, I yelled, “Thirty-six hours, Ripley!”

I skidded to a stop when I saw Waylon sitting on the stairs. He was grinning from ear to ear, and I lost sight of him when a lock of hair fell across my line of vision. When I blew on it to get it out of my face, he burst out laughing.

I realized that my breath was sawing in and out, and I hissed when I got a cramp in my foot. I lifted it up as I chanted, “Ow. Ow. Ow.” over and over.

I started to lose my balance, so I hopped on one foot toward the newel post so I could rub out the cramp. When it started to fade, I put my foot back on the floor and then leaned forward and rested my hands on my knees as I tried to catch my breath. “Don’t laugh at me, Waylon. I’m dying!” He laughed even harder, so I threw the bag of condoms at him.

“Oh shit!” Waylon cackled through his loud guffaws. He was leaning against the wall with both hands on his stomach, and there were tears of laughter in his eyes. I collapsed onto the stair next to him and sighed as I

swiped my hair out of my face. Waylon pushed away from the wall and put his arm around my shoulders as his laughter died down. I thought it was the sweetest thing in the world when he kissed my temple. He ruined that feeling when he said, “Way to take one for the team, Slugger.”

“You better put one of those on and get to work, mister. I went through hell to get them and we’re not wasting a single one!”

“We’ll use every one of them. I promise.” Waylon pulled me under his arm and chuckled a few more times before his stomach growled so loudly that it shocked both of us.

“You’re starving.”

“I could eat,” he admitted.

“What did you have for lunch?”

“Oreos, pistachio ice cream, and a Mrs. Baird’s peach pie.”

“What are you? 12?”

“For a little over twenty years, I’ve been compiling a list in my head of all the foods I missed the most. I’m slowly but surely going to work my way through it.”

“What *real* food did you miss most?”

“The most? There are too many to list.”

“Give me five options for now, and we’ll get to the others.”

“Chopped beef sandwich, a piece of Italian cream cake, tamales, Taco Villa combo burritos, and those little spice muffins from Jason’s Deli.”

“Put your shoes on, Mr. Voyles. We’re going to travel around Rojo and get everything on that list.”

“Slugger, you don’t need the key to my heart because you just kicked the fucking door clean off the hinges.”

12.

LEIA

“The look on your face when you found out that was my dad was priceless,” I said through my laughter before I took another bite of my burrito.

I’d watched Waylon savor every bite of his as if it were a delicacy created by a renowned chef rather than some kid who was working part-time at a local fast food joint. He did everything but lick the paper it was wrapped in before he picked up the chopped beef sandwich we’d bought from my friend Dylan’s restaurant before we swung by a few other places to get the rest of the food on Waylon’s wish list.

Waylon took a bite and then his eyes closed as he chewed, making little moans and grunts as he savored his chopped beef sandwich like it was the best thing he’d ever tasted. I had to admit, Dylan’s food was excellent, but it had never elicited that sort of response from me before, and I was someone who *really* appreciated good food.

When he swallowed the bite in his mouth, he took a sip of the beer we’d bought at the convenience store at the end of our food scavenger hunt and then leaned back against the headboard with a sigh.

“Leia, I think this is probably the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

“If that’s the case, then the bar is set pretty low, so I can only go up from here, right?”

Waylon reached out and tugged at a lock of my hair before he looked at me, his eyes intense, and said, “I’m serious, sweetheart. Nothing I eat for the rest of my life will ever taste this good, and I won’t ever forget how it feels right now, relaxing here with you.”

I couldn’t say anything because his sincerity was making me too emotional. I felt tears sting my eyes and looked away but Waylon put his hand on my cheek and pulled my gaze back. “Thank you, Slugger. You’re . . . everything I dreamed about while I was locked up. You’re smart, funny,

sassy, sexy, and . . . more than I ever hoped for.”

“Waylon . . .”

I started to argue, but he interrupted me. “I know you’re set on that expiration date you keep insisting on, so I just felt like I should tell you this right now while you’re relaxed next to me before you put up that wall you’re so fond of hiding behind. Thank you, Leia.”

“You’re welcome,” I murmured as I held his gaze. “We don’t have a lot of time, so we’ll have to pack as much in as we can.”

“I think we should start now,” Waylon said as he leaned closer. His lips hovered near mine for just a second and then finally touched in the softest whisper of a kiss. When he pulled back, I opened my eyes to see what was wrong and saw that he was looking toward the door.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just waiting.”

“For what?”

“For whoever is about to barge in and interrupt us.” I burst out laughing, but Waylon wasn’t deterred. “I’m sure there’s someone standing on the porch about to knock on the door and . . .”

I interrupted him by putting my hand on his cheek to turn his face back my way so I could kiss him like the world was ending. Like our lives depended on it. Like the future of the earth itself hinged on the outcome of my lips touching his.

Because that’s what it felt like every single time he kissed me.

Waylon leaned back against the headboard, pulling my body on top of his so that we were touching from our lips to our knees. His hand came up and gripped the back of my neck as his other hand ran across my back, pressing against me to pull my body even closer to his.

It had been so long since I was intimate with a man that the craving I had to be close to another person turned into a full-blown need. The feel of his hand on my back wasn’t enough. I wanted his hands all over me, running over my bare skin with nothing between us. I let my body rest against his while I hooked my thumbs in the waistband of my sweatpants and underwear and shoved them down, wiggling against him as I shimmied them as far down my legs as I could reach. Once they were almost to my knees I moved my legs against each other to push them completely off, leaving me naked from the waist down.

With my legs free, I straddled Waylon’s lap and then pulled my mouth away

from his long enough to yank my shirt over my head before I leaned in and kissed him again. He groaned when his hands touched my naked back and before I could reach back to unclasp my bra, he did that for me. I shifted on his lap again, pulling my bra off and tossing it aside.

“So soft,” Waylon murmured against my neck as he ran his hands up and down my back. I moved back a fraction so I could reach between us, needing him naked beneath me more than I needed my next breath. He seemed to understand my urgency and rolled us so that I was beneath him before he pulled away and got off the bed.

I watched as he stripped his clothes off, taking in the sight of his naked chest and then letting my eyes roam further down. He didn't give me a chance to look for long, though. Instead, he reached out and grabbed my ankle so that he could spin me around until I was laying across the bed. Before I had a chance to get my bearings, he was kneeling on the floor next to the bed.

Waylon slowly ran his hands up from my knees, pushing my legs farther out and lifting them so that my feet were resting on the edge of the bed, my most intimate places bared to his intense gaze. When he looked up at my face, his eyes were lit with a fire that took my breath away, and they just got more heated as he pushed my legs up and leaned forward.

“Hold your legs,” he ordered. When I didn't move quickly enough, he pinched the back of my thigh and said it again. I hooked my hands behind my knees and held them up and apart and then shivered as he ran his hands up and down my inner thighs a few times before his thumbs parted my pussy. Under his breath, he muttered a curse before he leaned forward and swiped his tongue across my clit. I jumped, and he growled before he did it again and then again.

After a few seconds, I was writhing on the bed beneath his mouth, begging for him to put his lips on my clit and take me even closer to the edge.

“I've been starving for years, Leia, and I'm gonna savor every second,” Waylon murmured between swipes of his tongue. His hot breath on my clit gave me chills, and I heard him chuckle before he said, “Especially since this is the prettiest pussy I've ever seen.”

I burst out laughing before I said, “I think you need your eyes checked, buddy. There's nothing pretty about . . .”

I let out a shout when he pinched my thigh at the soft spot where it met my ass and then gasped when he pushed my legs even wider and set his lips around my clit, instantly sucking it between his lips. His hands roamed up

and down the back of my thighs as he devoured me, licking and sucking my clit between swipes of his tongue. I was beside myself in seconds, and when he roughly pushed two fingers deep inside my pussy, I came around them with a harsh shout.

He moved his mouth away from me, and I heard the bag on the nightstand rustle before he pulled his fingers away. I was still trying to catch my breath when I opened my eyes and saw that he was looking down and heard him gasp when he notched the head of his cock at my entrance and slowly pushed inside.

I couldn't help but chuckle at the look on his face. When my muscles clenched around him, he groaned and then his eyes shot open. I laughed even harder, and he shuddered before he dropped forward and rested his hands on the bed by my shoulders.

"Stop," Waylon moaned. "You gotta stop doing that."

He sounded so pained that I couldn't stop laughing and clenched around him on purpose. He shuddered and then tightened his jaw as he pulled back and then slowly pushed deep inside me. Before he pulled out again, I squeezed his cock inside me, and he let out a loud shout.

I did it again and felt his cock twitch as he came, panting and shaking.

"Shit. That didn't go at all like I planned," he muttered. "I'm sorry. I'm not usually a one-pump chump." He looked thoughtful for a second before he said, "At least I didn't used to be."

"I have a feeling that we're going to spend the next day or so in bed with you proving that you're still not. Besides, I consider this a win."

"A win? How? I can't believe I did that," he grumbled as he slowly pulled out.

"I got my big O, and now, I'm convinced that my pussy is so magical, you couldn't handle it."

Waylon laughed as he got off the bed. As he walked toward the bathroom, he agreed, "I believe you may be right, but give me a few minutes and I'll show you a real win."

"We're going to have to . . ." My voice trailed off when I saw Waylon's back. I burst out laughing as I sat up in bed, and Waylon glanced at me with a frown before he walked into the bathroom. I realized that he thought I was laughing at him, so as I looked at the mess around me, I hurried to explain, "No! I'm not laughing about that! You've got . . . Oh shit!"

"What?" He asked as he tilted his head and asked, "What's all over you?"

I looked down at my arm and realized it was covered in sour cream and red sauce and then laughed even harder when I lifted my hand and saw the barbecue sauce on it. “That’s the last of my burrito, which explains a lot since you’ve got barbecue sauce on your shoulder and back.”

“Well, shit,” Waylon mumbled as he looked at the mess around me. He was still naked but didn’t seem to care as he walked back across the room. He stopped beside the bed and looked down at me before he reached out and swiped his finger across my collar bone. “We made a mess.”

“I’ll put it in the washer after I take a shower. I’m sure there’s food all over me and . . .” I let out a shriek when Waylon bent at the waist and picked me up. “What are you doing?”

“I told you to give me a few minutes, and it’s been at least that,” he said as he carried me into the bathroom. He set me on my feet in the middle of the bathroom and then reached beyond me to turn on the water. “I’m going to clean you up, fuck you senseless, and then do some laundry before we take a nap and then I wake you up and fuck you again.”

“You’re gonna do laundry?” I asked with a bark of laughter.

“My guess is you’re probably gonna have to show me how to use the washing machine because technology has passed me by since I’ve been gone. It took me way too long to figure out how to start the truck, and my guess is there are all new buttons on the washer and dryer by now too.”

“I have an app on my phone that controls both of them,” I said with a grin.

“Welcome to the new world, Waylon.”

“It’s going to take some getting used to, but as long as you’re part of it, I think I’m going to do just fine.”



WAYLON

“I looked forward to the cards you sent me over the years.”

“I thought about writing, but I didn’t know what to say,” Leia admitted before she yawned and then blinked a few times. “I should have figured it out.”

“You didn’t need to do that. It’s not like we’d ever met or that you even thought we would.”

“I knew we would someday just because of the good things Ripley said about you.”

“Good things, huh?”

“He said you protected him when he first got there.”

“I didn’t protect him so much as taught him a few survival skills.”

“Well, thank you for that.”

Leia snuggled a little closer to me as I slowly rubbed my hand up and down her side. I couldn’t stop myself from touching her, even now, when we were both relaxed and sated. I’d been mortified at my performance the first time we had sex, but felt like I’d redeemed myself in the hours afterward.

We’d stayed in the shower until the water ran cold, exploring one another’s bodies with the excuse that we were just helping wash off the food from our romp in the middle of dinner. I’d taken her against the wall in the shower, then again on the vanity in the bathroom before we’d taken a break to clean up our mess.

Once Leia filled the washing machine, I’d enjoyed my dessert by laying her out on her kitchen table and making a buffet of her body before we made our way back upstairs together to clean up again. Now we were laying face to face beneath the freshly washed sheets and comforter, our stomachs full again and bodies replete after hours of lovemaking.

That’s what I considered it even though she’d referred to it as ‘just sex’ more than a few times. It was sex, I’d grant her that, but much more involved and intimate than I’d expected to find within days of being released from prison. Over the years, I’d fantasized about what I’d do in the first few days after my release. Of course, touching base with my daughter had always been at the top of my list, but spending time with a willing woman always came in a close second.

But the last twelve hours with Leia were much more than that, at least for me. We’d laughed together, explored each other’s bodies while we made simple conversation until it trailed off because we were too distracted to pay attention to anything but what we were making each other feel.

Leia yawned again before she asked, “What are your plans for the future, Waylon?”

