

One Hot Momma

Cara North



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A Tease Publishing E book

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Thank You

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I would like to send a special thank you to my editors; Heather and Gail, and to Amanda Turnbow for giving me an advanced reader perspective.

For the readers and fans of the series, I promise not to make you wait so long for Lucky's story.

Cara

Layla sighed as she opened the door. Rafe was on her couch, the two kids on either side of him, their heads propped up on pillows resting against each of his thighs. His long arms stretched across the back of the couch, and his head lay back. All three of them were sleeping. The soft glow of the television provided the light. She turned and locked the door. Shaking her head, she turned back into the living room and then almost jumped right out of her skin.

"Rafe," she quietly scolded. He was wide awake and looking at her.

"What?" he asked and gave her an innocent look.

After tugging off the raincoat, she hung it on a nail by the door. If she didn't look at him, he couldn't affect her. Though God knew she loved to look at him. She would love to touch him, to taste him, to wrap her arms around him and have him hold her the same. "I told you, no more movie nights. They can't get used to you spoiling them."

"Grab Savannah, will ya?" He lifted Brice into his arms and stood once she had Savannah in hers. "She's older but he's heavier."

"Rafe." She wasn't sure if she said his name as a warning or if she called it out because she liked to say it. "This isn't working."

She followed him down the narrow hallway to the room the two children shared. She hated that he saw her apartment and how poor they were. She worked as much overtime at the shelter as possible. Truth be told she couldn't afford not to work overtime. Montana was far away from Georgia, but the cost of living was an adjustment.

Meeting Rafe was another adjustment altogether. You cannot allow him to penetrate your senses...defenses dammit! Stop thinking in terms of touch.

"She likes the bear," he told her as he tucked Brice into his bed. Then he walked over and tucked Savannah into hers. "She also likes the blankets tucked in all down her sides."

It irked her that he knew more about the children than she did. With annoyance clear on her face she said, "Thanks."

She followed him out and into the hall. He shut the door to the children's room, something he never did before. "Is that something they like now, too?"

"No." He turned. Suddenly she was aware of how small the hallway was. He didn't back up or give her any space. The scent of warm male spices filled her nose and almost stole her breath away. "You said this isn't working. I agree. I've been trying to talk to you for the last three months, but you keep brushing me off."

"Are you quitting?" Her heart almost exploded. Rafe was such an important part of the children's lives now. If she allowed herself an instant of honesty, he had become important to her, too.

"Far from it." He stepped forward and caged her in by placing his hands on either side of her head and against the wall.

"Rafe, you're making me a little uncomfortable here. We have an arrangement." Her voice whispered what she should have shouled at him.

"I'm making a new arrangement." He nuzzled her nose with his.

It was as if he poured gasoline on her and threw a match. Her body flushed with pure heat. Sparks shimmied up and down her spine. All of it just from a nose to nose touch. His lips moved closer, and the soft flesh slid back and forth over hers. The fingers on her hands grew a mind of their own and walked their way to his waist. As soon as she gripped the material of his T-shirt, he kissed her.

Gentle but deep, his tongue stroked over her lips and then swept into her mouth. He tasted like cinnamon, hot and sweet. Her mouth surrendered. Her tongue found his as her arms found their way around his back. She didn't know she had it in her anymore, but she pulled him closer when she should have been pushing him away. Rafe stepped forward, his large muscular thigh pressed between her trembling legs. His erection was prominent in the front of his jeans. His entire body was warm and welcoming, all of it pressed against her as tightly as they could fit against the wall.

His lips pulled away, and she instantly missed his kiss. He trailed his fingers along her neck. His lips kissed hers again briefly, then her cheek, then right below her ear causing her to moan. She wanted to be shocked and embarrassed, but from the moment she laid eyes on him, this was all she dreamed about. His lips continued to her throat. His fingers trembled as they slid over her collarbone and then to cup each breast.

"Rafe?" a small voice called from inside the bedroom. "Rafe, I need some water."

"I'll be right there, Baby-girl." His eyes closed, and he pushed away from her. He visibly took a breath and collected his senses. "I'll be right back."

She nodded. She couldn't breathe much less talk. Her body was liquid fire. The wall was the only thing keeping her on her feet. Layla took a few deep breaths of her own as he got Savannah a glass of water. She could hear him telling her not to drink it all or she would need to get up in the middle of the night to pee. Savannah agreed to just take a sip.

"I can't believe I forgot that," he said as he re-entered the hall. "Now, where were we?"

The space between them was enough for her to gather her wits. "We can't do this."

Fighting every instinct she had, she walked away from him.

"Yeah, the hallway is a little too risky." He followed her to the living room.

"No. I mean we can't do this at all." She began gathering up the remains of their movie marathon mess. "I know you might like me and you really like the kids, but I can't have sex with you."

"Is that what you think I want?" He gathered up the rest of the trash and followed her to the kitchen. The entire apartment was small. She was never more aware of how small it was than when he was in it. He took up a great deal of space. Six foot something, two hundred something she was sure, all lean muscle; he had just one dimple in his cheek, which drove her crazy every time he smiled. He wasn't smiling now. In fact, he looked a bit perturbed.

"I don't know what you want. But whatever it is, you can't have it." Layla threw the popcorn in the trash and leaned against the worn old counter next to the sink.

"I want you." He set the cups in the sink beside her.

"You want sex," she corrected.

"That too," he admitted.

She wanted to protest more and tell him all the reasons this wouldn't work and how the children would be the ones hurt in the end, but he didn't give her a chance. His arms wrapped around her, and his lips claimed hers with masculine demand. Feeling ready to swoon she grabbed his neck and allowed him what he wanted, at least for right now.

"I've never wanted anything more in my life," he whispered.

She could laugh; Rafe Johnson wanted her more than anything in his life, right. He could have any woman who traveled through Montana and all the ones living there if he chose to. Then a thought hit her. Maybe if she slept with him once, he would get over his silly infatuation and move on. Her heart hurt just thinking about the day he would indeed move on. It was better to think about the here and now. Especially since he now had her blouse unbuttoned.

He trailed kisses down her neck and over her chest to her breast. One large hand pulled her closer, lifting her toward him as the other pushed her right breast up and into his mouth.

"Ohhh." Against her will her hands gripped him harder, pulled him closer. She straddled his thigh and rocked her hips forward. The rough rubbing of her skirt against his jeans made a swishing sound. He growled against her skin, tugged her tender nipple gently with his teeth, then switched to assault the other nub with the same torturous pleasure.

"Shhh," he cooed. "You'll wake them."

Biting her lips to avoid making more moaning sounds, she allowed him to continue his exploration of her body. Rafe was skilled in the art of lovemaking, as evident by his current display of

affection. She doubted he would want more after tonight since she knew her lack of sexual prowess would turn him off.

"Where are you going?" She gripped his hair and shoulder as he slid to his knees.

"Right here." He smiled up at her. His handsome face was flushed, his eyes heavy with arousal. He licked his lips and lifted her skirt tucking the material around her back and securing it with her body against the sink.

"Rafe?" Her heart was thundering in her ears, her lungs breathing quick shallow breaths.

"Shhh," he said against her thighs. His lips and nose stroked her left thigh then her right. Up and down. Inhaling, licking their way to the juncture between them. She tried to close her legs knowing her panties were now soaked. He held onto her and gently rubbed circles at the back of her knees in a soothing way. His nose stroked the soft cotton of her panties, and then his warm mouth breathed against the cotton, making the hot flesh beneath burn and cry for more. "I always wondered what this would be like. How you would taste."

His tongue stroked the material, and she could feel it. She wanted to feel it against her flesh. Her embarrassment faded behind the desire. Letting go of his head and shoulder she hooked her fingers into the sides of the skirt and her panties and then pushed them down for him.

She bit her lip again as his fingers moved to meet hers. He stroked her fingers gently as he took over the removal of the clothes. She stepped out of them, and with his guidance spread her legs farther apart. The kitchen counter was short enough for her to lean on for balance without digging into her back.

He lifted one hand and spread her tender flesh. Her fingers twined in his chocolate brown hair again. His mouth opened for a more intimate kiss, and Layla fought hard not to cry out. He was an expert. He took his time licking and exploring, pushing his tongue inside her, testing the pressure on her clit until he knew exactly when and where to touch her. How fast, how hard, and what rhythm she needed. It took her years to master it with her hands, and Rafe figured it out in a matter of moments.

"God, you taste good. Hot and sweet, just like I imagined." He growled then pressed his middle finger deep inside her.

A low moan escaped her efforts to be quiet.

Rafe held her open with one hand, finger fucked her with the other, and sucked her clit until her legs trembled and her body wound tight for the release. One of her hands covered her mouth and the other pulled his head closer against her. Never in her life could she remember being so free with a man, or herself for that matter. Nevertheless, in those moments, nothing mattered; no thoughts entered her brain except finding the release her body craved.

Her orgasm pulled hard in her womb and flexed its release around his fingers. He sucked hard at the perfect time, and the pulse intensified to a crescendo that left her speechless. She could scream but nothing would come out. Her body trembled in the aftermath.

Rafe slowly nursed each pulse until she was limp and panting.

He stood quickly, unfastened his jeans, grabbed his wallet from his back pocket, and removed a silver square. He ripped the package with his teeth as the wallet fell to the floor. She watched in wideeyed wonder as he sheathed an impressively large erection.

"This won't take long." He half laughed. "You'll have to trust me when I say, I'll be better next time."

He kissed her before she could tell him there wouldn't be a next time. However, she was already softening to the idea. He gripped her legs as she balanced on the countertop the best she could with shaking arms. He wrapped her legs around his hips then placed one hand on her ass and the other under her ass on his cock to position it.

Once he found his mark, he pressed into her. Slow, steady, and deep.

Rafe was in heaven. Right where he had longed to be for what seemed an eternity. It took more strength than he could muster to hold back for long. Layla made the most amazing faces as he pushed inside her. She was tight, wet, and already clutching his shaft from the inside on the verge of another

orgasm. It was never this easy with other women, and he had been with his share. Of course, if she was anywhere near as desperate as he was tonight, coming was the easy part, holding it back long enough to make it count was the challenge. "Dammit. I can't hold back."

She bit his shoulder as he pushed in once, twice, then balanced them both against the counter as he let go. Pulses of pleasure throbbed throughout his cock; bursts of light crackled before his closed eyes. Layla's teeth bit into his shoulder, and her pussy pulsed around his dick. If he were to die tonight, this was the way he wanted to go.

"Rafe," Layla whispered. "My back."

"Oh." He almost dropped her but recovered in time. Clearing his throat and acting as if he still had strength left in his body, he balanced them both. "Sorry about that."

He looked at her and she looked at him. He knew he was smiling ear to ear; her face blushed and she looked at the floor.

"Why are you looking away from me?" He tipped her face toward him.

"I bit you." She looked at his shoulder; he looked and then looked again. "Is that...oh no."

"It's just a little...scratch; with a tiny bit of blood...it doesn't matter." However, it was beginning to hurt in the calm after the storm. "Marry me."

The words slipped out. He had planned to woo her and take it one giant step at a time, but now he jumped three squares and stepped right in it. She crinkled her face and then laughed.

"For a moment there, I thought you were serious." Layla giggled as she pulled her skirt and panties back on.

Feeling exposed he took care of the condom and re-fastened his pants. She was still giggling. Layla wasn't a giggler. Something was wrong. "What if I am serious?"

"But you're not." She turned on the faucet and began splashing her face with the water.

He turned her. Water streamed down her face, smudging her mascara and wetting the hair that framed her face. She looked crazy. Almost as crazy as he felt. "What if I am?"

She blinked, a lot, and then shook her head no. "I...you...no, no, no."

"Layla," he started.

"Leave." She pointed. "Go, go now!"

"You can't be serious." He could feel anger replacing the bliss.

"Rafe, you gotta go. You have to go now." She bent down, picked up his wallet, and handed it to him. She then marched to the door while fastening the rest of her shirt buttons. "I...no, no, no. You gotta go."

"You're freaking out, aren't you?" She was acting like she did the day he suggested signing the kids up for scouts. She got all wide eyed and paced for hours then decided no, they could not.

"I'm not freaking out. You...you're getting out. Go!" she snapped.

He let out a breath of exhaustion. Certainly, he had imagined he would at least be there in the morning after their first sexual encounter. Now, he was heading back to the ranch. "Call me in the morning."

She went to say something smart; he was sure of it, so he leaned in and kissed her. The water on her lips tasted like tears. He tried to get a better look, but the moonlight shining in the door didn't provide much for revealing the woman's secrets. He shook his head and left.

Layla leaned against the door and cried. The mix of emotions overwhelmed her. She slid against the door and sat on the cold floor sobbing. Rafe asked her to marry him. It was more than she deserved, more than she could handle. A man like Rafe would not let her keep secrets. He would want to know everything, and she couldn't tell him. For their sake, the babies, she had to keep to the course. She knew in the beginning it meant she would sacrifice everything. She would never be able to have a relationship with anyone.

She wiped her tears, stiffened her shoulders, and pushed up and off the floor. She went to the kitchen, grabbed the telephone, and dialed the operator. When the electronic voice asked what city and state, she hung up. She couldn't call her mother. Her parents had been through enough already. She didn't want to call when she couldn't hide the truth about things. Her mom would know in an instant she had been crying. Layla didn't want to tell her everything; she just wanted reassurance that she was still doing the right thing.

After walking down the hall to their room, she opened the door. Both children were sound asleep, safe, and happy. She nodded. She was doing the right thing for them. Except it didn't feel right anymore. Savannah had memories, real ones, undeniable ones, and there was nothing she could do to stop that. Brice was still too little, but she worried he too would recall moments of his life before Montana. Everyone agreed this was the best way, to leave and go where no one knew them. Layla barely knew herself anymore, so she supposed the theory worked. Returning to her room she thought to shower, then decided against it as she pulled her clothes off and distinctly smelled Rafe on her arms, her chest. His warm and spicy scent on her skin was too much to part with tonight. It would have to wait until morning.

Rafe cursed a frustrated blue streak all the way back to his house. He opened the door and took a good look around. He didn't know when he started renovating that he was going to make so many changes in so short of a time. The kitchen was all his, the living room, most of the large spaces, but he took the rooms upstairs and turned them into children's rooms, one for Savannah and one for Brice. The master bedroom he took care to add things he thought Layla would appreciate. *What the hell is that woman hiding?*

He paced around the house for an hour then surrendered to sleep.

"Rafe, can you...?" Jan, his sister, started.

"No, dammit. I can't. I can't okay. Whatever it is I can't do it today." Rafe tossed the clipboard on the desk in the large supply closet and folded his arms. He didn't look at her; he was afraid to. Jan was his little sister, and in the twenty years of her life, he had never talked to her like that. He wasn't sure why he was talking to her like that now.

"Fine." Jan physically pushed her way into the space beside him and stretched out her arm to grab the bottle of water on the far end of the desk.

He felt like an ass. He was an ass. "Jan, I..."

"Hey, whatever." She shrugged as she began walking away.

"Shit!" He started after her, caught up to her long legged strides, and grabbed her by the arm effectively swinging her around to face him. "I'm sorry."

His heart broke as he watched tears fall from his tough little sister's eyes. He made that happen, and he fought to hold back his own at the realization.

"I don't know you anymore." She shook her head and tried to be strong.

"Yes, you do. I'm Rafe, your big brother, your best buddy, the one who always came back and let you out of the closet when Heath and Jack locked you in to escape. I played Barbie's with you, and taught you how to fish and ride horses. I picked bee-bee's out of your husband's ass so he could marry you." She smiled at the memory then shook her head. He sighed. "I know I haven't been coming to dinner. I haven't been to game night, but Layla needs me."

"Layla." Jan took in a deep breath, and he knew Layla was a sore topic for her. Jan had told him over and over again the woman was weird, that she was hiding something, and that she was using him as a babysitter.

He nodded.

"Rafe, you are my best big brother. My favorite by far, but it is because of that I must say this to you. You've changed. You're short with all of us, now that includes me. You never eat a meal with anyone, and I'm not talking about the regular game night with Buck and me. Jack said he only sees you for lunch here at the ranch. Heath confirmed it. You leave work earlier and earlier and come in later and later. This is affecting your life now, all of it, family, work, everything. What the hell is happening to you?" Her brows drew together, and she looked very much like their oldest brother, Heath.

Aside from getting an earful of stuff he knew but wasn't really eager to admit to, he didn't like the fact that it was coming from Jan. He could curse at Jack or Heath. He could cowboy up and fight with them but not Jan. He wouldn't, couldn't, let his little sister who thought the world of him, down. "I'm going to ask Layla to marry me. If she says no, then I'll quit pursuing her. If she says yes, you will support my decision like I supported yours. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Am I forgiven?"

"For now." Jan smiled and hugged him a little too tightly. "I worry about you. Be careful okay?"

"Promise." Rafe shook his head as Jan walked off. Did she think he was so blind?

Everyone at the ranch thought Layla was using him, that she had no interest in him other than watching her kids. They never saw Layla the way he did. A single mother working overtime to make ends meet. A proud woman who didn't like to take handouts or help from others. It took a while for her to warm up to him, much less leave her kids with him, and now he was becoming a part of their routine. They expected him, all of them. He hadn't forgotten his family, but he was building a new one. Unlike his brothers, his bride wasn't going to fall into his lap. He had to work to get her affection, and that was something he had never really done before. Women were always easy to come by, and they loved him. Layla, hell he didn't know what else to do to earn her love.

Jan was right. He had sacrificed his family and his job, which again effected his family since it was their dude ranch collectively he worked at. Maybe he had been chasing Layla too hard for too long. Maybe she needed to miss him.

"Where's Rafe?" Brice asked as they sat down for dinner.

"He had work to do." Layla scooped macaroni and cheese onto the child's plate.

"This is lunch food." Savannah wrinkled her nose at the hot dog and bun.

"Well, it's dinner food tonight." Layla tried for a smile. Rafe always stocked their refrigerator no matter how many times she told him not to. There was "dinner food" in there, but she didn't know much about cooking it or what exactly they would eat. Rafe normally fed them dinner, and she ate her sandwich at work. When he was there with all of them, he cooked. The kids would eat anything he made. As Brice tested the macaroni, she knew she was not their favorite chef.

"Will he come over tonight?" Brice asked after reluctantly eating the food.

"I don't know. I don't think so." Layla realized in that instant he hadn't said. He always told her where he was or what he was doing. She didn't realize how much she had grown accustomed to knowing. Now she too began to wonder.

"Can we call him?" Savannah asked.

Layla thought about it for a moment. It wasn't her business where he was or what he was doing. Then the previous night flashed before her eyes. Horror stuck her core, and she began to worry that he took their moment of passion and her rejection at what was obviously a mercy proposal too seriously. "After dinner."

They ate every bite.

Rafe sat at Jack's house around the big country kitchen table with all of his family there. They were in the middle of setting up a game of monopoly when his cell phone vibrated. He looked at the number and excused himself. He ignored the long faces of disappointment from each one of them. He wasn't leaving unless it was an emergency. "Hello?"

"Hi Rafe!" Savannah giggled. "Are you coming over?"

"Not tonight, baby-girl." He forced a smile. It was like telling his own kids he wasn't coming home.

"Brice, don't pull." Savannah was obviously struggling to keep the phone.

"Let me talk to him." Rafe smiled.

"Hello?" The little monster got on the phone.

"How are you supposed to treat your sister, young man?" he asked.

"Be nice to her. She is the only sister I got, and it's my job to protect her," he droned out the lesson.

'That's right."

"We miss you. We had hot dogs and macaroni; that's lunch foods," Brice complained.

"Well, all food is good food any time of day."

"Are you coming over tomorrow?" Brice asked.

"I'll be there, cowboy. Now let me talk to your sister."

"I...okay." Brice handed the phone to Savannah.

"I will be there tomorrow all right? Be good for your mother, okay?"

"Do we have to?" the little imp asked honestly.

"Yes." He held back the laugh. He knew they gave Layla hell when he wasn't around, but really, the woman lacked common sense when it came to managing two kids.

"Oh all right," she said. "Good night."

"Good night." He waited for Savannah to hang up, laughed because Layla was asking for the phone when she did it, and went back to the kitchen. If she really wanted to talk to him, she would call back.

"We know, you gotta go," Heath, his older overbearing brother, rolled his eyes as he said it.

"Actually, I don't." Rafe sat back down and felt six sets of eyes on him. He looked around the table at them. Jack and Bethany sat close together. Jack had met Bethany in Las Vegas, and they married each other on a dare. They were now expecting a little one. Not to be outdone, Heath and his wife Chance had not only reconciled but also conceived upon that reconciliation. Chance absolutely glowed. Heath for all of his machismo could only find tenderness for one woman, the one at his side. The only woman willing to put up with him. Then he moved to the happiest faces in the room. Jan and Buck were the youngest couple there and the ones who missed him the most. When Jan and Buck got married, Jack and Heath thought that by shutting them out they would bring them to their senses. Heath had even shot Buck with a bee-bee gun when he came to ask for Jan's hand in marriage. Rafe had snuck down to their house once a week for dinner and family game night. He always went back to let her out of the closet when they wanted to escape the little sister, and he always went down to see her and her husband once a week when she was married and banned from the family.

His grandfather had told him when Jan came along that Heath was too old to be the big brother she needed, Jack was too wild and losing his spot as the baby wasn't fun either, so it fell to the middle child to pick up the slack. Rafe understood this. He had been compensating one way or the other all his life as the middle brother.

Six surprised faces still looked at him. "What?"

"Nothing," Jan said and quickly directed the attention back to the game. "You can be on our team."

"I'll be on my own team, thank you." He grabbed the horse piece he had custom created from a piece of wood and placed it at the start. Of course, he was the odd man out. He always was.

Squeals, shrieks, and laughter cracked through the air. Two kids were not behaving. They had stripped the sheets off their beds, dumped out all of their toys, and were currently running around the small apartment like wild dogs.

"Both of you stop it!" Layla yelled. They stopped. "Go to bed!"

Their faces looked shocked, hurt, and disappointed all at the same time.

"Now." She pointed to their room.

They marched in silence until they got to the door. Brice looked back. "But the sheets."

"I don't care." Layla's hands shook from her frazzled nerves.

"I'll fix it." Savannah gave her the cold look she always gave her and put her arm around her brother.

Layla swore that child knew everything. All of it. There was no way she could know, no way could she remember it, but when she gave her that look...she knew, somehow that child knew everything. The counselors said she wouldn't remember, that it would seem natural, but they were wrong. Nothing was natural. A bond between a mother and her children was the most natural thing on the planet, and she did not have that bond with either of these children. She didn't know how to force that bond either.

Layla went to her own bedroom and pulled the shoebox from the top of the closet. She could hear them in their room making up the beds. At least they were quiet. She took out a photograph and looked at it for a long while. The girl in the picture looked exactly like her. Well almost. Layla had lost a lot of weight since then, stress, pinching pennies, and dealing with the emotional strain on a regular basis in addition to time itself left her a shadow of the woman she once was though she was never like the woman in the photo who wore a painstakingly detailed bridal gown. The man next to her looked like an older version of Brice.

"This isn't fair. I let you have everything. Now look at me. What do I have? Nothing. Not you, not a career, I don't even have myself. I wasn't the strong one, remember? How am I going to take care of them and not let them down?"

Layla began to cry, and the picture crinkled in her hand. She heard Savannah's footsteps and quickly put it back in the box. She wiped her eyes and stood. Savannah reached the foot of the bed as she was placing the box back in the closet. "Mom, Brice wants you to tuck him in like Rafe does."

The word always sent a chill up her back. Layla nodded and tried for a smile. It was easier when they were smaller. She didn't have to be so perfect. Now they had expectations, and she knew she was falling short of all of them. They lived in a dump, clean but tiny, and they would be too old to share a room soon. Rafe bought most of their groceries, and though she hated to admit it, she was thankful. The kids had gained weight and got sick less often since she allowed him to baby-sit for them. Both a curse and a blessing, the day her babysitter got the flu and sent her boyfriend to take care of them. "How does Rafe tuck you in?" She looked down at the sweet faced boy and tried not to beat herself up with guilt. She should know this stuff. She should have a special way of tucking them in and not him.

"I just wanted to tell you I love you." Brice held open his arms, and she hugged him. It took everything she had to keep from crying.

"I love you, too." And she did. She loved them both. "Savannah, do you want me to tuck you in? Rafe said you like the bear and to be tucked all the way down your sides."

Savannah grabbed her teddy bear, and though she had a sour expression allowed Layla to tuck her in. "I love you, Savannah."

"Will Rafe be here tomorrow?"

Today was different. Layla knew she looked at him a lot, but today she really couldn't stop memorizing details. She wanted to touch him a million times when they walked down to the stables. The children loved being out here on his ranch. She liked it, too, with the exception of his family. She knew they weren't fond of her. She didn't blame them, but it still made for awkward moments. They tried to be polite, kind, and inclusive, yet she never quite fit. Like today, they were having a picnic, and a picnic for a dude ranch means at least sixty people. How the man got all his work done and still made time for the children was beyond her. She struggled to work full time at the shelter, and she had been working overtime since they lost funding. She didn't want to tell Rafe her job was in jeopardy. Instead, she kept her hopes up that the grant proposal would go through.

He walked toward her with a soda can in each hand. His jeans fit him so well, hugging his hips, showcasing his groin. *Stop looking at him like that*.

"Hey," he said as he tipped his cowboy hat with an uncurled finger and winked at her. She could feel the muscles in her throat tighten as she looked away feeling more than the sun heating her cheeks. "I brought you a drink."

"Thanks." She took the offered can of cola and drank in the cool liquid.

Rafe sat next to her under the tree and leaned back against the trunk as he crossed two long legs. "So."

"So the kids look like they are enjoying themselves." She tried for small talk.

"They do. What about you?" He was looking at her; she could feel it.

"It's always nice to be out here. It has a real sense of family, of freedom." She nodded. "It smells clean. The flowers over there travel on the air well."

"Why did you kick me out the other night?" He wouldn't let her evade him for long.

"It's complicated," she said honestly. "I don't want you to pity me. I don't want you to offer me a mercy proposal because you like the kids. You don't know me. You think you do, but you don't. You can't."

"I think I know you better than you know yourself. I know you didn't hate me the night before last, but you put me out anyways." He stroked a finger down her spine and every muscle in her body tensed. She wanted him. She wanted to turn around and lean right in to kiss his full lips, to taste his tongue, and to feel him all over.

