



Westin

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Description: The boys from Golden Sphinx Ranch are trying to have a quiet breakfast in the local diner when one of them sees a man pulling a woman out of her car by her hair. Unable to let that pass, Westin rushes outside to defend the woman, his friends close behind. Before they can figure out what's happening, the man jumps into the car and takes off.

Lea Adams is now penniless, homeless, and stuck in the middle of nowhere. She convinces the ranch hands to take her back to their ranch and give her shelter until she can figure out what to do next. The only problem is, they think they're helping a woman on the run from her ex, but the truth will drop them in the middle of a fight that was never meant to be theirs.

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Chapter 1

The moments before dawn were always Dulcie Howard's favorite time of the day. There was something beautiful and calming about watching the sky brighten with the rising sun. Even during the winter, like it was right now. Or maybe more so. There was something about the cold that made the pinks and yellows and blues so much more vivid.

She stood on her balcony, a light sweater pulled over her shoulders. Asa would have chastised her, told her she needed to wear something heavier if she was going to insist on being outside at this hour, especially if she was going to do it wearing her dressing gown. She could almost hear his voice, hear the disapproval under the light tone he would often take with her. No matter how many times she explained to him that she didn't feel the cold, that she was too lost in the beauty of what she was seeing, he would scold her. And she would listen, accepting whatever jacket he would bring her—usually one of his heavy work coats that smelled of cows and sawdust and hard work. The smells that were Asa in a nutshell. And then he would wrap his arms around her as though he were afraid that the coat alone wouldn't be enough to keep her warm. Didn't the silly man know that that was why she stood out there without a jacket? So that he would come and warm her himself? It was those intimate moments that she truly lived for.

Oh, how she missed them now!

Asa was gone. In the ground for nearly two years. It was he who should have been more careful of the cold, he who should have worn heavier clothing when he stepped outside. Perhaps then he wouldn't have caught the pneumonia that took his life less

than a week after he delivered that prized calf he'd been so excited about.

"It's a boy, Dulcie! A beautiful, bouncing boy! Can you imagine? We got exactly what we needed!"

She was pretty sure he'd been more excited by that steer than he'd been about the boy she'd delivered of her own loins to him more than thirty years ago. Their beautiful boy. Anthony. They'd tried long and hard to get pregnant, praying more than she had in her whole life. When she did fall pregnant, she prayed every night that she would stay that way as long as the child needed. Too many disappointments had come before for her to believe that she would finally achieve the one and only thing she'd ever truly wanted: a child of her own. But he finally came, screaming into this world in the middle of the night, right here in this bedroom. And he'd been perfect. She'd never seen such a beautiful boy! He was her boy, the love of her life. But he was gone now, too.

She tried not to think about him so much anymore. With Asa gone, it only made her sad. Besides, she had the boys of Golden Sphinx Ranch. As long as they were part of the ranch, she would never truly be alone.

Dulcie could see them now, a couple of them, coming out of the barn after finishing their morning chores. She could tell by the way they were walking that it was Westin and Bowie. There was something about the way a cowboy walked, but her five boys had a special sort of swagger to their movements that she would recognize anywhere. That meant Clint, Remington, and Landry were out at the paddock, delivering hay to the herd up in the winter pasture. They should wrap up soon, ready to head to town for breakfast at the local diner. Asa used to do the same thing, claimed it was the best place to get information from other ranchers. Men liked to talk over a good, hearty meal.

This wasn't the way it was supposed to end up. Asa should be down there with those

boys, as should Anthony. Asa should be showing his son how the place worked, all the things he needed to do in a day, the things that he should worry about and the things he shouldn't. Asa should be down there teaching his boy how to take the place over someday. Instead, there were five men Asa hired, men who were as loyal to Dulcie as they'd ever been to Asa. They were as close to family as she would have now. She knew they would do anything to protect her and this ranch.

As would she. Absolutely anything.

Westin Clark swung up into the cab of the truck, slipped off his gloves, and blew on his hands even as he reached for the ignition, turning the engine over in two tries. His breath didn't seem to be much warmer than the air outside, but his fingertips would have thought ice was as hot as fire at this moment. It was damn cold outside, below thirty according to the thermometer on the dash. There wasn't any snow on the ground just yet, but he could smell it in the air walking from the barn to the truck. It was going to snow tonight, would probably dump two or three inches before morning if the news reports were right.

"Damn, it's cold!" Bowie Wheeler cried as he climbed into the truck, his bulk making the whole thing shift slightly. "Too damn cold for working outside!"

"Tell that to Clint."

Bowie grunted, removing his heavy work glove and shoving his fingers up against the vents blowing slowly-warming air into the cab of the truck. "I had to go and pick Colorado! Couldn't find a ranch in Arizona or New Mexico that fit my needs!"

"They have cattle ranches in Arizona?"

Bowie glanced at him, ready to educate him on the expanse of cattle ranches in the Southwest, but then he stopped, shaking his head. “Okay, smartass,” he mumbled.

“What? Just because you’ve traveled the world, doesn’t mean you’re the only one who knows shit.”

“And just because you’ve never left Colorado doesn’t mean you have to act like some kind of redneck.”

“Why not? Isn’t that what people see when they look at me?”

Bowie just shook his head, pressing his fingers against the vents a little harder, like that would warm the heater faster. The sound of a motor approaching drew Westin’s attention to the rearview mirrors. Clint Grooms slid the tractor to a stop behind them, the long feeder wagon turning slightly with the momentum. Then, with the grace of someone who’d done this maneuver dozens of times before, Clint backed the tractor up, sliding the wagon right into the empty space it normally occupied when not in use beside the barn.

“He makes it look easy.”

Bowie nodded even as he tried to slide down into his jacket a little further. “He’s as graceful as a dancer behind those controls.”

Westin didn’t like the choice of metaphors, but he had to admit that Bowie wasn’t far off with his characterization. Clint was something of a master with most of the machinery.

“Who left the freezer open?” Landry Grooms, Clint’s brother, demanded as he climbed into the back seat of the truck’s cab, allowing a blast of cold air to dance over the two men already waiting. The other door opened a second later, admitting

Remington Echols, but he didn't have a comment on the weather. Again, Remington rarely had a comment on much of anything. At least, that was how it seemed to Westin.

Clint was the last to climb in, having a silent argument with his brother for a second when the younger Grooms refused to slide over on the long bench seat. Bowie grumbled, making a motion with his hand that finally got Landry to slide over, giving his brother space beside the door. The second that Clint was settled, Westin threw the truck into gear and headed up the wide road to the main gate. He could see the lights on at the main house, knew that Miss Dulcie had probably been watching them do their morning chores as she usually did. And, as he almost always did, he made a little gesture with his head, tipping a hat he wasn't wearing toward the balcony he knew stood right outside her bedroom, the place he knew she liked to stand as the sun came up every morning.

"There's a new group heading in today," Clint announced as Westin rounded a curve that led to the long, straight road that went to the main gates and the highway that would lead into the nearest town, Milsap, where there was a diner that served the best biscuits this side of the Rockies. Westin glanced in the mirror, then at Bowie, wondering if there'd be an argument like there seemed to be every time Clint made that particular announcement. "They'll be straggling in around noon. We won't schedule any events for today, but there'll be early-morning rides tomorrow."

"Do you know it's supposed to snow tonight, Clint?" Bowie asked without turning around.

"I'm aware, but it's only supposed to be a few inches."

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“These city people don’t do well in the cold.”

“The last group I took out in snow, three of them quit before we got out of the main paddock,” Landry agreed.

“You know this wasn’t my idea, boys. I just make assignments.”

Westin glanced in the mirror, a little surprised that Clint was giving in so easily. But, again, there were rumors he was having trouble at home. Maybe his mind wasn’t on business today.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and all of them will quit tomorrow,” Bowie said. “They only come here for the views and the romance they think they’ll find.” He shot a glance back at Landry. “Just put him in charge of the morning ride, and you’ll satisfy that part of things.”

Westin chuckled, as did Remington. Landry even smiled as he stole a look at himself in the rearview, always aware of how good-looking all the women seemed to think he was. Clint simply grunted, turning to stare out the window as Westin gunned the engine, pushing the truck up over the slight incline where the gate had opened for them. They were on the state highway a moment later, burning the asphalt toward town.

Bowie shook his head too, clearly having caught Landry looking at himself in the mirror. Then he, too, turned his attention to the window, staring at the frozen landscape as they raced by. It wasn’t a bad view, really. Westin knew it better than the back of his hand, and he couldn’t think of a better word for it than beautiful. He’d

grown up in Denver, but his mother had filled him with stories and images of this place from the time he was very small, probably starting when he was still just a gleam in her eye. She'd loved it here, and that adoration had rubbed off on him.

"Looks like the boys from Rocking D are here." Landry leaned forward against the back of the front seat as Westin slowed and pulled the truck into the parking lot of Roni's Diner. He pointed toward another truck that was parked near the front of the place. "Maybe they have some information on that new vaccination everyone's been talking about."

"Why would they know more than us?" Clint shot a dark look at his brother. "We all get the same newsletters; we all use the same vet."

Landry snapped up the collar of his jacket. "They seem to always know the latest when it comes to stuff like that."

Clint clearly didn't like that idea. He shook his head, grumbling something under his breath as he pushed the door open and stepped out into the cold air. Landry followed, but he waited for Westin to get out and walk beside Clint, seeming to prefer his own company to that of his brothers. Bowie came around and walked with Landry, knocking him in the shoulder with his much bigger shoulder, nearly pushing Landry into the parked car beside them. Remington brought up the rear, his arms wrapped around his dark coat, his head bowed to avoid the cold air, his face hidden behind his hat.

"Hey, boys!" Roni herself called from behind the counter as they came in and shed their outerwear, hanging it all on a coat tree that was already overflowing with heavy work jackets and hats. "Grab that booth over there and I'll get your order in."

"Thanks, Roni!" Landry called, blowing her a kiss that she pretended to catch then giggled like a little girl with a crush. Westin pushed Landry forward, giving him

another shove as they reached the booth, knocking him down onto the bench before he slid in beside him. Remington took the opposite bench with Clint next to him and Bowie nearly spilling out the end. Another waitress, this one a young blonde with the prettiest brown eyes, came over and dropped five mugs on the table, filling each one with coffee. “Food shouldn’t be but a minute or two.”

Westin grabbed her wrist and pulled her back to the table when she tried to escape. “Make my pancakes blueberry, would you, Annie?”

She smiled, a touch of color darkening her cheeks. “Sure thing, Westin.”

He winked as she walked off, peering back over her shoulder at him.

“You’re as bad as him,” Clint scoffed, a gesture of his head indicating Landry.

“Just because you’re married, doesn’t mean the rest of us are dead.”

Clint’s face darkened, too, but not in the same way Annie’s had done. Clint’s expression warned of a storm, and Westin was quick to back off, not anxious to get caught up in it. Instead, he picked up his coffee and blew on the hot brew, letting it warm up his still-frozen fingers.

“This weather...” Bowie shook his head, doing the same with his coffee. “I think I’ll take my ass back down to Texas.”

“You say that every year, but you never go anywhere,” Landry informed him.

“Yeah, well, springs here are pretty fantastic. Makes me forget how my balls turn to ice cubes in this damn weather!”

Clint pushed Bowie, gesturing for him to get up. Westin watched as their foreman

stomped off to the bathroom, pushing the door so hard that he could see it rattle as it fell back against the frame.

“What’s up with him?” Westin asked, pushing his shoulder against Landry’s. “He and Melanie fighting again?”

Landry shook his head. “It’s something more this time, but he won’t tell me about it. You know how he is.”

“What could it possibly be?”

“I heard she was stepping out,” Remington said, his tone low and his eyes stuck to the table like looking at us would be an actual admission of something. “Heard she was messing with one of them boys from over in Dixon.”

“Hell,” Westin muttered under his breath. “That sucks, man!”

“There’s no way Melanie would do that to Clint,” Landry objected. “No way in hell!”

“I heard it, too.” Bowie set down his coffee, his eyes narrowed in his big face. “Heard it was some banker or something.”

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Landry shook his head again, but he wasn't protesting that hard. His fingers were working at a packet of sugar, moving it in and out of his grasp with a steady motion that was not unlike the grace with which his brother handled a tractor. Hand-eye coordination. The Groomses had it in spades.

Westin just shook his head, imagining the pain Clint was feeling. He knew that Clint and Melanie had been together since high school, and their six-year marriage had produced a little girl Clint absolutely adored. It must be tearing him up inside. Westin couldn't really put himself in Clint's place, having never been married, having never even had a girl who had gotten him to commit to more than a month or two. Hell, Westin had cheated on his fair share of girls, but never been cheated on. He had to admit, it was probably much better being on the other side.

Clint came back out of the bathroom just as Annie appeared with a heavy tray laden with their breakfast. Plates started sliding across the table. Ham and eggs for Landry, chicken fried steak and four eggs over easy for Remington. Clint had bacon and scrambled with salsa, Bowie a feast with five fried eggs, three pieces of ham, two slices of toast, bacon, sausage, and a tall stack of pancakes. Westin's meal was a little less intense with just two pancakes, a couple of slices of bacon, and a couple of eggs with bright-yellow yolks running across the plate.

They all dug right in except for Clint. He nibbled at his bacon, but that was about it. Westin couldn't help but watch him, that sense of pity still weighing on his shoulders. But then he spotted dark hair and blue eyes coming toward them. He dropped his fork on the plate and got up, stepping into her path as she tried to get by.

"Hello, Rena."

She looked up at him, her cheeks bright red, though he wasn't sure if it was from the cold or from the excitement of seeing him. She had these big eyes that were so full of curiosity all the time, a smile that was almost contagious, and long limbs that brought to mind a new colt, though she had more poise than a newly born horse might. But it was that smile that always drew his attention, that he thought about late at night when there was nothing to distract him from it.

“Hi, Westin.” Her voice was slightly high-pitched, almost childish. “How are you?”

“What are you doing here?”

She slipped her fingers into her back jeans pockets. With a slight movement of her shoulder, she indicated a couple of tables further up along the diner filled with ranch hands. “I’m having breakfast with some of the guys from Rocking D.”

Westin glanced over his shoulder at them, catching a couple paying attention to him, probably wondering what the hell he was doing with their boss’s daughter. Give them another second and they’d likely come over and demand to know.

“Why are you hanging out with ranch hands?”

She giggled softly. “What’s wrong with ranch hands? Aren’t you one?”

“Sure. But a girl like you, you should be in Denver attending university, going to clubs at night.”

“That’s what my daddy says, too. But I’d rather be here, around the horses. This is home.”

“If I were you—”

“You aren’t me.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Why is it that everyone with three legs thinks he can tell me what I should and shouldn’t do?”

“Three legs?” Westin heard Bowie tittering behind him. He wanted to reach over and smack the guy. “I don’t mean to tell you what to do, Rena. I just think you could do better than this group.”

“Maybe you can take me to dinner some night and tell me all about Denver. Didn’t you grow up there?”

“Sure.”

“Tonight? Does that work for you?”

“Sure,” Westin said again, but she was already walking off, glancing back at him once with that beautiful smile in place. He lifted a hand, and she returned the gesture before sliding into a booth beside a couple of big, burly guys who were shooting Westin dark looks. He hesitated a second longer, then slowly settled back into the booth, not sure what he thought about what had just happened. Had she really asked him out? Had he really accepted?

“You ask her about that new vaccine?” Landry wanted to know. “I bet her father knows all about it. If it’s really that big of a deal, we should probably learn more about it.”

“Forget the vaccine, Landry,” Clint muttered. “We’ll talk to Doc Taylor about it next month.”

“Yeah, but if we went into the conversation with some understanding—”

“Let it go, Landry,” Bowie warned, his gaze bouncing between Landry and Clint, the

big guy clearly gauging the tension that was quickly coming to a boiling point in their trusted foreman.

“What the hell?”

Remington suddenly pulled himself up, climbing onto the bench to jump over Clint and Bowie. His boot caught on the table’s edge and he fell to his knees, but he was back up in an instant, rushing out the front door. Westin watched him go, then twisted in his seat to look out the window along with Clint and Bowie. It only took a second to figure out what had set Remington off. In the parking lot, sitting behind the wheel of a sedan, was a woman Westin had never seen before. Some guy, a tall, slender guy who wasn’t really dressed for the weather—he was in a fancy suit but didn’t have an overcoat or anything else to protect him from the temperatures—was reaching into the car, trying to pull the woman out with a clump of her hair.

“Let’s go, boys,” Clint announced, sliding his way out of the booth right behind an already-moving Bowie. Westin followed, a sense of dread in his chest. He knew how Remington could get when he saw what he thought was abuse of any kind. And it never ended well for the other guy.

The four of them piled out the door, none stopping to grab their jackets despite the freezing temperatures. Clint was ahead of them, jogging to reach Remington before he flattened the asshole in the suit. He grabbed Remington by the back of his shirt and jerked him back, whispering something Westin couldn’t hear into his ear. The stranger didn’t seem to understand that Clint was trying to help because he took advantage of Remington’s distraction to clip him on the jaw with a right hook. It might have been a good shot—if Remington wasn’t nearly twice his size. The blow didn’t even faze Remington. It just pissed him off.

Remington fought against Clint as the suit guy bounced on the balls of his feet like a boxer, waving his fists at Remington like he thought it was a good idea to invite him

in for more.

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“You have no fucking idea who you’re screwing with here, buddy,” the stranger announced. “You’re going to get messed-up!”

Westin wasn’t sure if Remington broke out of Clint’s hold, or if Clint just let him go at that point. But Remington was free and he swung, getting the guy on his jaw with the same sort of right hook. The guy, however, went flying where Remington had barely moved. He slammed up against the side of the sedan where the woman was still cowering behind the wheel. She cried out when the suit guy bounced against the thin side panel, jumping out of the car like she’d been touched by a shock of electricity. Westin grabbed the woman as Remington stepped into the stranger, throwing two more punches in quick succession, one to the man’s stomach, the other to his chin.

As Westin moved the woman out of harm’s way, pulling her up to the front of the diner, Clint gestured to Bowie and Landry, the three of them rushing the fighting pair in unison. Clint snagged Remington’s shirt again, but the material just pulled out of his jeans, allowing Remington the distance he needed to continue the fight. Bowie and Landry grabbed an arm each, straining to pull him back as he still fought to reach the suited guy. If Bowie hadn’t been as massive as he was, they might still have not gotten control of him. But fate was what it was, and they were able to pull him a good distance from the stranger.

“You have no idea what you’re getting in the middle of!” the stranger yelled loud enough that his words carried to where Westin had pushed the girl into a nook of the building, a spot where she couldn’t easily be seen by her attacker. Westin saw her flinch at the sound of the man’s voice, saw the fear that skated across her face before she hid it behind her eyes. Whatever was going on here, this woman was genuinely

frightened.

“I saw you dragging that woman out of this car!” they heard Remington yell back. “I don’t give a shit who you are! No one touches a woman that way!”

The woman turned away, making herself as small as possible against the cold brick wall of the diner. Westin stepped back into the parking lot, anxious to see what was happening with his friends. He only moved a few feet away, but it was far enough to see Remington straining against the hold Landry and Bowie had on him.

“What business is it of yours, cowboy?” The stranger pushed away from the car, pulled himself up to his full height, approaching Remington with a confidence that was misplaced. He tugged almost huffily at the sleeves of his dark suit, looking down his nose at Remington, Clint, Bowie, and Landry like he was better than them in some way. It infuriated Westin. If there was one thing he hated more than anything else, it was people like this guy who thought they were better than men who worked with their hands for a living rather than sitting behind some cushy desk all day long, making money that they didn’t deserve. A familiar hatred bubbled in his chest, clenching his fists and pouring steel into his bones.

The man continued his approach, looking down his nose at Remington. “The woman is my business, not yours.”

Remington pulled against Bowie and Landry hard. Westin could see the strain it caused the two men to keep their hold on him. When he couldn’t get free, Remington spat, hitting the stranger right on the tip of his nose.

“Bastard!” the stranger screamed, launching himself forward, but Clint stepped in the way, knocking him down with one punch to the side of his head.

“Stay down!” Clint cried as the guy rolled over and made like he was going to get up.

He stopped with Clint's words. Silence ruled over them for a moment, not even the twitter of a distant bird to distract. And then there was a familiar sound, the screech of a distant siren rushing in their direction. Westin glanced at the diner, saw the witnesses watching the whole production. Someone had called the sheriff.

"Fuck it!" the guy said, sliding backwards and pulling himself into the car. "You can have the bitch if you want her that badly!"

With that, he slammed the car door and took off, blowing out of the parking lot so quickly he nearly sideswiped two parked cars and took out a car pulling into the lot. He headed northeast, in the general direction of Denver.

Good riddance!

"What the hell was that?" Clint immediately turned and shoved a finger into Remington's chest. "How many times do I have to tell you to watch yourself? You want to go to jail?"

"No, sir," Remington said, dropping his head. "I'm sorry."

"What was that all about?"

Remington pulled away from Bowie and Landry, who let him go after a nod from Clint. He rubbed his hand, his knuckles already beginning to bruise. "He was pulling a woman out of the car by her hair." Though there was little passion in his words, Remington's eyes snapped with unburned anger. "I can't put up with that, Clint. You know that."

"I know, Brother." Clint rested his hand on Remington's shoulder, looking the other man in the eye. "But I can't have you getting into fights like that. Especially not in a place like this. The last thing Miss Dulcie needs is one of us getting arrested."

Remington lowered his head, clearly upset that his behavior might have caused trouble for their employer. Westin got it. Miss Dulcie was the sweetest woman he'd ever known in his short life—next to his own mother. The last thing he wanted—any of them wanted—was to put her in a bad situation.

“We should go,” Bowie said, snagging Remington’s arm as he began to move toward their work truck. A second later, a sheriff’s deputy pulled up in his squad car, silencing the siren as he stopped the car right across from where Westin and Clint stood. A weary look moved over Clint’s expression. “Go inside,” he instructed Westin. “Pay the bill and get your things.”

Westin tossed the truck keys to Bowie as he stepped into the diner, pulling his wallet from his back pocket as he did, aware of the curious looks he was getting from the other customers. The only one he really cared about, Rena, smiled at him, her lips quivering a little as though she was nervous he wouldn’t appreciate the gesture. She had no idea how much he did appreciate it.

“I had to call them, Westin,” Annie said softly. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. Clint has it under control.” He dropped a handful of bills on the counter beside the register as he offered her a flirtatious wink. “There’s a tip in there for you. We sure appreciate you each and every time we come in here.”

“I didn’t do anything,” she said with a blush, but she picked up the wad of bills and shot him a smile. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

Westin grabbed his jacket—the others were gone, so he assumed one of the group had stepped in and grabbed them—and pulled his gloves on, shivering a little as he stepped out the door again. The adrenaline was wearing off, and he was aware of how

the cold air had taken little bites out of his skin, particularly his fingers. He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets, hunching his shoulders as the wind hit him face-first. Instead of going to the truck where the heater was blowing—probably full blast if he knew Bowie—he turned the corner to check on Clint and the sheriff’s deputy.

“Hey! Is he gone?”

Westin had nearly forgotten about the girl.

“He’s gone. You’re safe.”

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She snorted, pushing away from the brick wall and wrapping her arms around herself. She was wearing a thin blouse and a pair of jeans, some fancy boots that wouldn't last a second on a real ranch, but not much else. She was a slip of a thing, slender and petite, with pale skin save for a scattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her hair was pulled back into a braid, a few small curls coming loose to frame her face. And her eyes were an amber that had red and gold tones to it, just like her hair. She was a beauty, but a beauty who was clearly not from around here.

“You always go around without a jacket?” Westin asked as he shrugged back out of the jacket he'd just put on and slipped it around her shoulders. “Kind of dumb around here.”

“I wasn't planning on getting out here, but he had other ideas.”

“Who was that guy?”

She rolled her shoulders even as she pulled his jacket tighter around her, practically burying her face in the collar.

“Well, he's gone,” Westin repeated. “I doubt he'll be coming back anytime soon.”

“He'll be back.”

Westin glanced back at the truck, saw the guys watching them through the quickly fogging windows. Bowie made a comical face, pretending he was kissing some broad, like they were all in middle school instead of grown men.

“Do you have someplace to go? Someone you can call?” He looked back at the girl, studying her face in search of that fear he’d seen earlier. It was gone almost like it had never been there. “A friend or some family?”

She shook her head. “I was just passing through the area.”

“We could call you a cab, get you back to where you came from.”

She shook her head, nixing that suggestion in the bud. Westin didn’t know what else to say to her. How could he help someone who didn’t seem to want help? He rolled back on his heels, shoving his hands deeper into his pockets, the cold eating at him again. They couldn’t just leave her here—but, again, was it really their problem?

Fuck, it was cold out here!

Clint came around the corner, hesitating slightly when his eyes settled on Westin, taking in his missing jacket. It was a second before his eyes moved to the girl, assessing her pale complexion and the dark jacket wrapped around her shoulders.

“What’s going on here?”

“You smooth things over with the deputy?” Westin asked, rubbing his upper arms in a useless attempt to warm them up.

“Yeah, everything’s good.” Clint’s eyes again rested on the girl. “I’m Clint Grooms,” he told her, holding out a big hand that was covered in a heavy work glove—someone must have brought him his jacket and gloves. “You are...?”

“Lea Adams,” the woman said, offering him her own smaller, delicate hand. “Thank you for getting rid of him.”

“Who was that guy?”

The girl hesitated, clearly not eager to explain herself to anyone. “Look, I don’t know who you guys are, but you came to my rescue and now I’m kind of stranded here. I don’t suppose you’d be willing—”

“Come on, Clint!” Landry called from the truck. “We gotta get going!”

Westin glanced over his shoulder, gesturing for Landry to keep his pants on.

“We could take you to the sheriff’s office,” Clint told the girl. “Maybe they could help you out.”

“No.” The girl lowered her head as she stomped her feet, feeling the cold as much as everyone else. “I can’t do that.”

“Well...”

Clint seemed as much at a loss as Westin was. Westin crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes moving over the girl, his desire to get his jacket back much higher than his desire to help her out. He cleared his throat as her eyes came up to meet his. There was something there, a memory of the fear she’d displayed earlier, but it quickly disappeared as she turned her attention on Clint, clearly marking him as the man in charge.

“I could pay you,” she said softly. “If you could take me somewhere safe, somewhere I could hide for a while, I could pay you. A lot.”

Clint shook his head, but she grabbed his arm. “Seriously. Lots of money. As much as you could want. I just... I can’t be here. I need to go somewhere else, somewhere safe. Somewhere he’d never think to look for me.” She gave him a look that was one

a man could never turn away from, one of those looks that said so much more than words ever could. “I just need a couple of days, someone to stick around in case he comes back. That’s all.”

“We don’t even know who you are, lady.” Clint carefully removed her hand from his arm and reached back to pull out his wallet. “I can give you a couple of bucks for a taxi, but—”

“You don’t understand!” She spun on her heel, turned toward Westin. “Please! I wouldn’t even be here if your friend hadn’t interfered!”

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“If he hadn’t interfered, you’d be much worse off than you are now,” Clint reminded her.

She shook her head. “Please.” She stepped into Landry, wrapping her fingers up in the loose material of his shirt. “Please. Just a few days. I really need your help!”

Westin didn’t know what to say. His thoughts moved to Miss Dulcie, to the trouble none of them wanted to bring to her doorstep. But he also found himself thinking about Rena, about his own mother. He thought that one thought most men have once in their life: what if she was my mother, my sister, my lover? Wouldn’t I want someone to help her?

“We do have that group of tourists coming in today…”

Chapter 2

“It’s just over four hundred acres that stretches from here to the northern border of the state.”

Lea nodded, staring out the window as they drove through an electronic gate that marked their location as Golden Sphinx Ranch. To their left, there were trees and an expanse of what was probably a beautiful lawn in the spring that stretched up to the front door of a lovely antebellum-style house. It was white with black shutters, the sort of thing that brought to mind sweeping epics like *Gone with the Wind*. It made Lea think of a time when she had desperately wanted to be Scarlett O’Hara.

“That’s Miss Dulcie’s house,” someone said in a shy but deep voice. “She owns the

place.”

“Miss Dulcie?”

“Dulcie Howard,” the one who seemed to be in charge announced from beside her. “Her husband, Asa, started the place back in the seventies with just three hundred acres and expanded it to what you see today.”

“Where’s her husband now?”

“He died a couple years back. Pneumonia.”

Lea nodded again, her attention turning to the front of the truck and the three handsome men taking her on this little tour. The two passengers were shoved into one seat, practically sitting on each other’s laps. One was the guy who’d come out and saved her from being yanked out of that rental car. He was dark and sultry, just staring out the window like he wasn’t practically in the other guy’s lap. That guy was blond and as handsome as a Hollywood hunk. He kind of reminded her of a young Brad Pitt, or maybe the little brother of that sexy superhero who played Thor in the Marvel movies. Very good-looking. Only trouble was, he seemed aware of the fact.

It was the driver who really drew her attention. He was the one who’d pulled her away from the fight that broke out at the rental, the one whose jacket she still wore wrapped over her shoulders. Thanks to the absence of the big, thick jacket, she could see his muscles work under the thin material of his work shirt, see the long lines of his masculine chest and thighs. No one would miss guessing that he worked at physical labor each and every day; the evidence was very clear in his sun-roughened skin and his big, callused hands. He brought to mind images of her childhood, of the rodeos she’d attended, the county fairs where cowboys were in abundance, decked out in their Sunday best to show off the livestock they’d raised for the sole purpose of being judged by the county’s finest, usually the mayor and a few of his minions.

That was the neck down. The neck up... he was just as handsome as the blond beside him, but he was a darker version of the blond bombshell. He had jet-black hair that was so dark it had hints of blue in it, hair that was smooth and thick and straight, left long on the top and shorter above the ears, the kind of haircut that was popular a year or so ago. He had a slight widow's peak that gave his long face an added stretch that lessened the squareness of his jaw. A long, Roman nose helped the illusion along, making his face appear to be well proportionate even upon close study. But it was those blue eyes distracting from the square jaw that really did it, that made him seem almost like an artist's idea of what a perfect man should look like, at least in Lea's humble opinion. Those eyes were such a deep blue that they seemed to jump from his face, a fact that probably worked well in turning the heads of every woman he'd ever met.

Lea found it difficult to take her eyes from him, and she welcomed the distraction. It meant she didn't have to focus on her current difficulties, that she could think of something other than the man who'd nearly absconded with her in front of an entire diner full of witnesses. Or the fact that the same above-mentioned man had taken off with her rental car that contained everything she owned. She didn't even have her cell phone. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been without her cell phone!

She leaned forward and buried her head in her hands, realizing once again that she was in a mess much bigger than anything she'd ever been involved in before, and she had no idea how the hell she was going to get out of this.

"You okay?"

She turned her head and glanced at the guy beside her before burying her face again. "I can't believe this is happening! I don't even know who you people are, and here I am allowing you to take me onto your property where... I can't believe I put myself in this position!"

“Maybe it’d make you feel better if you knew our names.”

Lea sat up, rolling her shoulders. “It’s a start.”

The guy beside her, the one she’d decided was in charge, pointed to his own chest. “I’m Clint. This is Bowie,” he said, indicating the big guy beside him. The big guy smiled brightly and held out his hand, then flashed her an okay sign, like that made everything so much better.

“That’s Remington up in the front seat, Landry smashed in beside him. And Westin is the one driving.”

Westin. A very western name for a cowboy. It seemed to fit him well.

They all acknowledged her with a smile or a nod. All except for this Westin guy. Granted, he was driving, but it still felt a little rude that he hadn’t even glanced in the rearview at her. She thought of half a dozen things she might say to him, but before any of them could form themselves on her tongue, they slid to a stop in front of a long, narrow building that looked like a log-cabin wannabe.

“What is this?” Lea asked as three doors all popped open at once, and the guys started jumping out of the truck.

“This is one of the guesthouses. It’s currently under repair, so no one is booked to use it this week. I thought it would be the perfect place for you to stay until you figure out your next step,” Clint said as he reached across her to open her door. “You’ll be safe here.”

She wasn’t too sure. As she stepped down, a gust of cold air slapped her in the face, moving a huge tree standing just to the left of the building so that it made a terrible ruckus, vibrations running through each of its naked limbs until it sounded like it was

going to fall down on their heads. The guys didn't seem to notice, but Lea couldn't help but glance up at the massive tree, hoping the damn thing had some pretty deep roots. The last thing she needed was to wake with a tree lying beside her in bed!

"Here we go," Clint said, gripping her upper arm as he guided her toward the door Remington had just unlocked. Remington stepped aside as she approached, practically bowing his head like he was giving a room to the Queen of England. "We're working on the roof in this section, but there's a nice room at the back where you shouldn't be disturbed."

He guided her down a long hallway, finally pausing as they came to the last door on the right. He pushed the door open and stepped out of the way, gesturing for her to go inside first. She wasn't sure what she'd expected, but it was actually a lovely room. The walls were wood paneling, a light-colored wood that seemed to gleam in the sunlight streaming through a tall window covered only by sheer curtains. There was a table with two chairs, a long, low dresser, and a massive queen-sized bed made of heavy wood—a walnut, maybe—with four posters and carvings of cowboys in the headboard. It was covered by a bright-green quilt that matched the sheer curtains, and decorated with half a dozen pillows that reminded Lea she hadn't slept in almost twenty-four hours.

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What a hell of a ride she'd been on these past few days!

She was grateful to see, as well, that there was an en-suite bathroom that was equipped with several towels and complimentary toiletries almost as if they had been expecting her. She stood in the doorway to the bathroom, her skin itching, already able to feel the comfort of the hot water running over her body.

Clint seemed to see the desire on her face. He cleared his throat, gesturing for the guys who'd followed them into the room to back out again, herding them like a group of cattle. "Why don't we give you some space," he suggested, practically pushing the other blond out of his way.

"Thank you."

He lowered his head just slightly before closing the door behind him. Lea could hear them out in the hallway, voices raised in protest—for what, she couldn't quite guess—but then the voices slowly faded. She turned back to the bathroom, more than anxious to tackle that shower. Damn, it would be good to get out of these clothes!

"What the hell are we doing?" Landry asked the question before Westin could give voice to it, but he could see on the faces of the others that the two of them weren't the only ones wondering.

They gathered outside the old bunkhouse, standing in a semicircle around Clint. He kicked at the ground with the toe of his boot, huddling in his jacket as the wind blew

the freezing air against his skin. He was quiet for a long time, almost too long, making the others bounce on their heels as they waited.

“The woman needs help.” Clint shook his head. “We got her in this situation. We should help get her out of it.”

Everyone seemed to toss a glance in Remington’s direction, but he had no response either. No one seemed to be too eager to stand up on this one today.

“What about Miss Dulcie?” Westin asked. “What are we supposed to tell her?”

Clint shoved his gloved hands into the pockets of his jacket. “I’ll talk to her. Tell her we overbooked or something.”

“And then?” Landry asked. “How long are we going to keep her here? Are we just going to set her up in that room and forget about her?”

“No. We’ll have to take turns keeping an eye on her.” Clint squinted up into the sky. “That guy... he could come back, cause her some trouble.”

“He can’t get onto the ranch without someone knowing about it,” Bowie pointed out.

“Yeah, but who’s going to tell us about him if they don’t know to be on the lookout for him?” Clint glanced over his shoulder almost as if he could see into her room from where he stood. “No. One of us will have to be with her at all times, because we’re the only ones who know what this fellow looks like.”

“Barely,” Westin commented. “We only saw him for a few minutes.”

“You have an idea.”

“We don’t know anything about her,” Remington pointed out. “We should find out who he was, what he was doing. Find out what kind of trouble we’ve invited here.”

“You mean you invited here.” Landry shoved Remington playfully on the shoulder. “We wouldn’t be in this situation if not for you.”

Remington lowered his head. “True. But this might not be a bad thing. Maybe this could become a side gig.”

“What are you talking about?”

Remington rubbed his chin. “Well, you know, a lot of ranch hands make extra money working security in the city. We could do that, but do it right here on the ranch.”

“Doing what? Pimping ourselves out as bodyguards?” Westin asked.

“Sure. Personal security pays pretty well, and we get a lot of rich assholes up here all year round.” Remington jerked his shoulders even as he shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. “I made four thousand bucks last month when that fellow sent his daughter out here for the ‘Cowboy Experience.’ Paid me to keep an eye out for her, keep her on the ranch. Easiest money I ever made.”

“You did that?” Westin glanced at Clint, saw him shrug in affirmation. “And you let him? What happened to that rule about taking extra money from the clients?”

“That’s just when it comes to tips and shit like that,” Landry said. “No one said anything about fetching fast food from town, or offering other, more pleasurable services.” Landry winked, alluding to one of his favorite pastimes, something everyone knew about because there wasn’t a night during the tourist season when one of them hadn’t caught Landry with a female guest somewhere on the ranch. Westin himself had caught him less than a month ago doing the deed with some girl in the

barn.

Westin backed away from the group, raising his hands. “You can count me out. I’m not getting wrapped up in some idiotic scheme. As far as I’m concerned, all these rich bitches can drown in their fancy perfumes and hundred-dollar bottles of wine.”

“Wait, Westin!” Clint snagged his elbow, pulled him back into the semicircle. “You’ve got to stay with this girl right now. Everyone else has stuff to do to get ready for the incoming tourists. You’re the only one with a free morning.”

“Yeah—free morning. That means I get to do whatever the hell I want.”

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“You were standing there when this went down,” Clint reminded him. “You helped get her out of the way; you stood there and calmed her down when it was over. You’re just as deep into this as the rest of us.”

“It wasn’t my choice to bring her back here.”

“No; that was my choice, and I’ll take responsibility for it. But we have to do this together, or we don’t do it at all.” Clint looked around at the other guys, ending his gaze hard on Westin’s face, making him feel almost like a bug under a microscope. “Either everyone helps, or we bundle her up and take her back into town.”

“We should vote,” Bowie suggested.

Westin rocked back on his heels, shaking his head. “This isn’t some sort of game, guys. We don’t know what this woman’s into. We could have just invited a hell storm to come erupt over our heads.”

“That’s why we should vote,” Remington said, sharing a quick high five with Bowie once the words were out. “Clint’s right; we can’t do this if we aren’t all in on it.”

Westin sighed because he knew how the vote would go, and knew that the new Dean Koontz novel he had waiting in his bunk would have to wait another day.

Lea heard the door open, and a part of her wondered if Fang had found her. But when the footsteps stopped only a few feet into the room, she relaxed, guessing it was one of the cowboys come to keep her company.

What were the chances she'd have a group of cowboys come to her rescue? Out here, in the middle of the great frozen state of Colorado? She might have thought it was impossible, but she was getting the impression that she'd somehow wandered into the heart of cattle country. She thought she'd left all this behind when she'd escaped Arizona, but obviously not.

She scrubbed at her skin, wishing she had a razor to remove the quickly-growing hair on her legs, still feeling dirty as long as she could feel that bit of stubble. It wasn't bad yet. She'd managed to spend a few hours in a motel room night before last, was able to have a shower and a quick nap before moving on. But she was a woman used to showering every day, to shaving every day. She was a little obsessive-compulsive that way. She supposed she would have to make do with what she had. That didn't extend to her clothes, though. She wasn't putting those dirty panties back on, no matter who was after her! She did, however, grab the sunflower pendant she'd had around her neck and drop the chain back over her head. That she would keep close—no matter how dirty it might get.

Did stainless steel get dirty?

Lea wrapped herself in a towel—a surprisingly thick towel—and twisted a second one around her hair before stepping up to the door. Much to her delight, the cowboy who had come back to watch over her was the driver. Westin. Wasn't that what the one in charge—Clint?—had called him?

“Hey, Cowboy,” she said, pulling the door open the rest of the way and leaning against the doorframe in just that towel. “You wouldn't happen to have a washing machine around here, would you? Or a little boutique where I can get some clean clothes? Though I'd have to borrow a couple of bucks to pay for them...”

He glanced at Lea like he'd seen his share of naked women and wasn't interested in anything she had to offer. “You're out of luck there. Maybe when Clint comes around

later, you can send him to the store with a list. He's got a wife, so he's used to shopping for female crap."

"Is that right?"

His eyes moved lazily over her, that deep blue electric. She could almost feel it burning her skin, like a touch from a fevered hand.

"I don't suppose you have a phone, do you? A cell phone? Do you cowboys know what that is?"

He grunted even as he leaned back in the chair where he was sprawled, lifting his booted feet up to the edge of the bed and crossing them at the ankles, dirt visibly falling in teeny avalanches onto the pretty green quilt. "You'd be surprised how much technology we use around here. We're not as backward as you might think."

"Then you have a phone?"

He rolled his shoulders as he lifted his jacket from where Lea had removed it and carefully hung it over the back of the chair opposite him to pull it up to his chin like a blanket. He closed his eyes like he was content to sit there and take a nap.

"Hey!" she cried, marching over to him in her bare feet, shoving his feet off the bed with her hip. "I asked you question!"

He sat up, leaning forward just slightly. "I realize you're probably used to being the center of attention, Ms.—what's your name again?"

"Adams. My name is Lea Adams, you buffoon!"

He tilted his head like he was struggling to see her in the bright sunlight. "Hasn't

anyone told you, Ms. Adams, that getting what you want is much easier with honey, not vinegar?”

“Fuck you!”

She spun on her heel and crossed the room, but there really wasn't anywhere for her to go. She ended up walking to the window, then spinning again to face him, nothing but that massive, beautiful bed between them. She clutched the towel she wore over her body, grateful it was wide enough to hide all the important parts, but still feeling more than a little exposed, which hadn't been a bad thing a minute ago, but felt disempowering now.

“I'd like to use your phone.”

“Never said I had one.”

She grunted, feeling a little more frustrated than she cared to admit. “Do you have a phone?”

He leaned back again, putting his big, dirty boots back onto the side of the bed. “What do you want it for?”

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“To make a call!” she cried, unable to keep the frustration from the tip of her tongue. “What else do you use a phone for?”

“Oh, lots of things. Personally, I like the camera. Takes real good pictures, that iPhone 10. You ever see the kinds of pictures it takes? Clear as a whistle.”

He said it with a southern twang to his words, making fun of her for accusing him of being behind the technological times. She nodded, lowering her head as she scratched at her hairline just below where the towel was wrapped there. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry for what I said.” She tilted her head as she glanced at him. “Can we start over?”

He hesitated a second, but then lowered his feet once more and leaned forward, studying her across the expanse of that big bed. She tugged at the top of her towel, pulling it up to cover more of her generous chest even as she crossed her arms tight across her breasts, both hiding them and making them pop a little more over the top of that white towel, her necklace resting against one pale mound. She saw his gaze hesitate there, knew his earlier disinterest had been an act. There were many things a man could hide, but she’d never met a man who could hide his fascination with the female form.

“Who are you, Ms. Adams?” His eyes slowly came back up to hers, burning with that same electricity she’d felt before. “Who was that guy trying to pull you out of your car?”

“An ex,” she said almost automatically, a little surprised how easily the half-truth rolled off her tongue.

“An ex? What does he want with you?”

She rolled her shoulders, allowing her arms to slip a little so that he could get more of a peek at her breasts. “I guess he doesn’t consider himself as much of an ex as I do.”

“So, this whole thing is just about some asshole who can’t take no for an answer?”

“I suppose so.”

He reached up and ran the fingers of both hands through his hair. “Who do you want to call? Him?”

“No, of course not!” Lea adjusted the towel again. “I have a friend who was expecting me tomorrow. I just want to let him know I’m not going to make it.”

“Another man? Is that why the first man is so upset?”

Definitely. But she wasn’t going to tell him that. “May I please use your phone?”

He hesitated, his eyes moving over her again, once more hesitating over her chest. She squeezed her arms against her breasts, making it look like a nervous gesture, but aware of what it did to his wandering gaze each time she did it. He stood and slipped the phone from a back pocket, tossing it onto the bed. She leaned over to retrieve it, aware that she was giving him even more of a sneak peek as the sunflower dangled, almost like a hypnotist’s tool to draw the eye. Then she settled on the bed, her back propped up by the pillows as she woke the screen and found herself looking at a surprisingly skillful picture of the sunset over the main gates of the ranch.

