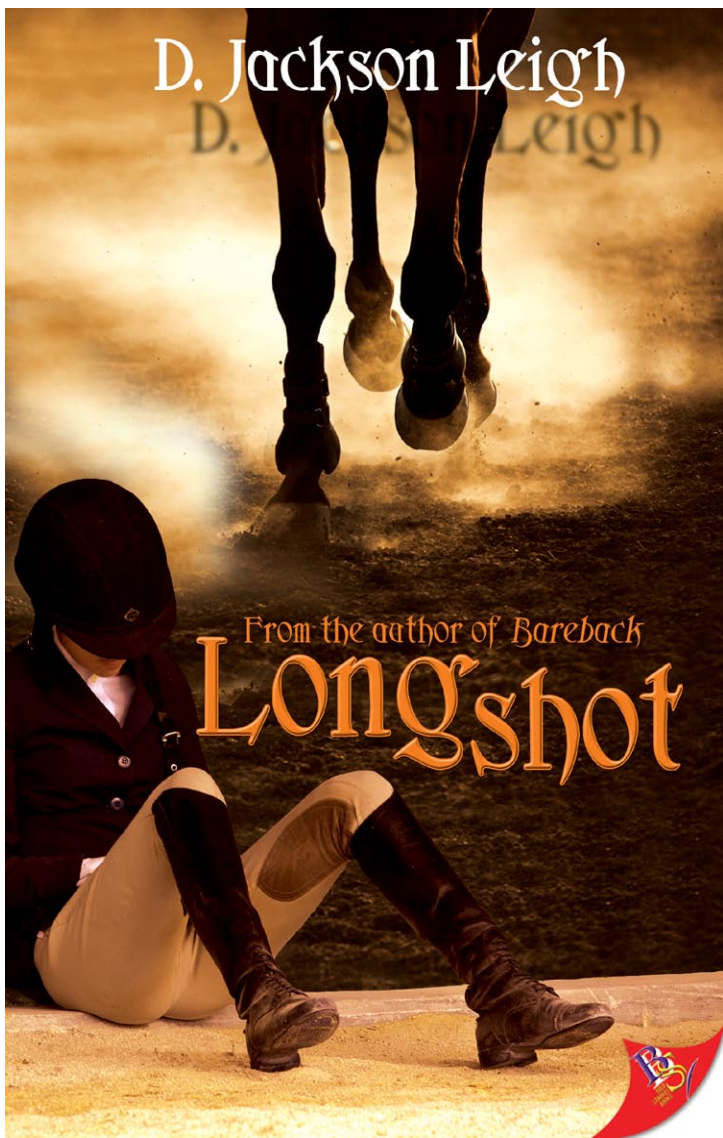


D. Jackson Leigh

D. Jackson Leigh

From the author of *Bareback*  
**Longshot**





E-Books are not transferable. They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

# LONG SHOT

**Visit us at [www.boldstrokesbooks.com](http://www.boldstrokesbooks.com)**

## What Reviewers Say About Bold Strokes Books

“With its expected unexpected twists, vivid characters and healthy dose of humor, *Blind Curves* is a very fun read that will keep you guessing.”—*Bay Windows*

“In a succinct film style narrative, with scenes that move, a character-driven plot, and crisp dialogue worthy of a screenplay...the Richfield and Rivers novels are...an engaging Hollywood mystery...series.”—*Midwest Book Review*

*Force of Nature* “...is filled with nonstop, fast paced action. Tornadoes, raging fire blazes, heroic and daring rescues...Baldwin does a fine job of describing the fast-paced scenes and inspiring the reader to keep on turning the pages.”—*L-word.com Literature*

In the Jude Devine mystery series the “...characters seem fully capable of walking away from the particulars of whodunit and engaging the reader in other aspects of their lives.”—*Lambda Book Report*

*Mine* “...weaves a tale of yearning, love, lust, and conflict resolution...a believable plot, with strong characters in a charming setting.”—*Just About Write*

“While these two women struggle with their issues, there is some very, very hot sex. If you enjoy complex characters and passionate sex scenes, you’ll love *Wild Abandon*.”—*MegaScene*

“*Course of Action* is a romance...populated with a host of captivating and amiable characters. The glimpses into the lifestyles of the rich and beautiful people are rather like guilty pleasures...a most satisfying and entertaining reading experience.”—*Midwest Book Review*

*The Clinic* is “...a spellbinding novel.”—*Just About Write*

“*Unexpected Sparks* lived up to its promise and was thoroughly enjoyable...Dartt did a lovely job at building the relationship between Kate and Nikki.”—*Lambda Book Report*

“*Sequestered Hearts*...is everything a romance should be. It is teeming with longing, heartbreak, and of course, love. As pure romances go, it is one of the best in print today.”—*L-word.com Literature*

“*The Exile and the Sorcerer* is a mesmerizing read, a tour-de-force packed with adventure, ordeals, complex twists and turns, and the internal introspection of appealing characters.”—*Midwest Book Review*

*The Spanish Pearl* is “...both science fiction and romance in this adventurous tale...A most entertaining read, with a sequel already in the works. Hot, hot, hot!”—*Minnesota Literature*

"A deliciously sexy thriller...*Dark Valentine* is funny, scary, and very realistic. The story is tightly written and keeps the reader gripped to the exciting end."—*Just About Write*

"*Punk Like Me*... is different. It is engaging. It is life-affirming. Frankly, it is genius. This is a rare book in that it has a soul; one that is laid bare for all to see."—*Just About Write*

"*Chance* is not a novel about the music industry; it is about a woman discovering herself as she muddles through all the trappings of fame."—*Midwest Book Review*

*Sweet Creek* "...is sublimely in tune with the times."—*Q-Syndicate*

"*Forever Found*...neatly combines hot sex scenes, humor, engaging characters, and an exciting story."—*MegaScene*

*Shield of Justice* is a "...well-plotted...lovely romance...I couldn't turn the pages fast enough!"—Ann Bannon, author of *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*

*The 100th Generation* is "...filled with ancient myths, Egyptian gods and goddesses, legends, and, most wonderfully, it contains the lesbian equivalent of Indiana Jones living and working in modern Egypt."—*Just About Write*

*Sword of the Guardian* is "...a terrific adventure, coming of age story, a romance, and tale of courtly intrigue, attempted assassination, and gender confusion...a rollicking fun book and a must-read for those who enjoy courtly light fantasy in a medieval-seeming time."—*Midwest Book Review*

"*Of Drag Kings and the Wheel of Fate*'s lush rush of a romance incorporates reincarnation, a grounded transman and his peppy daughter, and the dark moods of a troubled witch—wonderful homage to Leslie Feinberg's classic gender-bending novel, *Stone Butch Blues*."—*Q-Syndicate*

In *Running with the Wind* "...the discussions of the nature of sex, love, power, and sexuality are insightful and represent a welcome voice from the view of late-20-something characters today."—*Midwest Book Review*

"Rich in character portrayal, *The Devil Inside* is an unusual, unpredictable, and thought-provoking love story that will have the reader questioning the definition of right and wrong long after she finishes the book."—*Just About Write*

*Wall of Silence* "...is perfectly plotted and has a very real voice and consistently accurate tone, which is not always the case with lesbian mysteries."—*Midwest Book Review*

## **By the Author**

Bareback

Long Shot





# LONG SHOT

*by*

D. Jackson Leigh



2010

# **LONG SHOT**

**© 2010 By D. JACKSON LEIGH. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.**

**ISBN 10: 1-60282-140-0E**

**ISBN 13: 978-1-60282-141-5E**

THIS ELECTRONIC BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY  
BOLD STROKES BOOKS, INC.  
P.O. BOX 249  
VALLEY FALLS, NY 12185

FIRST EDITION: MARCH 2010

THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION. NAMES, CHARACTERS, PLACES, AND INCIDENTS ARE THE PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION OR ARE USED FICTITIOUSLY. ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, BUSINESS ESTABLISHMENTS, EVENTS, OR LOCALES IS ENTIRELY COINCIDENTAL.

THIS BOOK, OR PARTS THEREOF, MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM WITHOUT PERMISSION.

---

## **CREDITS**

EDITORS: SHELLEY THRASHER AND STACIA SEAMAN

PRODUCTION DESIGN: STACIA SEAMAN

COVER DESIGN BY SHERI (GRAPHICARTIST2020@HOTMAIL.COM)

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank my partner for her proud support. I will never forget her part in rallying our friends to make my very first book signing for *Bareback* a huge success. I also deeply appreciate her willingness, when the writing fever hits, to give up some of the few precious hours we have together each week.

I want to thank my sole beta reader, Gail. She is one of the few truly good people among the flawed masses. You can count on her to bake a ham for someone who is ill, or to sit for months at the bedside of the dying, or to read your manuscript at the last minute despite her more pressing, more important work.

Thanks again to Cindy, for answering pesky veterinarian questions at odd hours.

Thanks to Jennifer Knight for saying “I know you can do better” when I was only in the proposal writing process for *Long Shot*. You were right.

I deeply appreciate my editor, Shelley Thrasher. Her insightful coaching made the editing process a pure pleasure and, most certainly, my book better.

Finally, I kiss the ring of the Queen of Romance, Radclyffe, for nurturing writers and constantly feeding all who are hungry to escape into a world where the important characters are like us.



## Dedication

For Angie,  
The sweet tea in this Southerner's life



## CHAPTER ONE

Sweat trickled down Tory Greyson's back. It was unreasonably hot even for July, and Tory hunched over the horse's foot clamped firmly between her knees, shaving away the excess hoof.

It had never occurred to her before how vulnerable she was in that position—her ass in the air and her head nearly between her knees—at least not until the warning came.

"You better get away from my horses."

Tory looked over her shoulder, into the glare of the sun, toward the threatening voice.

She didn't see anyone but the sweet old lady she had talked to earlier. Correct that: The sweet old lady with a shotgun aimed right at her.

A shot rang out and a spray of buckshot rained against the barn wall next to Tory. The horse bolted, sending her tumbling across the ground. Before she could scramble to her feet, another shot exploded and the dirt in front of her kicked up in a dozen places. Weighted down by her heavy farrier's apron, she half crawled, half ran around the end of the barn and dove inside.

"Holy Mother! Thank God she's a bad shot," Tory muttered.

She crouched behind some bales of straw and grabbed her cell phone from her belt to dial 911.



The day had started out well enough. Tory's busy equine veterinary practice, nestled in the foothills near Charlottesville, Virginia, spanned

three counties that were dotted with more tiny farms than she could ever hope to visit or even spot from the road. However, her appointments today were thankfully within a ten-mile radius, in territory with which she was somewhat familiar.

Her first appointment was quick. In and out. But it was the last to go smoothly.

The second client wanted her to look at another horse not scheduled in her appointment book. Then the third client overslept and Tory had to wait twenty minutes for him to bring the horse that needed vaccinations up from the pasture.

So when a friend at the sheriff's department asked her to check out a report of neglected horses, Tory knew her schedule was doomed. She should have called her secretary, Joyce, and had the appointment set for later in the week. But she did occasional work like this pro bono for the county, and the site was only a mile away from the barn she'd just left. She would stop by and give up the thirty minutes she had scheduled to catch up on her paperwork while she ate a sandwich.

Her white Chevy Tahoe, loaded with heavy cabinets and veterinary supplies, bounced and swayed through the potholes of the deeply pitted gravel drive. It led to a modest ranch-style home and a weathered barn that tilted slightly to the left. Two horses and a very fat pony grazed in a weed-choked pasture. Tory sighed and prepared to deliver her "horses are not goats; they have to have the right kind of grass" lecture.

She rang the doorbell at the house and knocked several times without response. But as she was stepping off the porch, the door swung open to reveal a slight, sweet-faced elderly woman.

"Oh! I thought maybe Leah had forgotten her key." The woman combed her fingers nervously through her short gray curls and peered at Tory. "Are you a friend of Leah's?"

"No, ma'am. I'm Tory Greyson. I'm a veterinarian. I came out to check on your horses."

"Goodness. Are they okay?" The woman turned toward the pasture and shaded her eyes against the sun.

"I haven't looked at them yet. Can you tell me the last time they were vaccinated?"

The woman's speech was slow and halting as she struggled to respond. "Oh, dear. Let's see. Herbert Adams comes out every year. I'm



not sure what month. He likes my pies. I always bake him a chocolate one. Do you like pie?"

Herbert Adams was a local veterinarian who had been dead for at least six years.

"Yes, ma'am. I do like pie, but I'm sort of in a hurry, and I need to look at your horses."

"Horses?"

"There, in the pasture."

"Oh, I don't think I want to sell them, but you can take a look."

Tory was beginning to understand the report that the animals might be endangered because the owner was mentally impaired. Despite her shattered schedule and need to be efficient, Tory couldn't be rude to this sweet little woman.

"Are you the only one here?" she asked patiently.

"My granddaughter is visiting. She came all the way from Tennessee. No, not Tennessee..." The exact place seemed too difficult to summon from her memory, so she abandoned the effort and simply smiled up at Tory.

"Can I talk to your granddaughter?"

"Oh, she lives in Dallas, Texas." The elusive location seemed to suddenly pop through her recall block and the woman giggled. "She wears cowboy boots."

"Is she in the house?"

The woman looked through the open door a moment, as if checking for the missing granddaughter, then recall clicked in again. "She went to the store."

Well, they were making progress.

"Okay. I'll just look the horses over to make sure they're healthy, and then I'll be on my way."

"That's fine, dear. You go ahead. I'll tell her that Willie is out looking at the horses."

Tory didn't see much sense in trying to correct the name mistake, so she smiled and waved as she headed toward the pasture gate.

The pony limped over as soon as Tory stepped into the pasture. The two horses, grazing farther away, hurried over just in case she was handing out treats or grain.

She checked them carefully. Their teeth needed filing, but not so

badly that it had to be done today. Their hooves needed trimming. Since they weren't wearing shoes, she wouldn't need to call a farrier. She could do a quick trim job.

Despite the weeds, a good base of nutritious grass flourished, and the animals did not look malnourished. In fact, the pony was much too fat and stood slightly rocked back on his hindquarters. Horses normally supported the majority of their bulk on their front legs, so shifting his weight meant his front feet were sore. This could be a problem.

The pony stood patiently while Tory examined his feet. The soles were warmer than normal, and the rings of discolor on the hoof wall showed that this guy had suffered from founder before. Caught early, this inflammation of the hoof caused by too much protein could usually be remedied by a strict diet and anti-inflammatory drugs. Left untreated, it could permanently cripple the animal so badly that it would have to be euthanized.

So, it was a good thing for the pony that Tory had stopped by. At least that was what she told herself as she crouched behind some dusty bales of straw and waited for a sheriff's deputy to arrive and save her from Sniper Granny.

She could hear the woman struggling with the gate. *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!* If Sniper Granny had followed her into the back of the barn, Tory could have run out the front and maybe made it to her truck. Leaving the pasture through the gate put her stalker in the position to block any escape.

Tory strained to hear. Was a vehicle coming up the drive? That was a fast response, especially for the deputies around Cherokee Falls. She listened as the tires crunched slowly along the gravel and finally came to a stop. At the sound of a car door slamming, she slipped out from her hiding place and waited for a stern "drop that gun." Instead, a lilting, feminine voice floated her way.

"Hey, Gram. How was your nap?"

*Her nap? Sniper Granny is standing there with a smoking shotgun and this person wants to know about her nap time?*

The voice took on a worried tone. "Sugar, what are you doing with that gun? Whose truck is that?"

Tory cautiously edged forward to peek out of the barn. She wasn't anxious to be a target again. Sniper Granny was standing next to an

equally petite young woman dressed in cut-off jeans, a tight black T-shirt that said “Journalists love issues,” and Western boots. *Boots and shorts? Must be the granddaughter from Texas.*

“She was trying to shoot me,” Tory shouted from the doorway of the barn.

“Someone’s in the barn,” Gram said. “Trying to steal the horses.”

“Let me have the gun, and stand back, Gram. I’ll take care of this.”

Daisy Duke calmly returned her bag of groceries to her Jeep Wrangler and took the gun from the old lady. She cradled it in the crook of her arm, barrel pointed toward the ground like someone completely comfortable around weapons. Standing in front of the barn, legs spread in the defiant stance of a gunslinger, she demanded, “All right, horse thief. Come out with your hands up. Try anything funny and I’ll fill your butt with buckshot before you can spit.”