“I’m going to make love to you as many times as possible before the time limit you set expires and then work my ass off to get you to realize this doesn’t have to end.” Leia’s eyes had fluttered shut as I was talking, but they opened again, and in the faint light of dawn coming in around the edges of the blinds, I could see the uncertainty in her eyes. “I know you think that I’ve got wild oats to sow or some shit, but I’m not that guy.”

“You’ve been locked up for a long time, Waylon. There’s no way you’re

going to be able to convince me that this is anything but a weekend fling that . . .”

“You’re the only one that sees it that way, Slugger.”

Leia rolled her eyes before she mumbled, “We’ve got different priorities in life, Waylon, and we’re going to take different paths to get there, I’m sure.”

“You haven’t bothered to ask me what mine are, but I am pretty sure I know at least a few of yours just from the interrogation I went through while I was dancing with your friends.”

“Oh! Please tell me what my priorities are then, Mr. Voyles. I’d love to hear them listed out,” Leia said sarcastically before she let her eyes flutter closed again.

“You want a family. Babies. A man who will love you until his last breath and spend every minute until then making you as happy as you make him. Someone you can trust to be there through the good and the hard times and laugh with you through both, just like your parents have done since they met when you were a little girl.”

“And you’ve got years to make up for, so settling down is not one of your . . .”

“I’ll admit that wasn’t in my immediate plans, but that’s only because I didn’t know I’d meet a smart, funny, gorgeous, spunky woman who makes me laugh, makes me think, and impresses me with every word she says.”

“Do I know her?”

I slid my hand from Leia’s hip over her ass and then pinched her before I asked, “You’re not very good at taking compliments are you, Slugger?”

“I live in the real world, Waylon.”

“What does that have to do with what I’m saying to you right now?”

“You just got your freedom after years behind bars. The last thing you need is a woman to tie you down.”

I barked out a laugh and interrupted, “That’s exactly what you did the first time we met.”

Leia pushed at my chest and then continued, “You know what I’m trying to say.”

“No. I don’t. I hear the words coming out of your mouth, and you seem to think I’m going to argue with you, but all you’re doing is making me wonder how I got so lucky as to meet a woman like you straight outta the chute.”

Leia yawned again before she snuggled closer to me and then patted me on the chest with her open palm. “You’re cute, but you talk too much. Go to

sleep, Waylon.”

“Not finished with this conversation, Slugger.”

“I am.”

13.

WAYLON

I rolled over to find a more comfortable position and wondered why it was so difficult to sleep on a normal mattress. I was used to the one on my rack, a three-inch thick foam pad that barely protected a person from the cold metal beneath it. That shouldn't be considered a mattress at all in my opinion, but that was what I had grown used to over the years. Leia's mattress was like a cloud in comparison, and the sheets I'd helped her put on last night felt feather soft against my skin as opposed to the stiff sheets and wool blanket I was accustomed to.

So, why in the hell couldn't I stay asleep?

At first, I thought it was the sounds of the neighborhood waking up - dogs barking outside, cars driving past, and even the rumble of a few motorcycles. Those weren't sounds I was accustomed to, but they weren't nearly as bothersome as the constant hum of fluorescent lights and the sounds of men talking and yelling or my cellmate's constant snoring. The neighborhood sounds faded after a while, but that didn't help me relax.

I laid there for quite some time, but when I still couldn't sleep, I wondered if it may be that I was unsure about my surroundings. I got up and walked through Leia's house, checking all the windows and the doors to make sure they were locked. When I got back to the bedroom, I shut Leia's bedroom door, thinking I may not be able to relax because I was too used to being locked into a smaller space.

Then I wondered if the light coming in around the blinds was keeping me awake. Even though it was never completely dark in prison, the lighting was different, so I got back up and closed the curtains. The only thing less light did for me was make it harder to count the divots in the texture on the bedroom ceiling.

Could it be the temperature? The comforter may be soft as a cloud, but I was

awfully warm, especially since Leia was stuck to my side. I flipped the blanket over onto Leia, but then the air conditioner kicked on, and I had to readjust so I didn't freeze to death under just the sheet.

Through all of this, Leia slept like a rock. I had just dozed off and on, waking up every time she moved since I wasn't used to sleeping with anyone touching me and had actively worked to make sure I *never* gave anyone the opportunity to try.

Throughout the day, since we hadn't even attempted to go to sleep until the wee hours of the morning, I'd laid in bed beside Leia, stroking my hand up and down her naked back, amazed at how lucky I'd been to meet her. Of course, that wasn't what I'd been thinking a few minutes after we first met, but I couldn't really blame her for her reaction that day since she didn't know there was anyone staying on the property.

I had to give her credit. She'd protected herself without any hesitation but had been very apologetic when she realized that I was an invited guest instead of an intruder. I'd met enough horrible men in prison who preyed on unsuspecting women that I knew it was important that a woman alone knew how to defend herself and wondered how she learned to be so quick on her feet.

As if she knew I was thinking about her, Leia snuggled closer and mumbled my name in her sleep. She nuzzled her face into my shoulder, so I turned toward her and slid my arm beneath her pillow and looked at her face. I smiled when I realized how irritated she'd be if she knew that I was trying to count her freckles. I lost track of what number I was on when she shivered. I pulled the covers up and then used the hand underneath her to pull her closer to me before I rested my other hand on her hip.

I felt Leia tense just a second before she let out an ear-piercing scream and clawed me from my collarbone down to my nipples. I didn't have a chance to react to that before she reared her head back and slammed it into my chin. In a split second, she went from sleeping soundly to spitting mad and intent on doing me bodily harm.

Her eyes flew open. I could tell by the panic I saw there that she wasn't even fully awake yet, just acting on instinct to protect herself.

I shouted her name as I tried to grab her hands to stop her from pummeling my face into hamburger meat, but she kept yanking them away and hitting me over and over. I had to give it to her. The girl was quick, and there was power behind each hit.

“Leia! Stop!” I yelled again, not sure she could hear me over her screaming. She went still in the next instant, and I relaxed my hold on her wrists as both of us tried to catch our breath. I could tell that she was fully awake now, but I wasn’t sure what to say. She took the decision out of my hands when she pushed away from me and rolled toward the other side of the bed. I laid there silently as she put her feet on the floor and bent at the waist to rest her elbows on her knees.

We sat quietly for a minute before she sighed and said, “Maybe you shouldn’t stay over again.”

“Does that happen often?” I asked in barely more than a whisper.

Leia laughed bitterly. “I don’t know. You’re the first man I’ve slept with since . . .” Her voice trailed off before she changed the subject and said, “Scoot naps with me sometimes, but she’s been doing that since before, so I guess I’m used to waking up with her in my bed, but your arm was around me and . . . you’re a full-sized man and . . .” Leia sighed again before she said, “I’m sorry.”

I reached out and brushed her long hair to the side before I settled my palm between her tense shoulders. I slowly rubbed my hand in a circle to try and get her to relax and after a few minutes she took a deep breath and turned her head to look at me.

“You’re probably done with me, huh?”

“Why would I be?”

“Maybe because I keep whipping your ass?”

I barked out a laugh before I hedged, “I wouldn’t exactly say you whooped me, but you do know how to take a man by surprise.”

“That’s because I don’t like being taken by surprise. It’s not your fault by any means, but for your own safety, I think . . .”

“I’m a big boy, Leia. I can take care of myself,” I said as I tugged at a lock of her hair. “Come lay down with me.”

“I’m not going back to sleep with you here, Waylon.”

“So, lay beside me, and let’s snuggle up while we figure out what we’re going to do this afternoon.”

“A smart man would run like the wind.”

“You calling me stupid, Slugger?” Leia smiled and shook her head. “Come on, sweetheart. I won’t ask you to talk about it unless you want to, but I’m not going anywhere.”

“You might not be the brightest bulb on the string, but you sure are cute,”

Leia said as she studied my face.

“Aww. You say such sweet things to me. How could I even consider going away?” I could tell by the look in her eye that she was still at war with herself, probably feeling guilty that she’d attacked me and leery of it happening again. I couldn’t help myself, and before I even thought it through, I asked, “Who hurt you, baby?”

Leia snorted indelicately before she replied with a question of her own. “Who didn’t?”

“Do you react that way because you’re afraid they’ll come back or . . .”

Leia’s lips slowly tipped into a smile that could only be described as predatory before she said, “They couldn’t come back if they wanted to.”

“So, I guess I don’t need to go on a killing spree then.”

“You barely know me, Waylon.”

“Doesn’t matter. I won’t tolerate a man who hurts a woman or a child. Even twenty years in prison couldn’t beat that out of me.”

“You can stay until bedtime, but then you need to go.”

“We’ll see,” I said softly before I tugged on her hair again. “Come give me a kiss, Slugger.”

“Just a kiss?”

“Well, it’s been a few hours, and I’ve had a few bottles of water, so I’m fully rehydrated,” I told her with an exaggerated wink. “I’m ready for another taste of magic.”

Leia burst out laughing before she asked, “You’re never going to let that whole magical pussy comment go, are you?”

“Not a chance.”

Leia pulled her lips between her teeth and admitted, “I don’t want to lay back down. I was dreaming and then . . . All of it is just too much.”

“Then let’s go downstairs and see if I remember how to cook.”

“Bacon,” Leia said before she made an odd growling grunt sound.

“That was . . . something,” I mumbled. Leia burst out laughing and I asked, “What would you think if I told you I don’t really like bacon as much as I like ham?”

“Hmm,” Leia said. She wrinkled her nose as she studied my face for a few seconds and then said, “On one hand, I’d say you just lost all your hot points, but on the other hand, I have to consider that would just mean there’s more for me.”

“I’ll always give you my bacon,” I promised.

“Your hot points have been restored, Mr. Voyles.” Leia stood up and walked toward the bathroom, calling over her shoulder, “Come brush your teeth so we can make out while we cook breakfast.”

I hopped off the bed eagerly and jogged toward the bathroom, giving Leia quite a show since I was still naked.

“Don’t laugh at me. You’ll do anything for bacon, and I’ll do anything for more of your kisses.”

“Anything?”

I winced. “Within reason.”

“What would you do for a blowjob?”

“Fuck reason. It just left the building.”



“Holy shit,” I whispered in shock, tears in my eyes as I watched a movie character I’d admired since childhood die a horrible death at the hands of his own son. “I wasn’t expecting that at all.”

Leia sobbed against my chest, so I pulled some tissues from the box on the table beside the recliner and handed them to her before I got one of my own. She was curled up beside me, her body sprawled halfway across mine as she sobbed and sputtered even though she’d admitted to watching this movie more than a dozen times.

“Her heart is breaking,” Leia said through her tears as we watched the princess’ heartbreak on the screen. “It’s so sad.”

“Hell yeah, it is,” I choked out before I dabbed my eyes.

I was still trying to gather my emotions when the next fight scene started, and Leia sat up and started screaming at the television. “Whoop his ass! Get him!” My tears were forgotten as I watched Leia’s bloodthirsty side emerge. I found it sexier than anything I’d ever seen before. When the woman on the screen subdued her opponent, Leia lifted one hand and whooped loudly.

“That’s my girl!”

She relaxed against me and started sniffing again at another emotional scene and then laughed at me when the credits started rolling and I shouted, “That’s it? That’s how it fucking ends? You’ve got to be kidding!”

“I went to see it at the theater with my dad, and he had the same reaction,” Leia choked out through her laughter.

“That’s just bullshit.”

“There are two more movies after this one, though, if you want to have a marathon.”

“Good! And yes, I do want to watch them, but it doesn’t have to be today. I’m a little emotional right now, and I’m not sure I could pay attention.”

“I get ya, buddy. I’ve been there.”

“I can’t imagine watching that when it came out in theaters and then having to wait years for the next one.” I pulled her closer to me before I kissed her on the forehead and said, “Thank you for this, Slugger.”

“Any time. I’m a total nerd, but what else would you expect considering my dad named me after the princess who was his first crush.”

“No shit?”

“Leia. Duh.”

“That’s why you don’t get pissed when people call you Princess,” Waylon mused. “I wondered about that.”

“It’s more of a nickname than an insult.”

“So, your dad named you after his favorite movie crush. That’s cool. How did your mom feel about that?”

Leia shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve only met her one time, and . . . um . . . we didn’t exactly sit down and reminisce since she was actively trying to kidnap me.”

“What?”

“Yeah. It was quite the drama. She showed up with a gun and tried to hold me and Lexi hostage, but we got away and rescued my niece, who was just a baby, and then she took my mom hostage . . .”

“Your mom? But you just . . . Huh?” I interrupted in confusion.

“My biological mother took my adoptive mother hostage in the barn above the shelter where me and Lexi were hiding with my niece, and then Janis killed her.”