“You take this?”

He sat back and propped his feet up again, ignoring her question.

Lea dialed a number she knew better than her own, closing her eyes briefly as she lifted the phone to her face. A warm, familiar voice spoke almost distractedly in her ear.

“It’s me,” she said, more relief than she’d intended in her voice. “There’s been a snag.”

“Where are you?”

“Colorado. Fang found me.”

“You’re kidding me! How did that happen?”

“I don’t know. I must have left a trail somewhere.”

“You don’t leave trails.”

“Not usually.” She glanced at the cowboy who was now pretending to take a nap. “I’m safe where I am, for the time being. I think I’ll lie low for a couple of days, let things play out.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Lee. What if—”

“He has my rental car. He has everything.”

There was a string of curses that burned across the miles between them. Then the man on the other end said, “All right. I see what you’re saying.” He made a grunting sound. “Right. Let me see what I can do. Call back tomorrow, okay? Sooner if you run into trouble.”

“I will.”

Lea ended the call, holding the phone between both her hands, wishing she had her own phone. All the things that were in that car when Fang took off with it! And the asshole probably had no clue exactly what he had. They didn't call him Fang because he was intelligent.

“You really date men called Fang?”

Lea jumped, startled by Westin’s voice. It wasn’t that she’d forgotten he was there exactly. It was more the way he had of intruding on her thoughts. It was like he knew the direction her mind was taking and exactly when his words would have the most impact.

“It’s a nickname.”

“I assumed there weren’t parents out there cruel enough to name their child Fang on purpose. But, again, some of the names I’ve heard people call their kids...”

Lea laughed because she couldn’t help herself. Maybe he wasn’t as isolated up here in the middle of the frozen nowhere as she’d originally believed.

“You done with my phone?”

“Yeah.” She tossed it over to him, and he caught it gracefully, barely moving anything more than his arm. She whistled. “Good catch.”

He dropped the phone on his flat belly and lifted his arms up behind his head.
“Baseball.”

“You play in school?”

“Yep.”

She nodded as her eyes appreciated those thick muscles in his thighs and upper arms again. He had the build for it. “You grow up around here?”

He shook his head. “Denver. You?”

“This is my first visit to the great state of Colorado.”

“Enjoying it?”

Once again she laughed, wondering if he was serious. Her only experiences here were being attacked by Fang, dragged out of her car by her hair, and then rescued by a group of cowboys who seemed lost as to what to do with her now. “Are you guys going to take turns invading my privacy?” she wondered aloud as she stretched out a little more comfortably on the bed, crossing her own ankles as she repositioned the towel over her hips and chest. The one she’d wrapped around her head came loose, so she took it off and flung it onto the windowsill, then watched it slowly fall to the floor.

“That’s the plan, for the moment.”

“How did you get to be the lucky guy to get first shift?”

“It was my morning off.”

“Sorry.”

He rolled his shoulders. “This is easier duty than dealing with the wealthy tourists the others are preparing for.”

“For this ‘Cowboy Experience’ thing?”

“Yep.”

“What is that?”

He peeked at her from under the long fringe of impossibly thick eyelashes. “It’s a gimmick to make a little money over the winter.” He rubbed his chin with one hand, a heavy sigh escaping his full lips. “A group of tourists come up here—usually twenty or less at a time—and we teach them how to ride a horse, how to chase a couple of old cows around a paddock, shit like that. Show them a very small portion of what we do on a daily basis at a cost that rivals what I make in a month.”

“You don’t help with it?”

“I do. I do the chuck wagon.”

“The... what?”

He grunted, peeking at her again. “The chuck wagon. Food. We take them out into a pasture and cook biscuits and beans over an open fire like they might have done on the trail years ago.”

“You do that?”

“I do. I make the biscuits and run the show.”

“You put on a show?”

“It’s more like a history lecture.” He adjusted himself in the chair, sliding down a little further to get more comfortable. “Boring stuff, but the tourists eat it up.”

Lea nodded, her eyelids beginning to drift downward. She’d driven all day yesterday and all night. Her eyes felt like they were covered in sand. Watching him pretend to nap was just making it harder for her to keep her eyes open. Something in the back of her mind reminded her that she was alone in a room with a stranger and dressed in nothing but a towel, and she was about to become as vulnerable as a woman could. She should stay awake, but she couldn’t fight it anymore. In seconds, her world grew dark and she was out, drifting into a sound sleep that was deeper and more restful than anything she’d experienced in a very long time.

Chapter 3

Miss Dulcie watched Clint come toward her across the long room, a simple smile on her dry lips. She admired the way he walked, the little saunter to his every step. He reminded her of Asa back in the early days of their relationship, back when he’d come find her in the apple orchard during the summer, that saunter belying his excitement—excitement she could always see in his green eyes.

“What can I do for you, Clint?”

He stopped in front of her desk, twisting his gloves between his hands. “Ma’am, I just wanted to let you know that we’ve readied the guest bunkhouse for the tourists arriving today. They should begin to arrive around noon.”

Miss Dulcie glanced at her watch, noting that noon was less than fifteen minutes away. “All right. Inform the staff to prepare for their arrival.”

“They’re already out there, ma’am.”

Miss Dulcie sat back a little in her tall chair, aware that it dwarfed her slight body. It had been Asa’s, and she didn’t have the heart to get rid of it. There were few things that belonged to Asa she’d felt right about getting rid of. It kept him close, keeping his things around her.

“Is there something else, Clint?”

He cleared his throat. “There’s a guest in the other bunkhouse. We had an issue in town this morning, and we invited a woman back to the ranch with us.”

“Is that true?” She crossed her arms over her chest, studying him closely, watching for signs of deception. Clint had never lied to her before—that she was aware of—so she had no reason to be suspicious. Yet, there were firsts to everything. “What happened?”

“A man was attacking her in the parking lot of the diner. Remington interfered, but the guy took off with all this woman’s things. She had nowhere else to go.”

Miss Dulcie nodded, her eyes falling to the stack of paperwork on her desk. She had never appreciated how much paper-pushing there was on this ranch when Asa was alive. She knew he spent hours in this office but, honestly, she’d always kind of thought he spent all that time in here to escape her. Not that they didn’t get along, but Asa was a cowboy before anything else. He preferred his own company to anyone else’s, including his wife. If he couldn’t be out on a horse, he liked to lock himself up in this room where he could be alone with his thoughts. And, apparently, all this paperwork.

“I’d like to meet her. See that you bring her up to the house this evening. And make sure she has everything she needs.”

“I will, Miss Dulcie.”

She nodded, pulling the top sheet of paper toward her before shooing him away with a movement of her hand. “Get to work. Those guests will be expecting your attention.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She watched him go, once again reminded of Asa. It seemed everything reminded her of Asa lately. The smell of the horses coming from her boys, the sight of the cows roaming in the distant paddocks, the simple sight of the apple orchard, the barn in sunset. They’d had more than twenty years together, she and Asa, but she often wished it had been more. She missed the simple sight of him sitting here, hunched over this desk, hiding from her as much as dealing with the business of this place.

She sighed as she focused on her work once more. It was her place now.

Westin took a light blanket from the closet and draped it over the woman, covering the places on her body that had become exposed by the shifting of her towel. Any other man might have left her uncovered, might have waited to see what she’d eventually reveal. But he wasn’t one of those men.

He dropped back into his chair and leaned forward, running his fingers through his hair. If he’d known he’d be babysitting a sleeping beauty, he might have gone to the bunkhouse and gotten his book. He wasn’t good with idle hands, and was even worse with idle thoughts. His mind moved immediately to Rena and all she might represent

for him, and he really didn't want to think about that right now. When he overthought things, he tended to screw them up.

A knock on the door rescued him from his thoughts. He got up and slipped into the corridor, not surprised to find Clint there.

“How is she?”

Westin rolled his shoulders. “She’s sleeping at the moment.”

“Did you have a chance to ask her anything?”

Westin glanced over his shoulder at the door, recalling the brief conversation he'd had with the woman. “She claims the guy was a former boyfriend. Then she made a phone call.”

“A phone call? Using what?”

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“My cell.” Westin tugged the phone out of the pocket he’d returned it to just moments ago. He pulled up his call log and handed it to Clint. “She talked to someone—I could only hear one side of the conversation, so I don’t know if it was a man or a woman—and told them, ‘Fang found me.’ I asked her who Fang was, and she said it was her ex’s nickname.”

“Fang?” Clint frowned even as he took a picture of Westin’s call log with his own phone before handing him the iPhone back. “That’s an odd name.”

“I get a weird feeling about this, boss,” Westin told him. “I think we might have walked into something bigger than just a dispute between a man and his former girl.”

“Did she say anything else? Anything that might tell us more about her?”

Westin shook his head. “No.”

“Okay.” He sighed, glancing himself at the door. “Miss Dulcie wants to meet her. I’ll come for her about six to take her up to the house.”

“Until then?”

“Stay with her.”

Westin grunted. “We have one issue, though. The woman refused to put back on the clothes she’d been wearing.”

“So, what does she have on?”

“A towel.”

Clint frowned, his eyes jumping to the closed door again. “I’ll see what I can do. Melanie might have something that’ll fit her. They look to be close in size.”

Mention of Clint’s wife brought to mind the things Westin had discussed with the others over breakfast that morning. Tension burned through Clint’s expression, stiffening his shoulders at the thought of going home to his wife. Westin patted his shoulder lightly, offering what little comfort he could. A man didn’t get involved in another’s marital issues unless asked. Westin had no intention of stepping over that particular line.

Clint walked off, the sound of his boots against the hardwood floor a final note to the conversation. When he was gone, Westin stepped quietly back into the room, settling in that same chair, his feet up on the edge of the bed. He pulled out his phone and started a game of poker on one of the electronic apps, losing himself quickly in the simple game. It kept his mind busy, but not quite busy enough that he didn’t begin to think about the date he had with Rena tonight. He sincerely hoped that this mess Remington had pulled them into didn’t screw that up, too.

Almost as an answer to his unasked question, a text interrupted his game.

Meet me at Stubbins’s at seven?

He smiled, relieved to see those words. Perfect, he responded.

It was all coming together. In a matter of time, he would have what he’d come to this frozen ranch to get. Very soon. All the planning, all the waiting... it was finally coming to fruition.

“What are you playing?”

Westin glanced at the figure on the bed, watching as she tugged the light blanket higher up against her shoulders. She snuggled down against the pillow, the sigh that escaped her lips giving her entire face a gentle, almost erotic countenance. A part of him wanted to crawl onto that bed and join her, to lose himself in the comfort her whole presence seemed to emanate in that moment.

“Poker.”

“I was never very good at that. I prefer solitaire.”

“Solitaire is boring. Everyone can play solitaire.”

“But poker takes skill?”

“Some. And guts. Mostly guts.”

“I’ll give you that.” She sighed again, tugging at the blanket one more time. “How long was I asleep?”

“A few hours.”

“I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“You won’t get much tonight if you sleep any longer.”

She let her eyes slowly slide closed. “It’s nice of you to be so concerned.”

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“I’m not. You won’t be my problem in a few hours.”

“Yeah? Who comes next?”

“Clint. He’s taking you up to the main house to meet Miss Dulcie.”

“Is that right?” She peeked at me through one eye. “I’m sure she’ll be quite impressed with my undressed state.”

“Clint’s going to bring you some clothing.”

“Nice of Clint.” She made another soft sound before finally pulling herself up into a sitting position, tugging at the blanket to keep herself covered. “Why does your Miss Dulcie want to meet me?”

“You’re a guest on her property. She wants to meet everyone who comes here.”

“How efficient of her.” She ran her fingers through her hair, pulling at tangles as she did. Westin watched as she tugged awfully hard at a few of them, making a face when it caused her pain. She was ruthless, finally smoothing out her thick hair and twisting it into a loose bun, winding the strands tightly around its base to keep it in place.

“When does this happen?”

“At six.”

“And where will you be?”

The words on a date were on the tip of Westin's tongue, but something made him stop them from spilling from his lips. Normally, it was easy for him to keep things close to his chest, but something about her made him want to keep talking, to tell her things he wouldn't otherwise.

He set his phone on the table and got up to cross to the window. He peeked outside, watched as Bowie escorted a couple of women to the other guest bunkhouse, a building less than a hundred yards behind this one. The women were tall and slender, blond ponytails bouncing behind their heads as they walked quickly to keep up with the gentle giant. One whispered to the other as she gestured toward Bowie, clearly admiring something about him. Or making fun of his size. Westin couldn't be sure which it was, but when he turned to gesture for them to go into the bunkhouse and they started to giggle, he had a clear hint as to which it'd been.

"What are the chances your ex will continue to track you?" he asked of his own guest.

"Pretty good, I'd say. But I doubt he'd think to look here."

"Why is he so determined to find you?"

Lea made a little noise that made Westin turn. A part of him wished he hadn't because she picked that moment to whisk the blanket from her body, sitting up a little straighter so that he could get a good look at the length of her with just that towel to cover her. And the towel had slipped out of place in several sections, falling open at her thigh, her hip, revealing a curve that only a lover should have a view of. But that wasn't as good as the near-complete breast it also revealed, showing him everything but the cylindrical shape of her nipple, though he got a good idea of what it looked like from the way it pressed against the material of that towel.

Westin cleared his throat, allowing his eyes to move over the length of her. If she was

willing to show it off, who was he to deny her the enjoyment? There was beauty in the female form that Westin hadn't had the joy of viewing recently. Why not allow himself the opportunity she was dropping right there in his lap?

Her skin was pale save where it was marked by a scattering of freckles here and there. Her thigh was a milky expanse marred only by a single, deep-brown mole near her hipbone. And then there was a small spatter of freckles across her lower belly that moved up toward her ribs, a pattern that begged to be explored, that asked a fingertip to connect those particular dots. Then there was another of those singular marks on the lower curve of her breast, another spot that wanted to be touched, that nearly begged to be nibbled, tasted, the texture of that anomaly of skin to be explored. And that sunflower, resting in the valley between those beautiful breasts. He would have given anything to be that sunflower in that moment, feeling the heat of her skin, the softness of those perfect mounds. Just a taste, a little touch...

He chewed the inside of his cheek as those thoughts rushed through his mind in a matter of seconds, that hot need so intense that he could feel his body come to attention, a stiffness in his jeans reminding him that he was most definitely still a young, healthy man.

"Does that answer your question?" she asked softly before tugging at the towel to make a vague attempt at covering the exposed sections of her skin.

"Not really," he said with forced nonchalance. "A man can find a desirable woman almost anywhere if he looks hard enough. I'm sure this Fang can find someone just as sexy as you elsewhere."

"I don't know if I should be flattered or insulted by that comment," she said as she stood, the towel finally falling completely into place, much to Westin's disappointment. "I can't tell if you're interested or just annoyed."

“I’m not here to be either,” he said flatly. “I’m here to make sure that man doesn’t try to take off with you again.”

“But you’re a man.” She sidled up to him, pressing her shoulder against his chest as she shifted, turning to face him full on, her nearly naked body just an inch or so from his. “Surely it’s not every day you find yourself alone with a practically naked woman.”

“Is this how you seduced Fang?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes there isn’t enough time for the classic rules of seduction.”

“Is that what this is? A circumvention of the classic rules?”

“You can think of it any way you’d like as long as you play along.”

“Sorry, lady.” Westin rested his hands on her shoulders, intending to push her away but finding himself unable to pull up the strength to do so. “I’m not that kind of guy.”

“Then what kind of guy are you?” She turned her head slightly as she lifted herself up on her tiptoes, her lips coming so close to his jaw that he could feel the heat of her, could smell the sweet scent of the soap she’d used in the shower. “What does it take to get a reaction out of you, cowboy?”

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His thumbs moved over her collarbone as if they had a mind of their own, sliding along the smooth skin with a touch that sent a spark of electricity through his arms. He could almost feel the weight of her breasts against his palms, could almost feel the desire in her hardened nipples, could almost taste the warmth of her mouth. He ached to feel her body against his, the knowledge that all he'd have to do was draw her forward an inch or so making him almost lightheaded.

But he wasn't this kind of guy.

He pulled away, putting distance between them by crossing to the other side of the room, leaning his back against the door. She turned toward him, something like disappointment burning in her amber eyes.

"Okay," she said softly, almost as if she was trying to wrap her mind around the idea that a man might not want her. "Didn't mean to insult you."

"You didn't."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" She cocked her head slightly. "A boyfriend?"

Westin grunted. "I don't want to take advantage of you—therefore I must be gay?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean, Ms. Adams?"

"I'm just curious what your deal is. I practically throw myself at you, and you turn

me down. That's not something I'm really used to."

"You throw yourself at men a lot?"

"No."

She picked the blanket off the bed and wrapped it around herself, dropping the towel at her feet once she was well covered. There wouldn't be any more peeks at that lovely form today. Westin felt a rush of disappointment despite himself, a disappointment that made him ache in places where it wasn't always pleasant to ache, especially like that. They had a term for what he was feeling: blue balls. He completely understood it in that moment.

"Look," she said with a heavy sigh as she dropped herself on the edge of the bed. "I just... It's been a long few weeks, and I was hoping to burn off a little tension. That's all. I'm sorry if I upset you."

"You didn't upset me."

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "I think you're hot, okay? If you do have a girlfriend, or a wife, I apologize. You can tell her that you stood up well to temptation."

"I don't."

"Don't what?"

Westin stood a little straighter, shoving his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. "I don't have a woman. I just don't do things like that."

"Like what?"

“Sleep with some woman I don’t know without benefit of protection.”

Her eyebrows rose as she took a good look at him. “You mean you turned me down because you don’t have a condom on you?” He rolled his head, not really admitting she was right, but not denying her assessment of the situation, either. She laughed a little. “Would you have done it if I produced a box of condoms before I dropped the towel?”

Again, he refused to answer, but he couldn’t help the way his eyes moved over her, hesitating on her bare shoulders for a second before touching her eyes. She smiled, sliding back up against the headboard before she tugged the blanket a little tighter around her legs, then smoothing her palms over the soft material.

“Just my luck I run into the only hot cowboy with a moral conscience.”

“I’m sure Landry or Bowie might be a little more open to your proposition.”

“No, thanks. They’re not really my type.”

“Am I?” Westin asked, recalling the fancy suit her ex had been wearing when he attacked her. The two men couldn’t have been more dissimilar, really. Fang had been thin and wiry, the kind of guy who would be good in a street fight but probably couldn’t handle a day’s work on a cattle ranch. His kind of muscles came more from a gym, not from real work. In fact, a lot about that guy struck Westin as a city boy, the kind who was more likely to spend time in jail than on a horse.

But the way Lea looked him over made those thoughts evaporate from his mind. There was such heat in that look that he almost reconsidered his position. He even took a step forward, intent on joining her on that bed. Maybe just a little touch, a few kisses... But he knew it wouldn’t end at that. There was an eroticism about her that had wormed its way under his skin the moment she came out of the bathroom in

nothing but that towel. And her persistence... even a cold shower couldn't fix the ache that was burning through him. He wasn't sure anything could but her, lying with her.

"How long have you worked here?" she suddenly asked, reaching up to play with the bun in her hair again. "Do you live on the ranch?"

Westin cleared his throat, having trouble changing tracks. "How long...?"

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She giggled softly. “How long have you worked here?” she repeated, emphasizing each word.

“Three years.”

“You like it? You must.”

“Miss Dulcie is a good and fair boss.”

“Where’d you work before you came here?”

Westin dropped his head, finding it almost impossible to think while she was looking at him with that little smile on her pretty lips. He pushed his hands deeper in his pockets, that ache still burning through him. “Why do you want to know about me?”

“I’m curious.”

He shook his head. “My story isn’t that interesting.”

“Maybe to you, but I’m dying to hear all about it.”

He couldn’t help but lift his eyes to her in that moment. That smile was still on her lips, but there was something new in her eyes. He couldn’t tell if she was truly just interested, or if there was more going on here. He suspected she wasn’t being completely honest about Fang, her supposed ex, and something about that phone call she’d made left him a little nervous, for reasons he couldn’t quite describe. But this new look in her eyes felt genuine, like the first truly authentic thing she’d shown him

all day.

“I worked in Texas. In the oil fields.”

“Really? That’s rough work.”

“No rougher than the ranch.”

She sat up a little straighter, curling her legs in front of her. “What brought you to Colorado?”

“I was born and raised in Denver. My mother passed, so I came back to deal with that, and when that was finished, I heard about the position up here, and thought it would be a good place to settle.”

“Just like that?”

Westin rolled his shoulders. It wasn’t a simple decision, and it hadn’t been as random as he implied. In fact, his position here had been very calculated, but he wasn’t going to tell her that. There were some things that even her pretty smile wasn’t going to get out of him.

“Where are you from?” he asked her.

“Originally?” She leaned back, running a hand over her face. “I’m originally from California. My dad still lives there.”

“Where do you call home now?”

“That’s a good question.” Now it was her turn to evade questions. She rubbed her cheek again, her eyes moving up to the ceiling like she was looking for a lie up there.

“I move around a lot. For work.”

“What kind of work?”

“Chemistry,” she said with something like a chuckle, the amusement reaching all the way up to her eyes, making the gold in them sparkle. “I work in labs, mostly.”

“Doing what?”

“Pharmaceuticals.”

“You make drugs?”

She nodded. “Mostly. Medical grade. Nothing illegal.”

“And that causes you to move around a lot?”

“What can I say?” She flipped her hand in the air, like she was powerless to change her circumstances. “I’m in high demand with some of the top companies around the country.”

“You must make good money.”

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“You have no idea.” She sighed. “But this whole thing with Fang is putting a wrench in things. Can’t work while I’m on the run from some psycho ex. It’s making my life really frustrating.”

“But you had a plan?” Westin gestured to his phone where it still sat on the table. “That phone call...”

“Yeah, I had a plan. Hopefully it’s not completely screwed.”

The door suddenly opened, startling both of them. Westin twisted around, almost disappointed to see Clint coming through the door. But then he saw the storm on the man’s face, and he automatically stepped back, aware that when Clint looked like that, it was best to get out of his way.

“Get dressed, Ms. Adams,” Clint demanded, dropping a small duffel bag on the bed. “We’re supposed to be up at the house in five minutes.”

“I appreciate this,” Lea said as she climbed off the bed and grabbed the bag. “All of it.”

Clint didn’t comment, just made a gesture to hurry her to the bathroom. She disappeared behind the closed door in an instant, Westin’s last glance of her a wistful smile reflected in the mirror.

“Everything okay?” Clint wanted to know even as he went to snatch up the towel on the floor. “You’re keeping your hands to yourself—right?”

“Of course.”

Clint shot him a look that made it pretty clear he wasn't sure he could believe what Westin had said. But then the look melted into something else as he slid down to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Fucking women,” he muttered under his breath.

Westin stared at his back for a moment, wondering what he should say. Was Clint talking about Lea, or someone else?

“I'm moving into the bunkhouse tonight,” Clint suddenly said. “I know there have been rumors going around about me and Melanie... but I'm not going to air my dirty laundry here on the ranch. This is my workplace, not a place for that kind of conversation.”

“Sure.”

“You tell the others. I don't want any questions when I go to turn in tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

Clint nodded. “You should go. You have a date tonight, don't you?”

Westin glanced at the bathroom door, wondering if Lea had heard that last little bit. He had no reason to feel guilty—he'd made the date with Rena before Lea came crashing into his life. Yet, there was something like a stab of guilt pushing into his chest at that moment.

What was this woman doing to him? Why now? If she ruined his plans... he'd worked too long and hard for this. Nothing was going to screw it up for him now!

Chapter 4

Miss Dulcie wasn't what Lea had expected. She wasn't quite sure what she had expected, but this slight, delicate woman was not it.

They'd come through a side door into a long, wide corridor. Clint led Lea through what amounted to a maze, turning half a dozen times before stepping into a massive room that was brightly lit despite the dark walls that were covered in shelves filled by books and what appeared to her to be expensive knickknacks. The woman in question was sitting primly on an oversized armchair upholstered in a lovely flowered material. She had a book in her hands, but she wasn't even looking at it. Her gaze was on the large windows that made up the entire back wall of the room, staring out at a slight rise in the land that led down to the large expanse that was the first few acres of the massive ranch.

"Miss Dulcie," Clint said in a low, respectful tone, "this is Lea Adams."

She seemed slightly startled by the sound of his voice, but she quickly recovered, offering a gentle smile as she set her book down and gracefully rose to her feet.

"It's nice to meet you," Lea said as she accepted the light handshake Miss Dulcie offered. "Thank you for your hospitality."

Miss Dulcie's dark eyes moved quite alertly over Lea as though making a judgment of the person she appeared to be. Lea did the same, reminded of a dear friend's mother when she looked at Miss Dulcie. She was an older woman, easily in her sixties, at least, but her dark skin was smooth and her hair free of any age-related changes. She wore a light dress with long sleeves, and a skirt that flowed all the way to her ankles, her feet covered in big fur-lined slippers. She couldn't have been more than five feet tall, her body so slight she brought to mind the delicacy of a small bird. She was not what Lea had imagined when she pictured the woman who ran this ranch

and had earned the respect of these five ranch hands.

“Welcome to Golden Sphinx Ranch, Ms. Adams.”

“Please, call me Lea.”

Miss Dulcie lowered her head. “Please, have a seat.”

The two women settled into chairs as Clint retreated, disappearing back into the maze he'd brought Lea through. Lea, now dressed in borrowed slacks and a dark blouse, rubbed her palms on her thighs. She wasn't normally nervous in these kinds of situations, but this one did leave her a little anxious. Perhaps it was because of the chaos that had ruled the past few days of her life, or maybe it was as simple as the fact that this woman could send her tumbling into even more chaos if she should choose to ask her to leave the ranch.

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“I understand you met my boys in town this morning,” Miss Dulcie said with that same gentle smile.

“Your boys?”

She chuckled lightly. “Clint and Remington and Westin and the others.” She reached up and rubbed her chin. “I call them my boys because they’re the closest I have to family now.”

“I did. They got me out of a difficult situation.”

“Do you mind if I ask what that situation was?”

Lea lowered her head, brushing a loose string of hair behind her ear. “Well, it’s kind of shameful, to be honest. You see, I was involved with a man who couldn’t take no for an answer. When our relationship ended, he wouldn’t let me go.” She blushed, feeling a little conceited in speaking those words, but she didn’t know how else to put the situation without telling a complete lie. “He caught up with me outside that diner, and tried to pull me out of the car. Your boys came to my rescue.”

Miss Dulcie smiled. “That sounds like something my boys would do.”

“They were a godsend. I don’t know what might have happened if they hadn’t gotten involved.”

“And now you’re stranded here?”

“I am. He took my car with all my things in it, including my phone and wallet. And we’re heading into the weekend, so the banks and everything are closed. But I’m hoping that I can make arrangements on Monday to be on my way again.”

Miss Dulcie’s alert eyes moved over Lea again. “Well, you’re welcome to stay as long as you need to. All I ask is that you not interfere in the daily business of the ranch.”

“Yes, ma’am. Of course.”

“This is a working ranch and it takes a lot to run it. We have more than seventy employees during the winter and double that in the spring and summer. Clint is my foreman. He runs the day-to-day operations. His team is the backbone of Golden Sphinx.”

Lea nodded. “I’m sure they are.”

“Ranching becomes more and more about business every passing year. You almost have to have a business degree to run it.” Miss Dulcie sighed. “When Asa started the ranch forty years ago, it was an old boys’ club. If you knew the right people, if you played in the right circles, it didn’t matter if you knew the first thing about business. You were in.” She smiled, memories floating over her expression like clouds on a lazy summer afternoon that Lea could clearly see. “My Asa... he was quite the cattleman!”

“Is that your husband?”

“Yes,” Miss Dulcie said with a hint of the girl she once was lacing the simple word. “He was a good man, my Asa. Strong and hardworking. Never turned his back on a neighbor in need. And he ran this place like it was his child, with kid gloves when warranted, and with a whip when it was needed.” Again, she sighed, clearly filled

with affection for a man who'd been a great influence in her life. "We were married thirty years, Asa and me. Worked our way through difficult times, and good times. We fought for this place side by side. It's his legacy, and I am determined to make sure it remains a good legacy."

"Seems to me he was a lucky man to have a woman like you on his side."

Miss Dulcie smiled widely. "And he knew it, too." She giggled, again a hint of the girl she once was coming through. "They don't make 'em like Asa much anymore. Cowboys are becoming a dying breed."

"Yes, ma'am."

Miss Dulcie leaned over and patted Lea's knee. "I like you. You're a smart girl."

"Thank you."

Clint came back into the room then, his baseball cap in his hands. "Ma'am? The cook says dinner is ready."

"Come, join me," Miss Dulcie said, standing and holding her hand out to Lea. "Georgia is one of the best cooks in the whole Southwest!"

"I'd be honored," Lea said, shooting Clint a questioning look. He lowered his head slightly, his expression consistently dark and brooding. Lea was beginning to wonder if the man ever smiled.

And she wondered how she'd gone from being dragged out of her car by her hair to sitting down to a meal with a fine, delicate lady like Miss Dulcie. This day was threatening to give her whiplash!

“Ice cream in twenty-degree weather!”

Rena laughed at her own words, running her tongue delicately over the vanilla ice cream on her waffle cone. Westin walked close beside her, their arms touching from time to time as they made their way to a little bench in front of the drugstore in downtown Milsap.

“Are you home for good now?” he asked as he sampled his own vanilla ice cream.

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“Yep. All graduated and everything.” She glanced at him, a slight smile touching her sweet mouth. “You’re now looking at a girl with a bachelor’s in psychology.”

“What do you plan to do with it?”

She shrugged, taking a small bite of her dessert. “I don’t know. Daddy thinks I should go get my master’s, but it took me nearly five years to get my bachelor’s, so more schooling doesn’t seem like that much fun, you know? I’m ready to try something else.”

“Are you going to stick around the Rocking D for a while?”

She blushed a little as she stole a look at him. “That’s the plan. Right now, I’m helping Momma plan the Cattle Baron’s Ball.”

“Is she the chairwoman this year?”

“She is. It’s going to be the first week of April, so be sure you save the date.”

“I will.”

Her blush darkened as she took another little nibble of her ice cream. “What about you? I heard a rumor you might not be around much longer.”

“Where did you hear that?”

She rolled one shoulder as she tilted her head to look at Westin. “Around. Is it true?”

“I have no plans to move on.”

“Good.”

“Would you be upset if I left town, Rena?”

She turned slightly, concentrating on her cone even though she didn't take another bite from it. Instead, she rolled it around in her fingers, some of the sweet cream dripping down onto the soft knitted yarn of her gloves. She lifted the finger to her mouth, sucking the sweetness out of the material.

Westin got up and tossed his own cone into a nearby trashcan, turning toward her again with his hands shoved into his back pockets. He watched her, found himself staring into her face the way he'd done over dinner just twenty minutes before. A part of him was looking for something he could recognize there, something beyond the jet-black hair and the familiar jawline. She was a pretty girl—even he could appreciate that. Slender and long-limbed, she reminded him a little of a colt still learning to get its legs under it. And her quick smile revealed more about her than he'd ever really wanted to know. It made the knife of guilt twist hard in his gut, forcing him to push the feeling down, to remind himself why he was here.

He had to remember. He owed her that much.

“I'm glad we did this, Westin,” she said, standing to toss her own cone. “I feel like we've had this friendship building between us for years.”

“We have.”

She moved closer to him, but she didn't touch him. She just stood in front of him, allowing his body to block the freezing wind from touching her exposed skin. But he knew it was more than that, that her closeness was a question. A test maybe. She was

offering him something that he couldn't take.

"I should drive you home."

She nodded agreeably, but there was a hint of disappointment in her eyes. "My father expressed a desire that I be home by midnight. But I had to remind him that I just turned twenty-one, and therefore I'm old enough to stay out as late as I'd like."

"He's overprotective. Perhaps it's because you're his only daughter."

"Only child," Rena said with something of a growl to her voice. "He reminds me of that every time I turn around. Because I'm the only child, I will one day inherit Rocking D and everything that comes with that. Responsibility is a heavy burden, Rena he tells me all the time. Like I didn't know that." She sighed. "I think he worries that I'll sell the place, the whole kit and caboodle, the second he dies."

Westin stiffened a little, working hard to keep his emotions from his face as he listened to her complain about things most people never have to worry about. Imagine, inheriting a whole ranch without having to fight for it, without having to work for it. What a burden!

"I'm not even sure I want it," she said almost wistfully. "Rocking D has always been my dad's baby. Sometimes I think it's more important to him than I ever was."

"Didn't he inherit it from his father?"

Rena nodded. "It was the first ranch established in this county back when Colorado was still just a territory..." She rolled her eyes. "I can't tell you how many times I've heard that spiel. Or how my granddad nearly lost it all in the seventies, which is how Asa Howard ended up with those three hundred acres butting up against Rocking D. My daddy has lamented that decision ever since I can remember, talking all the time

about how he's going to get those acres back if it's the last thing he ever does."

"I think he'd have to put Miss Dulcie in the ground first."

Rena looked grief-stricken just at the thought. "Miss Dulcie is the sweetest woman in the world! I hope that's not what it takes!"

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“Miss Dulcie would never sell off part of Golden Sphinx. She doesn’t want it to change a single inch from the way it was when Asa was still alive. She sees it as her caretaking his legacy.”

“To be so devoted to a man’s memory.” Rena sighed like it was the most romantic thing she’d ever heard. Westin often found himself wondering how he’d feel if a woman devoted herself to protecting something he cared for. The problem was, he wasn’t sure the one thing he cared the most about would ever belong to him.

“I suppose your father is very interested in me courting you, isn’t he? Your future husband will have a lot to say about what happens to Rocking D, too.”

“True. In fact, my daddy is constantly trying to set me up with boys he thinks are appropriate for me. The problem is, none of them are my type.”

“And what is your type, Rena?”

That blush was back on her cheeks, burning across them like a wildfire in the brush. “Cowboys. Like you. Like the men who work for my father—ones he tries to keep me away from because he thinks it’s inappropriate for a young woman to spend time with rough characters.” She sighed. “I feel like I’m ten years old again every time I come home.”

“I suppose his concern is just as much about making sure you’re well cared for as it is for Rocking D.”

“I think he’s more concerned for the ranch, to be honest.” She crossed her arms over

her chest, shivering. “Could we go sit in the truck?”

“Oh, of course!” Westin slipped his arm around her shoulders. “I’m sorry! I’m so used to being out in the weather that I forgot you aren’t.”

“I spend plenty of time in the outdoors, but that wind is biting right through me!”

Westin helped her up into the truck, lifting her around the waist when her foot fumbled on the running board. She twisted, a smile touching her sweet mouth, her fingers brushing carefully over the curve of his jaw. He had to fight the urge to pull away, forcing a smile when her eyes registered knowledge of the tension that quickly and completely swelled inside of him.

She dropped her hand quickly, clutching her fingers in her lap. “Have I offended you in some way?”

“No. Why?”

She tilted her head slightly, but then her natural shyness took over and she just settled back against the seat, not responding, her cheeks burning with more than the cold, more than the sweet emotions that had inspired that blush before. Westin backed away, carefully closing the door before moving around the truck to climb behind the wheel. He turned over the engine and twisted the knob on the heater to put it on full blast. It blew nothing but cold air on them for a moment or two, but then filled the cab of the truck with superheated air that he had to turn down after four or five awkward moments.

“Why don’t I drive you home?”

Rena nodded, her hands still clutched in her lap. Westin reached over and squeezed her wrist lightly, but pulled away before she could fully grasp his hand, pretending he

needed both hands to navigate the way onto the road and back toward Rocking D Ranch. He turned on the radio, an old Tracy Byrd song filling the cab of the truck, that tune about how the stars all aligned to bring a man and a woman together.

Rena chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes drifting out the window, seeming to find intense interest in everything they passed beside the road rather than him.

“Looks like it might snow tomorrow,” he commented.

She made a small sound, but it was all the response he got.

“Hope it holds off until after the chuck wagon.”

She glanced at him. “You’re doing the chuck wagon at Golden Sphinx?”

“Yep. We have some tourists in for our ‘Cowboy Experience’ thing this weekend. I’m doing it tomorrow night and probably Tuesday, too.”

“I bet that’s a lot of fun.”

“Can be. Depends on the tourists. How interested they are in my little history lecture.”

“I’m sure it’s quite fascinating.”

Westin grunted. “Not always. Don’t get me wrong. I like the history of it all, but my delivery isn’t always fantastic, especially if I see people staring at their phones while I’m giving my little speech. Annoys the crap out of me.”

“I think you were born in the wrong era, Westin,” she said, laughter returning to her tone. “You should have been born back when chuck wagons were a real thing.”

“My mother used to say that, too. Told me I had an old soul.”

“Your mother? You don’t talk about her much.”

Shit! Westin glanced at her, saw the instant rush of curiosity in her eyes. He wanted to take the words back, wondering what had made him utter them in the first place. He couldn’t allow her to go home angry with him, but this was a swing too far in the other direction.

“What is she like?”

“She was beautiful. And kind. A woman who deserved so much better than what life handed her.” Westin couldn’t help the words that spilled from his lips, just like he couldn’t help the fire that spilled with them.

“Was?”

Rena was a smart girl. She didn’t miss a thing.

Westin scratched his jaw, hating himself for opening this door. “She died,” he said, knowing she wouldn’t just leave it there, but hoping she would.

“I’m sorry.” Rena reached over and tugged at his sleeve, taking his hand when he dropped it from the wheel in response to that simple tug. “How?”

Westin’s hand burned where her gloved hand touched it, the itch to remove her touch so overwhelming that he almost forgot why he needed to keep her on his hook. Talking about his mother was hard enough, but talking about her with this woman? The words clogged themselves in his throat, making him want to gag.

They pulled into the driveway of Rocking D, and the gate opened automatically, triggered by a motion detector. He eased the truck up to the front of the main house, parking within the circle of light that shone from a security lamp at the corner of the front porch.

“She’d been sick,” he finally said in answer to Rena’s question, not willing to expand

on that. Instead, he squeezed her hand then let it go, using his newly free hand to pull himself around to face her so that she wouldn't think he was once again trying to avoid her touch—despite the fact that he was. “It was a while ago.”

“Is that why you don't talk about her?” She laughed at herself a little, an unamused little sound. “Of course it is. I'm sorry if I've touched a sore spot.”

“Don't worry about it.” He touched her chin, drawing her close to him before dropping a kiss on her forehead. “I had a nice time, Rena. I hope we can do this again soon.”

“I'd like that.” She looked up at him, her eyes burning into his. “Really.”

“Maybe you could come for the chuck wagon.”

She shook her head. “I have plans with a couple of girlfriends tomorrow. But maybe Tuesday?”

“Sure. That would be great.”

She nodded, her observant gaze creating a shadow in her eyes again as she caught the relief that rushed through him on the news she wouldn't be available. But she only nodded a second time, leaning over to kiss his cheek before she got out of the truck. She paused at the door to turn and wave, a sweet smile belying the sadness he thought he saw in her eyes. Then she disappeared into the house, probably running up the main stairs that were as massive and beautiful as the staircase in some romantic movie from the 1930s. That's how his mother had always described them, anyway. He'd never been inside the house.

Westin put the truck into gear and drove slowly around the circle drive, his eyes moving over the rolling hills behind the house, the ranchland that had belonged to the

Mollohan family for over a hundred years. The firstborn son had inherited it for five generations, beginning with Stuart Mollohan, the man who claimed the land as his own before the Civil War tore the country apart, before reunification, before Colorado was officially a state in the union. Five generations. It was a tradition that hadn't been broken since Stuart Mollohan had passed the ranch down to his firstborn son, Donald. But it would be broken if Dominic Mollohan allowed Rena to inherit it.

Westin stopped the truck at the far end of the circle drive where he could see around the side of the house into the dark expanse of the four-hundred-acre ranch. Traditions were important to uphold. He intended to remind Dominic Mollohan of that very soon.

With Rena's help, he was about to turn Dominic Mollohan on his ear.

"She's quite a lady."

Clint lowered his head in agreement as he navigated the dirt track that led back to the guest bunkhouse.

"You respect her quite a bit."

"I do. We all do."

"I can see why. She's very quick, and she seems to be your biggest fan."

Clint glanced at Lea, but he didn't seem to have a comment for that.

"How long have you worked here?"

“Practically my whole life.” Clint pushed his baseball cap back on his forehead and scratched just beyond the hairline. “My father was foreman here before me. I worked beside him the second I was big enough to get on a horse.”

“You grew up here?”

“I did. Like one of the family.”

“Westin said you’re married.”

Clint changed with those words, growing stiff in the way he leaned forward toward the steering wheel of the old truck. A storm darkened his face, his expression so dark that she was pushed aback, wondering for a second if he might strike out at her for daring to mention it.

“Sorry,” she said softly. “I didn’t realize it was a sore subject.”

He shot her a look that was still dark, but also clearly bewildered. “Is it that obvious?”

“Yeah, it is.”

He grunted. “I didn’t think... Hell!” He smacked his hand on the wheel. “I’ve been trying to keep all that separate, packed away. I guess I haven’t been doing a very good job lately.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

“You can say that.” He glanced at Lea again, a desire to share his burden written in the lines on his weatherworn face. “She’s cheating on me. With some idiot from Denver.” He pushed his baseball cap off his head and ran his hand over the top of his skull with some pronounced aggression. “Met him a couple of months back. Over the Internet. Can you fucking believe that?”

“I’m sorry.”

His hands moved over the wheel, twisting across it like he wanted to tear it from the steering column. “We’ve been married eight years. We have a kid! She wants to take my daughter to Denver, to live with this son of a bitch! Says I’m not around enough, that I don’t spend enough time with them. Says I brought this on myself. Like I asked her to cheat on me!”

Lea wanted to console him, but she didn’t have the words. Besides, she knew that sometimes a person just needed to say what was hurting them, like spitting out the words was enough to exorcise the emotion attached to them. But it didn’t seem to be helping Clint any.

“She’s the one who wants out of the marriage, but she thinks she can take my kid and just walk away? Like what I want doesn’t matter? Like I don’t matter?” He shook his head. “That’s not how it works!”

Silence fell between them. Lea felt almost stupid sitting there, letting him vent and not saying anything. He stopped the truck outside the bunkhouse where she was staying, his hands still on the wheel, his attention everywhere but on her. She could feel the tension rolling off him, but she could see the sorrow, the pain that his wife was heaping on him with her actions. He might be a tough guy who could wrangle cows and control the semi-wild men who worked for him, but he was a man under that tough exterior. A man whose heart was breaking.

“When you’re ready,” she said softly, speaking barely loud enough for her voice to carry, “I have a friend in family law who might be able to recommend a lawyer for you. To help you with custody of your child.”

His grip on the wheel loosened, and he allowed his hands to fall to his lap. There was still tension in his body that left him looking something like a piece of stone sitting there behind the wheel, like some bizarre art piece. But then he slowly rotated his head, his eyes brushing over her quickly, filled with a shame that was so palpable that

it almost made her feel ashamed for seeing it.

“I shouldn’t have said all that.” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I’ve put you in an awkward position.”

“No, it’s fine. I understand sometimes it’s easier to talk to a stranger than to someone you know.”

He nodded. “It won’t happen again.”

Clint got out of the truck and came around, offering a hand to help her out of the cab. She followed him to the door of the long building, almost laughed aloud when he gently pushed her behind him and used a small flashlight he took from his pocket to check the door for tampering. He was very cautious, turning on the lights and looking around before he allowed her inside, almost like a trained security guard might do. When he escorted her to her room, he opened the door for her, but made her wait in the hallway while he checked everything, made sure the room was still empty and secure.

“Thank you,” Lea said as she entered the room, exhaustion settling on her shoulders at the first glance of that big, beautiful bed.

“I’ll have one of the boys stand guard outside during the night.”

She nodded, having almost forgotten how she’d asked for protection. They were taking it seriously, weren’t they? It struck her then that Clint was the kind of guy who took everything seriously.

“How old’s your kid?”