Tory shook her head, but held her hands where they could be clearly seen and stepped out into the sun.

“Put your hands on top of your head and turn around and spread ’em.” Daisy Duke grinned at Sniper Granny. “I’ve always wanted to say that.”

Tory put her hands on her hips and glared at the woman. “No, I will not. This is ridiculous. Your grandmother tried to kill me. She shot at me twice and nearly hit me.”

“You are trespassing on her farm.” The gun’s muzzle lifted, and so did Tory’s hands.

At the sound of tires again crunching over gravel, they all turned to see a sheriff’s cruiser carefully navigating the driveway.

“Fine. We’ll let the police sort this out,” Tory said.

“Gram, did you call the police, sugar? I told you to call me, not the cops again.”

Gram shifted nervously and wrung her hands. “They were trying to steal my horses.” She hurried over to the gate and peered into the pasture.

“I called the police. She had me penned down in the barn, trying to kill me,” Tory yelled in exasperation.

“Will you shut up? Can’t you see you’re upsetting her? You come out here and start poking around in her barn. How is she supposed to

know you aren't stealing her horses? And while we're talking about it, what were you doing in there? Maybe you *were* trying to steal something."

Tory opened her mouth to explain, but apparently the question was rhetorical. Daisy Duke barely drew a breath before continuing her tirade.

"You might be dangerous, somebody who preys on the elderly, scamming them out of their horses and selling the poor animals to the dog-food factory. Well, you picked the wrong mark today, lady, because Gram was one step away from tacking your hide to the side of the barn. That should make you think twice about coming on this property again, trying to steal our horses." She turned to the tall, lean deputy who had parked his cruiser and was ambling over. "Lock her up, Jimmy. There's got to be some kind of law about scaring little old women to death."

"Look who's here. Hey, Leah."

Satisfied that the horses were fine, Gram returned to the group. "Oh, dear. I wasn't expecting so much company today. I would have baked some pies." Gram peered at the deputy. "Do I know you?"

"Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Montgomery. I'm Jimmy. Buddy's boy." He removed his Stetson to give her a better look.

Gram stared, but showed no sign of recognition. Leah wrapped a comforting arm around her grandmother's shoulders.

"I think there's still a pie left in the fridge. Remember the ones I helped you bake the other day? Why don't you go see. We'll all come in and have some."

Gram nodded and obediently headed for the house.

"Can I help you take your groceries in?" Jimmy asked Leah.

"Thanks, I can get them. How's Angela?"

"She's great. We're expecting a baby in September."

"That's so wonderful. I knew y'all were meant for each other."

"How long are you in town for?"

Leah ran her fingers through her hair to brush it back from her face and sighed. "As long as it takes to figure out what to do about Gram's situation. I'm afraid it's getting to the point that she can't live alone anymore."

"You gonna move back here to live with her?"

“God, no. There’s nothing for me to do in this little-bitty town.”

Jimmy returned his hat to his head, shielding his eyes from the sun. “Oh, yeah. I forgot you were a big-time newspaper reporter now.”

Tory stared in disbelief. They were chatting like she wasn’t even there.

“Hello,” she said loudly. “I’m the one who called the police.”

Jimmy turned to Tory as though he had just noticed her.

“Hey, Doc. Sorry. You okay? I’d have met you out here if I knew you were coming right away.”

“No, I’m not okay. I’m an hour late for a paying appointment because Sniper Granny was shooting at me, and then Daisy Duke here shows up and holds me at gunpoint.”

“Is that a crack about my boots? Because I can still fill your butt full of buckshot.”

Jimmy laughed. “Daisy Duke. That’s a good one.”

Leah glared at him, so he apparently decided it was time to make introductions.

“Leah Montgomery, this is Dr. Tory Greyson. Animal Control got a call from a neighbor who was afraid Mrs. Montgomery wasn’t able to take care of the horses anymore. So we asked Dr. Greyson to stop by and take a look at them. Dr. Greyson, this is Leah Montgomery, Mrs. Montgomery’s granddaughter.”

“I told you I wasn’t a horse thief,” Tory insisted to Leah.

“Well, duh. That wasn’t hard to figure out. The sign on the side of your truck says Greyson Veterinarian Services.” Leah gestured to the farrier’s apron that Tory still wore. “And I don’t expect too many thieves trim hooves before they steal the animals.”

Tory ground her teeth in frustration. “So, if you had it all figured out, what was the Rambo act for?”

Leah smiled sweetly. “Just indulging my cop fantasy. You’re lucky I didn’t have any handcuffs.”

Tory gave a disgusted grunt and reached around to release the apron’s buckle at the small of her back.

“You sure you’re okay, Doc?” Jimmy asked. “Mrs. Montgomery didn’t mean nothing by it. She just gets confused.”

“I think my hip is bruised from landing on my keister when the horse took off on me, but I’m okay.”

She pulled the apron off with one hand and rubbed her sore backside with the other. Tory winced and stared at her hand. It was covered with blood.

“Christ! She did hit me.” Tory glared at Leah. “Now I’m going to have to spend the afternoon in the emergency room.” She turned for them to see her bloody jeans.

Leah scowled. “How bad can it be if you didn’t even know you were hit?”

“I could be in shock.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. You aren’t even bleeding that badly. I’ve seen gunshot wounds before, and they bleed a lot more than this. Maybe a nail snagged you in the barn.”

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to let my doctor figure that out.”

Jimmy was looking worried now. “Uh, Doc? You sure you want to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Go to the hospital.” Jimmy shuffled his feet. “What I mean is, if you see a doctor, and they dig some pellets out of your backside, I’ll have to write a report and arrest Mrs. Montgomery.”

“Arrest Gram? Oh, no, Jimmy.” Leah turned on Tory. “I can’t believe you would have a sweet old lady arrested and booked like a common criminal just because you came out here and scared her to death.”

“Leah.” Jimmy grabbed her by the arm and pulled her several paces away. He spoke urgently, low enough that Tory couldn’t make out what he was saying.

She limped over to the back of her truck and opened the cabinet containing her medical supplies. Pulling out a small mirror, she held it behind her to see just how much blood she was losing. She glanced at Jimmy and Leah.

Leah stared at the ground, blinking as she listened to what he was saying. After a moment, she nodded, then headed toward Tory.

She didn’t speak at first. They just stood and watched Jimmy put the gun in his car and carry Leah’s groceries into the house. Tory didn’t plan to make this easy for her. She waited until Leah finally cleared her throat and spoke.

“Look, I’m really sorry. Gram, well, her dementia is getting much

worse. Some mornings she doesn't even recognize me at first. I didn't know she had a gun in the house."

Leah's rich, lilting accent flowed like honey when she pronounced words like *shoo-gur*. When she nervously ran her fingers through her shoulder-length brown hair, Tory noticed the way the sun glinted off the blond highlights.

"Do you think maybe we could take a look and see how bad you're hurt? I...I don't know that Gram could handle being taken down to the police station. Unfamiliar places freak her out. I would really appreciate it. I, um, sent Jimmy into the house, so maybe..." Leah gestured toward Tory's backside.

This certainly was a change from her earlier cocky attitude, but Tory could see the flash of real fear in Leah's darting brown eyes. She slowly pulled a bloody calendar from her back pocket and laid it on the bumper. A pellet was imbedded in its pages and two more holes had pierced it. That put the snagged-on-a-nail theory to rest.

Tory hesitated.

"I'm a girl, too, you know."

"Yeah. I sort of noticed."

"Don't be bashful, Doc. Drop 'em."

Tory obediently turned and lowered her jeans.

"Oh, my."

"Is it that bad?" Tory grabbed the mirror again to see for herself.

"No-o-o-o. In fact, that's a cute little tush you've got there, Doc."

"For Christ's sake."

"But I'm afraid that little leprechaun tattooed on your cheek may be mortally wounded."

Tory felt a blush rise up her neck. "It seemed like a good idea when I was a drunk undergrad at Notre Dame," she muttered, handing Leah a gauze pad soaked with hydrogen peroxide.

"I'll just bet. A good Catholic girl, huh?"

Tory ignored the question as Leah carefully wiped the blood away with the gauze.

"It got you in two places, but looks like the pellets are just under the skin and the bleeding has pretty much stopped."

"Christ. I'll have to go to the hospital. Those pellets have to come out or they'll get infected."

“Don’t you have all the stuff here in your truck that a doctor has?”

“Yeah, but I can’t exactly see my backside to dig them out.”

“Maybe I can do it. I can feel them right under the skin.”

Tory closed her eyes for a prayerful moment, then held on to her pants with one hand while she used the other to dig a bottle of numbing agent and a syringe out of the truck’s supplies.

“I’m not letting you do this while I can still feel it.” She drew the liquid into the syringe with a practiced hand. “Take that cotton and soak it with the iodine-looking stuff in that bottle. Swab the area really well. Gently.”

When Leah was done, Tory handed her the syringe.

“What do you want me to do with this?”

“I want you to stick it just under the skin around the entry wounds. Push the plunger slowly. It stings less that way.”

“Can’t I just kiss it and make it better?”

Tory rolled her eyes.

“Okay. I can do this. I’ve jumped out of airplanes and eaten bugs in the desert just to get a story. I can stick this needle in your butt.”

Resting her head against the truck, Tory tried to concentrate on relaxing her hip and waited.

“I can’t do it.”

“What do you mean, you can’t do it?”

“I can’t stick this needle into your skin. I just can’t do it.”

Tory thumped her head against the truck several times in exasperation. “This is ridiculous. I’ll go to the emergency room. Then Gram goes to jail, gets a big butch girlfriend, a prison tattoo, and starts chain-smoking. Ow!”

“Guess I can do this.”

“Geez, that stings. Slowly, push the plunger slowly.”

“Sorry, sorry. You need to relax. Your glutes are hard as a rock. That makes it harder to stick the needle in.”

Tory sighed in relief when her hip was thoroughly numb, and Leah handed the syringe back. She filled another with antiseptic and handed Leah a hemostat clamp.

“Stick this clamp into the entry wound until you feel the pellet.



Close the clamp around it and pull it out. Then take this syringe, stick it in the hole, and flush it out really well.”

“Are you sure you can’t feel this?”

“I can’t feel a thing.”

“Okay. Here goes.”

Tory closed her eyes and tried to stay relaxed until she heard the plunk of a pellet on the top of the cabinet next to her.

“I dated a medical student once who used clamps like this as roach clips when she smoked pot,” Leah said absently as she worked.

At the sound of a second plunk, Tory opened her eyes. She handed Leah a gauze bandage and some tape to secure it, then waited for permission to pull her pants up and regain her dignity.

“Well, it wasn’t brain surgery, but I think the leprechaun will live,” Leah announced.

“Thanks,” Tory muttered.

When she looked up, Leah was staring at her.

“What?”

“Your eyes are the same green as the tattoo on your butt.”

“I’m not sure how to take that.”

Leah was dismissive. “It’s just an observation. It doesn’t mean anything. I’m a journalist. That’s what I do. I observe things.”

Tory began to fill more syringes with medication and hand them one by one to Leah.

“Then you can observe and assist while I finish examining the horses.” After a few quick vaccination injections and drawing blood, Tory pulled her clipboard from the truck and started a record for the horses.

“Next time, will you call me before you come out? I didn’t even know Gram had made an appointment with you.”

“She didn’t.”

Realization dawned in Leah’s eyes as she apparently thought back at what Jimmy had said about Animal Control, and her face flushed with anger.

“You *did* come here to take her horses, didn’t you?”

“The county asked me to make sure they weren’t being neglected. It’s a good thing they did. The pony is developing a dangerous case of

founder. You need to get him off that pasture, and I'll leave you an anti-inflammatory that you can give him in a handful of grain every day. All three horses seem to be in good condition, but the county requires that they be vaccinated."

"That's a pretty sweet deal for you, isn't it? Business gets slow and all you have to do is get them to send you out. You line your pockets by probably overcharging some poor old lady for vaccinations just because she can't find her records. Do you have to give the county a kickback or do you get to keep all the money? Maybe I should charge *you* for picking buckshot out of your butt."

"Then I guess you'd have to explain to the court why you were performing unlicensed surgery." Tory calmly handed the sheet she had been filling out to Leah. "The work I do for the county is pro bono. So, no, there is no kickback."

Leah stared at the paper. It was a record of the vaccinations for each horse with a zero balance in the "amount owed" column. Without a word, she marched over to her Jeep, grabbed a small travel pillow, and marched back. Tory barely caught the pillow when it hit her in the chest.

"For the leprechaun," Leah growled before she stomped into the house.

## CHAPTER TWO

At her next stop, Tory pulled the equipment she would need from the backseat of her truck and headed for the barn. This was one of her biggest accounts, next to the Cherokee Falls Equestrian Center. It was also one of her favorites.

She called out to locate the barn's owner as she entered the cool interior of the breeding facility, but a loud whinny answered her instead.

A large, burly man emerged from the barn office. "How come he never acts that glad to see me?"

"Because you aren't always carrying an artificial vagina under your arm," Tory said.

Carl Haskel laughed. "You're right about that, Doc. I'm glad you could work us in today. I've got a dozen orders for Trojan's little golden swimmers and not enough in the freezer to fill them all."

"Let's get to work then," she replied, thankful that her hip was still numb.

The mare brought in to tease the stallion was in full season, so Trojan reached erection quickly. Carl led the teaser away as Tory sprinkled some of the mare's hormone-filled urine onto a padded breeding dummy and led the stallion to it. Trojan mounted the dummy easily and Tory quickly shoved his penis into the artificial vagina to collect his ejaculate. She nodded approvingly as she held up the collection container. "Man, this guy puts out a lot. I can see why he's your moneymaker."

While Carl put the now-docile stallion in his stall, Tory stepped into the next room that served as a small lab. She made a quick slide of the sperm they had collected and shoved it under a microscope.

"Yep, this is a great sample," she told Carl when he returned. "I should charge you a percentage of what you make off Trojan instead of my flat fee for giving him a hand job. You can probably breed ten mares with this one ejaculation."

Carl shook his head and began dividing the sperm into tubes he would label and cool for shipping. His wife, Cheryl, appeared in the doorway.

"Hey, girl. I saw your truck come by the house. How'd it go?"

The Haskels were more than just clients. She counted them as friends. "Trojan was great, as usual. This should more than take care of the orders you have waiting."

"You're not in a hurry, are you?"

"I'm always in a hurry and constantly behind schedule."

"Then tell me quickly what you've been up to." Cheryl pulled a bottle of water from the fridge while Tory cleaned her equipment in the sink. "Who are you dating?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I don't have time for dating right now."

"How are you ever going to settle down and give your mother grandchildren if you don't date?"

"You've been talking to her again."

"I might have seen her in the grocery store." Cheryl's eyes gleamed. "My cousin just moved here to teach at the college."

"Cheryl, no. I can understand why my mother pesters me, but I don't understand why you're so interested in my love life."

"I'm practicing for when my daughter is old enough. My cousin could use someone to show her around town."

"You can show her around town yourself."

"What else do you have to do?"

"I'm loaded down with work." Tory cupped her hand and demonstrated an up-and-down motion. "Lots more hand jobs to give."

Carl chuckled.

Cheryl wasn't that easily put off the subject. "You'd make some

girl a really nice partner. You're good-looking and own a successful business."

"Yes, Yenta, but does she have a dowry?" Tory said with an affected accent. *Fiddler on the Roof* was one of her favorite musicals, but right now she felt like she was starring in it.

"I'm serious." Cheryl studied Tory. "You need to stop hanging out with Skyler Reese. She goes through girls like a kid through candy. People who don't know you might think you're the same way because you run around with her."

"Now you really sound like my mother. Let me reiterate. I'm too busy keeping my practice profitable. Anyway, Skyler isn't running around anymore. She's been off the market for a while now."

"You're kidding."

"I guess I can stop dreaming about that threesome now," Carl said.

"As if," Cheryl said, punching him hard on his big shoulder.

"Yep. Jessica has her locked up tight."

"Kate Parker's Jessica? The one Sky was training?"