“Janis?”

“My horse. I told you that my mother was trampled to death, and the horse was now living her best life. The horse is Janis.”

“Holy shit.”

“Like I said, it was quite the drama.”

“And you never met her before that day?”

“Did you notice how young my dad is?”

“Yeah. I thought he was close to my age, but I’m not that much older than

you.”

“He was 13 when I was born. My biological mother was his teacher.”

“Holy shit,” I whispered.

“That’s why I was raised watching these movies, and I’m named after the princess. My dad was *very* young.”

“And your mother was . . .” I let my voice trail off in question.

“She was married and had children older than my dad. As a matter of fact, my father was friends with her son.”

“Was she punished?”

“Before she was trampled? Yes. She was in prison for years, but when she got out, she was unhinged and sure that my dad was waiting for her. She even kidnapped her own granddaughter and was ready to pretend it was me. I fought with her, and Lexi grabbed the baby. We ran to the storm shelter, and then Mom . . . Sierra, my adopted mom, pushed her over the wall into Janis’ stall, and she was trampled.”

“So, what you’re saying is that you’ve always been a scrapper, and your mom . . . Sierra . . . is a badass too.”

“Absolutely.”

“Now tell me why you freaked out in bed earlier.” Leia gave an uncomfortable laugh and started to get up, but I didn’t let her go. When she started to protest I argued, “I’m not holding you down, Slugger. I just don’t want you to run off.”

Leia fell back against my chest and sighed. “I don’t like to talk about it. I was fine for a long time, but then four men broke into Emerald’s house while I was staying the night a few months ago. I had to fight them off me and . . .” Leia cleared her throat, and I felt her body tense before she said, “I was fighting them, and Adam rushed in to help me. He shot them. Emerald shot another one downstairs. He died as did two of the three upstairs. Well, the third one lived for a while but . . .” Leia shrugged. “He’s dead now.”

“You were fine for a time before? What does that mean?”

“I was attacked when I was younger. He grabbed me in a parking lot and took me . . . he took me to . . . and it was a while before they found me.” I didn’t ask what happened because I could tell by the look on her face. “He was arrested and then got out on bond while he waited for trial. He showed up one night while I was out dancing with Ripley, and then he died.” I tilted my head in question but didn’t ask. I knew that Rip had been convicted of killing a man in a bar fight, but he hadn’t mentioned that it was the same man

who had attacked his best friend. “We tried everything we could to get Ripley’s charges cleared, but the jury convicted him. I’m the reason he spent time in prison.”

“Bullshit.”

“I am. He’d have never fought with Paul if it hadn’t been for me.”

“If that’s the case, then it’s my daughter’s fault I went to prison since I killed the man who raped her and did my damndest to kill the other one too.”

“No! That’s different!”

“No, it’s not. That fucker deserved to die just like the man I killed, and no amount of arguing is going to change my mind. It’s not your fault that Ripley went to prison just like it’s not my daughter’s fault that I did. You and Tori had fuck all to do with it. I don’t have a single regret for what I did, and I know Ripley doesn’t either.”

Leia sighed. “He said the same thing.”

“And you should have listened to him.”

“So, now you know why I acted the way I did in bed earlier. I haven’t been sleeping very well lately . . . Well, I never really have, but since I woke up and those men were . . . I just . . .” Leia blew out a sharp breath. “It’s better if you don’t stay the night because I can’t guarantee it won’t happen again.”

“Have you talked to anyone about this? Told them you’re not sleeping well?”

“Sort of.”

“That’s a no.”

“She’s got her own problems, Waylon. She doesn’t need mine on top of them.”

“Who?”

“Emerald. Besides, she and Adam are in a good place, building a life together, and I don’t want to interrupt that.”

“Emerald’s a doctor, isn’t she?”

“She’s a psychiatrist.”

“She’s not the only one in town, Slugger. You can talk to someone else about this.”

Leia shook her head. “No.” She looked over at me and bit her lip before she said, “In order for a shrink to help me, I’d have to tell the truth about that night, and I can’t do that.”

I tilted my head as I studied her face and was shocked when I realized what she meant. Something else had happened that night, and Leia was hiding it

from the cops as were her friends.

“Talk to me about it. Anytime. I’ll listen. Whatever happened that night is just going to fester if you don’t get it off your chest. If you can’t talk to Emerald about it and you can’t trust another professional, then you should talk to someone you can trust. If you don’t trust me, then talk to Ripley. If you can’t talk to him, then talk to one of the other girls in your circle. I’m sure they already know the details, so it won’t be news to them. Those girls are something else.”

Leia burst out laughing. “I know, right?”

“If you don’t get it off your chest, it will drown you, sweetheart. If you’re not sleeping, that’s just going to make it worse. The cycle will just spin and spin until you can’t see your way out of it.”

“What is there to talk about?”

“Anything. Everything. Just unburden yourself.”

Leia shook her head. “I can’t talk to you about it, Waylon. It’s not just my secret.”

“Then you’ve got to find someone else to talk to.”

“Okay.”

“Promise me, Leia.”

Leia frowned. “You’re awfully pushy, Mr. Voyles.”

“Promise. Me.”

“I promise.” Leia put on a brave face and smiled before she said, “How would you like to go riding with me?”

“In the bedroom or . . .”

“Horses, you filthy old man.”

“Hey, it was worth a try.” I laughed along with Leia and then kissed her forehead before I said, “I’d love to go riding with you, Slugger. It’s been way too long since I was in the saddle.”

“In that case, I’m glad I get to give you that first after so long away,” Leia said with a wicked grin as she twisted her body so that she was laying fully on top of me. “There’s another first I’d be more than happy to give you too.”

“What’s that?”

Leia moved her hand down slowly between us and then ran her hand over my quickly stiffening cock. “I’d like to ride *you*.”

“Oh, hell yeah,” I muttered before I lifted my head and gave her a kiss.

“I bet I can last for more than eight seconds. Can you?”

I chuckled before I said, “You’re never gonna let me live down that first time,

are you?”

“Not a chance.”

14.

LEIA

I glanced up when I heard someone whistle and took a few seconds to admire the handsome men who were walking toward one of the animal pens farther out on the property. Waylon lifted his hand to wave at me, and then Ripley did the same before they turned to watch the truck back the trailer up toward the entrance to that specific pen.

I looked back at the man I'd been talking to, and when I realized he was still writing notes on the sketch I'd given him, I pulled my phone out of my pocket to send a text to Emerald.

Morning, hag. Do you have some free time today?

For you? No.

I rolled my eyes and waited for another text to come in. It didn't take long.

Actually, I'm free after two. Want to grab a coffee?

I'll bring one to you at the office. I think I need to talk to someone.

Scratch that. I know I need to talk to someone, and you're the lucky winner.

All traces of sarcasm were gone now as Emerald went into professional mode. I couldn't help but smile when she replied.

I can juggle my schedule and fit you in this morning at ten. No need to bring coffee, just bring you.

Don't rearrange anything for me. I'm working this morning anyway, but I can be there at two.

I'll see you then. Call if you need me before that.

I smiled at her response as I sent her a thumbs up, knowing that Emerald was a stickler for her work schedule. She had to be or some of her clients would take advantage of her time and throw everything off for the rest of the day.

"Okay, take a look at this." I stepped closer to my friend Cyrus, one of the Conner family who everyone I knew used to do their construction work, and

looked at the sketch he had turned to let me see. “Instead of building individual structures for each pen, we’ll build a central one that has different rooms attached. Your exam and treatment room will be at the center of the building with access from this pathway. We’ll have your storage and office space on the second floor with plenty of windows so you can enjoy the view and look out over the animals,” Cyrus said as he pointed to the page. “Each pen will fan out from the main building, and at the center, there will be an enclosure you can use to quarantine them or just protect them from the elements. They’ll still be separated from interacting with the animal next to them because of the walkways that we’ll put between each pen. In essence, you’ll have a barn with individual rooms for each animal you’re treating and be able to keep your supplies in the center room for ease of access.” He pointed at the large circle around the outside edge of the drawing and said, “Each pen will have a gate to access the animal for trailering, whether it’s to drop them off or load them up.”

“That’s genius,” I whispered as I studied the drawing.

“I know,” Cyrus said cockily. “This will cut down the amount of space you need to use, the cost of materials, and even the water and energy supply since there will only be one well access and one heating and air unit for the entire structure.”

“How soon can you start?”

“I’ll make some phone calls about the well and get a guy out from the power company to give an estimate on branching from the main line. Should take about a week to get it finished once we start, so I’d say you’ll have your new building up within the next month, six weeks at the very most.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. I’ll come out tomorrow with some of my guys and mark off the area, get with you for approval, and give you an update on the information I get from water and power.”

“You’re awesome.”

“Again, you’re not telling me anything new,” he boasted with a grin that let me know he was teasing. “I’ll get these measurements into the system and email you a link to the 3D blueprints so you can take a virtual tour. You should have that by Friday, and if you approve, I’ll get the guys out to start next Monday. While we wait on water and electricity, I’ll have them setting posts and building the pens.”

“I thought this would take months and months.”

“For anyone else, it might, but you’re sort of almost not really family in a roundabout way.” I laughed because he was right. The connections between my extended family and Cyrus’ were blurred after all these years just like it was blurred between my Texas Knights family and the Texas Kings. The sounds coming from where Ripley and Waylon were working got louder, and Cyrus and I both turned to watch the animals scrambling into the trailer before he said, “So, that’s the new guy, huh?”

“That’s Waylon Voyles. He’s a friend of Ripley’s.”

“I meant your new guy.”

“Well, I guess in a way he’s . . . well . . . um. . .”

“He took your drunk ass home the other night, and he’s still alive to tell the tale, so that makes him your guy, whether you want to admit it or not.”

“Good point,” I conceded.

“He looks like he’ll fit in much better than the usual schmucks you date.”

“I don’t date schmucks!” Cyrus gave me a knowing look, and I wanted to smack him. “Why hasn’t anyone ever mentioned they think my taste in men is that bad?”

“I’m sure they have before, you probably just didn’t listen.”

“Ha! Like you do? How are things with Rachel the beauty queen?”

“Don’t get me started,” Cyrus moaned. He shook it off and then smiled at me. “I’ll get this information to you within the next few days.”

I gave Cyrus a hug and thanked him again, and when he started off toward his truck, I walked across the field to watch the guys loading the animals into the trailer for transport. Once I was seated on the fence, I pulled out my phone to take a video for Ripley’s TikTok account while I admired Waylon’s physique and deep voice, knowing that some of Ripley’s followers would love it almost as much as me.

Once the truck was loaded, Ripley and Waylon headed towards me, so I hopped off the fence to greet them.

“Did Cyrus give you some ideas to look over?”

“Ideas? No. The first sketch he showed me blew me out of the water, so he’s going to get started immediately.”

“What are you building?” Waylon asked before he leaned down and gave me a quick kiss.

I was too stunned by his show of affection to speak for a few seconds, and I saw Ripley shake his head before he answered Waylon and explained my plans. I perked up when he asked him, “Have you asked Leia if she’ll let you

intern with her, or do you want me to talk to Nichole?”

“I haven’t mentioned it,” Waylon said uncomfortably.

“Intern?”

“He needs to do that program like you did with Nichole so he can get his license to practice.”

“That’s all you need to do to finish?”

Waylon nodded before he said, “That’s it.”

“He’s the whole enchilada, Princess,” Ripley teased. “He’s rich, smart, and your mouth hasn’t run him off yet.”

I flipped Ripley off, and he laughed.

“A quick wit is sexy,” Waylon argued.

“Sexy and Leia Lincoln do not go together in my world,” Ripley said with an exaggerated shudder.

“They do in mine,” Waylon said with a grin. “As a matter of fact, you should see . . .”

“La la la la,” Ripley chanted as he walked away. “I’m going to start getting the pen ready for the crew that’s coming in today while you guys do that lovey-dovey shit that makes me want to puke.”

“I’ll be there in just a minute,” Waylon assured him. He turned back to me and said, “You look beautiful this morning, Slugger.”

“You saw me just a few hours ago.”

“And you were beautiful then too,” he assured me.

“Why didn’t you tell me you wanted to be a vet?”

“Because that’s not why I want to be close to you, and I was afraid you’d use it as an excuse to keep me at arm’s length.”

I reared my head back in shock. “I wouldn’t . . .”

“No, ma’am,” Waylon said as he shook his head. “No lies, remember?”

“I remember,” I whispered. I tipped my head up to kiss his lips before I reminded him, “We have an expiration date anyway, right?”

“You keep reminding me of that,” Waylon said testily.

I wasn’t willing to get into that discussion while standing in the middle of the property surrounded by animals and Ripley’s employees, so I asked, “What do you want to do tonight?”

“It’s up to you what we do before bed, but I’ve got lots of ideas about what happens when we get there.”