He paused at the door, turning on his heel to look at her. “Excuse me?”

Lea rolled her shoulders as she leaned back on her arms where she was perched on the corner of the bed. “Your kid. How old is... she?”

“She’ll be eight in a couple of months.”

“What’s her name?”

“Katie.” He smiled, the first true smile Lea had seen on his handsome face. “She’s the light of my life.”

“And I’m sure she knows it, too.”

“I hope so.”

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“My parents were divorced when I was six, but I never doubted how much my dad cared about me. Even with the poison my mother poured into my ears, I always knew how much my dad loved me. Because he showed up.”

He lowered his head slightly. “I do do that. As often as I can.”

“Good.” Lea smiled, lying down across the bed with a heavy sigh. “Can I ask you something else?”

“Why not? I’ve already dumped my life story on you.”

She smiled as she stared up at the ceiling. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Because you were in trouble,” he said in a tone that suggested she should already know that. “Because you asked me to.”

“Do you always do what strangers ask you to do?”

He grunted. “Maybe.”

Lea laughed, sitting up again so she could see his face. He was smiling again, which made her feel a little better about everything. She liked this guy. She didn’t want to be the cause of any more trouble for him.

“If I can get a ride into town on Monday, I’ll be out of your hair as quickly as I can arrange it.”

“There’s no rush.”

“You aren’t responsible for me—despite the fact that I asked you to be.” She cocked her head to one side, smiling as charming a smile as she could conjure. “And Miss Dulcie is probably the sweetest woman I’ve ever met, and I doubly don’t want to be a burden to her. So… Monday.”

“We’ll see what we can do.”

“Thank you.”

Clint tipped his head in her direction and turned for the door again. Lea knew she shouldn’t, but she couldn’t help herself, the words spilling out before she could stop them.

“You aren’t the only one of the group of you who’s married, are you?”

Clint rested his hand on the doorknob, but didn’t turn it. He just stood there a moment, like he was trying to decide what to do: pretend he didn’t hear her, or indulge her curiosity and possibly cause an issue for one of his guys, or himself.

“I am, actually. Landry is very single.”

“Landry?” Lea frowned. “No, I was actually thinking in terms of Westin.”

“Westin?” Clint glanced over his shoulder at her, his brow knitted slightly. “He was only alone with you for a few hours.”

She rolled her shoulders. “What can I say? I’m a sucker for a cowboy.”

He chuckled lightly. “Well, you’d certainly have your hands full with Westin. That

boy isn't exactly the most charming cowboy around here. You might be better off with Landry. Or even Bowie."

"I kinda got my heart stuck on Westin." She tilted her head. "Is he single?"

"Yes, ma'am. He is single."

"Good. Makes the long weekend something a little more interesting to look forward to."

Clint chuckled again. "You're a hell of a lot braver than me." He slipped through the door then, disappearing before she could ask another question.

Lea dragged herself up from the bed and stepped into the bathroom to prepare herself for bed. In his thoughtfulness, Clint had brought her a toothbrush and toothpaste, a comb, and more toiletries. She quickly brushed her teeth and stripped down to the panties he'd provided fresh in a store package, a size too large for her curvy hips, but comfortable just the same.

She was already looking forward to seeing Westin again tomorrow. She hoped he would be her bodyguard in the morning. She'd always been a girl who could take care of herself, but as long as Westin was playing personal security, she was happy to play the target.

Westin walked into the bunkhouse, the weight of the world on his shoulders. Bowie and Landry were watching some reality show on the television, one sprawled in a chair with his feet up on their dining table, the other stretched out on the couch. Remington was in his bunk reading a book, so interested in whatever story was weaving itself in his mind's eye that he didn't even look up when Westin came

through the door.

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“I eat my breakfast there, you slob,” Westin complained as he passed Bowie, knocking his stinky sock-covered feet off the table.

“So do I. Makes it taste better, especially when you’re cooking!”

“Screw you!”

Bowie just laughed, but he didn’t put his feet back on the table. Westin crossed to the fridge and grabbed himself a beer, popping the top with the edge of the counter before swallowing half the bottle in one gulp. He finished the thing in a second gulp and grabbed another.

“What’s up with you?” Landry called across the room to him. “You spend all day with the sexy mystery lady and you’re over there drinking like the devil just walked over your grave!”

“You don’t know anything about it.”

“Don’t I?” Landry sat up, running his hands over the top of his head. “I wouldn’t mind spending time with a lady instead of loading hay bales on the feeder—that’s for sure!”

“It was my day off. You know that.”

“So? Still would have rather been in your boots today.”

Westin just shook his head, turning away from the boys as he downed the second

bottle of beer. The door opened as he tossed the thing in the trash can—hitting it perfect on the first toss—and admitted Clint. He dropped a duffel on the floor as he kicked the door closed with his heel.

“What are you boys still doing up?” he demanded. “The cows are going to be waiting for their breakfast at five sharp. I won’t be going out there with a bunch of half-awake cowboys!”

Bowie switched off the television with the remote as he stood, much to Landry’s dismay. “I’m twenty-eight years old and you’re still bossing me around like I’m five!” he muttered.

“Because I’m the foreman here, Landry.” Clint shoved his brother’s boots off the couch. “Get your ass in your bunk!”

“And what are you doing?” Bowie asked, gesturing toward the duffel bag.

“Just for a few nights,” Clint said, shooting a glance at Westin. “While that girl’s here. Speaking of which—you want to get over to the guest bunkhouse and keep an eye on her until morning? Westin will relieve you at five.”

Westin’s eyebrows rose. “Me? Again?”

“You’re riding fences tomorrow. I figure that’s better than dragging her up to the high pasture to meet the herd.”

“Why does he get to do it again?” Landry asked. “We all signed on to watch over that lady.”

“That lady has a name,” Westin reminded him.

“Yeah? Well, I wouldn’t know because no one’s letting me anywhere near her!”

“How is she?” Remington asked from his bunk, the book now resting on his chest.

“Everything go all right with Miss Dulcie?”

“They’re the best of friends now,” Clint said, snatching up his duffel bag as he crossed the room to one of the empty bunks. He started to unpack his things, his shoulders heavy with the burden of his new reality. As Westin watched, he reminded himself that his own problems could be much worse. He couldn’t imagine what it must be like being torn away from his kid that way.

Westin shrugged out of his jacket and stepped into the bathroom, using the facilities quickly before the others lined up for their toothbrushes. He caught sight of himself in the mirror, looked into his blue eyes and studied his jawline. Could he still see in his reflection what he’d believed he could all these years? Could he still see a family resemblance that his mother had always sworn was there? Or was this whole thing a joke?

Westin wasn’t a man who doubted himself often, but there was something about Rena tonight that made him wonder if perhaps he should. Or maybe it was something about the conversation he’d had with Lea that had screwed him up. There was something about that woman that got under his skin with just a look, a word.

“It’s worth it,” he told himself. “It’s all worth it.”

He just wished he really believed it.

Chapter 5

“This is not what I had in mind when I thought about spending the day with you.”

Lea grabbed the reins of the horse Westin had just lifted her onto and sighed, trying to remember the last time she'd been on a horse. She wasn't exactly a city girl, not as thoroughly as Westin probably thought she was, but it had been years since she'd visited her grandfather's farm. Even longer since she'd sat on a horse. She wasn't sure her thighs could take this.

“Could be worse. You could be helping the boys feed the cattle.”

“That almost sounds interesting.”

Westin chuckled, but he didn't seem to have a lot of sympathy for her. He swung up onto his own horse, his movements so smooth that it was obvious this was just another part of his everyday life. He looked good on a horse. Those thighs looked like they were made to straddle... Well, they looked good with that thick leather saddle horn between them.

He directed his horse out of the barn, and Lea's followed without any prodding from her. She made a little noise, having forgotten what it felt like to have such a powerful beast between her legs. The saddle squeaked and rocked beneath her, and the horse blew air from its nose as they moved out of the heated confines of the barn. The morning—if you could call it that, seeing as how the sun wasn't even up yet!—was crisp, their breath coming out in visible puffs of smoke. It couldn't have been above freezing, maybe even colder than that. Lea was suddenly grateful for Clint's faithless wife and her heavy down jacket.

It had seemed like she'd just fallen asleep when Westin was suddenly there, shaking her bare shoulder in an attempt to pull her out of her dreams. If only he'd been able to see what was going on in her subconscious, he might not have bothered her. He might have wanted to join her!

She'd been dressed in nothing but her panties when he came into the room, too. She wasn't so lost in her dreams that she didn't see the gleam that came into his eyes when the blankets shifted and exposed one full breast. Not only was there a gleam in his eyes, but his hand curled into a fist after he reached out to touch her and thought better of it. She could see by the movement exactly what he had intended to do, and

she rolled onto her back to give him a good look. She was more than open to that touch, and she'd made it clear to him twice now. Unfortunately, this cowboy had a code and he was sticking to it no matter how many times she exposed herself to him. He'd moved away, mumbling something about waiting for her in the hall before he slammed through the door.

He was unbelievably frustrating at the same time he was so endearing it only made her want him that much more. It'd been a long time since she'd known a man with strong morals.

"Where are we going?" she called out to him as his horse picked up speed and hers moved into a nice trot to follow.

"Check the fences."

"Check the fences? For what?"

He glanced back at her, a wry smile turning his handsome face into something even more intriguing. "Breaks, honey. Anything that might allow one of our cows out, or something else in."

"Oh."

He slowed his horse, waiting for her to catch up. After a minute, their horses moved into a nice gait next to each other. "This is a working ranch. We still have to do our work even while we're protecting you."

"I've heard that a time or two in the past twelve hours."

"I'm sure you have."

“Your Miss Dulcie thinks very highly of you.”

Westin’s expression surprised her a little. He didn’t smile that cocky smile, nor did he seem at all pleased with her comment. He adopted more of a grave expression, his blue eyes as dark as a stormy sea.

“She talked about all five of you like you were her children or something.”

“Miss Dulcie is too good to be real sometimes.”

Lea tilted her head slightly. “Why do you say that?”

He shrugged. “She deserves more, that’s all.”

It was an odd comment. He didn’t seem willing to elaborate on it, either. He patted his horse’s neck and gave it a slight kick, picking up the pace just a little. Her horse did the same, keeping right up with him like it knew somehow that they were supposed to stay close to each other. Horses were amazing animals. Lea remembered there was once a time when she wanted to grow up to be a big-animal vet. She’d had it all planned out—how she would open her practice down the road from her grandfather’s house, how she’d buy herself a truck and go to all the farms and ranches in the area, how she’d be best friends with all the horses in the area. It was a childish dream that evaporated the day her father died and her mother packed her away, taking her as far from the memories as she could get.

As an adult, Lea could hardly blame her mother for her reaction. As a child... she spent a long time being very angry with her mother.

She wondered what her life would be like now if she had followed her dream despite everything. Where would she be? What kind of life would she have now? But the thing was, she had a feeling she would have ended up right where she was, somehow.

On a ranch, riding a beautiful horse with a handsome cowboy. So, really, she couldn't complain.

"Did you know Miss Dulcie's husband? Asa?"

Westin nodded, glancing over at Lea from under the brim of his cowboy hat. "I did. He was the one who hired me."

"What was he like? To hear her tell it, he was a saint."

Westin laughed. "No, Asa was no saint. He'd be horrified if he even heard someone make that comparison."

"Why?"

"Because Asa was a man's man. He liked to drink and gamble and spit and cuss..." He laughed again. "He was a charmer, a businessman, a good boss. But at the end of the day, the label that made him happiest, that defined him the best, was cowboy."

"I believe it."

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Westin reached up and pushed his hat back a little so he could scratch his hairline. “Asa taught me more in just a month on this ranch than I would have learned in a year under anyone else. He was the kind of guy who’d just throw you into the ring and expect you to figure out how to fight your way out. He expected me to earn my wage from the word go, and if I hadn’t, he would have cut me loose without thinking twice about it.”

“Sounds tough.”

“Sometimes that’s the only way to teach someone.”

“I had a boss like that once,” Lea agreed. “Put me in a bad situation in order to prove a point. I think he’s serving burgers at McDonald’s now.”

Westin looked hard at her like he didn’t believe her, but then he nodded, scratching his forehead again. “That’s the difference between—”

“Men and women?”

“I was going to say city folk and cowboys, but I suppose that works, too.”

She grunted. “You really think you have it all figured out, don’t you?”

“No. No, I don’t, and I hope I never do. But there are a few things I understand, and ranching is one of those things.”

They rode on in silence for a while, only the sound of the leather creaking and the

horses breathing to fill the space around them. The sun was just beginning to peek through the high, winter clouds. They had to pause at a closed gate that Westin leaned down to release, gesturing for her to lead her horse through ahead of him. As she tugged on the horse's reins to stop her before she got too far ahead of Westin and his horse, a few snowflakes fell and brushed against her nose. She tilted her head back and watched as a shower of big, lazy snowflakes began to fall around her. Their touch was like a lover's caress on the bare inches of her flesh exposed below her hat and above the scarf Westin had given her. She was overwhelmed for a moment by how beautiful and graceful nature could truly be.

"Sometimes I allow myself to get so caught up in the darkness in this world, I forget there's some good out there, too."

Westin moved up beside her, his horse brushing at her leg as he came to a stop. "I guess cooking up drugs and being dragged out of cars by ex-lovers will do that."

"I never said Fang was my lover," she corrected him quickly, the idea of that man touching her sending a shiver of revulsion down her spine.

"You said he was your ex. The lover thing was just an assumption."

"An incorrect assumption. We only knew each other a few months."

"In my experience, that doesn't necessarily mean anything when it comes to becoming lovers."

"Oh? Are you insinuating that I'm some sort of slut?"

Westin studied her, his eyes moving quickly over the length of her. "That's not the word I would use."

“Then what word would you use?”

“Impatient? Maybe eager?”

Lea sniffed. “I love the double standard men have when it comes to women. You meet a woman in a bar, and you screw her brains out in the front seat of your truck, and it’s a normal Saturday night. I meet a guy, talk him into a little slap and tickle in the bathroom, and suddenly I’m a slut.”

“In that scenario, we’d both be sluts.”

He was so earnest about it that she had to laugh. “Is that right, cowboy? Are you just as much a slut as I am?”

“I’ve had my moments.” He shrugged. “Sex is a physical need that all human beings must satisfy in their own way, in their own style. Some are strong enough to control the impulse until they find the right person. Some aren’t. And some can remain monogamous, and some can’t. But there’s no shame in it as long as everyone goes into it responsibly. It’s the ones who aren’t responsible who should be ashamed of themselves.”

“You mean people like Clint’s wife?”

Westin gave his horse a kick, starting them on their path again. Lea’s horse kept right up, sauntering along like this walk was one she took every day. Westin glanced over at Lea, his eyebrow cocked.

“How do you know about Melanie?”

“He told me last night. I think he just desperately needed to say the words out loud.”

He nodded. “He’s taking it hard. And I don’t blame him, what with their daughter and everything.”

“He told me about her, too. He’s afraid his wife will take her to Denver and not allow him to see her again.”

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That was clearly news to Westin, judging by the look on his face. He shook his head, turning his attention to the land before them and the slowly falling snow.

“What about you?” she asked after a few minutes of silence. “Why do you have that little rule about the condoms? Someone try to saddle you with a kid once?”

His eyes were hard when he glanced at her. “Does it matter? It’s just a rule I have. I’m not going to father a kid until I’m ready. Period.”

“It’s a good rule.”

He rolled his shoulders. He seemed determined to allow the silence to fall between them, but Lea liked the sound of his voice, liked provoking him, even when it didn’t really work the way she thought it would. And she liked when he looked at her with those dark-blue eyes.

“I’d bet Miss Dulcie was one woman who didn’t have to worry about where her man was burying his stick, if you know what I mean. She talked about him with such warmth and love that I could only hope to find someone like that someday.”

Westin snorted.

“What? What does that mean?”

“You don’t know how to read people, do you?” He glanced at me. “Miss Dulcie talks about Asa that way because he’s not around to contradict her.”

“You mean their marriage wasn’t as perfect as she makes people think?”

“Far from it.”

“How?”

Westin pulled himself up in the saddle, sitting a little straighter as they continued to move at a slow pace through the early-morning sunlight under a sky determined to powder them with a good layer of fresh snow. He cleared his throat, then sighed.

“Asa was a man’s man, Lea, which means that he did what those kinds of men do.”

“You mean he cheated on her? That sweet woman?”

“That sweet woman was his mistress for nearly ten years before his second wife died and opened the door for him to make her his wife.”

“No kidding!” Lea knew there was a terrible amount of awe in her voice, but she couldn’t help it. She couldn’t imagine Miss Dulcie as anything less than the pious rancher’s wife whom she had appeared to be. She couldn’t picture that sweet woman as someone’s lover, especially not for that long.

“She worked here as a maid in the main house. The story I heard was that her mother was the cook and she practically grew up here. They started their affair when she was in her early twenties. When the second Mrs. Howard was diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer, it was Miss Dulcie who nursed her until her last days.”

“Wow! Talk about keeping things close to your vest!”

“They were married less than a month after the funeral because by that time Miss Dulcie was pregnant.”

“Did the wife know?”

Westin rolled his shoulders. “If she did, no one ever said.” He glanced at Lea. “And the second Miss Dulcie was his legal wife, Asa lost all interest in her. Clint told me he had a new lover before the baby was born, some girl in town he’d go see twice a week. Rumor had it that he had quite a few girls around town the last couple of years of his life. I even met one once, about a month before he got sick and died. Some redhead who worked for the vet. She’d come out here on some pretense of checking the animals and they’d hook up in one of the stalls.”

Lea just shook her head, lost for anything to say. She’d thought things were dark in the city, but it seemed they were just as dark in the country, but in different ways.

“There’s nothing to do out here,” Westin said in confirmation of her thoughts. “Sex and drugs. That’s the only recreation people have, and they indulge every chance they get.”

“What do you do for recreation?”

Westin didn’t respond right away. He patted his horse’s neck again and adjusted his hat on his head, pulling it down a little more as the wind picked up and began blowing snow into their faces. Finally, he glanced at her, those eyes like stormy seas.

“I don’t think I’d even thought about it until I set eyes on you.”

Lea smiled, taking that as confirmation of all the things she’d already surmised about him and his attraction toward her. She’d get him in bed before this weekend was over; she had no doubt about that.

Westin swung his hammer, watching the nail go through the wood and just pop out again when he pulled on the post. The wood was too far gone to hold anything. He'd have to replace it if he had any hope of this section of fence holding anything. He cursed softly under his breath, deciding a little bailing wire was the only thing that was going to solve this issue for the moment. He could feel her watching him as he pulled out a length of the wire and began twisting it around the post and the rail that was refusing to remain attached to it.

“Want to help?”

“Not really. I’m just enjoying the view.”

He glanced at her, catching his finger in a loop of the wire when he saw the appreciative look in her eye, and it led to him wondering what she’d look like in the throes of pleasure. He cursed, jerking off his glove to make sure he hadn’t just cut off the tip of his index finger.

“You okay?”

He cursed some more before sliding the glove back over his relatively unharmed finger and began tugging the wire back into place. He grunted as he pulled the wire tight, stepping back a few inches to make sure it was tight enough before he took his pliers from his back pocket and gave it one last twist before snipping the ends off.

“You need to stop distracting me,” he announced as he turned back to the horse, sliding the tools into the saddlebag. “One of us is going to get hurt.”

“Didn’t realize I was.”

“We still have several miles of fence line to check, so...”

“It wasn’t my idea to be out here. But it is nice that my mere presence is a distraction to you.”

“I’m glad you’re happy with that.”

He gestured for her to come to the horses, intending to help her back up into her saddle. Instead, she managed to move between him and the mare he'd chosen for her to ride, pressing her body as close to his as she could get without actually invading the length of his body. She smiled, those amber eyes threatening to steal his breath even as they danced with laughter.

“Why are we playing games, Westin?” she asked, brushing her gloved fingers against his jaw. “We both know why I’m such a distraction to you. Why don’t we do something about it so that it doesn’t continue?”

“What would you suggest we do?”

She licked her bottom lip in a very suggestive way, that little pink tip moving so slowly he could almost feel it on certain parts of his body. He grunted as his nether regions began to respond, coming to life with a jolt that was almost painful.

“This is not something I need right now.” His words were a warning, a determination he clearly didn’t feel, because he took ahold of her chin and pushed her back, shoving her against the massive side of the mare. “I can’t do this.” And then he kissed her.

Her lips were cold and her breath hot, the combination messing with his head a little. That first touch was almost electric, the feel of her shooting him into the stars in that instant, transforming a simple kiss into something bigger. Something he could never—nor would he ever want to—explain to himself or anyone else. It was sweet and exciting all in one package.

And it scared the hell out of him.

Westin pulled away, turning her with a quick hand on her hip and lifting her onto the horse. She grabbed the saddle horn, looking down at him with surprise and something else written all over her pretty face. She didn’t say anything, but he could read the

questions in her eyes. He could guess she'd never met a man who resisted her quite the way he was doing. Must have been a shock to her.

He climbed onto his own horse and gave him a little nudge, forcing his mind back to the task at hand. The fence needed to be secure, a job that was constant and year-round. He'd been doing this since he started working for the Howards, knew the fence line like the back of his hand. He could spot a break at half a mile in good weather. Just slightly less in bad weather. But, somehow, he nearly missed a large gap that popped up just two hundred yards further up the pasture.

He cursed softly to himself, needing this woman to get out of his head. He pulled the horse's reins harder than he needed to, causing her to rear up just slightly, which spooked Lea's horse. The mare backed up, then reared itself, lifting its front legs high into the air. Lea cried out, but somehow managed to hang on. Westin jumped down from his gelding and grabbed the mare's halter, jerking her around so that her wild eyes could see him, so that she could feel the pressure of his hold and know there was nothing to be frightened of. She fought him for a second, stomping her feet even as Westin spoke to her, whispering her name—Gray Lady—until she slowly calmed, still pawing at the ground, but still enough that he felt safe letting go of her.

“You okay?”

Lea had slipped from the saddle and was bent double a few yards away, catching her breath. “Fine.”

He touched her shoulder and she jerked away, pulling herself to her full height again, her gloved hands rubbing her already red cheeks. “Please, just leave me alone for a second.”

“You handled that well,” he complimented her. “I guess you weren't lying when you said you'd been on a horse before.”

“Yeah, well, the horses I rode were old. They didn’t do shit like that!”

“Sorry. It was my fault. I startled Jack.”

“Jack.” She shook her head. “What kind of name is that for a cowboy’s horse?”

“I have no idea. Asa named him.”

Westin walked off, securing both horses to an unbroken section of fence before grabbing some tools from the saddlebag. He went over to take a look at the damage on the fence, his thoughts on a million things all at once. It only took him a second to discover that this was going to be an easy fix, but a troubling one. This part of the fence had clearly been damaged by a person, not the weather, or wear, or some animal that had pushed a little too hard against it. This had clear marks from some sort of tool, a crowbar or something that had pried the nails loose from the wood.

Why would someone do that? It wasn’t like the fence was eight feet tall and required a break to walk through it. The thing was four feet tall, easy to jump over. Why cut it?

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Westin took a couple of pictures and texted them to Clint before nailing fresh nails into the wood, putting the fence back to the way it had been before it was damaged. When he was finished, he returned to the horses, dropping his tools back into the saddlebag. Lea was gone, and it took him a second to spot her some eighty yards off to the north of him, standing alone in the falling snow, her heavy jacket no longer a bright, almost painful purple, but now more muted as the early-morning cold and snow surrounded her in a white halo.

She was a firecracker, this woman. She'd handled that little blip with Gray Lady with the grace of a well-practiced horsewoman, yet it had clearly shaken her, for reasons he couldn't begin to understand. He didn't know enough about her. He didn't know where she'd learned to ride, why she was so comfortable out here on the ranch, why she'd been so determined to get them to protect her in the first place. Who was this woman, and why had her kiss sent him tumbling down a rabbit hole he didn't want to go down?

“You're going to freeze to death just standing there like that.”

She didn't acknowledge him as he approached her. She was studying something on the ground, something he couldn't see until he was right up behind her. It was a box, kind of like a shoebox, but slightly bigger. It had some sort of writing on the top, but if it was in English, it was a coded English he couldn't understand. It was half-buried like someone had been in the middle of the task of putting it in the ground but was interrupted.

“What the hell?” he asked, dropping to a knee to get a better look. Lea put a hand on his arm, stopping him.

“Don’t touch it.”

“What is it?”

She bit her lip, wheels apparently turning in her head. She was struggling to find an excuse to make. At least, that’s what it felt like to him. He stood back up and took her shoulders, pushing her back just slightly so that he could stand before her without stepping on the box.

“Who are you? What have you brought to our ranch?”

She shook her head, her eyes falling to the object again. “This doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“But you know what it is.”

She didn’t respond right away, just kept staring down at the box. Westin shook her, forced her to look up at him.

“What do you know about this?”

“That you’d better leave it alone for right now. And when we get back to the main house, you should probably call your local sheriff.”

“Why? What is it?”

She tilted her head just slightly, her eyes moving over his face as he could see those wheels beginning to turn again. He let her go with a little shove, turning to snatch the box up out of the ground. She grabbed his arm, pulled him back.

“Please, Westin, if you don’t believe anything I’ve told you since the second we met,

believe this: you really don't want to touch that thing. Just leave it there!"

"How can I believe anything you've said when I can clearly see you're lying to us? You've spent every second of the time we've spent together trying to distract me so that I wouldn't ask too many questions, but the things you do say all contradict each other."

"Westin, I—"

"You're a liar, and I'm not going to allow you to bring something onto this ranch that could hurt Miss Dulcie, or anyone else. Do you understand?"

"Then listen to me. If you touch that, you could open a whole bag of worms. Just leave it there. Hell, my best advice would be to leave it and just pretend you never saw it. I will guarantee it will be gone in a matter of days."

"How do you know that? How do you know what's in that box?"

A wariness burned through her amber eyes, making the gold sparkle like it was a real bar of the precious metal. It was obvious there was something she really didn't want to tell him. Instead, she moved up against him, pressing the full length of her body against his, resting a hand on his chest right over his heart.

"My intentions are honest here, Westin. I really like you and Clint, and the others. I don't want to bring anything bad down on you or this ranch. That's why it would be best if you stop asking me questions and forget about that box. Please."

"I can't do that."

He pulled away from her, but did think twice about picking the box up. Instead, he took a couple of pictures of it with his phone and texted those to Clint as well. Then

he turned to her and gestured for her to head back to the horses. “We still have a lot of fence to check,” he reminded her. There was obvious relief in her eyes when he did, when he didn’t touch the box. She happily headed back to the horses, but stopped every few feet to make sure he was behind her. She wasn’t letting him out of her sight.

Who the hell was this woman? And what the hell was going on here?

Westin didn’t like games. He’d been burned one too many times by liars. Maybe that was part of the reason he was living on this damn ranch, why he was pursuing a scheme that had very little chance of working. But at least he was doing what he was for good reason. This woman... what good reason could she have for lying to them, for hiding the truth about whoever or whatever she was? Nothing good could possibly come from whatever it was she was up to. The sooner she was off the ranch, the better.

He chose to ignore that part of him that ached at the sight of her, the part that would forever remember what it’d been like to kiss her. The part he knew would seek another kiss from her at some point; the part that couldn’t resist the game she was playing, the flirtation she perpetuated. The part of him that wished she’d come into his life sooner, or perhaps later, at a time that was not so complicated by Rena and Rocking D Ranch.

Chapter 6

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Lea bent over double, stretching out her thighs the best she could from a standing position. The soreness was almost incapacitating. She felt like she'd just spent a month on the back of that horse. She had no idea how she was going to move for the next twenty-four hours.

"A hot bath helps."

She spun around, not as surprised as she should have been to find Bowie standing behind her, amusement written all over his handsome face as he watched her stretch. He had the same open admiration in his eyes that Westin continuously tried to hide, but there was no attempt on Bowie's behalf to hide it. She'd chosen badly, it seemed, if all she was looking for was a casual lover.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to know I like what I see."

"Keep it to yourself." She stretched her arms above her head, aware she was only giving him a new angle to enjoy, but not really caring. "Where did Westin go?"

"To find Clint. I guess the two of you found something out there?"

"You could say that."

"Well, while they work that out, you're with me. And, I hate to break it to you, but it requires getting back up on a horse."

“You’re joking!”

“We’re giving the tourists a ride out to the paddock to see a couple of the older cows.”

“Great.”

“It’s a working ranch. Not much I can do about it.”

“If I hear that one more time, I might have to scream!”

Bowie just chuckled as he headed out of the barn, gesturing for her to follow him. After some hesitation during which she honestly considered making a run for it, she did follow him, not thrilled to see Gray Lady still tethered to the hitching post by the big doors. Reluctantly, she climbed back up into the saddle, sliding her feet into the stirrups and pushing them outward, taking as much of her weight out of the saddle as she could, not only to aid the horse, but to keep the pressure off her ass. It didn’t do much for her thighs, but she’d rather have sore thighs than a bruised ass.

It seemed Westin hadn’t had to go far to find Clint. She saw the two of them huddled together behind the barn, looking at Westin’s phone. She prayed they wouldn’t go back out there and dig the box up. They had no idea what—or who—they were dealing with here. These people were not the kind of people who would appreciate having their stash messed with. Nor would they go easy on people like Westin and Clint, good ole boys who should know better but didn’t. The last thing Lea wanted was for anyone on this ranch to get hurt, but she didn’t know how to stop it without exposing them to a world and a truth she knew would only take them down an even more dangerous road.

She never should have come here. She desperately wished she’d kept driving when she came to that diner Friday morning. She’d already been going for more than

twelve hours; she could have gone another couple of hours. If she'd only known Fang was that tight on her tail, she would never have put innocent people in danger. Never.

This was getting out of hand. She had to do something.

"There's our group," Bowie called out to her, gesturing to a small group of women huddled near the gate that led to the back of the property, the same gate Westin had taken her through this morning. "Give me a few minutes to get them saddled up."

He got down off his horse—a beautiful Quarter Horse that must have been seventeen hands at the withers—and sauntered over to the ladies, drawing their attention simply by his arrival. He was such a big man that he demanded consideration just by existing. Topping that off with a charming smile, deep dimples, and a charm that was like whipped cream on top of a sundae, he was almost irresistible. Lea once again found herself wondering if she'd set her sights on the wrong cowboy.

She dismounted and twisted Gray Lady's reins around the gate before walking over to join the group herself. She kept to the fringes, though, smiling to one woman who noticed her, but feeling kind of invisible as the others totally disregarded her presence in favor of hanging on every word out of Bowie's mouth.

"This is some vacation, isn't it?" she commented to a young blond woman when Bowie finished his introductory speech and began taking the women, one at a time, into the paddock to choose a horse. "I don't think I've ever been this sore."

"Not me," the woman responded. "I do yoga three times a week, so I'm in pretty good shape."

"I thought I was, too, but being on a horse for hours really does a number to your thigh muscles. It's like tensing your abs and forgetting to relax them all day."

The woman looked almost startled at the thought. “Lord, I hope not! I like my thighs. I need my thighs!” She leaned close to Lea, her eyes moving around the slowly reducing group as if she were afraid of being overheard. “I have my eyes on one of these cowboys. The younger, blond guy? So hot! I plan to get him into my bed before this week is over, so I kind of need my thighs to be happy, if you know what I mean.”

“Then I would suggest you be real careful how long you ride this horse today. A couple of hours and...” Lea rolled her eyes. “Sore city!”

The woman made a face. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

“Well, what else are you going to do today?”

“There’s a group of women back at the bunkhouse learning how to sew a quilt. I thought it sounded lame, but maybe I should do that instead.”

Lea nodded. “Maybe.” She glanced toward the paddock, watched Bowie deflect a flirty middle-aged woman while trying to get her settled on a horse. “You wouldn’t happen to have a cell phone on you, would you?”

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“Sure. Don’t you have yours?”

“Forgot it back at the bunkhouse.”

“You can borrow mine. Maybe you can look up cures for thigh soreness.”

“Maybe.”

The blonde handed Lea an iPhone in a pink case. She stepped away, turning her back to the fence in hopes that Bowie wouldn’t be able to see what she was doing. She quickly dialed, her heart pounding a little as she waited for the call to be picked up on the other end.

“Hello?” a cautious voice finally answered, one Lea knew almost as well as her own.

“Lee?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Oh, thank God! I was beginning to think you weren’t going to call.”

“It’s only noon here, Brother.”

“Yeah, well, I know. But I’m not used to being out of touch with you for so long. You okay? Are you still safe?”

“I’m good. I just... listen, do you remember a few years back when we ran into those guys who liked to bury boxes on private property?”

There was a pause. “Yeah, I remember.”

“They’re at it again.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because this place where I’m at, they found one this morning. Out in an empty field.”

“You’re fucking kidding me! In Colorado?”

“What are the chances—right? I’m afraid these people here aren’t going to let it be, and the owner of the box might come after them. These are good people, Will. I don’t want anything bad to happen to them, you know?”

“I get it, Lee. I know a guy in the Denver office. I’ve already talked to him about you. Maybe he can get up there a little sooner, have a look around.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“So...” Will let silence fall, expecting her to fill it in, but she didn’t, her thoughts still so tangled up in Westin. “Have you seen Fang? What’s going on? Can you talk?”

But Bowie chose that moment to come through the fence to pick another tourist, and his eyes moved quickly over Lea. She dropped the phone to her side so that he wouldn’t see it, but she was pretty sure he had anyway. Yet he only offered her a curt nod before turning his attention on another middle-aged woman, making her day when he bowed to her, offering her his elbow.

“I’ve got to go, Will,” Lea said when she lifted the phone back to her ear. “I’ll try to call you again tomorrow, but if you don’t hear from me, don’t worry. I’m safe where

I am.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. You do what you need to do, and I’ll take care of me.”

Lea disconnected the call, walking up behind the blonde to give it back. The woman started to say something to her, but Lea walked off, returning to Gray Lady. She’d just taken a position in her saddle again when she spotted Clint coming in her direction. She was a little worried he was intent on heading out to check on that box, but then he cut off in a new direction, a tool belt tossed over his shoulder. She sighed in relief, deciding to assume that meant she’d convinced Westin, and Westin had convinced Clint.

Westin squatted down in front of the firepit and used a small shovel to move the ashes from their last chuck wagon around, trying to see if there was any usable wood left in the pile. There didn’t seem to be, so he stood and shoveled the ashes into a bucket, clearing out as much of the mess as he could before he added new wood, shoving kindling down deep into the pile so that it would burn good and hot when the time came.

He hadn’t liked the notion when Clint and Bowie first came up with the idea of bringing in tourists to make more money for the ranch in the winter. It had been a game Asa came up with, offering the ranch hands a thousand-dollar bonus for the first one who came up with a viable idea. There’d been a lot of ideas, too, each one more outlandish than the last. It was Clint and Bowie’s idea that had won, but Westin—most of the guys, really—hadn’t thought Asa would actually implement the plan. When he did, they all started to wonder just how badly the ranch was struggling.

Lots of ranches were struggling in the modern world. Between animal rights activists and the rising cost of everything from vet bills and drugs to keep the animals healthy to the taxes on the land and the simple expense of heating the barn and the other buildings on the property, it was getting harder and harder to keep a ranch profitable. Asa had seemed like a savvy businessman, though. It had sent a shiver of fear through most of the ranch hands when he'd started this stupid program.

It'd been three years now, and Westin still didn't like the tourists. Most of them were bored housewives and their oversexed daughters, mostly women over men. There some families, some young kids. Those weren't so bad. Westin kind of liked the little kids. But listening to the stupid questions some of the ladies asked, the ones who'd never set foot outside of a city and thought a spa was roughing it, drove him up the wall. He dreaded the arrival of the winter season.

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But he didn't mind the chuck wagon. Maybe that was why Clint had put him in charge of it.

He finished setting up the fire, then went to the old covered wagon Asa had had built specifically for this, and started rooting through the supplies. They had chickens roasting up at the main house, and potatoes wrapped and ready to be baked in the fire. He'd make coffee and biscuits, too, all in the fire, the way the cowboys would have done on the trail back in the days when cowboys were real, and cattle drives were a necessity. They were expecting fifteen people to come to this tonight, and they usually had a few drop out, so he figured two of his huge cast-iron pots full of biscuits would be good.

The old cowboys would have probably eaten beans out of a can with their pocketknives and drunk dirty water from the river, but people expected more from these retreats. They didn't want the true experience; they just wanted something that took them far enough out of their comfort zone that it felt like the real thing. It was hypocritical to Westin, but he kind of liked making the biscuits, and who didn't enjoy a hot meal in freezing weather? In the snow, too. He'd have to send a text up to the main house, make sure they had enough blankets to send down. God forbid one of these city ladies catch a cold!

He was counting out the plates when his cell phone buzzed in his pocket. He tugged it out, wondering what Clint wanted now, but was pleasantly surprised to see it was a message from Rena.

Thinking about you, it sweetly said. I had a good time last night.

Westin sat on the edge of the wagon's gate and studied the words that should have thrilled him but left him with this heavy feeling in the center of his chest. He read it three times, not sure how to respond. How was he supposed to respond to words as sweet as those from such a kind, gentle girl? He liked her. He really did. He wasn't expecting that.

Me, too, he finally wrote. I'd like to do it again.

How about tomorrow night? was the near instant response. She must have been watching her phone, waiting for the second he responded.

What did he say now? Of course he had to agree. What other choice did he have? He'd already started down this road; he had to keep going.

Tomorrow sounds great.

Good. Come over for dinner. The cook is making a lovely roast, and Daddy's always in a good mood on Sundays.

Had she just asked him to have dinner at her parents' table?

Westin got up and began to pace in a circle around the campsite, unable to believe his luck. He'd thought it would take weeks, maybe even months, to get Rena to trust him enough to invite him home for dinner. But all it had taken was months of passing conversation, and one date. He'd never been that lucky in his life!

Had Rena taken lessons from Lea?

That thought made him a little sick to his stomach to consider.

I'd like that, if you're sure.

Why wouldn't I be sure?

Yeah. Why wouldn't she be sure?

He couldn't believe things were coming together. Finally. He'd thought about this for years; thought of how he'd get his foot in the door at Rocking D. He'd tried applying for a job there, tried ambushing Dominic Mollohan in Milsap—but it turned out the guy rarely left the ranch without an entourage—even tried calling the house and making an appointment to meet the man's wife. Everything else had failed, but this... this was working. The one thing he'd put off, the thing he hadn't wanted to do. This had worked.

I'll be there, he assured Rena. Nothing was going to keep him away.

“Potatoes, bread, and beans were staples for the cowboy on the trail. Meat was often a rarity—with the exception of salt pork—unless the cowboys were up north where beef was a little more plentiful.” Westin reached down to ruffle the hair of a little boy who was desperately trying to get his attention as he spoke. “Sourdough was often the bread of choice because it was simple and easy to make. But as any of you who have ever baked bread from scratch know, the starter needed to be kept warm at all times to keep the yeast alive. For that reason, when the cowboys were driving their cattle during the winter, the cook would often have to wear the sourdough starter in a pouch against his body in order to keep it warm.”

The crowd was busy stuffing their faces with pieces of chicken and the lovely, soft biscuits that Bowie, Landry, and a couple of new faces were serving. A few were listening, and there were some murmurs as people digested what he said, but none of them were hanging on his every word quite the way Lea was. She had a seat on a hay bale toward the back of the crowd, far enough from the fire that the smoke wasn't

burning her eyes, but close enough to still get a bit of the heat, a plate of food balanced on her thigh. She watched Westin, fascinated with the transformation that seemed to have come over him at some point in the day, something that added a spark to his eyes and a charming smile to his full lips. If she'd thought he was handsome before, she was even more convinced now.

And she didn't seem to be the only one. The very blonde whose phone Lea had borrowed earlier in the day was practically drooling as she listened to him talk, a piece of biscuit halfway to her mouth but stuck, like she'd forgotten that it was even in her hand. And several other ladies were batting their eyelids in his direction between greasy bites of chicken. He just managed to bypass one outstretched hand as he moved among the crowd, making sure everyone had a plate.

“Another interesting fact about the chuck wagon was the way in which they made the coffee. No one particularly likes to have coffee grounds in their morning cup of joe, so the cook would use just about anything he had handy as a filter. Quite often, cowboys would use their own socks as a filter in order to avoid that nasty mouthful of coffee grounds.”

Groans filled the air.

“Lucky for you,” Westin said, raising a hand to hold off the protests, “we splurged on a few proper paper filters for tonight.”

A small cheer moved among those paying attention. Lea giggled, finding it quite refreshing to discover Westin had more of a sense of humor than she'd thus far suspected.

“He's quite the showman, isn't he?” Clint straddled a hay bale beside Lea, gesturing with his head toward the man in question. “Outright refuses to have anything else to do with the tourists, but he loves doing this. Says he enjoys showing off his

knowledge of the Old West life.”

“He’s definitely enjoying something,” Lea commented as Westin bent low to hear something a pretty brunette was saying to him.

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Clint nodded. “I don’t think there’s a man alive who can resist that kind of attention.”

“I don’t think it’s just a man thing.”

Clint made a small grunting sound, reminding Lea of his trouble with his wife. She placed her hand on his arm, suddenly angry with herself for touching a tender spot. “Sorry,” she muttered, but he just brushed it off.

“I wanted to talk to you about that box you and Westin found out in the pasture.”

Lea stiffened slightly. This wasn’t a conversation she really wanted to have.

“He says you told him it would be best to just leave it, but he says you refused to tell him how you knew what it was.”

“I was hoping he’d just take my word for it.”

“He didn’t want to, but I convinced him not to go back until tomorrow. I’m hoping it’ll be gone by then.”

“Me too.”

Clint studied her face, his kind eyes searching for something she wasn’t sure he’d find. She brushed at a loose hair that kept insisting on blowing across her forehead in the cold breeze. The snow had stopped falling, but the air was still crisp with it, even with the large fire burning just a few yards away.

“I’m responsible for a lot on this property, Lea,” Clint told her. “For the people and the animals and the wellbeing of the entire operation. And I take that responsibility seriously.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Westin told me he let you use his phone, and he showed me the number you called. The Internet has amazing resources when it comes to reverse phone number lookup.” His eyes were still searching, still looking for something, but now she had a better idea what. “I need to know which side of this you’re on, Lea. And I need to know if you’re going to bring trouble to Golden Sphinx.”

“The less you know the better,” Lea told him. “I honestly don’t want to bring trouble to you and your friends, but I was desperate in those first minutes after what happened at the diner. I never would have come here if he hadn’t taken off with the car and everything important inside of it. Surely you understand that.”

“Of course I do. That’s why we brought you here in the first place. But I also can’t put your safety above the safety of people I care about. We’re just not equipped for that.”

“I know. Like I said, if I can get a ride into town on Monday, I’ll be out of your hair as quickly as possible.”

He hesitated a moment, but then he nodded. “I think it would be best if you remain in your room tomorrow. I’ll have someone hang around outside, but... I’m sure you understand.”

“I do.” Lea touched his leg lightly. “And for the record, I think you guys would run a fantastic security firm. Maybe you should think about it.”

Clint grunted. “It’s been suggested.”

“It wouldn’t take much to get a business like that off the ground. Most states don’t require more than a high school diploma should you want to get a concealed carry license. Other than that, a few courses on personal security, maybe some criminology courses might be helpful. But, heck, you guys could probably hang a shingle tomorrow and start offering services to anyone who needs your help.”

Clint took off his baseball cap and rubbed the top of his head. “It’s a thought. It’d probably be better than running the tourists around the property.”

“You wouldn’t have to involve Miss Dulcie, you know. This is something you guys could do on the side, something that might help you develop a few funds to help pay a good lawyer.”

Clint shook his head. “We couldn’t do it without involving Miss Dulcie. She’s more than just our employer, Lea. She’s... We’d just have to involve her.”

“Well, in that case, maybe you could call yourselves Sphinx Security Firm. Sounds almost regal.”