"That would be the one. I'm surprised you hadn't heard." Cherokee Falls really wasn't that small, but the horse community was when it came to keeping anything private.

"Well, I don't exactly travel in your circles. I can't believe you haven't told me before now."

Tory laughed. "I'm your vet, not your gossip columnist."

"If Skyler can settle down, then you can, too."

"Go play matchmaker with some friends who play on your team—straight girls."

"Are you saying I should treat you differently because you're gay?"

Carl jumped in. "Your *team* wants the same legal right to marriage. You should also have to endure the meddling from friends and relatives that goes along with it."

Cheryl cast a sideways glare at him. He shrugged off her look, and she turned her attention back to Tory.

"My cousin is up at the house. She's staying with us until she finds a place of her own."

“No.”

“She’s really pretty.”

Tory collected her equipment and waved as she backed out of the room to escape from Cheryl. “Gotta go.”

Just as she whirled to head out the door, she smacked into a warm body, sending the person and the equipment in Tory’s hands flying. She blinked at the woman sprawled on the barn’s clay hallway.

“Oh, God. I’m sorry.” Tory moved quickly to help the woman up, and they both began to gather her scattered equipment. “I should have been watching where I was going.”

“Really, it’s fine. I should have said something to let you know I was walking up behind you.” The woman held out her hand. “I’m Bridgette LeRoy, Cheryl’s cousin.”

Tory juggled the various items she was trying to keep under control to return the handshake. “Tory Greyson, Carl and Cheryl’s clumsy veterinarian.” Just as they shook hands, the two-foot-long tube Tory was holding slipped from her grasp and Bridgette neatly caught it.

“What exactly is this?”

“It’s an artificial vagina...for horses. I came by to collect Trojan’s sperm for shipping.”

Bridgette’s expression was odd, but she calmly returned the device to Tory and discreetly pulled a tissue from her pocket to wipe her long, slender fingers. Tory chuckled.

“Don’t worry. It’s a little damp because I just cleaned it. There was nothing on the outside anyway, except my fingerprints.”

Bridgette gave her a crooked little smile and folded the tissue before sliding it back in the pocket of her loose drawstring pants. She *was* pretty. Very pretty. Her curly dark blond hair framed her delicate features and draped over her slender shoulders.

Cheryl stood in the doorway. “As I said earlier, Tory, I thought you may like to show Bridgette our town.”

“Cheryl, I’m sure I can manage to do some exploring on my own. Tory may have other things to do.” Though Bridgette protested, her eyes seemed warmly hopeful.

“No, I’d be happy to play tour guide,” Tory said quickly.

“I don’t want to put you out, but if you really don’t mind, I’d like that.”

They smiled at each other, and Tory knew exactly what her friends were thinking.

Cheryl smiled. Mission accomplished.

Carl smiled. When his wife was happy, his life was always easier.

Tory jumped when the pager on her belt vibrated. She didn't bother to check it. Her next appointment was probably getting anxious because she was almost two hours late.

"Uh, how about tomorrow night? We can grab dinner somewhere. I'll show you around a bit and maybe we can catch a late movie."

"That sounds good," Bridgette said. "But I'll have to check to make sure I don't have a reception or something to attend at the college. They make you go to a lot of stuff like that when you're new faculty. Can I let you know tomorrow morning?"

"Absolutely. I've got to run, but Cheryl has my phone number and e-mail address. Just let me know what time I can pick you up."

She quickly exited the barn and hopped into her truck, then grimaced when she hit the seat. Christ, her hip was sore.

She dialed up her clinic, and Joyce answered.

"Can you call my next appointment and tell them I'm on the way?"

"Hello, Dr. Greyson. I'm fine. Thank you for finally calling in today and asking how things are going."

Tory chuckled at Joyce's sarcasm. She would be lost without her. Joyce balanced the practice's books and kept Tory's schedule running as smoothly as possible.

"I'm sorry. How is your day going? Better yet, tell me how my day is going."

"Your day is going better than you thought. I've just rescheduled your three o'clock appointment for tomorrow, so you are now on time for your five o'clock appointment. I also sent flowers to your mother for her birthday."

"Geez, I totally forgot."

"Well, she won't know that. The flowers have your name on them, of course."

"I'm forever in your debt."

"I'll add it to your tab."

"Thank you. And thanks for getting me back on schedule. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Just remember that the next time you write a check for my bonus."

"I don't give you a bonus." Tory laughed.

"Exactly. Oh, one more thing...let's see." Tory could hear papers shuffling. "Leah Montgomery called and asked for an estimate for a farm call, vaccinations for three horses, and a bottle of bute. She didn't ask for an appointment, though."

"That's the county call I went on earlier. I told her I don't charge for those calls."

"I spend half my time making collection calls to clients who won't pay their vet bills. How can I make you rich if you don't accept money from a client who wants to pay?"

"Did you give her a total?"

"Yes, I did. She said she'd put a check in the mail today."

"Then I want you to write a check to her from my account for the same amount and mail it."

Joyce sighed. "If you don't want her money, I'll just tear up her check or send it back."

"No. I want you to send her a check from me. On that check, I want you to write 'For surgical services.'"

"Oh. She's a doctor?"

"Not exactly. It's a long story I'll have to tell you later."

"Okay. You're the boss."

"I'm glad you finally realized that."

"I just said it to make you feel good."

"Later, Joyce."

"Bye, boss."

Tory's thoughts swirled as she drove to the next farm. She had barely noticed any woman since Jessica chose Skyler over her. But the two she'd met today had awakened a throbbing interest she hadn't felt in more than a year. She laughed aloud. The throbbing she felt was probably just the pellet holes in her butt.



## CHAPTER THREE

It was three in the morning, and Leah was bone tired. She had spent the afternoon making provisions to keep Nighty as comfortable as possible. Then it had taken hours to calm Gram after the excitement of the day.

When Gram was first diagnosed with dementia, Leah had done what she did best. She researched the subject thoroughly. She found medical studies, personal testimonies, and chat rooms on the Internet where people were anxious to share their experiences. They had helped her better understand Gram's disease, and she had collected lots of tips for helping patients and caregivers cope. But she didn't find a method or medicine that would keep her grandmother's once-agile mind from slipping away daily.

She helped her grandmother into a fresh nightgown, tucked her into bed, and dimmed the lights enough that Gram could sleep, but still see if she woke.

"We have to bake some more pies," Gram said.

"Yes, we'll do that tomorrow after you get some sleep," Leah reassured her.

"That Buddy sure can eat. He had three pieces of my chocolate pie."

"Gram, Jimmy was here today. He's Buddy's son," Leah said patiently. It was at least the third time she had explained that fact.

"Jimmy? My goodness, he has sure grown up."

"Yes. He's married now. He married Angela, remember? She's going to have their first baby soon."

"I remember now. You three ran around together when you visited me each summer. You kids had so much fun."

"Yes, that's right." Leah brushed a stray curl back from her grandmother's face.

"I told him not to eat all the pie because Willie would want a piece. Willie loves my pies. But then I remembered that Willie's partial to my lemon meringue, not the chocolate pie. We have to bake a lemon meringue pie for Willie."

"I promise we'll do that tomorrow, sugar."

She turned on the small speaker next to Gram's bed and the sound of ocean waves rolled over them. She had bought the device for Gram after reading that repetitive sounds could soothe agitated dementia patients.

"Willie took me to the seashore once," she said. "It was the best day of my life." Her eyes slowly closed. "We were so in love."

Leah blinked. Her grandfather's name was Earl, not Willie. But Gram was finally asleep. Leah didn't intend to wake her up to ask a lot of questions.

The experts called it "sundowning." Overstimulation like a new environment or unusual excitement during the day could keep dementia patients agitated and awake for more than twenty-four hours. She hated sedating Gram, but she was so exhausted and agitated herself that she'd finally given Gram the sedative her doctor had prescribed. Maybe they both could get some rest now.

Leah grabbed a blanket and pillow, then settled on the old sofa.

It sent shivers down her back to think that Gram had been on her own because nobody realized how much her disease had progressed. When Leah arrived, the house was disarrayed and needed a really good cleaning. Gram had always been petite, but was now waiflike and looked as if she hadn't bathed in a month. Leah had spent hours straightening and scrubbing the house. She stocked the kitchen with fresh groceries and took Gram to have her loose curls cut short so they would be easier to keep neat.

In just the few days she had been there, she also had taken all the precautions she could think of to keep Gram safe. She hid the keys to Gram's old truck and the knobs on the stove so Gram couldn't leave the farm or cook unsupervised. She gave Gram's shotgun to Jimmy to keep

at his house. She also installed small, inexpensive devices that buzzed every time an exterior door was opened.

Still, she worried that she might not hear Gram leave the house if she slept in the guest room. She knew how often the police sent out alerts for Alzheimer's or dementia patients who wandered from their homes or care facilities. Some were found safe. Others wandered onto busy roadways or were found frozen in nearby creeks or ponds. She wouldn't let that happen to Gram.

Leah knew this was only a temporary fix. She couldn't stay and care for Gram indefinitely. She had a life crisis of her own to deal with.

In fact, if she was honest with herself, she wasn't there just for Gram.

As a child, she ran to the farm every summer to escape the frilly dresses and tea parties her mother pushed on her. When she realized as a teen that she was gay, she fled from her conservative Southern Baptist family to her understanding grandmother during every school break. And now, when the life, the independence, the career she had worked so hard to achieve as an adult crumbled from under her, she again retreated to the farm.

Cherokee Falls was still her safe place.



It was nearly noon when hunger roused Leah from the sofa. Gram was still sleeping. Damn, that tiny old lady could snore like a bull.

She rushed through her shower so she could keep an eye on Gram when she woke. Was this how a young mother felt with a baby in the house?

Damn it all. It just wasn't fair. A month ago, she'd had a girlfriend, a great apartment, and a thriving career. The only thing she had to worry about was her pile of parking tickets.

She had grown up with nothing but disapproval. *Get down out of that tree. Put on a dress. Stop being such a tomboy. You should go to a Christian college. Watch your language, young lady. Lesbians are an abomination to God.*

That all changed when she became a journalist.

Clutching her master's degree from the Journalism School at Columbia University five years ago, she talked her way into a job at the *Dallas Morning News*. She worked hard to hone her craft and was soon rewarded with the best, most challenging assignments. In just three years, she earned a spot on the coveted investigative news team.

While the veteran reporters still tended to rely on contacts and interviews to turn up information, Leah was a bit of a technogeek. She used that skill to download huge chunks of information and mine them for proof of corruption and malfeasance. One of the veteran investigative reporters noticed her skill and helped her hone her interviewing technique. He encouraged her to use her cuteness and honeyed accent to her advantage.

After two years under her mentor's wing, she charmed even the toughest politician or government official when she zeroed in on them. And with a desk drawer full of awards, Leah was hunting that big story that could get her nominated for a newspaper Pulitzer.

That's why it was such a shock when the investigative team of four reporters had been reduced to two. The newspaper's executives announced that the soured economy had cut so deeply into their advertising revenue that the company was downsizing. They first froze hiring and pay increases, then offered voluntary buyouts. If the buyouts didn't trim the staff enough, layoffs would be next.

Her mentor, pulling down a hefty salary, was pressured into retiring. As the youngest team member with the least seniority, she was the next to go. They didn't want to lose her altogether, so they offered her the only opening available—editor of their community weeklies. Yeah, like she had worked those long hours so she could spend her days editing stories about Rotary Club luncheons and Eagle Scouts. She took the buyout, a year's salary, and walked.

It shouldn't be too hard to get another investigative job. Right? Wrong.

Bad news for the industry was flowing like blood at Gettysburg—layoffs, salary cuts, and papers for sale with nobody buying.

Leah's professional world—the one place where she seemed to do everything right—was crashing around her.

She pushed the power button on her laptop and waited for it to boot

up. At least it took only a phone call to get online and stay connected with the world outside Cherokee Falls.

As her e-mail loaded, she cocked an ear toward the bedroom. Gram was awake and stirring around. She quickly scrolled through her messages. Most were from friends, wondering if she was coming back to Dallas. A few were from colleagues with more bad news about the industry. The worst, a handful, were replies from the job feelers she had sent out. They loved her résumé, but were in a job freeze or suffering layoffs themselves.

She had a year's salary in her bank account, so she had that long to search, right? Maybe the economy would pick back up and people would start hiring again. But she knew that wasn't true.

Even if the economy suddenly improved, the longer she stayed unemployed, the lower her value dropped in the eyes of those hiring. And although no print journalist wanted to admit it, even when things got better, it would never be the same. The recession had finally pushed the reluctant print media into the arena of cheap digital distribution of news.

If she wanted to have a future in journalism, she needed to figure out a new approach. God, what if she couldn't figure something out and she ran out of money? She sure as hell wouldn't go to her family for help. But she couldn't depend on Gram this time either. Suddenly becoming the caregiver to the woman who had always sheltered her made her feel more isolated, more alone than ever.

She was enjoying a good wallow in her despair when Gram tottered into the kitchen, and Leah burst out laughing.

Gram apparently had found Leah's conditioning mousse and used it a bit too liberally. Her hair was sticking up like an exploded Mohawk. But her grandmother's eyes were clear and her smile brilliant. She laughed with Leah.

"This stuff makes your hair so pretty, I thought I'd try it. I guess I overdid it."

These moments when Gram almost seemed like her old self were increasingly rare and made Leah want to cry for the grandmother she was losing. She motioned Gram over to the kitchen sink.

"How about if we wash this stuff out and start over, sugar?"

Gram nodded and shuffled to the sink while Leah grabbed a towel and the shampoo from the bathroom. The wash job went quickly, and Leah showed Gram how to squirt just a dab of the mousse into her hand and work it through her curls.

“You should just let it dry naturally.” Leah fluffed the gray curls with her fingers while Gram sat in a chair at the small kitchen table.

Gram stared blankly across the kitchen. “I dreamed Willie came to see me,” she said.

“You mentioned Willie last night. Who is he?”

“Willie was the love of my life. But things were different back then, so I married your grandfather. He was a good man.”

“Willie or Grandpa? And why couldn’t you marry Willie?”

Gram didn’t answer. Her gaze was now unfocused.

“We need to bake some pies. Lemon meringue. That’s Willie’s favorite.” She heaved herself from the chair and began pulling ingredients from the refrigerator.

Leah hurried to help. “Where’s your recipe box?”

“I know how to make lemon meringue pies, young lady. I’ve made hundreds.”

Yeah, right, like the first batch of chocolate pies Gram attempted when Leah arrived. Recipes were another memory that she seemed to have lost in the dark crevices of her mind. Now Leah made sure she had the recipe card handy to guide their culinary ventures.

“I know, Gram, but it helps me follow along with you.”

Gram eyed her so suspiciously Leah figured that, in her grandmother’s mind, the granddaughter standing before her was again twelve years old. “I’ve never been able to get you interested in cooking before. All you want to do is ride that pony.” Gram shrugged. “I guess it’s time you learned, though.”

After Leah made a quick trip to the store for some missing ingredients, they mixed, whipped, and baked. They finally slid the pies into the cooling racks, then stepped out onto the broad porch and settled into rocking chairs.

They rocked in peaceful silence. As Leah looked out over the yard, a smile tugged at her mouth. She closed her eyes to focus on the memory that her mind was calling up unbidden—a handsome veterinarian with a very cute leprechaun on a very sexy tush.

She surely wouldn't be here in Cherokee Falls long enough to form any attachments, but that didn't mean she couldn't indulge in a little fantasy.

She opened her eyes and let them drift over to the barn, where she savored the memory of Tory standing there with her hands on her hips, indignant. Damn, that was fun. If she had only had some handcuffs...

She let her gaze drift toward the horses in the pasture—Gram's two thoroughbreds and Nighty.

Nighty! The pony stood in a patch of soft thick grass, his weight noticeably shifted to his hindquarters. At least the pain was keeping him from shifting forward to graze even more.

"Oh, my God. Gram, what's Nighty doing in the pasture?"

"He somehow got himself locked in the barn while you were at the store, so I turned him out."

"Gram, no! He can't go out in the pasture. Remember? I told you he's sick and has to stay in the barn."

"Nighty is sick? Oh, dear. I guess I should call Herbert." She rose from her chair to go inside, but Leah stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"It's okay. I'll put Nighty up. I have some medicine for him. I'll call the vet to see if I should increase the dosage."