"I had to." She gulped. "I can't let my body rule my brain."

"So you still want me?" He sat up. His breath stroked her ear like a caress. "Because I want you."

She didn't have time to answer. He pushed up off the ground and called for Brice who was chasing Savannah with a bug. She watched him approach the children and she wanted. She wanted him to be their father, she wanted them to be their children, and she wanted everything he would offer her and more. She couldn't have it all, but she could have another night with Rafe.

She wanted him all right. Rafe addressed the problem at hand with the two children, but he knew Layla had changed today. Normally she could hide her perusal of him, yet today she looked at him as if he were a slab of meat. He was anxious to be with her forever, but he might have to take it one night at a time. He started to wonder what she could be hiding that caused her so much pain.

"Yes sir." Brice held his head down, and Savannah finally forgave him. Once she did, he explained himself, "I just wanted her to see it."

Rafe knew what it was like to tag after an older sibling and want their attention desperately. Heath was his older brother, and until Jack came along, Heath was the best thing since sliced bread in Rafe's mind. Then Jack made him the big brother, and Heath was only partly special. As an older brother, he could also understand Savannah's role. She liked her little brother, only sometimes she wanted to do her own thing. He imagined bugs were not a favorite of regular little girls. Jan, his little sister, was so much younger than him, Heath, and Jack that she would have eaten the bug if she thought her brothers would give her attention. "Well, buddy, most girls don't like bugs. So let's see if you can find something else."

"I like butterflies," Savannah offered.

"Okay, let's look for those." Brice was happy. Savannah smiled, and the space where her two front teeth used to be stood out.

The children were adorable, loving, and a handful. He could be a better influence if they were his. If their mother would stop being stubborn and just let him have all of them as his own family, he could make all of their lives better, including his.

"Hi, I'm Chance, Heath's wife. We met briefly that time you came out with the kids and Savannah solved the problem of naming the restaurant." The long legged redhead took a seat next to her. Layla remembered Chance. Who could forget her? Certainly not Rafe's older brother Heath. "Man, this baby is already making me tired. Were you tired a lot?"

"When?" Layla brought her thoughts back to the moment, reluctantly pulling her eyes away from Rafe, who had been delayed yet again by a guest.

"When you were pregnant." Chance rocked into her shoulder. That gesture of sisterhood sent a different chill down Layla's back. How she wished for her sister to be here now. Everything about her life would be different. "My sister said she was tired the first three months then she was so full of energy she could barely sleep the months following."

"I don't really remember." Layla thought back, it seemed so long ago. Late night talks with Lola about pickles and peanut butter sandwiches. It was a happier time, a time when everything in her life made sense and she knew who she was and what she was doing.

"How old are they again?" Chance looked off to the children who seemed to be sneaking up on the bushes looking for something. "Rafe talks about them constantly, but I can never remember which one is which age."

"Savannah's six, and Brice is five." Layla looked away from the children playing to look at Chance. Her bright brown eyes were genuine with interest.

"I know you don't socialize much. I imagine you work a lot based on the way Rafe hauls ass out of here when school lets out, and then we don't see him till the next day. But face it, you got two pregnant chicks here on this ranch, and you're the only one around who's our age with kids. We are bound to break you out of that shell." She smiled. Chance was the kind of woman who meant business. She had a wild streak about her according to Rafe. The Johnson wives were all examples of headstrong females, but each was unique.

"Well, I don't know how useful I'll be." Layla looked away from the determined woman and toward the two children.

"So, do you want me to come into town this week and grab lunch with you or what?" Chance asked.

"Me too." Bethany, Jack's wife, approached. Bethany was quiet, sweet, and welcoming. "How exciting. I've been dying to get some girl time."

Layla was caught between a rock and a soft place so to speak. Chance bullied her way into lunch, and Bethany was so excited she couldn't say anything other than the truth. "I can't."

"What? Why not?" Chance wouldn't let her out so easily.

"I have to work through lunch tomorrow. Maybe another time." Layla pushed up off the ground and headed toward Rafe. It was time to go home. She wasn't going to tell his sister-in-laws she couldn't afford to go to lunch with them. She wasn't going to tell them she feared every morning she walked into work would be her last. Instead, she ran away from them, the shame, and the inadequacy she felt in their presence. "Rafe, can you take us home now?"

He looked as confused as she felt. "Sure. Is everything all right?"

"I don't feel so great." Her stomach turned, and her head hurt from fighting the tears.

He called to the children who dramatized the exit to the point of throwing a temper tantrum. They didn't usually act up when Rafe was around. They were tired, crying, and mad when they got into his truck. They were sleeping when he pulled up in front of her apartment building.

"You don't look so good." He tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. The gentle brush of his thumb against the shell, the subtle endearment behind the touch, all combined to make her eyes burn with unshed tears again.

This was her last pair of contact lenses. The insurance she had from the shelter didn't cover contacts, and with the cutbacks it really didn't matter because they'd lost what insurance she had three months ago. The one that popped out as she rubbed her eyes to prevent crying was lost. She looked at him; at this distance, she could see him just fine. She looked back at the children; they were a little bit blurry around the edges. Her lips pulled down into a frown and a tear streaked her cheek. "I don't feel so good."

"Come on, let's get inside. You might have a cold or something. It's fall, and if you don't watch it, you'll get pneumonia. Plenty of people think they can't get sick because the weather is still nice, but it isn't summer anymore." He opened the door and woke Brice up. Brice stood next to him, sleepy and rubbing his eyes. He pulled Savannah out and held her with one arm as he grabbed Brice's hand with his free hand. "Go on inside and I'll put these guys down for a nap."

"Okay." Layla let them all inside. She walked straight back to her bedroom and crawled into bed. She silently sobbed. She heard him putting the children into their room, tucking them in, and then walking down the hall to her room.

"Turn over. Let me feel your forehead." She obeyed. As his big warm hand touched her forehead, she knew she didn't have a fever. The warm clean scent of Rafe combined with so many pent up emotions to make her weak. "You feel normal. Does your stomach ache?"

She shook her head no.

"Throat?"

Again, she shook her head.

"You have a headache?" He quirked a brow this time and sat down next to her. His weight shifted the bed, and she slid against him. The slight touch of her body against his sparked tingles in her fingers and toes.

"I lost my contact," she said softly. "And Chance and Bethany asked me to lunch and I can't go."

He sat quietly a minute then said, "We can order more contacts. Do you have glasses?"

She nodded her head yes then opened the nightstand drawer where they were.

She slid them on and watched him smile as he saw her in them for the first time. The six-month supply of contact lenses she had was a birthday gift from her mother. Layla couldn't, wouldn't, tell her she couldn't afford more on her own. Her parents had suffered enough. She didn't need them to think both of their daughters had failed them.

"Okay, now why can't you have lunch with them?"

"You know why." She looked down.

"Layla, I have told you a hundred times to tell me when you run low on cash." His voice took on an irritated tone.

"And I have told you a hundred times I won't use you for money." She heard his deep sigh.

"I don't know what to do with you anymore." He turned and placed an elbow on each knee then scrubbed his face with his hands. She had never seen him like this. Rafe was always full of life, spirit. He radiated an energy she wished she could have. Unfortunately, she also knew she was responsible for the exhausted man sitting on her bed.

"I..." Her mouth opened then stopped. Her body was telling her a million things he could do with her. A trillion things she wanted to do with him. At the moment, only one thing made sense. "Lay with me."

He thought about it for a moment she could tell. Slowly he moved to lie beside her. She moved over in the queen size bed, which his body took up most of. Her heart thundered in her chest as the man she loved closed his eyes and let out a long breath.

"Everyone is exhausted today." Boldly she wrapped an arm around him and laid her head on his chest. His heart thumped strong and quick in her ear. He didn't touch her. He didn't say one word; he just lay there silently, still. Layla removed her glasses and looked at the door.

Rafe was warm, solid, and tired. She listened as his breath came slower, his heartbeat settled into a nice rhythm, and his muscles slowly relaxed. The lull of his body was too much to take. She had hoped to lure him into sleep; then she could spend some time looking at him, pretending, but instead sleep pulled her own eyes closed.

"Rafe." Savannah's voice whispered in his ear. He opened his eyes and felt the heaviness on his chest. He turned his head to look at the little girl. "We're hungry."

She gave him a strange look. He imagined it was weird for her to see him in bed with her mother though they were fully clothed. Guilt struck him; he didn't know how the children were going to transition if he could break Layla's determination to keep him out of their lives and take them all home to his house where, to his way of thinking, they belonged. He knew that no matter how the relationship progressed he needed to be mindful of the way they acted in front of the children now, or it would come back to haunt them when they were teens.

"I'll be right there," he, too, whispered hoping to sneak out without Layla knowing the children had caught them. She was snoring and sleeping like she had never slept before.

Savannah studied them a moment and he could feel heat creep into his cheeks from her close attention. Before he could complete the thought that the girl had the wrong idea her little mouth opened and she said, "I think my mom and dad used to sleep like that."

She left the room as he tried to wrap his head around her comment while unwrapping her mother from his chest.

Rafe met the two children in the kitchen. He scratched his shoulder and looked at them. His chest was heavy; guilt loomed over him though he hadn't done anything wrong. After a big gulp of courage, he faced the jury. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Are you going to get married?" Brice asked and propped his head on his hand.

"No," Savannah answered before he could. "You can't get married."

"Well...I, well...uh." He wasn't sure what to say. He had a feeling that honesty was going to come from one source in this family. He looked at Savannah who played with an ink pen at the table. "Why do you say that?"

"If you do, I think you'll die." She shrugged.

Every hair on his body stood straight on end. He wanted to ask her more questions, but Layla was walking down the hall and would be at the kitchen and able to hear.

"Can we have fried chicken?" Brice decided since he had his answer.

"Absolutely." Rafe clapped his hands. Layla looked at him and he winked. She didn't need to know anything. "Maybe mom here will peel the potatoes."

"I can help," Brice said.

"We'll all make dinner." Rafe smiled. Savannah folded up the paper she was drawing on and handed it to him.

"Open it later," she said and wouldn't let go until he agreed.

"They are both asleep." Layla returned to the living room and took a seat next to him on the couch. "Thank God you were awake before them this afternoon."

"Yeah." He nodded. She could tell he had something on his mind.

"I guess everyone was pretty worn out this afternoon." She smoothed a frayed edge on the small throw. It was nearing time for him to leave, and she didn't want him to go. They never spent a lot of alone time together. When they talked, it was always about the children. She tried hard to keep him out of their lives at first but only succeeded in keeping his distance from her. Lately that too was becoming impossible.

"I'd like to talk to you. I need to ask you some questions, and I need you to answer them." He searched her face as she tried to hide the panic building inside. Other people couldn't read her the same as he could. She tried her best to keep up the defenses, but Rafe always found a way inside. "Don't worry, not tonight. But I think we...you should let Heath and Chance take them camping, or at least have a sleepover so that you and I can talk."

"Okay," she spat out. His eyes rounded, and she knew she had shocked him by the response. She shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, they can go camping with them."

Slowly he nodded. He was speechless. She half smiled knowing he was afraid of messing up her acquiescence. Something had changed in her this afternoon. Maybe it was the sleep. She hadn't slept like that in forever. She was refreshed, pliable, and he was so serious she didn't want to tell him no again. She spent the better part of their discussions telling him no.

"I better go." He stood, took two steps toward the door, stopped, turned around, opened his mouth, then shut it.

"Yes?"

"When?" He flinched as though she may have thrown something at him.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes!" He smiled and her heart melted. Her lips pulled her cheeks into that unfamiliar form, and she beamed back at him. He bit his lower lip, and she gripped the couch for support. Nothing could unarm her like the look on his face right now. A cross between victory and lust. Whatever Rafe saw in her, she could read his joy clear on his face. She really needed to look at him more when he was looking at her, not when she was sneaking.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Rafe. Thanks for everything." Layla knew those words were a long time coming. She never thanked him enough; she couldn't thank him enough. It was obviously too much for him. He stumbled over a few words then bolted out the door like Brice would; running out of the room before she could change her mind. She thought she heard him let out a whoop of triumph after the door closed.

Rafe stood in his kitchen and looked at the drawing on the paper. He wasn't a child psychologist, but something was very clear. Savannah was expressing something he didn't understand. It was a funeral, and her daddy was in the ground. Her mommy was, too, but then she wasn't. She had two women labeled mommy. Mommy number one was in the ground with daddy; Brice was on the other side of mommy number two.

Layla walked into Rafe's house for the first time since she had known him. Looking around she was in awe of the place. She had been to Jack's house plenty of times when he lived there. She had been to Heath's house today, and now she compared the three in her mind from what she knew and decided that this house went above and beyond the others in addition to being the most gorgeous house she had ever laid eyes on much less had the opportunity to walk in.

"Rafe, this place is just...I mean you said you had remodeled, but I had no idea." She took in the large kitchen and the new stainless steel appliances.

"Thanks." He set his hat on the counter and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Can you explain this to me?"

Layla took the paper from his hand. As her eyes took in the images, tears burned her eyes, her throat constricted, and her heart ached. "Where did you get this?"

"Savannah."

Layla felt her knees give; the room became fuzzy. She gripped the countertop for dear life. Rafe moved around the counter, and as his arms moved around her, everything went black and silent.

A cool cloth traced her forehead and cheeks. "Layla."

His voice became louder, clearer.

"Layla." Rafe gently tapped her cheeks.

Her eyes fluttered open, and he became a mostly clear vision. His face was strained with worry as he looked down on her. He must have taken off her glasses. She was aware of the soft couch cushion she now laid on, but she was more aware of the man caging her in, concern in his dark brown eyes, and a cool cloth still in his hand. "When did she give that to you?"

"Yesterday." He let out a breath he must have been holding. "Brice asked if I was going to marry you. She told me I couldn't because if I did, I would die."

"They said she wouldn't remember. That she was too young." Tears streamed at the thought of her little girl suffering this alone. No wonder she was acting out; all this time she knew. Of course, she was nervous about Rafe. She didn't want them to get married and die like her real parents. Layla realized what a mess she had made of things.

"Remember what?" Rafe wiped her tears with the cloth. The coolness caressed her skin and brought relief.

"Her parents. My twin sister Lola, her husband Warren, the whole ordeal." Layla turned away from the coolness of the cloth and sobbed. Here she had come across the entire country to get away from this, to make it easier for the children, but it would never go away.

"Tell me, Layla. Tell me everything." His voice was commanding, but he stroked her hand.

She gripped the long callused fingers and held tightly. Drawing on him for strength, she closed her eyes and began to remember Lola, Warren, and life before the incident.

"My sister was having an affair. I was away at college. She was back in Georgia with her husband and two children. Warren was always a jealous man. We met in high school. She wanted him, and I stepped aside, like always. They married after Warren finished college, and she was pregnant with Savannah by then, named her after the weekend getaway on which she was conceived. I don't know what went wrong with their marriage. I just know Lola always wanted more." Saying the words out loud for the first time ever gave Layla a sense of strength. Lola had always wanted more. More clothes than her, more ice cream, more everything. Any boy who had looked at her, Lola took away. Layla brushed the tears away and sat up to face Rafe. He looked at her intently, expectantly. The tears stopped. She had cried enough for Lola.

"We are identical twins, so everyone thought it would be a smoother transition for the children to think I was their mother and that their father died in an accident. They said they wouldn't remember; they wouldn't know any different. I feel dirty when they call me mom because I know I am not their mother. I didn't change their diapers. I don't know what they like to eat, what their first tooth was like. How can I be their mother, Rafe? How can I let those babies know how much I love them when I am such a sorry replacement?"

"Layla, you are not a sorry replacement. You're a good mom, and you are *their* mom. Savannah knows who is taking care of her, who loves her. You just can't hide it from them and lie to them. They're children, yes, but smart kids. Savannah remembers. This has to be confusing for her." His brows drew toward each other and he frowned. "How did they die, in an accident?"

She shook her head no. He handed the glasses to her, and she put them on as she explained, "He came home and caught them in the bedroom. The kids were at my mom's house because Lola was supposed to be at work. Warren had hired someone to tail her. He suspected, and it was confirmed. He came home and killed them both; he shot them in the bed and then committed suicide. His parents left Georgia, disowning the kids in the process. My parents were bombarded by the media. People came from all over to cover the story. After the funeral, we thought it would stop, but a small town is unforgiving of a scandal this size. It wasn't fair for Brice and Savannah to grow up as outcasts because of it."

She let out a long hard breath. The more she talked the easier it was to unload. "I didn't know what to do. I mean they both left the children to me in their wills. I knew Warren. I...liked him. I had no idea he had that kind of faith in me. I had no idea Lola had that kind of faith in me. I mean it made more sense to give them to our parents. They raised us. I mean, here I am in school one day and driving across the country with two children the next. I drove and drove and then...I saw this huge eighteen-wheeler make a left at a stop light, and it was beautiful. It was a scene of Montana. I called my mother and told her we were moving to Montana immediately. She called my aunt and the vine of phone calls worked until I got the number to the women's shelter, and here we are. Instead of going to my aunt in Texas, we came here. The place that saved us is now going under, and the reason I ran to begin with is catching up to us. I lied about so much to get us here and now look at me. What am I going to do?"

"You're going to marry me and move in here. You can raise the kids and get to know them in truth. They need to know the truth, Layla. You can't hide it from them," he stated, so sure of himself and his convictions.

"Help me forget all this, Rafe. If just for a while, help me forget for an hour or two, one night when I can be Layla, just me, free." Making a bold move, she kissed him. Layla grabbed his head and pulled him in tight not giving him the chance to protest or question her, or heaven forbid, propose again. She couldn't marry him. She wouldn't. She promised her parents she would never risk the children with a man again, and Rafe was the kind of man that took all of a woman or nothing at all.

He pulled out of her grip. "Are you going to marry me?"

"I..." Her head shook no.

"Then we can't do this, and I won't ask again. Three times is two times too many." Rafe stood up and looked down at her. "I want you. I want them, but I won't hurt them and myself anymore by continuing this charade if you have no plans of ever wanting me."

She gulped. A tear streaked her eye, but she didn't say anything. Fear gripped her heart and threatened to stop it. "You don't understand. I can't."

"Goodbye, Layla. Please tell them the truth. At least tell *them* the truth, since you won't be honest with me." Rafe turned and walked to the door. He didn't look back.

She sat there stunned.

Enough was enough, and he had had enough already! Rafe left her at his house and headed into town. He wasn't much of a drinker, but he needed something to take the edge off right now. Walking out the door was one of the hardest things he ever had to do. Life with Layla was the goal, two kids, maybe a few of their own to add in the mix. Life with Layla was an impossible dream, and he would not put those kids through another day of him being around just to be let down in a few years when she moved on to someone, or now that he knew part of the truth, somewhere else.

He punched the radio buttons and found a loud screaming rock station. His foot hit the pedal, and he was burning rubber down his driveway and then throwing up gravel as he hit the path out of the Johnson Family Ranch compound.

"Rafe!" Lucky shouted as he walked in the door. Everything about Lucky exuded youth and freedom. "Come on back."

"How the hell are you?" Rafe smacked the young man on his back and followed him to the corner booth. Three lovely young things were waiting on him.

"How does it look?" Lucky laughed. Rafe shook his head and took a seat next to the brunette.

"Are you a rodeo cowboy, too?" She beamed at him with open admiration. How long had it been since a woman looked at him with such happiness?

"Oh, I don't know about that." Rafe shrugged. "I'm Rafe, you are?"

"Alexandra, but everyone calls me Lexi." Lexi batted fully lashed brown eyes at him and licked her pretty pink lips. She was a cute little thing. Not as tall as Layla, certainly she was more voluptuous than Layla.

"It's nice to meet you," Rafe offered.

"So," Lucky interrupted. "What brings you out tonight? I hardly see you anymore when I get back this way."

"I've been busy." Rafe left it at that. If he was going to drown his sorrows in booze and a busty brunette, he didn't need to tell everyone he had been babysitting two great kids for one impossible woman. "But I have a lot of time now."

"Are you thinking about riding this weekend?" Lucky asked then started before he could respond, "Ladies, Rafe here taught me everything I know about riding. I owe my sponsorship to him. I'd have been a math teacher if I hadn't gotten into this life."

The girls laughed. Rafe looked at Lucky. Lucky continued, "Three plus one can be a lot of fun, but three plus two equals more time for just a few."

"That was terrible." Lexi laughed at Lucky's rhyme.

The girls on his side of the table were twins. They were platinum blonde, big busted, and not very bright by the look of things.

"Wow. I would love to be able to do math without a calculator," blonde number one said.

"Rafe, this is Mercedes and Porsche," Lucky said and Rafe could tell he used all energy to remain serious while saying it. "Their daddy owns a...what was it again?"

"A car dealership down in Phoenix. We're up here for vacation. We wanted to meet some new cowboys. We're tired of Arizona and Texas cowboys. All they want to do is ride, work, train, work. I mean how much work does a man have to do these days?" Porsche, blonde number two, said.

"Our daddy doesn't work that much and he always made sure we had whatever we wanted. When they said we couldn't go skiing in the middle of the school year, he got us a tutor and we were home schooled. It just ain't right to make a girl miss vacation," Mercedes added.

Lucky made a face and Lexi laughed.

"What about you? Were you home schooled, too?" Rafe asked.

"No. I study biology at The University of North Carolina. I just met Lucky, and these two came to meet him also, and then you showed up, so now I am just waiting to see what happens next." Lexi laughed. "This is turning out to be a pretty good vacation."

All Rafe heard was Lucky and vacation, and he knew he was not going to be taking this one anywhere tonight.

Lucky smiled at the girl and winked then looked at Rafe. "So what's it going to be old man? You gonna ride or what?"

"I don't know. First, I'm gonna take this gal right here on the dance floor. Then I'll decide if I'm going to take your money this weekend." Rafe offered a hand to Lexi. Excited she took it and then they were on their way to the floor. He looked back at Lucky and the twins. One plus two equals a choice in dance partners, and Lucky was not having much luck with the math.

"Biology. That must be fun," Rafe said as he pulled Lexi in close for a slow dance.

"It's all right. I mean I mainly study marine life, and I am really interested in the coral reefs...I'm sorry. You don't want to hear about all that. It's why I rarely get dates back home. No one wants a geeky girl." Lexi looked back toward Lucky and the blondes. "He is out of my league, isn't he?"

"You're out of his, sweetheart. If I know one thing, I know ladies, and Lucky is still sewing wild oats. Now, if you want a one-night stand, he'd be up for it. I know him well enough to know that. But do you really want that?" Rafe watched her big brown eyes turn sad in concentration. "You're a beautiful young lady, and you can have your pick of guys. Maybe you're just fishing in the wrong pools."

She nodded. "I guess I do tend to look for..."

"People who are not available, or people you think are attractive? You look for that because you want to be them, not because you want them. But let me tell you this, I think you are pretty, and smart, and you can do a whole lot better than a one night stand in Montana on this vacation." Rafe knew women. He knew Layla really did want to marry him, he knew Chance loved Heath, he knew Jack loved Bethany, and he knew his little sister Jan and her husband Buck would last a lifetime. He also knew this little thing in his arms was hoping to wrangle herself a wild stallion, but he also knew deep in her heart she would feel worse for it, not better.

"You're right," she whispered. "So I guess you're not trying to pick me up either, huh?"

"Oh, he is trying to pick you up, make no mistake. Lucky likes to be chased. You want someone who is interested in more than just a one night stand." Rafe looked around the room. He saw someone he thought might actually have an interest in her. "Now that one over there, he's the town sheriff. That is a guy who could show you Montana and one you might not want to leave. He's about thirty though; Roy just can't seem to find a woman who cares about the things he cares about."

"What does he care about?" She looked at him while Rafe moved them closer to where Roy was sitting, all alone, with one bottle of beer.

"The lakes, conservation of the land and preserving the wildlife here." Roy took a lot of flak from some people, but Rafe and others who grew up respecting the bounty of Mother Nature understood him completely.

"Really?" Lexi was genuinely interested. "I'm twenty-four. That's not a terribly large gap in age, is it?"

"Nah." Rafe laughed as the song stopped, and Lexi practically slid from his arms and walked in Roy's direction. "Not at all."

"Rafe. What the fuck? Where is my girl going?" Lucky started after Lexi, but Rafe caught him by the shoulder.

"Come on, Lucky, you know you weren't really interested in her anyways."

"I could have been." Lucky turned easily and headed to another table away from the twins. "You didn't have to leave me with those two. Sheesh, I thought I was dumb sometimes. Those two better hope their daddy leaves them enough money to plow through the rest of their lives."

"I'm sure he will get a tutor for them." Rafe laughed. "So tell me about this weekend."

Layla stayed in Rafe's house. She didn't have much of a choice since he left her there, and she didn't have transportation with her. She wasn't about to go to any of his family and ask them for a ride back to her place. After crying, she did what any girl should do, she called her mother. Another hour or two of crying, and she was done. Her mother gave her the answers she needed to hear. She gave her permission to live her life again, not Lola's. She realized that everyone had been holding on to the past and living the charade for the sake of the children, but the children were not fooled.

Boredom is what got the best of her. Layla explored the house, noticed the rugs, the hardwood floors, the railing to the rooms upstairs. Once she was there, everything became clear. Rafe wasn't really asking her to marry him because of the heat in one moment of their lives. The rooms were set up for Brice and Savannah, and he must have been working on them since shortly after they met. What a fool she had been. Or was she? Rafe loved the children, and she loved Rafe, but did Rafe love her, and really how could he? Aside from the children, he didn't really know her.

Maybe he didn't know she was still there. He came in, tossed his keys on the counter, and then headed into his bedroom. Layla heard every move as she got up from the bed in Savannah's room and made her way down the stairs. "Rafe?"

He didn't answer.

She walked through the darkness feeling the walls for a light switch. When she got to the next doorway, her hand crossed a solid mass of flesh and chest hair. "Rafe."

"What the hell are you still doing here?" he asked. She sniffed, hoped he was drunk, but no luck. She should have known better. He wasn't the kind of man to drink and drive. He was sober and still sore about earlier. She understood but hoped he would have softened enough to talk by now.

"I didn't have a way home, remember?" Instead of letting him go, she placed her other hand on his chest. She could see him in shadows and light from the bedroom close to where they were standing. He probably couldn't see her at all. "Rafe, I need to tell you..."