He laughed. “Yeah, it does sound kind of professional, doesn’t it?” He patted Lea’s shoulder as he got up. “Westin’s going to walk you back to your room, then Remington will be on night watch. I’ll probably be on first watch in the morning, so if you need anything, just stick your head out the door, okay?”

“Thank you, Clint.”

He nodded as he walked away from the fire, disappearing in the late-evening gloom. Lea turned her attention back to the show, almost disappointed to see that it appeared to have ended. She’d lost sight of Westin, but it looked like it was dessert time.

Bowie and the others were moving among the crowd, handing out cups of coffee and small plates with something dark on them. Lea bit into her chicken, suddenly realizing she was ravenous. A day on the back of the horse had left her with more than incredibly sore thighs!

She was shoving a big piece of roasted chicken into her mouth when Bowie came to sit beside her, balancing a plate of something dark on her other thigh.

“What is it?”

“Reconstituted dried fruit. He soaks it in water, sugar, and a couple of spices.”

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“Westin really made all of this?”

“Everything but the chickens. Those they make up at the main house.”

“The man grows more and more fascinating with each passing hour.”

Bowie snorted. “We all have our talents, Ms. Adams. You’d be surprised by some of the things I can do.”

“I know you’re quite adept at flirting with rich tourists. I witnessed that all afternoon!”

He laughed a little, nodding. “I won’t deny that. But I can cook, too. I make a good meatloaf. You can ask the other guys about that.”

“I’m sure you do.” She patted his arm lightly to reassure him before breaking into the baked potato that had come with her plate of chicken, sighing as she sank her teeth into the soft, cooked flesh. She didn’t even miss the butter and sour cream. That’s how hungry she was.

“You enjoy our little tour of the paddocks today?”

She glanced at Bowie. “The first time, or the second?”

“The second, of course.”

“Yes, I did. I especially liked watching you rescue that woman who stepped on a

steaming cow pie!”

“Happens every time. It’s like those city ladies just go looking for the damn things.” He sighed. “I’ve worked on this ranch for over five years, and I never once stepped on one. But these ladies... there’s always at least one.”

“Can’t help themselves. The idea of being carried by a big, burly guy like you is just too irresistible.”

He smiled even as his cheeks darkened a little. “Yeah, well, maybe that is it.”

Lea set her dinner plate aside and picked up a piece of warm fruit between her index finger and thumb. She popped it into her mouth, syrup dripping down her chin. She closed her eyes, surprised by just how sweet and succulent it tasted as it burst over her tongue. She sighed, shooting a look at Bowie.

“It’s good. I know. But don’t tell him that, because he’ll never let you forget it!”

Lea laughed, feeling light for the first time in a very long while. When had she last just sat and had a meal with someone? When had she enjoyed her food as much as she was enjoying it right now? When had she been this relaxed, this without worry? She couldn’t remember.

She finished the fruit, savoring every bite as best as she could, but finding it hard not to eat it like it was about to be taken away from her. When it was gone, she was almost disappointed.

“Here.” Bowie handed her a beer, slipping it out of an inner pocket of his jacket along with one for himself. Lea almost refused. She’d never been big on beer, and she made a point of not drinking whenever she was working. But she wasn’t working right now, was she?

The beer was cold despite having been so close to his body, and it tasted of unbaked bread and everything that had been good about her childhood. Once again, she found herself thinking about her grandparents' farm and the long summers she'd spent there. It was the perfect place for a child to grow up: lots of sunshine; good, honest work; and lots of space for developing a proper imagination. It was funny, though. She hadn't thought of her grandparents or their farm in years. Not until this morning. And now she couldn't stop thinking about it all.

"Remington puts on a roping show when dinner's over," Bowie told her. "He should get started here in a few minutes."

"Remington's a roper? Does he do the rodeo circuit?"

"Used to. He has a couple of pretty impressive belt buckles, but he gave it up when he started working here. Doesn't talk about it much."

"Seems like none of you talk about much."

Bowie took a long swallow of his beer. "It's the stereotype. If we talked about ourselves, we wouldn't fit that image that all women have of the modern American cowboy."

Lea nodded. "Makes total sense."

He winked, and she couldn't help the giggle that bubbled up out of her throat.

The show started a few minutes later, Remington approaching the crowd silently with a lasso that he quickly used to rope a small child who was trying to get too close to the fire. Everyone cheered as he freed the child and proceeded to give a short lecture on roping and why it's an important part of a cowboy's repertoire. Lea sipped her beer as she listened to his words, unaware she'd finished the whole bottle until Bowie

slipped it out of her hand and gave her a new one. She was halfway through that when Westin slipped up to the rear of her, taking a seat on the hay bale behind her, close enough that she leaned back against him, taking some of the pressure off her poor thighs, and enjoying the heat of his closeness.

“Having a good time?” he asked warmly against her ear.

“Having a blast.”

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“We put on a hell of a show, don’t we?”

He slipped the beer bottle out of her hand and took a swallow from it himself, slipping it back into her cold fingers as Remington lassoed a tall blonde and pulled her toward him, making the crowd laugh as he then dipped her as though they’d been in the middle of some ballroom dance.

“And you call me charming,” Bowie said, dropping another wink to Lea as he got up and wandered off.

“You called him charming?” Westin asked.

“He is. You should see him with these women!”

“I’d rather not. I get my fill of this stuff with the chuck wagon.”

“Hmm—the stereotype.”

“Excuse me?”

Lea glanced back at him. “You like everyone to think you prefer your own company to anyone else’s, right? Just you and your horse?”

“I do, most of the time.”

“It’s a stereotype. The modern-cowboy stereotype.”

“Is it? Or is it that I’m just not the kind of guy who gets along well with strangers? I work just fine with Clint and the others—just not these... city women.”

“You grew up in a city, didn’t you? Didn’t you tell me you were from Denver?”

“I got to the country as quickly as I could.”

Lea finished her beer, setting the empty bottle with her discarded plates. Westin gathered them all and tossed them in a metal barrel they were using for trash before coming back to her, sweeping into a low bow, and offering her his hand. She giggled, not only because it was the most charming thing he’d yet done, but because she caught jealous looks coming from a couple of women who were paying more attention to them than the show.

Their jackets were too thick to allow much contact, but it was still nice walking side by side with him, her arm tucked into his. He didn’t talk, and she didn’t encourage him to. She decided she kind of liked the silence, liked the companionship without the need for chatter. Her life was spent talking to people, trying to get information from them. It was nice to just be quiet for a change.

“Clint says you’re going to try to arrange to get out of here on Monday.”

“I’m going to see what I can do. I have to make a few phone calls, visit a few people.”

“Do you know someone locally?”

“No, not really. But I have friends who might.”

“I don’t even know where you’re from,” Westin commented. “Every time I ask you something personal, you find a way to distract me from the fact that you never

answered the question.”

He didn’t seem annoyed; he just said it like he was making an observation. It caught Lea a little off guard, so she fell to what she always did. She told him the well-practiced lie she’d always told, mixed with just enough truth to make it easy to remember.

“I was born outside of Austin, Texas, but my mother took me to California after my dad died. I grew up in Van Nuys in a lovely neighborhood where most of my friends were either latchkey kids or in the foster care system.” She glanced at him. “Do you remember that term? Latchkey kid? That’s what my mom called them.”

“I’ve heard it.”

“I’m not a big mystery, Westin.”

“Not a mystery. Just a woman with a lot of secrets.”

“Wouldn’t you like to learn a few of my secrets?” They’d reached the bunkhouse and Lea leaned against the door, smiling up at him as she carefully unwound her scarf from her neck. “I’d be willing to show you just about anything you want to see.”

“You already have,” he reminded her even as he leaned close to her, his lips nearly brushing hers, but not quite. “Do you not remember the little game with the towel? Or the topless greeting you gave me this morning?”

“You wake a woman from a sound sleep—you risk seeing whatever she has to offer.”

“Then it was my fault, was it?”

“Definitely.”

Lea brushed her fingers over the curve of his jaw, the roughness of his stubble an erotic texture that would have driven her crazy if it was on her own body, but turned her on to no end on him. She could already feel that scratchiness against her mouth, her throat, and that increased the ache that had been burning deep in her belly since the moment she set her eyes on him.

She rose up on her tiptoes and nibbled at his bottom lip, smiling when she saw the fire she’d lit in his eyes. “Why don’t you stay the night? I think we could both use a little release. Don’t you?”

“You’re relentless, aren’t you?”

“I’m going to let you in on a little secret, Westin. Women enjoy sex as much as men.”

“That’s not really a secret.”

“I’m not asking for a lifetime commitment. Just one night, just a little release.” She kissed the corner of his mouth, her hand sliding down his chest to the top of his jeans, snagging behind his belt buckle. “Just two adults giving each other a little pleasure.”

He groaned, stepping into her, pressing his body hard against hers. He captured her mouth, taking everything all at once, exploring her with a passion that sent shivers from her head to her toes. She sighed, tugging at his belt to pull him even closer, giving back as much as he was offering. She couldn’t remember the last time a man had made her toes curl. There’d been a few—a sweet boy back in high school who’d

thrilled her despite his naïvety, and a boy in college who'd been exciting but more because of his endurance than anything else. But that had been longer ago than she cared to think about, a more innocent time she'd believed was gone from her life forever. And she had been right. But maybe a little wrong, too.

Something about Westin's kiss sent her back to that time, awakening things inside of her that had long been dormant. Just looking into those stormy blue eyes made her have thoughts that were unlike her. She had these boxes in her head, in her heart, that kept everything compartmentalized. It was important in her work that she not get emotional, that she not get too attached to the people around her. It'd made her hard, and that made it difficult to make connections when she wasn't working. So, this caught her by surprise, the way Westin somehow broke open a few of those boxes with just a look.

She was almost sad that this little vacation was almost over. But that was all it was. An impromptu vacation.

Westin ran his hand down her back, cupping her ass in the borrowed jeans she was wearing. His fingers were searching, and her body immediately responded, her muscles going slack to give him all the access she could. But his hand continued moving, grabbing her sore thigh, pulling her leg up along his side. She went willingly as he pulled her up, wrapped her legs around him, moaning with both pleasure and pain as her sore thighs cried out with the movement.

His hat fell off as she slipped her hands up along his skull, running her fingers through his thick, dark hair. He grunted, started to turn his head to see where his hat had gone, but she stopped him, a hand on his jaw. She wasn't letting him escape her just yet.

"You're something else," he mumbled against her ear as his lips burned a trail along her throat. "You'd make a monk break his vows."

She started to laugh, but his teeth nibbling against the curve of her shoulder turned her laugh into a groan. Hell, he knew what to do with that perfect mouth of his! And his hands on her ass were strong and curious, doing things through her jeans that she never could have imagined would feel half as good as they did. If he stopped now, she was pretty sure she would lose her mind.

At some point, the door popped open behind them. Logically, she knew he had to have turned the knob, but she wasn't sure when or how. She was lost in the way his lips were moving against her throat, the heat of his breath and the pleasure of his touch. And then his mouth was back on hers, touching places inside her that hadn't been touched in... hell, she was pretty sure they'd never been touched. At least not the way he was doing it.

Her head was spinning, and a part of her felt as though it was separating from reality, slipping into something else, something cosmic. She'd never felt anything quite like it before—like she was removed from her body, feeling everything in a way that was limited by the restraints of her physical being. Every point at which their bodies touched was like a hotspot, sending so much information to her brain that it was overwhelmed. Blown.

She wanted him so desperately that it almost hurt.

They stopped halfway down the corridor, slamming against the wall so hard she lost the air in her lungs for a minute. She didn't care. If this was the last thing she ever felt, it would be worth it.

She wanted his jacket gone. It was so big and so bulky, and she craved the feel of his skin against hers. She started to tug at it, her fingers fumbling in their rush. He set her on her feet, the same idea on his mind. Almost like a gentle caretaker, he carefully pulled at the zipper, sliding it all the way down until it separated, exposing the soft sweater she wore underneath. He dropped to his knees and lifted the bottom edge of

the sweater, his lips brushing against her bare skin. Her thighs immediately decided they couldn't possibly hold her up, those sore muscles finally giving up after the punishment she'd offered them all day long. Westin saw her going down, and he managed to catch her as he jumped back up onto his feet.

Westin swung Lea up in his arms and carried her the rest of the way down the hall. She laid her head on his shoulder, every nerve in her body alive and sparking, excited about what came next. But she felt something change in Westin just before he mumbled, "What the fuck?"

He set her down and she stumbled. He turned, calling out into what she could now see was the open door to her room.

"Who's in there? Come out where I can see you!"

It took Lea a second to understand what was happening. She reached behind her body, looking for a weapon that wasn't there. Westin stormed into the room ahead of her, making himself as big as possible as he moved with surprising grace, his footsteps light.

"Come out!" he bellowed again.

Lea heard something crash, a lamp maybe. And then Westin stormed ahead of her, disappearing for a second. She heard another crash, and her instincts kicked in. She quickly slammed the door behind her to block off that exit, then rushed to help Westin. However, by the time she was fully in the room, the glass in the window was shattered and Westin was standing among the broken pieces, watching as someone in a dark jacket and jeans ran into the snow.

"What the hell?"

Westin spun on her. “What have you brought here? Who was that?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“He was after something.” He gestured around him, pointing out the open drawers and the mattress that had been shoved off the bed. “Why here? Why your room when there’s a massive house just half a mile from here? What is he looking for?”

Lea shook her head, her legs weak again. She stumbled back, hit the wall. “I don’t know. No one knows I’m here. He couldn’t—”

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“But he was. He was here for you, for something he thinks you have.” Westin’s eyes were a firestorm. “What have you done?”

But she had no words for him. What could she say? And she could see that he knew it.

She’d never hated a situation as she did that one in that minute.

Chapter 7

“There!”

Westin’s finger tapped almost violently against the screen, shaking the whole monitor where it sat precariously already on the old desk. Clint shot him a look, but he didn’t say anything, more interested in what he’d pointed out. He leaned forward, squinting slightly as he moved the video footage forward a frame at a time.

“We can’t see his face,” he finally said. He turned to Lea, who’d been trying to disappear in the corner of the small office. “Do you have any idea?”

“Is it that guy from the diner?” Westin demanded. “Is it your ex?”

His words dripped with sarcasm, making it quite clear he was very much aware of the lies she’d been telling since her arrival, lies that appeared to be coming back to bite her in the ass.

Lea shook her head. Not that she could tell if it was or not.

Clint turned his attention back to the security footage, moving from one camera to the next until he finally sat back and ran his hands over the top of his head, knocking his baseball cap to the floor.

“Westin, take Remington and go to the guest bunkhouse, cover the broken window with a piece of plywood.”

“Shouldn’t we be looking for this guy?” Westin asked, clearly thinking Clint had lost his mind. “He could break into the main house, go after Miss Dulcie! Are we really going to—”

“He’s gone, Westin. It’s pretty clear from the security footage that he left the property.” Clint gestured toward the computer monitor they’d been studying for the past twenty minutes. “He doesn’t show up anywhere else. My guess is he had a car waiting for him on the east side of the property. He’s gone.”

“And if he isn’t?”

“There’s an alarm on the main house. It’s armed. If anything happens, we’ll be the first to know.”

Westin clenched his hands into fists and rubbed them against his thighs, but he didn’t seem to have anything else to say. He jumped to his feet and stormed out of the barn, not even giving Lea a glance.

Clint rubbed the top of his head again, then reached down to get his hat and set it back into place. He studied the computer screen for a few more minutes before he finally sighed.

“That number you called...”

He let it hang in the air between them. Lea shivered despite the warmth of the heated barn and the heavy jacket she still wore. The memory of Westin unzipping it was like a fantasy that had never really happened, a dream that she'd been rudely awoken from.

"You said you looked it up on the Internet."

"It's a private cell phone."

She grunted. He'd called her bluff, and she'd fallen for it.

Clint turned in his office chair and studied her. "Please, tell me what the hell is going on here. This has come to my house now. I need to be able to protect my people."

"I know."

"I can't do that if I don't know what I'm protecting them from."

Lea went to the door, looking down the long corridor that separated the horse stalls from one another. Westin was gone, but caution was deeply ingrained in her. She'd learned it the hard way when she'd first started her job. It was something she wasn't soon to forget. She closed the door and flipped the little lock that would keep anyone from surprising them.

Clint watched her as she came to sit in the chair Westin had just vacated. She reached across him and grabbed the computer mouse to reverse the video footage on the screen so that she could get a better look at the intruder as he leapt from the window of her room.

"His name is Isai Gomez. His street name is Fang."

Clint turned to face her, a student ready to learn everything she had to set down in front of him, silent in his interest.

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“He’s a member of the Southern Bloods. This particular group specializes in drugs and weapons, mostly crystal meth, but some cocaine and heroin. Fang is one of the lieutenants under a guy they call Razor. We’ve been trying to identify this guy for...” She stopped, finding herself unable to recall when they first started work on this case. It seemed kind of insane that she couldn’t remember, but the answer didn’t come right away. She must have been tired. She ran a hand over her forehead, shaking her head slightly. “A couple of years, I guess.”

“We?” Clint asked patiently.

She cleared her throat, her eyes jumping back to the computer screen. Who could she trust? Could she tell this man, who was basically a stranger to her, what her true identity was? It’d been so long since she’d last told someone the truth, she couldn’t even remember the truth herself sometimes. It was a pitfall of being undercover for such long stretches at a time. But it was also about safety. If he knew too much, not only could he put her at risk; it could put him at risk, too.

“I don’t know how he found me. He must have realized what he was looking for wasn’t in my things.”

“What was he looking for?”

Again, she hesitated. How much could she really tell him? Clint, to his credit, was patient, just waited until she finally reached under the sweater she wore—his wife’s sweater—and pulled out a slender pendant that was shaped like a sunflower. Carefully, she pulled the edges of the flower apart and it revealed a memory card stuck inside.

“What is it?”

“Evidence. Names, locations, money. It’s business records that never should have been kept, evidence that can be used to find this Razor.” She put it back inside the pendant and dropped the necklace down her shirt again. “I was working in a nightclub they owned, a front for some of their other business interests—illegal gambling, prostitution—and I got close to Fang’s girl. She let it slip that he kept some of this information on his private laptop. I found an excuse to get into his office, and he caught me downloading the information. I managed to get out of there, but he must have followed me.”

Clint sat back and rested his hands across his belly, clearly digesting everything she’d just told him. She ran her hands over her face, her exhausted mind trying to figure things out. She knew there was something wrong here, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. How had Fang found her? Again? She wasn’t sure, but it didn’t feel right.

“I caught the first plane that left Phoenix International,” she said more to herself than to him. “I used a credit card to rent the car out of New Orleans, so maybe that’s how he found me. But I drove for hours. I stopped in a motel in Dallas, but that was it. I was on the road nearly a full fourteen hours before he caught up with me. I don’t know how he found me, or how he knew I was here. How could he have found me here? No one knew I was here.”

“Did you tell the man you called?”

“Will?” Lea shook her head, frowning as she did. “No. I told him I was somewhere safe, but that’s all.”

“You didn’t say you were on a ranch?”

“You can ask Westin. He heard the call.”

“What about the second call? The one you made today?”

Her eyebrows rose. “Are you sure you guys aren’t a real security firm?” She scratched her cheek as she recalled the phone call. “No. I told him about the box Westin and I found in the paddock, but nothing else.”

“Why did you tell him about the box?”

“It was part of a case we worked once. Some really bad people.” She was babbling a little now, the day catching up to her. “We were working a case out of California where they used the boxes to make dead drops. Half-buried them on a stranger’s property so that if they were discovered, someone else would be blamed. They’d put drugs in them, and their dealers would come and take them, leaving money in their place.” She rubbed a spot on her shoulder, recalling an altercation she’d gotten into during that case that had left her pretty bruised afterward. “We took out the guy running it, though. That’s why I told him—because we thought that was done. That box shouldn’t have been there.”

“How do you know it’s the same sort of thing?”

Her eyebrows rose slightly. “The writing on the top. It’s a code that took us like a week to figure out. It denotes the dealer who’s supposed to use the dead drop.”

“It’s someone’s name?”

She nodded. “Petey J.”

Clint grunted. “You should have told us that part.”

She shook her head. “Didn’t think it was relevant.”

“Who do you work for, Lea? Is Fang going to bring more people to the ranch to find that little memory card?”

“No.” She wiped her hands on her jeans, surprised to find them covered in slimy sweat. She was freezing, but the room was warm, and her body was reacting to it. “He’s not going to tell anyone what happened. It’ll get him in trouble with his bosses. He’s not supposed to keep that information just lying around where someone can find it. That’s how this Razor has managed to stay off our radar for so long: he’s too smart to make mistakes.”

Clint’s eyes moved compassionately over her. “You’re exhausted,” he commented.

She laughed a little. “I guess all this horseback riding is more of a workout than it looks.”

“Come on.” He held out a hand to her. “We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

Gratefully, she took his hand and let him lead her out of the barn. The burst of cold air that greeted them as they slipped through the door took her breath away. Clint took her arm, guiding her like the gentleman she could see he was. But instead of taking her back across the ranch to the guest bunkhouse, he led her to another building that was some three or four hundred yards from the barn, a building that looked more like a log cabin than something that belonged on a modern ranch. A welcoming burst of heat enveloped them as they stepped through the door.

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It was a simple building, essentially one long room that was divided more by the furniture placement than walls. There was a couch and a couple of chairs scattered around a television immediately in front of the door. Beyond that was a dining-room table and a horseshoe-shaped kitchen with a full-sized refrigerator, an oven, and all the normal accessories. Along the back wall were twin-sized bunk beds, all positioned head to foot in a solid line down the wall. At the back of the building, beyond the dining table, sat an open area where another row of beds was pushed up against the front wall, just behind the kitchen. In the center of the back wall was a bathroom visible through an open door.

“You’ll stay here tonight,” Clint told her. “We’ll find you an empty room in the other guest bunkhouse tomorrow.”

Lea nodded, almost tearful in her appreciation. She barely had the energy to remove her jacket and tennis shoes before climbing onto the bed he pointed her toward. She was aware there were other people in the room, aware that eyes were on her as she lay there. But whatever it was that had made exhaustion fall so completely over her was not letting up. She closed her eyes, and the world went dark almost immediately.

Westin lay awake most of the night, unable to tear his eyes from her. She slept soundly in a bunk across the room, separated from the others across the wide space. He understood why Clint had brought her back here, but he didn’t like it—didn’t like that all these other guys were so close to her while she was vulnerable. Worse, he hated that he desperately wanted to go over there and lie with her, feel her body against his again. How reassuring would it be to feel her warmth, to feel her breaths?

As angry as he was with her, he was more concerned with her helplessness, and that was pissing him off, too.

He finally got up a little before five and took a mug from the hook in the kitchen, pouring in it a good amount of coffee from the freshly brewed pot. Clint found him there, leaning against the counter, the mug between his hands.

“I want you to come with me to the barn to check that camera we put out on the box yesterday.”

“She tell you something about it?”

Clint poured himself a mug of coffee too, using the action to avoid Westin’s question.

“We should wake her up, make her come with us.”

Clint shook his head. “No. She needs her rest.”

Westin’s eyebrows rose. “Since when are you her father?”

“Someone has to watch out for her. I get the impression she doesn’t let people in very often.”

“You know her pretty well now? She confess all her secrets to you last night after I left?”

“Enough.”

Rage burned through Westin. He told himself it didn’t matter. Who cared if she told the fucking world about her secrets? But it bothered him. It bothered him more than it should have.

He dropped his mug in the sink, heard it shatter, and walked away. Clint caught up to him halfway across the yard, still pulling on his jacket. “Wait a second!” He caught up just as Westin yanked open the door to the barn, startling one of the horses who kicked at its stall door in response.

Clint pulled up the footage from the camera they’d set up the day before on the box Lea found. The box was obviously not there on the real-time footage, but Clint didn’t seem surprised. Had she told him it would be gone? Of course she had.

Clint rewound the footage, and when it hit the three-in-the-morning mark, they found themselves watching two men bend over the box and remove something. It looked to Westin like they also left something—an envelope that looked like it was stuffed pretty full.

“Is that a Rocking D jacket?” Westin flicked his fingernail against the screen, touching the man on the forefront of the video. “It is, isn’t it?”

“You can’t really see it,” Clint said.

“It looks like a Rocking D emblem on his chest there.” He snatched the mouse from Clint and clicked on the image, zooming in a little. The bright-red mark on the jacket only grew blurry with the magnification, but he had no doubt in his mind what it was. All Rocking D employees had a jacket that was emblazoned with a logo of a D on its belly, tilted just slightly like it were rocking. It was the stupidest emblem Westin had ever seen, and he’d seen a lot of them. But there was no mistaking it. “I’m sure that’s what it is.”

Clint shook his head. “We can’t go making accusations without proof, and you can’t prove it with that video.”

Westin cursed, but he handed the mouse back to Clint. He used it to move the video

forward. About an hour later, another figure appeared in the dark. This one was dressed all in black just like the man who'd broken into Lea's room, but Westin couldn't be sure it was the same man. In fact, he was pretty sure it wasn't. This man had wider shoulders, a heavier torso. As they watched, whoever the man was dug the box out of the ground and slipped through the break in the fence, taking the box with him.

“What was the point?”

Clint shrugged. “To put it somewhere that wouldn't be associated with whoever put it there in the first place.”

“But the break in the fence makes it pretty obvious that we weren't the ones to put it there.”

“Does it? Or would we be smart enough to cut our own fence to make it appear that way?”

“You really think Sheriff Reeves would fall for that?”

Clint took off his baseball cap and ran a hand over the top of his head. “It's gone now. That's one less thing to worry about.”

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“Now you can tell me what Lea said to you last night. Who the hell was that guy who broke into her room? What was he looking for?”

Clint took his time shutting down the computer before he finally turned and focused on Westin. He rested his hands on his belly the way he did when he was thinking. Westin knew by the pensive look on his face and the way he was studying him that he wasn't going to tell him a single thing Lea had said. And it pissed him off.

Westin jumped out of his chair and headed for the door. “I'll just go ask her myself.”

Clint was fast, more adroit than he sometimes appeared. He got between Westin and the door in a flash, blocking his exit. “You won't ask her.”

“Why the hell not? She's keeping secrets, Clint! She could have gotten Miss Dulcie hurt! Have you thought of that? What if that guy had broken into the main house before he went to the guest bunkhouse?”

“I think the question we should be focusing on right now is how the hell the guy knew to look in the guest bunkhouse. Do you have any idea?”

Westin threw up his hands. “Hell if I know! She called that guy the other day. Maybe she said something to him.”

“She said you heard the whole call. Did she say anything about the ranch?”

Westin started to insist that she had because how else would the guy have known where to find her? But as the memory of that phone call played through his

mind—along with the memory of Lea wearing nothing but a towel—he struggled to remember one thing she’d said that might have led anyone to Golden Sphinx Ranch.

“She never mentioned the ranch by name.”

“Did she mention Milsap? The diner? Anything that might have given the guy an idea of where we are?”

Westin had only heard her side of the conversation—he should have made her put the damn thing on speaker!—but he was almost certain she hadn’t mentioned any of those things.

Colorado. Fang found me... I don’t know. I must have left a trail somewhere... Not usually. I’m safe where I am, for the time being. I think I’ll lie low for a couple of days, let things play out.

“She told whoever it was that she was in Colorado, but that was the only thing she said. No town names, no mention of any landmarks. Nothing I can recall.”

“You’re sure?”

Westin nodded. “What did she tell you? Was it the same guy, that Fang guy who broke into her room last night?”

Clint nodded, his expression a little wary. “She has something on him, something that could cause him some real trouble. She thinks that’s what he’s after.”

“Where is it?”

Clint touched his throat and Westin immediately remembered the necklace she’d been wearing. A sunflower he’d desperately wanted to be for a brief moment, nestled

there between her breasts. He couldn't imagine what that pendant might hide, but the understanding that what that man wanted was so close to her only notched up the fear he was trying to pretend he wasn't feeling for her another space or two.

“What could a chemist get on a guy like that?”

“Chemist?”

“That's what she told me she was.” A cold finger began to dance in Westin's stomach. “She's not a chemist, is she?” He cursed, not really needing Clint to verify what he already knew even as the foreman shook his head. All these lies...

“What are we going to do?” He rubbed his cheeks, feeling like they'd gone numb, like everything about him had gone numb. “We're in over our heads, man. Maybe it's time to call Sheriff Reeves.”

“I was going to have her spend the day with Miss Dulcie at the main house. But I'm not sure that's a good idea now.” Clint was quiet for a second, then he cleared his throat. “You should take her to the foreman's cabin. Melanie's taking Katie to Denver for a few days. It'll be empty.” He sighed, his own baggage rearing up with that statement. “I'll make sure someone will be outside her room at all times.”

“We tried that already, remember?”

“Yeah. And it worked. You were with her when that guy broke in last night. She wasn't alone, and she wasn't harmed. That's all we can offer her.”

“And tomorrow?”

Clint hesitated a moment. “She wants to go into town and contact her people. I don't think that's a good idea.”

“At least we agree on something.”

“I think it would be better if she stayed here and lay low. We need to figure out how that Fang found out she was here, and what room was hers. No one knew that but the five of us.”

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“Someone could have seen her coming or going at some point.”

Clint rubbed his chin. “Yeah, that was what I was thinking, too. Maybe someone saw Bowie walk her back there after the afternoon cattle ride. Or they saw him go pick her up for the chuck wagon.”

“Someone on the property.”

“When we have tourists, security is a little lax. Anyone could have gotten on the property at any point during the day. We’d have to watch every minute of all the security-camera footage to figure out exactly when the guy entered the property, and chances are good that he came over the fence somewhere where there isn’t a camera. So, you know, there’s no way to point fingers, at this point. We’ve just got to be more careful. Keep her out of sight.”

“And if he comes after her again?”

“One of us will be with her.” Clint patted Westin’s arm. “If we’re really going to open our own security firm here, this couldn’t be better practice for our skills.” He forced a smile. “She actually suggested we’d be pretty good at it.”

“Did she?”

Clint chuckled. “I kind of like her. And I’m beginning to like this idea. We might do better at it than the whole tourist thing.”

“Maybe.”

Lea lay awake, listening to the men around her stumbling to dress before beginning their chores. There was little conversation, but lots of coffee mugs clanking, bread toasting, eggs frying. She stayed still, her eyes closed, her mind drifting back to the night before. She wondered how much Clint had told Westin about Fang, about her. Did he know now just how much she'd lied to him since coming here?

The lies had never bothered her before. It was just part of the job. There'd been times when she'd cultivated relationships that she cared about, and would wonder how that person was doing after her disappearance from their lives. But she never felt bad about lying. The lies were as much to keep those people safe as they were to keep her safe.

But this time was different. These cowboys had an honor code they lived by, and it was kind of infectious. Made Lea feel like she was corrupting them all with her lies.

What if she told them the truth? What if she sat Westin down and told him her real story? How she resented her mother for tearing her away from everything she knew, so she rebelled in quiet, unimpressive ways. How she chose this path in life because she knew it was the one thing that her mother would never be able to accept. How she jumped at all the most difficult assignments because she wanted to frighten her mother, show her what it was like to be on the other end of that scenario.

It was childish, all of it, and Lea had known it not even a year into her career. But by then she was addicted to the adrenaline that came with being undercover, with the excitement of it all. She liked making up fake details about her past, liked killing off her mother in some scenarios, turning her into a drug-addicted shrew in others. The truth, of course, was that her mother did the best she could under difficult circumstances. Lea knew that, and as an adult, she understood. Maybe she should tell her mother that.

It felt a little old now, though. Maybe it was time she thought about some other kind of work.

A weight settled on the edge of the bunk. A hand brushed against her cheek, fingers tracing the curve of her jaw. She knew it was Westin before she opened her eyes. He smelled of the outdoors, of cows and wood and hay. The others probably did, too, but there was something unique to Westin under it all that she already knew like it was a part of her.

“Time to get going.”

She rolled toward him, peeking at him from under her eyelashes. “Where’d everyone else go?”

“Chores and then church with Miss Dulcie. It’s Sunday.”

“She takes everyone to church?”

“As many as she can. A few have to stay behind and feed the tourists, run the fences—that sort of thing. But she takes most of them.”

“You don’t go?”

He shrugged. “I go occasionally. I was just never real big on the whole religion thing.”

“Mother Nature is my religion,” she said softly.

“What?”

She shook her head, sitting up on the narrow bunk. “Something my grandfather used

to say when my grandmother would try to drag him off to church.”

“Sounds like your grandfather and I would have gotten along.”

She smiled softly, nodding. “Yeah, I think you would have.”

She slipped past him and into the bathroom, using the facilities quickly—it was predominantly a men’s space, and they made that pretty clear with the smells that emanated from nearly all the surfaces—before joining Westin again in the small kitchen. He was sipping from a coffee mug, leaning against the counter, his heavy jacket still on, but his hat was resting on the counter across from him. She grabbed her borrowed jacket from the bunk she’d slept in and joined him, snatching up his hat and setting it on top of her own head only to have it fall over her eyes.

“You have a big head.”

“Most cowboys do.”

She laughed, a little surprised he was making jokes after everything that had happened last night. She pushed the hat back and studied him as he pretended to be paying more attention to his coffee than to her. “What happens now?”

“Clint wants me to take you to his cabin.”

“He has a cabin?”

He gestured with a thumb over his shoulder. “It’s a little house about a quarter-mile from here. The foreman’s cabin.”

“Oh.” She took off his hat and ran her hands over the top of her head, realizing her braid had come mostly undone during the night. She quickly unwound it and braided it back again, twisting a couple of pieces of hair around the end of the braid to keep it in place. It was a trick a stripper had taught her once that had come in handy more often than she could recall.

“You ready? We should head out.”

She nodded, not sure if she was disappointed or relieved that he didn’t want to talk about what had happened last night. She’d expected him to be angry, or at least frustrated with her. He’d been pretty upset last night when Clint had sent him out of the barn after she’d refused to identify Fang in front of him. But he seemed to be

lacking curiosity now, and that made her wonder. What had Clint told him?

He had a truck waiting for them, the same truck he'd been driving the morning she'd met the boys of Golden Sphinx Ranch. He helped her into the passenger side before going around to climb behind the wheel. He turned the heat on full blast the moment he started the engine, allowing cold air to blow over them before it slowly heated, filling the cab of the truck with a comforting warmth.

"You're to stay at the cabin for the next couple of days, until Clint can figure out what's going on."

Lea's eyebrows rose. "What do you mean, figure out what's going on?"

"He's bothered by the fact that this guy who broke into your room knew where you were and where you were staying. No one but the five of us guys and you knew where you were." Westin glanced at her. "And you didn't tell anyone—right?"

"No."

He nodded, focusing on the road that was more of a trail ahead of them. "Someone must have told this guy something. How else would he have known to look inside a building that was otherwise unoccupied? We have over thirty buildings on this property. Why was it the only one he focused on?"

Lea shook her head. She was still struggling with why Fang had come back in the first place, let alone how he'd known to look for her on Golden Sphinx Ranch. She'd never mentioned the town or the ranch when she'd spoken to Will. Not once.

"Someone will be outside the door the whole time you're at the cabin."

"What about you? Where will you be?"

He glanced at her again, his dark, stormy eyes unreadable. “I have work to do, sweetheart. I probably won’t have time to stop by today.”

She nodded, not sure what to think of that.

The trail took a sharp turn and crossed a cattle guard that led into a small oasis tucked into a rise in the land. A blanket of snow covered an expanse of yard that led up to a building that was very definitely a cabin, one of those made of real logs that looked as though it belonged in the 1860s rather than the modern world. It had a lovely porch across the front, big windows to get the most of the view, and a low roof that probably provided refreshing shade in the warm summer months. Westin stopped the truck just a few feet from the front door, coming around to gently help Lea down from the truck before leading her up the porch.

Inside, the cabin looked much like the bunkhouse, with a large, open floor plan. The furniture was mostly rustic, mixed with a few modern pieces like the overstuffed couch. The kitchen was a galley style with a bar dividing it from the living room, complete with three tall stools for guests to sit. There were relatively new stainless-steel appliances, all the conveniences of a home in the city. Through an open door on the far side of the kitchen Lea could see the bedrooms—the master all the way back, and another off to one side through the door of which she could see a small shelf covered in stuffed animals. Clint’s little girl’s room.

“Remington will be here in a few minutes with your things. You should be okay until then.”

“Westin?”

He stood with his hand on the knob. It seemed like he was always just about to escape when she wanted him to stay. But when his eyes came up and moved over her, for just an instant she thought she saw some of the heat they’d shared last night before

everything went all to hell.

“I’m sorry that I’ve put you and your friends in a bad situation.”

He rolled his shoulders. “Things happen.”

“I never would have asked you to bring me back here if I’d had any idea he would follow me.”

Westin bit his bottom lip, stifling a grunt. “Then it was him? Fang?”

Lea crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t know how he knew to look for me here. No one should have known I was here.”

“But he did. And that’s a problem.”

“I know.”

“You put everyone on this ranch at risk.” His eyes suddenly darkened, clouds swarming. “If that man had gotten into the main house and gone after Miss Dulcie—”

“But he didn’t.”

“He could have.” He shook his head. “I’m done playing games with you, Lea. It was all a big joke until you put people I care about at risk. Now it’s no longer a joke.”

He stormed out, his boots stomping across the porch. She went after him, jerking the door open even as it still vibrated from him slamming it. But he was in the truck and tearing out of the drive before she could even reach the porch rail.

Hell!

The last thing she had wanted was to put these people at risk. And the more she’d gotten to know them, especially Westin, the less she wanted to introduce them to the darkness that was her world. That first day, she’d thought she was just going to take it easy, hide out for a few days. He was right; she’d thought she was playing a game, getting a few laughs out of these beautifully naïve people. She regretted it now. She regretted every second of it.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered under her breath as she watched the truck disappear over the swell in the land.

It felt like she was stuck in that cabin for days on end. She couldn't sit still long enough to watch television, couldn't concentrate on the magazines Clint's wife had left on the coffee table. She'd invited Remington inside to at least share a few tidbits of conversation, but he refused, insisting Clint wanted him outside and her inside. She was cut off from everything, and she hated it. She was used to being in the thick of things, not alone, not out of the loop.

This was her problem. They should allow her to deal with it.

When Clint suddenly came through the door a little before the dinner hour, she could have cried.

"I'm going insane in here!"

He lowered his head slightly, his eyes cutting to the door that should have hidden his child's bedroom but didn't. She could see the pain cut across his face and regretted that she hadn't made an effort to at least close the door. But would it have made a difference?

"Let's get out of here, then."

Lea jumped at the opportunity, snagging her jacket and shoving her arms inside as she stormed through the door. Much to her amusement, there were two horses tied to the rail of the porch—one the gray beauty she'd ridden all day before, and the other a black gelding with an almost stately profile. She sighed. Back in the saddle with her sore thighs. Well, it was better than being left another minute with her raging thoughts.

Up on the horse's back, she patted her neck as Clint released the reins and handed

them up to her. Then he mounted his gelding and led the way out of the yard. Lea offered a little wave to Remington, who watched them closely but never uttered a single word.

“He doesn’t talk much, does he?”

Clint glanced back at the house and his man sitting with his feet propped up on the rail. “He’s had a hard life.”

“Haven’t we all?”

“Some endure a lot more than others.”

Clint spurred his horse, and the beautiful animal moved easily into a canter as he rushed across the open field. Gray Lady followed easily, keeping tempo with the gelding like they’d ridden together often. Lea leaned forward slightly, putting most of her weight into her legs instead of the saddle, trying to remember everything her grandfather had taught her about riding. It was almost exhilarating, the feel of the wind blowing across her face, her braid bouncing against her back. It reminded her of those years on the farm, the long summers she’d never wanted to end. It was a peace that she desperately needed.

Lea didn’t think they had a specific destination in mind. She let herself fall into the rhythm of the horses, the ice-cold air on her face, the beauty of the terrain they were moving over. But as she was losing herself in it all, Clint slowed his horse and directed him toward a low-hanging tree where he dismounted and tied the reins.

“Come on,” he said to her without waiting to help her tie up her own horse. She dismounted gracelessly, nearly twisting her ankle in the process, but managed to secure the reins to a low branch without breaking anything.

Clint had wandered over to a low fence that wasn't much different from the one she'd spent all morning helping Westin check for breaks. Like several they'd found on that other fence, there was a break in this one. Clint dropped to his knees in the snow to examine the damage, eventually holding up a length of wood that had clearly been removed intentionally, the damage at the nail holes undeniably done by human hands.

"I think this is likely how he got onto the property. Probably had a car parked over there," Clint said, gesturing to a narrow trail that ran alongside the fence. "One of my guys reported the damage this morning, but it wasn't here yesterday."

He stood, brushing the snow from his jeans. Lea didn't know what to say, so she just dumbly handed the wood section back to him.

"The guest bunkhouses are back that way," he said, gesturing toward a stand of trees just three or four hundred yards from where they stood. "It wouldn't have taken much for him to get there."

"Assuming he knew how to get there."

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Clint lowered his head slightly. “Assuming that.”

Lea ran a hand over the top of her head. “I don’t know what to tell you. I’ve run it through my mind over and over again, but I can’t remember saying anything to anyone that might have given my location away.”

Clint nodded slowly. “My concern is that what happened is you told your friend on the phone about that box, and that somehow got back to the people who put the box on Miss Dulcie’s property. I’m afraid this is bigger than just some guy coming after you.”

“I know. That occurred to me, too.”

She’d been thinking about it all day. Since Westin had practically accused her of putting Miss Dulcie in the line of danger, she couldn’t stop working it over in her head, trying to figure out how Fang knew where she was. Just like Clint, the only thing she kept coming back to was someone had somehow overheard her conversation with Will. Someone who knew about those boxes. Or maybe he made a call after she’d talked to him, and that call was overheard. It was the only thing that made sense.

She moved away from Clint, her thoughts raging once more. She kept going back and forth, trying to figure it all out. Will wouldn’t have betrayed her. It had to be something else, some other explanation. It had to be.

“Look, I trust Will. He’s been my partner since I joined the DEA. There’s no way he could have caused this to happen. Not knowingly.”

“Then tell me about the case. Tell me about the box. Maybe there’s something we can figure out, some way we can make sure we haven’t just put Golden Sphinx in the middle of something we can’t control.”

Lea nodded, still pacing, kicking at the snow with her now thoroughly wet tennis shoes. “We were working a faction of the Southern Bloods. The Phoenix Police Department has been battling them for years, and we’ve been after this guy, Razor. I told you that last night.”

Clint nodded, standing patiently, just waiting for her to go on.

“We got a lead that Razor was involved with the Bloods. They have this club in downtown Phoenix where they run drugs and guns and women. It’s a pretty slick setup. Everything seems on the up and up, but when you look close enough, it starts to crack—you know?” She ran her hands over the top of her head again, shivering a little as she pressed the cold against her scalp. “I got a job at the club. I was a bartender, but I was also passing drugs to customers. They had this whole system, this way of slipping the packets to people who ordered these specific, made-up drinks.”

“You told Westin you were a chemist.”

Lea laughed, though there was absolutely nothing funny about the whole thing. “Yeah, well, I’ve been one of those, too. I’ve been a lot of things in the past five years. It’d make your head spin if I told you everything.” She shook her head, kicking at the snow a little more as she paced. “So, I was working the bar, and Will would come in sometimes, established himself as a regular customer, and we’d exchange information any way we could. We’d been at it for weeks, but we weren’t making any headway. I was beginning to think we’d never get the information we needed to find Razor. And then one of the girls told me about Fang’s computer.”

“And what role was Fang playing in all this?”

“He managed the club. The whole thing—the illegal shit and the legal stuff. It was all his.”

“You got into his office and stole information off it.”

“Yeah. He was keeping track of all kinds of stuff. Emails he probably should have deleted, texts he’d downloaded from his phone, audio files of conversations he’d had. The boy was keeping things that I’d never seen one of these gang members write down, let alone save to a computer. Ridiculous, really. I’m not even sure of everything that’s on there, because he walked in on me.”

“How did that happen?”