“Okay then. Dinner at Grazie’s it is,” I told him. “I’ll be home by six, and I’ll need a little time to change. Can you meet me at my house at seven?”

“I’ll meet you there at six, and we’ll clean up together,” Waylon suggested. “I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to shower alone again after yesterday’s adventures.”

“Liked that, did ya?”

Waylon took a step back and pressed his lips together before he looked at the ground and shook his head. After a few seconds, he said, “I’m not gonna think about it anymore because we’ve both got work to do, and I’m too much of a gentleman to bend you over and fuck you right here in the open.”

I couldn’t help but tease him, so I asked, “But you want to, don’t ya?”

“You’re playing with fire, Slugger.”

I made a show of licking the tip of my finger and then hissed when I touched it to his shoulder. “Goodness. You *are* awfully hot, Mr. Voyles.”

“Are y’all gonna play footsies all fucking day, or can we get some work done around here?” Ripley called out from somewhere behind me. I flipped him off over my shoulder, and Waylon chuckled before I explained, “He’s always pissy when Scoot’s not nearby, so give him a little grace today, alright?”

“Where is she?”

“The speech therapy center. She goes three mornings a week, and he’s a bear from the minute he drops her off until he picks her up before lunch. When she starts school full-time, it’s gonna be really hard to like him at all.” I thought about it for a second before I asked, “Did you call Tori back this morning?”

Last night, Waylon’s daughter had called him, and he could tell that something was wrong just by the tone of her voice. After I showed him the FaceTime feature and he talked to her on video, he was even more convinced that she needed some sort of help even though he couldn’t get her to open up.

She’d seemed very receptive when he insisted on introducing me, and I was happy to meet her even though I could tell by the tense lines of her face that there was something wrong.

“I did,” Waylon said before he blew out a breath. “I asked her if she’d like to come visit me, and she said she couldn’t right now. I told her I’d come see her, and she . . . I don’t even know how to explain it. She seemed scared. I hate that.”

“I know she’s not scared of you, Waylon. Even though I only talked to her for a few minutes, I could tell she loves you, so there must be something else going on in her life that she’s not ready to talk about yet. Give her a little

time and see if she opens up. If not, then we'll just have to take a road trip.”

“The last thing I should do is step foot in that town.”

“Why?”

“My ex still lives there with her *husband*,” Waylon said with a sneer. “I might be inclined to finish what I didn’t get a chance to before.”

“Okay then. Let’s avoid that town.”

“I’m not going to be able to if she doesn’t come see me soon.”

“Well, if you decide to go, I’ll go with you.”

Waylon studied my face and a slow smile replaced his worried expression.

“Thanks, Slugger. I better get to work.”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Ripley glaring at us, so I smiled brightly at him before I stuck my tongue out. I tiptoed up and gave Waylon a quick kiss before I walked toward my truck, making sure to put a little extra sway in my hips since I knew he’d be watching.

I wasn’t sure what it was about the man, but he made me feel beautiful, even in my work clothes that were already grubby from my early morning appointment. If I didn’t watch out, I could get used to the way he made me feel. As I drove to my next appointment, I tried to remind myself of all the reasons I’d come up with to make our interlude temporary.

It was difficult because even after just a few days, I didn’t want to imagine what life would be like without him. He made me smile, laugh, and feel safer than I had in years.

That was probably something I needed to address in my session with Emerald this afternoon.



“Why haven’t you talked to me about your problems sleeping before?” Emerald asked. When I shrugged, she shook her head. “I know I’m not your therapist, Leia. I can’t be because of our relationship, but I’ve always been and will always be your friend. I just happen to be able to listen a little more intently than some of the others, and I may have some insight they don’t when it comes to things like this.”

“I don’t know why I haven’t talked to anyone about it before.”

“Have you given any more thought to talking to a professional counselor? I gave you that list of . . .”

“You know I can’t, Em.”

Emerald took a deep breath and exhaled deeply as she turned and looked out the window at the traffic passing by on the street. After a few seconds, she nodded and said, “I understand why, and I hate that you have to make that sacrifice for me.”

“I don’t. It’s not a sacrifice.” I shrugged. “We’ve all got our secrets. Some of them connect more than others, but they all leave a mark on us.”

“I get that you can’t talk about exactly what happened at my house, but you can talk through what you’re feeling about what happened with Paul all those years ago.”

“When I told the authorities what he did to me, Ripley lost *years*, Em. Years.”

“He shouldn’t have,” Emerald muttered. “He did what every other man you know wanted to do; he just got there first.”

“And he got caught. That’s going to be on my conscience for the rest . . .”

“You can’t blame yourself for the crime Ripley committed. You didn’t hold a gun to his head and force him to kill Paul. He did that all on his own.”

“Is it weird that I have more feelings about Ripley going to prison than I do about Paul dying?”

“Paul hurt you in so many ways, Leia. Not just physically, but mentally and emotionally. The repercussions of what he did to you will last the rest of your life. Even as a professional, I can’t say that I feel like you should feel bad that he’s dead. As your friend, I think we should turn the day he died into a holiday we celebrate every fucking year.”

“That day is coming up soon,” I pointed out, openly crying now. “Maybe that’s why I’m sleeping even less than I was before.”

“That and the fact that you were attacked in a place where you should have been safe,” Emerald said as tears filled her eyes. She sniffed as she reached out and took my hand. “I’m sorry that happened to you in my house, Princess.”

“I handled it, and then you and Adam helped. I’m just glad that Aspen was with her father and that I was there instead of you. With your hand the way it was, there’s no way you could have fought as hard as you would have needed to.”

“The way you fought,” Emerald said as she swiped at the tears on her face.

“I’ve had practice,” I said bitterly. “Since I was so defenseless when Paul took me, I’ve worked very hard to make sure I’m ready for anything.”

Waylon got a piece of that when I woke up yesterday.”

“How bad did you hurt him?”

I laughed, a little bit proud that she thought so much of my ability to defend myself but a little sad that she knew why I felt like I had to.

“Not too badly. He’s got scratch marks on his chest and . . .”

“Are those from attacking him in your sleep or all the naughty things you have probably gotten up to over the last few days?”

I couldn’t help the giggle that escaped before I admitted, “Possibly both.”

“Having fun, huh? Have you given up on that bullshit about the time limit?”

“No! And it’s not bullshit.”

“Total bullshit. I like him. Holly loves him. I’m pretty sure that if Lexi wasn’t such a loyal sister, she’d do her best to steal him away. Even Jewel likes him, and you know that’s saying something.” I laughed as I nodded, agreeing with her since a positive reaction from Jewel was rare. “What does he think about it?”

“He doesn’t like it. I’m not sure if it’s because he doesn’t like to be told what to do or . . .”

“Or he sees something in you that makes him want to stick around,” Emerald interrupted. “That’s usually how a relationship starts, Leia, just so you know.”

“I’ve had relationships before!”

“You always pick the guy you know won’t last.”

“I do not!”

“You can’t lie to me because I know you too well. You only date men you know won’t get along with us so you have an excuse to dump him later.”

I tilted my head in question and asked, “Is that what you think?”

“I don’t just think, I *know* that’s what you do, Leia.” Emerald pointed a finger at her chest and said, “Trained professional.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” I argued.

“They’re weak minded, weak willed, and basically puny men who are attractive from the outside, but when you get to their squishy center, you realize it’s not all heart. it’s more . . . vanilla pudding. Very vanilla. Bland and tasteless vanilla. Boring vanilla.”

I burst out laughing at how emphatic she was but had to admit she was right. They were pretty to look at if you liked that sort of man, but that type wasn’t for me. I liked the gruff type. Weathered. Seasoned. Rough around the edges.

Like Waylon.

“You just had an epiphany, didn’t you?”

“No!”

“Liar.”

“Maybe.”

Emerald burst out laughing but was able to choke out, “Still lying.”

“Most of the time, I don’t like you at all. Especially when you get all shrinky and doctorly and shit. You’re a pain in my ass more often than not, and that’s the damn truth.”

“Your Texas comes out full force when you’re backed into a corner,” Emerald said, still laughing. “That twang is loud and clear when you’re lying, sweetheart. It’s one of your tells.”

“Bullshit.”

Emerald batted her eyelashes dramatically and clasped her hands to her chest before, in an obviously exaggerated Southern drawl, she exclaimed, “I swear, officer, I didn’t know I was speedin’. I promise to watch out from now on. *Please* don’t give me a ticket! My mama and daddy’ll never forgive me!”

“I do not *ever* sound like that.”

“Principal Castillo, I don’t know what that girl’s talking ‘bout! I’d never even consider trippin’ somebody and makin’ ‘em fall. But you know her. She’s always been a little bit clumsy and way too extra with her drama. Bless her heart!”

I giggled and tried to mask it with a cough before I said, “I wanted to hit that bitch, but I settled for tripping her instead. You can’t blame me for that because I was defendin’ . . . dammit!” Emerald lost it and started cackling so loud that she probably didn’t even hear me correct myself. “*Defending*. I was defending you.”

“And I thank you for that, but you have to admit that I’m right.”

“I hate your face.”

Suddenly, Emerald was serious again and said, “I want to help you, but I don’t know how, and it has to come from within anyway.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s probably just going to take some time. After Paul, I didn’t sleep well for a long time, just an hour or two here and there. I’m having the same problem now.”

“I want to schedule some more sessions with you, Leia. I know it can’t be official, but I really think I can help you deal with this.”

“How?”

“Well, we can talk about some ways you can relax your mind as well as your body and how to give yourself some grace because this situation would be difficult for anyone.”

“I tried to get Waylon to go home last night because I was afraid it would happen again, but he refused.”

“Good. Did you tell him what happened?”

“No,” I whispered as I remembered my terror that night when I woke up surrounded by strange men. “I don’t want him to know that it was me who shot them or . . .”

“Or what, honey?”

“That it felt good,” I whispered.

My admission didn’t even phase Emerald, and she asked, “Why do you think it felt good?”

“Because they tried to hurt me like Paul, but this time I fought back. This time I stopped them and made sure they’d never hurt anyone else again.”

“That’s what I need you to remember as you try to fall asleep at night. Not what it looked like or sounded like, but that it’s over, and they’ll never be able to hurt you or anyone else again.”

“But when I dream, they’re there and so is Paul.”

“Nightmares are your subconscious bringing your biggest fears to life, but it’s still your brain Leia. You can tell it what to do.”

“How?”

“Do you remember your nightmares?”

“They’re always the same.”

“While you’re in it, in that situation, do something different. Force your brain to take action during the dream. Make sure it’s something that will wake you up. Force yourself to scream or run headfirst into a wall. Tell your brain to make you reach up and pull your hair or even pinch yourself. If you concentrate hard enough, your body will naturally obey and wake you from your nightmare.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“No, it’s not. It’s not easy to do, but some scientists believe that by concentrating on doing *something*, you’re taking the focus off of what is scaring you and changing the narrative.”

“Changing it?”

“You can teleport to another house that’s safe. Sprout wings and fly to a different location. Shoot lasers out of your palms like Iron Man and make

heads explode. Imagine a herd of purple elephants with pink polka dots charging through the wall and trampling the bad guys. It doesn't have to be realistic, Leia. It can be your imagination overriding your fear. Take charge in your dream like you do in life and see if that helps."

"This is the weirdest shit I've ever heard."

"The brain is a weird fucking place, Princess."

"No wonder you fit right in exploring it."

Emerald sniffed. "Now, let's move to a more pleasant subject. Tell me about Waylon and how you're going to explain that you were wrong in giving this whole thing an expiration date."

"Maybe the only reason that upsets him is because he doesn't like being told what to do."

"Possibly, but I think it's mostly that he's smart enough to see that he's the luckiest bastard on the planet to have run into you so quickly after his release."

"Technically, he didn't run into me. I knocked him out, hogtied him, and then left him on the barn floor."

"And the way he reacted to that makes me believe he's just the man you need in your life."

"I'm starting to think that myself, but I'm not quite willing to admit it out loud yet."

"You just did," Emerald pointed out with a bark of laughter.

"Only to you, Em, because I know you'll take my secret to the grave if I ask."

"I would even if you didn't, Princess. You know that."

15.

WAYLON

“Have you finished with that pen?” Ripley asked without looking up.

“I took care of both of them,” I confirmed. “Found three with superficial leg wounds, and I treated them before I put them in the quarantine pen. I found another that has what looks like an infected puncture wound at the base of her neck. It needs to be debrided and packed and will require antibiotics and follow-up care, so I put her in the smallest pen until you tell me what to do next.”

“Can you take care of it?”

“I can, but I’m not a licensed professional.”

“I know that, but you’re an experienced rancher with some schooling under your belt. Leia’s busy this afternoon, so go ahead and doctor the animal. I’ll have her come out and check your work some time this evening.”