"You don't need to tell me anything. I'm done with it, Layla." His words stabbed like ice picks.

Boldly, aware that he may reject her but desperate to make him more agreeable once again, she stroked her hand down his chest, over his abs, and into his boxer shorts.

"Layla," he warned, but she could feel his length thicken in her hand.

"Shhh," she said and dropped to her knees.

It was too much for him to deny her since he would really be denying them both. Rafe wanted her; his body didn't lie. Pulling his briefs down as she slid into a better position, Layla hoped she could keep steady hands and not seem as nervous as she truly was.

"This doesn't change anything," he said weakly.

"I know," she lied.

He had expected her to go get the children and ask Heath to take her home. He had not expected her to wait at his house for him to return. He definitely did not expect her to reach into his briefs. The touch made his body betray his intentions and then she dropped to her knees. He was mad, yes. However, he was also a man, and when the woman he had longed for and loved for so long got on her knees with his cock in her hand, he let her. Hell, he deserved this. He deserved one last roll in the hay. Maybe this would really show her how good it could have been.

Her breath caressed the head, and his eyes closed. Maybe this would show him just how badly he was going to miss her. Not what he was planning at all.

Layla inhaled one more deep breath then opened her mouth and took him inside. It had been years since she had been intimate with a man. College away from Lola had given her a little bit of freedom, a chance to meet someone and not fear her sister stealing him away. She was always careful, not like she was being now. The taste of Rafe beat the hell out of the taste of latex any day. This wasn't something she had ever enjoyed before, but now, listening to his breathing, the sound of her mouth and his skin, the soft moans of pleasure he obviously tried to hold back, she felt as if she had power.

The rush consumed her. She placed her hands on his thighs and felt the muscles beneath her fingers tense. She let him slide deeper, farther back than she thought possible. His hands betrayed his anger and pulled her hair up and away from her face. Her glasses slid on her nose just slightly from the rocking motion.

She pulled back, and her lips made a popping sound as they left his cock. She wasn't finished with him, but her jaw was feeling tight, and she needed to flex the muscles.

"Layla," he started in a near whisper.

Layla didn't want to give him the chance to change his mind. She opened her mouth and took him in again. His right knee bent and his head fell back. She sucked, licked, and took him in as far as she could without gagging.

His entire body changed. His knee locked back in place, and his hands left her hair and gripped her shoulders. He pushed her back far enough she couldn't keep him in her mouth. "Rafe, I want to..."

"Stand up." He didn't ask, he commanded as he practically pulled her off the floor. As she stood, he embraced her in a rough and demanding hug. His lips came down on hers with an urgency she had never known in Rafe. He was always gentle, easy. Now he was more like a caveman ready to knock her out and drag her back to his bedroom. She met him with equal intensity. "Damn it!"

He walked them to the bedroom stepping out of his briefs somewhere along the line. When he sat her on her feet again, he seemed angry. At her or himself she couldn't tell. "Take your clothes off."

She didn't like him this way, but she deserved the distance he was trying to put up between them. Nervously she undressed as he searched through his dresser drawer for a box of condoms. The moonlight filtered in through the window and silhouetted his gorgeous body. This was Rafe, she reminded herself. Even if he was mad right now, he wouldn't hurt her. She took a deep breath and then lay back on his bed. Completely naked, completely open to him.

Rafe turned back toward her expecting something else. Instead of scaring her, making her feel more distant, possibly making her run, because he was having a hard time keeping himself from wanting to propose marriage again, she had opened up even more and practically welcomed him to do as he pleased. He would not give her the satisfaction of breaking him tonight. "Turn over."

Her eyes widened, and he fought the smile. She wasn't expecting that. She was hoping for more kissing, more licking, more of him pleasing her, but he was not going to give in that easily. He had spent months at her beck and call, for what, multiple rejections and a broken heart.

He wanted so terribly bad to be like Lucky for one night; free of the woman in his bed come morning. As he positioned himself behind her, he felt her body tense. Did she think he would hurt her? Even though he was mad, hurt, and frustrated, he wouldn't hurt her. Guilt got the best of him, and he let his hands stroke her back first. She relaxed. He realized how much weight she had lost since he met her. He couldn't tell under the clothes she wore, and he was too preoccupied the first time they had sex with the fact she was letting him near her he didn't care or notice.

Now, however, he could see the frail frame of a woman dealing with more than her share of life. His jaw tightened. "Turn over."

Silently, slowly, she obeyed him. Her expression was pure confusion. He reached toward her face and took her glasses off. As he laid the glasses on the nightstand, he knew he wouldn't put her out of his bed tonight, but he would have to get her out of his house and out of his life for a little while in the morning.

Layla watched his expression soften as he pulled her glasses off of her face and laid them aside. It was almost as if he was giving up on something. When he touched her again, it was gentle, more tender than any other touch she had known. When his lips met hers, it was as if he were making love to her, and for the last time. She refused to let those thoughts enter her brain. This was just Rafe being Rafe, gentle, caring...she had made a huge mistake. Rejecting him was the worst thing she had ever done.

His body covered hers. Slowly, silently, they began the age old dance of lovemaking. Her hands gripped his back and tried to keep him impossibly close to her. He kissed her time and again for long moments. Her body responded to his every touch, every move, every thrust. She was panting, rocking her hips up to meet him thrust for thrust. She could not get enough of him, not now, not ever. He was tireless in his efforts. The scent of their lovemaking filled the air. Sweat, sex, and the unique scent of Rafe combined for one heady aphrodisiac. It seemed as though it would never end; then he held her tighter, his thrusts became quicker, shallower, and her body wound against him, her release ready to break on his command.

"Rafe," Layla called out his name as she came right after him in a rolling wave of pleasure. He kissed her full and deep until the pulsations slowed and eventually stopped.

"Rafe," she said as he rolled off her and got up to dispose of the condom. He didn't answer her or look back. "I just..."

"It didn't change anything, Layla. Tomorrow you will go home, and I will explain to the children that I will be away for a while. You need time to think about things. So do I." He walked back into the bedroom, leaned over her, and kissed her on the lips one last time. "Sleep."

"But..." She started as he walked out of the room closing the door behind him.

Layla awoke the next morning wearing one of Rafe's T-shirts she had pulled from his chest of drawers. She inhaled deeply, and the scent of fresh coffee made her smile. Maybe he was willing to be a bit friendlier this morning. Layla found her bra, pulled on her jeans, and straightened herself up. She had showered when he left; her hair was still a bit of a tangled mess, but he didn't have a hair dryer, and the natural waves made her hair more unruly than usual. Ready for anything, or so she thought, Layla headed out to the kitchen to face the day.

"Hi," Bethany said with a warm smile. "Rafe stopped by this morning and asked if I could give you and the kids a ride home. He had to be somewhere important apparently because he was adamant about being there on time."

"I..."

"Heath is going to bring the kids over within the hour. He said they were eating breakfast right now, so I thought I would make myself useful." Bethany looked at Layla, then the stove, then back to Layla. "I hope you don't mind. I got bored, and I didn't want to wake you."

"It's fine, thank you." Layla hoped her face did not reveal the disappointment her heart felt. He was serious. Last night didn't change anything. Defeated she walked toward the stove and made a plate. She was trapped with Jack's wife Bethany for at least an hour. "I hope the kids had a good time."

It was lame conversation, but she didn't really know what to say.

"Well, they were laughing this morning in the background, so I am sure they will have tons of stories to tell." Bethany smiled and took a seat with her own plate. "I don't normally eat breakfast twice, but I could only eat toast this morning, and now I am starving."

Layla forced a smile. She made quick work of getting food in her mouth. Maybe she could avoid conversation if she kept eating. As she ate, she realized how hungry she was. She didn't eat after Rafe left yesterday; her stomach growled in approval of the food.

"I really love what he has done with this place. Chance and I made him give us the full tour after the Heath incident." Bethany quirked her lips into a half smile. "These Johnson men are sure something to figure out. Not that I'm innocent, or Chance either, for that matter, they seem to be attracted to women with issues." She laughed.

Layla nodded. "Well you and Jack make a lovely couple."

"Thank you." Bethany blushed.

Layla wondered what the woman was thinking as she sighed and stared at an indiscernible spot for a moment. It was a good thought, her face expressed as much clearly.

They ate in relative silence. Bethany didn't seem uncomfortable by the quiet.

The kitchen door opened and in ran Savannah and Brice. They were pink cheeked and full of excitement.

"Mom!" Brice ran to her and hugged her. "I caught a fish!"

"And we ate it!" Savannah clapped her hands in excitement. "And we went swimming!"

"Swimming?" Layla looked up at Heath. He shrugged.

"And we roasted march-mallowds." Brice shook her hand gaining her attention back to him. "With chocolate and crackers."

When she looked up again, Heath was gone. "Where did he go?"

"Probably ducked out after the look you gave him." Bethany laughed again. "It sounds like you guys enjoyed your camping trip."

"Uncle Heath said we can come camping anytime Mom lets us." Savannah smiled.

"Uncle Heath?" Layla could feel her heart thunder, panic set in around her. "But Heath isn't your uncle."

"We make our own family now, just like you." Savannah shrugged.

"What do you mean?" Layla whispered. Bethany was there, but she needed to know now what Savannah was talking about.

"You know. You were Aunt Layla. Now you're Mommy. Mr. Heath was Mr. Heath. Now he's Uncle Heath." She smiled. "We chose him and everybody else to be our relatives, too."

Layla could feel tears falling behind her glasses. Her chest tightened; her mouth went dry. It was a full-blown panic attack. Everything she suspected was confirmed. Savannah knew. She could hear her name being called; Bethany was closer to her now. The children were calling for her. The room went dark.

"Look, I understand everything, but I am still going to have a talk with him when he gets in." Jack, Bethany's husband and Rafe's little brother was there now.

"Layla?" Bethany came to her side.

She had a bag of frozen peas on her head, held in place by Savannah. Brice held onto her glasses and stood quietly staring at her.

"What happened?" She could feel heat creep over her face as she sat up to face the four of them. "I mean, I'm sorry I passed out. I get...I don't know why I can't..."

"Don't worry about it." Bethany smiled. "See guys, your Mom is okay, just like I promised."

"Can we go home now?" Layla whispered. She was mortified. Jack quirked a brow as he looked at her, shook his head, and then whispered something to Bethany.

"It runs in your family." She said in a normal tone, getting a scowl from her husband. "Kisses."

He shook his head at her this time then kissed her on the lips. "Okay kiddo's, be easy on her today all right?"

"Yes sir." They both nodded and answered in unison.

Layla frowned. She had never had an episode in front of them before. Fainting was new to the panic attacks, which began after her sister died and she became responsible for the children. The combination of all they had done camping, and then Savannah's revelation simply rocked her to the core.

"Heath put your backpacks in the van already so I guess I am ready when you are." Bethany said as though nothing major had taken place moments before. For that, Layla was grateful.

"You need a swift kick in the ass, that's what you need!" Jack was mad. She knew he was upset with Rafe, but she didn't know until just now how upset he really was. She snuck back in the house to hear the conversation, and now she was glad she made the phone call before this whole thing got even worse.

"You think you can kick my ass, little brother. Let's take a walk outside," Rafe challenged.

When Heath arrived, she felt a sigh of relief.

"What the hell is going on here?" Heath barked as he entered Jack's kitchen.

"What are you doing here?" Jack asked

"Your wife called and said she needed me to deal with my little brothers before they did something real stupid." Heath crossed his arms and leaned a hip against the doorframe. "So what is going on?"

"Rafe left Bethany to take care of his mess this morning. My pregnant wife is not his chauffer service, and certainly she was not in any position to pick a grown woman up off the floor and deal with two crying kids," Jack snarled.

"Rafe?" Heath looked to Rafe. They couldn't see her from where she was standing, but she could see Heath, and she could hear Jack and Rafe.

"I asked her to give them a ride home. I didn't know it was going to be a damn soap opera." Rafe didn't sound like himself. Lately he wasn't acting like himself.

"Jack, what the hell is he talking about? When I dropped the kids off, she looked like she always does, mad and stuck up. So how did she end up on the floor? Don't tell me Bethany hit her." He cast a look in her direction and winked. Apparently, he could also see her.

"I don't know. Bethany said she passed out when Savannah said she chose us as her family or something." Jack had settled down a bit. She heard the chair being pulled out from the kitchen table. "I feel for the gal, I really do, but Bethany is my wife, and when she called, she was upset, and you know she's pregnant, and I just...that's my world, you know. I don't want anything or anyone upsetting her."

Heath put out a hand, which probably looked weird to them, but it stopped her from running to Jack.

"Rafe?"

"They aren't her kids. Apparently, she is their aunt, but she was raising them as her own." Rafe still had not sat down. "She lied about the ex-husband. She lied about everything."

"What happened to the parents? She in some kind of witness protection or something? That would explain a lot." Heath nodded.

"No," Rafe answered. "It was a scandal though, no doubt. Her twin sister had been cheating on Brice and Savannah's father, and when he caught her, he killed her, her lover, and then himself. Layla became their guardian through their wills, and she left Georgia to get away from the scandal."

"So the kids know, and she didn't know they knew until today. Gad-zooks. I need to remind Buck how lucky he is our little sister isn't a whack-job like the rest of the women around here." Heath smiled in her direction. She stuck her tongue out at him. He was right. Jan was the only woman to have a "normal" start to a relationship in this family. "You know that's twice I've said something that normally would set you on end, little brother, and yet you haven't defended her once."

"I'm done with her," Rafe said smoothly.

"What?" Jack, Heath, and Bethany all said in unison. She came into the kitchen then and went to Jack. He frowned at her, but she simply kissed his temple and held his hand. He was only defending her; she couldn't be mad about that.

"I asked her to marry me, and she said no." Rafe laughed. It was a haunted sound. Terribly full of heartache. Heath winced. Bethany wished she could be everywhere at once to console them.

"Ask again," Jack said and squeezed her hand.

"I asked three times." Rafe clenched his jaw and looked away from them. "I'm riding tomorrow in the rodeo. If I win, I might keep going for a while. You might want to ask around to fill my spot here on the ranch. I won't need my salary of course. That should help."

"Tell me you're riding Broncs, Rafe." Heath didn't hide the expression of frustration and worry on his face. Grown men or not, they were his little brothers, and Bethany knew how far he would go to protect them.

"More money in bulls." Rafe shifted his weight to his other leg and then looked at them in turn. "I need to get my life back. I don't know who I am anymore, and I don't know what I want to do. I had a plan. I never made a back-up plan. I never saw it coming down to this, but it has. I'm sorry this puts the ranch in a bind, but I can't stay here right now. You will either support me in this, or you won't."

Bethany could feel the muscles in Jack's back go rigid under the hands she had placed on his shoulders. He let out a long breath and asked, "What time?"

Layla returned home to find a message waiting for her. The shelter had closed; the grant didn't go through. She spent the afternoon with Brice and Savannah and the shoebox she kept in her bedroom.

"She looks just like you," Savannah whispered.

"We're twins." Layla smiled. "Brice looks a lot like your dad, but you look like your mom."

"And you," she added.

"And me." Layla nodded.

"Did they die because they were married?" Savannah asked.

"No, sweetheart. They were in an accident." There was no need to tell them the whole truth about the circumstances of their parents' deaths. It was horrible enough that she knew the truth. She didn't want those images or dreams haunting the children, too.

"I thought I heard you tell grandma you would never get married." Savannah looked at her. "I was supposed to be in bed, but I was in the hall. I heard you."

"I...I made that promise to keep you and Brice safe because I didn't think you knew, and I didn't want to confuse you and...I didn't want to tell anyone the truth." Layla frowned. "I didn't want to risk anyone being that close to us."

"But Rafe is," Brice said as he put the pictures back in the stack. "I need a daddy, too. Rafe would be a good daddy, and you are a good mommy, so why can't we make our own family?"

"It's not that simple, sweetheart." Layla swallowed the lump in her throat. Of course, they loved him. Of course, he would make a good daddy. Of course, she had the chance to give them what they were asking for now, but she was too stupid to realize it was best for them at the time.

"I told him not to marry you." Savannah looked down. "I thought he would die, and I didn't want him to die."

"Oh, honey, you didn't do anything wrong. I did." Layla hugged both of the children close to her. For the first time since being their "mother" she felt like a mom. "But maybe I can fix it. Okay, I will try to fix it, so we can have Rafe as part of our family. But if I can't..."

"You're still our mom." Brice looked at Savannah.

She nodded, then added, "But please try to fix Rafe."

Rafe was easy to find. Apparently, the entire family was there to see him ride a bull. Layla was horrified at the thought. She asked Chance to take the children to get a hot dog while she found Rafe and tried to talk sense into him. They were all in agreement. No one wanted him riding the bull, but no one would tell him not to.

She made her way past cowboy after cowboy until she found her cowboy. "Rafe!"

He turned to look at her, his expression confused, and then he looked away. He wasn't getting off that easily. In fact, he was stepping down into the cage to straddle a huge brown bull that was already trying to kick and buck him off. She moved faster and was finally as close as she could get. "Rafe!"

"I'm busy right now, Layla," he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Rafe, I lied. I want to marry you, okay. Just get off that bull!" She watched as they tightened the straps. He was paying more attention to the men on either side of him than to her. "You don't have to do this, Rafe. I'm sorry. I messed up. I messed up bad. So can you please forgive me? At least get off that bull and talk to me?"

He turned his head to say something to her, but the gate man mistook his hand gesture to her as the gesture to open the gate. She watched in horror as he bounded out of the gate on the most ferocious animal she had ever seen. That woman would be the death of him he knew for sure as the gate opened and the bull shot out. He wasn't ready. He wanted to tell her to mind her own damn business, to get the hell out of here, but when he raised his hand to point at her, the gate sprang, and now here he was, holding on for dear life as this beast beneath him did his best to get him off of its back.

It seemed like an eternity but an instant at the same time. He was up, way up in the air, then down. He could feel the ribs snap, something hard on his right arm, something warm down the right side of his face. The bull was jumping still, but away from him. He couldn't feel anything anymore. His mind was drifting. Everything around him seemed to be closing in. They were calling for help over the speaker. He could hear it in the distance. He could also see three men running toward him with four more in security vests running after them. As Heath, Jack, and Buck came to a halt at his side, he just couldn't see anything anymore.

"Well, I guess that about does it." The doctor patted his hand. "I was always surprised I never got to bandage you up as a kid. Unfortunately, as a grown man, this is going to hurt worse and take longer to heal. When it does, you'll still feel it. I'm just glad it made a clean break."

"Is that all we need?" Heath asked. Rafe looked at his brother who seemed a bit fuzzy to him.

"It's not that bad really," the doctor said in a cheery voice. "The stitches can come out in a couple weeks. The ribs need to be taped for a few days, and the cast will come off in a few months. As long as he's good to that ankle, he should be fine once it's all healed up. The first week or so he's going to be in a lot of pain. Watch the amount of meds you give him. They are addictive and easy to overdose on. He should feel pretty numb right now, but he should not be up and moving for a few weeks, and he should have limited movement after that. Someone needs to be with him for a while, especially until some of the swelling goes down."

"We will be." Heath shook the doctor's hand. "Thank you, Dr. Beasley."

"Tell your mother hello for me. I miss that woman's cooking. She always brought me a plate after I fixed you or Jack up." He laughed. "Best fried chicken in the world."

"I'll tell her, and I'll send you a plate from Momma's Kitchen. Chance makes it just the same." Heath looked at Rafe when the doctor left the room. He walked three long paces to stand next to the bed. "When you get better, I am going to kill you. You scared the shit out of us."

"Sorry." Rafe closed his eyes. "I feel really weird."

"Well, you're all drugged up, so I guess you would feel weird." Heath snorted. "Come on, we need to get you in the wheelchair and get you home."

"Wheelchair?" Rafe opened his eyes. "What all's broke?"

"Just your arm, and a few ribs cracked." Heath laughed. "A few inches farther and that bull would have landed right in your chest. Most of this damage came from the fall and the fact that you went up, hit the bull on the way down, and then hit the ground. You looked like a pin ball in a machine and everything was hitting."

"Jan, you need to go to class. This is your last semester, and you can't miss anything or you risk your grade point average." Buck was trying to reason with her Rafe could tell.

"I'm not leaving him," Jan said stubbornly.

"Go to school, Jan," he croaked out. "Get me a glass of water, and then go to school."

"Rafe, you're awake." She seemed so pleased by that he laughed. Laughing hurt.

"Ah, still hurts." He smiled. "What day is it?" It dawned on him if Jan was in school it sure wasn't Sunday anymore.

"Thursday." She held out the glass of water Buck brought in. "You seem to be in and out, but most of the time you just sleep. The doctor said you would be like that for a few days." He realized he was propped up, and Jan had the straw pointed his way. He reached up for the glass and knew why she was holding it. His right hand was in a cast. "Well hell."

"Yeah, you're going to have to be a lefty for a little while." She held the glass closer. He took a long drink of water.

"I'll stay with him, Jan. You need to get off to school," Buck reminded her.

"Rafe?" She looked at him.

"Go to school. I'm awake now and fine, really." He smiled when she kissed his forehead. "You're my favorite little sister."

"I'm your only little sister." She shook her head at him. Then she turned to Buck and whispered something in his ear. They shared a brief hug and kiss and an exchange of quiet words before she left.

"You hungry?" Buck asked after a moment of looking at him.

"Yeah, I think I am." Rafe nodded. His head still hurt. He could definitely feel the ribs ache. He moved his legs, and his right ankle spiked a new pain for him to deal with. "Man, this feels like hell."

Buck nodded. "You look like hell, too, buddy."

"Thanks," Rafe said.

"Anytime." Buck left the room.

Layla approached the house at the same time Jan was leaving. No doubt Rafe's little sister was going to give her an earful.

"I'm not happy about this," Jan said to her point blank.

"I understand." Layla nodded. She did understand.

"Well...okay then." Jan seemed to have lost her argument when the children caught up to them. "Hi guys, how are you?"

"Is Rafe awake today?" Savannah asked.

"Yes, well, he was a minute ago..." The children ran past them into the house calling his name.

Layla moved quickly behind them so as not to give her a chance to say anything else.

"Hey there." Buck, Jan's husband, greeted her with a friendly smile. "You need help getting your things?"

"No, thank you. I'll grab it later...there really isn't much to..." She looked away toward the stove. "He wants to eat?"

"Yep." Buck stirred the soup again. "I figured we might need to start with liquids first, see how that goes, then move on if he stays awake and keeps this down."

"Well, I guess there's no time like the present." Layla turned off the stove and poured the soup in a bowl. She grabbed a few napkins and the crackers Buck had laying out. "Don't leave in case he doesn't take this well."

"I'll be in the hall if you need me." Buck nodded. The giant grizzly bear Jan was married to was the easiest person to be around.

Layla picked up the tray she had placed everything on and took in a fortifying breath.

When she came closer to the bedroom, she could hear him talking to Savannah and Brice. They were so afraid he was dead they cried every night. It didn't matter that they could see him in the bed, and that everyone had told them otherwise. Until today, they didn't fully believe it. Of course, he looked a wreck to grown up eyes, so he must have looked worse to the children.

"Be careful, Savannah," Layla whispered unintentionally. Savannah was on the bed next to him, and it made her nervous. She could hurt him very easily right now, and that would only make her little heart sad if she did.

"Yes, ma'am." Savannah eased off the bed.

"She's fine," he said, defiance laced his tone. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, it's a long story..."

"I'll take the readers digest version if you don't mind." He was certainly in a foul mood today.

"Savannah, Brice, why don't you ask Buck if he would put in a movie for you. Let mommy and Rafe have a few minutes alone." She watched him watch them. They listened to her now. She wasn't frazzled or confused. By no means was the relationship perfect, but she was learning, and they were eager to help her be the best mom she could be. They had open communication now, and that made a world of difference.

She set the tray on the tray table and then sat boldly next to him on the bed. "I'm taking care of you."

"The hell you are," he said in a low breath.

"You wanted the readers digest version." Layla looked at him, at the stitches over his right eye, the bruising on his chest over his ribs, the cast on his arm. It was pointless for him to refuse. "I'm here. Actually, we are here. Bethany told us to move in because you needed twenty-four hour supervision and assistance, and everyone else around here has to work, and you know better than me this place is a full-time job all on its own. It never sleeps with the guests and the workers..."

"I know how this ranch operates, but that doesn't mean Bethany, or anyone else can let you move into my house, or...what about your job?" He seemed to think she cared more about the job than she actually did. If she could apply elsewhere, she would have, but no one else was flexible with the childcare hours and what she almost had a degree in wasn't in high demand in Montana. "I lost my job. They closed the shelter. The lease is month by month, so of course, in a week this month would be up, and I couldn't see spending my last paycheck on a place if it would only buy us a month. When we came to the hospital, Bethany pulled me aside and asked if I needed a job. So now, I am here, at your beck and call. My job is to take care of you."

He snorted. It hurt; she could tell because he put his hand up to his ribs.

"When you're better, if you don't want us here, we'll leave. I have my aunt in Texas..."

"That's not fair." He looked at her. His brown eyes were sad, frustrated, and painful. "I want *them* here."

"It's a packaged deal." She sighed. No point in putting him through the emotional gauntlet while he was hurting physically. "For now, I am your nurse, your housekeeper; whatever you need I am just a bell ring away."

She nodded toward the bell on the table. "So do you want to eat soup or not?"

"I can't hold a spoon." He showed her his cast as if she couldn't see it herself.

"Again, that's why I'm here." She picked up the bowl with one hand and the spoon with the other. "Open up."

Rafe narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth. He was hungry. His stomach rumbled from the need for real food. It was the worst kind of punishment his family decided to enact on him. Sending Layla to be his keeper, knowing he was trying to get away from her in the first damn place. What had he done to make them so? He knew what he had done. He scared them, and he had been a complete jackass for at least three months. Now he was going to take his punishment like a man, and she was going to regret taking him on. He wasn't finished being mad at her, not by a long shot.

After eating the bowl of soup and a few crackers, he did feel better. In fact, he thought it was a fine time to break her in as his new personal assistant. He rang the bell.

Layla appeared in the doorway, pleasant, unusually so. "Yes?"

"I want some water."

She nodded and left the room. When she returned, he had her hold the water, though he could hold it in his left hand if he chose to. When she left, he gave her five minutes then rang the bell.