Lea sighed, turning to face him. He was leaning against the fence, just staring down at the ground like he wasn’t even listening to a thing she had to say, but she knew he was. She knew the words coming out of her mouth were the most important thing to him right now simply because of how hard he was concentrating on the ground. She was beginning to figure Clint out, and he was a lot more complicated than he first appeared.

“It was after closing. I was alone in the bar, putting away clean glasses before I left. He came out of his office, said good night and told me Danny—the bouncer—would lock up when I was gone. I watched him leave, went to the back where the security cameras were and watched him drive away. He never came back after he left. There was a joke around the bar that he had some pretty thing handcuffed to his bed and he was always anxious to get back to her.”

Lea groaned. The memory of it made every muscle in her back tighten up. He wasn’t supposed to come back. He shouldn’t have come back. But he did. In minutes.

“I slipped into the office, shoved the memory card into the port and began grabbing files randomly, dropping them onto the memory card. I’d had a look at it a couple of days before when that girl told me about it, so I kind of knew what to put on the card. I was working as quickly as I could and had about three-quarters of what I wanted when he walked in.”

“Why did he come back?”

Lea shook her head and lifted her hands. “I have no idea. I didn’t stop to ask.” She pressed a hand to her chest, felt for the heavy pendant that still hung there. “I pretended I was trying to email my mother. But he didn’t buy it. He seemed to know exactly what I was up to.”

He’d grabbed her by her hair, jerking her up out of his office chair. He’d dragged her across the room, tossing her onto the low couch against the far wall. She knew about that couch. All the girls talked about it. It was where he tried out the new girls, made sure they’d be able to satisfy his customers to his satisfaction. He made a mistake putting her on that couch, though. She could still feel the semi-hard mass in his pants that she’d slammed her knee into, still felt the satisfaction of watching him fall to the ground in silent agony.

“I got out of there and took off; called Will. I told him what had happened, that I was burned. He told me that as far as Fang knew, I was just some stupid girl who thought she could steal information from her boss. Told me to stay undercover.”

“You let him follow you.”

“No, not exactly.” She sighed. She was tired of pacing, but the ground was so covered in snow that there was nowhere dry to sit. She finally just went and leaned against the fence beside Clint. “The plan was for me to meander for a few days, then make a beeline for Seattle. I flew to New Orleans, stayed a night in Dallas, and drove

straight from there to Denver. I was going to stay there for a night or two, but Will called me, said they couldn't locate Fang. They thought he might have followed me out of Phoenix."

"You kept driving."

"And I was starving, exhausted. I needed coffee if I was going to keep going. Some carbs." She sighed. "I saw the sign for that diner, and it was like a gift. I hadn't seen anything else for miles on miles, and figured I wouldn't again if I kept going. I had no idea he was anywhere close. I hadn't seen another car for nearly an hour. I have no idea where he came from."

“Not from another car.”

She tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“If he’d driven up behind you, we would have seen another car. But there wasn’t one.”

“There must have been.”

Clint shook his head. “Milsap is a small town, Lea. Everyone either owns a farm or ranch, or works on a farm or ranch around here. And everyone knows everyone else. We know each other so well, we know each other’s vehicles. I don’t remember there being a strange car in that parking lot that day. And none of the boys do, either.”

“If he didn’t drive there, how did he get there?”

“That’s a good question.”

A silence fell between them for a long moment, a tense silence that was filled with too many unanswered questions. Lea knew what Clint must be thinking, knew he was making connections she didn’t want to make. And he confirmed it with the next thing he had to say.

“Will told you to lure him out of town. Then Will told you to keep going when you reached Denver even though there’s an office of the DEA in Denver, which seems like the best place to go if this guy is following you.”

“Will thought we should get Fang to Seattle because that’s the office we’re based out of; that’s where our bosses know about Fang and Razor and the whole case.”

“Whose idea was it for you to drive up through Colorado?”

Lea pushed away from the fence. “How else am I supposed to get to Seattle from New Orleans?”

“Oh, I don’t know—a plane? Or a straight path that would just barely touch the corner of Colorado and take you through Utah. Why go through Denver and then up here? I mean, hell, you took a bit of a wild turn coming northwest. Even if you were to go through Denver, you should have continued on the 287 to Wyoming, not cut this way.”

“I was trying to stay off the major interstates.”

“Why?”

“What do you want me to say, Clint?” She threw up her hands in a gesture of surrender. “I trust my partner, and my partner was sending me information he was getting from someone he trusted. That’s what this job is all about—relying on people we trust to take out the bad guys.”

“But what if you can’t trust your partner?”

“Will would not burn me!” Her whole body vibrated even as she clamped her fists at her sides, her jaw clenching so hard that it hurt to speak. “He’s my friend!”

“I can see you believe that.” Clint crossed to her, snow dusting the tops of his boots with every step. He rested his hands on her shoulders, bending a little so he could look her in the eye. “But why would he send you here? Why would he plant you in

the middle of ranch country when you have this psychotic criminal chasing after you? Why not go to the Denver DEA office and give them the memory card? Why not arrange for you to fly from New Orleans to Seattle and be met by an agent? Why not do half a million things that would have been a hell of a lot safer for you?"

"Because I'm not supposed to be a DEA agent. I'm supposed to be a frightened bartender who stumbled onto something she thought she could handle, but got in too deep. I'm supposed to be playing a role for Fang, to draw him out and force him to hang himself."

"Then why lure him to Seattle? Why not just set up a sting in Phoenix or Denver or any of the other major cities you passed through on your way here?"

"Stop!"

She jerked away from him and rushed to the horses, dragging Gray Lady's reins down from the tree branch. She couldn't do this anymore. She couldn't go down that road—because if she did, she'd have to admit that it didn't add up, and this wasn't the first time she'd questioned Will's decisions in the past few days. Hell, it wasn't the first time she'd questioned his actions in the past few months. But they were both under a lot of pressure to identify Razor, and the undercover stuff was taking a toll on Will's marriage. He had two kids at home, two small kids, one of whom was a daughter with special needs. His wife needed him at home, and he kept promising that, after the next assignment, he'd talk to the bosses about a desk job. But there was always something that came up, always another case, always something that he couldn't just turn his back on.

But that didn't mean he would turn to the dark side, burn Lea so that he could...what? What was he getting out of it? Was he working for the Southern Bloods? Was he protecting Fang and his gang? How could that be possible? Will had been by her side dozens of times when they took down people like that. Hell, worse

than Fang and his band of idiots! Who put that kind of information on a damn computer, anyway?

She climbed on the horse and took off, pushing her into a gallop the second they were in the open field. She leaned forward, holding tight to the horse's reins, welcoming the freezing cold of the wind burning across her unprotected skin. She didn't know where she was going; she just needed to go. She needed to get back to that feeling that had settled her thoughts before, the memory of being that little ten-year-old girl on the back of a pony on her grandfather's farm. She needed to be that free and that innocent again.

She needed to forget that sometimes bad people could fool you into thinking they're good, to serve their purpose. And sometimes good people were too stupid to see what was right in front of their face.

Chapter 8

Westin hesitated before he touched the intercom button, a part of him convinced they were never going to let him into this house. Rocking D was the biggest ranch in Colorado, one of the most respected ranches in the country. The Mollohan family had been such a huge part of this state, of this industry, that just the name itself opened doors. It was like visiting the home of Michelangelo or the Pope. Yet it wasn't that reverence that was making Westin hesitate.

He'd waited nearly ten years for this moment. He'd known it would happen, knew that he would one day sit here, ready to confront a past that begged to be confronted. He was savoring the moment, wanted to take a few seconds to drink it all in.

"This is it," he said as much to himself as to the world around him. "This is the moment."

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He pushed the button, and a disembodied male voice asked him what his business was.

“This is Westin Clark. I was invited to dinner by Rena Mollohan.”

“Drive up to the main house.”

The gates slowly began to slide apart, allowing space for his truck to slip through. Westin eased his foot onto the accelerator, his heart in his throat as he drove the quarter-mile or so up into the circle drive. He knew every inch of this house. He knew the main staircase was decorated with carvings that depicted the family crest; he knew the chandelier in the dining room was purchased in France in the late 1870s. He knew there was a dumb waiter in the butler’s pantry, and a hidden door behind the laundry room that used to go down into the root cellar. He knew more about this house than he knew about the main house back at Golden Sphinx—and he’d never set foot in it a day in his life.

He was about to. He was about to step through those stately doors for the first time.

Almost on cue, Rena came out the front door dressed in a pretty flowered dress, her hair done up in one of those neat, wide buns. He lifted a hand to her, glancing at himself in the mirror before he got out of the truck. He straightened the thin bolo tie Clint had allowed him to borrow, tugging at the sleeves of his white shirt, making sure everything was straight and still wrinkle-free. He’d ironed his own shirt for the first time in nearly a decade, and it was stiff with the liquid starch he’d used too liberally. But it looked good. He could see that when he stepped out and checked again in the side mirror. He looked like a cowboy ready to head off to church, which

was the best compliment he could think of.

He took off his hat as he approached the front steps, brushing his fingers through his carefully washed and brushed hair, aware that he probably now had hat lines. He shouldn't have put the hat on, but some habits couldn't be broken quite that easily.

Rena practically jumped into his arms as he approached her. He turned his head when she reached up to plant a kiss, accepting it chastely on his cheek rather than her originally intended destination. Her slight body was warm, but she was already shivering in the cold air.

“We should go inside.”

“Yes, yes, we should.” She backed away, blushing as she smiled at him, her hand slipping into his. “Come on. Momma was about to ring the dinner bell.”

Westin followed her into the house, not disappointed by the gorgeous marble floors that he knew had been built with marble shipped over specially from Italy. The walls were a darker color than he'd expected, but he realized he should have expected they would have been painted a few times over the years. Rena helped him out of his coat and hung it in the closet, smiling again as she gestured for him to follow her into the sitting room.

It was a massive room, decorated in furniture that was both fashionable and functional. Dominic Mollohan was sitting in a wide, straight-backed chair, an iPad on his knee. Mrs. Mollohan was on the couch, a glass of wine clutched between both her hands. She smiled as she watched them come into the room, her eyes moving over the pleasure in her daughter's eyes before moving to Westin. He recognized Rena in her features—the same wide-set eyes, the same perky little nose. And that smile. It was obvious where Rena got her good looks.

“Momma. Daddy. This is Westin Clark, my friend I was telling you about.”

Mrs. Mollohan was the first to stand, her glass left on a low table as she approached, offering a quick hand. “It’s lovely to meet you, Mr. Clark.”

“You, too, Mrs. Mollohan. Rena speaks very highly of you.”

The older woman winked at her daughter. “That’s what I taught her to do.”

But it was Dominic Mollohan who drew Westin’s attention. He was slow to stand, seemingly reluctant to greet his daughter and her latest conquest. When he finally turned his attention to the younger man, Westin found himself studying his features, looking for something familiar. He found it, or thought he did, just as he thought he’d seen it in photographs that were decades old. He was just as he’d expected to find him—tall and dark and arrogant. The kind of man who thought he ruled the world, because he did. At least, his little part of it.

“Daddy, come say hi,” Rena pouted.

“Hello,” Mollohan said, lowering his head slightly as though in a bow that felt more condescending than welcoming.

“Daddy!” Rena shot a look at her mother who gently grasped her husband’s arm and drew him closer to the small party. “Be polite, Dom,” the older woman said.

“You work at the Golden Sphinx, don’t you?”

Westin lowered his head just slightly. “I do. Have for three years.”

“You knew Asa Howard, then.”

“I did.”

“Man was an ass. Stole three hundred acres of the Rocking D and refused to give them back.” Mollohan shook his head before skirting Westin and his own daughter in favor of the bar. He poured himself something dark, a brandy maybe, and swallowed a generous slug before topping it off. “Isn’t dinner ready, Carolyn?”

Mrs. Mollohan blushed with what Westin could only imagine was embarrassment, but nodded. “It is. We should go in.”

“Sorry,” Rena whispered near Westin’s ear. “He can be difficult sometimes.”

“It’s all right. He’ll warm to me. Everyone does eventually.”

“I’m sure he will,” Rena said with a bright smile. She tucked her arm into Westin’s and paraded into the dining room like it was the first time she’d been escorted by a gentleman. Westin wondered if it was. If that didn’t make a man feel like an ass, he wasn’t sure what would.

The four of them settled on opposite sides of the table, forced to stare at one another as a member of the kitchen staff delivered their salads on beautiful white china plates. Westin glanced at Rena, watching which fork she picked up, not ready to look completely like an uncouth fool.

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“Westin, you said you’ve worked for Golden Sphinx for three years? What did you do before that?” Mrs. Mollohan asked.

“I worked the oil fields in Texas for a few years after high school, before settling back in Denver to attend college.”

“You have a degree?” she asked, the surprise not completely hidden.

“Yes, ma’am. I have a bachelor’s in philosophy.”

There was no hiding the surprise on Mrs. Mollohan’s face this time. She stared openly at Westin like she couldn’t quite believe what he’d said. “Philosophy? As in ethics and critical thinking?”

“Yes, ma’am. We studied many things in depth, such as history and ethics in the law as well as society. In several classes we had very heated discussions over human rights and the legality of a government deciding whether women should be forced to carry an unwanted child.” He rolled his head slightly on his shoulders. “It was quite interesting listening to opinions from such a diverse group of people as those who were in my classes.”

“And what was your opinion? On the whole abortion thing?” Rena asked, smiling sweetly at him, her hand sneaking onto his thigh. Westin quickly arrested her hand, keeping it closer to his knee than anywhere else.

“Well, that’s a complicated subject.” Westin stole a glance at Dominic Mollohan. He was studying his phone, clearly more interested in something on the screen than the

conversation or even the food. “I believe a woman has a right to do whatever she wants with her body. Men shouldn’t tell a woman what to do with her body. A man shouldn’t have an opinion until that child is born.” Westin stared at Mollohan as he spoke those words, willing him to look up, to listen. Willing him to recognize his own actions in those words.

He didn’t.

“That’s very enlightened, Westin,” Mrs. Mollohan said. “What other things did you discuss in your classes?”

He rolled his shoulders, falling back a little as Mollohan continued to stare at his phone. “We discussed all the good oldies—Plato and Locke and Nietzsche.”

“Nietzsche?” Mrs. Mollohan looked impressed. “I read some of his work when I was in school, but I’m afraid it was a little over my head.”

Westin tilted his head to one side, adopting a thoughtful expression. “‘Happiness is the feeling that power increases—that resistance is being overcome.’ Or something like that.”

Mrs. Mollohan clapped. “Very good. I always wanted to be the kind of person who could quote a Nietzsche or even JFK, but I could never remember those sorts of things very well.”

“You underestimate yourself, Momma,” Rena said. “You can remember who’s feuding with who, and who just filed for divorce so probably shouldn’t sit together at a dinner party.”

“Oh, that’s just silly stuff. I mean the important things.”

“I think even Nietzsche would agree that people getting along at a dinner party is very important,” Westin argued, earning a smile from Rena.

Their salad plates were taken away and replaced by bigger plates covered with a generous cut of prime rib and a creamy dollop of potatoes. Rena leaned close as they waited for the kitchen help to leave the room and whispered in his ear, “You’re charming the pants off her.”

Westin glanced over at Mrs. Mollohan and caught her shooting her husband an irritated glance as the man continued to scroll through something on his phone. It wasn’t as satisfying to Westin to see the unhappy state of the Mollohan marriage as he might have thought it would be. He felt sorry for Mrs. Mollohan. She seemed like a perfectly reasonable woman, patient and kind. She didn’t deserve to be ignored and talked down to the way Mollohan had done since the moment Westin had walked into this fabled home.

“Dominic, darling,” Mrs. Mollohan said, “why don’t you put your phone away.”

“It’s important. A text from Petey.” Mollohan shot his wife a dirty look. “One of us has to work around here to keep you in all your finery.”

Mrs. Mollohan blushed, her eyes falling to her plate. After a moment, she carefully picked up her fork and touched it to her potatoes, but it was quite clear she wasn’t much in the mood to eat.

“Where did you go to college, Mrs. Mollohan?” Westin asked after a few heavy, silent moments.

She looked up, her eyes telling him without words how grateful she was for a man to take notice of her. She smiled much like her daughter, tilting her head slightly, her dark hair falling over her shoulder like he imagined it must have done when she was

Rena's age and flirting with all the boys who must have orbited around her.

"Northwestern," she said with some pride. "I have a bachelor's in literature with a minor in creative writing."

"Really? Did you want to be a novelist?"

She blushed. "Once. When I was very young and naïve. But your dreams tend to change when life happens."

"I understand that. I was never really sure what I wanted to do with my life. I was just going from one thing to another, doing what felt good at the time. I'm still not really sure this is what I'll be doing ten years from now."

"With a degree in philosophy, I imagine you must not be as challenged as you could be on the ranch."

"Oh, I don't know. Some of the boys on Golden Sphinx are actually quite intellectual. One of our guys has a master's in mathematics."

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“No kidding?”

“He taught at the university level for a short time, intending to get his PhD. But he changed his mind, decided he wasn’t cut out for the academic life.”

“Well, you’re just a bunch of Rhodes Scholars over there, aren’t you?”

Westin smiled, his eyes jumping to Mollohan once more. The man was still glued to his phone like the only thing in the world that mattered to him was written on that screen.

“This is a lovely meal, Mrs. Mollohan.”

She smiled again. “I can’t take all the credit for it, but I’ll pass your compliments along to our cook.”

“I’m sure you had more to do with it than you’re implying.”

“Momma is very hands-on around here,” Rena agreed. “Nothing happens in this house that she doesn’t know about and didn’t put her stamp of approval on.”

“It’s all just part of running a proper home.”

Mollohan grunted. “It’s all just fluff. Women’s work.”

Without looking up, with just those meanly uttered words, Mollohan deflated his wife just like he’d pricked a balloon with a needle. The light left her eyes, the smile leapt

from her mouth, and her whole body seemed to cave in right in front of Westin. His hands curled into fists, the urge to jump over that table almost too much to ignore.

Silence fell heavy over the room, both of the Mollohan women silent as they picked at their food. Westin touched Rena's cheek lightly, just trying to draw that smile back out. She looked up, a sadness that was old and familiar filling her pretty eyes. She mouthed the word sorry, a blush burning across her cheeks.

"Don't. Don't apologize for his rude behavior," he said low enough that she didn't have to worry about her dad hearing. "It's not your fault."

She kissed his cheek lightly. "Thank you."

"Tell us about your family, Westin," Mrs. Mollohan said a bit later as the dinner dishes were exchanged for dessert, a lovely fruit tort with a single scoop of ice cream.

"My mother's from this area, actually," he said around a bite of the sweet vanilla ice cream. "The other side of Milsap."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Is that how you ended up here?"

"Yes. She talked about the ranches out here so often that I just felt like I wanted to see them for myself."

"Your mother must be so proud."

"She would be, but she passed away a few years ago." Westin set down his fork as

his eyes moved over Mollohan again. “Cancer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Westin lowered his head slightly. “It was difficult to watch someone who’d worked so hard and so selflessly all my life to take care of me waste away as she did. I’d promised her the world, you know? When I made my fortune, I was going to set her up in a big, beautiful house, give her everything she might have had if I hadn’t ruined her dreams. But the cancer had other ideas.”

“I’m sure your mother wasn’t expecting anything from you. She did it because she loved you.”

Westin smiled. “I know she did. Worked three jobs sometimes just to give me every opportunity. I went to a good school, played sports, had everything I could have ever wanted. I didn’t even know we were poor until some kid told me, and I asked my mother about it. But she, like everything else she always did, told me that we were rich in love and that was all that mattered.”

Mollohan snorted. “Sounds like something someone who didn’t have anything would say.”

Westin’s fists clenched again. “She worked here, you know. Years ago.”

“Did she?” Mrs. Mollohan asked, curiosity written all over her face. “When?”

“Back in the early nineties. She was a ranch hand, one of only three women who got jobs on the ranches out here back then. She was proud of that fact.”

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“What was her name?” Mollohan demanded, finally paying attention.

“Heidi,” Westin said, watching the older man’s face closely for any sign of recognition. “Heidi Clark.”

Something slipped across his face, a ghost of comprehension. But it was gone almost before it arrived, his mask of disinterest still firmly in place.

“She mentioned you a time or two, sir,” Westin added. “Said you worked alongside the ranch hands at the time, learning the business from the ground up.”

Mollohan didn’t comment, but his wife nodded. “Dominic did do that. His father wanted his sons to know what it was like to run the cattle. Said it was important they knew every job on the ranch before they took it over.” She glanced at her husband. “You told me once about the woman you worked with. Said she was surprisingly good at the job.”

“Yeah, well, she took off, left Father high and dry during the mating season. You can’t just be good; you have to be reliable, too.”

“She had good reason for leaving,” Westin said, his jaw clenched. “Really good reason.”

“Oh?” Mrs. Mollohan asked as her husband glared across the table at Westin. “What was that?”

Mollohan slapped his hand on the table, forcing all eyes to jump to him. There was a

storm brewing on his face, lightning burning in his eyes as he stared at Westin. “I think Mr. Clark and I would like to retire to the study for some brandy. If you ladies will excuse us.”

He stood before his wife or daughter could protest. Rena reached for Westin’s hand as he set his napkin on the table and began to stand.

“It’s all right,” she said, patting her knee lightly before he stood and rounded the table, more than ready to follow Mollohan. He’d been waiting for this moment for a very long time. All his life, maybe.

Mollohan led the way down a long corridor, pushing open double doors that revealed a dark room filled with expensive furniture all in wood and dark fabric, a room designed for a CEO. There were shelves covered in books on one wall, trophies in cases on another. A portrait of the family graced the space above the fireplace, a cliché if Westin had ever seen one. He had to admit, though, it was a beautiful rendition of Rena and her mother.

Westin stood before the fireplace, his hands in his pockets as he studied the crackling fire that burned there. The words he’d practiced since the moment he’d decided he would one day stand in this room ran through his mind, so well-practiced that he couldn’t imagine they wouldn’t come out perfectly.

“What did she tell you about me?”

That, however, was not the first question he had anticipated Mollohan asking.

He turned, found Mollohan pouring two glasses of brandy as promised. He crossed the room, holding one out to Westin. He took it more out of a momentary sense of confusion than anything else.

“I’m sure she told you all about me, about this house, about the fortune she missed out on having.”

“Missed out on?”

“She was a beautiful woman, your mother.” Mollohan took a deep swallow of the brandy. “Those blue eyes... a man could get lost in them for days.”

“She believed you loved her.”

“I think I believed it at the time. But don’t we all? That first big romance, the first summer fling that you want to last forever but know can’t?” Mollohan tilted his head to one side. “She tell you I was your father?”

Again, Mollohan had blown Westin’s script out of the water. He was supposed to deny it, pretend he hadn’t known. He was supposed to argue so that Westin could get all righteous, tell him exactly where he could go. He wasn’t supposed to admit it.

Mollohan strolled over to the couch and took a seat, crossing one leg over the other with a sigh. “We were both young. I was twenty-four, just home from college, sowing my oats. My father sends me out to the bunkhouse, tells me to live with this group of sweaty ranch hands and this one beautiful, blue-eyed beauty. It was like giving Rena a credit card and telling her to go to town. I couldn’t resist.” He even smiled this self-satisfied smile, like an older generation telling themselves that boys will be boys. “But I wasn’t the only one. She tell you that, too?”

Westin stood very still, that sniffer of brandy between both his hands. He stared into the dark liquid, but saw only his mother’s face, her tired smile as she lay in that hospital bed, ready to go wherever it is the terminally ill go when their bodies can’t fight any longer.

Don't be angry with him, Westin. He meant well.

He didn't mean well. He was just a rich boy who thought he could have anything he wanted.

"You gave her a thousand dollars and told her to take care of it."

"What was that?" Mollohan asked, tilting his head slightly. "Speak up, boy."

"You gave her a thousand dollars and told her to take care of it," he repeated, his eyes coming up slowly from the rim of that glass. "You told her I was an inconvenience because you were already engaged to another woman. Told her it was out of your control, that your father had set it up and you had to do what your father said or he'd give the ranch to your younger brother. Right?"

Mollohan had the nerve to chuckle. "Is that what I told her? I told so many lies to so many girls back then, I couldn't keep them all straight."

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“Do you remember telling her you loved her? That she was the only woman you’d ever loved and would ever love?”

Mollohan leaned forward and set his drink on the small coffee table in front of him before twisting his head to look at Westin. “You’re a young man. Surely you’ve told a woman lies to get her into bed.”

“No, I haven’t. I haven’t needed to.”

“Well, good for you.” Mollohan chuckled softly. “Those of us here in the real world sometimes have to use a little charm, some white lies, to get what we want. You use what works, you know?”

“Which is it, then? You had to lie to my mother to get her into bed? Or she was so easy that every man on the ranch had her, so you just jumped into line?”

Mollohan sat back again, rolling his shoulders with such nonchalance that it physically hurt Westin to see it, to realize just how callous this man really was.

“A little bit of both, I suppose.”

Westin nodded slowly. “That’s not how she told it to me. Her story was more of a romance, a young man whose future was out of his hands because of his father’s money and power. A young girl who took what she could from the only man she’d ever love. Hell, to hear her tell it, she was happy to take that money and leave town, because that huge sum you offered her proved that you loved her, that you would have run off with her if you could have.” Westin grunted softly. “She made every

excuse she could for you, building you up for me like it was some sort of fairy tale. And maybe it was. Maybe she was just so good she couldn't see how truly rotten you really were."

Mollohan didn't seem fazed by anything Westin had to say. "I think we all want to believe our mothers are angels. Doesn't make it true."

Westin turned back to the fire and set the glass he'd been holding on the mantel, afraid he'd break it between his hands because he could no longer deny his fingers the desire to curl into tight fists. He shoved his hands into his pockets to keep them to himself, afraid if he didn't, he might throw a punch he'd regret.

"She used to tell me stories about the Mollohan family, like the one about the man who started this ranch before the Civil War, or the one about the tradition of passing the ranch down to the firstborn son."

"All things she picked up working here. All common knowledge."

"You didn't tell her any of that?"

"Why would I?"

"Because you told her you wanted to marry her."

"Kind of hard to do when I was already engaged to another woman."

Westin shook his head. "She didn't know that until it was too late—because you waited until it was too late, until she had already given in to you."

"Look, boy, our mothers all tell us stories to make them look like fairy-tale princesses in our eyes. No parent wants his or her kid to know the truth about their past,

especially when that past involves a few indiscretions. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Why would I be ashamed of my mother falling in love with a man who promised her the world?"

"I told you; she got around. Any of the men on the ranch back in those days could be your father. Just because I spent a few nights rolling in the hay with her, doesn't mean a thing."

"Except that you are my father."

"There's no proof of that."

Now they were back on script. Westin was prepared for that argument. He tugged a narrow box out of his back pocket and tossed it onto the coffee table, knocking over the sniffer that held the remnants of Mollohan's brandy.

"DNA test. All you have to do is swab the inside of your cheek."

Mollohan pulled back from the narrow box like it was a snake that might bite him. "You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

"My mother wasn't a liar. She said you were the only man she'd been with, the only man she cared about. Hell, it was you she was thinking of as she lay dying in the hospital. Told me not to be angry with you. That you'd only done what you had to do." Westin snorted. "She died of uterine cancer, you know. I always kind of thought it was you, the seed you'd planted inside her that just kept rotting until it destroyed her. Her refusal to see you for what you really were."

Mollohan got to his feet and snatched up the DNA test, tossing it into the fire as though that would end the discussion. "You didn't know your mother the way I did,

boy. She slept with every man on this ranch.” Mollohan snickered, the sound like nails on a chalkboard. “Hell,” he said with a slow drawl, “she might even have done my father for all I know! There were quite a few times when I found them alone in this very room. Maybe you were conceived right there on that desk. He liked to bend his women over that thing; said it was—”

That was all Westin could take. He spun on Mollohan and threw a punch, catching the older man across the jaw, sending him stumbling backward. Mollohan touched his jaw once his momentum had stopped, glaring at Westin as he checked his fingers for blood.

“That’s the difference between me and you, boy. I can control my temper.”

“Can you?” Westin rubbed his hand as he stared at Mollohan. “I told her what kind of man you were. Told her a real man doesn’t get a woman pregnant and then hand her money to take care of the problem. But she refused to see you the way I did, the way I do. She kept those rose-colored glasses on until the day she died.”

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“If she could see us now, she’d been ashamed of you.”

“No. She’d be shocked by you.” Westin took a step toward Mollohan and the older man moved backward, clearly not anxious to get into Westin’s personal space again. “She always thought that all I’d have to do was show up, tell you I was your son, and you’d welcome me with open arms. She thought you’d hand me the keys to Rocking D, teach me the ropes the same way your father taught you. It was this image of the two of us running the cows together that she was talking about the day she died.”

“The keys to Rocking D?” Mollohan spat, a thick glob of spittle flying across the room and landing on the glass of the fireplace screen. “I don’t fucking care who your father is. No bastard is getting his hands on my ranch.”

“That’s what I told her you’d say.” Westin shook his head as he shoved his hands in his pockets again. “She told me to come up to the front door and knock, like I had every right to be here. You know what? I applied for a fucking job here and you never even called me. So, I studied you, tried to figure out the best way to get close to you. Three years I’ve worked at Golden Sphinx, learning about you, trying to figure you out. And then Rena just stumbled into my path one day, and I knew she was the best way in.” Westin looked down his nose at Mollohan even as the man’s face turned a dangerous shade of crimson. “All that time studying you and I realized there are only two things you give a damn about: this ranch and that girl.”

“Stay away from my daughter!” Mollohan cried, finally showing some life as he charged Westin. It was a fool’s errand, of course, since Westin was half Mollohan’s age, and more agile than he probably ever had been. Westin stepped easily out of his path, and Mollohan nearly charged right into the fire. He caught himself and turned,

throwing a blind punch that connected with Westin's shoulder. The impact wasn't half as intense, however, as the impact of the blow Westin threw that caught Mollohan in the stomach. He fell forward, bent over. Westin caught his head and punched him again, twice more, in the breadbasket before he stepped back and allowed the older man to fall to the floor.

"You know what, old man?" Westin asked as he bent low, using the toe of his boot to lift Mollohan's face just enough to see his eyes. "I came here for my mother. I came here because she believed in you so much that I wanted to give you a chance. But the more I learned about you, the more I knew you were just another spoiled rich boy who thought he could have whatever he wanted no matter the cost to anyone else. My mother thought I deserved this place, your money and your legacy, but I don't. My mother gave me more than enough. She raised me to be a better man than you will ever be."

There was fear in Mollohan's eyes. Westin thought he'd feel some sort of satisfaction if and when he saw that, but he didn't. All he felt was tired, and damned disappointed. But he wasn't disappointed for himself. He was disappointed for his mother. All that time she'd truly believed Dominic Mollohan was a good man, a caring man. But he was just a user, just like every other man who'd ever used and abused a good woman.

"I'm better than you," Westin repeated as he jerked his foot away, causing Mollohan's head to bounce onto the floor.

Westin stormed out of the house, barely remembering to snag his jacket as he passed through the entry hall. He heard Rena call after him, but he didn't stop to acknowledge her. How could he? The poor girl believed she was in love with him, and here he was, her half-brother.

Shameless. He'd wanted so desperately to get close to Mollohan that he'd used his

innocent daughter. What did that make him?

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he wasn't any better than his father.

Chapter 9

Clint approached Westin cautiously, his eyes taking in everything about the scene in front of him. It probably wasn't every day he saw a grown man sitting on a snow-dusted sidewalk in his Sunday best, a bottle of whiskey dangling between his legs. Or maybe it was. Westin had no idea what Clint did in his free time. But he did know that Clint was the only one he trusted enough to call in this moment, the only one he knew could talk him down off the ledge he'd stepped out onto.

"I'm not sitting down there," Clint announced, choosing instead to lean against the front of Westin's truck. "I don't need any extra moisture on my ass, thank you very much."

"I get it. No problem."

Still assessing the situation, Clint stood silently, waiting for Westin to open the conversation.

How do you open this kind of conversation? So, my biological father is a callous ass who not only denied being my father, but also basically called my mother a whore and threw her completely under the bus? Didn't seem like a good start to any conversation.

"You have a bottle," Clint finally said, gesturing with the toe of his boot. "But it's not open."

"I've been thinking pretty seriously about remedying that."

“Why haven’t you?”

Westin tilted his head as he studied the bottle he’d paid nearly twenty bucks for, a bottle he knew he shouldn’t have bought while he was doing it. A bottle that would take him down a dark road he didn’t want to travel. Again.

“That’s a good question.”

“Is this about Lea?”

Westin snorted. A lot of things had been about Lea these last few days, and if any woman was likely to send Westin cascading into a bottle, it would probably be her. No other woman had ever gotten under his skin the way she did. And the lies she was telling only made it that much worse because there was this part of him that didn’t care, that wanted to be with her even though he knew she was trouble for his peace of mind. He needed his life simple. It was complicated enough being here, determined to confront his father.

But he’d done that, hadn’t he? He’d accomplished his goal, all the good it did him.

He shook his head. “I can’t even begin to explain what this is about.”

“Give it a try.”

Westin wrapped both hands around the bottle, his taste buds tingling at the idea of savoring its contents. He knew exactly what it would taste like, knew how it would burn going down his throat. He knew the calming buzz it would give him, the deeper numbness that would come with more. It probably wouldn’t take as much for that life-saving oblivion to settle over him, not as much as it had taken back when he couldn’t function without a drink. And it would feel damn good to slide down that hole again.

“I promised her I wouldn’t do this.” He shook his head as he studied the bottle. “I promised that I would focus on the future, that I would let it all go and move forward. I let her down.”

“Who?”

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Westin rolled his head, still staring at that bottle, his fingers itching to pull the paper from around the screw-top lid. “My mother.”

Clint knew how Westin’s mother had died. There were long nights during the spring spent watching over heifers about to give birth for the first time. Nothing to do but talk, and sometimes those conversations could get pretty personal. It was how Clint knew about Westin’s trouble with alcohol; how he knew when Westin called him tonight and said he was in trouble exactly what it was causing the problem. Clint was a quiet, peaceful kind of guy. It was impossible not to open up to him.

Westin ran his thumb over the top of the bottle. “She used to tell me stories. I think she thought she was giving me a piece of my father by telling me about him. When I was little, I drank it all up, swallowing every word like it was the hottest thing around. When I got older, I started to see the cracks, started to see what an ass he really was. Who hands a woman a thousand dollars and tells her to ‘take care of the problem’ when she tells him she’s pregnant?” He shook his head, the anger he thought he’d left back at Rocking D flaring up again. “She thought he loved her, but he was only using her, and I knew that. I saw that, despite the rosy shine she put on the story. I knew. But I still had to go and prove it.”

Clint was quiet, absorbing what Westin had said. Hell, Westin was still absorbing it all. He’d known exactly how it would go, but he hadn’t realized how badly he’d been hoping he was wrong until it was over. All this time he’d tried to find a way to get close to Dominic Mollohan, all this time he’d struggled with the words he’d use when he told him who he was. All this time he’d played the scenario over and over in his head, imagining worst-case scenario, best-case. Something in the middle. But not once had he allowed himself to believe it would go exactly how he’d known deep in

his heart it would.

“She was the sweetest woman I’ve ever known. How could he do that to her?”

Clint dropped down onto the curb beside Westin, obviously no longer worried about a wet butt. He leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees. “Some people just aren’t capable of compassion.”

“I saw how he was with his wife. Nearly thirty years of marriage and he talked to her like she was a servant, like she meant no more to him than the girl who washes his underwear. I should have known then. Should have walked out of the house then.”

“You had a right to tell him the truth.”

“And he had a right to keep a civil tongue and not disparage my mother’s reputation. Did he honestly think I could just stand there and let him do that?”

Clint gestured to Westin’s ungloved hand, the bruises that were just beginning to show on his knuckles. “Looks like you didn’t.”

“No, sir.”

“Good.”

Westin snorted, surprised by Clint’s response. Normally he’d reprimand any Golden Sphinx man caught fighting. It was unprofessional and un-Christian. Golden Sphinx was nothing if it wasn’t a reputable ranch that operated under strong Christian morals.

“Fuck him,” Clint said. “He missed out on getting to know you, missed out on being a part of your life. That’s his loss, not yours. Don’t let some jackass set you back.” Clint rested his hand on Westin’s wrist. “Don’t let his indifference put you back in

the bottle.”

Westin nodded, setting the bottle on the ground between his feet. “I don’t know what I’m going to do now. This was my whole reason for coming up here. I turned down a position in a master’s program, turned down five job offers.” He shook his head. “I’ve been so focused on this, on proving myself right, that I made it my whole world. I don’t have anything left.”

“You must have something, or you wouldn’t have called me. You would have just sat here and drunk that bottle until some cop was scraping you up off the sidewalk.”

“Maybe.”

“There’s no maybe about it. You wanted me to come talk you down.”

“Maybe,” Westin said again. He leaned forward, stretched out his back as he continued to stare at that bottle. “But why did I buy it? What am I doing here?”

“You just need something else to focus on, Brother.”

Westin shook his head. “There’s nothing else to focus on. My life is a damn mess. I don’t even know what I want, what I should do.”

“I know what you should do. You should help me open this security firm.”

“You’re serious about that?”

Clint nodded slowly, his expression thoughtful. “I think I am. I’ve talked to Miss Dulcie, and she’s behind it. She even offered to give us some start-up money. We don’t really need it, but she’s insisting.”

“What about the tourists and everything else on the ranch?”

“I’ve already assigned most of the tourist duties to the boys in D bunkhouse. You can still do the chuck-wagon thing when you’re available, but everything else is under control. And the rest of the chores, well, there’s more than seventy employees on the ranch, and we’ve got everything down to a near perfect science. I don’t think it’ll make a difference if two or three of us are absent at a time. We’ll just have to figure out how to do both jobs without causing one or the other to suffer.”

Westin nodded, his eyes still on that bottle. “But what do we know about providing personal security for people? And who the hell out here will need personal protection?”

“You’d be surprised how many of those tourists ask about security services when they book their reservations. Rich people, Brother. They’re all insane and they all think someone’s out to get them.”

“You mean I’m going to have to follow some rich asshole around for a living?”

“It pays well. I looked it up on the Internet. People will pay between five and seven hundred dollars a day for that sort of thing. Seeing as how you only make about a hundred dollars a day now, that’s pretty impressive.”

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“Yeah. Can’t shake a stick at that.”

“And Lea helped, some. She told me we don’t need special certification or anything.”

“How would Lea know?”

Clint was quiet for a moment, maybe worried his answer would push Westin to pick up that bottle again. But Clint couldn’t lie if his life depended on it. “She’s a cop. A DEA agent.”

Westin cursed under his breath, rocking back on the ice-cold sidewalk into a small drift of snow. “What the hell!”

“Yeah. Crazy, huh?”

“And that guy? Fang?”

“He’s some gang member she was working for in an undercover operation. She stole some information from his computer and he’s trying to get it back.”

“That’s what she has in that necklace?”

“A memory card.” Clint ran his hands over his thighs, his attention as hard on that bottle as Westin’s. “I think she’s been compromised. Someone’s feeding this guy information, and I think it has to do with whoever planted that box on Miss Dulcie’s property.”

“The dead drop.”

“It was something Lea knew about because she recognized it from a case she worked a few years back.” He rolled his head on his shoulders. “I think this is a lot bigger than even she appreciates. I think someone wanted her to come to this area because someone who can make her disappear is here.”

For the first time since he bought it, Westin forgot about the bottle. He studied his boss, reading his face and not liking what it had to say. “You think someone wants Lea gone? Like, dead?”

“I might be wrong. But I think so.”

“You’re seldom wrong when you set your mind on something.” Westin took off his hat and slapped it against his hip before reaching up to run a hand over his head. “Hell, that’s not good.”

“No. We need to figure out who is behind that box as quickly as we can.”

“I’m telling you, that one guy was wearing a Rocking D patch.”

“You’re sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

Clint reached for the bottle and set it casually on the sidewalk, just on the other side of him, and out of reach of Westin. “I’ve got a friend in Denver who works with computers. I’m going to call him in the morning, see if he can enhance that video, maybe get us a good look at a face or a jacket, something we can definitively use to identify one of those guys.”

“And Lea? How are we going to keep her safe?”

“I’ve ordered a lockdown of Golden Sphinx. Four guys are running the fence all night; there’s two guys on the front gate. And Bowie’s standing guard outside the foreman’s cabin.”

“She’s DEA. Why don’t we call her people?”

“I’m pretty convinced her partner’s involved. And if that’s true, there’s no telling who else at the DEA might be involved.”

“What about Sheriff Reeves?”

Clint nodded. “As soon as we have something concrete to give her.”

Westin got to his feet. “We should get back, then. If something happens, I want to be there.”

“I thought you would.” Clint stood and scooped up the bottle of whiskey. “What about this?”

“Take it to the bunkhouse. I’m sure the boys wouldn’t mind killing it for me.”

Clint slapped him on the arm. “I’m sure they wouldn’t.” He stepped off the curb and headed over to his truck. “Follow me?”

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“In a minute. I need to pick something up first.”

Westin could see the look of concern on Clint’s face as he headed away from his truck toward the liquor-cum-convenience store. He waved him off, smiling. “No more booze. This is something else.”

Clint just nodded, perhaps deciding he had to trust his friend. “Meet you back there.”

Westin watched Clint drive off before he ducked into the store. Less than five minutes later, he was behind the wheel and on his way back to the ranch. He had to admit it was comforting to see the two guys on the front gate, not to mention the shotgun one of them had hanging in the back window of his truck. He’d never been one to worry much about security—always figured he could take care of himself—but it was different now.

He bypassed the barn and the main bunkhouse, taking the trail that led to the foreman’s cabin. He could see Bowie in the cab of his truck, the engine running and probably the heater, too. There was a ghost light that he discovered was the glow of Bowie’s iPad when he approached the window. The man was reading, probably some biography. He liked biographies of politicians and world leaders.

Westin rapped on the window and Bowie looked up, a fog engulfing his entire countenance. It took him a second to even identify the source of the noise.

“Westin? What are you doing here?”

“How is she?”

Bowie glanced up at the cabin. “Haven’t heard a peep since I got here.”

“Are you sure she’s in there?”

“Positive. Spoke to her when Remington left so that she knew I was out here.” He set his iPad down on his lap. “And she brought me some tea a couple of hours ago.” He indicated a cup sitting in the console. “Chamomile.”

“Okay, Sister.”

Bowie sniffed. “You’re just jealous she never brought you anything.”

“Oh, she brought me more than you can imagine.” Westin smacked the side of the truck. “Go back to your book.”

Westin walked up to the front of the house, practically jumping over the steps to the porch. He knocked, three quick, successive knocks, and leaned against the doorframe as he waited. It was a good minute before he heard the rattle of the chain, the scrape of the deadbolt being undone. And then she was there, those amber eyes a little puffy from sleep.

“Westin? Is everything okay?”

“Everything is... I brought you something.” He held up the plastic bag from the convenience store. “Thought you might appreciate it.”

“Yeah? What could that be?”

He rolled his head, unable to keep a small smile from creeping its way to his lips. “Just a little something you asked for a few days ago.”

She frowned, slipping the bag from his fingers. She peeked inside, and her cheeks warmed, the color darkening for a moment, then disappearing, draining right there in front of him, like someone had pulled a drain plug.

“Funny,” she said in clipped tones, handing the bag back to him.

“Lea—”

She slammed the door, leaving him there on the freezing porch, wondering how something that was supposed to be funny had twisted so completely for reasons he wasn’t terribly clear on. He tried the knob and found the door unlocked, his momentum pushing him hard through the entrance. He hadn’t expected it to open.

Lea was pacing in front of the couch. She reached up and ran her hands over her face, pulling up the little T-shirt she was wearing. Her hips, the wide band of her panties, and her lower stomach were exposed for a moment, distracting Westin for an instant. Or maybe a little longer than an instant.

“What’d you do that for?”

She jumped. She must not have heard him come in. “Hell, Westin! Don’t do that!”

“Why did you do that?”