“It’s a deep wound, and I don’t feel comfortable taking care of it without a local anesthetic,” I argued.

“Okay. I’ve got three that need to be looked at too. Since Leia’s not available, I’ll call Nichole.”

Ripley stood up and pulled off his gloves before he took his phone out of his back pocket and made a call. When a woman answered, he greeted her before he explained that I needed some things and passed me the phone as he walked off.

I introduced myself and then explained the injury I’d found. She asked me what I would suggest for treatment. After I gave her my recommendation, she asked for a list of supplies I thought she’d need to take care of the call. She assured me she’d be on her way within the hour and gave me instructions on how to prepare for her arrival before we hung up.

I walked into the barn to look for Ripley and found him standing by the short wall of one of the seclusion stalls, staring inside with a forlorn expression.

When I approached, he didn't look at me, just put his hand out for the phone. I glanced into the stall and saw Scoot sleeping on the straw, her feet propped up on Rufio and her head resting on Falcor.

"She must have had a busy morning to be able to sleep like that."

"She can sleep anywhere because she can't hear what's going on around her," Ripley said bitterly.

I wasn't sure why he was upset, but I felt like I should say something, so I pointed out, "That's what the dogs are for, right? To pay attention to her surroundings for her?"

"Yeah," Ripley said before he sighed heavily. "I've fucked her up, Waylon, and I don't know how to fix it."

"What do you mean?"

"Kids should come with a handbook or something."

"I remember feeling that way the first time my daughter threw a screaming fit in the middle of the kitchen because I took a bite of her apple to get it started for her. I'd done that every time I gave her an apple since she had enough teeth to gnaw on one by herself, but that day, she lost her shit, and I didn't know what to do. I just stood there staring at her like she was an alien." I laughed softly before I said, "The next day she threw a fit because I *didn't* take that first bite."

"She's different."

"Well, yeah. They're all individuals, Ripley. Not a single one is the same. That's what makes it an adventure, and that's why there's not a handbook. She's gonna have some different issues because of her deafness, and that just adds to the questions, I'm sure."

"No, she's different because I made her that way. I wanted her to be tough because the world's a fucked-up place, but at the same time, I kept her away from people to protect her. That's backfiring on me now."

"How so?"

"I believe she's gotta be the most stubborn individual on the planet. She's surly, she won't communicate, she's stubborn, bullheaded, and she's . . . she's just . . . she's making me fucking crazy," Ripley stammered. I wasn't quite sure what to say to that, but it was really hard not to laugh out loud. I knew that if I did, my friend would probably start swinging, and that wasn't how I wanted this day to go. He glared at me before he said, "Just fucking say it, Waylon. I can hear the goddamn gears in your head turning, and if you clench your jaw any tighter, you're gonna break a fucking tooth."

“It’s probably like looking in a mirror but seeing a smaller, prettier, more intelligent version of yourself, isn’t it?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what it’s like. I’m surprised someone hasn’t just killed me yet.” I couldn’t help it. I burst out laughing. I tried to disguise it with a cough, but Ripley wasn’t fooled. “Fuck you, Waylon.”

“I’m sorry. I’m trying to be supportive, but I’m out of my element here.”

“I know. I need help.”

“I could have told you that years ago, my friend.”

“What did Nichole say?” Ripley asked, changing the subject abruptly.

“She’s on her way over with the supplies and gave me some tasks to take care of before she gets here.”

“Then I guess you should get to it instead of standing here laughing at me, huh?”

“I guess so.”



“You did an excellent job, Waylon. I’ve got an open position at my practice if you’d like to join the staff. The pay is shit, but you get to cuddle puppies and kittens anytime you want.”

“I’ve been trying to figure out exactly how to ask you about that. I need to intern under an established vet, but I’m not sure how to go about that since I’ve got a record and . . .”

“That doesn’t hold much weight in my book,” Nichole interrupted. “You’ve served your time, and now you’re out among the world trying to make something of yourself. There’s no shame in that.”

“Do you know why I went to prison?”

“Murder.”

“Okay then,” I winced. “I guess it’s common knowledge now.”

“The Rojo grapevine is faster than high-speed internet, especially when it concerns someone in our extended family.”

“I’m not part of your family.”

“But Leia and Ripley are. They seem to think that you’re an upstanding guy even though you killed a man, and that’s good enough for us.”

“That doesn’t bother any of you?”

“Honey, you’ve met Martha. She may seem like a sweet older lady, but she’s

got a will of steel. There's nothing she won't do for a member of her family."

"That's what makes everyone love her."

"Right. And when I say there's nothing she won't do, I mean *nothing*, down to and including garroting a man with a shoestring to protect her grandson before picking herself some flowers on the side of the road while she waited for the cops." I smiled as I tried to imagine that dear woman doing such a thing and was sure it was an exaggeration until Nichole said, "I'm not playing. She did that without blinking an eye."

"Wow." I thought about it for a second and said, "But she didn't go out of her way to find that man and kill him. That's what I did and why I went to prison."

"And that's why our justice system is a laughable sham," Nichole said with an exaggerated eye roll. "You've got all the paperwork for your degree?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Bring it to my office, and I'll make some copies for you. Which care is your specialty? Companion or . . ."

"Large animal. I grew up on a ranch, so that's what I know. It made sense to follow that path in school."

"That's understandable. I chose companion care for the simple fact that it keeps me surrounded with cuddly animals who don't talk shit or judge me."

"Cattle and horses don't either."

"Yeah, but they smell worse," Nichole said as she wrinkled her nose. "We'll help you take care of the paperwork to get you set up under our practice, and then you'll trail Leia for a while before you set out on your own, under her supervision, of course."

"I wasn't sure that would work since I'm seeing her and all."

"I didn't plan on putting that anywhere on the paperwork, and I suggest you don't either."

I laughed softly before I nodded. "Yes, ma'am." I thought about it for a second and then asked, "If Leia doesn't . . . Well, she's insistent that we're not going to be dating. How should I handle that, as far as this goes?"

"I suggest you be persistent, Waylon, but I'm not saying that just so you can intern with her. I'm saying that as a woman who watched her grow up from a freckle-faced gangly little girl who was all elbows and knees to the freckle-faced intelligent woman she is today. If I could offer any advice to your generation and all the ones after, it is to go after what you want with solitary

intent and focus. You'll win out in the end. I learned that from my husband."

"Did he give you that advice about something important?"

"No, honey, that's how he became my husband."



I heard Leia's voice upstairs and wondered who she was talking to but didn't go explore since I needed a shower almost as much as I needed a kiss after the long afternoon I'd had. I hurried through my shower and got dressed before I grabbed a bottle of water and walked up the stairs. I called out to Leia from the doorway of her bedroom, and when she invited me inside, I walked across to the bathroom to find out who she was talking to.

Scout was sitting on the vanity facing the mirror, and she had an irritated look on her face as she studied Leia's reflection.

I didn't have to ask what was going on because Leia finally snapped. Her hands were flying, signing to Scout as she spoke out loud. "We'll sit right here until you start your exercises, young lady." Scout just glared at her and shook her head, so Leia shrugged and put her hands down.

I watched the battle of wills and wondered if I should make myself scarce so I didn't get scorched when one of them exploded. I'd never been one to take the safest route, though, so I closed the toilet and sat down on the lid.

After a few minutes, Leia finally spoke to me even though she never lost eye contact with Scout in the mirror. "We may be here for a while, so if you're starving, you should grab something."

"What exactly are you doing?"

"Fighting the Ripley Booker demon that's possessed this child's body."

I bit back a laugh and nodded. "Looks like she's winning."

"For now," Leia conceded. She tilted her head and cocked an eyebrow as Scout sighed. She didn't sign this time, but I knew she was talking to Scout when she said, "I've got nothin' but time, little girl." Scout clenched her hands and let out a growl of frustration before she started signing furiously.

Leia closed her eyes and interrupted, "Exercises. Now."

Scout stuck her tongue out, and I thought it was because she was being sassy, but when Leia opened her eyes and saw what the little girl was doing, she did the same thing. They watched their reflections as they curled their tongues

for a few seconds and then let them relax before they did it again. Scoot was still, watching her reflection, but Leia reached down and picked up a brush and started working the tangles out of Scoot's long hair.

Since it was wet, I assumed that the little girl had just showered and wondered why she was doing that here instead of at her own home.

"Next," Leia said before she lifted her jaw and showed Scoot that she was touching her tongue to the top of her mouth. Scoot mimicked her and Leia looked over at me. "Celia comes over almost every afternoon and showers before I do her hair. No matter how hard Rip tries, he just can't master the art of braiding, and she's not quite old enough to do it herself."

"Does it always turn into a battle of wills?"

"Lately, yes," Leia said before she nodded at their reflection and stuck her tongue out and held it there.

Scoot growled before she pulled her tongue in and said, "Done."

"Not even close, sweetheart," Leia said as she lifted Scoot's hair and started brushing it from the ends.

Scoot turned her head and looked at me before she pointed. "You do."

I hadn't heard her speak before, so I was shocked by the raspy sound of her voice. It was deeper than I'd imagined it would be but beautiful all the same.

Leia leaned around her so that she blocked Scoot's line of vision and enunciated when she said, "Will you do them with me, please?"

Scoot was silent, so Leia repeated herself twice and then leaned back so Scoot could see me again before she slowly asked, "Will you . . . do . . . them with me. . . please?"

I made sure she was still looking at me when I answered, "You'll have to show me how."

Scoot nodded, so I stood next to Leia and watched the little girl demonstrate the tongue exercise she was working on. As I followed Scoot's lead, Leia explained, "This exercise strengthens the tongue and helps enunciate L's, dark L's . . ."

"What's that?" I interrupted before I put my tongue back in position.

"Like the word 'all.' It also helps with R's, Th's and Z's."

"Really?"

"Your tongue goes into position naturally from muscle memory. She's having to train her tongue to do that."

"Done," Scoot barked.

Leia demonstrated the next exercise, and Scoot and I followed suit, holding the tips of our tongues between our teeth as we blew out. “Th th th th th.”

“Now, the animals,” Leia said as she leaned down so her head was next to Celia’s. “Lion.” Leia gave an exaggerated roar as she nuzzled Scoot’s neck, and I smiled when the girl giggled and made the same noise. I was glad to see that Scoot’s surly look was gone since she couldn’t help but giggle at me and Leia as we roared at her.

The tone of the room changed once she started laughing, and while Leia braided her hair, Scoot showed me the different sounds and exercises she had to do everyday. I didn’t care that I looked and sounded foolish; I would have done anything to get the quiet child to smile and interact with me more. Leia seemed to recognize that, so she braided slowly to draw out our time together.

When Leia was finished with her hair, Scoot attached the receivers for her implants and then smiled at me. “Thank you . . .” She looked confused for a second, and without thinking, I leaned over so we were eye to eye and said my name slowly. Scoot smiled and said my name a few times before she said, “Thank you, Way-lon. Tomorrow?”

“All the words, Scoot,” Leia ordered.

“Will you be . . . here tomorrow?”

“Absolutely,” I assured her. I saw Leia cut her eyes to me before she narrowed them, and I smiled at her before I looked back at Scoot. “See you tomorrow.”

“Bye!” Scoot spun around on her butt and then threw her arms around Leia before she said, “Go Grandma now.”

I couldn’t help but smile as Leia hugged the little girl and then explained how to form the sentence she was trying to communicate before she kissed her cheek and said goodbye.

“Love you, Leia. Love you, Way-lon.”

“Damn,” I whispered as I leaned forward and rested my hand on the vanity to hold myself up.

“What’s wrong?” Leia asked as we heard the front door slam. “Why are you so pale? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I whispered before I took a deep breath in through my nose and blew it out slowly.

“Isn’t that what I’m supposed to say when you ask me what’s wrong?”

I smiled at her and then shook my head. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s something,” Leia argued before she glanced at the door and then back at me. “Scoot said she loved you, and you went white as a sheet.”

“It’s been a while since anyone said that to me,” I admitted. “Watching you do her hair and act like a hard-ass while you made her do what’s good for her instead of caving was a sight to see and made me remember the time I spent with my daughter when she was young.”

“You didn’t get to watch her grow up.”

“I didn’t, and that was my choice. I understand that, but it doesn’t make it any easier.”

“Do you regret it? Killing that man?”

“No. I don’t have any remorse for what I did. I’m sorry that it took me away from my daughter, but I’m not sorry I killed him or tried to kill the other one.” I shrugged. “I guess the only thing I regret was not finishing the job.”

“It’s never too late,” Leia said with a nonchalant shrug.

I chuckled before I asked, “You gonna help me get away with it this time?”

“I could give you some pointers,” she said slyly. “Are you ready for dinner?”

“I need to go wash my boots and then we can go.”