Leah slowly led the limping pony into the barn. He hesitated only a moment before folding his legs and lying down to relieve the pressure on his feet. It hurt her to see her childhood friend in so much pain.

She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and punched in the numbers on Tory's card, aware that Nighty's condition wasn't the only reason for her urgency. When she awoke that morning, pleasant dreams of the green-eyed veterinarian and a wounded leprechaun had lingered in her thoughts.





## CHAPTER FOUR

Tory stripped off her latex gloves and threw them on top of the bloody gauze pads piled on the ground next to her. She groaned as she stood and straightened her stiff back and sore hip.

“That should do it. I think she’ll be fine. It didn’t hit anything vital, but it did crack that rib where it entered. I’d put her in the barn for at least a day. Then you’ll need to keep her in a small, quiet paddock to limit her movement until the rib heals.”

“I can’t believe those kids were shooting arrows out behind the barn. What the hell were they thinking?” Skyler glared at the bloody hunting arrow clenched in her hand. A half hour ago, the tip of it had been embedded in the side of the gentle old mare, Summer, that lay snoozing at their feet. They had anesthetized her right there in the pasture. It was a clear, warm day and it was safer than performing the impromptu surgery in a stall where she might stagger into the walls as she was waking up.

Summer had been a mediocre jumper in her youth, but was an excellent brood mare and personal riding horse for Kate Parker, the owner of the Cherokee Falls Equestrian Center.

The center was known for training both horses and riders for a variety of competitions. It was also recognized in certain circles for its Young Equestrian Program, a refuge and rehab for troubled youngsters. Kate became a big sister to Skyler when the program rescued her and her brother from an abusive home. And more than ten years later, she’d rescued Skyler again by hiring her as a trainer when an indiscreet affair got her blackballed as a professional rider on the eventing circuit.

Kate was pleasantly surprised when Skyler turned out to be a natural with the young equestrians now benefiting from the program. So, when she and her partner decided to retire and travel, they'd appointed Skyler as director of the program. They'd turned the Equestrian Center over to the Parker heiress, their daughter Jessica.

Jessica and Skyler were a team. More than that, they were soul mates. That reality still made Tory uncomfortable sometimes.

Tory and Skyler had been friends since they were children. Both stood a shade over six feet tall. Both were dark blondes with similar short, layered haircuts and trim, athletic builds. But that was where the similarity ended. Tory's eyes were evergreen, whereas Skyler's were dark brown. Tory was gregarious and laid-back. Skyler was intense and sometimes brooding. Tory courted girls. Skyler fucked them.

In fact, Tory lost just about every girl she dated to the roguish Skyler. Each time it happened, Tory tamped down her disappointment and excused Skyler's behavior because she knew childhood abuse had caused her flaws. Back then, Skyler constantly tested their friendship, but Tory never let her down.

Unfortunately, Skyler's salvation required that she hurt Tory one more time. Tory was dating Jessica when Skyler stole her heart and Jessica finally healed Skyler's. Tory had once again tucked away her resentment so the three of them could remain close friends.

During the year that her friends had been lovers, Tory had watched Skyler blossom in the loving relationship. She had become so relaxed and open with Jessica at her side that Tory forgot life had taught Skyler to expect to screw up and disappoint the people she cared about most. But today she knew Skyler was blaming herself for letting Kate down by not supervising the program's kids well enough and allowing Kate's favorite horse to be injured.

Tory squeezed Skyler's shoulder reassuringly. "She'll be fine, Sky. She'll be sore for a while. It was an accident. And judging from the kids' tears, they feel worse than Summer does."

Tory's reassurance softened Skyler's scowl. "Shit. I know. But they could have injured another kid instead of a horse. I'm gonna let them worry over it tonight to teach them a lesson."

The equestrian students worshipped Skyler, and her silent treatment

would devastate them. Even as angry as Skyler was, she wouldn't let them suffer long. She'd give in and forgive them. Skyler loved the kids as much as they loved her.

Tory chuckled when Summer let out a long snore. "Let's see if we can wake up the old girl and get her up on her feet."

Summer began to shuffle her legs, and her breathing picked up after an injection to counteract the anesthesia. Tory tickled the inside of the mare's ear and pinched her nose to urge her awake. After a moment, Summer raised her head and Skyler pushed against her side to roll her onto her stomach so she could get her legs underneath her.

"Ugh," Skyler grunted as they helped the swaying horse stand. "We need to cut back on your rations, ya fat thing."

Tory laughed. "Don't be too quick. It was probably that layer of fat that stopped the arrow before it could do any real damage."

The long row of stitches in her side didn't seem to bother Summer. She blinked at them, then sauntered over to a tasty patch of grass.

Tory glanced up toward the barn where a slender fourteen-year-old stood in the doorway. "Don't tell me Jamie was involved in this. I'd think she'd be way too smart to be shooting arrows around horses."

Skyler waved for her young protégé to join them. "Not Jamie. She's just the one the other kids sent to see if Summer's okay and to find out how much trouble they're in."

Tory laughed and slapped Skyler on the shoulder. "You should know all about that. You were forever sending me to find how angry Kate was over some stunt you pulled."

Skyler smiled for the first time since Tory arrived at the farm. "I'd have done the same for you, but you never did anything to get in trouble."

"Later, Sky." Tory chuckled as she walked away.



Tory climbed into her truck and booted up the laptop that sat on the console. It was her newest toy. She could access medical records and transmit billing statements to her office wherever she could find wireless access, and the equestrian center broadcast a strong signal.

She absently flipped screens to her e-mail. A message about her registration at an equine medical conference...her electronic bank statement was available for her viewing...some junk e-mail. Hmm. The labs were back for her next call. What was this? She opened the e-mail with a strange return addy on it. It was from Bridgette. Their date was on. Would Tory pick her up at seven p.m.?

Tory typed a quick confirmation. She clicked "send" and jumped when someone tapped loudly on her truck window.

"Jesus, Jess," Tory grumbled. She thumbed the button to lower the window.

"Hey, stranger."

"Hey yourself."

"Everything going to be okay with Summer?"

"Yeah. She'll be fine. I'll take the stitches out in about ten days."

"Well, if you get too busy, Skyler can do it."

Tory eyed her friend. At five foot six, Jessica was a good seven inches shorter than Tory and Skyler. Her dark hair, pulled back into a French braid, was an attractive contrast to her pale blue eyes.

Tory had met Jessica when she came to Cherokee Falls so Skyler could train her for a spot on the U.S. Equestrian Team. Their quest for the Olympics had failed when Jessica's knee was injured in an accident, ending her professional riding career.

"How's that knee doing?"

Jessica bounced carefully on her toes to demonstrate. "Nearly as good as new. How's the veterinary business?"

"I've been delivering so many foals, I can't remember what it's like to sleep an entire night without interruption."

"That's money in the bank."

"Yeah. But I could use some downtime."

"Good. We're throwing a shindig next Saturday night. We'll have lots of food, soda, wine, and a keg. If you want something else to drink, bring it with you."

"That sounds good," Tory said.

"You can bring a date, you know."

"Maybe I will."

"You will?"

Christ. Was everybody keeping track of how long it'd been since she'd had a date? "Maybe."

"Excellent. The crowd will start arriving around four, but you can come as soon as you get free. We haven't seen enough of you lately."

"I'll see what I can do."

Tory's pager vibrated. She plucked it from her belt and groaned when she read the message.

"Bad news?" Jessica asked.

"An emergency call from the Montgomery farm."

"Over on U.S. 33?"

"Yeah. They've got a Welsh pony trying to founder."

"Not Nighty!"

"Dark Night."

"That's him. Leah always called him Nighty. I hope he's okay."

"You know Leah Montgomery?"

"She spent summers with her grandmother when we were kids, and she rode Nighty over here so we could hang out together. We always had a great time."

"Well, when I went over there yesterday, that crazy old lady got the shotgun after me and I ended up digging a couple of pellets out of my butt."

"She shot you? She actually shot you?"

"I'd drop my pants and show you, but your jealous girlfriend might not understand. It could have been worse if your friend hadn't shown up."

"Leah's in town? That's so cool. Are you going over there now? Invite Leah to the party."

"No way. We didn't hit it off so well. You invite her yourself."

Jessica gave Tory a blank look. "You always get along with everybody."

"Yeah, well. I can't explain it either, but she doesn't like me."

Jessica patted Tory's arm. "She just doesn't know you yet. You're a sweetheart. I'll invite her. Now go to your call."

Tory waved as she turned her truck around.

Normally, she would have phoned when she was paged before she actually drove to a farm. An emergency would put her behind schedule

once again. Normally, that would irritate her. Normally, she wouldn't be happily humming as she pointed her truck toward the Montgomery farm.



The coolness of the darkened barn welcomed Jessica as she searched for her lover. The tense set of Skyler's shoulders brought a smile to her face. Such a worrywart. But Skyler's concern for every animal and every kid was part of what Jessica loved about her. She slipped her arms around Skyler from behind and rested her cheek against her warm back.

"Hey, sweetie. I saw Tory outside. She said Summer will be fine." Jessica could feel the frown even though she couldn't see Skyler's face.

"Crazy kids shooting arrows," Skyler muttered.

Jessica slipped around in front of her and slid into the automatic embrace. "Children learn from making mistakes. But I'm sure you never did anything stupid like that," she teased.

Skyler smiled sheepishly. They both knew she had. Her brother usually had been the unfortunate victim of Skyler's many misadventures. Having heard some of their childhood stories from Tory, Jessica was surprised he'd survived.

"I got Tory to promise she'd come to the cookout Saturday. She actually said she might bring a date."

"She's dating somebody?"

"That's what I came to ask you about. Did she mention any names while she was here?"

"No."

"What did you talk about?"

"We stitched Summer up, and I ranted about the kids."

Jessica laughed and planted a quick kiss on Skyler's lips.

"You two are such guys sometimes."

Skyler tightened her arms around Jessica and pressed her hips forward. "Yeah, but I'm definitely a girl when it counts."

Jessica pulled Skyler's head down and opened to her, humming her pleasure as Skyler's warm tongue swirled languidly around her

own. When she drew back, they gazed at each other fondly. “You are so right about that, lover. I’m very glad you *are* a girl.” She sighed and laid her head against Skyler’s breast. “I just want Tory to have somebody, too. I still feel guilty that she got caught in the middle when we fell in love.”

Skyler kissed the top of Jessica’s head. “I know you do, babe. I do, too. But that’s even more reason for you to stay out of her love life. What could be more humiliating than the woman who dumped you trying to throw you a consolation prize?”

“You know that’s not what I intend.”

“Yeah, but Tory’s pride doesn’t.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because that’s how I’d feel. And, like you said, Tory and I are a lot alike—a couple of butch egos.”

Jessica stepped back and laughed. “Still, Tory said my old friend Leah Montgomery is in town. Those two would be perfect together.”

“Jess...”

“I’m going to invite her to our cookout.”

“Jes-si-ca. Stay out of Tory’s love life.”

“I matched us up, didn’t I? We’d still be dancing around each other if I hadn’t made the first move.”

Skyler wrapped her arms around Jessica again for another long kiss. “Made the first move? Hell, woman, you jumped my bones.”

Jessica winked. “End justifies the means.”





## CHAPTER FIVE

Leah and Gram were still sitting on the porch when Tory pulled up. Gram brightened, combed her fingers through her hair, and pulled off the apron she had been wearing while they baked pies.

“Leah, honey, entertain our company while I freshen up a little,” she said breathlessly.

Leah opened her mouth to say it was just the veterinarian, but the screen door was already slamming shut. Well, damn. She would have never guessed Gram could still move that fast.

She walked out to meet Tory in the yard. Her pulse picked up a bit, but she brushed it off as just being anxious about Nighty.

“I got your page, Ms. Montgomery,” Tory said pleasantly. “What can I do for you today?”

“It’s Nighty. I think he’s getting worse.”

“What’s he doing?”

“He’s lying down a lot now, and when he stands, he hardly puts any weight on his front feet.”

“I guess we should go to the barn and take another look at him.” Tory glanced toward the house. “You promise to protect my backside?”

“You mean from my ninety-pound, seventy-year-old grandmother?”

“That would be her, the one with the shotgun.”

“I promise. Now, shall we take a look, Dr. Greyson?” Leah gestured toward the barn.

“Lead on, Ms. Montgomery.”

“Oh, no, after you, Dr. Greyson. I have to keep an eye on your leprechaun.”

Tory shook her head but started for the barn. Leah trailed, fixing her gaze firmly on Tory’s backside.



Tory was impressed with the provisions Leah had made for the pony. A thick layer of sand had been poured over the hard clay floor of the stall, then covered with a layer of straw bedding, making the surface as soft as possible for Nighty’s sore feet.

“This is nice,” Tory said. “I’m sure it’ll make him more comfortable.”

Leah shrugged. “I read about it on the Internet. I went with sand because I could get it right away. The rubber stall mats it mentioned would have taken at least a week to be delivered.”

Tory nodded and bent to examine the pony’s feet. She frowned as she pulled a hoof pick from her back pocket and began to clean the fresh mud and grass packed against the sole of his foot. Her first instinct was to give Leah a stern lecture, but she took a deep breath and reminded herself to be patient.

“He’s been out in the pasture. He really needs to stay off the grass, Leah. I can’t emphasize that enough. If we don’t get his protein down, the inflammation will dissolve the material that attaches the hoof to the bone and the bone will rotate right out of the bottom of his foot.”

Leah used her fingers to comb her hair back from her face, a gesture Tory was beginning to realize meant she was frustrated.

“I know, I know. I read that, too.” Leah stared at her own feet, as if deciding how much to disclose. When she looked up, Tory could see the guilt in her eyes. “I went to the store for just a few minutes, and Gram apparently turned him out. I didn’t see him until hours later. I’ve explained to her that Nighty has to stay in the barn, but ten minutes later, she’s forgotten it. Damn it, I can’t turn my back on her for a minute.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” Without thinking, Tory gave Leah’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “We can fix this. We’ll increase the bute until he

shows significant improvement. And I just happen to have a spare padlock and hasp in the truck. If you have a screwdriver, we can install it right now.”

“I can go buy a padlock.”

Tory exaggerated a look of panic. “And leave me here with Sniper Granny? No way.”

Leah laughed, but her eyes were a little sad. “You know, if she heard you call her that and could remember shooting at you yesterday, she’d think you were really funny.”

“I am funny, and charming.”

“And modest, I see.”

“I’m sorry about your grandmother. It must be hard to deal with, and I mean no disrespect when I joke about it.”

“It’s okay. It helps to keep a sense of humor.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, their eyes and smiles acknowledging that they actually had been flirting. The moment hung there, then was gone as Leah turned away.

“I’ll go find a screwdriver,” she said over her shoulder.

Tory was digging around in her truck for the lock when Leah returned with the tool and Gram trailing close behind. She was surprised to see Gram dressed in a neatly pressed sky blue dress and sandals as though she was going to church or a party. Gram smiled shyly up at Tory.

“I’m so glad to see you again,” she said.

Tory shot a questioning glance at Leah, who shrugged and gave her head a slight shake.

Tory cleared her throat. “It’s nice to see you again, too. That’s a very pretty dress.”

“Thank you, Willie. I was hoping this is still your favorite color.” She smoothed the dress along her hip.

Leah, her eyes begging, looked over Gram’s shoulder at Tory and silently mouthed, “Play along.”

Tory glanced from one of them to the other. “Yes. Blue is my favorite color,” she said. “You look wonderful in it.”

Gram blushed and ducked her head. “I have some pie in the house if you would like some...lemon meringue.”

“I love lemon meringue pie.”

Gram's eyes twinkled. "I remember."

Tory held up the lock in her hand and gestured to the barn. "I need to install this first, but how about if I come to the house and have some pie before I go?"

Gram touched Tory's biceps. "You're so strong. You're always fixing things around here for me."

"Uh, I really don't mind. I won't be but a minute." Tory began to back toward the barn, grabbing the screwdriver from Leah as she passed her.

Gram gave her a little wave. "I'll get the pie ready."

"We'll be right back, Gram," Leah said.



Tory already had the lock out of the package and was fitting it on the stall door when Leah joined her. "Here, can you hold this in place while I put the screws in?"