“What? Did you think I was going invite you inside, shimmy out of my clothes, and let you have your way with me?” She shook her head even as she grabbed her long braid and began to untwist it between her elegant fingers. “You yell at me for putting everyone on the ranch in danger, and then you come back in the middle of the night and expect me to welcome you with open arms?”

“You should have told me what was really going on with you.”

She paused, her fingers still for a long moment as she studied him. She whispered something under her breath he didn't quite catch, a curse perhaps. "He told you, didn't he?" She laughed, that humorless laugh he'd heard escape her lips before. "That's what I get for trusting some cowboy! Can't keep his damn mouth shut!"

“Don’t blame Clint.”

“Why not? He was supposed to keep all this stuff to himself!”

“If I don’t know what’s going on, I can’t protect you.”

“Yeah? And where have you been all night?” She tilted her head, her newly freed hair falling around her face, softening her features in a way that threatened to steal his breath. “These boys, none of them can keep their damn mouths shut. Bowie told me you were having dinner with some girl and her family.”

“Bowie doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“Then you weren’t gone? You weren’t on a date?”

“It wasn’t a date.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it wasn’t. For you. What about the innocent little girl you were with? Is that how you like them, dumb and naïve?”

Westin tossed the convenience-store bag on the kitchen counter and crossed toward her, stopping when he reached the back of the couch, allowing the long piece of furniture to act like a line in the sand between them.

“You’re not the only one with issues,” he told her. “I didn’t exactly have a great night, either. I just came over here because I heard what was going on, what Clint thinks is happening, and I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Yeah? Didn’t know you cared.”

“I’m beginning to wonder why.”

“Asshole,” she muttered, running her fingers through her hair, catching them on a knot or two. “I just wanted to have a little fun, blow off some steam. But this... things have gotten so out of control, the pressure’s too high. I’m going to blow, and I’m going to take everyone on this ranch with me.”

“That’s not true.”

“Sure, it is. You were right. I never should have come here, never should have put all these people in this position.” She shook her head, beginning to pace again, running her fingers so roughly through her hair that she actually pulled out a few more strands than was probably normal. “Never should have come here.”

“Lea, you—”

“That’s not even my damn name!” She spun on him, her eyes wild even as big tears rolled down her cheeks. “You don’t know the first thing about me!”

Westin stormed around the couch and grabbed her arms, jerked her toward him. “Then tell me. Stop filling me up with these lies and be honest for once in your life!”

“I can’t! Don’t you understand? I don’t even know who I am anymore!”

“Then that makes two of us.”

She tried to pull away from him. “Don’t. I can’t do this, not tonight.”

“Why? Because someone you trusted betrayed you? Well, wake up, sweetheart.

You're not the only person in the world that's happened to." He grabbed her jaw, forced her head up so he could look her in the eye. "My father denies he's even my father. Called my mother a slut." He shook his head. "If that's not betrayal, I don't know what is."

She stopped fighting him, but she pulled her jaw from his grip. She stared at the front of his jacket for a long, silent moment, only her feet moving, doing this bouncing motion on the balls of her feet like she simply couldn't sit still. Then she sort of folded inward, resting her forehead against his chest as she sighed, her whole body molding toward his. Westin slipped his hands down her back, wrapping his arms around her as he bundled her closer.

"Is this a contest? To see whose life is more screwed-up?"

He chuckled. "That's what it's turning into, isn't it?"

She sighed, pulling back a step to look up at him. "You can't just come in here and tell me you need some oblivion? That you need the casual bit of fun I offered you?"

"I thought I did."

"No, you didn't. You turned it into a pissing contest."

"Who made it into a pissing contest, Ms. Shutting-The-Door-In-My-Face?"

She rolled her shoulders, this look of absolute innocence brushing across her face. "I have a little bit of a temper."

“Apparently.”

She laughed again, but this time there was humor in it. She turned and walked away, disappearing behind the door that led to the private area of the cabin. He watched, confused. Again. Where the hell was she going?

But then she stuck her head through the door. “Don’t forget your bag.” She winked before she disappeared again.

Westin rushed to the kitchen counter and snatched up the bag, dumping out the box of condoms it contained. He tossed the bag and grabbed the box, practically jogging as he followed her to the bedroom. Lea slipped her shirt up over her head as she returned to the room. It’d seemed strange to sleep in this bed she knew belonged to Clint and his wife, even stranger to know she’d cheated on him, possibly in this very bed. It was even stranger to welcome Westin into it, but it wasn’t like she had a lot of choices. The kid’s bedroom only had a twin smaller than the beds in the bunkhouse.

What was she doing? She’d spent most of the afternoon trying to convince herself Will hadn’t turned against her, that he hadn’t sent her up here to get her killed. It had to be a misunderstanding, a mistake on someone’s part. Will’s? Or maybe someone else was feeding him information, someone else who’d been compromised. It didn’t necessarily have to be Will.

But deep in her heart, she knew it was Will. He’d set her up, and it was just dumb luck that she hadn’t fallen into his trap.

What a load of bull to have to swallow!

Being here on this ranch was like a wakeup call. It reminded her so much of her childhood in Texas, so much of those beautiful days on her grandparents' farm. It was a simpler time, a time before her life was turned upside down, before her father died and her mother dragged her away from everything she'd always known. It was a time before the darkness descended on her life. All she'd known since then was darkness. It'd become so ingrained in her that she'd forgotten what it was like to live in the light. This place reminded her of that time, reminded her that her life had purpose. It had meaning. She wasn't ready to allow the darkness to swallow her whole.

An idea had begun to form in her head as she lay restless in this bed... a plan. But then Westin had shown up and reminded her that she wasn't the only one wrapped up in this mess. These people had no idea of the hellfire she was about to allow to rain down on them.

"You're so damn beautiful!"

Westin moved up behind her, his hands sliding over her shoulders as he stepped close, still wearing that bulky jacket that must have been so hot in the heated room. He bent close, his lips grazing her neck even as his fingers carefully gathered her hair and pulled it off to the side.

She was naked now with the exception of the panties Clint had bought for her. She'd ached for her own clothes when she'd first arrived, but she was growing used to the wide band of the boy-short cut of the panties. And the high-waisted jeans Clint's wife preferred didn't look so bad on her curves, maybe even better than the skinny jeans she wore almost exclusively. This country style was more in tune with who she'd been before the darkness, who she still wanted to be somewhere deep inside.

Westin's lips moved over the curve of her neck and down along the channel of her spine, his hands moving ahead, scouting the spaces between her ribs and her waist, and further, down along the base of her spine, the area just above those high-cut

panties. She kind of liked the feel of his warm hand against the soft material of her panties, liked that he didn't have immediate access to her ass the way he would have if she wore her sexier thong. There was a touch of mystery to it. Not much, but enough.

He slowly dropped to his knees as his mouth slipped down along the path of her spine, his heated breath igniting a fire inside of her that had been an ember from the moment she set her eyes on him. She sighed as she pressed her own hands to her breasts, holding back evidence of her arousal even as she leaned her head back and shivered with the pleasure that was racing up and down the length of her spine.

But she wasn't ready. Not just yet.

Lea stepped away, tossing herself onto the end of the bed, her legs crossed, her arms across her chest. "Why don't you take off your jacket and stay awhile, cowboy?" she asked, brushing his arm with her toes.

"Yes, ma'am."

Westin stood and stripped out of that jacket probably faster than he ever had before. Then he untucked his shirt, a nicely pressed pearl-button shirt with a bolo tie that sent a shiver of jealousy through her. Who'd he get so dressed up for?

"All dressed up and nowhere to go."

"Not for much longer," he commented, already tugging at his belt buckle.

"Are you going to ask me my real name?"

He paused, his dark-blue eyes moving over her with an intensity that sent a shiver of fear through her for a second. Was he going to walk out on her? Had she told him too

many lies? But then he licked his bottom lip as he tilted his head, considering her with a different kind of intensity.

“What is your name?”

“Lee.” She leaned back, resting her weight on one arm. “I’m Lee Montgomery from Seattle, Washington.”

He lowered his head slightly. “It’s nice to meet you, Lee.”

“DEA Agent Lee Montgomery.”

No surprise registered in his eyes, which confirmed that Clint had told him everything. She wasn’t surprised. In fact, she was kind of relieved. The less she had to explain, the better. Yet, there was a part of her that needed to explain.

“It wasn’t all lies. They teach you to stick as closely to the truth as possible so that you don’t get tripped up trying to remember too many lies.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder, burning under his unrelenting gaze. “What I told you about my grandparents’ farm was true. And my mom making us move, though she took me to Seattle, not Van Nuys.”

“And your father?”

She sat up again, any mention of her father always a blow to the stomach. “Dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

She rolled her shoulders. “He was a good man, a good father. But he was a little too fond of the women and the drink, if you know what I mean. Got himself shot in some woman’s bed—which is why my mom decided to split town after he died. Too hard to stay in that small town when everyone knew the truth about her marriage.”

Westin dropped to his knees again, sliding over her thighs as he scooted up against the end of the bed. “I was raised by a single mother, too.”

“Oh, my mom didn’t stay single long. She remarried about six months after we moved. Turned out she’d been having a long-distance thing with this guy in Seattle she met while visiting some friends in the area. Within a year, I had a new little brother who was the center of my mother’s world. And then he was joined by twin girls two years later. I was an afterthought.”

Westin kissed her knee. “I’m sorry.”

She sighed. “I can’t blame her. She had a right to go on with her life. But she could have held on to her past just long enough to get me out of the house, you know?”

“That why you chose law enforcement? To get her attention?”

He’d hit that nail right on the head! She made a little noise in her throat, shaking her head, her hair falling around her face. “You should have been a head shrinker!”

He chuckled softly, his lips so close to her knee that she almost moved it so that he’d

be forced to touch it. “Thought about it. I thought about a lot of things.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because ranching is in my blood.”

“You see yourself doing this forever?”

“I don’t know.” He gently lifted her leg and separated it from the other, pushing her thighs gently apart as his fingers did a little dance on her inner thigh. “If you’d asked me yesterday, I would have said yes. I would have told you it was my dream to own one of the biggest ranches in this area. That I was going to inherit a legacy that was only rivaled by Golden Sphinx.”

“But today?”

“I realized that even if someone handed me the keys tomorrow, I don’t want them. I don’t want to be the kind of a man who comes with that sort of power.”

Westin bent and kissed her ankle, his lips slowly skimming over her skin until he reached her knee. He took his time there, his breath hot and sexy on the back of her knee, the tip of his tongue doing things that made her nipples shrink under the pressure of her arm. She moaned softly as she slowly lay back, adjusting her hips to give him anything and everything he wanted. For the moment, it seemed, he just wanted the back of her knee.

“I wish life was really that simple,” she said as she stared up at the ceiling, the feel of his touch quickly diminishing her ability to think straight.

“What do you mean?”

“I wish I could see that clearly. That I knew exactly what it was I was doing, what it was I should be doing.”

“You’re a badass,” he commented, his ministrations moving to the other leg. “You’re a cop taking down the bad guys.”

“I’m a federal agent,” she corrected, more out of habit than any sense of respect for the job. “I’m a pretty girl pretending to be a stripper or a bartender to trick some idiot into giving up his operation. There’s not a lot of smarts that go into that.”

“There’s a lot of courage.”

“I suppose.”

Bored with her knees, he began to nibble at her inner thighs, his shirt hitting the floor as he shimmied out of it. And then his hands were on her hips, his fingers hooking themselves under the elastic of her panties, tugging at them just enough to set her imagination to the next step, anticipating where he might put his mouth next. She bit her bottom lip to keep a sigh from escaping, wanting this more than she had thought she could.

“You’re so damn beautiful!” His sigh sent hot air brushing over her thigh, up against the core of her. Just that little touch, that spark of heat, sent her nerves into overdrive, making her ache in places that hadn’t ached in a long time. She moved her hips a little, reminding him of where he was, of what waited for his touch. But he ignored that little move in favor of burying his mouth against her inner thigh again, biting down gently, but with enough pressure to send just the slightest jolt of pain through her. This was the most delicious pain she’d ever felt!

“Hmm, you’ve got to stop,” she murmured.

“What do you want me to stop?” He gnawed at her thigh. “This?” And then he ran his tongue along that space between her inner thigh and her panty line. “Is this it?” Then he turned his attention to a spot he had largely ignored until that moment. He nibbled at her core through the soft cotton material that still covered it. “Or this?”

She moaned, unable to even try to hold it back. “Please!”

He chuckled softly. “Am I driving you crazy?” He nibbled at her again, making her writhe a little there on the edge of the bed. “Serves you right. I’ve been going crazy since the moment I set eyes on you.”

“Liar!” She sat up, her arm still over her chest. “You couldn’t have cared less!”

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“You believed that?” He pushed her back against the mattress, rising above her, one hand holding her still, the other tugging at her arm so he could see her bare breasts. “I would have taken you the second you came out of that bathroom in nothing but a towel if it hadn’t been for the fact that I knew Clint would kick my ass if I did.”

“Yeah? You’re that afraid of your boss?”

“Aren’t you?”

She thought of her boss, a bald, middle-aged paper-pusher, and nearly laughed. “I’m more afraid of the bad guys than him.”

“Well, I guess your boss wasn’t a champion bull rider in his younger years.” He grunted as she finally relaxed her arm and let him have an unobscured view of her breasts. “Being on Clint’s bad side scares the shit out of me.”

“Won’t he be mad tomorrow?”

Instead of answering, Westin buried his face between her breasts, nibbling again, pulling the same shivers through her body. Lee wrapped her body around him, tugging him against her as she ran her fingers through the thick, dark hair that covered the top of his head.

“I want you,” she said softly, uttering three words she’d never said to another man. “Now.”

He moved further up her body, capturing her lips with the same heated passion they’d

shared just the night before. Was it really just a day ago? It felt like it'd been a lifetime! The passion was there, burning through them both as they moved together, exploring each other with an urgency that made her heart swell in her chest. It almost felt like it might burst if he let her go, like her life depended on him, on the feel of his hands on her body, the taste of his mouth on hers. In that moment, maybe it did. Maybe everything depended on it.

And then the heat tempered a little. Westin ran his hand over the top of her head, his fingers moving down along her jaw, drawing her lips closer to his. But he pulled back a little, staring into her eyes as he brushed his lips against hers, barely touching her, but taking her breath away. Her heart stuttered in her chest, a new ache beginning inside of her that had nothing to do with the physical ache that had been pulsing in her core from his first touch.

“You scare the shit out of me,” he said against her mouth.

She couldn't agree more. There was something about him that set off warning bells in her head. But she couldn't resist him any more than she could resist the food she needed to nourish her body, the water she needed to hydrate, the air she had to breathe. It was almost out of her control, almost instinctual. Like there was something bigger than the two of them drawing them together—not that she would ever say anything like that out loud. There was no explaining it, but her body knew even before her head that this man was meant to be hers.

Lee was tired of waiting for him. She caught him off guard, shoving him over so that he was the one lying on the mattress. She straddled him, tugging at the belt buckle he'd only managed to partially unhook. It was a big thing, sporting a bucking horse in a silver background. A true cowboy's belt buckle. Her father had had half a dozen of these from his rodeo days before he married her mother. She used to admire them, staring through the glass door of the case he kept them in. And he'd loved to come and tell her the story behind each one.

She'd have to ask Westin about this one someday. But not now.

She got his jeans undone even as he ran his hands over her breasts, distracting her with the things he was doing with her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. But she wasn't one to be denied what she wanted. She finally got his full attention when she managed to get his boxers down far enough to grasp him, to hold him in her hand and begin a slow stroke.

"Oh, hell," he muttered, moving his hips to push down his jeans, giving her even more exposure, more space to stroke him. And then his hands were sliding over her hips, pushing at the panties she still wore. Too many clothes. She needed all these damn clothes gone! And where was that box of condoms?

Too much to think about. Her mind was beyond logical thought. She needed him inside of her, and that was all she was capable of thinking about just then. She slipped off the bed, stripped out of those panties as he struggled with his jeans, kicking off his boots and sending them flying against the far wall. She turned around, scanning the room for that little bag, but he'd taken them out and it took her fevered mind a second to recognize the little box sitting on the dresser just inside the bedroom door. She grabbed it, found him waiting for her on the bed, his arousal standing tall and proud, taking her breath away.

"Oh, boy! And they say they make everything big in Texas."

"Texas doesn't have anything on Colorado," he said proudly.

She giggled as she struggled with the box, trying to remember how those little tear-tab things worked. When she couldn't get it, she held it out to him with a frustrated whimper. He grabbed her wrist, pulling her back down on the bed beside him, kissing her almost roughly before pulling back to deal with the box himself. He managed to get it open, but tearing into the condom wrapper itself was a whole new chore.

“They should make that easier,” she mumbled as she slipped her lips over his shoulder, her hand searching for his manhood again, wanting to touch him, to feel him even if it was only in her hand. He grunted when she wrapped her small hand around his massive erection, telling her, “That doesn’t make it easier.”

“Do I drive you that crazy?”

“At the moment? Everything is making me crazy!”

She giggled again as she snatched the condom from him and managed to rip the thing open with her teeth. “Oh, hell, yeah!” he cried, taking it from her and rolling it into place before trying to pin her to the mattress. But she wasn’t going for that. She wanted to be in control.

Lee shoved him to the mattress a second time and straddled him, sliding her hands over him, squeezing gently as he cried out, moving his hips, begging for exactly what she wanted. She guided him to her as their eyes met, their gaze unbreakable as she teased him, moving him against all those places that had been begging for his attention since he walked into the bedroom. She ached so deeply, so painfully, that it was excruciating to deprive herself a second longer. But she liked the desperation she saw in his eyes. No one had ever wanted her quite like that.

He sat up and kissed her, a thorough kiss that reminded her of a movie she saw once where a man told a new love that every woman should be kissed thoroughly every day of her life. She’d thought it was a cheesy line in an equally cheesy movie. But now? If he kissed her like this every day for the rest of her life, she’d never leave the house again, but she’d be the most content woman in the world!

“Quit teasing,” he whispered against her mouth as he gripped her ass and pulled her hips up a little higher, trying to force her to give him what he wanted.

“What will you do if I don’t?”

He groaned so intensely she could feel it in her core. “I’ll turn into a pathetic little boy, begging for what I want.”

“That might be worth seeing.”

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He slapped her ass hard, making her cry out. But she still wouldn't give in, needing to see what he would really do. It didn't take long before she found out.

He wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her up, dropping her on the mattress. He grabbed her wrists, pinning them at her sides as he lowered himself, pressing his mouth to her core, doing things with his tongue and his front teeth that she'd never felt before. She arched her back, a scream locked in her throat. The man knew his way around a woman's body, and he knew how to use that knowledge. She suddenly regretted—not really!—teasing him as he worked mercilessly on her, sending her quickly skidding toward a cliff she wouldn't survive plummeting off of.

But just as she thought it was done and she was going to lose her mind for good, he stopped. He rose up on his knees, releasing her hands in favor of her legs. He lifted her knees up over his shoulders and leaned forward. No more teasing, no more games. He was inside of her with no preamble, no warning.

They both cried out. His eyes slid closed and he twisted his head, like he was struggling. It was a long moment before he looked down at her again, his eyes filled with a fever of need. He studied her face, like he needed to see something before he could proceed. She had no idea what it was he wanted; she just prayed he found it and soon. Damn, but she was close! Having him inside of her finally was a whole new paradise, a whole new pleasure that was unlike anything she'd known before. She needed him to finish this thing they'd begun, yet she wanted it to last for the rest of her life.

He leaned down and kissed her, his touch soft and tender this time, not lacking passion, just tempering it. Then he began to move, rolling his hips, doing things that

told her she wasn't his first. But maybe she'd be his last. It was too early to have thoughts like that, but they kept creeping in as she moved against him, as they found a rhythm that was theirs and only theirs. He stared into her eyes as his body offered her pleasure that should have been impossible but was somehow moving through her body in waves, a pleasure that was so intense she was sure no one else had ever known it before. She could see things in those dark-blue depths, things that made promises to her soul she never thought anyone would ever offer her. This was it. This was her man. This was... insane!

And then that cliff came looming again and she almost felt herself flying through the air as she stumbled and fell, floating in space as her climax burst through every cell in her body. It wasn't a minute before he cried out, his movements becoming spastic as his orgasm rushed through him, too. He wrapped his arms around her, pulled her hard into his body like he was afraid she'd try to leave him in his most vulnerable moment. But she wasn't going anywhere. If it were up to her, she'd never go anywhere else again.

Chapter 10

Westin wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep, but didn't think it'd been long. How could he sleep with her gorgeous body moving against his, her curvy ass pressing back against him until he was hard as a rock and dreaming dreams that were never conducive to sleep? For a night that had gone so sour, it had sure ended up sweet.

He traced the curve of her shoulder with his lips as his fingers moved slowly over her body. He brushed against the chain of her necklace, and a few intrusive thoughts danced through his mind, but he easily pushed them away as his fingers found that certain button between her legs, making her moan softly in her sleep. He nibbled a little at her throat, remembering the taste of that little button, wanting to taste it again. But she pressed her ass back against him, and the next thing he knew, he was searching for that box of condoms that was waiting eagerly on the nightstand.

She moaned as he entered her, his finger still pressed to that button. She moved her ass against him further, ready despite just coming out of the land of dreams. He nibbled at her neck again, loving the taste of her, the feel of her. He couldn't think of a better way to wake up on a cold, Colorado morning.

She turned into him when it was done and drifted to sleep again with her face pressed to his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, allowing himself to admit that it felt real good to hold a woman in his arms. Particularly this woman. But now that the sun was rising, the light beginning to peek through the bottom edge of the blinds in the windows, reality came back to him slowly, memories of the things Clint had said to him last night reigniting the cold fire of fear that burned in his stomach.

What had this woman gotten herself into? What was it going to take to make it go away?

He kissed the top of her head as his mind worked the information, feeling around for something, a toehold he could use to pull himself up to the top and find a way out. The thing was, he knew there was still a lot they didn't know, things Lea—Lee—was keeping to herself. The first chore was going to be convincing her to tell them the truth, to allow them to help her.

“Westin!”

Lee jumped in his arms, pulling herself up to peek over his arm. The door vibrated as a loud knock came, the sound of Clint's voice as he once again called his name. “Westin!”

“It's Clint,” he assured Lee, his hand sliding soothingly down her back. “It's okay. I'll deal with it.”

He unfolded himself from her body, a shiver running through him as the heat of her

skin was replaced by the cold reality of the small bedroom. He kicked around the piles of clothes until he found his jeans and tugged them on, zipping them up as he walked to the door. He glanced back at Lee, aching to climb back into bed against her naked body. Reality had suddenly burst over her, too. He could see it in her eyes.

“Something wrong?” he asked as he carefully slipped through the door without opening it wide enough to give Clint a glance at Lee.

“Besides the fact you’re screwing a woman you barely know in my marital bed?” Clint rolled his shoulders. “Miss Dulcie wants you up at the main house.”

“Me? Why?”

Clint narrowed his eyes. “Do you think she tells me everything? That I’m her confidant or something?” He shoved Westin’s shoulder. “I don’t know. But when Miss Dulcie asks to see someone, you better believe that person best get his ass up to the main house.”

“All right.” Westin started to turn, but Clint grabbed his shoulder, stopping him. “This wasn’t just a replacement for the bottle, was it?”

Westin crossed his arms over his chest, glancing toward the door like he could tell if Lee was standing there, listening. “Naw,” he said, shrugging the idea off even though he’d asked himself the same question on the drive out here, and again as she’d welcomed him into her bed. He’d doubted himself until he held her, until he was inside of her. He knew then that it was bigger than just looking for some sort of oblivion. That’s why it scared him so deeply.

Clint nodded. “Get dressed. Miss Dulcie was insistent.”

Westin went into the bedroom where he found Lee still curled up in bed, still

breathing slowly, her eyes closed. She looked peaceful there, beautiful. He wanted to crawl back under the covers with her. It was an effort to force himself to gather his clothes and head for the shower.

“Are you going to sneak off without saying goodbye?”

He turned, not surprised to find her watching him. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“Good.”

She crawled out from under the covers, doing nothing to cover her nakedness as she strolled up to him. She rose up on her tiptoes and kissed his nose before bypassing him, stepping into the bathroom and closing the door in his face. He groaned, tapping his fingers on the door.

“Clint’s waiting for me. I have to go up to the main house.”

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The toilet flushed and she opened the door, bowing as she gestured for him to come inside. “It’s all yours, sire.”

“All ours,” he said, pulling her into the room with him.

They showered, taking much longer than they probably should have with Clint waiting. He couldn’t get enough of her. His hands just seemed to wander to places they didn’t belong, slipping over curves and along straight lines, exploring every inch, memorizing the shape of her. She did the same, touching him, her fingertips exploring old scars and a simple tattoo on his bicep. She never asked, and he never offered, but the look in her eye told him she understood. A person didn’t have to be a friend of Bill W. to understand what it meant to follow the Twelve Steps. Maybe she’d ask him about it later, but for now, she just let her fingers dance. And he loved her for it.

They dressed, her in borrowed clothes taken from what Melanie had left in the closet, him in the clothes he’d carefully chosen the night before. Clint was in the kitchen, sipping coffee, a ghost hanging over him as he stared out the window. Westin cleared his throat and Clint turned, brushing the ghost away.

“Landry will be here in a few minutes,” Clint said. “I don’t know how long we’ll be gone.”

“I want to go with you.”

Westin and Clint were both caught by surprise. Westin started to shake his head, but Clint was a little more reasonable. “We don’t want to advertise your whereabouts.”

“I need access to a computer. I assume Miss Dulcie has computers in her house. She must use them to help run the business.”

“She does, but—”

“I need a computer.” Lee produced the silver necklace she’d taken off for their shower but had replaced the moment they were out. “I need to see what I have here.”

Clint’s jaw clenched. Westin, however, couldn’t see what the harm would be, and the idea of keeping Lee close was more satisfying than the idea of leaving her alone.

“It couldn’t hurt anything, Clint,” Westin argued. “She’ll be with us. And no one’s going to see her who doesn’t already know she’s on the ranch.”

Clint frowned. “What if I brought a laptop here?”

“Do you have one?”

Clint nodded. “There’s a laptop in the security room up at the barn. I could bring that to you.”

“It’s ancient,” Westin argued. “It wouldn’t have a slot for the memory card.” He glanced at Lee. “It’s older than the hills.”

“I do need one with a memory-card slot.”

Clint frowned. “Then what about the computers in the security room? The desktops are top-of-the-line. Miss Dulcie bought them just a few months ago.”

“The house would be safer. You and I will be there to make sure no one sees her.” Westin slipped his hand into Lee’s. “I think she should be with one or the other of us

until we figure out how much danger she's really in."

Clint continued to resist, the muscles in his jaw popping as he studied the two of them. But then he sighed and lowered his head. "All right. But she stays in the office and doesn't talk to anyone. Understand?"

"You know, I am a federal agent. I'm trained to take care of myself in dangerous situations."

"Yes, well, you asked for our help. This is what you get." Clint dropped a wink before he turned to rinse his coffee cup in the sink. "Let's get out of here. Miss Dulcie's waiting."

Westin's arms had allowed Lee to sleep as though on a cloud, but she was crashing back down to earth now, reality worming its way back into her peace of mind. She held the sunflower between her fingers, her mind running over the things Clint had pointed out to her the day before. Why had Will sent her up to this part of Colorado? Why hadn't he had her go to the DEA office in Denver? Why hadn't she thought of it? Was she so blindly trusting of her partner that she never questioned his orders? Or was it something else? Something she didn't want to admit to even herself?

How long had she suspected that Will was going rogue?

Federal agents going bad and working for the very bad guys they were sworn to take down was not uncommon. It happened so often that it was a joke at the offices in Seattle. It wasn't the idea of Will going rogue that messed with her equilibrium. It was the idea that he would turn on her that pushed her off balance.

Undercover work was a blurred line. It wasn't as black and white as crime shows on

television depicted. Sometimes a cop had to break the law in order to convince those around him that he was one of them, that he was willing to do whatever it took to survive. And, sometimes, those acts blurred the line even more, making it almost impossible to know what was right and what was wrong. So what if an undercover cop took a little money in exchange for a little information if that meant he could get closer to the really bad guy, the one he was there to uncover? How was that different from selling narcotics, taking drugs, sleeping with some lieutenant just to get to his boss? All lines could be crossed to get what was needed.

But turning on a partner? A friend? That was one line Lee wouldn't cross. She couldn't. That was the one thing that kept her grounded, that reminded her why she was surrounding herself with all this darkness. And she knew that Will felt the same way.

At least, she thought she knew.

She held on to Westin's arm as they drove to the main house, wishing she could just go back to that bedroom and lose herself in him. She didn't want to know what she was afraid she already did know. She didn't want to see Will's name on the memory card she'd protected with her life. She didn't want to know that he'd turned on her.

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“We’re going to figure this out,” Westin said softly against her temple almost as if he knew exactly where her thoughts had gone. She kissed his shoulder, grateful for his presence.

Clint pulled the truck up to a side door, leading Lee and Westin into the house through the kitchen. He nodded to a young woman slicing tomatoes on a butcher-block-topped island, but offered no other greeting as he led the way down a narrow corridor that led the way through the same sort of maze as the one he’d taken her through during her last visit to this house. When they arrived at the same room, that large sitting room, he gestured for her to wait. He and Westin entered the room together, both with their hats in hand.

Curious, Lee peeked around the corner and discovered that Miss Dulcie wasn’t alone in the room. A man, tall and dark with a distinguished amount of white beginning to lighten his jet-black hair just above his temples, stood before her, his entire body expressing fury in the way he stood, in the way he held his hands behind his back, in the tension that seemed to vibrate through every inch of him. When he spotted Westin, that fury only seemed to increase, burning like a wildfire through dry brush. Lee didn’t understand this stranger’s fury, but she took an instant dislike to him.

“Spend three years trying to get an audience with this guy, and I suddenly find myself in his company twice in twelve hours,” Westin commented dryly.

“Do you see?” the stranger said to Miss Dulcie. “The insolence is ridiculous.”

Lee peeked again, aching with curiosity. There was something about this guy, the stranger, that seemed familiar to her. She couldn’t put her finger on exactly why, but

there was something about him. She felt confident in her dislike for him, though, based solely on his attitude toward Westin. Anyone who didn't think Westin was a great guy was someone she didn't want to know.

Miss Dulcie stood between the two men and gestured for Clint to leave the room. He hesitated, clearly not sure he really wanted to do that. If anyone but Miss Dulcie had suggested it, he probably wouldn't have gone. But this was coming from Miss Dulcie, and he respected her too much not to do as she said. His hat still in his hands, Clint came out of the room and gestured for Lee to follow him. She did, somewhat reluctantly, glancing into the room as she passed. She caught Westin's eye, and he nodded, a clear attempt to reassure her that failed miserably. There was just something about that stranger that made her very uneasy.

Clint led the way up a large staircase that worked its way to the second floor, directing her to a set of double doors beyond a wide landing. The room was dark-paneled with shelves built into the walls from floor to ceiling, all of them covered in books. She caught a glimpse of some of the titles, knew enough about expensive books—criminals had a thing about collections, and a few she'd gone after collected rare first editions to launder their money—to know that some of them had to be first editions.

Clint led her through the room to a table at the back where someone had laid out several books, some of them open to specific pages, like they'd been doing research. Clint carefully moved the books out of the way, then produced a laptop from a cabinet built into one of the bookshelves.

"You won't be bothered up here."

"Are you leaving?"

Clint lowered his head slightly. "I should go back down in case things get out of

hand.”

“Who is that man?”

“Dominic Mollohan. He owns the Rocking D Ranch.”

“The Rocking D?”

“A neighboring ranch. It’s the biggest ranch in the state, barely, and a direct rival to Golden Sphinx. Asa and Mollohan used to fight all the time, but they did it in the courts or at the auctions, always trying to outdo each other. Mollohan is convinced that Asa stole three hundred acres of Rocking D because he won them against Mollohan’s father in a card game. It was how he started the Golden Sphinx back in the seventies, with those three hundred acres.”

“That’s a lot of acreage.”

“Yeah, it is. But Rocking D is still more than four hundred acres, just a little bigger than Golden Sphinx.”

“What is his beef with Westin?”

Clint shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure.” But even as he said it, Lee knew he was lying. He knew—or he had a suspicion—what it was about. That was why he was in a hurry to get back downstairs.

“You’re worried about him.”

“It’s my job to worry about all my boys.”

“You think this guy is going to push him back to the bottle.”

Clint's eyebrows rose. "He told you?"

"Didn't have to."

There was a tattoo on Westin's bicep that told the story. Twelve simple, impossible, steps, it said. She knew it could have been there for lots of reasons—that those twelve steps could have referred to a lot of things, not necessarily the one Clint had just confirmed. But there was something about the way Westin was, the quiet control that was always right there, right under the surface, that Lee recognized. She had to know people, had to be able to read them so that she could protect herself if it came down to that. She knew Westin's demons even if she didn't know what caused them.

Clint took off his hat and ran his hand over the top of his head before putting it back in place. "He won't like that I let it slip."

"I think he probably knows I figured it out." She settled back in her chair and lifted the lid of the laptop. "I'm glad he has friends who care enough to look out for him."

"You don't have to worry about him."

Clint crossed the room, but hesitated just inside the door. "Stay here. Don't go wandering around the house."

“I’d get lost if I did.”

He lowered his head in agreement before stepping out, pulling the door closed behind him. Lee had the feeling he would have locked it if he could.

She studied the computer screen for a moment, struggling a little to get back into that mindset of work. It was like returning to the office after a prolonged vacation. Only Lee hadn’t been on vacation. Not really. She was on the run.

She slipped the memory card from her sunflower pendant and popped it into the slot on the side of the computer, waiting as the operating system read it and gave her the option of opening it. She scrolled through the files, remembering the rush to put each one on that card and the ones she’d been forced to leave behind when Fang had suddenly arrived in the office. She sent up a quick, silent prayer, hoping she hadn’t left the wrong ones behind.

Criminals were normally very smart about the kind of information they kept track of. They encoded it, used their own ciphers so that the cops couldn’t figure it out if they happened to confiscate a computer or ledger. There were those who set computer viruses on their system that would destroy all the information if someone tried to take it, and those who simply never wrote a single thing down. They kept it all in their heads, or just kept things so pared down they didn’t have to keep track of anything. Lee had come across all kinds, and she’d figured out how to get what she needed from each and every one.

Fang was a new kind of stupid. He kept notes on everything—every transaction, every customer, every conversation. There were recordings, spreadsheets, journal

entries. He wrote down what he had for lunch each day, what girl he took to bed that night, what he bought at the grocery store. He was anal in everything he did, and he kept track of it like it was going to be a part of the history books one day.

Good for law enforcement. Not so good for Fang and his gang.

Lee combed through the files, reading as quickly as she could, not sure how long she had for going through this. Some of it meant nothing to her, but others had little tidbits that connected to other bits she knew would eventually make puzzle pieces. The client list was invaluable. Her boss would love to have that. The journal entries were tedious, but not really as useful as she'd hoped. It was in the audio files, though, that she began to hit pay dirt.

She got up and searched through the cabinet where she'd seen Clint get the computer, finally finding a set of earbuds that looked brand-new. She plugged them into the computer and listened, curiosity turning into disappointment, and disappointment becoming a knife in the back.

Shit, shit, shit!

She didn't want to believe it, but the proof was here. She wondered if Will had been aware of Fang's habit of recording all his phone calls. If he had, he had to know that she would listen to them eventually. Was that why? Was it Will who sent Fang back into the office that night? Had he meant for Fang to kill her? What a shock it must have been to him when she'd called him, asking for help after escaping the club that night. Is that why he'd sent her to the airport, why he'd arranged for her to get on a flight for New Orleans instead of Seattle? Was that why he'd instructed her to drive north?

Lee was beginning to feel like a fool. She'd played into Will's hands like a blind person following another blind person. She never questioned him. Not once. She

should have.

But if she had, would she be here now? Would she be breathing?

Lee used her credentials to get into her files at the DEA, verifying a few things she had begun to suspect as she looked through Fang's files. She had a better idea now what Will had done, had been doing. She was putting together pieces she was sure he'd never suspected she would find.

As she worked, she couldn't help but think of the years she'd worked with Will, the things they'd shared. He'd been her partner for five years, at her side through dozens of cases, so many undercover assignments that she couldn't even remember how many. And it wasn't just work. How many times had she slept on his couch after a bad case when she couldn't be alone? How many times had she sat at his dinner table, chatting with his wife while he made jokes from the kitchen? How many times had she held his children, babysat them so that he and his wife could have a few precious moments alone together? How many times had she heard him talk about his kids, talk about his pride and his fears?

They'd cried together, laughed, gotten drunk together, even kissed a few times. Granted, it was usually for an undercover gig, but they had. He was the one who whispered in her ear when she was about to take the bad guy down, the one who talked her down when things went wrong. They weren't just coworkers. He was more of a brother to her than her own half-brother would ever be.

How could he have turned on her?

Lee had learned a lot of things over the past five years of working undercover. She could dance like a professional, could seduce a priest. She could cook a pretty good batch of meth, knew the street value of almost every illegal drug on the market. She could break down a Colt M4A1 carbine assault rifle faster than a SEAL could. She'd

talked her way out of dozens of dangerous situations and taken the stand in over twenty criminal courts. It wasn't always about drugs and guns. There were several times when computer skills were essential. She'd learned how to hack a computer like a pro, a skill that she'd never used outside of an undercover assignment until this moment.

She had to make sure she was right. She had to know that what she was about to set in motion wasn't going to destroy a good cop. It wasn't just her life on the line here.

Measure twice, cut once. It was a piece of advice her father once gave her that had come in handy more times than he could ever have imagined it would.

Westin was only partially surprised to find Dominic Mollohan standing in Miss Dulcie's sitting room. He'd known Mollohan wasn't the kind of man to be made a fool of, but he hadn't thought he'd have the balls to show up at Golden Sphinx after what Westin had revealed to him the night before. But maybe he'd underestimated the man.

"Mr. Mollohan has spent the last hour telling me about your behavior at his home last night, Westin," Miss Dulcie said the moment Clint had left the room, her voice soft and steady. "He wanted to make sure I knew just how rude he felt your behavior had been."

"I've come here to request that your ranch hands stay away from my home and my daughter," Mollohan said directly to Miss Dulcie, not Westin, a weariness to his voice that suggested he'd said this more than once already.

Miss Dulcie lowered her head slightly. "Would you like to explain yourself, Westin?"

A soft grunt escaped Westin's lips. Explain himself? Was that really something Mollohan wanted him to do in front of witnesses?

Apparently not.

"I don't need an explanation," Mollohan quickly interjected. "I just want your people to stay as far from my house as possible! It's ridiculous! I shouldn't have to put up with uneducated, boorish young men coming to my house and thinking they can do and say anything they want to do and say!"

"Uneducated?" Westin tilted his head slightly. "Is that what you think? That my mother didn't raise a boy who understands the importance of an education? Or is it simply that you believe people who don't live in your social bracket can't afford school?"

"Westin," Miss Dulcie said softly in warning.

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Mollohan turned on Westin, revealing a nice bruise forming just below his bottom lip. “I think someone who resorts to fisticuffs instead of words must not have learned a damn thing, no matter how much philosophy he studied!”

“Then you were paying attention. And here I thought you were more interested in your damn phone than you were in the people who were right there, right in front of you, asking for your attention.” Westin shook his head. “We poor may not be educated, but at least we know how to appreciate what we have.”

Mollohan’s face reddened. “How dare you!”

“You’re so worried about who’s spending time with your daughter... why don’t you put down your phone and get to know her a little? I’m sure she’d appreciate it.”

“Watch yourself, boy!”

“I’m sorry I wasted my time trying to get close to you.” Westin shook his head, feeling as though he finally had twenty-twenty vision for the first time. He’d had his suspicions before, but now he could really see the man Dominic Mollohan was, and he felt sorry for the women in his life because they had no idea. Just like his mother. “You’re not worth my time.”

Mollohan’s fists tightened at his sides, his face so red he looked like he might explode. “How dare you talk to me like that! I could destroy you with one phone call. You know that, don’t you?”

“Make up your mind. Am I a loser with no worth, or someone with enough worth you

could bother yourself to destroy me? Can't have it both ways."

Westin smiled as the redness in Mollohan's face darkened even more, amused by the power he suddenly appeared to have over this man who seemed to think he ruled the world. But that amusement didn't belie the pressure in his chest, the disappointment he was still feeling, and the sadness he held on to for his mother's sake. She'd so believed in this man. He was glad she wasn't around to see this, to see what he'd become, assuming he'd ever been the honest, kind man she'd believed him to be.

"Gentlemen!"

Miss Dulcie moved between the two men, her slight body hardly a physical barrier to their animosity, but the respect Westin felt for her pushing him back. He backed away, standing half a room away from Mollohan, not interested in a repeat of the night before. Not here. Not in front of Miss Dulcie. After all, he was a better man than Mollohan.

At least, he wanted to be.

Mollohan turned away and moved to the glass doors that looked out on the back porch, his hands behind his back. He was silent for a long while as Miss Dulcie approached Westin, taking his hands lightly in her own. She didn't say anything, just held his hands and looked up into his face, her expression saying more than any words ever could.

"Asa Howard stole three hundred acres from my father, and he built this house right in the middle of it."

Miss Dulcie stiffened. "He didn't steal anything!"

Mollohan turned, his dark eyes moving disdainfully over Miss Dulcie. "I don't care

what the legal system had to say about it. My father put pieces of Rocking D up as collateral in dozens of card games, and not a single one of his opponents ever took it seriously. Asa had no right to believe it was a genuine bet!”

In true Miss Dulcie style, she took a seat on the couch and crossed her hands in her lap. “That was between your father and my Asa long before you or I got involved. Who are we to question what they agreed to?”

“My father didn’t agree!”

“His name is on the contract, Mr. Mollohan.” She smiled sweetly. “And, like I said, that was long before I got involved in Golden Sphinx, and long before you took over Rocking D. Also, as you pointed out, the courts have settled this argument as well.”

“We’ll see what the courts will say when I call the police and tell them how one of your men burst into my house and attacked me last night!”

“That’s not what happened!” Westin cried even as Miss Dulcie stood and moved between the two of them once more.

“You do what you need to do, Mr. Mollohan,” Miss Dulcie told him. “But I must warn you that if you bring false charges against one of my men, I will be forced to enlist the help of my lawyers.”

“You think that scares me, Mrs. Howard? We all know about you here in this town. How Asa picked you up out of the gutter, how he only made you his wife because you were carrying his bastard! You really think walking around with the Howard name makes you any better than the trash you were born into?”

“You’re playing with fire, Mollohan,” Westin growled as he attempted to move in front of Miss Dulcie, needing to protect her from that vitriol. But Miss Dulcie pushed

him back, patting his arm lightly.

“I know what your kind think of me, Mr. Mollohan. But rumor and gossip doesn’t hold up in a court of law. I will not allow you to harass my employees.”

“You have no idea who you’re screwing with here,” Mollohan hissed. “There is so much I could do to you with just a single phone call! You think you’re so above it all, but you’re not. You think you were his only whore? The man had a whole stable of women!” He shook his head, his eyes moving to Westin. “If you were truly as smart as you think you are, you’d stop associating yourself with these people and find something better for yourself. Something your mother might have been proud of.”

“Don’t talk about my mother!”

Mollohan’s eyes narrowed. “If it’s a war you want, then you’ve got it. Watch yourselves, both of you. I won’t allow the likes of you to ruin my reputation, to steal from me, or to corrupt my only child.” His eyes bore through Westin as he emphasized the word ‘only.’ “Stay the hell away from me, or I’ll rain hell down on you!”

“Why don’t you let me show you out, Mr. Mollohan?”

Clint, his hat in his hands, stood just inside the doorway, dryly observing the conversation. Mollohan barely glanced at him, more interested in Westin’s and Miss Dulcie’s reactions to his speech, but neither gave him the satisfaction of a reaction at all.

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Clint stepped forward, and Mollohan gave in, brushing past him on his way to the door. When they were gone, Miss Dulcie turned to Westin and gripped his forearms, staring hard into his face.