"I want to watch the news," he said smugly and watched her walk to the television hanging on the wall across from the foot of his bed and turn it on. She found a news station and brought him the remote. *Damn remote*.

He did that for about an hour; then she brought him his medication. Against his will, he was sleepy again.

"Rafe?" A small voice came from the doorway. "Can we come tell you goodnight?"

"Come on in, baby-girl." Savannah and Brice made their way, quietly and slowly toward him. "Come on this side." He patted the bed on the left side. They both climbed up in slow motion. "It's okay. I'm not going to break."

"We don't want to hurt you," Brice said and looked at his foot still propped up on the pillows.

"You won't, cowboy. Don't worry," he reassured him. They both looked unconvinced. "You know what you could do though?"

They shook their heads no.

"You could read me a story. I'm pretty sleepy myself." He yawned a genuine yawn.

"I'll go get the book." Brice lit up.

"Hang on." Rafe grabbed the bell, and Layla appeared in the doorway. Before she could get onto them for being on the bed again, he said, "I told them they could get up here. They want to read me a story for bedtime."

"I'll be right back." She left to get the book.

Instead of leaving him with the two children and the book, Layla stayed. She sat on the left side of the bed and helped Brice sound out his words. Rafe remembered this was what he had asked for, prayed for, and now he had it, just not the way he thought he would get it.

After the story was over, Savannah gently hugged his arm and then slid off the bed. Brice was a bit less delicate, and he squeezed a lot harder.

"I'm glad you're not dead," he said as he slid off the bed.

"Me too, cowboy." Rafe laughed. That made his ribs hurt, but he didn't care.

"I'm going to go tuck them in. Do you need anything?" Layla asked before walking out the door. She stopped, turned, then said, "You have a urinal bottle if you need to do number one, but if you need to do number two, I will have to call your brothers until you can handle some of your own weight again."

He knew his mouth was open. She had just shocked him right to his core. How had he been using the bathroom the past three days? Had he been using the bathroom? Was she going to have to clean up after that, too? *No, no, no.* He was more determined than ever to do one thing on his own. It hurt like hell to sit up completely. It really hurt when he stood up, and his ankle gave way, and he went right back to a seated position on the bed, which in turn made his ribs hurt. Fighting back tears of pain, he looked at the bottle she had set out on the nightstand and then at the bathroom door just a few feet away.

A stream of profanity was coming from his bedroom as Layla entered the hallway. She ran to see what had happened and found him trying to sit in one of the chairs his guests had been using to sit in while visiting him the past few days. "Rafe!"

"I'm not pissing in a bottle." He growled.

"Okay." She stood there, uncertain what to do. "Should I call one of your brothers?"

"No." He glared at her. "Just give me a damn minute. I can do it myself."

"Fine." She took a step back and watched him push out of the chair using only his left arm. His chest and forehead were glistening with sweat. His pajama bottoms hung low on his hips, and for the first time since the accident, she looked at him in an appreciative way not like he was fragile and helpless. Under all the bruising, he was still all lean muscle and determination. That was the stubborn man she knew and loved. He staggered. She moved under his left arm and unwillingly he allowed some of his weight to rest on her. He was a heavy man. "Just let me help you in there okay?"

He cursed a blue streak, but he didn't tell her no.

"Shit," he said as they finally got to the commode. "I can't use my right hand."

"You want me to hold it for you?" He couldn't see her face, but she was blushing, that much he knew for sure.

"You wish." He growled. "I need you to undo my pajamas and help me turn around. I can pee sitting down."

"Really?" She didn't mean to sound so surprised but she was. This whole conversation was scandalous.

"Pants." He shifted his weight from her to the wall. His left side was going to be as sore as his right if he wasn't careful.

Layla quickly undid his pants, tugged them past his knees, and helped him turn around.

"I can take it from here. I'll call you when I need to go back. I need to rest a minute." He sounded so out of breath and defeated as she left him.

Layla closed the door to the bathroom and took the opportunity to fix up his bed again. She fluffed the pillows, pulled the sheets tight, and tried to clear a path from the bathroom to the bed without moving the large sturdy chair too far away in case he needed to stop again on the way back. She knew this was hard for him. His pride was bruised more than his ribs right now, but what else could she do?

Once back in the bed he fell right into a deep sleep.

He vaguely remembered her bringing him something to drink in the middle of the night. He definitely remembered Jack helping him to the bathroom this morning when Layla had taken the kids to school. He was grateful his brother was there. He didn't want to have too many trips to the bathroom with Layla as his keeper.

"What's that?" he asked as she brought in a square tub and set it on the tray table.

"Sponge bath." She shrugged. "You can't get in the shower, or the bathtub, so..."

He let a stream of curses fly under his breath.

"You know I don't care that you have taken to cursing like a sailor in my presence, but please don't do it in front of Savannah and Brice. They will join you as foul mouthed crew members in no time." She rang the cloth out and stepped toward him.

"I...I won't. It..." He knew it hurt but also knew he would never curse like that in front of children. He had never cursed in front of Layla before now.

She pulled back his sheets and noticed he was in boxers. "How did you?"

"Jack came over while you took the kids to school." He watched her as she uncovered him completely. Never in his wildest dreams was Layla his servant. In most of his fantasies, he had been the one rescuing her, taking care of her, driving her wild with lust. Now here she was, in a pair of jeans and a well-fitted T-shirt taking care of him. Planning to give him a sponge bath no less. He made a sound of irritation at the thought.

"What?" she asked as the warm cloth made contact with his skin.

"Nothing." He closed his eyes so as not to be betrayed by his face. Of course, he was sure other parts of his anatomy were going to be harder to control.

She let it drop. He tried to think of something, anything other than Layla touching him. She spent extra time at his neck and shoulders, and that relaxed him too much. It was useless to resist her effect on him. She caressed him everywhere but where he wanted her to touch him by the time it was over. His cock strained against the boxers he now tented.

She made no mention of his erection. He was sure she noticed. His brain was functioning on a whole different level now. Nothing, not the pain, the frustration, the fact that he was not supposed to like her anymore, or the fact that technically she was being paid to take care of him mattered. She put the cloth back in the tub and started to pick up the whole thing to leave.

"Layla." She hesitated. He smiled. Then he drew his face to a scowl. "You're not done yet."

"I...I don't understand." She turned to look at him, set the tub down, folded her arms, and waited. He looked to his tented shorts then back to her. Her eyes rounded, and her mouth opened into a perfect little 'O'. "I thought since Jack was here he would..."

"Jack can't do what I need you to do." Rafe bit his lower lip and watched her expression. Heat crept up her neck and spread over her face. He loved to see her blush.

"But, I thought..."

"Oh, I'm still mad at you for several reasons." However, he was having trouble at the moment recalling any reason other than her rejecting the marriage proposals. "But I am also right handed, and I can't take care of that with my left," he lied. "So I need you to do it."

"You want me to ... "

"You're here to take care of me right, do what I can't do. Well, I can't do that, and I will be in more pain if you don't. Do you want that Layla?" It was dirty and down right rotten of him to do this to her, but at the moment, he didn't care. He needed to keep her emotionally at a distance, but he desperately wanted her physically closer to him.

Layla looked at the scoundrel who had possessed her Rafe and wondered exactly how hard he had hit his head in that fall. It was a challenge. He was daring her to take this over the line. An internal war began at once. The part of her that wanted to be with him for the rest of her life wondered why she stood there gawking when she had wanted to touch him the moment his boxers began to rise. The other part didn't want to feel like a hooker. She was being paid to look after him after all. Her teeth clenched and released over and over again. He waited. His brown eyes were challenging and mischievous. If he were better, she would lunge onto him and show him exactly how well she could take care of all his needs. She looked at the door. He had regular visitors.

"I need to lock the door," she squeaked out.

"Fine," he said in a flat tone, but his cock twitched. He wasn't oblivious to her, and maybe, just maybe, she could take this time to not only show him that she could take care of him and the children as a wife and mother, but she could also work her way back into his heart and ultimately remain in his life for the rest of hers. If she could just get him used to having her around...

Rafe watched Layla walk to the door. Something was different about her. Maybe it was the meds. Maybe it was the way she became more like a predator the moment the door locked and she turned to look at him with that same hungry expression he remembered from the picnic.

"Do you want me to do it my way, or would you rather give me directions?" She moved to the left side of the bed and gently climbed in. She looked at him with those dazzling blue eyes and waited.

"It's a simple stroke up and down." He wanted to sound less out of breath, but his heart was thumping and his self-control was waning.

She didn't hesitate. She slid the elastic band of the boxers over his hips and half way down his thighs. He was completely exposed to her. In the morning light, she could now see every last bit of his naked body. Her breath caught, and her right hand slid around his shaft. Rafe couldn't believe how much relief a simple touch could bring. She held him entirely too loosely. The gentle strokes she made were more teasing than effective.

"Harder," he whispered and watched her hand on him. Her grip firmed.

"It's not very slippery." She was breathless, and he wondered if she was as turned on as he was. In the moment, he wished he wasn't injured. He wished he could...nope, that was exactly what got him in trouble to begin with, and thinking about taking her over made him spout silly things. It was better if she did this, and he did nothing but let her.

"Then make it wet." He closed his eyes and laid his head back on the pillow. It was better that he didn't look at her while she did this. Her blue eyes could unarm him. They made him weak the moment he met her.

He could feel her shift around on the bed. She was cautious not to disturb his propped up foot.

"Rafe," she whispered.

He grunted a reply.

"I really like doing this to you."

He didn't get a chance to respond. It would have been useless anyways. He couldn't put together a sentence right now to save his life. Her mouth was so fucking sweet. Warm, wet, and the way she let her tongue tip hit the rim as she reached the top had him taking deep breaths to hold out as long as he could.

Unfortunately, it wasn't nearly as long as he hoped it could last. "Layla, I'm gonna..."

"Shhh." She hushed him and went back to her mission.

He hoped she understood what she was getting herself into. He tried to warn her, but as her mouth drew tightly around his dick, there was nothing else to do but spend.

His body trembled, his legs shook, and when he opened his eyes, she was smiling at him. He went to say something...

"No mess." She shrugged and slid off the bed. She walked over to the water and twisted the cloth. "You don't have to..."

The cool cloth ran over his chest, down his abs avoiding the bruised ribs, and then around his spent cock as it began to return to its normal size. Without saying another word, she simply pulled his shorts back up, pulled the sheet back over him, and turned on the television with the remote. "If you need anything else, just ring."

Why did it seem like she was getting the best of this situation? He scowled at her triumphant little smile. He wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of a thank you though she deserved an applaud for that performance. Instead, he turned his head toward the television.

Once safely out of the room, Layla made all the faces she wanted to make the moment ejaculate hit her tongue. She was prepared for what was going to happen, but she had no idea what a full load of sperm would taste like. Not that it was bad, it was just different and something to get used to. Always cautious in her adventures she was certainly trying new things with this man.

She walked to the bathroom and emptied his bath. Then she swished a bit of mouthwash and got back to work. Changing his sheets daily in addition to two children and her clothes meant a nonstop cycle of laundry. She also needed to see if Chance had his requests for dinner this evening. He didn't seem to care what the kitchen was cooking for the entire ranch; he also didn't care what she had planned to cook for herself and the children though they usually ate what Chance made in the dining facility as well. Rafe made sure to come up with something he was sure she didn't have ready.

It was a personal game for him. He was punishing her. She knew as much by the way he waited for her to get out of the room before he would ring the bell again. She headed down to Momma's Kitchen and hoped he didn't ring while she was gone. She asked Heath if there was any other communication device he could get so she could also take care of things outside. She expected the walkie-talkies this afternoon. Maybe she could get some work done if Rafe would sleep. He seemed worn out after that blow-job. Maybe that was another way to knock him out, her lips curled into a mischievous smile of their own.

"Hi Chance," Layla said as she walked into the kitchen area of the dining hall. "Hi Malina."

"Hey," Chance replied and kept working on her current masterpiece, a cake of some sort that looked like she should frame it rather than allow someone to cut it.

"What he wants today?" Malina took the list and scoffed. "Who does he think he is the king of England?"

Chance laughed. "What is it today?"

"Ridiculous. I think he hit his head harder than that doctor said. This is not Rafe, not my Rafe!" Malina tossed the list in the trash.

Layla went to get it out, but Chance said, "Leave it."

"But..."

"Leave it." Chance turned to face her. "I don't care what that man has on that piece of paper...ouch." She twisted and started messing with her pants.

"Are you all right?" Layla stepped forward. "Is it the baby? Should I call Heath?"

Chance laughed again. "No, it's these damn maternity clothes my sister gave me. I wanted to wear them, but she had my niece so long ago, and I'm too fat for my regular pants and not fat enough for these."

"I can fix them." Layla nodded. "I mean I have my sewing machine. I may need some other supplies, but I could fix all of them if you want me to."

Chance quirked a brow at her. "How?"

"I, uh, was in design school when I got the children, one class away from graduating. I had an apprenticeship at several New York design houses through the years. I loved all aspects of fashion." She looked down at herself and added sadly, "Of course I am a long way from fashion week now."

"Well, I don't know about fashion week, but if you can fix my maternity clothing problems, honey, I will pay you. I will pay you in money, food. You want me to go rip Rafe's stitches out of his eyebrow and put them in his lip..."

Layla laughed with her. "That won't be necessary. I'll fix them because it will give me something I love to do, and it will be my way of saying thank you for taking the children camping, and for everything else you've done."

"Okay." Chance nodded, and Layla was grateful the woman understood she couldn't take any more money from this family. The money Bethany was paying her now was more than enough, though it would also come to an end when Rafe was better.

"I do need my list back though. He'll be mad if I don't find duck for him." Layla frowned.

"He's not getting duck. Rafe doesn't eat duck, and you are not wasting time and money on something I know for a fact he is going to complain about, so he doesn't have to eat it because he doesn't eat it in the first place!" Chance was so animated. Her fiery red hair was pulled back and tucked under the chef's hat, but it definitely suited her personality.

"What doesn't he eat?" Jan asked as she entered the door. This was Layla's least favorite person; his little sister thought Rafe did no wrong. She would probably agree he not only needed duck, but that Layla should go and kill one herself if that's what it took to get him one.

"Duck," Chance said and looked at her as if to dare her to say he did.

"Why would you want to feed him duck? Especially on a day we're having momma's fried chicken for dinner?" Jan was obviously there for kitchen duty. She went to the sink and began scrubbing her hands.

"I...he..." Layla hated that she couldn't get out anything coherent around the woman, but really, she was more intimidating than Heath at times.

"He's eating chicken," Chance said in an end of conversation tone. "I'll bring up dinner for all of you and the clothes, deal?"

"He's going to make me pay for this." Layla shook her head and walked out. She couldn't get the list because Malina intentionally poured hot water on the trash, just enough to saturate and ruin the paper.

She heard Jan say, "Pay for this?" as the door to the kitchen closed. Back to the house it was then.

"I don't smell duck," Rafe said and looked at the clock. "You are feeding me tonight, right?"

Layla nodded. Brice and Savannah ran in to see him, and his mood changed instantly. Even when he was in real pain, he would smile and welcome them. Layla didn't allow them to see him until homework was done. It gave him a chance to wake up from his afternoon nap and the meds to settle in.

"I got an A on my test!" Savannah beamed and handed Rafe her spelling test.

"Me too!" Brice held out his math paper.

"Wow, you two are really doing great in school," he said and then looked at Layla. The expression was a cross between shock and disappointment. She imagined he suspected she didn't know how to help them study. Of course, when she was pulling overtime to keep a roof over their heads, she couldn't help them nearly as much as he did.

"I can't wait for Aunt Chance to get here. You know why?" Brice said.

Layla watched his eyes widen at the name 'Aunt Chance', the children had taken to calling his family what they chose to, and no one seemed to mind. In fact, they began referring to themselves as aunts and uncles, even Jan. It did Layla's heart good to know Jan may not like her, but she didn't hold it against the kids.

"Why?" Rafe smiled because Brice was ecstatic. He loved Chance's cooking more than anyone's cooking.

"Fried chicken!" He then did a dance she had not seen before either.

"Brice, stop doin' the chicken dance!" Savannah scolded him. "He's been doin' it all day."

"Mashed potato," he continued to dance except now he mimicked mashing potatoes. "Come on, Savannah, you know you want to."

"If I do it one time, will you stop?"

Brice nodded, and they both did the chicken dance for Rafe. For someone who was so tired of seeing and hearing it, Savannah knew every step and added her own flair to it. Rafe's eyes were bright with amusement. She wondered if their real father had been so adoring. Then she shoved the thought aside. She wasn't going to compare him, and she was no longer putting herself up against Lola.

"Okay, enough dancing, let Rafe get some rest before dinner. Go get cleaned up and be ready to show Aunt Chance when she comes. I am sure she wants to see it."

The two children ran out of the room, both singing the song.

"Now she's their aunt?" Rafe scoffed. "I don't want you getting them any more confused than I am sure they already are. This is a horrible situation for them to be in."

"You'll have to take that up with your family, Rafe. I didn't tell them to call anyone aunt or uncle. They decided to start calling them that when Heath and Chance took them camping. I tried to explain who aunts and uncles are, but they let me know in no uncertain terms that they were choosing their own family now, and your brothers and sister are encouraging it. I have to pick and choose my battles here, Rafe. I can't fight all of them and try to keep up with you at the same time."

"What if I fire you?" He flinched at his own venomous words.

"You didn't hire me, so you can't fire me. Bethany made that clear. I asked." She smiled wickedly. This might be rock bottom for his attitude, and that was a good thing.

"You didn't get me duck. That's insubordination or something." He raised his voice just a bit. She could hear someone coming closer, but the steps were too hard to be one of the children.

"Says who?" she challenged.

"Says me!" He pointed his finger the best he could considering it was sticking out of the cast. "You are here to serve me. Not to become all chummy with my family, not to take over my house, and not to..."

He stopped mid rant. Whoever was standing behind her silenced him without a word.

"Can I have a moment to talk to my brother, Layla?" Jan's voice was so cold it could have brought the first snow with it.

Layla nodded and left the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

"Here's your favorite." Jan placed a plate of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, and homemade biscuits on his nightstand.

Rafe didn't like the way she was looking at him, as if he was the bad guy. Didn't his little sister see how badly Layla had treated him? Wasn't she the one who hated Layla to begin with? "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" she asked.

"Like Heath looks at someone when he wants to punch their face in. Like I have committed a crime, like I am the bad guy here, when you of all people know I am *not* the bad guy!"

"Hmmm." Jan crossed her arms and pulled one finger up to her temple and touched it while her eyes squinted in thought. "I do find myself in a perplexing situation. I mean on the one hand, you're my brother, my favorite brother, or at least you were before you went stark raving loony. Then on the other hand here is Layla, a woman I don't have much love for, but a woman I am beginning to learn a lot more about as she takes care of said loony brother. So I will make you a deal, big brother. If you can answer ten questions about Layla, I won't say another word about how you talk to her or what you put her through, but if you can't answer these questions about a woman you claimed to have loved at one time, then I will tell you this; you better never let me catch you talking to a member of our staff like that again." "Ask." He snorted. Of course, he knew Layla for crying out loud. He had the right to talk to her like that. She broke his heart and now she was stealing his family.

"First question, what is her favorite color?"

Rafe thought for a minute. He knew what Savannah's favorite colors were, what Brice liked the best. Did Layla even like color? "Yellow."

"No." Jan shook her head in quick disapproval. "What is her favorite type of food? I won't ask specifically this time. I'll cut you some slack since you had a head injury."

Smug little...He thought about the kids again. He knew Layla would eat anything he cooked for her, but she always took peanut butter and jelly to work. Was it a trick question? "Ha! Trick question, PB and J."

Jan's look of disapproval bordered on sad.

"What did she go to college for, Rafe?" His little sister's voice was almost pleading. It was as if she wanted him to know the answer.

He thought about it for a long while. He didn't recall her ever talking about college really. In fact, Layla never talked much about anything except the children. "Marketing?"

"Should I go on?" Jan shook her head again.

"How do I know you even know the answers to those questions?" Indeed, she could be making it all up to get him to be nicer, more like the brother she was used to.

"Chance has been teaching me how to make decorations for the cakes. I go there when I don't have school. Layla comes to the kitchen to search for your ridiculous requests, and while she is there, I learn things about her. For example, we were making these lilies, and Layla said how much she loved lilies. She also said that purple was her favorite color when Bethany wore a purple scarf one day. Her favorite food is Mexican. I know that because she was more than grateful when Malina told her she would set aside a special plate for her when you had her running to the store to buy what you wanted for dinner that night. I know that she was almost finished with her fashion design degree when she got custody of two kids and ran away with them. Did you know she lived in New York?"

Rafe sat there wondering if his face revealed what his thoughts were. He had no clue what Jan was talking about. He didn't know any of those things about Layla. He knew she was a dedicated woman who loved her children and made sacrifices for them. He knew she was proud, stubborn, and beautiful. "No, I didn't."

"So I can see why you were shocked when she refused your proposal. How did it go down in your head, Rafe? Did you think you would get to really know her after the kids left for college? You are a hero; there has never been a doubt in my mind about that. You're her hero. It is plain as day the way she looks at you and how she is letting you treat her like a servant when she is only here to help you out because the rest of us can't stop running the ranch to be here around the clock. Not that you care about us, or the ranch. You seem to only care about your pride these days."

"That is harsh and unfair, Jan." True, but he didn't want to tell her that. He didn't like the fact she was making more sense by the minute.

"What's harsh and unfair is how you have done nothing but want for that woman and those kids to be here in this house with you, and now they are, you can't be grateful for the chance the good Lord has given you. You wanted to run, but you got put right back where you belong and so did she. Don't keep screwing it up, Rafe." With that, his little sister got up, took a step toward him, and leaned in to give him a gentle hug. "I love you. You are my favorite, even though you're acting like an ass lately. I hate to see you hurt, but I think you may have caused this hurt yourself."

"Well," he said as she stood up straight again. "I hadn't really looked at things like that. I mean I always thought I was a pretty perceptive guy. I knew what they needed. I just thought..."

"You had the right intentions, but knowing the kids and knowing Layla, especially when she was trying to keep anyone from knowing the truth about her, it's not the same. Women have always been easy for you to read. It was an honest mistake. Forgive yourself, I'll forgive you, and with any luck who knows, maybe you can actually get to know Layla and see if you still want to spend the rest of your life with her." Jan shrugged. "To be continued, huh?"

"I'll let you know when I'm ready for those ten questions." Rafe frowned. "Number four was if you had ever been on a date, just you and her and not at this ranch." Jan winked.

He winced. No. They had never been on a proper date, ever.

Chapter 9

Layla avoided Jan by taking the maternity clothes to her room. She stayed in the guest room on the first floor; the children stayed in the rooms Rafe had obviously intended them to have. She made it a point to remind them they were guests. She didn't want to get their hopes up higher than necessary, and they all had their hopes up pretty high. Apparently, he was still angry at her, but in time she hoped that anger would pass. She was learning a lot about Rafe during this time, things she never thought possible. Like his temper. She had never seen him more than frustrated with her. He had no problem being flat out mad now.

By the time she had everything sorted, Jan and Chance had left, the children had settled in to watch a movie, and Rafe still needed to eat.

She stood at the door looking at him. He seemed lost in thought. "Rafe, can I come in?"

He drew his brows together as he looked at her. "Why are you asking now?"

She shrugged. How about because you were ready to bite my head off earlier?

"You don't have to ask." He sighed.

She moved closer to him then looked at the plate; it was empty. He had already eaten. Jan must have helped him, she decided. "I'll take this out for you. Do you want more water, tea, a soda?"

"What are the kids doing?" he asked as she gathered up his plate and glass.

"Watching a movie." She straightened. "It's movie night, remember?"

"Will you come back when you're done?"

"Okay." Layla left wondering where all of his temper had went or if he was storing it up for later.

When she returned, he was sitting up on the side of the bed, his feet on the floor. His ankle was still swollen, but it wasn't huge like before. Now it was the size of a baseball. "Rafe, you're going to make it swell again."

"Just help me up." He held out his left arm to her. "Actually, grab me a pair of sweats out of that third drawer first and a shirt. It's cold in here."

"Summer is officially over." She grabbed the items out of his chest of drawers and without thinking began dressing him as if he were a supersize version of Brice. "Hold your arms up, good. And over,"

His laugh stopped her.

"I'm sorry. I..."

"It's okay." He pulled his shirt down the rest of the way himself.

She slid the sweat pants over his feet and then stopped at his ankle. "This isn't going to work. The band is going to be too tight."

"Just lift it up the leg. It will be fine." He grumbled as he struggled to navigate his left arm into helping get his pants up. She knew it was hurting his ribs by his voice, but she also knew if he wanted to be dressed, he would get dressed, and it was better if she helped him rather than letting him hurt himself.

"I'll cut the bottom. I can fix it back later, but if you hike it up, it will just cut off circulation farther up your leg and cause more swelling." Layla didn't let him argue. She stood up and walked over to the dresser where all of his supplies had been staged. By the time she returned to him with scissors in hand, he had pulled one pant leg up higher but still struggled. She helped him get them up and over his large thighs, and then it was time for him to stand.

"Okay, when you stand up with the guys to change bottoms, how does it work? I've got the walking thing down, but do you need me to pull them up, or do you need me to help you balance while you pull them up?" She looked up at him. For a brief moment, he had trapped her with his eyes. The expression there was gentle and caring, like the old Rafe.

"They normally balance me, but if you would pull, it would go faster, plus I don't like putting my weight on you. And I definitely wouldn't live to hear the end of it if they had to pull my drawers up for

me." Rafe extended his left arm, and she braced herself to help him stand. Once he was standing, she made quick work of pulling up the pants. "Now let's go."

"Did you put all this on to walk to the bathroom?" He had been in pajama bottoms or boxers for the past week. He wasn't supposed to start walking on his foot until next week and then only when necessary because he couldn't use crutches yet due to the ribs. "I thought you got dressed because you were cold."

"I'm going to the living room." He started to walk, but she pushed him, causing him to sit back down on the bed. "Ouch. What?"

"No."

"If I want to go into the living room to watch a movie in my own house, I should be able to do so." He didn't say it with the same bite as he used earlier that day.

"I know that. I just don't want to hurt you. I can't hold you up that long. I don't want them to forget you're hurt. They may run into your foot, or..."