“Your work boots?”

“My only pair of boots,” I corrected her.

“Oh. Shit.”

“Yep. They’re covered in it.”

“We should get you a new pair.”

“I’d like that but . . .”

“I’ll front you the money. You can pay me back.”

“I don’t need your money, Slugger.”

“It’s just until Ripley pays you. He *is* going to pay you, right?”

I grinned and said, “As far as I know. I filled out all the employee paperwork on Monday.”

“Good. So, I’ll buy you a pair of boots and then . . .”

“I have plenty of money, Leia.”

“How?”

“I had money before I went in, and after my parents died, their estate was split between me and Tori, so I have that too, along with the rest.”

“The rest?”

“There’s a trust that holds the properties and income for us and any of our descendants.”

“A trust?”

“Simple sentences all of a sudden, huh? I’ll have to remember that the one way to get you to stop with the snappy comebacks is to talk about money.”

“Well, that’s not generally something people discuss when they first meet.”

“True. But just so you know and don’t think I’m trying to hide anything from you, I am the proud owner of quite a bit of land around my hometown even though it’s not a good idea for me to go there.”

“Because that *scumbag* is there.” I nodded. “Fuck him and fuck your ex-wife.”

I smiled at her vehemence before I asked, “Since I can afford a good pair of boots, will you show me the best place to shop for them?”

“I hate shopping.”

“If I remember correctly, I’m not much of a fan either.”

“I could use a new pair of boots myself,” Leia said thoughtfully. “Let’s go shopping before we get dinner at Grazie’s.”

“Let’s do it.”

It didn’t take us long to get on the road, and our shopping excursion was short and sweet, just the way I liked them. However, it was more fun than I’d ever had shopping with a woman. I watched Leia trail her fingers over the toes of all the boots on the shelf before she stopped at one and said, “This is the pair.”

“You don’t want to look around?”

“Nope. I want these,” Leia said to the salesman. She told him her size and then sat down to try them on while I did the same with a pair I’d chosen.

“You’re not going to get some cute girly ones?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“What for? I’m not wearing them in a pageant, Waylon. These will be my good boots for a while until I wear out a pair of my work boots and then swap these into the rotation.”

“I never realized how sexy practicality could be,” I mused as I stood up to walk around and get a feel for the pair I had on. I sat down and tried on another pair before I said, “These will be my *good* boots, I suppose. The ones I’ve been wearing still have some life in them, but they’re more than two decades old, so they don’t fit the way they used to.”

“You were wearing them when you were arrested?”

“Yes, ma’am. They were covered in shit that day too,” I said with a grin.

“Got it all over the back of that police cruiser.”

“They picked you up at work?”

I nodded. “They cut the fence and drove out into the field to find me. Pulled

me off my horse, and when my dog went apeshit, they shot him.”

“Oh no.”

“Did I mention that the man I killed was the sheriff's best friend? Guess not.”

“Is he still the sheriff?” I nodded, and she whispered, “That’s why you can’t go back.”

“Exactly. It’s not just because my ex-wife’s husband is living there. I could probably resist killing that bastard, considering he’s still walking with the limp I gave him, but I have a feeling that the sheriff would be looking for any reason he could find to lock me up.”

“We’ll have to get Tori here to see you then,” Leia said firmly.

“Since this is where I’m going to stay, I’d like to hope that she may move here someday.”

“You’re going to stay in Rojo?”

I shrugged. “At first, I thought it might be a resting place before I moved on. Not home, but somewhere closer to it.”

“And you’re not leaving?”

“I’ve developed a fondness for Rojo over the last few days.”

“You’ve barely seen the town, Waylon. How do you know you’re fond of it?”

“It’s not the town, Slugger. It’s the freckles,” I said before I leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. “And the company.”

“You’re making it very hard for me to stick to my original plan, Waylon.”

“Good.”

Leia was quiet for the rest of our shopping excursion and waited patiently while I picked out a few pairs of pants and a couple of shirts to add to my meager wardrobe. By the time we left, it was killing me not to ask her what was going through her mind, but I resisted and gave her some time to think in the hopes that she’d work out what I’d just told her.

I wanted to stay in Rojo because of her. I wasn’t going to fuck my way across the great state of Texas like she thought I might. As far as I was concerned, unless she turned into a screeching banshee during the full moon, I was going to stay here and figure out a way to keep her by my side. Hell, even if she did lose her shit once a month, I’d figure out how to deal with it and just brace myself for next month’s adventure.

I was quickly coming to realize that there wasn’t much I wouldn’t go through for the chance to have Leia Lincoln by my side.

When we arrived at the restaurant, I wasn’t surprised when she greeted the

hostess and server by name. What *did* surprise me was her reaction when she saw a man sitting at a table alone.

“We should go,” Leia said before she spun around and bumped into me when I didn’t get out of her way fast enough.

“Why?”

“Because I’m not in prison,” Leia whispered before she glanced at the man again. She grimaced when he spotted her and his eyes got wide. “Fuck! It’s too late.”

“Prison?” I asked as I put my hands on her shoulders and turned her back around so we could go to the table where the hostess was patiently waiting to seat us. “Is this sort of like the penguins in Alaska bullshit?”

“Maybe.” Leia sighed. “Okay, yes.”

By the time I pulled Leia’s chair out and settled into the one next to her, the man who had been sitting alone had made his way to our table and was looking down at Leia with a shocked expression.

I took a few seconds to study him and realized he was much different than the man I’d met at the park that day. He had on a button-down shirt, khaki pants, and dress shoes that were so shiny, I could probably see my own reflection if I got close enough. His hair was parted on the side and slicked down with something that most definitely had at least one ingredient akin to glue. The look on his face was wary while confused at the same time.

He finally asked, “You’re already out?”

“Obviously.”

He scoffed before he said, “Of course you are because the prison system isn’t nearly strict enough. Anyone who goes to prison should have to stay there for a minimum of ten years. They should just make compounds where they are locked in and it’s a free for all. Dog eat dog. Only the strong survive. That would keep some of those assholes off the streets and stop them from committing more crime.”

“Even white collar crimes? You think an accountant who skimmed money should be stuck on an island with a bunch of violent criminals?”

“One criminal is no different than another,” the man snapped in answer to my question. “Obviously, Jewel didn’t know you were a reprobate when she set us up.”

“Wow. Reprobate. You don’t hear that word very often,” I muttered. I realized what he’d just said, and I asked, “Jewel set the two of you up?”

“Dr. Parker was kind-hearted enough to think that I may be a good influence

on Ms. Lincoln, but I had to explain to her that we were on very different paths in our lives and wouldn't work out after all."

"Different paths? You mean you're walking down one on the hunt for Sally Homemaker who will fetch your slippers at the end of the day and bring them to you with a rocks glass of scotch before she serves you dinner."

"The kitchen *is* a woman's place after all," the man said with his eyebrows raised. "Except for you, obviously."

"You don't think she can cook?" I asked.

"I wouldn't eat a single thing she tried to serve me, including a drink."

"No scotch for you then, Jason," Leia said with an exaggerated shrug. "I suggest you remember what I went down for before you start harping at the next woman about her supposed place in the world."

"How did you get out so quickly?"

"Good behavior."

"Seriously? How is that even possible?"

"Well, since I'm so creative in the kitchen . . ." Leia glared at me when I started giggling, knowing full well that I was remembering exactly what we'd done in the kitchen more than once so far and none of it had to do with food.

"I single-handedly cooked three meals a day for the entire prison, and that went a long way with the parole board."

"All by yourself, huh?" I asked, more than ready to jump into the conversation because I was sure it would be as funny as the one she had with the dimwitted Jeep owner the other day. "There are usually a minimum of a thousand people in prison at any given time."

"I'm aware," Leia said primly.

"And you cooked for all of them?"

"I did," Leia said as she nodded. The man standing next to the table looked horrified when Leia continued, "Of course, they didn't recognize that I had many other skills besides my ability to cook and clean and were understanding when there were days here and there when I thought it would be great to get takeout or have pizza delivered."

"To the prison? For a thousand inmates?" I asked. Leia didn't respond verbally, but the hard pinch she gave to my thigh was answer enough. She wanted me out of this conversation, but she wasn't going to get her wish. If she could have fun playing games with this schmuck, then so could I.

"What's the delivery fee on an order like that?"

"They waive the fee for orders over a hundred dollars." She looked at the

dispshtit who was still glaring daggers at her and asked, “So, how’s your hunt for a permanent housekeeper going?”

“I’m dating with the express purpose of finding a wife.”

“Have you considered asking Jewel out? I think you would be perfect together.”

“You do?” the man and I asked at the same time.

“Absolutely. There’s nothing she likes more than catering to her man. Of course, she’ll play hard to get for a while, so you’ll have to *really* pursue her. You might try to use that firm tone of voice you used with me when I laughed at your suggestion that I pay more attention to my appearance.”

“Firm tone?” I asked, as I slowly turned my head to study the man standing beside me. “How firm?”

“Nothing too problematic. I think he thought it would put me in my place, but it just gave me indigestion.”

“Did he raise his voice?” I asked menacingly.

“No. He just got a little snippy when I told him he should be looking for a live-in maid instead of a partner.”

“A wife. I have a partner who helps me with my business, but my wife’s job will be to take care of my home.”

“Seriously. You and Jewel are so well-suited, I’m surprised she hasn’t snatched you up yet.” The man looked thoughtful, so Leia pushed a little harder. “I bet you didn’t know that she’s a virtuoso in the kitchen, did you? And her house is *always* spotless. As a matter of fact, I ate scrambled eggs off the tile in front of her stove last week just to test the theory. They were fluffy and buttery goodness that didn’t have so much as a speck of dust on them.”

The guy looked a little grossed out, but he was still interested, so I played along. “Yeah. She’s always walking around with a dust rag in one hand and a mop in the other. She looks so cute in her apron too.”

“Of course she does. She coordinates her apron with the clothes she’s wearing. Very bougie about it,” Leia whispered as if she was telling a well-kept secret. “Do you have her number?”

“I generally talk to her while she’s in the office.”

“Let me give you her cell,” Leia told him with a grin. She waited for him to pull his phone out and then rattled off a number before she said, “Word of warning - she won’t be content with just a few simple phone calls, and when you do talk to her, make sure that you tell her all about your day in minute

detail. She loves listening to others explain their good qualities while pointing out her flaws.”

“Really?”

“Definitely. She’s all about self-improvement. You should mention that she needs to moisturize the fine lines around her eyes. I suggested that to her the other day, but she was still on the fence about it, so you may want to pretend it was all your idea.”

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but thank you for your input, Leia. I’m a little distressed that a dangerous woman like you is already out. I hope this fine gentleman is fully aware that you’re a convicted criminal.”

“I think hardened criminals are sexy, don’t you, Slugger?” I asked with a sly grin.

“Fuck off, Waylon,” Leia hissed before she smiled at the fool who was too stupid and full of himself to understand how hard he was being played.

“Good luck with Jewel, Jason, and remember, persistence is key.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Without another word, the man turned and walked toward the front of the restaurant. I managed to hold myself together until he was out of earshot but burst into laughter the second the door closed behind him.

“What the fuck was that?”

“That was me getting revenge on Jewel for setting me up with that revolting caveman in the first place,” Leia grumbled before she took a sip of the tea the server had just put on the table. “Evil bitch.”

“You know you just signed that man’s death warrant, don’t you?”

“Fully aware.”

“So, what did you go down for?”

“This morning?” Leia asked innocently.

I sputtered out a laugh as I tried to will my cock to go back down from the instant hard-on *that* memory brought about, then asked, “Prison, Slugger. Did they catch you trapping penguins in Alaska?”

“No. I was convicted of putting antifreeze in my ex’s jello.” I started laughing again, and Leia shrugged. “I wanted to put a nugget of doubt in his brain that might . . . deter him from being such a prick about certain things.”

I was still laughing when she leaned closer to me with wide eyes and said, “He flat out told me that even though I was *homely*, he could get past that as long as I understood a woman’s true role in life, and then he told me that he expected his wife to get pregnant within a month of marriage, especially if it

were me because I was so old that I had to be running out of viable eggs.”
“Oh shit,” I whispered. “Jewel is going to eat him alive.”
Leia giggled. “I know.”

16.

LEIA

I was still trying to catch my breath when Waylon collapsed onto the bed beside me. He pulled me into his arms and kissed me on my shoulder before he whispered, “How was that for stamina?”

“I’d give you an eight out of ten for endurance, but . . .” I squealed when Waylon nipped at my neck with his teeth, then started laughing. “I’d say that your stamina has improved drastically in the last week, Mr. Voyles.”

“Eight out of ten? Are you kidding me right now? Did that *third* orgasm make you loopy?”