“You okay, boy?”

He nodded. “I’m fine. I’m sorry he dragged you into that.”

She brushed that away with a little sound and a wave of her hand. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve heard worse, believe you me!”

“Still, it was uncalled for.”

She reached up and touched his face. “You know that my boy died years ago. Killed here on this ranch, right?”

“I know, Miss Dulcie.”

“He was my only child, my only life. I was broken by his death. And then, not long after he died, Asa forced me onto a horse, took me out to watch the ranch hands move the cattle from the lower pasture to the winter pasture. When I complained and asked him why he was being so cruel to me, forcing me out of my safe bed, away from my private grief, he pointed to the boys on horseback and on those noisy ATVs, and he said, ‘This is your family now, Dulcie. These are your boys. As long as you have this ranch, and those boys, you will have a family.’ I took those words to heart, Westin.” She patted his face gently. “You are my boy. And I won’t let anyone, not even that pompous ass, do anything to hurt you.”

Westin nodded, a frog leaping to his throat. Miss Dulcie smiled, patting his cheek again. “Don’t let him get to you. He’s all bark and no bite.”

Westin kissed her forehead lightly. “Thank you, Miss Dulcie.”

Clint cleared his throat, letting them know he’d returned to the room. Westin turned, snatching up his hat from where he’d set it on the low table behind the couch. “We should get back to work,” he said, shooting a questioning look at Clint, his thoughts on Lee.

Miss Dulcie made a gesture with her hand, shooing them out of the room. “I have work to do, anyway.”

Clint was already halfway up the stairs when Westin caught up to him. “She find anything on that memory card?”

Clint shrugged. “I don’t know. I left before she started.”

“She’s alone?”

“She’s in a house full of people. She’s fine.”

But Westin had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach that made him rush up the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. When he burst through the library doors, he half-expected Lee to be gone, but she was there, typing furiously on the keyboard of a slim laptop. She had earbuds in her ears, so she didn’t immediately realize they’d entered the room. For a split second, he was able to study her without her knowing it. Damn, she was beautiful!

“Hey,” Westin said, rapping his knuckles on the table near her as he dropped into a chair beside her. She looked up, her eyes wide, a touch of fear registering in their

amber depths. She bit her bottom lip as she studied him, a cloud of emotions rushing over her.

“I’ve got to go,” she said in a flurry of words. “You were right. I never should have come here!”

“Whoa!” Westin took her hand, but she pulled away, sitting back and tugging the earbuds out of her ears. “What’s going on?”

“It’s worse than I thought.” She closed the top of the computer and sat back, running her hands over her face. “I thought it was just about Fang and his little group of drug dealers, but I was wrong. This goes back so much further! And there are so many people involved...”

“Slow down,” Clint said as he also took a seat across from her. “Start at the beginning.”

Lee looked from Westin to Clint and back again, taking a couple of deep breaths. “It’s the box. I should have known the moment I saw it that I was screwed, but I just...” She stopped, choking on her own words. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, her eyes skating over Westin.

“Hey...” He took her face in his hands and caressed her jaw with his thumbs. “You need to take a deep breath. You are safe here, okay?”

She shook her head even with him holding her face. “No, I’m not. They know where I am and they’re coming for me.”

“Who?” Clint demanded.

She leaned forward and kissed Westin softly, then pulled away, standing to pace for a

second behind the table before she finally turned, hands on hips, and began talking... “Two years ago, Will and I worked a case in Utah. We’d gotten reports of an increase in fentanyl overdoses in rural areas of the state, so we went out there to check it out. We went undercover as a couple of teachers at a small-town high school where half a dozen kids had overdosed, hoping to find the source of the drug.”

She ran her hand over the top of her head, remembering details far clearer than she wanted to, right down to the smell of the classroom where she’d stumbled through lessons on the Iliad. “After a couple of weeks, we built a relationship with this girl who finally told us where she got the drugs—some farm on the outskirts of town. That’s when we stumbled on the boxes buried in the ground.”

She stopped, her head spinning a little as she tried to recall all the information she’d just discovered from her less-than-skillful computer hacks. “We thought we had a small operation, a couple of locals stealing the fentanyl from a local hospital and selling it to kids who had no idea what they were doing. But it turned out to be just a small piece of a much larger operation. This cartel out of California—”

“There’s cartels in California?” Westin asked.

Clint shot him a dark look as he gestured for Lee to continue.

“There are cartels everywhere,” she sighed. “Every time we take one down, it seems like three more pop up to take its place.” She ran her hand over the top of her head, smoothing her palm over her braided hair. “We tracked the supplier to Sacramento. I got a job working for the guy—he had a little bakery in a suburb, so I learned how to properly frost a cake—and we discovered that he was working for this cartel, and they were using ranches and farms and small businesses in rural areas to sell and move their drugs.”

“This cartel is behind the boxes?”

“Was.” Lee glanced at Clint, aware he was following her story easily because they’d already talked some of it out. But Westin... he was watching her with such trust in his eyes, and she felt like a liar, like she’d deceived him when he’d trusted her most. “They would bury these boxes in remote areas, usually on private property, not only to protect themselves should the boxes be discovered when they were full of product, but so they could use them to set up enemies, people they wanted taken out of the equation, whatever equation it might have been. We saw them call the police on some strawberry farmer outside of Sacramento because he’d been causing trouble for one of their members who happened to have a home that butted up against his. And that wasn’t the only time...”

She sighed. “It’s not an uncommon thing, these dead drops. Drug dealers have been using them for years. But the boxes, the code they write on the top—”

“Code?” Westin asked.

“The lettering on top,” Clint said.

“Like the box we found,” she told Westin. “It had a man’s name on it. Petey J.”

“Petey?” Westin asked, tilting his head just slightly. “Are you sure?”

Lee nodded. “Positive. It took us a little while to break the code, but once we did, it was simple to remember.”

Westin shot Clint a look. “I told you one of those guys was wearing a Rocking D logo on his jacket!”

“What?” Lee looked from Clint to Westin, suddenly aware she was missing something here. “What are you talking about?”

Clint cleared his throat. “We put a camera on the box. When they came to clean it out, and then to remove it, we got footage.”

“Are you kidding me?” Lee wasn’t sure if she wanted to kiss them or kill them. “What did you see?”

“It was too dark to see faces. But Westin thought one of the guys who came to put something in the box was wearing a jacket with the Rocking D logo on it.”

“It had to have been!” Westin cried somewhat triumphantly. “How many grown-ass men do you know who go by Petey? Only the fucking foreman over at Rocking D!”

“We don’t know positively that it was him,” Clint warned. But Westin clearly thought it was. He was smiling like the Cheshire cat, more pleased with himself than Lee imagined he’d been in a long time.

“Listen,” Lee said. “You don’t know the whole story yet. Don’t get too excited.”

Clint tilted his head as he regarded her. “What is the whole story?”

“These people are dangerous. They’ll stop at nothing to get what they want.” She made a wide gesture. “Two years ago, Will and I traced the hierarchy of the cartel back to this politician in Sacramento. He wasn’t anyone terribly important, not yet, but he might have been someday. Turned out the boxes were his baby. He came up with it to get rid of a few political rivals. He was making so much money from the drugs he was selling over several states, that he could afford to lose a few here and there to set these people up. He was ruthless.”

The memory of it was almost painful to her. She rubbed her shoulder, remembered a fight with the guy’s personal security when he came to the little bakery, a fight that had ended with her blowing her cover. She was damn lucky that Will was there to get the guy out of the way before he was able to warn anyone else what they were up to.

Or maybe she wasn’t.

“Look, I thought we took the head of the operation down, that it was over. When I saw that box out there in your field, I knew something was up. I knew it wasn’t good. Someone else must have taken over this guy’s operation, but I didn’t know who or when or how. Not until now.”

“You’re getting ahead of us again,” Clint told her. “Back up a little.”

Lee sat back down, landing hard on her tailbone. “There’s no time for a bunch of explanations!” She ran her hands over her face again, rubbing so hard that her cheeks ached. “The thing is, I thought it was over. I thought we got this asshole and that he was rotting in jail, waiting for his trial date. I thought we put it in the past. So, when I saw that box, I didn’t know what to think, but it didn’t occur to me not to tell my

partner. Yet, telling him told him exactly where I was.”

“That’s how Fang found you.”

Lee pointed a finger at Westin. “Bingo!”

“That means your partner knew about the boxes ahead of time.”

“Give that man a prize!”

Lee stood again, so much nervous energy built up inside of her that she couldn’t stay still. “I looked over the files I got from Fang’s computer. Most of it is crap. Just names and transactions we already knew about, most of which I made myself. But there were phone calls that Fang recorded, conversations with his bosses and his gang, information that it will take days to gather from listening to his ramblings. But I heard a few familiar voices, and that sent me looking in a different location.”

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She gestured toward Clint. “You were the one who put the idea in my mind.”

“Your partner?”

“Wait! What are the two of you talking about?” Westin demanded.

Lee turned to him even as she made a wild gesture toward Clint. “He suggested that my partner sent me up here intentionally. That he wanted me stuck in the middle of freaking nowhere when Fang caught up with me.”

“Why would he do that?”

Lee snorted. “Good gosh-darn question!” She twisted her hands together, wringing them mercilessly until the pain in her bones made her stop. “I hacked his computer.”

“Will’s?”

“Will who?”

She groaned. Too many damn questions!

“I can’t breathe,” she muttered, suddenly doubling over. “I need to get the hell out of here!”

Westin was immediately there, sweeping her up into his arms and cradling her head against his shoulder. Tears began to fall, humiliatingly enough. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d shed a tear, let alone in front of two men she so deeply

respected. They'd taken her in when she was desperate, no questions asked, and here she was, delivering a shitload of trouble on their doorstep! What the hell was she going to do?

Clint had jumped to his feet, too, and without her asking, he gathered up the computer and the memory chip she'd left sitting beside it. Westin carried her downstairs, not setting her on her feet until they reached Clint's truck and she had nowhere to go but into the passenger seat.

"Westin!"

A girl, too old to be a child but still too young to be an adult, came rushing toward them, her eyes filled with the same sort of tears Lee had cried upstairs. She threw her arms around Westin, burying her face against his shoulder even as a gleam of fear entered his dark-blue eyes.

"Rena?"

"I've been so worried! When father came out of the study and started ranting about finding you, about the things he was going to do when he did...!"

Westin's eyes jumped to Lee's face even as he gently pushed the girl back, holding her jaw so that she was forced to slow down, to look up at him.

"What are you talking about?"

"Last night! I'm so ashamed of his behavior! How dare he throw you out like that?"

"What did your father tell you about what happened last night?"

"That you attacked him—but don't worry, darling; I know you wouldn't do that."

“Darling?” Lee asked, an ironic twist to the word.

“Who are you?” the girl asked, suddenly noticing Lee for the first time.

“I could ask you that, too.” She focused on Westin. “Is this who you dressed up for last night?”

Westin’s expression was priceless. He knew he was caught, and he wasn’t sure what to say. But the girl in his arms didn’t notice. All she saw was green, the color of jealousy. She pulled away from Westin and stepped into Lee, pushing her back against the side of Clint’s truck like she thought she was tough.

“You need to back off. This is none of your business!”

“Yeah? Is that why he spent the night in my bed last night?” She shot a look at Westin. “Is this the game you were talking about last night? You’re carrying on with this girl, too?” She shook her head even as she gave the girl a once-over and found her less than impressive. “If that’s how he wants to play, you can have him, sweetheart.”

But the strength had gone out of the girl. She stepped back, shaking her head like the mere act would make Lee take her words back. “Westin?” she asked softly, turning her big, sad eyes on him. Lee almost felt bad. She clearly thought he was the moon and the stars.

But, again, so had Lee. For a while, anyway.

“You don’t understand.” Westin reached for Lee’s arm as she turned to get into the truck. The girl cried out and turned, running off into the open space beyond the house, her slight body already shivering with cold and the heartbreak Lee had just delivered.

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“I think it’s pretty obvious.” Lee pulled away. “Go after her. She needs you more than I ever did.”

But he wouldn’t let her go. He jerked her back against him, wrapping his arms hard around her until she stood still, no longer resisting him.

“I wasn’t playing games with you, Lee,” he said roughly against her ear. “I would never do that to you.” He squeezed her for a moment, and she had to admit it felt good. It felt perfect. She wanted nothing more than to lose herself in him, pretend this morning hadn’t happened, that her world hadn’t just imploded. She wanted to pretend she didn’t know what she did, that trouble wasn’t coming for her sooner rather than later. She wanted to pretend that, if he had been playing games, it didn’t rip her heart right out of her chest to know it.

He kissed her jaw gently.

“That girl,” he said, his voice filled with more emotion than she’d seen him express since she met him, “is my half-sister. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

And then he let her go, and she felt as though she were in a freefall. Her knees went weak even as she turned and watched him chase after the girl. Clint was there. He somehow always knew where he needed to be just in time to save everyone from themselves. He caught her and helped her into the truck, offering her hand a gentle squeeze before he closed the door.

What was it her mother used to say?

When it rains, it pours.

Chapter 11

“Rena!”

Westin chased after Rena, surprised by how fast someone so small could be. They were halfway to the barn when he finally grabbed her, snagging her coat from behind and nearly pulling her off her feet.

“Will you stop?”

“Is it true? Were you with that girl last night?”

“You don’t understand,” he said, feeling like he was constantly repeating himself.

“What don’t I understand? That you’re just like my father said you were? A double-crosser? A liar? A user?”

“I never meant for you to get the wrong idea, Rena.” He wanted to touch her, but he was afraid that she would read too much into it, so he stepped back, shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. “You were the one who assumed it was a date. Not me. I wanted to tell you, wanted to explain everything, but you just... I didn’t know how to do it without alienating you.”

“Tell me what? That all you wanted from me was what I’ll inherit someday?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Then you weren’t just dating me to get close to my father, to Rocking D? You’re just like all these other fools around here, all these ranch hands who see themselves as

some lord of the manor if they can just get me to marry them! But I thought you were different!”

“Did I ever say anything to you about marriage? Did I even kiss you?”

She turned away. “So, what? You didn’t kiss me so that makes you some sort of saint?”

“I’m as far from a saint as anyone could possibly be.”

“Why did you go out with me, then?”

“Because I needed a way to get your father’s attention.”

“See!” she cried, spinning on him. “You admit it. You were using me!”

“Not for the reason you think.”

“Does that make it better?”

“No. What I did is wrong. I know it was wrong, I knew it as I was doing it. But I was desperate, Rena.” He took off his hat and worked it in his hands, needing something to do with them. “I’ve been here for three years. Three years trying to find a way to get to your father. I tried applying for a job at Rocking D, but I couldn’t get past the foreman. I tried calling his office, tried ambushing him in town, but he never goes to town! I tried everything I could think of, and then you just... you were sweet to me, always seeking me out whenever we ran into each other in town, always talking to me when all those idiots from Rocking D looked down their noses at me.”

“Because I liked you!” she said, sniffing as her nose began to run. “You’re different from those other guys. I thought we were friends!”

“So did I.”

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“Then why would you do this to me? Why did you want to see my father so badly?”

“Because he’s my father, too.”

That knocked the air out of her. Her mouth dropped open, her jaw unhinged. She backed away, then doubled over, gasping for air. He went to her, but when he touched her, she pushed him away, stumbling a few yards further across the field.

“I’m sorry, Rena. I didn’t want it to come out like this.”

She fell to the ground, landing hard on her ass. He didn’t know what to do. He stood over her, guarding her, but he was afraid to touch her, afraid of not touching her. The ground was still covered in the snowfall they’d gotten days ago, and it was probably soaking through the linen pants she was wearing, pants that were hardly appropriate for the weather. She was going to catch her death, and then where would he be?

“Rena—”

“Explain.”

He cleared his throat, not sure exactly how much explanation she wanted. But, again, wasn’t it time for the entire truth to come out?

“My mother worked at Rocking D back in the mid-nineties. She was a ranch hand, moving cattle with all the other ranch hands. And your grandfather decided your dad needed to learn the craft, so he sent him out there for the summer to live like a ranch hand, sleeping in the bunkhouse and working side by side with my mom and the

others.” He ran his hand over his head as he slapped his hat against his thigh. “The way she told it, they set eyes on each other and it was love at first sight. She was young, just past her nineteenth birthday, and she had all these dreams, things she was going to do with her life. Falling in love wasn’t part of the plan.”

Rena looked up, tears still slowly falling down her face. She didn’t speak, but he could read the questions in her eyes. They were the same questions he’d always asked. Why? How?

“He convinced her that he was in love with her, that they could do anything as long as they were together. They were going to run away together. But then my mother found out about your mom.” He remembered his mother telling him about it, how she’d been invited to a big party at the main house, a birthday party for Dominic Mollohan. She had mistakenly believed she’d be his date, and she’d taken great pains with her appearance. But when she arrived, it was just in time for Dominic’s father to make the announcement that Dominic was engaged to marry Carolyn. “She went to him, told him she was pregnant. He gave her all the cash he had on him at the time—a thousand dollars—and told her to take care of it. That he had no choice but to do as his father asked of him. His hands were tied.”

Rena was quiet for a long moment, her gaze drifting over the field behind him, the house that towered over the landscape. Finally, she wiped her hands on her pants and then rubbed at her cheeks, wiping her tears away.

“Where did she go?”

“Denver. She got a job as a waitress and used the money to put a deposit on an apartment.”

“Did she tell my dad that she didn’t have an abortion?”

“She wrote to him. A letter a week for years. She even showed me a couple of them, let me write notes to him on birthday cards.”

Rena shook her head. “I don’t believe you. My father isn’t the greatest guy, but I don’t think he’d turn his back on a son. I mean, hell, I’ve listened to him and my mom fight for years over the fact that she never gave him a son. He resents her for it!”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

She stood up and wiped her butt off as best as she could, doing nothing but muddying her hands. “Your mother must have lied to you.”

“Now you sound like him.”

Rena’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah? And who’s the one who used me to get close to him? Who made me believe he was interested in me just so I’d invite him to dinner?” She shook her head. “My mom liked you. She defended you to him last night, just like I did.”

“I’m sorry if I hurt you, Rena. That wasn’t my intention.”

“What did you think you were doing? Did you think you’d tell me the truth and I’d be okay with it?”

“I don’t know.” He slipped his hat back on his head. “I guess a part of me was hoping that you would be. We both grew up as only children when we could have had each other all along. I was kind of hoping you’d be open to getting to know me. The real me.”

Rena shook her head. “That’s asking a lot.”

“Is it?” He sighed. “Your father pretty much said the same thing. He called my mother a slut and implied that he couldn’t possibly be my father. Do you think that, too? Do you think she made it all up?”

“I think you lied to me, and that’s about all I can hear right now.”

He lowered his head. “Fair enough.” He started to walk away, headed toward the barn where he could catch a ride to Lee. “You should know, though, I liked your mom, too. She’s a nice lady who doesn’t deserve a man like Dominic Mollohan. Neither of you deserve someone who’s too involved in his own life to pay attention to you over a simple meal.”

He walked off, leaving her to consider that thought. He honestly did feel bad for what he’d done to her. She had every right to never forgive him for it. But there was a part of him—just like the part that had held on to the hope that Dominic Mollohan would accept him as his son—that hoped she would understand where he was coming from and see past the deception. It was a lot to ask of her, he knew. But he couldn’t stop holding on to that hope.

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Lee curled up on the couch, the mug of tea Clint had fixed for her between her hands. She stared out the windows at the snow-covered ground and the heavy clouds, wondering if it might snow again. She couldn't remember the last time she'd spent a winter in this kind of weather. They didn't get a lot of snow up in Seattle. Just a hell of a lot of rain.

But, again, it had been a while since she'd spent an entire winter in Seattle.

"Do you have a phone?"

"Why?" Clint asked as he settled in a chair near her with a mug of his own.

"I'd like to call my mother." Lee glanced at him. "I haven't talked to her in a while, and if this is my last day on earth..."

"We're not going to talk like that."

"Might as well be realistic."

"What makes you think he's coming after you?"

"Because I turned him in to our boss in Seattle. If he's there—which I doubt—he'll be arrested in a matter of hours. If he isn't—which I kind of lean toward—he'll do what he can to protect himself, including finding me, killing me, and covering his ass."

"You think Will is here in Milsap?"

“I do. I think he’s hanging out with the people he’s been running this drug deal with.”

Clint tilted his head slightly, regarding her over his mug. “Tell me.”

Lee sighed. “Someone who knew about the boxes, the codes, took over the operations of that old cartel leader. I can count on two hands how many people knew that, and most of them are in prison.”

“You think your partner picked up where the cartel left off.”

“I think he used the information we found during that investigation to start the operation again. And I think he was working with Fang and his gang to do it. But not just him.”

“Someone local?”

Lee was quiet for a few minutes, her thoughts spinning in her head. She wasn’t sure how much she wanted to tell Clint. She was afraid if he knew too much, someone would put a target on his back, and she didn’t want that. But she was also afraid it was too late, that all five of these boys already had a target on their backs just by virtue of the fact that they’d helped her.

“I’d like to call my mom. I have a few hatchets that need to be buried, if you know what I mean.”

Clint nodded, reaching into his back pocket before handing over his phone. She held it for a second, looking at the photograph he used as his wallpaper. It was a little girl with pigtails, a big smile on her pretty face. His daughter, she assumed. It made her ache some, this sudden fear bursting through her that she would never know the joys of motherhood. She’d never really spent much time thinking about her future. She wasn’t sure until that moment that she even wanted kids. It was like a punch to the

stomach to realize she did but she might not have the chance.

She dialed quickly before she could change her mind.

“Angie Wallace,” the disembodied voice answered after three rings. “How may I help you?”

Lee closed her eyes. She almost couldn’t make herself speak.

“Hello?”

“Mom? It’s Lee.”

“Lee.”

Her voice took on this familiar edge that Lee couldn’t help but bristle at. But she reminded herself that this could be the last time she might speak to her mother, so she made herself stop. Just stop and listen.

“Listen, Mom, I just... I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry. I know I never made things easy for you after Dad, and I... Shit!” She rubbed her eyes, sitting up a little taller on the couch, aware of Clint watching her. “I just wanted you to know that I get it. And I’m sorry.”

“Lee?” The edge was gone to her mother’s voice, and now it was filled with concern. “Is everything okay? Where are you?”

“I’m all right, Mom. I’m in Colorado. On a ranch, actually.” She glanced out the windows again. “Do you remember Grandpa’s farm? That pony he taught me how to ride? He’d be proud of me now, Mom. I went riding again the other day, and I remembered everything he taught me.”

“That was a long time ago, Lee.”

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“I know. But it’s made me think a lot about what you must have gone through back then, just after Daddy died. I know that couldn’t have been easy for you.”

“It wasn’t,” she agreed. “But I shouldn’t have let it get between us.”

Lee’s chin began to quiver a little. “Thanks for saying that, Mom. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that.”

“I love you, Lee,” her mother said softly. “Whatever’s happening... please come home. As soon as you can. The twins’ graduation is in May, and Johnny will be home for spring break in a month or so. They’d really love to see you.”

Lee smiled even as tears began to spill from the corners of her eyes. “I’ll try. Really.”

“I’m proud of you, sweetheart. I don’t think I ever told you that.”

Lee took a deep breath, barely keeping her voice steady. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“Will you call again?”

“In a few days.”

“Okay. Be safe. Please.”

“I will, Mom. I love you.”

“Love you, too, darling.”

Lee ended the call and pressed the phone to her chest as she gave in to the sobs she’d held back. That was the most intimate call she’d had with her mother since she was a preteen. Her father’s death had driven a wedge between them that Lee had never tried to understand, or overcome. But there was no time better than the moment one realized their partner was out to kill them to bury the hatchet—right?

“You okay?” Clint asked.

She nodded. She handed him back his phone without looking at him, curling up on the couch again with her tea mug. She rubbed at her tears and sighed heavily. “You should give me a vehicle and send me off on my own. With any luck, they’ll follow me and leave you alone.”

“And if they don’t? Then we’ll have to fight them on two fronts.”

“You say that like this sort of thing happens on a daily basis around here.”

“I still don’t even know what ‘this’ is.”

“Yeah.” She sat up, shooting a glance in his direction. If she were him, she’d be freaking out right about now, but he seemed as calm as he always was—even when he’d been talking Remington down off the drug dealer trying to kill her. “I guess I owe you that much.”

Lee took a deep breath, trying to get her emotions under control. “So, I hacked into Will’s computer. Not his work computer, but the laptop that he uses for his personal stuff.” She tilted her head to one side. “I was looking for his password into his DEA files in Seattle, but discovered that my partner is just as stupid as Fang. Apparently, he felt that the password he had on the physical laptop, and the simple encryption on

his files was enough to keep someone out. He forgot that it was the computer specialists at Homeland who taught me how to hack.”

She sipped from her tea mug, then set it on the coffee table in favor of pulling her knees up against her chest, holding herself for the little illusion of security it provided. “There are emails and audio files on his computer, just like Fang’s. He’s been keeping a record of conversations with his partners, I suppose because he’s not sure he could trust them. Or maybe he was planning to use them for something else. I don’t know.”

“What else could he use them for?”

Lee’s eyebrows rose. “Worst-case scenario? Someone finds this stuff on his computer, but I’m dead? He could say that I’d convinced him that he should do and say certain things with these people as part of the case, but the truth was I was the one who went rogue, and I set him up to make it look like he was going with me. He could turn it all around, stay clean and still get the benefit of all the money these drug dealers have been paying him.” She shrugged. “He wouldn’t be the first to do it.”

“You don’t think it’s possible that those recordings are part of an undercover case you don’t know about? Or a part of the one you were working together?”

“No.” She took a deep breath, then sighed. “I want to think he’s still clean, but I looked at his bank account. Not hard once I hacked the rest of his personal accounts. He has money coming in that can’t be explained by the DEA. There’s an account in his name that his wife probably doesn’t know about, an account that has more than ten million dollars in it. I don’t know what legitimate explanation he could come up with even if he had an answer for the recordings, the emails. It’s just too much.”

“Then there’s no doubt.”

“No.”

“So... who do you think he’s working with?”

That was the tricky part. “Do you know this Petey J?”

“He’s the foreman over at Rocking D. He’s born and raised around here, just like most of the ranch hands in the area. Mom still lives in Milsap.”

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“He strike you as the kind who might deal drugs if the right person talked him into it?”

“He’d do anything Dominic Mollohan told him to do. Might let a woman talk him into some stupid stuff. But I don’t see him being a pushover for anyone else.”

Lee was quiet for a second, mulling this over. “What about the morning you guys met me? You said there were no unfamiliar vehicles in that parking lot that morning, that if Fang had followed me there, he’d have to have walked?”

“Yeah?”

“Was Petey J there?”

It took Clint a second, but he was quick to follow her line of thought. “A whole group of ranch hands were there from Rocking D. I remember because Landry wanted to talk to them about this new cow vaccine he’d heard about. Figured they would know about it if anyone local did.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, some of the final puzzle pieces falling into place. Before she could connect the dots for Clint, however, the door burst open and Westin came into the house.

“Lee, I can explain everything. It wasn’t what it looked like.”

“How is she?” she asked gently.

He shook his head, looking as though he might just be standing on the last straw.
“She was pissed.”

“I’m sorry.”

He threw himself onto the couch beside her and knocked off his hat in his attempt to run his hands over his face. “What a fucking day!”

She moved against him, just wanting to feel his arms around her. He obliged, wrapping her up tightly, pulling her hard against his chest. She closed her eyes, thinking that if this was the last thing she felt on this earth, that would be okay. This was heaven all on its own.

“I think now is a good time for me to make myself scarce,” Clint volunteered. “I might go make a phone call to the local sheriff, explain to her some of the things you’ve been telling me.”

Lee pulled away from Westin. “Wait. What if the local sheriff is involved in... I mean, I haven’t—”

“We can trust Sheriff Reeves,” Westin told her.

“She’s a good person, Lee. She isn’t corruptible.”

She rolled her head. “That’s what I thought about Will.”

“You can trust her,” Clint repeated. “I do.”

“You can,” Westin agreed.

Lee slowly settled back down against Westin. “I guess I put my life in your hands the

day I came here. I should probably start trusting you.”

Westin kissed the top of her head. “Maybe you should.”

Clint headed for the door. Just before he stepped through it, Lee sat up again. “One more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you think you could get me a gun?”

Clint shot Westin a look, but then he nodded. “Yeah, I can do that.” He backtracked, going through the door that cut the main part of the house off from the bedrooms. A few minutes later, he was back, a 9mm Glock in his hand. He popped the clip, emptied the chamber, and then handed it to her.

“Military?”

“Marines.”

Lee nodded. “Thank you for your service.” She looked the gun over, the feel of it not unlike her DEA-issued weapon. “This’ll work.”

Chapter 12

The gun made Westin nervous.

Lee refused to leave it sitting on a table, or beside the bed. She carried it with her everywhere she went like it was her smartphone and she was expecting a phone call. She moved between the couch and the windows, between the bed and the front of the house, pacing like she expected an ambush any moment. He couldn't distract her with reality television, with funny banter, even with a kiss or a romp in the bed. Nothing could keep her still.

"Are you expecting an ambush?" he finally asked her as the sun started to go down, the land darkening with dusk.

"Yeah."

"Who? Who are you expecting to come for you?"

She was standing at the windows in the living room, studying the view out the front of the house that looked toward the back of the property. It took him a while, but he finally realized that this view pointed toward the field where she'd found the box. It was that direction from which she expected trouble.

"Lee, you can trust me. I can help you."

"Can you?"

He moved up behind her and slipped his hands over her shoulders. "Tell me who you think is coming for you."

“Besides my partner? The one person I should have been able to trust, but apparently can’t?”

“Yeah. Besides your partner, one man out there all by himself.”

“But he’s not alone.”

“I get that impression. What I want to know is who you think is working with him.”

She didn’t answer him right away, just stood there staring off into the unfamiliar darkness. He could see her reflection in the window, could see the worry lines that were etched across her forehead and beside her amber eyes. He wanted to smooth them away, make them disappear, not because they weren’t pretty—everything on her was beautiful—but because he knew what lay behind them, and he wanted to take that from her too.

“That California cartel was that bad?”

“It’s complicated.”

“But that’s who you think is behind this?”

She once again chose not to answer him. The tension in her body was infectious, moving through his own body until his shoulders were sore and his back ached. He rubbed her shoulders lightly, running his fingers up against her neck, caressing as much as massaging, wanting her to know he was there, to remember that he was part of this too. Finally, she sighed and turned into him, pressing her face against his chest.

“I should have seen it coming,” she said. “I knew the pressure he was under. His daughter has spina bifida, which requires physical therapy and a wheelchair and so

many other things. It cost money that he was barely able to afford, and time. He was never home, never there to help his wife with the emotional and physical parts of having a child with special needs.” Lee shook her head. “I saw it, but he kept assuring me that they were working it out. I believed him.”

“It’s not your job to figure out when the people you trust are lying to you. It’s his job to be honest with you.”

She shook her head against his chest. “I should have known. How desperate did he have to be to make a deal with these people?”

“Lee,” he said softly, “what people? Who else is involved in this?”

But she didn’t have a chance to answer him. The house shook as an explosion rocked the land underneath them. Westin pulled her back from the windows as they imploded, twisting around to cover her body with his own. He could feel the glass bouncing off his shirt, felt the bite of it cutting him in a few places. They stumbled, falling against the back of the couch, covering their faces as they waited for the debris to stop flying.

“What was that?” she asked even as she turned into him, touched his face to check for damage. “What happened?”

“I think it might have been the old hay shed. It’s about half a mile from here.”

“Why would they do that?”

“To get our attention. To draw us out.”

“It worked.”

She pulled away from him and stood, charging to the door like she was going to just walk out there. Westin scrambled to his feet and grabbed her, pulling her back.

“They could be anywhere!” he hissed. “You can’t just walk out there! You could be walking right into their hands.”

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“I’m the one they’re after. Why shouldn’t I walk out there?”

“Because they’ll kill you!”

“If they’re busy killing me, they won’t mess with you or Clint or any of the others!”

“I’m not going to just stand here and watch you give yourself over to them! We’re going to fight, Lee, whether you like it or not!”

“I see she told you what her name really is,” a voice behind them said. “She’s usually good about staying in character until the final arrests are made.”

Westin watched the color drain from Lee’s face, but her eyes never left his. There was fear there. Cold fear. He’d never seen anything quite like it.

He turned, pushing her behind him. A man, smaller than him, less than six foot he guessed, blond and good-looking, the kind of guy who would do well in Hollywood if he had a box to stand on every time he kissed his leading lady. A golden version of Tom Cruise.

“How gallant of you,” the man said. “But I can assure you that Lee can protect herself much better than you probably can. She was trained by the best.”

“You always did have a massive ego, Will,” Lee said as she stepped around Westin, refusing to be protected, even by him.

“Are you going to tell me I wasn’t the best?”

She lowered her head slightly. “You were. You were the best at all of it—until you turned to the dark side.”

“We’ve always been on the dark side, Lee. Just because we did it in the name of catching the bad guy didn’t make us any better than them.”

“But didn’t it? At the end of the day, we went home, and they went to prison.”

“I’ll still be going home.”

“I don’t know about that.” Lee stepped further away from Westin. He could see Clint’s gun tucked into the back of her jeans, barely covered by the tail of her shirt. He was sure this guy couldn’t see it, but he would if she turned the wrong way. “I sent an email to White this morning. It contains more than enough evidence to prove you’re the one who went rogue.”

“Any information you got off Fang’s computer I can explain away.”

“This isn’t just from Fang’s computer.”

The Tom Cruise lookalike paused at that, but he didn’t stop. He took a few steps toward her, waving his gun as he directed her the long way around the couch. “It doesn’t matter. I can explain everything once I have your body.”

“Then why don’t you just shoot me, Will?”

He ignored her question, again impatiently gesturing with his gun to get her to come around the couch down the long way. Westin frowned, a little confused about what this guy was up to. He’d been so busy watching him, he hadn’t checked the windows behind him, hadn’t looked around the room to see where he’d come in. There were windows in the bedrooms, but there was also a small laundry room at the other end of

the cabin with an exterior door. He saw the movement just before Lee did; that same slender Hispanic man who'd tried to pull her from her car by her hair was sneaking into the room, a gun in both his hands.

“Lee!”

She jerked the gun out from her waistband and fired in one, quick succession as Westin hit his knees. Two shots fired, then a third. Westin watched as Lee jerked back, twisting on one ankle just before a fourth shot echoed through the cabin.

“Lee!” he cried again, crawling to her as she fell back. He moved his hands quickly over her body, expecting to find blood staining his fingers. She sat up and kissed him almost roughly on the lips. “I’m okay,” she said. “I just turned too fast. My ankle went out on me.”

“You’re okay?”

“I’m okay.”

She untangled herself from him and cautiously pulled herself up to her knees. Whatever she saw must have given her courage because she quickly jumped to her feet and ran around the couch. Westin followed, catching sight of the Hispanic guy bleeding out on the carpet. Clint was going to be pissed about that! All that blood...

“Why, Will?” Lee dropped to her knees again beside her partner. “Why did you do it?”

Blood was bubbling out of the man’s mouth and he was moving it almost like a fish out of water. It was surreal, like something Westin had seen on the cop shows Clint liked to watch so much. There was a hole in his chest and it was sucking in air; he could see the way the blood seemed to be flowing in two different directions. The

man wasn't going to make it if someone didn't do something—that much was obvious to Westin. But Lee didn't seem intent on saving him. She only wanted answers.

“Was it just about the money?”

Will coughed, splattering blood across the front of her shirt. She stared at him for a long moment, then suddenly seemed spurred into motion, grabbing a throw pillow from the loveseat and shoving it hard against the wound on his chest. Will cried out, proving he could still make a noise, and then lay back, breathing visibly easier.

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“Tell me they forced you into it!”

He focused on her, his eyes moving slowly over her face. “Oh, Lee, my beautiful Lee. You were always so idealistic. All those undercover jobs, all those slimeballs always shoving their hands up your skirts, yet you still somehow held on to your morals.” He moaned, arching his back as he coughed, more blood splattering on the surfaces around him. “How was I supposed to turn down all that money?”

Something broke inside of Lee. Westin could see it, something about the expression on her face, the very way she held herself. His words destroyed something in her.

“Fuck you, Will,” she whispered. She stood up, placing all her weight on his chest as she did, then releasing the pillow that had been keeping the air from sucking into his chest wound. He grunted again, but he was actually smiling even as more blood bubbled up out of his mouth.

“Do you think it’s over?” he asked, the blood spilling, getting over everything. “It’s not over. They’re coming for you.”

“They’ll have a fight when they do,” Westin informed him. He took Lee’s arm and pulled her away from him, but before he could, she kicked him, landing a kick right to his ribs. He grunted again, but then he began to laugh, the sound one Westin would not soon forget.

“We have to get out of here. We have to warn Clint.”

Lee stooped to pick up Will’s gun, sliding it into her waistband where the other had

been. Then she grabbed the Hispanic's, and then Clint's where she'd left it on the floor behind the couch. Westin got their jackets, tossing hers to her before opening the front door. He peeked cautiously around the frame. Lee slipped up behind him and pressed one of the guns into his hand. He didn't have a lot of experience with handguns. His preferred weapon was a shotgun. But he knew how to use it. One did not work the oil fields in Texas without learning how to use a variety of weapons, guns in particular.

Together, they stepped onto the porch and made a quick beeline for his truck where it was still parked in the spot he'd left it the night before. He pulled out a little too fast, mud flying up under the tires as they slid through the slush that used to be a lovely layer of snow.

They didn't see anyone at first, even as Westin directed the truck over the small rise that led to the trail back toward the main section of the ranch. But less than half a mile later, he spotted an ATV in the distance.

"That's not one of ours."

Lee came to attention, leaning forward slightly to attempt to get a better look. It was a single ATV with what looked like only one person on board. It was headed in the opposite direction to them, but there was no doubt whoever was driving it had spotted them. There was nothing between the two vehicles. No cover.

"Who is it, Lee? Who's coming for you?"

"Razor." It took a little while for the puzzle pieces to come together, but once they did, it created a picture Lee hadn't wanted to see.

Two years ago, it was a cartel out of California. They were supplying fentanyl, cocaine, and meth to neighborhoods from Sacramento to Los Angeles to Portland to

Salt Lake City. Lee and Will had traced them back to that low-level politician, had taken out the whole operation with the evidence they had. It had come together beautifully, every piece fitting in a way that was rare in her line of work. But she hadn't thought twice about it because it was good. They'd made a dozen arrests. The fentanyl overdoses had stopped. They'd achieved what they set out to achieve.

Fast-forward two years. Cops in Arizona knew there was a gang moving drugs and weapons through Phoenix but they had yet to figure out who was running the operation. They'd made arrests, but it was always street-level dealers, never anyone high enough in the hierarchy to do damage to the operation, to stop it from moving in their city. They brought in the DEA to root out the leadership and take them down. In a matter of weeks, Lee and Will had gotten close to one of the lieutenants, Fang, to put together a map of the leadership. Everything pointed to this guy, Razor, as the head of the whole operation. He was their target, and Fang was going to lead them to Razor.

And then everything went to hell and Lee was on the run, trusting her partner to get her somewhere safe. Instead, he walked her right into the monsters' den.

Until Clint had pointed out the illogical aspects of Will's actions after Lee was discovered stealing files from Fang's computer, she had not suspected him of any betrayal. Will was her partner, had been her partner through some truly difficult cases. They'd leaned on each other, had each other's backs. She would have followed him blindly through the desert without question. But Clint had forced her to step back and take a look at the things he'd done and said from the moment she'd left that nightclub, and that had made her take a closer look at other things Will had done over the past few months, and continued, dominoes falling all the way back to the California cartel two years ago.

It started there. But when? And why?

It was hacking his computer that had put her on the right road. Finding that bank account. The audio files, the things he'd kept that would have easily incriminated her as much as they would him. He was preparing. Setting her up. But what pushed it over the edge was something she'd found in an unexpected place: her own files.

They routinely recorded interviews with suspects. All law enforcement tended to do that now. It was just safer for the cop as well as the suspect. In one of the interviews she and Will had done with that low-level politician, he'd said something that she didn't make note of at the time, but which haunted her now.

"You have no idea just how widespread this is. You think that by taking me out of the equation you're doing something good for mankind. The thing is, you crush one cockroach under your foot—there are hundreds crawling around inside your walls that you don't see. It's never going to end. It's everywhere. You think you're the one in power, but I'm the one holding the razor."

Even now, taking it at face value, it seemed like the rantings of a man who knew he was caught. But what were the chances he'd use that word? Razor. Why that word? Why not power? Or knife? Or almost anything else? Why that one, simple word?

Lee went back, dug through the information they'd gathered on this politician. Turned out he hadn't always lived in the city. He was a transplant from Phoenix, Arizona. He had family in the city, one of whom was a co-owner of the club Fang managed. And that man was married to a woman who had family in Salt Lake City. And that woman? Her cousin was a widow by the name of Mollohan.

And when Lee went back to look through the files from Fang's computer, she came across a recorded phone call during which Will said the name Mollohan.

"Have you heard from Mollohan? When's the drop?"

“Tomorrow.”

“Good. It’s all coming together. All we have to do is get rid of that other problem.”

“When do we do that?”

“She’s talking about wanting to do it after you leave the club. Make sure you leave early tomorrow night.”

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She knew immediately what they were talking about. Will was telling Fang to set Lee up, to leave the club and give her the time to get into his office. Then he was supposed to come back and kill her. Only, Fang let his personal proclivities get in the way—he wanted to rape her first. But he underestimated her will to fight. She got away, and Will had to think quick.

He sent her to Razor.

“Razor?” Westin asked, leaning forward to keep track on the ATV. “What is that?”

“He’s the guy running the drugs between here and Arizona.”

“Another gang member?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Then who?”

She shook her head. “This is the boss, the guy who took over the operation when we arrested that guy in California.”

“Someone local?”

“Probably.” She ran her hands over her face, realizing when she dropped them that there was blood drying on her palms and between her fingers. There were pictures, fuzzy pictures, of a man who met with Fang a few times outside a restaurant in Phoenix. He was tall, dark. But so were more than half of all American men. They

never could get a clear picture of him. Will said it was because the guy traveled with security and he couldn't get close enough, even with the wide-angle lens. But now Lee knew it was because he didn't want them to have a good picture of this guy. Will was protecting his own boss.

But when she'd seen that man in Miss Dulcie's sitting room this morning, there'd been something about him that she instantly disliked. And it wasn't just the attitude he'd turned on Westin, though that didn't help.

"Who is Dominic Mollohan?"

Westin glanced at her, his expression almost comical in his obvious disbelief that she would ask that question now.

"He owns the Rocking D."

"Where Petey J works?"

"Yeah." He glanced at her again. "And he's Rena's father."

"That girl who thought you were cheating on her with me?"

"Yeah." He rubbed a hand on his jeans as he continued to drive with the other hand.

"Why? What does Mollohan have to do with this?"

"Does he have a brother?"

"He did. Michael. But he died like five years ago, I think. Car accident in Utah. He was down there visiting his wife's family."

Lee just nodded, her mind still moving around pieces, putting the puzzle together.

“The box... are you sure there were never any other boxes on your land? You’ve never seen anything else like that?”

“It’s a big ranch, Lee. It’s kind of hard to search every inch of it every day.”

“But you have people running the fences.”

“We have guys on ATVs who ride sections of the fence that can be accessed from roads or trails, and we have a couple of guys check specific sections of the fence at specific times to make sure there’s no damage, no spots where a curious cow could get itself hurt or escape. But, like I said, it’s a big ranch. We can’t have eyes on every inch of it every single minute of every day.”

“Then it’s possible there have been other boxes on the property.”

“Anything’s possible.”

“Mollohan doesn’t like Miss Dulcie.”

Westin grunted even as he stretched to check out all three of his rearview mirrors. Lee turned around and studied the area, but she could no longer see the ATV they’d spotted earlier.