"Layla," He reached out to grab her hand with his right hand then switched to his left. The touch of his skin against hers purposefully, not in a necessary manner, lit memories and longing on fire within her. Heat crept up her cheeks, and she tried not to look at him. "Grab one of the crutches for me, okay?"

"I'll call Jack," she warned.

"Jack is my little brother. He doesn't scare me."

"Heath then."

"Heath called me a pussy yesterday because he had to help pull me up." Rafe snorted.

"I'll call..."

"Jan, no you won't and we both know that, so get me the crutch before we miss the movie, honey." He let his thumb slide along the outside of her hand when he said the word honey. Little sparks of electricity bolted through her in different directions. There was no arguing then; she couldn't say anything to argue.

Layla grabbed the crutch from the corner and brought it over to him. He gripped it, pulled up on his own steam, and stood. It hurt just watching him.

"Now the hard part," he said and switched the crutch to his right side, the side with the busted ribs, the side with the bad ankle.

"I don't like this one bit. Can't we get a wheelchair or something?" As she said it, he seemed more determined than ever to get to the living room on the crutch. He started moving, one painful step at a time. She held her breath between each step, thought of a hundred ways to explain things if he fell, thought of at least ten ways to strap him to his bed where he couldn't move if he wanted to try this again.

"Rafe!" Savannah shouted, and Brice stood up along with her to look at him. Then they remained there like statues.

"Recliner," he said with a strained voice.

Layla turned the recliner toward him and then stood at the back to ensure it did not immediately recline on him. She learned all too well the first time she sat in it that it was sensitive; she thought she was going to flip out of the thing.

Once in the chair, he smiled, a painful smile of triumph. "Can you turn it back toward the television?"

"Yes." She tugged with all of her might. The chair was so much heavier with Rafe in it. Once he faced the television, she made sure the reclining was smooth and easy. His ankle appeared bigger, the stitches in his eye had a spot of blood from his expressions no doubt, and if she could see that, his ribs must have been throbbing, along with the arm in the cast he tried not to use every time his weight had to shift to his right side.

"I know you don't want o hear it but..." he started.

"I'll get them, and be right back." She knew he had overdone it, and he knew it, too. So did the two sad faces staring at him. Savannah was already tearing up. "It's okay, guys. Savannah, come help me for a minute. Brice, why don't you pick another movie, so we can all start at the beginning? You and Savannah can finish this one later if you like."

"We've seen it a hundred times." He shook his head. She knew Savannah had chosen the movie; she chose the same thing every time.

Savannah followed her to the kitchen. When they were clear of the doorway, she turned and picked her up. Savannah wrapped her arms around her and cried. "Is he going to die?"

"No, sweetheart, Rafe isn't going to die. He's just stubborn. He wants to be with you and Brice, so he got out of bed sooner than he should have, that's all." Layla stroked Savannah's long curly hair and then wiped her tears when she leaned back.

"He looked like he was hurting." She sniffed.

"He is. So be extra gentle if you hug him, okay?" Layla smiled as Savannah nodded. "Be brave, all right. You know it would make him sad if he thought you were afraid of him."

"I'm not afraid of him." She wiped her own tears this time.

"That's my girl." Layla sat her down after another big hug. If losing her job meant gaining these children, it was beyond worth it. "I made cookies earlier. Will you put them on plates?"

Savannah nodded. Layla set the cookie jar on the kitchen table and headed back to Rafe's bedroom to get him some pain medicine.

The cookies had been eaten, the movie had rolled credits, and she had carried two children up a flight of stairs to their beds. Unfortunately, though she could tell she was physically stronger now, she couldn't do the same for Rafe. He was asleep in the recliner. The medicine always knocked him out, which was why he refused to take it unless he was really hurting.

One phone call later Heath and Jack were there.

"How did he get in there in the first place?" Heath asked in as much of a whisper as the man could manage.

"You don't want to know. We were lucky he didn't fall since he can't very well use his arm to support much weight either. I tried to tell him not to. He is so..."

"Stubborn?" Jack, the youngest brother, said then smiled. They had very similar features, all three brothers; thankfully, Jan got more of her mother's traits though when she was angry she definitely had Heath's expressions. "It's a family thing. Johnsons are known for being stubborn."

"Well, let's get him back in bed. He has one week left; then he can try this shit. Until then, we are taking the crutches, and if he so much as tries to go farther than the bathroom, you call." Heath propped his hands on his hips and looked down at her. The man meant business.

"Okay. I wanted to call in the first place." Layla shrugged.

"Should we try to wake him up first?" Jack asked Heath.

Layla responded before Heath could. "He's out. The pain meds knock him out solid. You could throw him downstairs, and I doubt he would wake up."

"You been wanting to throw him down some stairs?" Heath quirked a brow.

"No." She blushed and looked away.

"It's okay, Layla," Jack said and put a hand on her shoulder. "We know you're taking the brunt of his moods. I imagine any one of us would be in similar temper if we had to have someone care for us around the clock. I like being babied by Bethany, but I would be humiliated if she had to do everything for me you are having to do for Rafe right now."

With that, the brothers left her to get Rafe. She made sure the bed was ready for him. He was like a huge rag doll, one they undressed and positioned back in the place he was supposed to have been to begin with. She noticed Heath inspecting Rafe the same way a parent would look over a child. Her heart thumped heavily as she realized how much his family truly loved him. They were every bit as worried, and though they may talk big when he was a wake, they were sure showing concern now. He looked at Rafe's ankle again. She assured him, "I'll put some ice on his ankle."

"Oh, of course." As if he were caught being too attentive, he snapped right back into a more macho demeanor. He headed out tossing his words over his shoulder, "Night Layla."

Jack started talking before she could respond. "If you need a break or anything..."

"I don't," she insisted.

"Yeah, I didn't think you would." Jack nodded as if he understood something she didn't. He also read her expression like an open book. "Don't give up. He'll come back around to where he belongs."

"And where is that?" Layla asked and frowned at him. Jack thought that was funny.

"Here, with you, them—" He pointed up in the direction of the children's rooms. "—and us. You gotta understand, Layla, Rafe has never had to chase a woman. He has never had to work to get to know her. He's a cocky S-O-B, and you have proven over and over again he doesn't know more than the rest of us. In fact, when it comes to you, I bet he knows less than the rest of us. He was too blind by what he wanted, too sure that any day you were going to wake up and swoon over him like every other woman in his life had, and you...you were just as stubborn as he was about it all."

"You're right." She nodded.

"You wanna call my wife and tell her that?" He smiled as she shook her head no. "Traitor." "Night Jack," Layla said as he walked away. Bethany was a very lucky lady to have Jack. "Night."

The next few days were hell. It was difficult to deny him anything he wanted, including getting out of his bedroom, and she was tired of trying. The only thing he liked about being in his bedroom was getting his daily sponge bath. Much like Pavlov's dog, he was conditioned. He got hard at the sight of the basin, expecting his daily relief.

"What did you do before you were injured? Did you have to...you know... every day?" She was curious.

"Not every day," he teased. "Can I have my crutch back today?"

"Ugh! No!" She was so tired of this. "I swear if you ask me for that crutch one more time before Friday, I am going to tie your ass to that bed and make sure you can't get out of it at all!"

She bit her lips. She didn't mean to shout at him, but he was making her crazy. Crazy every day with longing to be more than just a brief relief. Crazy with guilt for being the reason he couldn't do anything anyways. Had she not gone to the Rodeo he may have won. He may not have, but certainly if he wasn't going to point and yell at her, he wouldn't have been let out of the gate before he was ready.

"Why are yelling?" He laughed a little.

"I don't know." She continued to shout. "You have no idea how hard it is to say no to you. I've been saying no to you for so long, Rafe, I wish I could say yes. I wish you could just get up and walk into your living room, or out the door to see how amazing it looks outside today, but you can't and it's my fault."

Rafe looked at her for a long moment. "Come here." He waited. "You just said you didn't want to say no, so come here."

Layla walked closer to him, and he could see why she was trying to keep her distance; she was crying. He patted the bed on his left side. She walked around and stood there facing him. This was the woman he had been lusting after forever, the woman who came everyday and gave him incredible pleasure because she thought he needed it. He bit his lower lip. He knew he was being a bit of a scoundrel with that one, but how could he resist? Like she said, it was the one thing he had asked her to do for him not medically related she didn't say no to. "Sit."

She sat on the edge of the bed. "I need to do laundry."

"Layla, come closer to me." She moved closer but didn't face him. "Kick your shoes off and get up here for crying out loud. Don't make me drag you."

"Rafe, what can I do for you in this bed?" She snapped, and then her eyes softened with a memory of what they had done in this bed once before he was sure of it. Then she was all business again. "I can talk to Heath and see if he will give me your crutches back."

She was sitting next to him, not looking at him, her mind obviously turning with her to do list for the day. She looked healthier than he had ever seen her, but her eyes looked tired. She needed a nap, for that matter so did he. If he could wrangle her under his arm, he could keep her there until she fell asleep. Slowly he slid his arm closer; then like a snake striking, he wrapped her up and pulled her close to him.

"Rafe!" she scolded, but he could tell she was afraid to resist him. She was afraid to hurt him.

"Shhh. You look like hell, Layla. Just settle down a few minutes and lay with me." He hugged her even closer. He could smell her hair as she let her head drop to his left shoulder. The soft tendrils touched his skin, and he took a deep fortifying breath. He couldn't see her face from this angle, but he could feel her hand gently rest on his chest. They were at an angle thanks to the million pillows she stuffed behind him daily to prop him up.

"I look like hell because it is tough to sleep around here. I'm afraid I'll miss it if you call for me. The guest room is so far away from you. Even though Heath brought the phone things that let you call me, I keep dreaming you call, then I get here and you're fast asleep." She yawned. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," he said and stroked her hair. "Hand me your glasses."

"I can't see without them." She tried to protest, but he could use the tips of his right fingers. He pulled them off and placed them on the nightstand beside him.

"You're getting better with that hand now." She sighed. He could feel her breathing slow and knew she was fighting the sleep.

"I'm getting better at a lot of things now." He turned his head to kiss the top of hers. She was already asleep.

Rafe had been asleep for an hour when a pain shot through his ankle, and his eyes opened stinging with unshed tears. It was Layla. She had looped her left leg over him in her sleep and kicked his ankle. He fought the urge to wake her and ask for the pain medication. He didn't want to take it unless he needed it. The throbbing was present and burning with shooting pains up and down his right leg. He turned on the television and decided to try to block it out.

A half hour later, she was mumbling. One word he made out distinctly, his name. A grin slipped onto his face, and he hugged her closer.

As if she had an internal clock in her head, Layla woke up thirty minutes before she needed to leave to get the kids from school. Normally he would get a pain pill and wake up when she came back, but today he was not taking it. "Feel better?"

Her body tensed and then slowly relaxed. "What time is it?"

"Time to get the kiddo's from school." He relaxed his arm as she rolled away from him.

"I'm sorry," she said as she put her shoes back on. "My glasses."

"For what?" He handed her the frames.

"I thought you would fall asleep, and I would get up and get back to work. Instead I slept through the afternoon and now I'm behind." She stood abruptly and paced to the chest of drawers.

"I'm not taking the pain pills. Can you get me some over-the-counter stuff?" He frowned at her back.

"Are you sure?" She turned and looked at him. Her sapphire blue eyes sparkled. She was behind yes, but also rested. A new energy was building in her as she completely woke up from the nap.

He nodded.

Weeks later...

"If you can get in the bathtub, I think you can wash yourself." Layla put the plastic bag over his cast and secured it.

"My back hurts. My ribs still hurt, too," he pouted. His stitches were gone. He moved around the house on his own for the most part, but this, this he was insistent on. "What if I slip when I step in?"

She shook her head no, but she finally said, "Okay, Rafe. I'll do it." He had no idea how hard this was for her. Now that he was getting better, she didn't see an injured man. She saw a man who entered her dreams every night and relieved all of the suppressed sexual tension she built up from this very topic of discussion. It was great for Rafe. He always got to release, but for her, on the other hand, it was becoming torture. She mumbled to herself, "I must be masochistic."

"What's that?" he asked with a smirk of triumph.

"I'm going to end up soaking wet," she lied.

"It's a large Jacuzzi tub. You could make it easier and get in with me." He waggled his eyebrows at her. The thought had not escaped her mind, but getting naked in front of Rafe, after seeing him naked so often, made her very aware of her own body, each and every flaw. She was pretty confident about her body at one point in her life, but it had been so long ago. He looked at her as if he were reading her mind. "You can wear a swimsuit if it makes you feel better."

"I don't own a swimsuit," she retorted.

"Bra and panties then." He shrugged.

She bit her lower lip and watched his face light up. He had won. She knew it, so did he. His cheek dimpled and his eyes brightened as he smiled. "So let's get to it."

After getting him settled in, completely naked, she moved out of his sight to undress. Thanks to the new income, she was able to buy a few clothes that actually fit her. She had also sent money to her mother to ship the things she had in storage out to Rafe's address. The children had new fall and winter wardrobes. Bethany had been generous with the salary, and Layla would always be grateful to them.

Layla was currently wearing her favorite of the new undergarments though, a purple bra and panty set. Admittedly, it could have passed for a bathing suit if it were of another material and the panties tied at the side instead of being a thin silk ribbon.

The large tub had space to sit, more like a hot tub in her opinion, just not as tall. He watched her carefully as she stepped into the water.

"You decided to keep the bra and panty on, huh?" He looked her up and down. Heat crept from her toes to her head, and not just from the warm water. Her whole body blushed if that was possible. "Will this ruin those?"

She shook her head no and sat down in the tub with him. It was awkward. She had had sex with this man twice and had given him a blowjob almost every day for several weeks. He pushed the button on the tub, and the jets stirred the water as it shot out against them in all directions.

"Ahhhh." He sighed and rested his casted hand on the side of the tub. "I love this tub. After a long day at work, it felt like a massage. Of course, that was before I had you here. This feels good, but you feel better."

She stared at him. He had his eyes closed and was clearly enjoying himself. The water pressing against her back did feel good, the water on her tired legs and feet even better.

"So what did you do in New York?"

The question took her by surprise. "I, uh, I went to school there. I designed women's clothing, and I worked at a few high-end boutiques customizing clothes for people. I interned at a few big labels, and I had one more class to complete before I could graduate."

"How long does it take to get a degree in design?"

"Well, I didn't just study design. I needed the last class for business. I had planned to run my own line one day." She tried not to sound sad when she said it but couldn't help it. "That was before...everything. I don't want to run my own business now. I can hardly stand the thought of going back to work when..." She didn't want to say when she left him. It was too hard to think about. "I just want to keep the relationship and time I have with the kids, you know? Maybe I can work at a school, in the office or something."

"Just give up your dreams?" he asked quietly, but he never opened his eyes or moved from his position.

"I wouldn't say that. I have new dreams now. I have more than I imagined, even when technically I have nothing but the kids and a few suitcases of clothes to put in an old Honda." She laughed at herself. "God, I was so stupid then. I always thought my sister had everything. I was right. I was also right when I thought she could never have enough of anything."

"What about you? Can you have enough of anything?"

"Almost," she admitted quietly. The silence lingered between them; only the sound of the jets could be heard. It was getting awkward again. Time was ticking, and her to do list was resurfacing in her mind. "So let's get you scrubbed up and out of here, shall we?"

"Suit yourself," he said and didn't budge one bit.

"Rafe, I need you to move a little more this way." She tried to maneuver around him, but it was no use. The tub was big, yes, but he still dominated the space. He still had his head resting on the only bath pillow and his eyes closed. Taking advantage of his relaxed state, she moved to straddle him so that she could finish her job.

Rafe knew she didn't mean to put herself in the position she was currently in. He knew that even though he was naked, she had become used to it. He also knew she had to get into this position because he refused to move. Nevertheless, she was straddling his thighs and whether she was aware of it or not, he was extremely aware of her. "Move a little bit closer."

Layla inched closer and closer until she was aware of the man under her and his unspoken need. "Rafe, I can't do that underwater."

He laughed. His head came up, and he unleashed the full force of his chocolate brown eyes on her. When she was this close, she could see gold flecks she hadn't noticed before. His left arm moved, and he pulled her so close his length pressed against her panties.

The feel of him against her made all rhyme and reason fly right out the window. His face moved closer, and she had to close her eyes; his lips gently pressed against hers, questioning. She answered with instinct. Her heart raced in her chest as her body took over. She kissed him. He sat straighter, and she pressed tighter against his lap. Their mouths opened at the same time, and their tongues collided in a frenzy. She pulled her glasses off and tossed them without thinking about where they may end up.

Chapter 10

Rafe knew the moment her body took over, the moment she stopped thinking about what was right or wrong, and started thinking about what she wanted. It did him good to know she had not been oblivious through all the oral sex, and now she was ready to tear him apart; the only problem was that she could. He was vulnerable to her both physically and mentally right now.

She nibbled his lower lip as he slid his left hand down and into the back of her panties. He tried to get them off her, but she wouldn't budge. He didn't want to rip them, but she was rocking her hips against him and making him blind with lust.

Layla had lost her mind, she decided, as she pressed her bra-covered nipples against his chest and slid a hand between them to shift her panties before he tore them. It was bad enough he was tugging with one hand, but as the casted hand moved from the tub, she knew she had to take action or there would be some serious explaining to do. "Put that hand back on the tub, mister."

He did so immediately. "If you would just take them off."

She tried. She pulled at one side, but then Rafe pulled at the other, and the seam gave way. "Satisfied?"

"Almost," he said and then pulled her close again. "Let me in."

He then kissed her lips and she complied. Layla pulled her panties from in between them. Her hand slid down to give him access. Her hips lifted and adjusted over him. Without thinking of anything other than the need to have what she wanted, she slid down his length. He pulled away from her mouth to get air.

She gasped as his lips returned to her neck and her body adjusted to his size. Against her neck he whispered, "Can you come like this?"

"I...I don't know." It was an honest answer. She didn't care if she could come, at the moment, having him inside her, being this close to him was enough.

"You can't imagine how good you feel," he continued. "Every day when you come in, every day since the first time you wrapped your mouth around me I wanted you to do this."

"Why didn't you say so?" She was being entirely too honest now.

"You would have..."

"Yes," she said as she slid up and down his length again, relishing the feel of him, the water around them, massaging their bodies as if there were more hands than normal.

His left hand stroked up her back over her bra strap and then pulled down on her shoulder as he lifted his hips against her. He raised and lowered his right hand several times wanting to use it then remembering he couldn't. "Rub your clit."

"What?" She was breathless. The tub was beginning to make her knees ache, and Rafe was lifting into her sure to cause him pain later if it wasn't already hurting him now.

"I can't touch it with my other hand, so you have to do it. Trust me."

Rafe kissed her lips as she slid her hand between them and rubbed. Within a matter of seconds, she needed no more encouragement. She was chasing the feeling on her own, riding him with abandon, moving her hips to her own rhythm and calling out his name. He was loving every second of it; even if he would be sore later, it was worth this moment now.

Layla made a distinct expression when she came. Her teeth bit down on her lower lip, her eyebrows drew closer together, and her cheeks and chest flushed with color. It was enough to make him want to say stupid things all over again, but he wouldn't. Instead, he tried to focus on not coming.

When her body went limp, he turned the jets off. "Up. You gotta get up."

"I'm sorry," she said and moved quickly. "Did I hurt you? Of course, I hurt you. Rafe, how could you let me do this?"

"It wasn't easy." He laid his head back again. He was hard and his self-control was wearing thin.

Layla stepped out of the tub and found her glasses. After putting them on, removing her wet bra, and wrapping in a towel she turned to see him standing in the tub, soaking wet and hard as ever. "Rafe! Again?"

He chuckled. "No, not again, this is still the first one. Hand me a towel, will ya?"

"But..." She grabbed the towel and helped him wrap it around himself. He was more insistent these days on doing things himself.

"No condom." He sighed. "I didn't want to take advantage of your...moment of passion."

She frowned at him. "I'm on birth control. I got my shot when we first got out here. I wasn't expecting to...but..."

"Really?" He seemed more interested than she expected. "Help me out."

She let him hold her for balance, and he put his good leg out first then his right one. "Do you want me to...?"

"Come on. You have a few minutes, and it won't take that long, trust me." He tugged her hand.

She followed behind him as he went right back to bed and opened the towel. "Rafe, I wasn't expecting to do that in there...I know how you feel about me, and I don't want to get confused."

"How do I feel about you?" he asked.

"You're mad. You don't like me much, but I'm here so sex is something to...distract you." She rubbed her temples as her glasses slid down her nose.

"I was mad. I'm not...mad anymore, so come here and distract me." He held out his casted hand. He had removed the plastic somewhere along the line. "Or do I not distract you?"

"You've always distracted me." She stepped toward him and touched the uncasted part of his fingers.

It was too easy to take off the towel and climb in bed with him. She knew it would change things, again, but she didn't know what he wanted from her other than a distraction. He was careful not to admit how he felt though he said he wasn't mad.

"We're on the clock," he reminded her.

She looked at the clock next to his bed and realized she needed to leave soon. "Then let's get to it."

She straddled him again except this time he was laying flat, and was clearly enjoying his relaxed position. He touched her nipples, and sparks arched through her body making her wet again. A fresh heat surged as she positioned him. He was watching her, and she was never more self-conscious in her life than in that moment. Then he whispered, "You're beautiful, Layla."

Her body warmed at his words and at his entry. Feeling him, flesh to flesh was so much more intense than anything she had ever imagined. At first, she was moving straight up and down. Rafe tugged and tweaked her nipples, and fresh arcs of pleasure shot through her as he did. As she grew more restless, as her body desired more, she leaned over to be closer to him. He wrapped his arms around her, cast and all and held her closer. Their lips met and their tongues danced. How could she ever get enough of him? He was like a drug, and she was already addicted. "Rafe," she called as her body responded to the mental thoughts and physical pleasures.

"I'm almost there." He groaned. "I can feel it. I can feel you tightening up. I love it when you come, Layla. Come with me...come with...oh God yes."

October

Rafe finally thought about checking his accounts to make sure his bills were still getting paid and to be able to consider some new purchases he had in mind. Unfortunately, what he found was that money continued to go out on time, but no money was coming in. Layla had left to get the kids from school and aside from the cast, and an occasional throbbing ankle, Rafe was fine. He walked over to Jack's house to address the issue of his paycheck with Jack's wife Bethany since she handled the payroll. "Hey there."

"Good to see you out of the house for a change." Bethany smiled at him then went back to typing. Once she finished, she turned to him and gave her full attention. "What's up?"

"I'm not getting paid." He took a seat and could have sworn she smiled.

With a more stern expression, she explained, "You quit, remember?"

"But." It took a few minutes for it to register.

"But what? Heath had me take you off payroll that night you stormed out of here. So what, Rodeo not paying like you thought it would?" Her eyes glared at him.

"B, you too? Is everyone against me?" He sighed. "What do I have to do to be re-employed at my home?"

"Well, the only person employed at your home is Layla, and apparently you are ready to come back to work, which means that she is no longer needed to work." He knew she spun away from him to hide her face.

"Is it like that?" he asked.

"For now it is," she replied stiffly.

"So it's me or Layla?"

"I'd rather not choose," she said and turned back to face him.

"Pregnancy is making you mean." He crossed his arms and looked at Jack's pretty little wife. Bethany was all business and balls; she always had been.

"Rejection is making you stupid," she quipped.

It stung like hell to hear it. "So, why can't Layla and I both be on the payroll? Enlighten me since I am so stupid."

"Well, you may be coming around after all." She smiled a half smile at him. "If I take Layla off the payroll, she will have to find another job. It is practically winter, and I doubt she will stay on here unless you have done something to make her feel like you want her, and them, right where they are. I don't think you have had enough time to convince her."

"So, you want Layla to stay?" He snorted.

"Yes. We all want Layla to stay, even Jan. She likes being an aunt. And unless you have a bottle of tequila or years of history with each other, I don't see this relationship, much less marriage happening, other than the old-fashioned way. You have to work for it." Then a frown pulled her pretty lips down. "Unless you no longer want her."

"You know me better than that," he said quietly.

She smiled again. "Good. So unless you need a loan or something..."

"I'm fine. I have money saved up. I just had something else in mind." He nodded. Bethany was right. He couldn't do this the easy way. She was also right in that if he had the means of following through on his plan, it would make things worse not better. He wanted to improve their travel situation, yet a new car would send Layla back in a defensive position.

"Will you tell me what you were up to?" She was interested.

"I don't know. How many tomatoes do you have downstairs?" He wiggled his eyebrows and she got up. It was just a tomato with cheese and basil, but man it was good, and Bethany always made them for him. She had a way of making people feel special, even him.

"You like being an aunt, right?" he asked Jan as she entered the kitchen. She looked a little taken aback at the question.

"I like the kids. They're cute." She nodded.

"Fridays are movie night. We always watch a movie and eat popcorn and some sort of junk food."

"Yeah, so?" Jan crossed her arms and leaned against the counter.

"Buck has duty tonight, right?"

"Get to the point, Rafe." She rolled her hand as if she could pull it out of him with the motion.

"Will you watch the kids tonight?" he blurted.

She hedged. "Well, I don't know. I mean I'd have to ask Lucky to take my shift with the horses, and..."

"Lucky? Since when did Lucky let out or bring in the horses around here?" He hadn't heard about that.

"Since we needed a cowboy who knew the land and the trails to take our guests on. You think Heath is going to trail out for three days with a group of tourists to show them how to rough it while Chance is pregnant?" She scowled at him. "Do you have any idea what this is like for me? Thankfully, he spends more time away from the ranch than on it. Buck has all but pissed a ring around our house. You know their friendship ended badly, and you know how close I used to be to Lucky. This is hard for me. I have to choose Buck because he's my husband, but when I don't know why they were fighting in the first place or how it came to this, I don't know how to justify not talking to a man I've known all my life."

"Is there anything else I don't know?" He was irritated now. How had they kept everything from him so easily? Of course, Layla didn't know the ranch hands from anyone else. So many people were in and out now, and they probably kept her on a need to know basis in addition to the fact that she spent most of her time there with him.

"You don't get paid anymore. Did you know that?" She made a face that was somewhere between an apology and a smirk.