They were silent, each buried in her own thoughts. Leah held the lock in place while Tory worked. The last screw secure, Tory straightened and looked over to see Leah struggling not to smile.

"You are so strong," Leah teased, touching Tory's biceps just as Gram had.

"Shut up," Tory growled, but she couldn't stop smiling. "Your grandmother thinks I'm some guy named Willie."

"Oh, no, sugar. Not just some guy. The love of her life, according to her."

"She was flirting with me!"

"I didn't know the old girl still had it in her. I wouldn't worry about it unless she tries to feel you up." She folded her arms over her chest and gave Tory a stern look. "I guess I should ask what your intentions are."

"My intentions?"

"Are you coming to have a piece of pie, or are you planning to stand her up and break my poor old grandmother's heart?"

Tory laughed as they headed back to the house. "Lemon meringue is my favorite."

“Yes, that’s what Gram said when she insisted we bake three of them earlier today.”

Tory put a hand on Leah’s arm to stop her before they went inside. “People will talk, you know,” she said seriously.

Leah’s brow furrowed. “Talk?”

“About the age difference. Your grandmother is forty years older than I am.”

Leah laughed. “I’ll brace the family for the scandal.”

Tory smiled at the sound of Leah’s laugh. It was soft and feathery, like silk against her skin.



Gram was sitting in a rocking chair in the living room, a faraway look in her eyes and the pie apparently forgotten.

“Gram, I thought you wanted to have some pie,” Leah said.

“Oh, I’m too tired to bake anything right now. We’ll do it later.”

“Gram...” Leah stopped midsentence. Gram had closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Leah motioned Tory to follow her into the kitchen. “Would you still like some?”

Tory looked at her watch. She had been here longer than she realized. “I really should go. I have another call that I’m already late for.”

Leah looked as if she wanted to say something, but then wrapped one pie in foil and handed it to Tory. “Here. You can at least take one with you.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s your favorite, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It is.” Tory fingered the foil covering and set the tin on the kitchen counter. She needed to go, but found herself searching for something to prolong the visit. “I heard that we have a mutual friend.”

“We do? Who’s that?”

“Jessica Black.”

Leah brightened. “You know Jess? I haven’t seen her since we were twelve years old. I thought she lived in Atlanta.”

"She lives here now. She's managing the Parker farm."

"What happened to Kate Parker?"

"The floozy ran off with Jessica's mother to Greece and other parts of the world."

Leah laughed with that melodic lilt that made Tory warm in places she didn't need to think about while she was working.

"They're having a cookout next weekend. Jess told me to invite you."

"They?"

"Jessica and her partner, Skyler."

"Skyler is female?"

"Is that a problem?" Had she misunderstood when she thought Leah was flirting?

"Not at all. I guess Jess and I had more in common than horses. We were both going to grow up to like girls."

"Would you like to go?"

"Are you asking me on a date?"

"I...well, yes. Would you like to go with me to their cookout?"

"No. I don't think so."

Tory was stunned. She thought they were getting along really well. She had never been ditched so bluntly. "Okay. No problem," she said in an overly casual tone.

Leah followed as Tory returned to her truck. When she climbed in and started the engine, Leah handed her the foil-covered pie through the open window.

"You forgot your pie."

Tory set it on the seat and put the truck in gear, but kept her foot on the brake because Leah was still propped against the door.

"Look, I'm only here long enough to find a suitable place that can take care of Gram. I don't have time to date, even if it's just a roll in the sheets. And the last thing I want to do is get involved with anyone."

Tory felt the familiar cold sting of rejection. She'd heard many versions of it's-me-not-you. She was getting tired of being nice about it.

"I was just inviting you to a freakin' afternoon cookout, not asking you to move in with me. I thought you might need a break from your

grandmother. And, for your information, I don't do 'just a roll in the sheets.'"

"I can't leave Gram to go anywhere," Leah snapped back.

"Like I said, it's no problem. Call me if the pony gets worse."

Leah stepped back and Tory immediately pulled away and headed down the drive.





## CHAPTER SIX

Tory adjusted her rearview mirror, and the image reflected back at her showed what some people called classic, handsome features. But Tory saw something different. She saw a woman who apparently never quite measured up.

She hadn't realized how much she wanted to spend more time with Leah, until she turned her down. Christ, it wasn't like they had a relationship and Leah dumped her. But the sick feeling in her stomach felt the same.

That was a bit of an overreaction, wasn't it? Maybe she was PMSing. No. Rejection felt the same way no matter how involved she was, like when she found out she wasn't enough for Jessica or any of the other girls who chose Skyler over her.

The real gut punch was that she couldn't blame Skyler this time. The too-cute Leah Montgomery had chosen to sit at home rather than spend time with Tory.

Tory looked at the pie on the seat next to her. She wanted to roll down the window and toss it out on the ground in a fit of anger. Oh, yeah. That would be an incredibly satisfying, but childish thing to do. Being the reasonable adult she had always been, Tory tucked away her resentment and left the pie there. With a loud sigh, she turned her truck down the driveway of her next appointment and forced her thoughts to her date that evening with a very pretty artist.



## D. JACKSON LEIGH

---

Two appointments later, Tory had to finally admit that the visit to the Montgomery farm had wrecked her carefully scheduled day so badly she wouldn't have time to take Bridgette to dinner before the nine p.m. movie. She dialed Bridgette's number, bracing herself for the second letdown of the day.

"Hi, it's Tory."

"Hey, how's your day going?"

"Not that great. An emergency put me way behind schedule, so I don't think I'll be able to pick you up on time. I still have another call before I can change and come by there."

"We could do it another time if you want." Bridgette sounded truly disappointed.

"No. I was looking forward to some downtime and good company. But it's almost six now and the appointment's on the other side of town."

After a moment of silence on the other end of the phone, Bridgette asked, "Where are you now?"

"Uh, about five minutes from your house, but I'm headed in the opposite direction."

"We could save time if you turn around and pick me up now. I could go with you on your last call. Then we can go directly to the movie." Bridgette's tone made it clear this was only a suggestion. "If that's okay with you," she added hastily.

"That's a great idea, if you don't mind me smelling like horses."

Bridgette laughed. "I love the smell of horses. But you have to promise not to make me hold icky things for you."

"Icky things? Oh, you mean like the artificial vagina I had yesterday. No icky things, I promise. I just have to check on a mare and her new foal."

"Wonderful! I love babies."

Bridgette was easy to please.

"I'm turning around, then. See you in a few minutes."



"I'm really, really sorry."

Tory's luck with women today was getting worse. Disaster had already struck during the first hour of their date.

“Stop it,” Bridgette said. “It wasn’t your fault. I should have asked before I tried to help.” She wrinkled her nose at her own pungent odor. “You should see me when I paint. I’m usually covered from head to toe. But I have to admit, paint doesn’t smell like this.”

The foal at the Bartlett Farm seemed healthy enough, but the mare was still having a discharge that indicated a uterine infection. The baby had been a pest, butting Tory and being too curious about her equipment as she worked to flush out the mare’s uterus.

So Bridgette had decided to be helpful and hold the foal back while Tory ministered to the mother. It seemed like a good idea until the baby let out a bleating cry and the protective mother wheeled around, knocking Bridgette and the foal into a large pile of warm manure.

Normally, horse manure was dry and not too nasty. But with the mare’s health off a bit, it was softer and more fragrant than usual. The foal struggled to regain its footing, rolling Bridgette—dressed in a white, gauzy bohemian outfit—around in the droppings even more.

Back in the truck, Bridgette sat forward so the seat didn’t press the reeking shirt against her skin. Despite her brave front, she looked like she would be sick at any minute.

“I know you want to get out of those clothes. My house is less than a mile from here. You could shower there and borrow something clean from me.”

Bridgette looked relieved. “That would be great, if you don’t mind.”



Tory showed Bridgette to the guest bathroom and handed her some clean towels.

“There’s a brush in the shower to scrub your back,” she instructed. “My clothes will probably be a little big on you, but not too bad.”

Bridgette put her hand on the door sill and ran her eyes over Tory’s physique. “They’ll need to be a little big to make up for the differences in our bodies.” She gestured to her hips. “I’m wide where you’re narrow.” She gestured toward Tory’s chest. “And you’re small where I’m not.” Bridgette didn’t bother to close the door before she began to strip.

Tory blushed and turned to stare down the hallway, anywhere to keep her eyes off the now-naked Bridgette.

"My wardrobe is pretty limited. Jeans or sweats?" She was surprised her voice sounded so calm.

"Jeans."

"Polo or button-up?"

"Button-up, I think. Do you have a tank top I could wear under it since I'll be braless?"

"Sure. I've got a drawer full."

Bridgette stepped into the shower and stuck her head out. "You're cute when you blush."

Tory ducked her head as she felt her cheeks redden even more. "I'll put your dirty clothes in the wash," she muttered, grabbing the soiled items and escaping down the hall.

They hadn't even kissed yet. Tory was kind of old-fashioned about courting. Not that it had won her a lot of women. Maybe that was her problem. Maybe she needed to loosen up a little. Bridgette obviously had a more casual attitude about getting up close and personal.

She started the washer and began to place the clothes inside. She groaned and stared at the lace thong panties in her hand before she changed the washer's hot setting to cold.



Tory was relieved when Bridgette emerged from the bathroom fully dressed, apparently getting the message that she was moving a little fast. If they rushed, they would miss only the first fifteen minutes of the movie, but they both agreed they didn't want to have to guess what happened at the beginning. So Tory grabbed a sweet blush wine from among her stock and they headed out.

"Do you like Thai food?"

"Yes. It's one of my favorites."

"I was thinking we could get some takeout and find a picnic spot."

"That's a great idea."

Tory had a hilltop picnic table in mind, one she often used for a lunch spot and some downtime. But when they rode past the community ball fields, blazing with light and swarming with softball players, Bridgette brightened.

“You like softball?” Tory was surprised. She had pictured Bridgette as more of a community-theater kind of person.

“I love softball. Fast pitch, that is.”

“Do you play?”

“I pitched in college.” Bridgette laughed. “What? You think an artist can’t be a jock, too? Do you play?”

“Softball? No, I prefer my knitting circle.” This brought a new round of laughter from Bridgette. “What? You think a veterinarian can’t knit?”

Bridgette was wiping a tear from her face, she was laughing so hard at the idea of Tory sitting in a circle with a bunch of women sharing knitting patterns.

“Okay. Maybe I don’t knit. I played softball before I graduated and opened my practice. Unfortunately, summer is my busy season, so I had to choose between softball and work. I play community basketball in the winter when my workload lightens up.”

Bridgette regained her composure, her eyes following the players on the closest field. “Do you know anybody on the teams out there?”

“I know most of them. How about we pick up the food and come back here? I’ll introduce you around.”

“That’d be wonderful!”



Tory spread a blanket in the grass next to the dugout where her old team was playing. It was a close game and they cheered loudly for Tory’s friends. Afterward, most of the team joined them to watch the next game. Bridgette chatted with the other women, easily making friends and securing an invitation to join their next practice. They needed a new pitcher. The current starter was pregnant and her partner was worried about her getting hit by a line drive while on the mound.

When the last game ended, they said their good-byes and returned to Cheryl and Carl’s farm. Tory hesitated. She had this strange suspicion that Cheryl was peeking out from behind the curtains to watch her walk Bridgette to the door. Bridgette seemed to have the same thought, because she put a hand on Tory’s arm to stop her from getting out of the truck.

“Even though things started out a little bumpy, I had a great time tonight. The picnic and meeting your friends was much better than dinner in a restaurant and a movie.” Bridgette brushed her lips against Tory’s. “I’d like to see you again.”

“Actually, I was planning to ask if you’d like to go to a cookout with me Saturday. A lot of the people you met tonight will be there.”

“I’d love to. This week is going to be really busy. I have to prepare for classes to start soon and find an apartment or house. But I’ll definitely be free by the weekend.”

“Great. I’ll call or e-mail the details.” Warmed by the bottle of wine they had shared, Tory kissed Bridgette with more purpose. When her tongue brushed against the warm lips, Bridgette opened them willingly. Tory was startled by the sudden thought of what it would be like to kiss Leah, and she pulled back.

“Good night,” Bridgette said, not noticing Tory’s discomfort. She gave a small wave before disappearing inside the house.

Tory pressed her hand to her throbbing crotch. What in the world had made her think of Leah while she was kissing Bridgette?

Leah Montgomery and Bridgette LeRoy were like day and night. A hot pepper and a cool drink. A Janis Joplin song and a piano concerto. A bloodred rose and a lavender orchid.

She sighed. She was just exhausted and horny. Once she got home, slipped under the covers naked, and took care of the ache between her legs, she would get a good night’s sleep. That should fix everything.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Leah's job search was going nowhere, so she decided to turn her attention to locating a facility where Gram would be safe and happy. Checking the Internet, she found more assisted-care and extended-care facilities in the area than she would have guessed, given the size of the town. So she called ahead and made an appointment at one of them. Administrators at two others put her off until the next week, but she planned to drive past and see what they looked like from the outside.

She rose early and phoned Gram's oldest friend, Margaret, to ask if she could come sit with her while she was out. Margaret readily agreed.

When she pulled up to Kentwood Extended Care, it reminded her of a one-story elementary school built in the 1970s. The glass double doors opened automatically in deference to wheelchairs, and she found herself at a pleasant enough reception area that resembled a formal living room.

The administrator wasn't more than an inch or two taller than Leah's five-five height. Despite his short stature and balding head, he dressed and moved with the confidence of a man who had once been fairly handsome.

He thrust his hand forward. "Hello. I'm Ralph Brown. Welcome to Kentwood."

Leah returned his firm handshake. "Leah Montgomery," she replied.

“Well, Ms. Montgomery, I understand you are considering Kentwood for your grandmother?”

“I’m visiting several places in the area.”

“Good. You should look around. I’m confident you’ll find Kentwood stacks up well against the rest. We try to provide a homey and safe atmosphere for our residents.”

Mr. Brown led her through cheerful halls lined with bulletin boards announcing appointment times for hair styling, manicures, massages, tai chi classes, and bingo games. Photos of happy residents at birthday parties and holiday celebrations were scattered among the postings. He introduced her to a few who were glad to show Leah their rooms, which held their own furnishings from home.

“We try hard not to feel like an institution. Many of our residents choose to live here because they enjoy the social opportunities and are simply weary of taking care of their own daily needs such as housecleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, and meal preparation. We also have a full medical staff to handle the usual ailments that go along with aging—arthritis, respiratory ailments, and the like,” Mr. Brown explained. “Does your grandmother have any special needs?”

Leah had noticed that none of the exterior doors had locks, so the residents could come and go if they wished. Some residents even had their own cars in the parking lot.

“My grandmother is physically healthy, but suffers from advancing dementia,” Leah explained.

Mr. Brown stopped their stroll toward the dining room and rubbed his chin. “I see. Well, we have special facilities for Alzheimer’s and dementia patients. They require additional safety precautions.”

“Yes, I would think so. I don’t want my grandmother wandering off,” Leah said firmly. “I’d like to see your accommodations for those patients.”

Mr. Brown seemed reluctant but led Leah past the comfortable media room and the elegant dining room with white linen tablecloths. They turned a corner and stopped at some solid double doors, where Mr. Brown punched a code into an electronic pad on the wall, and the doors opened.

This hallway was very different—no bulletin boards on the walls, no pictures. A waist-high handrail extended down both sides of the



hallway. The wall below the rail was painted brown, with textured beige covering the top half. The floors were covered with industrial vinyl.

The rooms were equipped with hospital beds, but some of them also contained personal items like pictures, blankets, or bookshelves. It was lunchtime and most of the patients were eating in their rooms. Several sat in wheelchairs, parked in the hallway to eat their lunches on trays and stare at each other. There apparently was no dining room, but Leah saw a central room with a few plastic tables and chairs and a large-screen television surrounded by several vinyl-covered sofas. The air smelled like a heavy pine-scented disinfectant.

"I know it looks sparse," Mr. Brown began to explain. "But our primary responsibility is to keep these patients safe and clean. That's not easy to do."

Leah nodded. She knew firsthand what a full-time job it was to keep Gram from wandering off or finding something in the house that could harm her.