“Okay, it may have been a nine, but that’s as far as I’m going,” I murmured. My eyes shot open when Waylon pointed out, “You do realize it’s been eight days, right?”

I tried to pretend I didn’t know what he was talking about and asked, “Since I got a good night’s rest without you all up in my space? Yes.”

“Are you ready to admit that I’m in this for the long haul?”

“A week does not constitute a long haul, Waylon.”

“I just felt the need to point out that our weekend has now turned into two, and I have no plans to go anywhere, Slugger.”

“Well, I plan on going to sleep,” I retorted before I yawned loudly. “You should do the same.”

“I had a nice chat with your dad today.” Waylon chuckled when he felt me tense. “He said he hasn’t seen you this light and happy in years.” When I didn’t comment, he asked, “Is that true?”

“We haven’t even had our first argument yet, so I’m not sure why you’re so giddy.”

“Giddy?”

“What else did my dad say?”

“He told me that he married your mom just a few days after they met.”

“And?”

“That before her, he would never have believed that a couple who moved so fast could be so right together.”

“There are a lot of things we’d have to talk about before we even consider anything permanent, and right now is not the time.”

“When will it be the right time?” Waylon laughed softly before he kissed my shoulder one more time and then pulled me even closer. “It doesn’t matter, Slugger. I’ll be here. Whether it takes a year or ten, I’ll be here.”

I tried to relax as I listened to Waylon’s breathing even out, but I didn’t have much luck even though I was exhausted. The last few nights of sleep had been riddled with nightmares - some new, but most of them the same scenario I’d dreamed about before.

The new ones concerned me most, though. In every single one, I could hear Waylon calling for me, but I couldn’t get past the horrible men trying to hurt me. I’d fight and fight, but I could never get to him before his voice faded away. I wondered what a dream analyst would say about that. I had some ideas of my own, and they were almost as terrifying as the nightmares themselves.

When I met with Emerald for our now weekly unofficial therapy appointment today, I’d opened up more than I ever had. By the time our visit was over, I was a mess, but she insisted that was a good thing. I couldn’t imagine why, considering how I felt at the time, but I realized now that she may be right.

I was feeling better. I was even sleeping better than I had before, but I thought that probably had something to do with the man snoring beside me. It terrified me to think that I was already that dependent on him. When I decided to sleep with Waylon, I’d given us a deadline that he’d blown right through. I’d easily let him, not putting up even the slightest fight.

I’d been trying to tell myself to enjoy his company while it lasted. I knew better than to get too comfortable since it would inevitably end. However, Waylon didn’t see it that way. He’d made plans for the future, not just in a week or two, but months away. He talked about how much he’d missed celebrating Christmas and how excited he was to ring in the new year as a free man.

When he met Jewel at her office Wednesday morning, they’d even discussed going to Colorado next summer for the family reunion so that he could meet our Tempest family and all of the friends we’d made over the years. Yesterday, he asked Ripley if we could borrow his RV next summer to take a

weekend trip down south so he could visit some old friends. I had no idea we were even traveling to Tenillo until Ripley mentioned that he not only agreed to loan Waylon the RV, but he and Scoot would be coming with us.

Over the course of the last few days, Waylon not only had multiple conversations with my father, but he'd joined him and my mom for lunch at Gamma's diner where they made plans to have a cookout *at my house* tomorrow. In eight days, I'd gone from a single woman to the other half of a super couple that had future travel plans and hosted Sunday dinners with the family.

And I wasn't upset about it. That was the most disconcerting part. I'd fallen into an easy routine with Waylon. I managed to only have a few panicked meltdowns about what I'd do when the other shoe inevitably dropped and he let me down or realized that I was way more trouble than I was worth.

I wondered if my dreams weren't just dredging up my deepest fears and past trauma. Maybe they were trying to tell me something at the same time.

In my nightmares, I knew Waylon was somewhere nearby and felt that if I could just get to him, everything would all be okay. Did his voice fade because he was tired of waiting on me, or did it fade because he didn't want to deal with my drama? Did he leave because I didn't try hard enough to get to him? There were so many scenarios that I talked myself into circles. I would wind myself up until I was so confused that I had no other alternative but to shut my mind off and go to sleep.

My last thoughts before drifting off were about Waylon and how no matter what happened in my dreams tonight, I'd find my way to him. If I did, we'd be together forever, no matter what problems got in our way.



WAYLON

I came awake suddenly, not sure what had woken me, but it only took a few seconds for me to figure out that it was Leia having another nightmare. But this time, she wasn't screaming; she was fighting like her life depended on it. I couldn't imagine the battle she was locked in deep in her mind. I knew that if I had all the details, I might not ever sleep again either. The poor woman had dealt with so much. I wasn't sure I could be as strong as she was if I'd gone through even one of the things that plagued her.

She'd thwarted a kidnapping, protected a kidnapped baby, been attacked by a man she had trusted, and then survived more than twenty-four hours of hell while he kept her captive and tortured her in retaliation for her breaking up with him. She had also been the victim of another attack, but with the help of her friends, had managed to escape the situation with minor injuries.

Or had she?

I'd pieced together several things from what she muttered and occasionally yelled in her sleep, and I had a feeling that more had happened during the attack at Emerald's house than she was willing to talk about. I wasn't going to push her on the subject because I knew she'd tell me in her own time if she was able, but that didn't mean I wasn't curious about how she'd been able to defend herself against three men until help arrived.

I shuddered to think of what might have happened if Adam and Emerald hadn't come to her rescue. I wanted to hold her close as I brushed those thoughts away but knew that I couldn't do that right now.

Leia was in the middle of an epic battle somewhere deep in her subconscious. If I intervened in any way, I'd become the target of her rage and fear and probably end up worse for wear because of it. After the first time she woke up swinging, I'd been very careful to give her plenty of space while she was dreaming, only letting myself touch her from the other side of the bed. Since my reach was longer than hers, she wouldn't hit me like she had that first night if she lashed out.

I wasn't worried about the pain she might inflict; I made sure to stay far enough away to protect myself only because I knew how upset she'd be when she came to and realized she'd attacked me in her sleep again. I wasn't afraid of her, but I was afraid of her reaction because if it was anything like the last time, she'd try and kick me out of not just her bed but, most likely, her life too.

I was almost at the edge of the bed before I reached out and ran my hand over her hip, back and forth, trying to calm her down as I softly said her name. Her body tensed and then relaxed again before she started flailing her arms and making an odd buzzing noise.

I smiled to myself when I realized that it wasn't buzzing, per se, but more like the sound of a lightsaber as it cut through the air while the movie characters were in battle with their enemies. If I didn't know better, I'd think that my Leia was really a princess, fighting a space battle somewhere, trying to protect the galaxy from the dark forces intent to wrest control from the

heroes there to protect it.

She jerked again, locked in a battle with an enemy I couldn't protect her from. Suddenly, she sat up and let out a hoarse shout. Her quick movement shocked me so much that I almost fell off the bed. As I scrambled to stay on the mattress, I realized that she was fully awake and wide-eyed.

"Hey, Slugger. Are you okay?" I asked as I moved closer.

"You didn't leave," Leia whispered. "I fought my way through all of them and found you."

"Of course I didn't leave, sweetheart. I keep telling you that you're stuck with me, but you haven't quite . . ." I let out a loud grunt when Leia threw herself at me. She landed on my chest and started to sob, and all I could do was run my hands up and down her back as she held me tightly, fighting her demons even though she was fully awake now. "It's okay, Slugger. I'm not going anywhere. You're alright now. Shh. I'll stay right here."

"I killed them. All of them."

"That's my girl," I whispered. "Such a fighter."

"No, Waylon. I mean I killed them, and I'm not sorry about it. I'm not sure why he didn't tell the truth, probably because he thought it would affect my license or something, but he didn't shoot them. I did."

"No one would blame you if they knew, Leia, and you've got to stop beating yourself up about it, even in your dreams."

"I think I can do it every time now that I know how. If I kill them over and over again, maybe they'll stop showing up."

"And maybe they'll stop showing up while you're awake too."

"I'm not sorry, Waylon. I'm not sorry at all."

"I completely understand, baby, because I'm not either."

"I found you in my dream. You were right there waiting for me, and I wasn't even surprised." Leia laughed softly and sniffed, her tears fading now. She propped her chin up on her hands that were resting on my chest, her damp cheeks shining in the moonlight coming through the edge of the blinds. "I've never really believed in dream analysis or anything like that, but this time, it's different."

"What do you think it means?"

"That if I let my past get in the way of my future, I'll lose you."

"So, don't let it."

"I won't," Leia assured me. "I'll just pull out my trusty lightsaber and decapitate the fuckers that get in my way."

“That’s the sexiest, most bloodthirsty thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”



“Should one of us go upstairs to check on her?” Rowdy asked as he set a stack of plates on the table. “She’s been asleep all day. Were you guys up all night or something?”

Leia’s mom, Sierra, laughed as she walked out onto the patio carrying a bowl of salad. “That hurt to ask, didn’t it?”

“Little bit,” Rowdy admitted. “Depending on his answer, it might start to hurt worse.”

“We were at Jewel’s until almost ten o’clock and then came back here and went to bed. She woke up from a nightmare about three, but she’s been sleeping soundly ever since.”

“I wish there was some way to make those stop,” Lexi said as she reached for a deviled egg. She looked over at her daughter, Georgia, who had just arrived and asked, “Are Tinkie and Nana on their way?”

“They should be here any minute now. They were going to leave the house as soon as Nana’s pie came out of the oven.”

“You mentioned your daughter the other day at lunch, Waylon. Will she be coming to visit any time soon? We’d love to meet her.”

“I’m trying to convince her to visit, but I’d really like it if she came here to settle down since she’s almost finished with school.”

“What is her degree in?” Georgia asked.

“Speech language pathology,” I answered with pride.

“She’s been helping me with a plan to get Scoot on track with her speech,” Ripley said as he glanced over to where Scoot was napping on the hammock with her dogs laying on the grass underneath her. “She’s had some great ideas, I’m just having a problem adjusting to them.”

“Have you talked to Lily at the speech and hearing center about them?”

“Yeah. Mrs. West has been really helpful with helping us learn sign language, but even she’ll admit that speech isn’t her specialty. I mentioned that Tori is getting her degree, and she said she’d be interested in talking to her, so I gave her Tori’s email.”

I looked over at Rip and said, “Tori didn’t mention that.”

Ripley shrugged. “Maybe there’s not enough money working in Rojo.”

“She’s not in it for the money,” I assured him.

“I forgot. You two have plenty of that, don’t you?”

I laughed. “Yep. I roll around on piles of cash every chance I get.”

“You and I never got around to doing that, did we?” Rowdy asked Sierra.

“I remember saying I wanted to at one point, but then I remembered reading about how dirty paper money really is and decided to skip that part of being a winner.”

“A winner?” I asked.

“Mammy won the lottery. That’s why Pappy married her,” Georgia said with a grin. “He’s a gold digger.”

“Yeah, and she forced me to sign a prenup so I couldn’t divorce her and take half,” Rowdy teased before he pulled Sierra onto his lap. “You’re stuck with me, sweetheart.”

Sierra gave him a kiss and then leaned her head on his shoulder before she said, “You know, we got married just a few days after we met.”

“Don’t even think about it, buddy,” Rowdy growled, his intense stare aimed at me.

“I can’t even get the woman to agree to keep me around as a boyfriend. There’s no telling what she’d do if I mentioned marriage.”

“You’ve made it a week, at least. Usually, she’d have come up with some wild story by now about taming zebras in Africa or studying the five-toed sloth in . . . Australia, right?”

“Are they from Australia?” Lexi asked.

“I think they’re from China,” Georgia said as she picked up her phone. “I’ll look it up.”

“If Hank were here, you could just ask him,” Rowdy said with a laugh.

“Have you met Hank, Waylon?”

“He’s the trivia guy, right?”

“That’s him,” Sierra answered with a grin. “You should call Uncle Hank instead, Georgia. See if he knows.”

Georgia giggled before she said, “Let’s see if we can finally stump him.”

“Will you guys watch the grill for a few minutes? I’m going to go check on Leia,” I said as I started walking toward the patio door. “Anybody need refills when I come back?”

“Beer me!” Lexi said without looking up from her phone.

The others called out their answer, and I made a mental note of them before I pulled the patio door shut behind me. I had just turned the corner to go up

the stairs when Leia appeared at the landing.

“Hello, Sleeping Beauty,” I said as she started down the stairs toward me. “I was coming to check on you.”

“I slept like the dead.”

“Did you have any more lightsaber battles after I got up this morning?”

“Not that I remember. I can’t believe you let me sleep so long, though. I’ve got to run to the store if everyone’s coming over and . . .”

“I did that already. The burgers are on the grill, and your family is outside enjoying the nice weather while we wait for them to finish cooking.”