"Yeah, I found that out today. Look if you'll watch the kids, I'll ask Lucky to cover your shift tonight, deal?" He hoped he looked pleading enough. Jan threw her hands in the air, and he knew she was going to do it. "Thank you. And very ladylike agreement by the way."

"Now, tell me why I'm on rugrat duty?" She headed to the refrigerator. "At least she knows how to stock a refrigerator. I thought you boys lived on steak, eggs, and beer until I realized it was only food for breakfast and beer for evenings."

"I'm going to take Layla out tonight." He shrugged as Jan choked on her drink of soda. "You all right?"

She glared at him. "That got up my nose." She pinched it. "Oh, man, that hurt." She made another face then looked at him. "Lucky is down at the stables. I made a real effort of avoiding being seen coming here since I was on foot. Why don't you run down and talk to him? Heath said he feels bad because of your injury. He has skipped his tour to stay here and help out."

"Layla should be home any minute," he said the word home as natural as if it had been her home all along.

"I know. Don't worry, Rafe. I won't be ugly to her." She wiggled her eyebrows at him. "But you might want to hurry back, just in case."

"I'll be right back." He nodded and headed out.

Jan heard him start up the truck and knew he took her warning too seriously. Aside from being jealous of Layla and not understanding her position before, she didn't hold much against her anymore. Now she knew more about her; she actually liked the woman. After all, Layla could have left when Rafe was hurt, but she didn't. She could have asked for money to take care of him, but she argued against it until Bethany finally intervened and reasoned with the woman. Layla is a proud, stubborn, independent soul. Jan could relate all too well to those qualities.

"Aunt Jan!" Brice took a running start, and she lifted him up the moment he got to her.

"Hey, cowboy, how was school?" She loved the fact that they called her and Buck aunt and uncle.

"He got in trouble," Savannah said as she came closer for her own hug. "But he's not in trouble now."

"Rafe, you will not believe what..." Layla stopped dead in her tracks and stared at her. They hadn't really talked to each other. There was always someone else around when they were in a room together. It was time Layla understood why she had been so mean to her all this time.

"He's down at the barn," Jan said. The children were very perceptive. They could tell the air had changed, and that their mother was guarded.

"Come on, Brice. Let's go get in play clothes." Savannah tugged her little brother, and the children disappeared up the stairs.

Layla finally moved and hung up the coats. "I can't seem to keep them in their coats once they get in the car."

"I was like that, too. Drove my mom crazy. Of course she had Heath give me a coat one winter, and he told me if I wasn't going to wear it, he was going to take it back and give it to the children in the woods." Jan laughed. "Needless to say I kept that one on until spring, and Rafe told me there were no children in the woods. Thankfully, Heath has better communication skills when it comes to children now."

Layla smiled a guarded smile at her.

"Do you wanna go to the living room and talk for a sec?" Jan tilted her head in that direction and headed toward the living room. Layla followed, took a seat on the couch, and looked at her. "So. I know you and I may not have started on the best foot. No, don't say anything. I'm not good at being wrong, and I need to say this now or I might not ever get it out."

Layla nodded.

"Okay, so I thought you were a major 'B' until you came here to stay with him and watch over him. I didn't know you were guarded because of the whole family tragedy situation, and Rafe led us all to believe that there was more than the children between you. I somehow thought he knew you, but I realized after you got here, he was as clueless as the rest of us. It seemed impossible since he is generally very perceptive when it comes to women, but indeed he really screwed it up when it came to you."

Jan smiled as Layla blushed. She didn't mean to embarrass her, but she knew her brother needed help getting Layla to stay in his life, and it was a family effort now. They were all courting the woman they at one time didn't like. "So I'm apologizing. Please understand that Rafe is not like my other brothers. He's very special; he's my hero and always has been. He has naturally been able to swoop in and rescue a damsel in distress, whether that was letting me out of the closet when Heath or Jack locked me in to escape their little sister, or making every woman this side of Helena swoon when they met him. It comes natural, so when you were not falling all over him, it was weird. For all of us, I guess. And for me especially since you were taking time away from me, his spoiled little sister, and then rejecting him so blatantly in front of everyone, which made me resentful and suspicious of your motives for keeping him around at all."

"I didn't mean to hurt him, mentally or physically. I mean a part of me has always wanted everything he offered, but I wouldn't use him. And I didn't think he wanted me as much as he wanted them." Layla thought quietly for a few moments. "I guess I still don't know."

"Well, he is a work in progress," Jan said as the door opened in the kitchen. "Try to keep that in mind."

"Rafe. Rafe!" Two children bolted down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"What are you wearing out tonight?" Jan asked.

"Excuse me?" Layla put one of her hands up to her chest.

"I told him I would baby-sit because he is taking you out." Jan looked at her and realized it was news to Layla. "Sorry, I thought you knew."

"I don't know." Layla searched the floor as if it held an answer.

"I'll be right back. Don't move." Jan headed to the kitchen. When she came back, Layla remained in place but her expression was expectant. "It would not be my first choice, but I'm glad I asked." Jan shook her head. "Come on. I'll help you pick something out."

"I..." Layla started.

"You want to surprise him, too, right? Well, if he sees us go in there together as a team, I am quite sure he will be shocked."

Rafe lost his train of thought when he watched Jan disappear into the guest bedroom behind Layla. He stepped through the kitchen and across the foyer to the room at the bottom of the stairs, which also led to the upstairs bedrooms. "Layla?"

"She will be out in a minute." Jan opened the door a crack then shut it before he could say anything else.

He paced as the children talked about their day. He tried to pay attention, but the thought of his little sister and Layla becoming buddies had unnerved him. Jan could destroy everything he was working to build. Would she? Or was she serious about giving Layla a chance?

When they emerged, he knew his little sister had plotted against him.

"Mom!" Brice shouted.

"You look beautiful." Savannah ran over and touched the fabric of her dress. "Wow."

He couldn't have said it any better. A stroll around the lake was no longer on the agenda. He was going to take her out to a movie and dinner as Jan had told him he should do then guaranteed it by conspiring to dress Layla like...hell like a magazine cover.

"Is that what you're wearing?" Jan smiled with pure mischief on her face.

He shook his head, no, then headed off to put on something more suitable.

Layla worried about the outfit. It was out of her old wardrobe. Her mother had shipped everything that had been in storage out to them. It was necessary to get to the materials and supplies to continue working on the maternity clothes for Chance. She loved the first outfits and brought her more. Bethany had stopped in, too. After taking a look at her wardrobe, Jan was anxious to see what she could do for her also, especially after she pulled out this old number. For some women a little black dress goes a long way. For Layla, it was more than that. It was something she had made for herself, and thanks to a few months of normal eating, she filled it out in all the right places again.

"Layla," Rafe called from his bedroom. She immediately set the sparkling black handbag down and went to him. It was strange to hear the clicking of her heels against the kitchen tile and then the wood floor. She looked at him and had to catch her breath. "I'm stuck."

So was she. Stuck in place. He was gorgeous. All dressed up like a cowboy. He had on black boots, fitted jeans, a black shirt, and he was pulling on a black jacket, but his cast was not cooperating.

"Will you undo the buttons at the end of this? That's how I got the shirt on, but I forgot to undo the jacket." He looked at her head to toe and back. She remained frozen in place for another moment just staring at him. "Layla? Little help here?"

"Oh, Of course." She put her feet in motion and made it across the floor without falling over herself. She undid the three buttons, and his cast fit snugly down the arm of the jacket. "Is it comfortable?"

"No," he said. "But I'll manage. Nice shoes. When did you get those?"

"I've had them for years. My mom sent all of my old stuff from storage." She looked up at him and tried to keep a coherent thought.

"And the dress?" He reached out and touched his fingers to the material. "It's very...soft."

"I made it about a year before..." She didn't want to say it.

"It's nice." He leaned in as if he were about to kiss her but then changed his mind. "I see you restocked the contacts, too."

She blushed. "So, where are we going?"

"Where else is there to go? We're going to town to catch a movie and grab some dinner." He looked her up and down again. "Unless you would rather stay closer to home, we could grab some dinner and dancing at The Big Barn instead."

"Definitely dancing." She tried to control her excitement, but she loved to dance.

His right ankle was definitely over being in cowboy boots tonight, but the woman in his arms was a dancing machine. She danced with him, with all the rest of the girls when they line danced, and she danced with Lucky when he showed up, the only other man in there he let get near her. Lucky reported back that Layla was definitely worth getting busted up over. Then he proceeded to do what most young cowboys did, he danced with every free gal in the place.

"Rafe." She looked up as he looked down. "This has been the best night of my life since...well, since I left New York."

Taylor Swift's song *Love Story* came on as they continued to sway. The lyrics didn't escape his notice. "You want to go back; finish your degree?"

"No." She frowned. "You want me to go?"

"No." He stopped them from moving. "No, I don't want you to go. I want another chance to try to...if you would let me try to...I don't know. Can you just...?"

She reached up with her warm hand and pulled him closer. The moment his lips touched hers he was unequivocally back in love with her. He wasn't stupid about it this time. He knew more about her. He had made it up to number four on Jan's list of things he should know about a woman or at least done with a woman before proposing to her. The kiss was too brief for his liking and current mood. "Let's get out of here. I know a better place to dance."

She smiled up at him and his heart melted.

He drove them out to the lake, left the radio on, and realized it was colder outside than it had been when they went inside the restaurant earlier that evening. Layla didn't seem to mind. She kicked off her shoes in the truck and danced barefooted on the grass with him. The moon provided light, the lake provided atmosphere, and Layla provided warmth. Their breath was visible in the night air when they spoke.

"Do you want more children someday?" Surely that would be on Jan's list of things to know.

"I never really thought about it. I mean when I was single I thought about having kids of my own, but then when I got two kids at once, and toddlers at that, I was really not prepared. I was less prepared to find employment. I thought I could work anywhere with my skills. I didn't realize how naïve I was to the world. Until I had them, and they were all that mattered." She looked up at him and he waited for her to say more. "Do you want children of your own?"

"What do you mean?" He really hadn't thought about it. He thought of her kids as his own.

"I mean do you want them to be yours, your bloodline, your genetics. Half of your DNA?"

"You mean now?" He hedged.

"Rafe." She sighed as she said his name.

"I don't know. I mean this is a tricky question for me. Either way I answer is going to be the wrong way, and besides, I asked you first."

"I answered."

"No, you didn't." He took a step back from her. "You started to, but then you changed it around. You never said yes, Rafe, I want to have children of my own, or no, Rafe, I don't. So which is it?"

"I don't know." She shrugged then put her hands on her arms and rubbed them.

"I don't know either." He went back to the truck and got his jacket. As he helped her put it on, he thought up more things he should know about a woman he was going to marry. "How many men have you had sex with?"

She blanched then headed for the truck.

"What?" He followed after her. "It's a fair question."

"What's fair about it? You know I wasn't a virgin so that means there was at least one other man before you. Do you really want to know how many? What does that number prove to you? That I was a slut before we met or that I have always been frigid?" Now she was mad. He had seen her irritated before, but he had definitely taken what was a great night and turned it into a disaster. He should have listened to Jan and stayed away from the lake tonight. "How many women have you slept with, Rafe?"

He stopped dead in his tracks. His mind started to register the number, adding up all of the women in his life since he was sixteen seemed to take more brainpower than he had to spare at the moment. "That can't be right."

"What can't be right?" she asked and whirled around to face him. Her face was pink, her nose red, and her lips trembled.

"It's...I asked you first," he said and hoped she would stick to her guns and not tell him.

"Three." She threw up her hands. "You happy now? Three and then you, so four. Ha!"

"Well, that is a very reasonable number." He hoped she would let it drop. No way did he want to tell her now. She was right; it didn't matter. He didn't know why his ego wanted to know.

"And you? I'm dying to know now. Where do I rank in the list?" Her fierce blue eyes locked him in place.

"Times ten." He wished he could take it back, take back the questions and the answers and go back to holding her and dancing.

"Ten?" she said as if it were a lot.

"Times ten, you said three. Three times ten." He looked away from her shocked and appalled expression.

Layla turned away from him and climbed in the truck. He shut the door and got in on the driver's side. She turned the heat on and the radio down.

"You rank number one though," he said as he put the truck in reverse. "I mean it, Layla. You are the only woman I have ever been flesh to flesh with, the only one I have tasted, and the only one who has ever really tasted me."

He couldn't tell if she coughed or laughed at him.

"Heath made us go to the clinic and watch all of the STD videos. He would do terrible things like put a picture of a penis all distorted on mine and Jack's dressers and a note with a box of condoms saying double up or die. Hell, the first time I had sex I wore three condoms and kept most of my clothes on." He laughed at the memory. "Thirty is a big number. I never really thought about it before."

"So I get to look at half of the women in this area and know they have had sex with you. Great." She sniffed and he checked to make sure she wasn't crying. Her nose was still red, and she was hunting through her purse for what he now knew was a tissue.

"No. Not at all. Both girls I had sex with in high school have married and moved away. The rest were scattered around the country. I was a rodeo cowboy when I was younger. I made good money riding Broncos, better money riding bulls. The more I came home, the more time I spent with Jan. The more time I spent with Jan the less I wanted to let women let me take advantage of them. I was full of hormones as a young man, what can I say. But as I got older and Jan got older, I would think about Jan as a teenager, a young woman, and I knew I had to be better than I was being. I couldn't let her see both me and Jack as wild boys. I mean Heath was always working. Jack did date locally, and I was all she really had as a male role model since my dad and granddad died. I like to think she made a good decision in choosing Buck because she didn't make bad decisions in high school. I'm pretty sure she walked down the aisle a virgin, at least she better have." He waited to hear her reply. His hands gripped the steering wheel, and his gut clenched. "Really if you look at the last four years, there has only been two." Silence. "Are you still mad at me?"

"No." She sniffed again. "I thought I was going to marry the first guy I had sex with."

Her statement felt like a kick in the gut. "What happened?"

"My sister married him instead." Layla shrugged.

Rafe pulled off the road and slammed on the brakes. "What?"

Her nose was still red. Her eyes looked heavy, sleepy. "I never told that to anyone before. It happened once, one time. I was head over heels in love with him. Then he came to pick me up for a date and Lola left with him. He didn't even realize she wasn't me until they got to dinner. Of course, she turned on the charm, and that was the end of it. It was like a sick joke that their children became mine, I mean my twin sister. Those children would look the same no matter which one of us gave birth. At first, it was a hard reminder. Of course, I dealt with it. That is why I always said I was divorced. I mean if anyone saw pictures of them, they would think it was me not Lola anyways."

She sat in silence still thinking. He sat there staring at her. "The other two were just college flings. I was spreading my wings so to speak, testing my boundaries. I'm only telling you because you should know that I have always been careful, too. I wouldn't go down on a guy unless he had a condom on. I guess in a lot of ways you are my first, too. Does gender count for anything?" She sniffed and then blew her nose. "Ugh. My head is killing me."

"Gender?"

"The third time there were three of us." She coughed, put her head to the window and her fingers to her temples.

"Let's just get you home." He reached across the seat and offered her his casted hand. She placed her hand in his for a moment, but then had to cough and sniff again. His head was starting to hurt, too. It hurt with processing the fact that Layla had been a part of a threesome and one of the partners was a woman. Of all the things, he never saw that one coming.

"Rafe, where's mommy?" Brice asked as he stretched and walked into the living room.

"Still asleep." Rafe smiled at the little man. "I can make you breakfast, and mommy can rest."

"She's not in there," Savannah said as she walked in behind Brice. "Her blanket and pillow is gone, too."

Rafe stood quickly and fought the panic rising inside him. She wouldn't leave them. Certainly if she would leave him, she wouldn't leave the children, so where was she and what had happened? "Layla!"

He walked and called her name through the house. As he passed the hall bathroom, he heard his name. He opened the door and found her on the floor, under the blanket with her head on the pillow. "Layla?"

"I'm sick." She sniffed and closed her eyes. "I got tired of running back and forth. I'm exhausted." "Mommy?" Savannah started toward the bathroom.

"Stay back, sweetie." Layla held up her hand and Savannah stopped. "I have a cold, and I don't want you to get sick. I love you, Savannah, but mommy is really not feeling good right now, and I don't want you to catch it if it's the flu, okay?"

"Okay." She nodded. "Ms. Chester told us about the flu. We squirt our hands with bacteria all the time in class."

Rafe and Layla both shared a smile at Savannah's understanding of antibacterial gel. Layla's smile faded quickly. "Close the door."

Rafe stepped inside the bathroom and shut the door, so Savannah couldn't see. Layla looked so weak as she tried to get up enough to vomit in the commode.

"Leave, Rafe, please," she pleaded but he didn't listen to her.

He held her hair back as she heaved. Nothing was in there, so he knew it must have been painful. Her tears confirmed it as she lay back down on the bathroom floor.

"You need a doctor." He covered her back up with the blanket. "I'll be back."

She tried in vain to protest.

"Is mommy okay?" Brice asked.

Rafe squatted down to look the boy eye-to-eye. "No, cowboy, mommy has the flu. She has a very sad tummy right now, and she is afraid you and your sister will get sick too if you get too close, and that would make her very sad if you got sick because of her. So as much as we all want to make mommy feel better, we have to give her some space until the doctor gets here and can get her better, okay?"

"Okay." He nodded then hugged Rafe tightly. "I'm glad we're here."

The boy's words sunk in. If they were still in the apartment and Layla was sick, they wouldn't have another grown-up around to take care of things. They would have had to call him, but if he was gone with the rodeo...his jaw clenched and he decided one way or the other he would not leave them to face these things alone ever again whether it worked out with Layla or not.

"That hurts," Layla said as the doctor gave her a shot in the ass. Heath and Chance had come over and picked up the kids, so they didn't have to sit at home and be worried and bored all day. Rafe had carried her, against her will, and his arm's protest to his bedroom. The bathroom in his bedroom was closer than the hall bathroom near hers.

"The shot should help ease the nausea," the doctor said and then looked at Rafe who was holding his casted arm and in obvious discomfort. "Let's take a look at that arm next week. I'm afraid to take the cast off. You don't seem intent on letting it heal."

"I'm working on it." The doctor shook his head and walked out. He turned his attention to Layla, sprawled out in his bed, her left butt cheek exposed with a band-aid on it. A bucket next to the bed just in case she needed it. "Can I get you anything?"

"No." She pouted.

He sat beside her on the bed, so he could rub her back with his left hand. "You've gained weight since you've been here."

"I'm sure I gave up a few pounds last night." She groaned. "Way to tell me I'm getting fat, Rafe, when I'm sick and puking my guts out."

"You are far from fat. I was just noticing that you look a lot healthier. Well, not at this moment, but in general. You look healthy and happy here," he whispered as he continued to make gentle strokes up and down her back. He gathered the blonde hair with a hint of red in it and twisted it before laying it aside. "If things don't...I mean if we don't...I don't mind things the way they are. I'd like all of you to stay here, even after I get my cast off. I mean I still have months of rehabilitation to go through."

"I'll stay as long as you need me to." She sighed as her eyes closed.

He let out a breath. It was a step in the right direction. She at least saw the value of staying with him. He could settle in to the idea of living as roommates for a while. Obviously, he didn't want to share a bedroom without being married, especially when he had Savannah to think of. Brice too for that matter, he definitely didn't want that boy to grow up to become a heartbreaker.

Rafe slept in Layla's bed that night. It was a whole new torture for him to be wrapped in her sweet scent all night long. He caught himself more than once reaching for his cock. He would get up then, go check on her in his bedroom, and then return to a restless sleep. He wanted so badly to crawl in bed beside her and snuggle up to her. He wanted to stroke her hair and place his nose in her neck. He

wondered if this was how she had been feeling all that time. He wondered if her nose was clear enough that she was affected by being in his bed.

Morning came entirely too early, and the children came down the stairs and were ready for the day to begin. They started by bundling up and heading down to the barn. It was good for them to start learning a few things about the ranch. It also allowed Layla more time to rest. By the end of the night, they were exhausted and so was he.

Rafe sat on the edge of his bed and watched her sip the soup he had made. She was keeping liquids down now. "You amaze me."

"It's soup." She lifted an eyebrow and looked at him. Of course, she had no idea what he was talking about.

"I mean you did everything while I was in bed, and I had no idea what all that entailed. I mean I knew what the kids were like in the morning before school, or when they got home, but day in and day out all day without you has opened my eyes to a whole new side of them." He watched her face slowly fade to a frown. "What's wrong?"

"You don't want us here?" Her eyes were so sad he wanted to lean in and kiss her face all over and tell her he wanted them there now and forever.

"Of course I want you here. I was just trying to tell you I'm exhausted. They are kicking my ass, and I had no idea how much you did when I was out of it. That's all. I'm just trying to tell you..." He thought for a few moments, gathered his words. "I just want you to know that I understand now, and I appreciate everything you did. I had no idea."

A bit of sparkle came into her sapphire blue eyes and she smiled.

Crazy. She decided the man's mission in life was now to drive her crazy. Rafe had started doing work around the ranch again. Layla contented herself with tailoring clothes and personalizing them, not just for Bethany, Chance, and Jan, oh no, she was now a regular tailor in the area, except she was more creative. Bethany had agreed to give her half of the salary instead of the full salary. Layla just didn't feel right taking the money when Rafe was almost as good as new again.

"Rafe," she scolded him as his fingertip just so happened to trace the line of her spine while she did the dishes. They had been going out every other weekend when Buck had duty. Jan had a blast with the children, and they adored her. Rafe made it his mission to torture Layla all week long; day in and day out. Then when they went out, he was the perfect gentleman. "You're going to keep doing that and then..."

"What?" He smiled in triumph. They had agreed it was too risky to do anything with the children home, even tucked away in bed and fast asleep. Layla reasoned she wouldn't want to leave his bed if she were there at night, and they both agreed that was not the relationship they wanted the children thinking it was okay to have. It was complicated. More complicated than either of them expected things to be.

"We have an agreement." She turned to face him. It was rare they had any time alone. Now that Rafe worked, she didn't see him in the day. Sometimes she was in the loft where she had set up all of her sewing equipment and fabrics until the late hours of night. Though he would come sit and talk with her, she was working, and he knew how important the work was, so he didn't tease her then. But now...

"Yes." He nodded and then tugged her into his arms. She stepped closer and let him hug her. "I know we do."

"So why do you do this to me?" She looked up as he looked down.

"Do what?" He bit down on his lower lip and let it out slowly.

"You are always touching me, and then when we go out, you don't... you know."

"Well then, when we go out this weekend, I will...you know." He leaned in and kissed her. She opened her mouth and accepted his tongue. Her leg lifted and wrapped around his. Her arms clung to his back, and though he had a boner the size of Texas, she knew they were not going to have sex.

When he let her go, it was too soon. She frowned up at him.

"Night, Layla."

"Night, Rafe."

And so, they went in opposite directions again.

"So this is the big move?" Layla was going to tear his clothes off when they got back in the truck. She was sick of going to the movies, going out to dinner, and not getting naked. If this was a game, he was winning.

"You don't want to see this movie?" He smiled with his eyes full of mischievous delight.

"This movie is supposed to suck. There are like eight people in here including us." She followed him into the practically deserted theatre. They could have sat anywhere, but Rafe took them down a side row, stopped at the middle seats while everyone else was in front of them seated in the center seating section. "Why are we sitting in the nose bleed section?"

"You'll see." He took his seat next to her.

Layla was beyond frustrated. As the lights went down, she was aware of him instantly. The light from the film reflected gently on them. Everyone was watching the movie. She turned her attention to the movie as the theater went completely dark except for the screen. It was then she realized something. Rafe had insisted she wear her jean skirt. It was chilly out. Hell, it had snowed, but the theater was a nice warm temperature, and as his fingers slipped over her kneecap, she began to feel a bit hot.

"Rafe," she whispered.

"Shh. Watch the movie." He didn't look at her, but his hand slid farther up her leg.

Layla wasn't sure if it was a conscious decision she made as her legs parted enough for his hand to reach her panties. They were in a public place. At any minute anyone could walk in, walk past, or catch them. She realized why he chose this movie. His thumb stroked her gently over the cotton panties, and it wasn't long before she was wet enough he could feel it.

He stroked and stroked, slow, constant, tirelessly. She was ready to climb out of her skin by the midpoint of the movie. She couldn't tell anyone what had happened so far. She made a move to return the favor, but he wouldn't allow it.

"I'm watching this," he said.

She gripped the armrests and tried to resist his touch. It was useless. The constant stroke had turned her into a bundle of nerves. She needed to come in the worst way. Then he slid his fingers under her panties, and the moment his skin touched her clit she broke in convulsive waves. She tried to stifle the moan but failed. He pressed into her with one long finger and held there as she pulsed around him.

She was burning up in that theatre now. The movie was ending, and Rafe turned to look at her. He pulled his hand away from her sensitive flesh then pushed the finger he had in her pussy past his lips and then pulled it out. "You taste amazing, Layla."

It was all she could do to keep her eyes open. Her legs twitched, her pulse throbbed, and so did her clit.

"Rafe," It was a breathless plea.

"You ready to go?" He stood as the lights came up. He was hard, that was for sure.

Layla stood on wobbly legs as he escorted her to the truck. Once inside she was determined to get more. She wanted to taste him. She wanted him to taste her, and not just one lick. She was wanton, reckless. As he pulled down the long road toward the ranch, she took action.

"Go to the lake." She sounded more demanding than not.

"It's late. We should probably head home." He bit his lip, and she knew he was testing her.

Layla slid her hand up his thigh and over his crotch. The man was as hard as an ancient boulder. He needed relief and she needed more. "Rafe, take me to the lake."

"You plan on swimming? I mean it might have a layer of...oh, mmmm, okay, we'll go to the lake." The moment she had her bare hand around him he became much more agreeable.

Layla stroked his shaft as he pulled down the road leading to the lake. Once they were there and he had stopped the truck, she wasted no time in bending over to consume him in her mouth. Rafe tasted amazing. She pushed farther down on him than she thought possible, and he let out a groan of approval. She could feel him growing impossibly harder and then she pulled back and sat up.

"Where are you going?" he said breathless.

"Right here." She wiggled her way between him and the steering wheel. He let the seat release and slide back giving them more space. As she lifted to give him access to her, she bumped her head on the ceiling. "Ouch."

"Careful," he whispered and then groaned as she sat down on him.

Layla sat there for a moment with Rafe completely inside of her. She looked at him, and he looked at her. They both held back words of devotion. "Make it last, Rafe."