"We don't encourage the families of these patients to bring a lot from home because the things can go missing. It's not that anyone steals anything, but other patients often mistake things as their own and take them, or the dementia patients tend to give their things away, then forget who has them. The staff just doesn't have time to keep up with it all. As the residents' minds deteriorate, they usually become incontinent. That's why the floors and furniture are surfaces we can sterilize."

"Why are the colors so plain and the walls bare in here?"

"Too much stimulation can agitate the advanced patients. One distressed patient wandering the halls and making a ruckus can stir up a lot of the others, and the staff has to lock them in their rooms to calm down."

They walked past a patient slumped in her wheelchair, asleep. Urine dripped from the chair onto the floor.

Mr. Brown detoured to the nurses' station. "Annette, Mrs. Johnston needs to be returned to her room and changed," he ordered, pointing down the hall.

The nurse looked up from her charting. "Yes, sir. Dot is on her break, but I'll send Corrine as soon as she finishes with Mr. Bracken."

Leah and Mr. Brown stepped closer to the nurses' counter as a

cafeteria worker pushed the lunch-tray rack past them. “You need to send Corrine into Mrs. Morris’s room. Whew! She has done made a mess in that bed,” the worker said.

Corrine ambled toward them, carrying a plastic bag full of soiled laundry. “I swear, if the kitchen serves them cabbage one more time, I’m going to have a come-to-Jesus meeting with that cook. These folks’ old stomachs just can’t digest that stuff.”

Mr. Brown reddened, but remained calm. “Perhaps you could take care of Mrs. Johnston, Annette, while Corrine sees to Mrs. Morris.”

The nurse glanced at Leah. It was clear from her expression this was not the usual procedure, but most likely prompted by her presence. “Right away, Mr. Brown,” she said, closing her paperwork.

Mr. Brown explained the locks and other security systems installed to keep the mentally disabled patients safe, then invited Leah to join him in his office to go over cost and financing.

“I don’t want finances to be a deciding factor on where my grandmother lives,” Leah said. “If Kentwood is among my final choices, I’ll visit again to discuss the financial arrangements.”

“That’s up to you, Ms. Montgomery. But I think you’ll find extended care can be an expensive venture. Kentwood works very hard to help the families of our patients find adequate financing.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”



Leah was shaken by what she’d seen. Mr. Brown’s explanations for the Alzheimer’s accommodations all made sense. But she would not take her beloved Gram from her green pastures, flower garden, freshly baked pies, and front-porch rocker to live out her last years in a beige, vinyl-covered environment. Never ever.

She reminded herself that a one-source story wasn’t a balanced investigation, so she decided to check out the other two facilities on her immediate list.

She never slowed down when she drove past the first one. Surrounded by a parking lot, it looked like the place poor patients with only Medicaid to pay their bills ended up.

The third place looked hopeful. The colonial-style building had a broad front porch filled with rockers. Gram would like that. So Leah parked and trailed in after a family of five apparently there to visit someone.

Nobody was at the front desk, but the visitors seemed to know where they were going and headed down a hallway to the right. Leah turned left. She pushed the panel indicated to open the double doors and walked right past a nursing station where a male employee was entertaining two female employees with a story. They glanced her way, but did not stop her. She heard a patient calling for a nurse and saw the lights over the doors of two patient rooms blinking to indicate the inhabitants needed assistance.

A fourth employee came in through an exterior door at the end of the hall, still blowing out cigarette smoke from her lungs, and headed toward one of the blinking lights. The exterior door didn't close all the way, propped open by a block of wood to keep from locking smokers out. Leah peeked out. The area behind the building was grassed for about thirty feet, then dropped into a deep ravine with a woods on the other side. Leah headed back toward the nurses' station, passing an elderly man who was shuffling resolutely toward the open door.

Did things like this happen even at the good places like Kentwood? Fortunately, Leah knew how to find out.

She stopped at the nurses' station and slapped her hand on the counter. "Hey, that back door is open and one of y'all's patients is headed straight for it." Her tone wasn't very polite.

One of the women jumped up to retrieve the patient. The other two lounged in their seats and eyed Leah. They weren't interested enough, however, to ask who she was. The female nurse glared at the male nurse. "I told you not to prop that door open anymore."

"Do you see me sitting right here? It ain't me this time."

Leah had heard enough. She wasn't even back in her Jeep when she began ticking off the research ahead of her. First thing would be a public-information request for any violations reported by state inspectors and the fines levied. Those usually took a while to get a response. In the meantime, she'd search the archives of the local newspaper, then the two larger papers that covered the state to see if anything had been

written on the extended-care facilities. She'd check with Jimmy, too, to see if he recalled any incidents of patients wandering off from local nursing homes.

For the first time since she'd stepped onto the hot sidewalk outside the *Dallas Morning News*, newly unemployed with the contents of her desk in a cardboard box, Leah had a direction in her life again. Even if it was just temporary, it felt good.



Margaret and Gram were sitting on the porch when Leah pulled up and parked. Margaret looked enormously relieved and hurried out to intercept Leah before she made it to the house.

"I had no idea she'd gotten so bad," Margaret said. "She's been restless, insisting that we need to go to the store because you were coming to visit. I tried to explain that you were already here, just out for a while. That didn't seem to work, so I told her that you'd worry if we were gone when you got here."

"It's okay. Thanks for staying with her. I didn't mean to be away so long."

"How'd it go?" Margaret looked very concerned.

"Not too well. I've got a lot more looking to do."

"Oh, dear. She really can't stay here on her own, can she?"

"No, I'm afraid not." Leah gave Margaret a weak smile. "I'll figure out something, but I refuse to put her in one of those places I saw today."

Margaret patted Leah's arm. "She's so lucky to have you."

"I've been lucky all my life to have her," Leah replied, heading to the porch.

Gram was dressed in a simple flowered dress, with white pumps and a white purse clutched in her lap.

"Gram, are you going somewhere?"

"Oh, my granddaughter is coming to take me to the store," Gram said, her eyes searching the driveway.

"You're in luck," Leah said cheerfully. "I'm your granddaughter, and that's exactly why I'm here, to take you grocery shopping."

Gram's eyes focused on Leah for the first time and she smiled. "I know who you are."

"Of course you do. I was just teasing, sugar." Leah held her hand out to help Gram step down off the porch. "My, you look nice this afternoon. Did Margaret help you pick out that pretty dress? And with shoes and a purse to match. I could have helped you get dressed."

Gram giggled. "If I let you dress me, you'd have me wearing those cowboy boots of yours."

Leah hooked her arm in Gram's and winked at Margaret. "I know you secretly want my boots, Gram. I bet you try them on when I'm not looking."

Gram laughed. "I do not."

Margaret seemed shocked at Gram's sudden return to the present, but Leah was used to it. What did surprise her was that it didn't bother her any longer. They waved good-bye to Margaret and headed into town.

Leah was hoping a little trip off the farm might be a good way to tire Gram out so she could put her to bed and get busy with her research.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Leah preferred to shop at the trendy grocery that carried organic foods and a larger ethnic selection, but she took Gram to the local Food Mart where she had shopped for years. The aisles of groceries and the faces of the employees were more familiar to her. They really didn't need anything, but they strolled up and down each aisle.

Gram would occasionally stop and pick up a box or can of something. She selected a huge box of cereal Leah's grandfather used to eat daily and put it in their cart. The cereal was hard and tasted like tree bark. Leah always wondered if that was why he had to wear dentures by the time he was fifty. She did know that Gram didn't eat it. So, while Gram was inspecting some canned peaches, Leah discreetly took the box from the cart and set it on the nearest shelf, next to the salad dressings. A teenager who was restocking shelves glared at her. He would have to return it to the correct aisle.

"Sorry," Leah whispered, nodding toward her grandmother.

The teen didn't seem to comprehend, but Leah didn't care. She wheeled the cart past Gram so she wouldn't turn around and see the rejected cereal.

Leah spotted Jessica when they turned toward the meat counter. "Jessie?" God, it had been sixteen years, but Jessica's trademark pale blue eyes and dark French braid were unmistakable.

"Leah? Oh my God! When Tory said you were in town, I couldn't believe it. I half expected you to come trotting down the drive on Nighty so we could hang out like we used to. This is so great." Jessica hugged her.

Leah returned the hug. She was suddenly taken back to long summers with two barefoot girls riding ponies bareback to explore the trails on the large Parker estate and adjacent state park. Those were happy, stress-free times.

But when Jessica was around twelve years old she stopped coming to Cherokee Falls in the summer. She had begun to seriously train as a rider and worked with a trainer year-round near her home in Atlanta.

"Here you go, Ms. Black. Twenty pounds of fresh ground chuck and thirty pounds of beef ribs." The butcher loaded the meat into Jessica's cart, next to the hamburger buns, fresh produce, and lots of chips and dip. "That must be some party you're planning."

"We've never had all our friends over at once, so we thought we'd do it this summer while the weather is nice enough for something informal and outdoors."

"Well, you tell Kate not to burn those ribs. They're some of my best."

"I'm afraid Kate and Mom are still in Greece. Skyler will have to do the grilling. I'll be sure and warn her."

"Tell her to soak them in the barbecue sauce overnight and turn them every five minutes until they've cooked twenty minutes," he instructed.

"I'll do that. Thank you."

Jessica turned back to Leah. "You'll come, won't you? I'd love the chance to catch up on what you've been doing."

Leah glanced toward Gram, who was picking through the packages of bacon a few feet away. "I'd love to. I really would. But I can't leave Gram alone. I told Tory that."

"Tory asked you?"

In the years they hadn't seen each other, Jessica's expressions hadn't changed.

"Okay. What's up with that? I can tell you're surprised that she asked. Does she have a girlfriend or something?"

"No, it's just that Tory hasn't dated for a while. It's a long story."

Leah crossed her arms over her chest. "I've got time. Gram will look at every package of bacon they have before she picks one."

Jessica sighed. "I guess I should tell you, because someone will if



you come to the party. Tory and I were sort of dating when Skyler and I connected.”

“Skyler? Oh, yeah. Tory mentioned her.”

Jessica’s smile was brilliant. “She’s my honey. I’m running the farm now and Skyler is director of the Young Equestrian Program.”

“Tory mentioned your mom and Kate are back together. That’s so cool. So you dumped Tory? Are you nuts? She’s a hottie.” It was as if they were twelve again and gossiping about Josh Friedman showing his penis to Candy Sheehan in the movie theater.

“Skyler is pretty sizzling herself.” Jessica shrugged. “Tory’s a dream, but Skyler and I were just destined. We both felt terrible. Skyler is Tory’s best friend.”

“Whoa. Y’all must have generated a lot of gossip.”

“For a while. We managed to stay close friends, though, and it’s been almost a year. In fact, she’s helping Skyler at a show today.”

Leah eyed her. “It’s been that long and you’re still surprised that she asked me?”

“Well, she told me about... you know...” Jessica grinned and gestured toward her own butt. “She told me you shot her.”

“I didn’t shoot her.” Leah stepped closer and whispered, “Gram shot her.” She paused for dramatic effect. “Shot her right through the leprechaun, poor little fellow.”

“Leprechaun?”

“The one tattooed on her right butt cheek.”

“Tory has a tattoo? A leprechaun? Oh my God. I wonder if Skyler knows?” Jessica was laughing so hard, tears were beginning to leak from the corners of her eyes.

“You never saw her leprechaun?”

Jessica caught her breath and wiped at her eyes. “We didn’t get that far. I would have never guessed. Tory just doesn’t seem like the tattoo kind of girl.”

“What kind of girl is she?” The words were out of Leah’s mouth before she could censor them, and she didn’t have a clue why she asked.

“Tory is the best friend you could ever have. She always does the right thing, puts other people’s feelings before her own, sometimes to

a fault. If Skyler didn't own my heart, Tory would be at the top of my list."

That wasn't what Leah wanted to hear. She wanted Jessica to say Tory was a player or had some other character flaw. Then Leah could wash away the images of the sexy vet that constantly crept into her thoughts at odd moments.

"Yeah, well. Her superhero cape seems to slip a little when she's around me."

Jessica wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "I think she likes you. Come to the party."

"She likes me about as much as a dog likes fleas."

"Who does, honey?" Gram returned empty-handed, having forgotten her bacon mission. She stared at Jessica.

"Hi, Gram," Jessica said, greeting her as she had when she and Leah were children. "Remember me? Jessica Black."

Gram gave her a blazing smile. Sometimes far-off memories appeared easier to dredge up than the recent ones. "Jessie! My goodness, you've grown up so pretty."

"Come to the cookout, and bring Gram with you," Jessica insisted, turning back to Leah.

Leah was doubtful, but Gram was delighted. "A cookout? How lovely. I'll bake some pies to bring."

"You don't have to bring anything, but I still dream about your chocolate pie," Jessica admitted.

Leah lowered her voice. "Gram, it's going to be a lesbian cookout. Nothing but women, lesbian women. You do remember that I like girls, right?"

"Oh." Gram looked down. When she looked up again, the twinkle in her eye was reminiscent of the grandmother Leah loved as a child. "Lesbians don't like pie?"

Jessica chuckled. "She's got you there, Rooster."

Leah groaned at Jessica's use of her childhood nickname. "Okay. But if we come, you cannot call me that name in front of anybody. What time does this shindig start?"



Leah slowed her Jeep as several trucks pulling horse trailers in front of her turned into the fairgrounds just outside Cherokee Falls. “I wonder if this is the show where Jess said Tory was helping today?”

“Your grandpa and I loved watching you and Nighty when you used to show him. Let’s go take a look,” Gram said eagerly.

“That would be fun, if you aren’t too tired.”

“I’m fine. I get tired of sitting around the farm with nothing to do. Let’s go see what’s going on.” Gram practically wiggled in her seat in anticipation.

Leah recognized many of the farm names displayed on the trucks and trailers. Youngsters and their horses were gathered around their riding instructors to get last-minute orders before heading over to one of three show rings. It seemed like yesterday that she was standing among them, fidgeting with nervous excitement while Nighty waited placidly to carry her over jumps in the junior competitor class.

She spied the familiar Cherokee Falls Equestrian Center logo emblazoned on the side of several dually trucks and long trailers. When she recognized the Greyson Veterinary truck parked next to them, she tugged Gram in that direction.

She knew Tory had been upset when they last parted, and that had left her feeling oddly disturbed. This was her chance to smooth things over between them.

Half a dozen kids, decked out in hunt and dressage attire, were gathered around a tall woman, who Leah at first mistook for Tory. They had the same athletic build, but the blond hair was lighter and the tan was deeper than Tory’s. The kids listened closely as she moved from youth to youth, giving-last minute encouragement, straightening jackets, and checking that the chin straps on their riding helmets were securely fastened.

The woman had just pointed the group toward the warm-up ring when Tory approached on a dancing chestnut stallion. She expertly worked the curb bit on the dressage bridle to control the sidestepping horse.

“How’d he do?” The woman grasped the horse’s bridle and accepted the top hat Tory pulled off and handed down.

“Not bad for his first show.”

Leah watched Tory dismount and quickly shed the dark dressage jacket. She was wearing a sleeveless silk mock turtleneck underneath, tucked into white riding breeches. Tory in jeans was very sexy, but Tory in skintight breeches was downright lethal. Leah took her time scanning from the broad shoulders to the muscled rump, down to the bottom of the knee-high polished black boots.

“Now that’s enough to make a girl swoon.”

“Did you say something, honey?”

“Uh, I said, look, there’s the veterinarian. You know, the one you thought was stealing the horses the other day.”

Gram squinted in Tory’s direction. It was obvious from her puzzled look that she didn’t remember. She stepped over to the metal bleachers and sat down. “You go say hello, dear. I’m going to sit right here and rest my feet while I watch the riders.”

Leah hesitated, but Tory was standing close enough that she could keep Gram in sight. “Okay, sugar. You stay here. I’ll be right over there if you need me.”

Tory was standing with her back turned and didn’t see Leah approach.

“Mmm-mmm. I thought I recognized that tush. It must be healing nicely if you’re out riding horses already.” Leah stepped around her so she could keep one eye on Gram while she talked.

Tory stiffened. “Miss Montgomery, we meet again.”

“Okay. I guess I deserve that less-than-enthusiastic welcome. I need to apologize for my rude response to your invitation.”