“Mollohan’s father was a little reckless when it came to business. He struggled to keep Rocking D afloat during his time there, and he would often use the ranch as collateral in card games. Asa knew that, and he arranged to play Mollohan’s father a hand of poker when he first came to town, hoping to get a bit of land to use as a jumping-off point to start his own ranch. And that’s exactly what he did.”

“But Mollohan didn’t appreciate it.”

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“Mollohan was a kid at the time. He had no idea how badly his father had run the business until twenty or so years later. And when he found out that part of the land his father had ended up handing over to Asa had a small oil well on it—the rights to which his father had also handed over to Asa—and that the oil had financed most of the fortune Asa built in the years after winning the land, he was furious. He believed the transaction was illegal and that all of Asa’s fortune, as well as the empire he’d built from it, belonged to Rocking D. He wanted it back.”

“But Asa refused.”

“Asa refused. They fought it out in court until about five years before Asa died. Every time Asa would win a complaint in the courts, Mollohan would think of something else to sue him for, until he just finally ran out of lawyers willing to work with him. It was a futile struggle. Asa was always going to win because he had a legal contract from Mollohan’s father. He made sure of that.” Westin shrugged. “No matter what Asa might have been, he was a damn good businessman, and he made sure that every angle was covered.”

“He must have been some guy, Asa, starting his fortune with a card game.”

“It’s almost like something straight out of a Sidney Sheldon book.”

The reference made Lee laughed. It was a horrible time to be laughing, but she couldn’t help herself. Westin glanced at her, that startled look still in his eyes. He must have thought she’d gone over the edge, that she was in shock or something.

They slid to a stop at the bunkhouse a minute later. Westin picked his gun up out of

the console as he stepped down from the truck, coming around to help her out despite the fact that she had two guns shoved in her pants. One for each hand. But it still might not be enough.

They burst through the door of the bunkhouse, neither really sure what they'd find. Bowie was in the kitchen, moving his big body to music blaring through a smart speaker. Landry was coming out of the bathroom, nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. And Remington was in his bunk, a book in his hands.

"What the hell?" Bowie cried when Westin walked over and switched off the speaker.

"Where's Clint?"

"He went to town to talk to Sheriff Reeves," Landry offered up, not in a hurry to cover up. Lee looked him over, already aware of just how pretty he thought he was. Now, she had to admit, there was some weight to his opinion.

"He's still in town?"

Bowie rolled his shoulders. "They're friends. With Melanie playing around..."

Westin cursed under his breath, flashing a look at Lee. That was the moment the others seemed to finally notice her, to see the blood splattered across the front of her shirt, the gun in her hand.

"What's going on?" Remington asked slowly as he unfolded his body from his bunk and stood. "What's with the guns?"

"We were attacked up at the cabin."

"By whom?" Bowie wanted to know.

“It’s complicated,” Lee said, checking to make sure the door was closed and locked before going to the window to peek outside. There was still that guy in the ATV. He had to have seen them. He had to know they’d moved on from the cabin. It wouldn’t be long before Will’s friends would come looking for them. “You guys should be prepared, though.”

“For what?” Landry asked. “A battle?”

“Yeah.”

He thought she was joking, but when she flashed him a look, he suddenly seemed to understand that she wasn’t. Westin came over and drew Lee away from the window, his hands gentle but insistent. She took a seat on an armchair, sitting on the very edge, ready to spring up at the least notice. Bowie came over and handed her a moist cloth to wipe her hands on. She nodded to him, grateful.

“Is it that guy? Your ex?” Remington asked, looking as though he was ready to take him on again.

Lee shook her head. “He’s dead.”

“Dead?” Landry asked, suddenly anxious to put on some clothes. “Did you say someone’s dead?”

“It’s complicated,” Westin repeated for her. “All you need to know is that there might be more people on the ranch, and they’re looking for her. We’ve got to keep her safe.”

“That’s not a problem,” Remington said. “That’s why we brought her here—right?”

Landry and Bowie didn’t seem to agree. They didn’t appear to be against the idea;

they just didn't seem anxious to jump into the middle of a gun battle.

Westin knelt in front of her. "You're sure they'll come? Are you sure it won't end when they find Will?"

"I'm sure. This Razor has a lot to lose if I can identify him. He's not going to take any chances."

Westin nodded. "And you're pretty sure you know who it is?"

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Was she? She had an idea, but she wasn't positive. The next few hours would prove her right or wrong. They were coming. She had no doubt about that.

"I should go move the truck," Westin said. "Leaving it out front will be like a beacon, showing them exactly where we've gone."

"I'd rather you didn't. Let them see it."

"You want them to find you?"

"No. But is there anywhere else we can make a stand? Anywhere that would be easier to defend than this building?"

"She has a point," Remington said. "There's only the one window, only the one door. They won't be able to come in here without us knowing it."

Westin studied her face. "All right. Tell us what you want to do."

Bowie walked over with three shotguns laid over his arms. He handed one to Remington and one to Westin before snapping the third open to make sure it was loaded. "We'll take the door. You should go get cleaned up and stay back there with Landry."

Lee nodded. It seemed like the best idea she'd heard yet. She leaned forward and kissed Westin, a little surprised when he grabbed both sides of her head and drew her into him, kissing her with the same heated passion he'd offered her the night before. When he finally backed away, her head was spinning and she'd forgotten for a

moment where she was.

“Be careful,” she said softly.

“You too.”

She walked back to the open space in front of the oversized bathroom and pulled the guns she’d stuffed into the back of her waistband out, checking both to see how many bullets they had left. The gun Clint had given her was down by three, leaving twelve bullets, and the other was down by two. Twenty-five bullets altogether.

“That’s Clint’s,” Landry said, coming out of the bathroom again, fully dressed this time minus his boots. “Where’d you get that?”

“He gave it to me.” She turned it around and offered it to him by the handle. “You know how to fire it?”

“Who do you think gave it to him?”

He released the clip and popped loose the one in the chamber. Then he counted, doing the same inventory she’d just done before he put it all back together. Knowing that these men knew their way around a gun should have made her feel a little better. Somehow, it didn’t.

She had no idea what was coming for them. If one of these innocent men got killed because of her, she’d never be able to live with it. Bowie tried Clint on his cell three times, but it kept going to voicemail. Westin took up a position by the window, watching until his vision was blurred, expecting trouble to appear at any instant. But five minutes turned into thirty, and that turned into an hour. Time passed slowly, the world darkening as the sun disappeared from the sky, and the moon refused to show itself behind the high winter clouds.

“How many are there?” Remington wanted to know.

“I don’t know. Two broke into the cabin, and she took them out. We saw one on the way over here, but I’m sure there’s more than that.”

“They’re probably gathering more,” Bowie suggested. “That’s what’s taking so long.”

“Probably.”

The whole thing was surreal, like something out of a John Wayne movie. He just wasn’t sure who had the advantage here—the guys who had all the time in the world to gather their forces, or the ones locked up in a small building with only one way in, one way out.

It was just about two hours since they’d arrived when something finally happened. Westin peeked out the window and saw someone running from the barn to the back of his truck.

“They’re here.”

Bowie came up and peeked out the window, too. “Where?”

At that moment, the truck exploded, flipping into the air and landing just feet from the door of the bunkhouse.

“Fuck!” Bowie cried, jumping back as the window shattered from the concussion of the explosion. Westin had seen a flash and managed to get down before the window broke, but he hadn’t managed to grab Bowie. He clutched his arm, pulled him onto his back, checking him for injuries. He was fine, though, unharmed. Just startled.

“We’ve got to move,” Remington said, grabbing the back of Westin’s collar. “That fire is going to catch the walls.”

Even as he said it, the front of the building burst into flames. It was like the wall had morphed from wood to fire in just the seconds it had taken for Westin to turn his head.

“That’s our only way out!”

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There wasn't time to panic. Remington pulled Westin away from the wall as Bowie scrambled to his feet and followed. Lee and Landry were standing by the bathroom, shock on both their faces.

“What now?” Landry demanded.

Bowie pointed. “The crawl space. That's our only chance.”

There was a panel in the ceiling just above their heads, an opening to the small crawl space that allowed for access to the roof for repairs. Bowie could reach it easily thanks to his impressive height, tapping it a few times to loosen it before tugging it down. He turned to Lee, interlacing his fingers so that she could use them as a toehold. She went easily, almost too quickly, into the space. Landry followed, then Remington, and finally Westin. By the time he got up there, Landry and Remington were already trying to find a thin spot in the roof to break through.

“We need a knife,” Westin called down to Bowie.

The building was beginning to fill with smoke. It was difficult to see much further than the kitchen. Westin could barely see Bowie fumbling around, searching for instruments to help them get out. When he came back, he had a butcher's knife, a cleaver, and meat tenderizer.

“It's the best we have,” Bowie mumbled through a moist towel he was holding over his mouth and nose.

Westin handed the tools to Landry and Remington, praying it would be enough to get

them out of there. The boys went to work, smashing on the plywood that created the platform on which the roof rested. They cut and slashed, pounded with the tenderizer. Finally, they got a little hole that they used their hands and feet to enlarge with every motion they could manage. As they did, the air coming in through the hole drew the smoke up from down below.

“Hurry!” Bowie called. “The fire’s getting closer!”

When the hole was big enough, Landry lifted Lee through first. Remington came over to help Westin hoist Bowie up into the crawl space. It took a bit of effort, but they managed, the heat of the fire a fantastic motivator. Landry was out of the hole next, then Remington, Bowie, and finally Westin.

The smoke was pouring through the gap in the roof, and flames started to lick the edges as they stood there. Remington was already on the ground, having found a gutter that was bolted well enough to the side of the building to hold his weight. Westin urged everyone else over, watching them all climb down before him. He pulled the handgun Lee had given him the second he hit the ground, not sure what they’d find when they got there.

It was dark and smoky, visibility down to nothing. There was the occasional burst of light from the fire, but it was inconsistent and more of a liability than an asset. That’s why it took him a few minutes to realize what his heart had already known.

“Where’s Lee?”

No one responded. They were looking, too. But Westin knew. She was gone. They’d gotten her.

Chapter 13

Lee saw the gutter and rushed for it, the heat under her feet reminding her she was standing on top of a burning building. She'd been prepared for bullets, for violence, but this wasn't something she'd expected.

She shimmied down the gutter and they were waiting. Two of them.

Hands were on her ankles before she was halfway down, too close to the ground to climb back up, too far from the ground to let go. She screamed, but the roar of the fire was growing, probably drowned her out. Then they yanked, pulling so hard that she felt her ankle dislocate.

She let go and fell in a heap at their feet. One of them scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder like she was nothing more than a piece of a luggage. He carried her to a waiting ATV, catching her wrist in a handcuff that was already attached to the machine's frame before she could even respond. The other guy climbed on in front of her, and they were off, just the two of them, leaving his friend behind.

What was he going to do?

As they drove away, she twisted around, saw Westin on the roof of the burning bunkhouse. She screamed, tried to warn him, but there was too much noise from the fire. She hadn't even realized how loud it was until she needed to be heard.

Westin. Please, no!

They drove away from the occupied parts of the ranch, away from the main house and the barn, the guest bunkhouses and the other structures scattered across the vast landscape. She didn't realize she knew where they were until the ATV started to slow and she spotted the fence sparkling in a sliver of moonlight.

The driver cut the engine and climbed off the machine, pulling a phone from his back

pocket. As he walked away from her, Lee tugged at the handcuff, testing its connection to the ATV's frame. It was on there good, wrapped around a piece of metal that was welded to the underside of the seat. And the cuff that was around her wrist was good and tight, making it impossible for her to slide her hand out no matter how long she had to try.

"We've got her," she heard the man say into his phone. "Where do you want me to take her?"

Her ankle was throbbing, a shiver rushing through her as the temperatures plunged into the subzero zone. She watched her captor, waiting for him to say something else, anything she might be able to use against him.

"They're dead," he said. "We left them in the cabin."

He was quiet a moment longer, then he disconnected the phone, clearly done with the conversation. He must have gotten his orders.

"I don't know anything," she said as he came toward her. "Will was my partner. I trusted him! I'm not going to turn on him, especially now."

"You shot him, lady."

“He pulled a gun on me.”

The guy wasn't impressed with that. He simply climbed back onto the ATV and started it again. The engine roared as he gave it a little gas, then they took off again, following the fence line until they came to a small break. It was the same area where Fang had gotten onto the property when he broke into her room. It was the same place Clint had brought her the day he told her that Will wasn't to be trusted.

There was a narrow road on the other side of the fence that the driver eased the ATV onto, gunning the engine as he seemed to have found a space he was comfortable with navigating in the near pitch-darkness. A sinking feeling moved through Lee as it occurred to her that this road ran between the three hundred acres Asa Howard had won in that infamous card game and the still-existing sections of Rocking D.

She knew where he was taking her. She hated that she was right, hated what it might mean for Westin. What it meant for Miss Dulcie and everyone else on Golden Sphinx.

The road was rutted, causing her to bounce all over the wide seat. She slammed into the back of the driver several times, a part of her hoping she was hurting him. He finally reached back and grabbed her arm, pulling it around his waist so that she wouldn't move so freely. She tried to pull away, but he had a strong grip on her wrist, too strong.

She had to be smart. Save her energy.

She also needed to remember that they had failed to search her. There was still a gun

tucked into the back of her jeans, if the bouncing of the ATV didn't shake it loose.

They cut to the left in a sudden, jolting turn that had them bouncing over uncut grass and drifts of snow. She held on, suddenly imagining herself falling off the machine and being dragged by her wrist where it was still handcuffed to the seat. She'd be dead quicker that way, but it wasn't really the way she wanted to go out.

A hulking building stood off in the distance, clearly the destination of her driver. As they sped toward it, the tall doors were rolled backward, lights pouring out onto the ground in front of it, an almost welcoming sight. The driver pulled right into the building—which appeared to be an abandoned barn—and stopped just a few feet from a table that had been set in the middle of the dirt-packed floor. He climbed off the machine, walking over to one of the guys who'd closed the door behind them, slapping him on the back. They spoke in quiet tones, glancing over at her from time to time, but neither seemed to be in a hurry to move her from the ATV.

Lee pulled one leg over the seat, turning so that her back was away from their line of sight. She reached back, touching the satisfying hulk of the gun under her shirt. But almost the moment she did it, someone came over and yanked the gun free.

"You won't be needing that," a deep, masculine voice informed her.

Lee turned again, taking in the vision of the man standing before her. He wasn't familiar to her, not someone she'd ever seen before. He looked to be about forty, sandy-blond hair and green eyes, a face marked by years of sun exposure. He had dimples when he smiled, something he did just then as though he were greeting her as a guest to his establishment rather than as a kidnapping victim.

"I apologize for the dramatics, but it was necessary for us to have a conversation."

"I don't know who you are."

He tucked her gun into the back of his pants much like she'd worn it, before straightening the dark jacket he wore. There was a logo on his left shoulder, a red D lying on its rounded side, hash marks around it to indicate a rocking motion. Rocking D, she assumed. The logo Westin had mentioned.

"I'm Pete James. Everyone around here calls me Petey."

She nodded. "Petey J."

One eyebrow cocked as he looked her over. "You're a smart one. Will said that you were."

"He would know. He's the one who trained me."

"Did a good job, too." He rolled his head a little as he looked at her, something almost like pity in his eyes. "He considered recruiting you to our side. Said he took your temperature a time or two, but he ultimately decided it wasn't an option." He sighed. "Too bad. You could have been a real asset."

"An asset? To what? Destroying the youth of our country?"

"I like to think of it as weeding out the weak and allowing the strong to rise to the top. Kind of like the cream in real cow's milk."

"So, you're helping society while making yourself rich?"

"It's a happy side effect."

She swung with her free hand, tried to connect with his jaw, but he easily stepped out of her reach.

“We’re going to have some real fun with you,” he said, that charming smile coming back before he turned and walked away.

Lee watched him join a group of about three men at the back of the old barn. She turned, trying to see who else was in there, what else was happening around her. There were four sets of doors: the massive doors they’d driven through, a person-sized door beside those, another in the far wall, and one at the back. There were windows, but they were up in the loft level and there didn’t appear to be a ladder or anything that she could use to get up there. Three more men were standing by the massive doors—the driver who brought her here, and two others.

The table set up in front of her was bare of any instruments or weapons. It was just a table, probably used for packaging product when it arrived. There were hooks on the beams above her in a square around the main part of the floor, probably to hold plastic that would keep the residue from the drugs from spreading throughout the building when they worked. Drug dealers had this stuff down to a science, and it looked like this operation wasn’t any better or worse than any other she’d busted in the past.

She tugged at the handcuffs again, but they weren’t budging. She slid her legs back over to the other side and slipped to the floor, testing her sore ankle. Pain shot through her with just a small amount of pressure, unbearable pain. She wasn’t going to be able to put weight on that ankle.

That wasn’t good.

“Bring her here!”

Petey’s voice reverberated around the building. She saw him wave to the men behind her. She turned just in time to find the driver approaching, a ring of keys in his hand. He undid the cuff from the ATV, but didn’t bother to take the other half off her wrist. Instead, he used it to force her up onto her feet.

“I can’t!” she cried when he tried to get her to stand. “My ankle!”

He frowned, glancing down. When he did, she slammed her elbow into his nose. It broke, blood immediately gushing on her, on him, sending him reeling backward as much from shock as the blow. She pushed away from the bike and tried to put her weight on that ankle, but it crumpled under her and she landed face-first on the ground.

“Fucking bitch!” a voice cried right before a foot slammed into her ribs, sending even more pain cascading through her.

“Stop!”

Petey was suddenly there, squatting beside her as he eased her over onto her back. “You okay?” he asked, looking down at the fresh splash of blood on the front of her shirt. “They hurt you?”

“My ankle,” she muttered, angry with herself.

Petey turned his attention to her legs, running his hand down the length of her calf

before lifting her leg to touch the ankle. She cried out when he touched a tender spot.

“Yeah, it’s dislocated,” he said, glancing at her. “I can pop it back into place, but it’s going to hurt like a son of a bitch.”

“I don’t suppose it matters. Whatever you have in mind for me probably won’t feel too good, either.”

He nodded. “You’re probably right about that.” Suddenly, the worst pain she’d ever felt burst through her body as he manipulated her ankle, forcing the bone back into place. She screamed, the world growing dark around the edges. She fought it, refused to pass out, but that pain... it was almost unbearable.

“There,” Petey said, turning on the balls of his feet to look at her. “All fixed.”

She nodded, biting down so hard on her bottom lip she could taste blood. “Thanks.”

He laughed. “Damn, look at this one! I’ve seen grown men pass out with something like that! You’re quite the woman!”

“Thanks,” she said again, reaching up to wipe tears from her eyes. “Are you impressed enough to let me go now?”

“Sorry.” He sighed. “If it was up to me, I might. But it’s not. Unfortunately.”

“Who’s it up to?”

He smiled. “Fishing for information, are we? Can’t tell you that, either. Just in case.”

“In case of what? You’re not going to let me go—right?” She pulled herself up to a sitting position, wiping her hands on her jeans. “You big, brave boys who are

weeding out the weak in society have balls so big you're not at all worried about killing a federal agent."

"It's one of those things you have to learn how to deal with when you get into this business." Petey stood and offered her a hand, all polite and gentlemanly, like they were just two people having a conversation. He pulled her up, allowed her to balance on one foot while resting most of her weight against him. "If there was a way around it, believe me, I'd do it. But there isn't. You didn't leave us much choice."

"You do realize that everything I know, I sent to my boss back in Seattle—right?"

"That's possible. It's a chance we have to take." He slipped his arm around her and began walking toward the back of the room, going slow so she could keep up. "Will assured us, however, that there was nothing on Fang's computer that would incriminate him. And you didn't have access to any other information. Just suspicion—and that doesn't hold up in a court of law."

"You're right about that. There wasn't much on Fang's computer that I could use against you and your friends. And I didn't even get all the files because he came back too soon."

"Yeah, we told him to wait until you came out of the building, but he got in a hurry."

"He had other plans for me that I doubt he told you about."

"I kind of figured that was what happened."

Lee glanced at him, wondering if this felt as odd to him as it did to her. "Just a few phone calls. And, you're right; they don't convict anyone but Fang and Will, and they're both dead now."

“Exactly.”

“Will’s computer, on the other hand, had a few other things on it.”

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By then they'd reached an arrangement of chairs at the back of the room where Petey's buddies were waiting for them. He gently sat her in one of the chairs, careful with her ankle, kind in the way he set her down. Again, it felt as though they were just a couple of friendly people, having a conversation.

Petey grabbed a chair and brought it close to hers before straddling it backward. "What were you saying? About Will's computer?"

"Did you know he was also making recordings of phone conversations? That he had surveillance pictures and snapshots of someone's customer ledger?" She tilted her head slightly. "I always thought it was kind of ridiculous that criminals write down all this information. I know you need to keep track of what's coming and going, but there's got to be a better way than writing it down, creating an evidence trail."

Petey dropped his head down, clearly thrown a little by what she'd said. "Will kept that stuff?"

"He did."

"How do you know?"

She rolled her shoulders. "Maybe he told me."

"I doubt that. He was very insistent that he hadn't told you anything. In fact, he swore to it. He didn't want you to die. He was hoping you would wrap the case in Phoenix and just walk away, but that didn't seem to be happening."

“How long was he on your payroll?”

Petey glanced at one of the men sitting just a few feet beyond them. The man shrugged. Petey turned his attention back to her and shrugged, too. “A little over a year. He approached us, said that he knew we were continuing what a friend had been doing in California. Said if we put him on the payroll, he’d protect us from future investigations by the DEA.”

“That worked out well, didn’t it?”

Petey sighed. “Well, the thing is, our people in Phoenix got a little ambitious and started doing things that we hadn’t sanctioned. We’ve taken care of that—you helped by taking out Fang—so things should settle down there now. You and Will might actually get credit for it. Posthumously, but, well, you know. Credit is credit.”

“It is that.” She tucked a piece of hair that had come loose from her braid behind her ear. “A year ago. That would have been about the time his daughter needed an operation on her spine.”

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t get into the personal life of my employees. I just pay them and send them on their way, unless they screw something up.”

“That happen often?”

“Sometimes. Criminals can’t be trusted.” He laughed. “I suppose that’s the nature of the beast.”

Lee looked down at her ankle. It throbbed like crazy, but the pain was finally lessening. Her ribs ached more now. She took a deep breath, testing them out. Not terrible. They weren’t broken, just bruised.

The question was, could she run if she got the chance? She wasn't sure.

“You should know that Will did everything he could to keep you out of this. He set it out for us at the very beginning; you weren't to be involved. And then this thing in Phoenix came up. The plan was that we were going to allow you to take down Fang, maybe a couple of his dealers. But somehow you found out about Razor, and you started digging. Will said he tried to get you on a different track, to keep you from going down that road, but you wouldn't let it go. He said you were like a dog with a bone.”

“Yeah? When did he try to bring me in on it, then?”

“Weeks ago, when you stumbled on Razor. He said some things to you, hypothesized what it would be like if you just walked away from it all.”

Lee bit her lip, suddenly flooded with a memory of sitting in Will's car, dressed in the sexy outfit she wore to tend bar, exhausted after a busy shift.

“Have you ever thought about giving it up, Lee? Just throwing in the towel and retiring to some beach somewhere?”

“Wouldn't that be fantastic? The only problem is, I don't look that great in a bikini.”

“That's a lie. If you said that to my wife, she'd break your nose.”

Lee laughed. “Yeah, she probably would.”

“But, seriously, what if we just forgot about all this, forgot about these guys, let them go kill each other. You know that's what would happen if we just left them to their own devices.”

“I know it seems frustrating, Will. But what we do is a good thing. We keep these people from destroying good people like your wife, my mom. We keep them from turning your kids and my little brother and sisters into drug addicts. We do good.”

Will had agreed with her in the end and dropped the subject. She'd thought it was just his frustrations with the case, his guilt for not being at home, that drove the conversation. It'd happened many times, but he always came back around. At least, she'd thought he did.

She wished she could go back with what she knew now and make a better argument. She wished she'd pushed him, made him tell her the truth so that she could help him out of his predicament, maybe save his life.

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“When I didn’t go for his plan, he made a new plan.”

“Fang was supposed to follow you from the club that night and kill you quietly at your place. But he got in a hurry, confronted you in the office.”

“I got free.”

“And Will called us in a panic. We told him to send you up here and we’d give Fang a second chance.”

“Which he screwed up. Again.”

“Idiot.” Petey sighed. “Never should have invited him into this organization. He was nothing but trouble from the beginning.”

Petey stood up, pulling a gun out from his waistband. He played with it, checking the clip, and then he balanced it in one hand, then the other, getting a feel for it. He was getting tired of talking.

Lee lifted her hand, the handcuffs still dangling. “Do you think you could take this off before you do whatever comes next?”

Petey gestured to one of the guys behind him. The man came over, digging in his pocket as he walked, finally pulling out a ring of keys not unlike the one the driver of the ATV had had. Lee studied the ring as he unlocked the cuff, noticing a couple of keys that weren’t shaped like traditional keys, but were more like old-fashioned skeleton keys. Or maybe they were for some sort of machine. She wasn’t sure, but

she knew she'd seen the same thing on the other guy's key ring. What did it mean? Why was it familiar to her? Where had she seen something like that before? And recently, too?

"Now what?" she asked, rubbing her wrist where the cold metal of the cuff had bitten into it. "Is this the part where you put a bullet in my head?"

"Nothing that dramatic. We actually need you to change clothes."

"Oh? Into what?"

Again, he gestured, and another man came over with a bag she knew. It was her own bag, a duffel she'd packed in a hurry on her way to the airport a lifetime ago. On top of it, the man set her cell phone, and then he handed her gun and holster to Petey.

"We need you to be wearing your own clothing." Petey gestured to the bag. "The thing is, as far as the people in Seattle know, you left Phoenix six days ago, and fell off the map. No one but Will knew you were here, and as you've pointed out, he's not talking to anyone anymore. So, when they find you, you need to be in your own clothes, and you need to have your cell phone on you. The SIM card has been removed, of course. But they'll assume you did that to keep Fang from tracking you."

"What about all the people at Golden Sphinx who saw me?"

"As far as they know, you were being stalked by an ex—right? Isn't that what the foreman told Miss Dulcie about you?"

How did he know that? But she knew how. She knew who Razor was.

"And the explosions? The bunkhouse you destroyed?"

He shrugged. “Things happen in cold weather. It’s a phenomenon people around here are used to seeing.”

“Just like that. You think they’ll all keep quiet?”

“If they know what’s good for them.”

Westin flooded her mind in that moment—the feel of him, the taste of him. Would he be okay if she went along with this? If she let them take her out, would he live to see what came next in his story? Would Clint have a chance to make amends with his wife? Would Bowie and Landry and Remington be allowed to continue down the path that was meant for them?

She brushed a hand against her cheek. There were no tears, but she could feel them in her throat. She’d never cried while undercover unless the situation demanded it. She’d never shown her emotions, never allowed a mark to know she was scared or excited or on the verge of taking him out. It was one of the first things Will had taught her. But she wasn’t sure she could do that now. She couldn’t pretend that those boys didn’t matter to her.

“I’ll do this. I’ll play along. But you have to promise me you won’t hurt the boys on Golden Sphinx.”

Petey’s eyebrows rose. He looked her over, a new curiosity in his eyes. “Which one is it?” he wondered. “Which one got under your skin?”

When she refused to answer, he chuckled. “I know it’s not Clint because that boy is more committed to his wife and kid than is healthy. And that Remington... he’s too fucked-up to get close to a woman. A man looks at him sideways, he’ll kill him. A woman? Won’t even let one close to him.” He scratched his chin. “Bowie doesn’t seem your type. That leaves Landry and Westin.” He studied her again, his eyes

moving slowly over her, taking in her curves, her long legs and her ample chest. He licked his lips like he was seeing something he'd been craving for a long time. "I'm going to guess Westin because I think Landry is a little too full of himself to handle a woman like you. Am I right?"

Lee turned her head so he couldn't see her expression. She didn't want to give herself away, but her attempts to avoid it caused her to do just that. He laughed, a hardy laugh that came from deep in his belly.

"Our girl is in love with Westin Clark!" he cried, his voice bouncing off the walls, reverberating through the entire building. Some of the other guys laughed, apparently finding it just as amusing as Petey. "Well, well, I guess we'll have to save a little souvenir for Westin, remind him why he's got to keep his big mouth shut!"

She glared at him. "Go to hell!"

"You first."

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He slid his gun back into the waistband of his jeans and pulled out a large hunting knife. She refused to cower as he approached her, holding her head up straight, looking him in the eye. He grabbed her braid and began to saw against it, pulling on her hair so that she could feel a few strands pop loose. She gritted her teeth to keep from crying out.

“Hey, Petey, are we expecting someone?” a voice called out from the front of the building.

Petey turned, releasing Lee as he did. She reached up and grabbed his wrist, wrapping her hand around the blade of the knife to wrench it from him. He didn’t seem to understand what she was doing at first, because he just looked down at her like he thought it was some kind of joke or something. And then he smacked her, rocking her head back. But she had that knife—and one twist... She jumped to her feet and shoved him back. He stumbled, releasing the knife, but she still had hold of his wrist. She jerked him into her, flipped the knife in her hand and pressed it to his throat. He backed up until he hit the wall, fear finally coming into his eyes, burning in their mossy depths.

Chaos suddenly broke out around them. She thought his buddies had come to his rescue, and she was ready to tell them to back off. But it wasn’t his friends.

“Sheriff’s office!” a woman’s voice cried out. “We’ve got a warrant to search the premises.”

Petey’s head turned and she pressed the knife harder against his neck, drawing blood. “Stay still, asshole!”

“You’re fucking insane!”

“Lee Montgomery?” The woman’s voice that had called out a moment ago was behind her, speaking in low, calm tones. “Agent Montgomery?”

She nodded, bouncing on her good foot as pain once again began to throb in her bad ankle.

“I’m Sheriff Jack Reeves. Your boss back in Seattle asked that we come and give you a hand with this bust.”

Lee nodded, tears beginning to fall from her eyes. “The boys on Golden Sphinx. There was a fire.”

“They’re fine. In fact, there’s a couple outside waiting to see you.”

She nodded. But she couldn’t back down. She wasn’t sure why, but she couldn’t let Petey go. Something inside of her wouldn’t let her.”

“My partner is back at Golden Sphinx, too. He and another man, Isai Gomez.”

“I know, Agent. We’ve already spoken with Westin Clark.”

She nodded a third time, feeling almost like a bobbing head, but unable to stop. “He’s okay?”

“He’s fine.”

“You know who these people are? You know they’ve been running drugs through multiple states? That they’re responsible for dozens of fentanyl overdoses and—”

“We know, Agent. We’ve got it under control now.”

“Make her let me go,” Petey said, his whole body suddenly trembling against her.

“I’m not making her do anything,” the woman behind Lee said. “She’s the agent in charge here. If she wants to slit your throat, she has the authority to do it.”

“That’s not funny!”

“I’m not joking.”

The fear in Petey’s eyes increased tenfold. “Look, Lee; I didn’t touch anything more than a few hairs on the back of your head. That’s it! Please—you don’t have to do this.”

Lee nodded. “You’re right. I don’t have to do anything.”

But still, she couldn’t make herself let him go. The image of him with that gun in his hands, balancing it like he was trying to decide which hand he could aim better with, if he could do tricks like some gunslinger in the Old West. All the while, he was contemplating her death. And she’d been ready for it, prepared to give up her life for the safety of her friends on Golden Sphinx.

She wanted him to pay for that.

But he would pay. This man was going to go to prison for a very long time. Clint had video of him putting money in a dead drop. She had phone conversations between him and Fang, and more between him and Will. And she was sure some of the guys in this very room would be more than happy to offer testimony on him if it meant lesser charges for them.

It was over. She had bigger fish to fry.

Lee stumbled back, dropping the knife to the floor, hopping on one foot. The sheriff caught her, wrapping an arm around her as she gestured for one of her deputies to come put the cuffs on Petey J.

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“We have an ambulance at the front gates for you.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank your boss back in Seattle. I was on the phone with him most of the afternoon. And then Clint Grooms charged into my office, demanding I do something to help you.” She chuckled softly. “You made a lot of very good friends in a very short time, Ms. Montgomery.”

They stepped through one of the people-sized doors, officers milling around everywhere, it seemed. There were dozens of cars, most of them with emergency lights flashing. She hadn’t realized that such a small town had so many patrol cars. And then she was being lifted into the air.

“You disappeared!”

“Sorry.”

“As long as you don’t do it again.”

“I’ll try not to.”

Westin laughed as he pulled her close, wrapping her up in that embrace that she loved so much. She buried her face against his shoulder and, to her horror, burst into tears. No one seemed to notice, though. Or maybe it was just because she kept her face

buried until the sobs finally passed.

Either way, she was surrounded by friends. Maybe it was okay to fall apart now that she had someone there to catch her. Westin had not imagined he'd be here again, especially so soon after the fiasco of the night before. But there he was, standing at the back of an ambulance, watching as the paramedic wrapped Lee's ankle, explaining that she would have to spend the night in the hospital so that a doctor could decide what needed to be done for the dislocation.

Every light seemed to be on in the house. They could see the shadows of officers moving in the windows. Westin knew that Rena and her mother were in there, and he felt horrible for them, having to go through something so traumatic. It wasn't enough that Dominic Mollohan treated them with such indifference; now they had to endure a search warrant that allowed strangers to paw through all their belongings with no concern for their privacy. He wished there was something he could do, but he knew just the sight of his face would likely cause them more pain than comfort.

Lee reached for his hand, squeezing it gently. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. You didn't choose this for him."

"He's your father."

Westin shook his head as his eyes moved over the front of this house he'd dreamed of owning almost his entire life. But dreams rarely ever came true.

"A father is someone who takes the time to get to know a child; he's the man who gets up at night to scare away monsters, and holds hands during illnesses. This man... he wasn't a father. He was a donor."

Lee nodded. "You deserve better."

“I have better. I had a mother who gave up everything for me. And I have a boss who sees me as her son, and four brothers I know would do anything for me. What more do I need?”

“Not a thing.”

“Exactly.”

Westin leaned toward her and kissed the tip of her nose. “I have everything I could ever want. It was selfish to ask for more.”

Even as he said it, something behind him caught her attention. She nodded, and he turned just in time to watch Sheriff Reeves walk Dominic Mollohan out of the house. He thought he was prepared for it, but the actual sight of it was harder than he’d expected. Despite his big words, despite the truth he’d spoken, it still hurt.

Lee had found all the evidence on her partner’s computer. She hadn’t realized what she had at the time, but she’d forwarded all the files to her boss, even files she hadn’t had a chance to review. He was the one who found irrefutable proof, the one who called Sheriff Reeves and offered her the bust, the one who set into motion an arrest that was about to ignite a media storm that would change everything in this small town. All because of this man.

That was the man behind one of the biggest drug rings the state of Colorado had ever seen. That was the man known as Razor, the one who’d come up with the dead drops in the boxes, the one who came up with the idea of selling fentanyl to children. This was the man who was responsible for dozens of deaths over the past ten years or more. And all so that he could save his ranch from the mess his father left behind. To pay for all those lawsuits he’d brought against Asa.

That was his father.

Chapter 14

Two months later

Westin whistled, pushing his horse forward, encouraging the cows to move deeper into the valley. The winter grazing lands were frozen over. Snow had fallen last night, dumping over seven inches on the county. The damn cows wouldn't move on, wouldn't get their butts out of the shade under these trees and out into the warmth of the sun. Every year. Bowie was in the truck, dragging the hay feeder behind it, but even that wasn't encouraging the cows to move. Sometimes, the old ways were still the best ways. They knew what to do when a horse came riding at them.

The cow dogs were barking, the cows were moaning, the birds were singing. It was a beautiful morning despite the cold. Westin took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his hanky, pausing for a second to wonder how Lee was doing up in Washington. She'd had to go back. She'd stayed at Golden Sphinx for a few weeks, but she'd had to go back to Seattle to file her reports. She wanted to see her partner's wife, wanted to visit with her family. She'd said something about settling her affairs, but he wasn't sure what she meant by that. She'd promised she'd come back, and that was all he heard.

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He spurred his horse on, getting the last of the stragglers out into the sunlight, watching them come to life in the warmth. Another month or so and they'd move them back down to the spring pastures, get ready for mating season. They had a dozen or so heifers that would be inseminated this year. It was always touch and go with the heifers; the more there were, the higher the stress of it all. But that was Clint's department, really. Let him worry about how many of the heifers would survive the mating season, and which would be good producers for the next few years.

Westin was more interested in the new bunkhouse they were building. Miss Dulcie had given them a healthy budget, which meant they could make it a little bigger than the old one. He was half-hoping there would be private rooms this time around. They were the top team at Golden Sphinx. They deserved something a little nicer than what all the other hands had, didn't they?

His own space. That was all he really wanted.

Westin signaled Bowie, let him know he was heading back down the hill. He rode easy for a while, enjoying the sights, the snow-covered land, the sun on his face. He could see himself doing this for a while longer. His whole life? Maybe not. But for a few more years. And then Clint had this private-security thing going. They'd had a client last week, some reporter who'd been getting death threats related to some article he'd written before he'd arrived to cover the whole Rocking D scandal. They were still coming, those media hounds, even though there was nothing left to cover. Dominic had been taken down to Denver to face charges in the federal courts, with all his coconspirators. There was nothing left here to talk about, no more gossip to be heard. But they still came, and it was good for the economy. At least, it'd been good

for their bottom line. They'd made several thousand dollars following that guy around for three days.

Westin really had nothing to complain about. He missed Lee. That was all.

His cell rang in his back pocket. He stopped the horse and pulled it out, connecting with Clint's phone.

"What's up, boss?"

"Miss Dulcie wants to see you at the main house."

"Yeah? What's up?"

"I don't know. But you should get up there."

"All right."

The house was quiet when Westin got there. He walked through the kitchen, nodding to the girls preparing Miss Dulcie's lunch, and headed out to the sitting room. When he walked in, instead of Miss Dulcie, he found himself face-to-face with Carolyn Mollohan.

He hesitated, not sure he wanted to hear what she had to say. But then her expression softened, and she even smiled. "I'm sure I'm the last person you thought you'd see again."

Westin took off his hat and stepped into the room, lowering his head with respect.

"Mrs. Mollohan, I—"

"Thomas." She smiled softly. "I've taken back my maiden name. It's Carolyn

Thomas.”

He nodded. He’d heard rumors, but hadn’t been sure. “I’m sorry for what happened to you and your family, and any part I played in it.”

“You had nothing to do with it. It was all Dominic.” She cleared her throat, stepping to the coffee table where she’d set her purse. She took a bundle out of it and came back, stopping just before him. “Rena told me the truth about what happened that night you came to dinner. I should have known.” She tilted her head to one side. “You look like him. Like the good parts of him I once loved when I was young.”

He lowered his head, touched despite himself. “Thank you.”

“She also told me how Dominic denied you, what he said about your mother. I thought you’d like to know the truth.” She held out her bundle to him. “I found these among Dominic’s things after... everything.” She gestured to them. “They’re letters from your mother to Dominic. I hope you don’t mind, but I read them. It’s very clear from the things she said in them that she loved him very much. And, if everything she says is true, it seems he loved her too.” She sighed. “He kept them. He read them. They must have meant something to him.”

“I knew she wrote to him, but I wasn’t sure he ever saw them.”

“He did. I don’t know why he lied to you about it. But, again, I don’t know why Dominic did most of the things he did.” She brushed her hand over her cheek, wiping away a tear that had escaped from her eye. “And that brings me to my real purpose for coming to see you.” She cleared her throat. “For reasons I didn’t understand at the time, Dominic had the deed to Rocking D transferred into my name a few years ago. I guess, maybe, it was his way of taking care of Rena should what happened happen. But you know that the tradition of Rocking D states that the firstborn son should inherit the ranch. And that would be you.”

Westin shook his head. “You don’t have to worry about that, Ms. Thomas. I don’t plan to make a claim on Rocking D.”

“I know. And that’s what makes you a better man than my husband.” She smiled softly. “But I want you to know that I’ve had a will drawn up. Upon my death, you and Rena will inherit the ranch equally. When that happens, it’s up to you what you want to do with it. It’s a simple thing to sign it all over to her, or to sell your half. Whatever you want, Westin. But you should have the right to choose.”

“That is...” Westin was speechless. He didn’t know what to say.

Carolyn Thomas stepped into him and touched his cheek lightly. “You deserve so much more than he will ever give you. It’s the least I could do. And Rena... she misses you. I think if you were to give her a call, she’d be open to speaking to you.”

“You think so?”

“I do.” She smiled. “I always wanted to give my daughter a sibling. I don’t think I could have chosen a better one than you.”

Westin dropped into the booth, shoving Landry over with his hip. Why they always had to pile into the same damn booth, he didn’t understand. Roni had tables with chairs and plenty of elbow room, but they always had to grab this damn booth!

“The usual, boys?” Annie asked as she set their water glasses in front of them.

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“Can I have blueberries?” Westin asked.

“Anything for you, sweetheart,” Annie said, winking sweetly.

“We’ve got a couple of stragglers up in the pasture again,” Clint commented. “One of you needs to go up there and make sure the boys from C bunkhouse aren’t leaving them behind for some reason.”

“I’ll do it,” Westin volunteered. He didn’t mind.

Clint nodded. “Thanks.”

“When’s the new bunkhouse going to be finished?” Landry asked. “I’m afraid I’m getting used to the space and the private bathroom in the guest bunkhouse.”

“I told you,” Clint said, a little irritation in his voice. “They have to wait until the ground thaws to dig the foundation. It’ll probably be May or June.”

“Three more months,” Bowie sighed. “I can do that.”

Westin laughed, shaking his head a little. “You guys are too soft.”

“What about you?” Landry asked. “You were the one hoping there would be private rooms in the plans for the new bunkhouse.”

“I just think we should have perks the other crews don’t have. After all, we’re the A crew, and we’ve got this business we’re trying to run.”

“Are you sure it’s not for other reasons?” Remington asked, his eyes glued to the window beside him.

“What other reasons could those be?”

Remington shrugged his shoulders, but he was watching something, his eyes moving slowly from the parking lot beyond the window to the front door of the diner. Clint grinned, his attention also drawn to the doors. Westin frowned, twisting in the booth to see what had their attention. When he saw her, his heart jumped into his throat.

He couldn’t get out of that booth fast enough.

Lee, dressed in a slick overcoat, her hair shorter now, curling around her face, stood just inside the diner, looking around for something. For someone.

He ran to her, lifting her up in his arms, laughing when she squealed with delight.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were still in Washington!”

“I told you I was coming back.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t say when.”

“When,” she said with a little wink.

Westin groaned, pulling her close to him, his mouth seeking hers. She sighed, wrapping her arms around his neck. He pulled her closer, wanting her as near as he could get her. A few catcalls went up behind them, other ranch hands acting like a bunch of frat boys.

“I missed you,” he whispered against her mouth.

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Why?”

She gently extricated herself from his arms, stepping back as she began to unbutton her coat. “I decided that I needed a change in profession, and this lady made me an offer I couldn’t resist.” She opened the jacket and gave him a peek at what she had on underneath. There was a second of confusion as his fevered mind tried to make sense of what she was showing him.

“That’s a cop’s uniform.”

“A sheriff’s deputy uniform, actually.”

“You took a job with Sheriff Reeves?”

“She needed an undersheriff, and I happened to be available.”

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“You’re staying.”

“For the next three years at least. That’s how long my contract is for.”

“Three years.” He pretended to consider it, and then he snatched her up again, pressing his mouth against her throat. “Okay. I think I can work with that.”

“You can? That’s a relief.”

He laughed, taking her hand and pulling her over to the booth. Clint switched places with Bowie, giving them room for Lee to join them. She smiled brightly as they all greeted her, her face glowing as they chatted happily. But she couldn’t possibly be as happy as Westin was to have her there, to be able to hold her.

Now his life was perfect.

“Hey! What’s that?”

Remington smacked the window before jumping up, climbing over Bowie and Landry on his way out the door.

“Here we go again,” Clint mumbled as he chased after him.

~ THE END ~