"Easy for you to say." He let out a strangled breath as she began riding him.

Almost fully clothed they were getting hot and fast. The windows fogged up, and Layla hit her head once more on the ceiling. "Fuck, it is getting hot in here."

"Take off your shirt." He tried to work it up and over her head as she moved faster, lifted quicker, and sat down harder. "Oh, fuck it. Fuck me. Ride me hard and fast, Layla. Make me come."

She obliged him. Layla lifted and pressed down on him driving him deep, right into her soul. She was in love with Rafe, and making love with Rafe only made those bonds stronger. She would have to make a decision. If he didn't propose again soon, she would simply have to do it herself. "You feel so fucking good, Rafe."

"Yeah? Good enough to make you come?" He slid a hand between them and stroked her clit in the way he now knew toppled her almost instantly.

She didn't answer in coherent words.

Halloween...

Trick-or-Treating was out of the question since they didn't actually have real neighbors and the temporary ones in the guest cabins were not there to be trick-or-treated. The ranch did provide a costume ball in Momma's Kitchen and most of the guests attended along with other locals who didn't have neighbors but had children.

"Who are you supposed to be?" Heath snorted as he asked.

"I hope you have a son, so you know what this is like." Rafe watched his older brother choke on a sip of tea at the realization. "I happen to be Batman, though I did talk him into letting me come as Bruce Wayne, and Brice of course is Robin."

Heath followed Rafe's gaze and pointed finger to the crowd of children where Brice and Savannah readied themselves for a three-legged race.

"So who is she?" Heath asked with genuine interest now.

"Savannah is Dorothy, and Layla—" Rafe pointed across to where Layla and Jan stood together. "—is Glenda the good witch."

"You know that woman looks better every time I see her. I'm beginning to see why you held out so long, little brother." Heath smacked him on the back and walked off toward Chance who entered with an amazing cake she had created to look like a haunted house with ghosts, monsters, and the like all around and inside of it.

Rafe looked around the large room and smiled. Life was pretty good at this moment, especially since Glenda the good witch was heading his way.

Chapter 11

November

"So, where are we off to?" She looked at him, and the moment he faced her heat filled the truck cabin and electricity crackled on the air between them.

"That depends." He started up the truck and waited.

"On?" She laughed.

"We can go to the movies, dinner, dancing, or any other place we have gone before and do things we have done before." He licked his lips, and his voice dropped slightly lower. "Or we can head back to one of the guest cabins and pretend we don't live here, and..."

"Let's go." She nodded. Her insides were already warming as anticipation threatened to make her do something stupid right there in the driveway.

They drove well back into the section of the ranch dedicated to guest cabins. Far away from the rest were a few set far apart from each other.

"Why are they so far apart?" she asked as he pulled down the drive to one.

"They're for...I don't want to get in trouble for saying it, or scare you, or mess this night up." He frowned as he looked straight ahead out the window.

"Are they here for sex?" She gasped.

He chuckled. "Not by the hour if that's what you're asking. But there are times in peoples lives they might want more privacy."

"Oh." She understood now. They were for honeymooners or people on their anniversary and certainly for those who may need to express themselves a bit louder and enthusiastic on vacation than others. "Does anyone know we are coming here?"

"What do you mean by anyone?" he asked and she knew someone did.

"Like your family?" She was not going to go in if he said yes, no way, nu-uh.

"No." He shook his head. "No one in my family knows we are here."

"So who?"

"Lucky. I had to get a key somehow, so I had him tell them he wanted a place to stay, and then asked him to stock the fridge with some things. If it makes you feel any better, he is going to keep the key, so he does have a place if he needs it. These won't get as much rental time in the winter." He looked at her, and his eyes softened, pleaded. "You can change your mind you know."

"No." She decided. "I can't."

"So where do you want to go?" He let out a frustrated and disappointed breath.

Layla bit her lower lip; he misunderstood. "I mean I can't change my mind about being here with you."

Rafe was out of the truck and around to her door before she could reach the handle. Unable to stop him, unable to control herself, Layla accepted his lips against her own. They pulled each other closer, lining their body up to rub and touch in all the right places. The cool air made steam roll off their bodies. Rafe was the one to pull back; she was impressed with his self-control.

"We have to get inside." He was as breathless as she was.

Layla nodded and sucked in another full breath. The cool crisp air brought little relief.

His fingers trembled as he put the key in the lock. "I gotta tell you I haven't been this...I don't know I have ever been this wound up."

His revelation both surprised her and empowered her. If he was as anxious as she was, this would be over in minutes. She laughed in thought as they entered the cabin. Too focused on the need to touch him, she didn't pay any attention to the surroundings. Her coat dropped to the floor.

He locked the door and shrugged out of his jacket as he moved closer to her.

"Rafe," she pleaded.

He wrapped her in his large arms and held her close a moment, his lips tender and insistent against hers. She began unbuttoning his shirt. He slid his hands under her top and released her bra. Rafe with two hands was definitely better than Rafe with one.

His lips moved down her neck as her shirt and bra were pulled over her head. She was half undressed, yet he still had a ways to go to get naked. Giving up on the shirt, she undid his belt buckle.

He laughed and helped her by removing his shirt then toeing off each of his shoes. She kicked hers off and started to unfasten her pants.

"Wait." He put a hand over hers. "I'm getting there."

He then stepped out of his jeans and boxers and stood gloriously before her naked except for his socks.

She smiled as she looked at them.

He laughed then stepped one foot over and pulled out of the socks one at a time, too. When he looked at her, she registered the hunger in his eyes.

Her hands gripped warm flesh as he unfastened her jeans. She took her time rubbing over his shoulders, his chest, his stomach, and his thighs. She touched him everywhere around his cock, but she didn't touch it.

His mouth moved over her collarbone and down to her left breast where he licked then sucked her nipple. She gasped as the shocks of electricity jolted her inside. Rafe slid her pants down and slid farther down her stomach as she stepped out of them. He was on his knees rubbing his nose across her abdomen, his hands over her thighs. He too was being careful not to touch the place she wanted to be touched the most.

As easily as he kneeled before her, he made his way back up and treated her right nipple to the same mind numbing sensations.

When his mouth touched hers again, it was like turning over the ignition in a car. She revved up a notch and was ready to go.

He walked them backward until her legs felt the bed against them. She sat down and he moved with her. They had found ways to have sex, to touch, to taste, and feel each other in the small spaces and for the limited times they could steal. Now, it was as if they had freedom, a closed door, and a soft bed to play in.

At the foot of the bed, she let him press her backward with one hand as he slid his other between her legs. "I have been dying to taste you again. I never in my wildest dreams thought I would crave a woman's skin the way I do yours."

She started to say something but lost all coherent thought as his fingers parted her vaginal lips, and his tongue swept up one side then down the other. Her legs trembled as her back arched. Rafe explored and tested; he teased her clit then withdrew to lick her folds again.

"Rafe, I need..."

He pushed two fingers into her, and she could feel herself losing control. Her brain was checking out; her instincts taking over. The pleasure of his mouth, his fingers as they pushed in and out of her pussy, made her reckless. "Fuck me, Rafe, please."

He pressed a third finger into her, and she could feel the stretch, the thickness. Then he was gone. Her legs shook and her eyes opened.

"Scoot up on the bed." She turned to crawl on the bed, and he gripped her hip with one hand before she could get too far. "Stay like that."

"Rafe?" she questioned then knew what he was doing as the head of his cock nudged against her pussy.

"Spread your legs just...right there." He slid into her slowly. His hands gripped her hips tightly, his fingers sinking into her flesh as he pulled her against his thrust. "Be still."

She tried to comply, but her body had a mind of its own. Inside she was clenching, gripping him, and trying to get him to move.

"You're moving, Layla." He let out an exasperated laugh. "I can feel it each time you do that. I'm trying not to lose control here, sweetheart, but..."

"Fuck control." She bucked against him driving him deeper. "Move, Rafe, move."

"Tell me if it hurts," he said and then began moving.

Slow at first, but then quicker, longer strokes in and out. Faster. Harder. Deeper.

"Layla?" he gasped as he said her name and pounded into her.

"Harder," she gasped as he pulled her back harder and thrust forward. She knew he was all the way in when he began hitting against her cervix. It was a mixture of pleasure and pain. "God, you feel so good."

"Shhh," he hissed.

She smiled wickedly and knew he was turned on and losing control by her words. "Your cock is so big, Rafe, I love the way it feels inside me. You're so fucking good."

"You..." His words died with a long groan of satisfaction as he emptied inside of her. His body twitched and jerked forward as the orgasm seemed to linger. Once he finally settled down, he ran his hands up her back and tugged gently at her hair. "Hey."

"Hmm?" Layla slowly rocked against him again as she turned to look over her shoulder.

"Turn over." He shook his head. "That was too soon. I was trying to hold out."

"I know." She groaned a sigh of pleasure as she pulled forward and then rolled over to face him. "I didn't want you to hold back. I don't want to hold back either."

"Did you?" He lifted a brow.

"No." She shook her head. "I didn't."

"Unacceptable." He bit his lower lip. "Why don't you show me how you do it? I might learn something."

She could feel her eyes widen. He wanted her to touch herself. His eyes were heavy, a challenge clear in them, and his right hand whether he was aware of it or not, had already found its way to his penis. Watching him grip himself, stroke, tug, made her clit tickle and her nipples ache.

"Fine." Layla slid a hand between her legs and laid her head back. *I can do it. I can do it.* In a minute, she could touch herself without thinking about what she was doing. Instead, she focused on what he was doing and the rest came naturally.

Rafe shuddered as she slid her hand between her legs and began to touch herself. He needed a minute between sessions. A chance to recuperate. She was helping him recover faster than he thought possible. He became aware of the fact he was holding a decent grip on his dick when she finally looked up again and stared at him. Conscious of his actions he realized how it might take a minute to do what he asked. "Need help?"

"Do you?" Layla licked her lips, and he thought of the times she had sucked him off.

"Yes." He felt the curve of his lip as it turned to a smile. "But I asked you first."

"Yes." She nodded. Her face was flushed, her chest. She was climbing that peak alone. He looked at her fingers. He wanted to taste her again. He thought about the fact he had just been there and what he left behind. As Layla said yes once more, he decided he didn't care. It was his, and she had tasted it, and they had kissed, and surely she would be getting a taste of them both in a minute.

He bent to lick her pussy. Letting go of his cock he focused on her clit as she held it between two fingers for him. Having her fingers there to lick in addition to the blade of her clit turned him on more. He pushed two fingers inside of her, and by the second thrust, she was calling his name and pulling his hair as she tried to get him closer. He decided to suck her clit to see what it did.

It broke her. She cried out; her walls pulsed around his fingers, and her hips bucked against his lips and his fingers. This was freedom. This was what he always thought sex could be like. As he pushed himself upright, he crawled over her and thrust inside again. She wrapped her legs around his hips and arched to meet him. His mouth found hers, and without restraint, she kissed him. She pulled him closer. He found it difficult to be gentle. He wanted to take her over in every way known to man.

They broke the kiss, so they could breathe again. He pushed against her. He couldn't get enough, not fast enough, not deep enough, not hard enough, there was always more. He wanted more and more of her. Having sex with Layla should have sated him, but instead it made him insatiable.

Her teeth bit into his shoulder, and her body shook with another orgasm. A confident smile broke across his lips, and he pushed her for one more. One more and he would let himself go again.

Layla lay red-faced looking at the mark on his shoulder. She had bit him, again. "Am I part dog or vampire?"

"No." He snorted. "You just get excited. I don't mind really. It doesn't hurt when you do it. It hurts now, but it didn't when you bit me, if that makes any sense."

"Do you want to bite me? To make up for it I mean?"

"Do you want me to bite you?" His brow raised in question.

"No." She shook her head for emphasis.

"I know another way you can make up for it." Rafe tucked a blonde lock behind her ear.

"Already, wow, I..."

He laughed. "No. I need to eat. You have used all of my energy reserves, so if there is more to give, it will be a few hours from now. I think."

"Hmmm. What do you want to eat?" Layla took a moment to really appreciate the man next to her. She knew Rafe now. Not like before when she knew what kind of father he would make for the kids. Now she had no doubt what kind of man he would make for her.

"Duck." He bit his lower lip and held back his laugh.

"Rafe Johnson, don't you dare!" She sat up laughing. "How did you even come up with that menu? It was outrageous."

"I was watching it on television and doing my damndest to memorize what to call things. I am sorry about all that. I was a real ass." He stroked a hand down her naked side. Her nipples tightened; her insides warmed. His words were genuine.

"Well, I imagine there isn't a duck here, so what else do you have in mind." She watched his eyes look down and away from her face, and his gaze caught on her breasts. "Besides me."

"Sorry." He shrugged. "I like looking at you. I've memorized a few things, you know."

"Like?"

"Like the freckles across the bridge of your nose. They're very light, and I hadn't always noticed them. The scar right here on your hip. I wonder where it came from. The fact that you now paint your toenails though you always wear socks and shoes." He looked up.

Layla gulped and tried to remain calm, but Rafe was really paying attention to her. He wouldn't have confused her for Lola. For the first time in a very long time, she wasn't being compared. She was simply Layla, and she was all he knew. He didn't compare parenting skills; he didn't compare voices, or wonder who was smarter, better in bed, prettier, faster in a race. The realization struck her with both joy and grief.

"Layla, did I say something wrong?" He sat up as she looked down.

"No, not at all."

"So why do you look and sound like you're about to cry?" He tucked his hand under her chin and lifted her face toward him.

"You have no idea how good and bad it feels at the same time to know you are looking at just me. There is no comparison." She sniffed.

"There wouldn't be anyways." He moved closer to her and held her. "You have your own mind, sweetheart. I enjoy your hot little body, but I...like you. I enjoy our time together. I mean I thought I knew you, but I had no idea. You are so much more than I...deserve."

He was still choosing his words wisely. She had not earned another proposal. "So what do you want to eat?"

"Let's see what Lucky stocked." Rafe kissed the tip of her nose and sighed. "Of course we could still go out."

"You won't be ready in a few more hours?"

"I need to eat, but I'm ready now." He waggled his eyebrows.

"I need food, too." She conceded. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't trying to get away from me."

"Not after what happened the last time." He laughed and rolled out of the bed. He looked at her, and she was sitting there sad again. "I'm teasing, Layla. That was my own fault, not yours."

She nodded, but he knew she would think about it. How did he always seem to say the wrong things to her?

They were sitting on the couch, naked. Relaxing and letting the grilled cheese and tomato soup settle in. A crisp air sometimes flittered over her and made her skin tighten, her nipples bead.

"This is really nice," Layla commented on the cabin ignoring her nakedness. It was a genuine log cabin inside and out. The bathroom was finished and had updated accessories. The kitchen had basic modern appliances, and the furniture reflected a contemporary country feel. The fireplace was perfect for cold winter nights, and the flat screen television hung on the wall and out of the way. It was both a place where a couple could cozy up, and a place someone could escape and have fun. Fortunately, they had escaped here to have fun. "I'd stay here; well, I mean if I were going to visit Montana at least, I would definitely want to stay in a place like this."

"We've put a lot of work into the cabins to make sure they meet the needs of the modern guest without taking away the reason some of the guests come here to begin with," Rafe said as he looked around the cabin and appreciated the work. He had one long leg stretched toward her as they sat at opposite ends of the couch. Her foot was in his lap; his thumb stroked the sole occasionally sending sparks up her leg to her clit. While Rafe looked around, Layla took the opportunity to look at him and appreciate the art of Rafe. He wasn't big like Heath, though he wasn't small. Rafe was all long lean muscles. His arm had healed for the most part, though he complained about it from time to time when he overdid it. He was still on limited use though he'd made good use of all of his body tonight.

"Where did you get that scar from?" Layla noticed for the first time the small scar that made a half moon circle on his shin. Of course, he had hair all over his legs and she paid more attention to the area below his navel and above his knees than anything else when he was naked like he was now. Yet tonight she began to notice more details.

"Which one?" He laughed.

"The one on your shin, the little one." She pointed.

"Oh, yeah, that one. Let's just say that having a little sister made for interesting toys, and when you slip on one thing and land on another, you get a little plastic moon imbedded in your skin." He rolled his eyes and looked at the ceiling. "She left everything out, and I was sneaking in. I woke up the whole damn house. I always took jeans when I went swimming at night from that point on."

"What were you doing swimming at night?" Layla asked then regretted the question. "Don't tell me."

"It's not like that. I mean there were girls there yeah, but like I said, I had on shorts. Me and a few friends would go to the lake, drink beer, flirt with the ladies, and jump in. You know go get wild now and then. Haven't you ever just let loose and had fun with a bunch of friends?" He drew his brows together.

"I didn't really have a lot of friends. I mean I had my friends at school, but we were all pretty driven. We went out to eat and danced, but a wild girl's night, no, not really." Layla shrugged. "You are about the wildest thing I have done, this—" She looked around— "is about the wildest thing I have done."

"I'm wilder than a threesome?" He snorted a laugh. "I somehow doubt that."

Her face went red and she cringed. "It really wasn't as much fun as you might think. I mean I consider myself pretty open to exploration. I enjoy sex, though until you, I enjoyed sex alone a lot better than with anyone else." She rubbed her forehead; this was not going well. How could she explain without sounding like a slut? "It was awkward. I only kissed her, and we touched a little, but it was weird, and at some point I sorta left. I mean once two people are connected in a certain manner it is easy to escape without much notice. I think we were all mortified. I never saw him again, and I didn't talk to her much afterwards either. It was her idea in the first place."

"Well then." Rafe licked his lips. Immediately the air changed and her heart thumped harder, faster. "It's safe to say that the two of us will do."

She laughed. "I couldn't share you with another woman, Rafe."

"I won't share you with another man." It was a serious statement, and he didn't laugh.

"I wish we could stay here tonight." The words came out of her mouth before she was able to stop them. It was his fault; he had her so compliant, so relaxed, she didn't think before speaking. His eyes widened a moment then a slow easy smile tugged at his full kissable lips.

"I can make a phone call. We could be there before they wake up." His dimple drew her attention. She nodded as a response. "Be right back."

The moment he left the couch, she missed his warmth. She wanted that big hairy leg back under her smooth shaven one. Unable to stay away from him long enough for the phone call, she walked to where he stood in the kitchen area, naked, as he told Jan they would be there before eight in the morning.

When he hung up the phone, she slid her hands up his back. Her fingers pushed into the muscles on his neck, his shoulders. They trailed down his spine and gripped his buttocks in each hand. "You have a better ass than me. It's firm." She gripped and tested the muscles.

He chuckled. "I like your ass just fine. I don't think I would be as attracted to it if it were like mine."

Layla kissed his shoulder blade, between the blades, and let her tongue lick down his spine until she reached the crease of his ass. She nipped his left butt cheek, and he took a step forward. "Layla?"

"Turn around." She stroked her hands down his legs. "I want to feel your cock in my mouth, Rafe. I want to taste you."

His left knee dipped a second then straightened again. He turned slowly, but when he faced her, his dick was thick, full, and ready to be sucked.

"Beautiful." Layla nodded and then took him in her hand. She stroked him once, twice. He lifted her hair off her shoulders. She stroked his hair-roughened testicles and teased them with a lick of their own.

"You are beautiful. I agree," Rafe whispered.

Layla licked his dick from root to tip. She felt as if she were intoxicated. He really got her high in a way. The Layla everyone knew would in no way be reenacting a porn scene, but the woman she was right now, in this minute, wanted to see what her limits were. She wanted to test her body, her mind, and his.

She sucked him fast, slow, easy, and then hard. Her tongue slid around the rim of his cock, and he moaned. Her hand was so slick from her saliva it pumped him in and out with ease.

"Get up." He growled. "Bend over."

She leaned over the kitchen table and looked back at him.

"No, I changed my mind," he said then pulled out a chair to sit in it. "Sit up there."

"On the table?" She moved to oblige his request.

"Yeah, that's it." He slid closer to her, placed her feet on his thighs, and pushed her legs apart.

It was an awkward position, sort of like a pelvic exam at the doctor's office. She wiped that clear from her mind. Rafe scrutinized her vagina. He looked at it as if there was a mystery to be solved. She couldn't resist. "Insert tab A into slot B."

"What?" He looked up at her with a wry smile.

"It seemed like you were waiting for directions, and I am dying up here, so I was trying to help." She laid back the rest of the way so that she was flat on the table. The cool wood was hard and uncomfortable, but she didn't mind. "If you don't lick me, finger me, touch me in the next two seconds..."

"You'll what?" he asked humor in his tone.

"I'll...I don't know what I'll do..."

Rafe leaned in and tasted her. He nipped the inside of her thigh with a gentle love bite. Her legs were already trembling by the time he was using two fingers to stroke her clit on either side. Rafe began licking her. Slow at first, torturing her clit by only teasing it then moving on. Her hips moved against him, he pressed a finger inside, and she groaned as it eased into her. "You're so fucking wet, Layla."

"More, Rafe, I need more." She was mindless; her body rocked and rocked against him. He licked, sucked, and tugged. He pushed two fingers then three. Her hands cupped her own breasts and pulled at the nipples. "Rafe."

"Yes?" His voice was low.

"What do you want to do to me, Rafe?" She continued the rocking of her hips.

"What do you want me to do to you?" he asked then suckled her clit a second making her cry out. "What else can we do, Rafe? I want to be wild, remember, free. What would you do in your wildest dreams?" she asked. He left the fingers inside her and then a new sensation struck her like lightning. The tip of his finger touched the budded hole of her ass.

Layla gulped. It was a request. A serious one considering his size. "I might have to work up to that."

He laughed and slid his fingers out of her. "Ride me, Layla. You have me all wound up now."

She slid down and relished the feel of the tip of his cock as it slid so easily into her. "God, you feel so fucking...good, Rafe."

"Yeah...Mmmm...Come here." He pulled her closer as she rode his dick up and down over and over again.

She used the floor for leverage, but her thighs got tired quickly. "Get back on the table."

He stood up, pinning her underneath him. He pulled her legs up and propped her calves on his shoulder. It was so deep this way. He kissed her lips in a frenzy. His body trembled and pushed against hers until she was crying out for more. He pulled out then slid farther down her body and licked her pussy again until she was mindless. Her wetness soaked her from front to back. He put his finger at her anus again. This time he pressed against the hole. As soon as it passed the barrier inside, she came.

It was a hard violent orgasm. She thought she may just pass out as the sensations shook her from head to toe.

"Well, that was something." He was at her ear whispering. She hadn't even noticed he moved.

"I didn't know..."

"Me either. But it is certainly something to look into for next time." He was lazy, nibbling her ear.

"Rafe, don't you want to come?" She pushed him up to look at her. His eyes were curious.

"I did come." He frowned. "Did you black out?"

She shrugged.

He laughed. "Maybe we shouldn't try it then."

"We'll see." She smiled. Her whole body grew tired, sated. She was drained and unable to think clearly. Her back ached from the table, and she understood how he could not feel the pain of a love bite as she was just realizing the ache from the table. He kissed her lips. "Shower?" "UmHum." She nodded then yawned.

Chapter 12

Rafe had set the alarm for five o'clock. He wanted to be sure he could start the morning right since he had no idea when he would get to do this again. He held Layla so close it was as if they became glued together in their sleep. Her nose was in his neck; her breath tickled his skin. Her thigh was pressed tightly between his, her front was glued to his front, and their arms were wrapped around one another.

The radio began playing country music, and he could feel the flutter of her lashes against his skin as she opened her eyes. "I just realized something."

"What's that?" They didn't move from the position they were in.

"I had to toss out the contacts last night, and I don't have my glasses." He could feel it as her smile spread across her lips and then those lips opened allowing the heat from her mouth to ignite the fire inside of him as she kissed his neck.

His cock, already hard and pressing against her belly, twitched. He lifted his right leg off her thigh and moved his hand down to reposition her. He pulled her leg over his hip. Layla tilted back as her sex lined up with his. "I should brush my teeth first."

He smiled at her. Surely after all they had done, all they had been through in the past few months, she couldn't think morning breath would stop him. Besides, he didn't have a toothbrush either.

He ignored her shyness and leaned in to kiss her lips as he rolled her to her back and let the head of his dick slide along her heated pussy. She was hot, wet, and ready. He slid in with a moan. There was no way to get enough of Layla; she was made for him. He could feel words creeping into his throat. He couldn't say them, though they were there. He didn't want to undo all the progress he was making. He needed to stop moving slow. If he picked up the pace, he could say something dirty.

"Your pussy is so tight, Layla. It feels fucking amazing." He bit down on his lip to hold back any sentimental declarations.

"Rafe," She gasped as he went deeper, so deep he could feel the head of his cock rub against her cervix.

"Too far?" He pulled back and made shallower thrusts.

"No." She pulled a pillow from underneath her head and lifted her hips. She tucked the pillow underneath her ass giving her body a new angle. "Yes, yes, that's good."

"Fuck." He liked this angle. He could go deep, and it didn't hurt her. "I..."

He gripped her close in his arms, let all of his weight push against her, and took her over from head to toe. She gripped his back with biting force, and her nails stung as they sunk in to his skin. He couldn't say it. He wouldn't say it first this time. He kissed her lips as she pulsed around his cock. He couldn't watch her face as she came. He couldn't look at her when he came or he would be done for.

Closing his eyes and biting his bottom lip, he let go with a long grunt.

Collapsing on top of her made her giggle.

"What?" He kissed her shoulder then rolled to her side.

"I was thinking how silly it is to have to sneak back into the house this morning." Her face turned serious, her cheeks still flushed. She reached a cool hand over to stroke his face. "I don't think I can wait another two weeks to do this again."

"We'll work something out." He nodded. "I...Do you want to head back now?"

"We probably should." She sighed and sat up. "If we are ever sneaking out for an overnighter again, don't let me leave without my contact stuff, or at least my glasses."

The children were asleep. Exhausted from building their first snowman of the year, they were easy to settle down tonight. He made his way down the stairs and into the kitchen. Layla had made some hot chocolate and was wearing a fuzzy pair of pajama bottoms, a long sleeve shirt that looked very familiar to him and thick socks. Her long hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she had her glasses on. He didn't know if he had ever seen the woman look more attractive to him than in that moment.

"For me?" he asked as he picked up the cup she nodded toward.

"I put extra marshmallows in there for you." She winked. He stifled a groan. His dick was already growing hard against his jeans. She was simply trying to be nice to him, and he was simply going mad with lust for her. He sipped the drink then gulped it as he realized it was warm not too hot.