“Don’t give it another thought.”

“And please accept my belated apology for accusing you of trying to take advantage of Gram. It seems your intentions were pure after all. I got your check for ‘services rendered.’”

Skyler had started to lead the chestnut toward the trailer, but stopped. “Services rendered?”

Tory ignored her, speaking instead to Leah. “Where is your grandmother?”

“You don’t have to worry. I made her leave her shotgun at home.”

“Shotgun?” Skyler asked. “You’re the one who shot Tory?”

"No, she isn't," Tory replied. "This is Leah Montgomery. Leah, this is Skyler Reese."

Leah shook Skyler's hand. "That's not a very common name, so you must be Jess's Skyler. Gram and I just saw her in the grocery store."

"It's nice to meet you. Since Tory told her you were in town, Jess hasn't stopped talking about looking up her friend Rooster."

Tory's reserve cracked, her expression going from sour to amused. She opened her mouth, most likely to remark on the nickname, but quickly closed it when Leah pointedly looked down at her butt and back up into her eyes. The message was clear. Any jokes about roosters would open the door to a discussion of leprechauns.

"That's a nickname I haven't heard since I was twelve years old." Leah smiled sweetly, but it was clear the rooster subject was closed.

"You haven't cashed my check," Tory said.

"I'll cash your check after you cash the one I sent you."

"I guess we have a standoff, then."

"At least it doesn't involve a shotgun this time."

Tory finally smiled. "Thank God for that."

A young boy ran up to Skyler, holding up a broken stirrup leather.

"I'm sorry," she told Leah. "Duty calls. It was nice to finally meet you. If you saw Jess in the grocery store, she must have told you about the party this weekend."

"Yes, she was buying up every cow in the county for you to grill."

Skyler laughed, but began to back away as the boy tugged at her hand. "Come if you can," she yelled over her shoulder.

Leah turned back to Tory. "That riding habit is attractive on you."

Tory blushed. "Thanks. I don't really show anymore, but Skyler has her hands full with the kids today. So she asked me to ride a client's horse that she's training in dressage, just to give him some show experience."

"Why didn't the client ride him?"

"It's a breeder. They want Skyler to train their stallion and show

him to build his reputation. Then they get big bucks for breeding him.”

“I see. I wish I’d gotten here earlier to see you ride.”

“Do you show?”

“I did when I was a kid. I showed Nighty in hunt seat and jumping classes for fun. Then I went off to college and didn’t have time for a horse.”

They were running out of small talk, and Leah searched for some other subject to prolong the visit.

“Jessica invited me to bring Gram along to the cookout.”

“You’re going, then?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Gram overheard the invitation and really wants to. I promise to lock up the shotgun if your invitation still stands and you don’t mind Gram tagging along.”

“I’m sorry. When you turned me down, I promised to take someone else.”

Leah shrugged nonchalantly. She wasn’t about to let Tory see her disappointment. “No matter. Gram will probably forget about it by tomorrow, and I won’t have to take her.”

“Hey, Dr. Greyson!”

A shout from across the field drew their attention. A middle-aged man huffed his way across the pasture and arrived breathless.

“I’m glad I caught you here. One of the horses we were unloading reared and cut the hell out of his nose on the edge of the trailer roof. We need you to look at it.”

“I’ll drive my truck over to where you are,” Tory told him. She turned back to Leah. “Now duty calls me.”

“Gram and I should be leaving, too. I’m sure she’s tired.”

Tory hesitated. “I really hope to see you at the cookout.”

“Maybe you will. Now, go get your superhero cape and save that man’s horse.”

Tory rolled her eyes, then turned and trotted toward her truck. Leah watched until she disappeared into the crowd. Damn, she wished Tory wasn’t such a Girl Scout. She shivered at the thought of a hot, sweaty one-night fling. Naked skin, long legs, sculpted shoulders, and that tasty-looking derriere. She shook the thoughts out of her head.

“One sip of that water and I’m afraid I’d be jumping in headfirst,” she warned herself.



The visit to the grocery store and stop at the horse event did, indeed, wear Gram out. They ate a light dinner when they returned home, and Gram talked nonstop about the pies she would begin baking the next day. But after the dishes were done, she was like a car that suddenly ran out of gas. Leah helped her to bed, thankful for the quiet so she could begin her research.

Fortunately, the Commonwealth of Virginia Web site allowed Freedom of Information Act requests to be submitted via e-mail. So she requested incident reports for the past five years, as well as fines levied for all extended-care facilities in the state. She also asked for records from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of any autopsies done on extended-care residents as the result of an incident investigated by the state. She stipulated that she needed an immediate response, detailing how long it would take them to extract those records for her review.

A quick call to Jimmy gave her the name of the person at the sheriff’s department that she should talk to about any reports filed concerning the local nursing homes. Then she settled in to begin searching for any news accounts of nursing-home abuse in the state. She was surprised to see that her *Morning News* sign-on for LexisNexis still worked. *Use what you’ve got*, she decided as she logged on to let the media research engine do the work for her.

She was browsing through some articles when the persistent buzzing of her phone broke through her concentration. She sighed when she checked caller ID, but answered the call anyway.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sis. How are things going with Gram?” Her sister, Debbie, sounded artificially chipper, which irritated Leah.

She had grown up close to Debbie. They shared a bedroom, clothes, a bicycle after Leah wrecked her own, and lots of secrets during their childhood. Leah’s Ken doll dated Debbie’s Barbie doll.

But when they were old enough to put away the dolls, a wide chasm grew between them. Debbie dated, then married the man who would become the associate pastor at her daddy's church. Leah got caught kissing the star of the girls' basketball team.

So, her father called a family prayer session and sent her for counseling. At least they never threw her out or ordered her off to some conversion camp. They just prayed. They continued to pray when Leah won an academic scholarship and escaped to a secular college rather than the Christian college her father had picked out. They still prayed for her today. *Love the sinner, hate the sin*, they said. That pissed her off even more than being disowned.

"What do you want to know?" Leah's response was cold.

Debbie's sigh was audible. "I'm not the enemy, Leah. We're all just concerned about Gram."

"If you were concerned, you'd be moving her to Tennessee to live with some of y'all."

"She refuses to come live with us, and we don't have room in our house anyway. I'm expecting again." Her sister paused for the expected congratulations, but continued when Leah remained silent. "I've got your two nephews to take care of and a baby on the way. Plus, Albert is no help around the house. The church is growing so fast, he and Daddy stay busy almost seven days a week."

"Whatever." Leah hated that talking to her sister always seemed to reduce her vocabulary to that of a juvenile. She also hated that when she started sounding like a sulky teen, Debbie started sounding like their mother.

"Have you found a place that can take care of Gram?"

"No."

"Have you looked?"

"Yes, Debbie. I've been looking. It's not that easy. I'm not going to dump her just anywhere. I've visited a couple of facilities and I'm researching performance records on a long list of places."

"Well, we probably need to do something soon," Debbie said. "A developer has contacted Daddy about Gram's property. Daddy wants you to talk to him."

"Me? I can't believe Daddy trusts me to handle the sale of her property."



There was momentary silence on the other end. “You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“It seems Gram named you as her power of attorney and executor of her will right after you graduated from college.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“Do you have to use that vulgar language?”

“Sorry.” Leah rarely apologized for language unless she slipped up around her nephews. But her mind was already racing a hundred miles ahead of their conversation. She always had been closer to Gram than any of her other family members, but Gram rarely stood up to her son, Leah’s father. Her daddy must have been furious.

“Look, Mom said she’d watch the boys one weekend so I can come help you.”

That jerked Leah’s racing brain to a skidding halt. “You’re coming here?”

“I don’t think you should have to do this by yourself.”

Leah was suspicious as to why her family was suddenly so interested in Gram’s welfare. Still, she needed someone to sit with Gram while she visited some more extended-care facilities. And, despite their differences, she really wanted to believe her sister’s motive was sincere.

“Thanks. I’d appreciate the help.”

“I’ve got a women’s conference this Saturday, but how about the next weekend?”

“That should be fine.”

“Great. Daddy wants to take care of this as soon as possible. See you soon.”

*Shit. So much for sincere.*



## CHAPTER NINE

Tory considered going to the party in her work clothes because she was running a little behind schedule, as usual. Bridgette had been okay with that on their first date, but Tory didn't want to appear like a slob who didn't care about her aroma or appearance. So she made a quick call to Bridgette to let her know she'd be about twenty minutes late. She quickly showered and threw on a pair of khaki shorts with a white tank and navy cotton button-down, then slipped on her deck shoes. When Bridgette came to the door, Tory was glad she had taken the time. Bridgette was stunning in a soft blue sundress and tanned, bare legs that led to a pair of light sandals.

When they arrived at the cookout, the driveway was full and the house was overflowing with guests. Tory led Bridgette through the house to the patio, expecting to find Skyler out by the grill. After Tory poured them a couple of beers from one of the two kegs, Bridgette spotted her new softball friends and promptly led Tory in that direction.

The circled group opened up and Bridgette waded right in as though she had known everyone for years. A back slap that nearly made Tory choke on her beer stopped her on the edge of the group.

"Hey, Tor. How's it hanging," Lou, the team's catcher, asked jovially. "We owe you one for bringing Bridgette around. Damn, that woman can burn one across the plate. You sure wouldn't expect that by just looking at her."

"Really?" Tory stared at her date. Bridgette definitely fell into the lipstick-lesbian category. She elbowed Lou's beefy bicep. "Guess you don't have to be butch to be tough."

“She’s definitely a wildcat on the mound.” Lou leered. “Makes you wonder how she is in other situations.”

Tory shook her head. “That’s something you’ll never know, considering that Desiree would chop you into little pieces if you stepped out on her.”

“You’re right. But a girl can wonder, can’t she?”

Tory didn’t answer because her attention was fixed on the tiny, elderly woman making her way across the wide patio, headed right for her.

“Willie!” Gram exclaimed, wrapping her arms around a very surprised Tory.

“Hello, how are you?” Tory gave Gram a light squeeze in return. She ignored Lou, who was pretending to almost spit out her beer and mouthing “Willie?” behind Gram’s back. “I didn’t think you were coming to the cookout.”

“That sweet little Jessie invited us. I baked the pies over there on the table. Chocolate and your favorite, lemon meringue.”

“I’ll be sure and have a piece.”

Gram grabbed Tory’s hand and tugged. “We have to tell Leah you’re here.”

Tory started to protest that she couldn’t leave her date. But Bridgette was in deep conversation with several other women, so she let Gram pull her through the crowd over to where Leah, a cup of beer in each hand, was apparently holding court with another group of women.

“I’m just saying that if a gay person is a public figure like that coach being inducted into the Hall of Fame, I think they have a responsibility to own up to their sexual orientation so the straight world knows we’re good people too,” one woman insisted.

“I disagree,” another said. “Outing yourself is a personal choice.”

A third woman jumped in. “How are we ever going to get the respect we’re due and have equal rights if some of us hide our true identities as though we’re ashamed of our orientation?”

“Maybe some of us just want to be known by something other than who we sleep with,” the personal-choice woman growled.

Gram tugged on Leah’s sleeve. “Willie’s here,” she announced, oblivious to the conversation that was growing a little heated.

Leah handed off the cup of beer she was holding in her right hand to Gram, who promptly sat in a chaise next to the one Skyler and Jessica were occupying. Then Leah hooked her arm through Tory's to draw her into the group, as though they were old, intimate friends.

The move startled Tory. The heat of Leah's body against her side and Leah's hand wrapped around her forearm were distracting. She glanced back toward Bridgette, who apparently still hadn't missed her.

"I just don't understand. If the media knew about the coach's relationship, why didn't they out her like they usually do?"

They turned their attention to the only journalist in the group to get an answer and smiled when they noticed Tory attached to Leah's side.

Leah's fingers absently stroked the bared skin on Tory's forearm, like someone would stroke her chin as she thought. Her words came in a measured pace, as if she considered each one before speaking it.

"Well, the legitimate media—I'm not talking about self-appointed Web bloggers or the grocery store-rag paparazzi—would argue each case as it comes up. For example, when the granddaughter of a very prominent, very conservative U.S. senator ran for a local judgeship, we got phone calls from the gay community and from the woman's opponent, demanding that we out her. But even though she was thrusting herself into the public arena by running for an elected office, her sexual orientation had no bearing on her ability to administer the law on the district-court level. So the newspaper I worked for decided not to reveal that this particular woman was a lesbian."

The lively debate continued to flow around them, but Tory heard little of it. Her attention was focused on the slender hand stroking her arm. The way Leah rested her cheek against her shoulder warmed Tory.

She relaxed into the moment, letting her eyes scan the other women. It was a diverse group—a lawyer, a nurse, a car mechanic, a chef, a teacher. Her eyes drifted to Gram, who had finished her beer and was nodding off.

Skyler was seated with her long legs stretched out along the lounge and Jessica tucked between them, resting her back against Skyler's chest. A woman approached and held out a fresh beer for

Skyler while Jessica chatted with another guest. Skyler started to reach for the beer with her heavily bandaged left hand, then extended her right hand instead. *What the...*



Leah had been pleased when Gram led Tory over, but surprised at the wave of pleasure she felt.

When she pulled Tory close, she told herself it was only the old reporter's trick—up your credibility with a group of people you don't know by associating yourself with someone they do know. She didn't want to think about how solid Tory's shoulder felt when she laid her cheek against it. She didn't want to think about the light scent of raspberries and vanilla she was beginning to associate with Tory's presence. She didn't want to think about the sudden loss she felt when Tory pulled away from her to confront Skyler.

"What in the world have you done to yourself?" Tory demanded.

Skyler, her eyes a bit glassy, held up her left hand. "This? Oh, it's just a nick. Just a slip of the hoof knife and blood was everywhere."

Leah was amused by the silly grin on Skyler's face as she looked up at Tory. She was impressed with Jessica's choice for a partner. Skyler was a handsome woman, obviously in love with Jessica and adorable when she was a bit drunk.

"That's your left hand." Tory frowned.

Skyler stared at her hand for a moment. "I'll be damned. I thought I had two right hands."

"You know what I mean."

Jessica shook her head. "I told her not to drink beer after taking a pain pill."

"S'okay," Skyler slurred. "I'm not dancing, I mean driving."

"It's a good thing, sweetie, because I think you're a little toasted. Tory was just pointing out that hand is your dominant one." Jessica sat up so she could twist around and see Skyler's face.

"S'okay," Skyler leered at her lover and stuck out her tongue. "My other parts still work fine."

Leah laughed, but Jessica playfully slapped Skyler's leg. "Behave, or I'll put you to bed."

"Is that a promise?"

Tory's frown deepened. "Exactly how much damage did you do there? Chincoteague is next weekend. I need you to be able to write and hold horses for me."

"Chincoteague?" Leah asked.

"I always volunteer at the annual pony swim. Skyler helps hold the horses and writes down their information while I examine and vaccinate them."

"We bet on the horses," Skyler interjected. She bent forward to rest against her lover's shoulder, her injured hand cradled in Jessica's lap.

"We always stop off at Colonial Downs near Richmond on the way there and spend an afternoon betting on the races for a bit of fun," Tory explained.

"I'm sorry, Tory. I know you guys have been planning this for months, but she cut it really deep and nicked a tendon," Jessica explained. "She won't be using this hand much for a while. Is it too late to find somebody else to go with you?"

Skyler sulked. "Oh man, I wanted to go to the track. I can write with my right hand."

Tory scowled. "Damn it, Sky. I need a helper with two good hands. It'll be hard to find somebody this late. Somebody else I don't mind sharing a hotel room with because everything is booked up for fifty miles around."

Leah looked over at Jessica. It was easy enough to read the question in her eyes. *What about you?* Leah glanced at Gram, resting comfortably in the next chaise. Debbie had said she would come for the weekend, and the irrational desire to defy her father's need for expediency won out over her need to face the issues at hand. Running away for a weekend was sounding pretty good. Running away with Tory sounded even better.

"I can do it," she said. "I read Marguerite Henry's *Misty of Chincoteague* a million times when I was a kid, but I've never seen the swimming of the ponies. I'd love to go."

Tory stared, her face unreadable. "What about your grandmother? Besides, I thought you were too busy."