Leia stopped on the bottom step, putting her nose to nose with me. She leaned forward and rested her hands on my shoulders before she surprised me with a kiss hot enough to scorch the earth around us.

When she pulled back, I said, “Well, looks like someone woke up happy.”

“I did. I am. And you know what?”

“You can keep your screams down to a dull roar so your family doesn’t know what we’re doing when I carry you up to the bedroom and have my way with you?”

“I can’t guarantee that, old man. Your stamina has improved so drastically that when you get going, there’s no stopping the noises I make.”

“You’re killing me, Slugger,” I moaned as I leaned forward and rested my forehead on her shoulder. “Absolutely killing me.”

“Are you too horny to listen to my declaration, or can you focus for ten seconds while I pour my heart out?”

“I’m all ears,” I said as I lifted my head and looked her in the eye.

“It’s only been a week, and I still think it’s an absolutely crazy idea, but weirder things have happened. My parents are living proof. I want to sit down and talk to you about your plans for the future and what my part may be in them before we set anything in stone but . . .”

“Marry me and have my babies,” I said before I swept her into my arms. “I want three, however they come about, whether it’s from pregnancy or adoption. I want to raise a family with you, Leia Lincoln.”

Tears filled Leia’s eyes as her arms wrapped around my neck. “You’re crazy, Waylon. Totally certifiable.”

“I might be, but I’m glad you’re there with me. I don’t ever plan to let you go.”

“It’s not normal to be head over heels in love with someone you met a week ago,” Leia whispered.

“Honey, I’ve never claimed to be normal. Even though we’ve only known each other a week, I can tell you shouldn’t either.”

“As much as I long to have children, one of us has to be grounded in reality, so I guess I’ll take that baton and run with it.”

“Why? Reality sucks.”

“I’m not going to argue that point, but I am going to say that I think we should hold off for at least a year before we start trying for a baby.”

“I guess I have some more work to do before you’ll finally have faith in me, huh?”

“It’s not that, Waylon, but I do think we should get to know each other and at least work the kinks out before we start a family together.”

“So rational and level-headed,” I muttered. “I’d have never guessed.”

“That’s what I mean, old man. We should really get to know each other before you knock me up.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t practice as much as possible, though.”

“True. You’re getting better, but you could still use a little work when it comes to endurance and . . .”

I started up the stairs with Leia still in my arms as I growled, “I’ll show you endurance, Slugger.”

“No! We can’t do that right now! My parents are outside!”

“Then you better figure out how to keep quiet, sweetheart. I’ve got something to prove now, and there’s no stopping me.”

“You used the last condom last night, remember?”

“Shit,” I hissed as I stopped at the top of the stairs. “I don’t suppose you’re willing to do another condom run around the neighborhood, are you?”

“Nope, but I’ll make an excuse for you to have to go to the store later, and you can pick some up while you’re out.” I let her slide down until her feet touched the carpet. “And since you’ll be buying some anyway, you should pick up a few boxes so we can replace the ones I stole from Ruf.”

I heard the glass door slide open and shut before Lexi appeared at the bottom of the stairs. “Dad’s getting antsy because he thinks you lovebirds are up here doing naughty things.”

“We were about to, but we’re out of condoms,” Leia said with a grin. “Got any in your purse?”

“No,” Lexi said before she rolled her eyes and turned around to go back outside.

“Think Georgia does?”

“Does it make me a horrible mom to say that I’m hopeful she does because that means she won’t have to go through teen pregnancy like I did?” Lexi asked.

“Sounds perfectly rational to me,” Leia said before she jogged down the stairs after her sister. I followed at a slower pace but could hear them talking as they walked through the kitchen. I smiled when Leia said, “I know how you like to hold it over everyone when you get good gossip, so I guess I’ll just go ahead and tell you now that I’m going to keep Waylon around. We might even try to get pregnant some time next year.”

“You’re kidding!” Lexi said before she squealed loudly. “I knew he was perfect for you, but Jewel said I was just too soft-hearted.”

“I’d have to agree with her on this one, but don’t tell her that, okay? I don’t want her to get a big head,” Leia said as I walked around the corner.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

Lexi walked outside, but instead of following her out, Leia slid the door closed and turned to face me. “I have to say it now because I’ll regret it if I don’t.”

“Hit me,” I said as I walked closer, knowing by the look on her face that she was serious again.

“I know this sounds crazy, but I keep dreaming about us, Waylon. You are calling for me, and I have to fight my way through my demons to get to you. Don’t let me down, okay?”

“I’ll go to my grave trying my hardest to be a man who is worthy of a woman like you, Leia.”

“I love you.”

I grinned at her, knowing that of all people, Leia would appreciate it when I replied, “I know.”

EPILOGUE

LEIA

I could hear music coming from the back yard, so I knew that Ruf and Koda were probably outside. Rather than knock on the door, I went through the gate and walked down the side of the house.

When I walked around the corner, I was shocked to see the progress that Koda had made on his new dwelling and not surprised at all to see Celia working right beside him as he nailed another board up along one of the walls.

“Hey, Princess,” Ruf said when he spotted me walking his way. “What brings you to Casa de Crazy?”

“I was desperate the other day, so I broke in and robbed you,” I told him as I tossed the plastic sack I was carrying toward him. As I pushed Ripley’s legs over so I could perch on the end of the lounge chair where he was relaxing, I said, “I’ve come to make restitution.”

Ruf opened the sack and laughed before he asked, “You took those? I thought Koda threw them away to hide the evidence.”

“What is it?” Ripley asked.

At the same time, I asked, “The evidence?”

“She brought me condoms,” Ruf explained.

“Why did you call them evidence?”

“It was just Koda being Koda,” Ruf said with a laugh. “He got into trouble for snooping in my drawers and even more trouble for using my signed Nolan Ryan baseball card and two boxes of condoms for target practice when he was playing with the staple gun.”

Ripley laughed along with Ruf, and neither man was paying attention to me, which was good because I wasn’t sure if I was going to pass out or throw up. There was a distinct possibility that I would do both.

“I can’t even take a shit with the door closed because I’m afraid he’s going to get into something and cause a catastrophe.”

“You know, when Scoot pulls crazy shit like that, I blame it on her mother’s genetic input.”

“I’d do that, but anyone who knows my family would call bullshit and say the

boy got it all from the Forrester side.”

“No shit. Y’all are all crazy.”

Ruf looked up at me, and when he realized I was freaking out, his eyes got wide. “Oh shit. I just realized that you took those so you could use them!”

“Why else would I break into your fucking house and steal condoms, Ruf?”

“Oh no,” Ruf whispered before he pulled his lips between his teeth. His eyes filled with tears as he tried not to laugh, but after a few seconds, he lost it and started howling. Ripley had just taken a sip of his beer when he grasped what Ruf and I were talking about, and he started choking while laughing like a hyena. I was still hyperventilating when Ruf pulled himself together and said, “Listen, I know it’s scary, but they probably worked just fine, and I’m not even sure he put holes in all of them. The odds are that the ones you used were perfectly fine.”

“We used them all.”

“Really?” Ruf asked.

“*All. Of. Them!*”

“Damn. There were a dozen in each box,” Ruf said, impressed. “Go Waylon.”

“I’m gonna vomit,” Ripley said as he wiped the beer off his chin.

“Holy shit.”

“Holey is right,” Ruf quipped, causing him and Ripley to start laughing again.

My phone rang, and I answered it without even thinking since my mind was still racing at the thought that I might already be pregnant. I put it to my ear to answer it when I heard my sister’s voice and then Jewel said hello, so I pulled it away and looked at the screen. It was a video chat from Emerald, and as I watched, another box popped up, and Holly’s face appeared.

“You’ve gotta see this shit! Margaret figured it out!” Emerald chortled before the screen turned and I saw the street in front of Ruf’s house. “She’s talking to Heath and Adam right now.”

“Oh shit!” I yelled as I stood up.

“What’s going on?” Ripley asked as he sat up straight. “Is everything okay?”

“Margaret is tattling to Heath and Adam out front,” I said as I ran back the way I’d come in.

I heard the men laughing as I rounded the corner, but by the time I got to the gate, they were right behind me. We skidded to a halt at the edge of Ruf’s house before we peeked around the corner to watch the drama unfold.

Our resident Karen, who swore her name was really Margaret, was standing on the curb and waving her arms around like she was trying to take flight while she yelled at Adam and Heath who were sitting in the Gator with the neck of their T-shirts pulled up over their faces to mask the smell coming from Margaret's yard.

As we watched, Adam got out of the Gator and started walking toward his house. I glanced down at the phone and saw that Petra had joined the call, and they were laughing just as hard as me and the guys. Finally, Adam got to the front yard where Emerald was sitting on the porch, and he started giving her the third degree. We yelled our encouragement, knowing that Emerald wasn't really in trouble. If she was, she'd figure out a way to get Adam to calm down, especially if she took Petra's advice and started the conversation with a blowjob.

When we ended the call, I looked at the guys standing on either side of me and asked, "Did you really leave those kids in the back yard by themselves?" Just then, the sound of a power tool coming to life split the air, and Ripley and Ruf both jumped, wide-eyed in fear of what might be going on in the back yard. They took off around the house, and I laughed as I glanced back toward where Adam and Emerald were still talking.

Suddenly, Adam picked my friend up and started spinning her around. I could hear their laughter and excitement even over Ruf and Ripley's yelling behind me and Margaret's shrill voice as she argued with Heath.

I shook my head and started toward my own house, not far from all the excitement. I knew that Waylon was waiting there and would be more than ready to make some excitement of our own . . . especially when I told him about the faulty condoms and that I may already be pregnant, which was *not* part of my immediate plan.

But then again, I had always said I wanted to have a child when I turned 40, and that was coming up in just a few months. I'd had plenty of wild and crazy things happen in my life . . . some good, some bad, some absolutely horrible, but I knew that the adventure of falling in love with a man I'd only known for a few days and planning to spend my life with him ranked at the top of the good column.

And this adventure would outweigh all the rest.

THE END

Please take just a few minutes to leave a review of this book on Amazon and feel free to share the link with your friends. I enjoy discussing my books and characters and would love to hear from you. Check out Cee Bowerman on Facebook. You can also find information about the author and her books on www.cebowermanbooks.com.

COMING SOON

Sugar (Texas Kings MC: Nomads, Book 1) - COMING JANUARY 15th, 2023!

This is the story of two people who survived traumatic childhoods and ended up on very different paths in life. But now, after different scenarios led to them both serving hard time and being released, those paths will cross in a way that will alter their lives forever.

Born to a neglectful mother and bounced around the foster system all his life, Sugar Sweet got wrapped up in a life of drugs and violence that led to him squandering his younger years behind bars. His one constant throughout his childhood was his foster mother who had shown him and many other children the love that every kid needs to thrive.

After changing his life for the better and taking in his young, orphaned niece, Sugar created a home to share with her while also starting a very lucrative business in Whitefish, Montana, far away from his Texas roots and the Time Served MC that had welcomed him into their family. When his foster mother calls on him to help one of her other children, he can't say no, even if the woman who needs him happens to be a girl he couldn't stand during their time together at Althea's house.

Juni Dawson bounced back and forth from her mother's house, where she was left to fend for herself, to her foster home with Althea, where she experienced a timeless, unconditional love that would never fade. Choosing a different route than what fate seemed to have put before her, the Army put her on track to a better life.

When her sister's choices lead to her tragic end, Juni takes in her niece rather than let her go through the system that had failed her throughout her childhood. Decisions she made while in the service will follow her home and threaten the life she has planned with the little girl. Rather than stand and fight like she'd been trained to do, Juni takes the advice of the only woman

who has ever looked out for her and runs to Montana to hole up until the threats can be identified and taken care of, one way or another.

Close quarters might prove to be too much for two strong-willed individuals who are seemingly stuck in the past and unable to see the people they've each become. If they can open their eyes to the possibilities before them, they might just find the family they've been yearning for and the happily ever after they've never let themselves believe in.

About the Author

Cee Bowerman is a proud, lifelong resident of Texas. She is married to her own long-haired, tattooed biker and is Mom to three mostly adult kids - a daughter and two sons. She believes in love, second chances, rescue dogs, and happily ever after.

Cee received her first romance novel along with a bag of other books from her granny when she was recovering from surgery at 15. She has been hooked on reading romances ever since. For years, she had a dream of writing her own series of stories, but motherhood and all the other grown-up responsibilities kept getting in the way. Luckily, with the support of her family and the encouragement of her son, she purchased a computer and let her dreams become a reality.

With over fifty published books, Cee is still happily writing and creating new worlds for her readers to enjoy.

You can find her on Facebook @ceebowerman or online at www.ceebowermanbooks.com.

Look for more fun romances in the coming months and get updates on the Facebook page for more information on characters and stories that are in progress.