"Do you want to watch TV?" she asked. Her blue eyes sparkled; her smile came so easy now.

"In my bedroom?" He bit his lower lip.

Her brows drew tight making a crease in between them. "What if?"

"They are out. Brice was even snoring." He closed the distance between them and placed the coffee cup on the counter. He reached for her cup and set it down, too. "We can watch television, or we can be quiet, slow, and torturously naughty as we watch each other."

She looked toward the stairs then back to him. Her eyes proved she was aching for it as much as he was. "We have to be very careful. I mean, it seems ridiculous sometimes. I think to myself why can't I just go sleep in your bed? Why can't we be like normal parents and not sneak to have sex? If we were normal parents, we wouldn't have to be in separate bedrooms."

He couldn't talk, couldn't breathe. She was referring to him as a parent. Had she made a commitment and not told him so? "But I'm not their dad. I'm not a parent."

She took a deep breath. "You're the only dad they have, Rafe. Like it or not, that is what they see you as. They have been seeing you as their father since the first time you watched them. You have no idea how hard that was for me. I wanted to be a good mom, and when I came home to find a man in my house watching my kids, I freaked out. Then I really freaked out when they told me how great you were. They have loved you from the first moment you stepped foot in their lives. Tell me you don't see them as your babies. I knew the moment we came to stay here, you had built those rooms for my children. I know you want them. The only question is, do you want me?"

"I want you," he admitted in a low voice.

"Rafe?" The woman had totally turned the tide on him. He watched as she bent down on both knees in front of him. "Will you marry me?"

"Do you love me?" She wasn't getting her answer until he got his.

"Yes." She smiled. "I've been in love with you for a very long time. I was just too afraid to admit it."

"If I say yes, do we have to abstain until our wedding night?" He crossed his arms and looked down at her.

She scowled at him. "No."

"Do I get to pick when and where?" he asked.

"Rafe Johnson, will you marry me or not?" She stood up and put her hands on her hips.

A smile slowly tugged at his lips. "I'll think about it."

To see the look of shock cross her face was priceless. "I...You."

Before she got too wound up, he closed the distance between them and kissed her anger away. "Mmm, I thought about it. I think I will marry you. If..."

"There's a condition?" She was torn between laughter and frustration.

"My little sister has ten questions for me. I want her to ask those ten questions to you, too. If we can answer them, then we can get married. If we can't, we have to wait." He hugged her close. "But we don't have to wait to sneak around before the inquisition."

"Do you love me?" Layla frowned at him. Her tone was entirely too serious for the moment.

"Layla, I had no idea what love meant until I met you. I love you more than life itself." He gulped. At least she said it first this time.

She smiled, bit her lower lip, and said. "So what's playing in your bedroom?"

"Let's go see."

Tonight was the night Jan would ask her ten questions. She had warned him they were new questions. Layla had been studying, so had he. Neither of them were prepared for the questions they were about to receive this morning.

"What's birth control?" Savannah asked.

Layla choked on her orange juice. She looked adorable at the other end of the table, all flustered by the question. Rafe took a minute to compose himself. He was sure his eyes rounded, too. "Where did you hear those words?"

"Alice says her mom told her grandma she was not taking birth control anymore. Alice is really mad because her mom keeps talking about a new baby. I mean where do you get a new baby from anyways?" Savannah's two front teeth had grown back in for the most part allowing her to pronounce her s's again. She didn't seem affected by the conversation; the kid was simply curious.

"Well, mommy, you wanna answer this?" Rafe smiled as Layla's face got redder and redder as her daughter talked.

"I'm not sure where to start." She rubbed her forehead.

"What's birth control?" Brice helped her get back to the first question as he shoveled in another bite of pancakes.

"Thank you, Brice." Layla cleared her throat. "Well, birth control is something mommies take to help them plan for babies."

Rafe nodded. Sounded reasonable enough.

"Do you take birth control?" Savannah asked, and Rafe looked at Layla with interest. It was a sin to have so much fun watching her squirm.

"Well, mommies should be married before they think about babies. All girls and boys should be grown up to at least..." Layla looked at him with pleading eyes.

"Thirteen," he supplied.

"Thirteen!" Layla shouted, and all three of them looked at her.

"Well, things happen around that age when they should start to know more about other things. Not that they should be doing those things, but some things will be learned through friends, and it won't be as simple as this." His own head was hurting from the questions now.

"So at thirteen boys and girls should start to learn more about babies and birth control." She sounded more like she was asking then telling.

"Okay." Savannah nodded. They both relaxed. Then she asked her second question again. They should have known she wouldn't forget it. "So where do babies come from?"

Before either of them could get a word out, Brice answered, "The vagina."

"Rafe!" Layla was stunned. What she didn't realize was the fact that he was, too.

"I didn't tell him that. Brice, who told you that?" Rafe looked at the little boy.

"Robert has a little sister, and he said his mom had the baby in her belly, and it came out the vagina. He said that boys can't have babies because they are too big to come out the penis." He shrugged.

"Like Aunt Chance and Aunt Bethany, they have babies in their bellies, right?" Savannah nodded.

"Uh, yeah, they do." Rafe's head was spinning.

"Mom." Savannah looked at Layla, and he could see her actually squirm in the chair. "Will you have a baby?"

"Well, there are a lot of things to think about before having a baby." She tried for a smile.

"Yeah, like getting fat." Brice nodded. "Babies make your belly really big."

Certainly, this breakfast was teaching him more than it was them. There was a lot more to consider when planning a family. They wouldn't remain little forever. Some day that strawberry blonde little girl would bring a boyfriend home, and he would have to do his best not to kill him. Sooner than he wanted to think about he would have to talk to Brice about being a young man and

respecting both his own body and the way he treated girls. He had a feeling his face was mirroring the same anxiety Layla was feeling.

"Do you think you want another little brother or sister, Savannah?" Rafe asked. "Or do you think you would be like your friend Alice?"

"I want a little brother," Brice answered.

"You would." Savannah scowled at him. "I want a little sister, so I can play dress up with her."

"Well." Being diplomatic, he nodded. "Aunt Chance and Aunt Bethany are both going to have a baby, so you might get lucky and have a boy and a girl, or two boys, or two girls soon enough."

"Don't do it." Savannah looked at Brice.

"Do what?" Layla asked Savannah.

"Brice." She gave her brother a look that made him mad, and whatever she wanted him not to do, he was going to do anyways.

"Rafe." He looked at him. "Can I talk to you alone?"

"Brice, don't do it," Savannah warned.

The kid had his undivided attention. "All right, cowboy. Where do you want to talk?" He shrugged.

"How about the living room?" Rafe asked.

"Can we go outside?" The kid's expression was so serious Rafe got up from the table and grabbed both of their coats before he realized he was doing it.

Savannah didn't excuse herself. She jumped up from the table and ran upstairs.

"I'll go this way." Layla frowned then headed after Savannah.

He nodded then stepped outside with Brice.

"I have to ask you something." The little man toed his boot in the snow just off the step.

"All right, ask." Rafe took a seat in one of the rocking chairs, leaned forward, and rested his elbows on his thighs. He wanted to be a bit more on Brice's level for something so serious.

"Why won't you marry my mom?" He sniffed. Rafe couldn't tell if he was about to cry or if it was due to the cold air.

"Do you want me to marry your mom?" He could feel his heart hurting for the little man in front of him. If Layla had said yes the first time, they wouldn't be going through this now. Of course, he wouldn't know Layla like he did now. It was a double-edged sword. Someone was hurt either way. Hopefully, they would all stop hurting and soon.

"We want you to be our dad. Savannah told me not to say anything, but it's hard not to. When you used to come over, we would wait until you were gone and say goodnight dad." He was definitely crying now. "Why can't you just be our dad, Rafe?"

Rafe could feel the tears sting his own eyes. Never did he want to hurt these children. "Hey." He reached out and grabbed Brice's coat sleeve. The little boy ran into his hug, and Rafe picked him up. He hugged him. "You're a very brave little man, Brice. I'm proud of you for asking me these questions. I do want to be your dad. I've thought of you and Savannah like you were my own little boy and girl for as long as I have known you. Your mom and I had to do some grown-up thinking is all."

"But you're not married, and you don't act like a mom and dad. You act the same way as before, but you talk more." He faced him. "I know she isn't my real mom, but I love her. I know you're not my real dad, but I love you, too."

"I love you, Brice. I love Savannah, and yes, I love your mom. Layla may not have given birth to you, but she is your momma, and I am your dad, son." His heart hurt. He needed Layla. He needed to tell her it didn't matter what Jan's questions were, he was going to marry her, and they were going to do it as soon as possible. "Let's go talk to them."

"Savannah's going to kill me." He frowned.

"No, she won't" Rafe smiled. "You did the right thing. It is hard to do the right thing sometimes. We all waited too long to do the right thing, but it doesn't mean we can't fix it."

"He's going to ruin everything." Savannah cried into her pillow.

"How sweetie?" Layla pulled at her strawberry blonde hair and finally found her face. "Tell me."

"He's going to tell him we want him to be our dad. I told him to wait, but he can't wait anymore." Savannah cried. "He said you had enough time to fix it; he had to talk to Rafe."

Good Lord, Layla thought they were growing up fast, but they were mature beyond their years. She knew why, but it didn't make it better or any easier to deal with. "Honey, Rafe is fine."

"He's not our dad." She sobbed.

"Yes, I am." Rafe's voice was heard from the doorway. She turned to see him set Brice on his feet, and he took long strides to get to Savannah as she sat up. "Your mom and I are getting married, and I will be your dad, Savannah, I've been your dad for months now, Baby-girl. It's time we made it official."

"Rafe?" Layla's heart thumped.

He shrugged. "Come here."

Savannah sat up and then jumped toward him as she continued to cry. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" he asked Savannah as Layla tried to fight her own tears.

"I'm sorry I was afraid to ask you." She sobbed, sniffed.

"Don't be sorry, Savannah. That was a hard thing to do, but we're a family now. You know I made this room just for you? I put the tiles in pink and yellow because they are your favorite. I made Brice's bathroom blue and green because those are his favorites. I can show you pictures of this house before I met your mom and both of you. I always knew you would be my family. I didn't know it was going to be so hard for all of us to get to this point."

Layla held Brice and hugged him. She looked at Rafe holding Savannah. He held out a hand to her. She took it. "Layla, will you marry me?"

"Yes." She nodded and smiled. There was no doubt about it this time.

"So let's call your aunts and uncles and see what we can do about it tonight." Rafe kissed Savannah's forehead.

"Really, you will be our dad tonight?" She beamed up at him.

"Well, if we can get it done tonight, then yes. If not, as soon as possible," he promised them all.

"Do we have to wait until then to call you dad?" She frowned.

"No," Brice, Rafe, and Layla all answered in unison.

Chapter 13

December

Getting married was not as simple as they had planned. Once everyone knew, they also wanted a wedding. Layla's dad wanted to walk her down the aisle. His mother insisted on being there. It was all too much to deal with, so they took the children, Lucky, and Jan to the justice of the peace and eloped. Everyone was sworn to secrecy, but being legal in front of the children allowed Layla to move into his bedroom. Everyone else would and could wait for a spring wedding.

"Why did you choose Lucky as your witness?" Jan hissed at him.

"Your husband is on duty. I need a witness, and I can't very well have Jack or Heath do it since it is a secret." Rafe looked at his little sister. "What's the problem?"

"Buck does not want me around Lucky," Jan said.

"Still?" Rafe looked over her shoulder to the man leaning against the wall looking at the floor. Lucky didn't look in her direction, not once. Brice sat on the bench patiently, a big smile on his face. "You really need to talk to him. Maybe he will tell you what happened. If Buck won't, maybe Lucky will. He isn't going to go back to the rodeo, Jan. He is staying to work at our ranch, and he is starting school. You are bound to run into him, and the sooner it is resolved the easier it will be for everyone."

"If I talk to him, do you promise not to tell Buck?" Jan gave him a fierce expression.

"I think I can manage to keep it a secret since we are all here in secrecy." Rafe propped his hands on his hips.

"Fine. I'll talk to Lucky." Jan let out a long breath. "You think the kids can keep it secret?"

"Have you met those children? Savannah kept the truth a secret for years, and Brice kept their frustration at me not being their father secret for months. Yeah, I think they understand, and they are just as anxious for us to be legal as we are." Rafe looked at Lucky once more. He hadn't moved an inch. "We will have the huge spring wedding, and the family will be happy. No one gets hurt. Layla and I get to sleep in the same bed this winter, and the kids can officially call me dad."

"Well, go on, dad. Your bride and daughter are ready to leave." Jan nodded and smiled over his shoulder. He turned to see Layla and Savannah both smiling and indeed ready to go home.

"Do we get to be Johnson's now, too?" Brice asked as he came up beside him and grabbed his hand.

"We'll get the paperwork ready Brice, but not until the wedding in the spring okay?" Layla gripped Rafe's other hand.

"Now we get to go eat?" Savannah asked.

"Our first official family meal." Rafe nodded. "Let's go."

"Aunt Jan's not coming to?" Brice asked and looked back at Jan as they walked out.

Rafe looked at his sister who waved. She hadn't moved an inch, neither had Lucky. "Nope, it's just the four of us."

Jan stood there until Rafe and his family were out of sight. She was happy for her favorite brother. She was not happy about being left alone with Lucky. Rafe was right though; she did have to get to the bottom of things. If Lucky was staying, it was necessary to know why he and Buck no longer spoke, and why she was "forbidden" to speak to Lucky. She laughed, as if she could be told what to do.

"Hey." Jan turned to look at him as he pushed up off the wall and stood straight. There was a day when the sight of Lucky stole her breath away. When the sound of his voice made her heart thump harder in her chest. "You wanna grab a drink?"

"You talkin' to me?" he asked, and she realized when he looked directly at her, and he spoke directly to her, he still had an effect on her.

"Yep." She nodded. She did not like that he had this effect on her. She loved Buck. She married Buck. Buck didn't leave for the rodeo, and Buck didn't care about what her brothers thought.

He lifted a shoulder and looked off into the distance, past her. "Why not?"

That was Lucky. A true cowboy. Distant, brooding, and devilishly handsome, and boy could he sing. The first time he sang a song at the honky-tonk she thought she was in love. "We can go back to the ranch or...the lake if..."

"I'll meet you at the lake." He nodded and walked by her putting his hat on his head and not looking back.

"Okay," she said to the empty room.

"I brought this for you." Chance handed her a framed picture from the Halloween bash at the ranch. Rafe and Brice had dressed as Batman and Robin. She and Savannah had dressed as Glenda and Dorothy. Rafe had a lot of fun being Batman and rescuing Glenda from the wicked witch of the west.

"Thank you." Layla smiled at the first family portrait. "We had so much fun that night."

"I can't wait to see what Heath will dress up as for this one." Chance rubbed her belly. "I know it is a long way off, but have you two thought about adding to this picture?"

Layla shrugged. "Maybe."

They were married early in the morning, took the children to lunch and then to the movies. When they got home, Rafe went to work at the barn. Chance had stopped by. They went to Momma's Kitchen to have dinner, and Layla found herself walking back to the house later than Rafe and the children because she stayed behind to help Chance, Malina, and Bethany clean up. She thought it was odd that Jan and Buck were not at dinner, but when she asked about them, Heath said Buck had to work late and Jan said she needed to study.

The snow crunched beneath her boots, and the walk seemed short and long at the same time. When she walked in that door, she was going to be Mrs. Rafe Johnson. Not his bride to be, but his wife. This also meant she didn't have to sleep in the guest room. A sense of excitement and anxiety washed over her. How could she be nervous after all they had already done?

"Hey." Rafe smiled as he helped her out of the coat. "Your nose is red."

"It's cold out." She didn't hear the children. "Are they already in bed?"

"Yeah, it's nine o'clock. I was about to call down and see if you were coming home tonight." He laughed.

"Time got away from me." In more ways than one she realized. The entire day had been a blur, everything happening so fast one minute and moving in slow motion the next.

"Well." He looked at her then without warning picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. "It's the best I can do for a threshold since you stayed behind at dinner."

"Rafe." She looked at him as he sat her on their bed. "We're married."

"Yeah, I know." He smiled and then bit his lower lip.

"Aren't you nervous?" She watched his brown eyes as they watched her.

"What's there to be nervous about?" He sat next to her and took her hand. His thumb stroked across her knuckles.

"I don't know. I just feel different. I mean I feel good, but..."

"But what? Tell me and don't hold back." He looked at her intently and she frowned.

"I guess I am still afraid of letting everyone down." Layla shrugged.

"I understand that." He nodded. "I realized the other day how much work goes into all of this. Life, family, raising children, and loving you." "And?"

"And I think there will be times I make a wrong decision. I will have to apologize more than once before our lives are over, and they will, too, and so will you. We aren't perfect. I don't really feel like I have to be anymore. I can be me. We can have our flaws and still love each other. We can make mistakes and still raise good children." He leaned in and kissed her lips. "I think in a year we might even want one with our DNA sequence combined. That way when they are teenagers we can make them stay home and baby-sit."

She laughed. "Did you see the picture Chance brought us?"

"I put it over the fireplace in the living room." He let go of her hand and began to undress. "We need to start thinking about Christmas pictures. I know my mom will want some, and I am sure your parents will, too."

Layla removed her clothes and got under the blankets on her side, his left side, of the bed. "We should be getting the school pictures in pretty soon. Savannah said she wants a horse for Christmas. I mean there are so many out there already, what would she do with a horse?"

"Learn to ride it." He slid under the blankets with her. "I think an animal would be good for them, help them settle into their new life and also teach responsibility. Maybe we can get a puppy for Christmas?"

"Rafe." She loved saying his name.

He grunted.

"We're really doing this aren't we? We're really going to sleep in this bed tonight and every night after this together." She turned to face him as he turned to face her.

"Yeah." He pulled her in close. "I love you, Layla Johnson."

"I love you, too, Rafe."

"Call me Batman." He held her as she laughed. "Ahhh, this is the way it should be."

"I was thinking of a wedding present for you," Layla spoke against his throat.

"Yeah? I thought we said we would wait until the fancy one before we got each other a gift." He stroked her hair, her back.

"Well, I was thinking. I could give you something no one has ever had before. It is our wedding night, and there is one way I am still a virgin." His hand stilled on her lower back.

"You don't have to...," he started but she cut him off with a kiss.

Chapter 14

Spring...

Everyone arrived at the ranch two weeks before the wedding. The best part about having a Dude Ranch was the fact that people could have their own cabin if they chose to. Layla's parents decided they wanted a cabin. Rafe thought Heath was going to blow a gasket because not only did their mother want to stay with Heath and Chance she wanted her boyfriend to stay there when he arrived later in the week.

Chance finally talked their mother into taking a cabin when the man got there, for her son's sake.

Rafe, Heath, Jack, and Lucky were in the barn laughing when Buck walked in madder than a wet hornet, and all hell broke loose.

"You son-of-a-bitch I am going to kill you!" Buck was a man of few words, and he rarely lost his temper. All four men looked at the blonde hulking man stalking toward them.

Rafe knew who he challenged when Lucky stepped forward. "You can try."

"You kissed my wife!" Buck seethed.

"So." Lucky shrugged though Rafe knew Buck wasn't the only one mad now. "You married the one woman I loved. You were my best friend, and I asked you to look after my girl and you stole her."

It was out. Rafe stood, jaw unhinged. He looked at Heath and Jack who seemed as shell-shocked as he was.

Buck stopped. His face held the truth. Lucky wasn't lying. "You left, and you never told her not once that you cared for her. You didn't tell me you loved her, Lucky. You asked me to look out for her and I did. I fell in love with her. I stayed. I didn't leave her. I sure as shit wouldn't leave her for a damned rodeo, and I married her. She is my wife!"

"I know." Lucky nodded. "I love Jan. I always have and I always will, but if you know we kissed, you know that she kissed me. I would have taken it to my grave to keep her from hurting, but she told you, and here you are. So now what?"

"She kissed you?" The big guy's heart broke in front of all of them. "She was talking in her sleep last night. I..."

"Buck...," Lucky called as Buck turned and headed back the direction he came in. "Shit."

Lucky ran after Buck.

Rafe and his brothers stood for another few seconds then headed after them.

"What the hell do you make of this?" Rafe asked as they ran to catch up with the two men ahead of them heading toward Jan's house.

"They can beat the shit out of each other but not in front of Jan," Heath huffed.

"Well hell," Jack said and picked up the pace passing his brothers then Lucky, and finally he caught up to Buck.

Rafe couldn't hear what he was saying, but he got the kid to stop. Rafe couldn't help feel a bit responsible for it all. He had forced Jan to talk to Lucky, and if she kissed him...what did that mean? He couldn't believe it. He wouldn't until he talked to her.

Heath stopped with Buck, Lucky, and Jack while Rafe moved on to the house to talk to Jan.

"Jan?" Rafe called as he entered the front door.

"Rafe!" She ran to him crying. He held her close as his heart broke for her.

"What is going on?"

"I made a mistake. I only wanted to be sure, you know? I mean I know I love Buck. I know that, but I thought I loved Lucky for so long. I just wanted to be sure I wasn't in love with him anymore. I'm not. He knows that. He didn't kiss me back, Rafe. He wouldn't do that to me or Buck. Now I can't face either one of them!"

"What did you say to Buck?"

"I didn't get a chance to say anything. He asked. I didn't have a chance to say anything; he knew. He tore out of here and I..." She stepped back and put her hand up to cover her face. "Where's Lucky?" "They are both out front. Heath and Jack are with them." Rafe pulled her hand away. "Hey, you can face me all right?"

"I can't." She looked away.

"Yes, you can. Jan, I don't understand what happened, but I am your brother. Everyone makes mistakes. You're young. Apparently, you had loved them both, and they both love you. I know it can be scary and confusing, trust me." Rafe frowned as he looked at her. "I should never have made you talk to him. I had no idea..."

She had moved to sit at the kitchen table. "Neither did I. I mean I stopped thinking about him when he left and Buck stayed to join the police department. Then I fell in love with Buck, and I didn't think about Lucky at all until he came back. I don't know why I did it. It was an impulse move. I didn't know how to be sure I was being honest with myself, but I knew the moment I kissed him I was. I am completely over him. I love Buck. I never loved Lucky the way I love my husband."

Jan had put her head down on her arms, so she didn't see Buck or the others walk in the door that Rafe had left open in his haste.

"See. I told you." Lucky's tone was sad and sobering. Jan didn't look up. She curled her hands over her head and appeared to try to become invisible. "I'm sorry."

"Can I talk to Jan alone now?" Buck took a few steps forward.

"Can you handle talking to her now?" Heath asked from behind.

Buck nodded.

They all knew damn good and well he would never hurt her physically. If anything, under the circumstances, this was a hurt the three brothers had all known before, rejection, betrayal. Rafe put a hand on Buck's shoulder and whispered, "You know where to find me."

Buck nodded.

"Have I told you today how much I love you?" Rafe asked Layla as he entered the kitchen.

"What have you been doing?" She turned to look at him and tell him, no, he hadn't, but one look at him made her wonder what he had in fact been up to.

Rafe took three long steps toward her and hugged her tight. "I love you. Don't you ever break my heart again, okay?"

"Rafe?" Layla didn't know she had ever broken his heart, hurt his pride, yes, bruised his ego, okay, but broken his heart?

"When you told me no the first time, I thought I was okay. The second time it hurt like hell, but I was sure I would get you to say yes. The third time I lost a piece of my soul. It hurt like hell, and I don't ever want to feel that kind of hurt again." He looked at her seriously a moment then kissed her.

"Rafe, I didn't..."

"I know you didn't know." He smiled at her. "But now you do, so don't ever do it again."

"What brought this on?" Layla frowned at him. His actions were loving, but his words cut through her like a knife.

"Jan kissed Lucky. Buck found out about it. They are so damn young I don't know if any of them understand what they are doing. I do know that watching that kid's heart fall out of his chest because of my little sister hurt me, too."

Layla's mouth opened then shut. She followed him to their bedroom as he stripped out of his clothes, which were now wet from sweat. Into the bathroom he walked stark naked and she followed. "Rafe."

He looked at her and her heart broke. Something big had happened, and it was eating him up inside. "No. Don't take a shower. Let me run you a hot bath."

"I'm sorry I said that earlier. I..." He frowned when she stood to face him again.

"It's okay." Layla stepped closer to him. "I love you, Rafe. I can't imagine the hurt you feel for all of them. I do understand the hurt though. I care for Jan and Buck. I even care for Lucky. This is my family, too."

"I hate that this is happening before our wedding. Your parents are here. My mom is here. What in the world did we do to deserve all this drama? Nothing, not one thing has been easy for us. " She stroked his sun kissed cheek, and he turned his face to her again.

"If it were easy, we wouldn't know half of what we know about each other now. If this family upset takes center stage, I don't really care. I'm with you. Getting here hasn't been easy, but I wouldn't change the end result. Buck and Jan have only had Heath to contend with. Every relationship has bumps in the road. If they want it to work, it will." She tiptoed up to kiss his lips. "We all make mistakes. I made a huge one when I tried to shut you out in the beginning. But I promise you, there is not another man on this planet I want to kiss besides you."

His lips curled to a half smile.

"Get in." Layla turned to lock the bathroom door. When she turned back, he was seated in the large tub. "We have about two hours before my parents head back this way with the kids."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Rafe pushed the jet button, and the water began to pulsate around him.

About Cara North

Cara North began writing short stories as a child. Her first full length novel was written by hand in approximately seven different hard bound journals. Of course today she uses the computer. She is published in several different genres of romantic fiction, sweet romance, science fiction/fantasy, contemporary, and erotic romance. Both of her novel series' will be released at Tease Publishing LLC.

Cara's goal is to continue winning readers over one by one and eventually make the NY Times Bestseller list. In a perfect world *The Beaufort Series* would be made into a movie. Ethan would be played by Josh Hartnett, Joshua by Jake Gyllenhaal, and Ayden by Ryan Reynolds. The heroines could be played by several talented actresses. Did you hear that Hollywood? I'm waiting...

In the meantime she lives with her own personal hero and husband, Chris. They share their home with two dogs, Brittany and Jonah, and two cats, Han-Solo and Shiva. Learn more about Cara at:

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Other Titles by Cara North

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