"I could really use a break, and my sister is coming to visit from

Tennessee. She can look after Gram for the weekend. Besides, I could make it a working trip and freelance a travel piece about the event.”

Jessica jumped in. “That’s an excellent idea. Leah’s great with horses, Tory. She’d be a big help.”

Leah could see that Tory was wavering, so she offered up her most engaging smile. “It’s the least I could do to make up for the, you know, leprechaun incident.”

Tory blushed a deep red.

Deciding she should make a quick exit before Tory had a chance to refuse, Leah gently shook Gram’s shoulder. “Gram, honey, we need to take you home now.”

Gram sat up groggily, and Leah helped her to her feet.

“Jess, thanks so much for inviting us. No, don’t get up. We’ll talk soon. Skyler, it was a pleasure to see you again. I hope your hand heals quickly.”

A very sleepy Gram gave Tory a hug and rose on her tiptoes to give her a quick kiss on the lips. “Come by for a visit soon, Willie,” she said.

Tory looked stunned.

Leah pointed Gram toward the Jeep, then turned to wink at Tory. “When she starts slipping you the tongue, I’ll have a talk with her. Call me to let me know when we leave for Chincoteague.”



Tory was still staring after Leah, feeling like the coyote flattened by a Texas roadrunner, when Bridgette appeared at her side and wrapped an arm around her waist.

“Here you are! Sorry, I didn’t mean to get so caught up talking softball.” Bridgette looked down at Skyler and Jessica, who both looked surprised. “Hi.”

Tory quickly made the introductions. “Jessica and Skyler are our hosts,” she explained to Bridgette. “Bridgette is Cheryl Haskel’s cousin. She just moved here to teach art at the college.”

Jessica extended her hand. “It’s so nice to meet you, Bridgette. How do you like Cherokee Falls so far?”



Skyler suddenly seemed a lot more focused, her eyes darting from Tory to Bridgette as she and Jessica plunged into a discussion about art and where Bridgette previously taught.

"I have to pee," Skyler announced, extracting herself from Jessica and the chaise lounge. She swayed for a moment when she stood up, and Jessica reached out to brace her.

"Honey, maybe I should go with you."

Skyler grabbed Tory's arm and pulled her toward the house. "That's okay. Tory will make sure I don't fall down the steps. She needs a fresh beer anyway. You guys just keep talking. We'll be right back."

"Since when did I become your bathroom escort?"

"Since you quit keeping me in the loop. You've been busy, my friend."

"You sure sobered up fast."

"Spill." Skyler hesitated when she unconsciously reached out with her left hand, then realized she couldn't grasp the door handle.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tory reached around Skyler and pulled the door open for her.

"I'm talking about your near miss there. Bridgette, who I'm guessing is your date for the evening, almost walked up on you making plans to run off with Jess's friend next weekend."

"I didn't exactly make plans. I got railroaded."

"I saw you looking at her. Tell me you aren't interested in that little Texas spitfire."

"So you know Leah?"

"Just met her at the horse show the other day, but I've heard a lot of stories from Jess. And she started arguments in two groups of people and got Lou in trouble with Desiree for watching her cute little ass sashay across the patio—all before you got here."

"Oh, she attracts trouble, all right."

"Seems to me she's attracted more than trouble."

"I'm not interested."

"Look me in the face and tell me you're not interested."

Tory shook her head, but smiled. "Shut up."

"I knew it. So, what's up with the artist?"

Tory shrugged. "Cheryl asked me to show her around. We had

dinner last week, and it was nice, so I asked her to come with me today.”

“She’s pretty,” Skyler observed. “Did you know Leah would be here, too?”

“I asked Leah first, but she turned me down. She doesn’t want to go out with me. So I asked Bridgette.”

“She sure seems anxious to go to Chincoteague with you.”

“Yeah. I’m still trying to figure that one out.”

Skyler playfully bumped her shoulder against Tory’s.

“Just when I thought this old dog had forgotten how to hunt, she flushes out a bevy of women. You go, stud. Somebody has to keep the women in this town happy since I’m off the market.”

Tory’s chest puffed out at the compliment. Maybe it was time for her to just relax and enjoy this sudden wealth of female riches. She grinned. “It’s a tough job, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Skyler began rummaging through the kitchen cabinets, then stopped to point out a large tray and a sleeve of plastic shot-sized cups. “Pull those down for me, will ya, while I hit the bathroom. Then grab the big bottles of Baileys and Buttershots. It’s time to get this party really started.”

When Skyler returned, she and Tory poured out a table full of buttery-nipple shots for the enthusiastic crowd. The conversation continued for several more hours before they turned up the music and everyone helped push the tables to the borders of the large patio to make room for a dance floor. The sun began to set and someone lit the outdoor fireplace and switched on the strings of colorful lanterns that lined the area.

Tory sat out the lesbian staple, the Electric Slide, but joined Bridgette on the dance floor when the music switched to a thumping dance tune. Warmed by a couple of shots and a third beer, Bridgette effortlessly matched Tory’s rhythm through rap tunes, shag tunes, and even a lively two-step. When the music finally slowed, the evening had cooled enough that Tory felt Bridgette shiver slightly. She guided her over to the fireplace and took off her outer shirt to drape it over Bridgette’s bare shoulders. Then she turned her to face the fire and wrapped her arms around her from behind to warm her back.

"I'm having a wonderful time, Tory," Bridgette said softly.

"It has been fun. Thank you for coming with me," Tory replied in Bridgette's ear. She glanced at her watch. It was nearly two in the morning. The time had gone quickly. "But I'm afraid we need to go. I have to pick Mom up for early Mass in the morning, and I've got this family thing all day tomorrow."

"Ah. A good Catholic girl, huh?"

*"A good Catholic girl, huh?" Leah asked as she gently cleaned the blood from the leprechaun tattoo on Tory's bared hip.*

"Tory?"

"Oh, sorry. I guess I drifted off there for a minute."

"Are you okay to drive?"

"Sure. I was thinking, not nodding off. I switched to water several hours ago. I'm fine."

"Good, because I'm still a little buzzy. I don't think I could drive us."

"No problem," Tory said, relieved that Bridgette didn't ask what she had been thinking about.



When they pulled up in front of the Haskels' two-story, plantation-style house, Bridgette seemed to be catching on to Tory's old-fashioned gallantry and waited while she circled the truck to open the passenger-side door. They walked hand in hand onto the porch and paused to face each other. Bridgette stepped close.

"You could come upstairs," she offered.

Tory chuckled. "I don't think so. All I need is to have to explain to Cheryl's thirteen-year-old daughter why I'm having a naked sleepover with you."

Bridgette slid her arms around Tory's neck and pulled her so close their lips were almost touching. "Can't blame a girl for trying," she said.

Bridgette's lips still tasted of the butterscotch liquor she had been drinking. She was an excellent kisser, and Tory's body responded. Their hips pressed together, each seeking the other's heat. For just a moment,

she considered taking Bridgette back to her house. Her ovaries were ready to take things further, but something stopped her. She ended the kiss and stepped back.

“How about coming to my first ballgame Tuesday night? We’ve got the early game,” Bridgette said.

“That’s sounds good, but I’ll probably have to come straight from work and may not make the first couple of innings.”

“As long as you get there, anytime is okay.”

“I’ll see you then.”

Tory waited until she saw Bridgette was safely inside, then pointed her truck toward home. Bridgette’s kiss tingling on her lips, the taste of her mouth lingering on her tongue, Tory was dismayed to find her thoughts already shifting to the upcoming weekend.

## CHAPTER TEN

Tory inhaled the aroma of the fresh-brewed coffee she always associated with her mother's kitchen.

"Mom. I'm here," she yelled into the living room before pouring herself a cup and dropping a bagel into the toaster.

"What have I told you about yelling in the house, young lady?" Alma Greyson hurried into the kitchen. At sixty-eight, she was as tall and still as slender as Tory. "I swear, you and your brother still act like teenagers."

"What's Matt done?" Tory had two brothers, one older and one younger. Her older brother, Matt, was the reason for the family gathering today. His youngest daughter was being christened at church and was the guest of honor at the afternoon's cookout to celebrate.

"Not Matt. Your younger brother."

"Don't compare me to him. I paid my own way through college, own a business, and support myself."

Alma stared pointedly at Tory. "Don't be uppity."

Tory rolled her eyes, taking a bite of her cream cheese-covered bagel. "So, what has David done now?" she asked after she swallowed.

A deep voice answered from the doorway. "David quit school again."

David Greyson was her direct opposite. At only five foot seven, he was thick bodied, dark, and hairy like his father. Shirtless and wearing

baggy flannel pajama bottoms, he moved from the doorway to help himself to the coffee.

“David, put on a shirt before you sit down at my table,” Alma said.

David shuffled over to the laundry closet, selected a T-shirt from a pile of his dirty laundry lying on top of the washer, and pulled it over his head.

This scene had repeated itself several times over the years. Twenty-eight years old, he had been enrolled in five colleges and started seven different major areas of study, finishing none. He was interested in only one thing: video games. He played relentlessly, day and night, to the exclusion of his studies or a profitable job. That’s why they’d been sure his last field of study, video-game design, would be a good fit.

“So what happened?” Tory asked.

David shrugged. “I got tired of the lame classes. Me and this guy I met, Brent, have a great idea for a new Wii game that’ll blow people away. We need to spend our time developing it.”

Alma looked at her watch. They needed to leave for church. “Your father called. He wants you to pick up six bags of ice for this afternoon.”

“Where’s Dad? He isn’t going to the christening?” Tory asked, not really surprised that her father wasn’t going to Mass with them. He rarely went to church, so Tory usually escorted her mother.

“He’s at your brother’s house, smoking the pig so everyone else can be at church this morning.” The disappointment in her voice was evident, so Tory didn’t bother to point out that David could have watched the pig so her father could be there for his granddaughter’s christening.

“I need some money,” David said while chewing a mouth full of bagel.

Alma pulled \$10 from her purse and laid it on the table.

“I need gas money, too. My car’s on empty.”

“That’s all the cash I have,” Alma said, fishing around in her purse again for her wallet. “You’ll have to take my debit card.”

Tory pulled a twenty from her pocket and tossed it on the table. She remembered the several hundred dollars her brother helped himself

to last time he got his hands on his mother's debit card. "You need to get a job."

"Don't you have something he can do at your clinic?"

"He didn't show up half the time when I hired him last summer," Tory pointed out.

"He's grown up since then."

"Mom, I need time to work on the game."

"Oh, yeah, I can see he's grown up a lot."

"Shut up. When this game hits the market and I'm as rich as that Microsoft guy, you'll eat those words."

"I hope I do, David. In the meantime, I guess you'll just have to keep living off Mom and Dad. They might feed you and give you a place to sleep, but who'll put gas in your car and pay your insurance? You aren't a kid anymore. You think they'll support you forever?"

"That's why you're going to give him a part-time job," Alma said.

Tory opened her mouth to refuse again, but the don't-argue-with-your-mother look stopped her.

"Fine."

"I'm not cleaning up dog shit again."

"I have enough kennel help. The guy who fed the horses and cleaned the stalls in the clinic barn was in a car accident last month. You can do his job until he recovers. He also kept my lawn, the clinic lawn, and paddocks mowed. It takes about twenty hours a week. That should leave you plenty of time to play video games."

David shrugged. "I guess that's okay. I don't mind cutting grass."

Alma patted Tory on the arm. "Thank you, dear. Now, we have to get going or we'll be late for Mass. Don't forget the ice, son."

"Yeah, yeah. I won't forget."

Tory paused on her way out to point a warning finger at David. "I want to see you at eight sharp tomorrow."

"Grass is too wet to cut that early."

"The horses have to be fed and their stalls cleaned early. Eight sharp."



David, of course, didn't show up until ten, so after Tory had to listen to Joyce's lecture about hiring her lazy brother again, she had to feed the clinic patients herself. That put her behind schedule for the rest of the day.

Tuesday didn't go much better. An emergency call to see a horse with an infected eye delayed her arrival at the softball fields where Bridgette's game was already under way, so Tory parked along the fence in the outfield and watched the game from her truck.

She fell asleep halfway through the fifth inning, not stirring until she felt fingers combing through her hair. She opened her eyes to find Bridgette smiling at her.

"God, I hope I wasn't drooling," she mumbled sleepily.

Bridgette laughed. "No. You're adorable. But you look exhausted."

"Long day," Tory said, rubbing her face with her hands to clear the cobwebs from her brain. "I guess the game is over. Did you win?"

"Yes. You missed me striking out the last batter."

"Oh, man, I'd like to have seen that."

Bridgette shrugged. "There'll be other games. I came over to invite you to go with the team for pizza, but I really think you need to go home and get some rest."

"I think you're right. I wouldn't be very good company tonight."

"You were very good company Saturday night, so you're forgiven. What about this weekend?"

Tory shook her head. "I volunteer each year at the Chincoteague pony swim. I'm leaving Thursday morning to head to the coast."

"Ah. The wild ponies. I sketched them once. They're beautiful."

"Well, I don't know exactly how wild they are anymore with so many tourists around, but they do still run free."

"Call me next week when you get back?"

"You bet."

Bridgette gave Tory a quick kiss. "I better run so I don't get left by the others. See you later."

"Yes, you will," Tory vowed as she watched Bridgette jog gracefully across the field. When she saw her catch up to a few of the other team members, she started her truck and wearily headed home.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Yes!” Leah leapt from her seat, raising her arms overhead and wiggling her hips in a little happy dance. Her two-dollar bet to place had come in second to pay off at twelve-to-one odds. “I wo-on, you lo-ost! I picked a winner, you picked a do-og!”

Tory might have replied to Leah’s little victory song, but she couldn’t peel her eyes away from that cute butt long enough to put together a coherent thought.

Leah had been waiting when Tory picked her up that morning. Her sister Debbie wasn’t due to arrive until afternoon, so she had enlisted Gram’s friend again to sit with her until Debbie got there. Jimmy had promised to come over and care for Nighty until they returned Sunday afternoon.

The two-hour ride to New Kent’s Colonial Downs went fast. Leah brought along information she had downloaded on the pony swim and pelted Tory with questions the first hour of the trip. The second hour, Tory answered questions on how to bet at the track and how to pick a winner.

They walked the backstretch where the horses were stabled and ate lunch in the Jockey Club while they studied the day’s racing form. Neither being much of a gambler, they spent the afternoon playing two-dollar bets. The competition to see who could win the most money was fiercer than the horses’ race for the finish line.

Tory couldn’t help but roll her eyes as Leah insisted on ignoring her advice about bone structure and muscle tone and, instead, bet on horses

with a catchy name or a flashy coat. To her chagrin, Leah's system of picking winners seemed to be as accurate as her more technical approach. But she was too enamored with that cute happy dance to be seriously insulted.

Tory couldn't remember having so much fun. It was impossible to resist Leah's enthusiasm and playful teasing. She was disappointed when the horses lined up for the last race of the day.

They watched the entries closely as they were walked toward the starting gate. Tory had her eye on number three, a leggy two-year-old with a deep chest and powerful hindquarters. He was the picture of Thoroughbred breeding.

"That one," she said, pointing him out to Leah.

But Leah shook her head. "I like the black one, number seven."

"No way. That horse is too small, with a short back," Tory insisted. "Give me the racing sheet."

"Arabians have short backs and they're fast. Didn't you read *The Black Stallion* when you were a kid?"

"Of course. I even have a video of the movie. But Arabians are built for stamina. Thoroughbreds are faster. That's why you don't see a track full of Arabs down there."

Tory scanned down to the last race and quickly found the horse she picked. "On the Move," she told Leah.

"What?"

"Number three. That's the horse to bet. His name is On the Move. He's won two of the four races he's previously run, and placed in the two he didn't win." Yep. She knew horses and how to pick them. The betting line was three to one on him. He was favored to win. She knew it and the bookies knew it.

But Leah stubbornly shook her head. "I like number seven."

Tory scanned down a few lines and smiled. "You just like the name."

"I don't even know his name," Leah insisted, reaching for the paper. "Let me see."

But Tory held the racing sheet out of Leah's reach. "*Her* name," she said. "She's the only filly in a race full of boys. It's also her first race. The bookies think she's a fifty-to-one long shot."

"I don't care. I'm going to bet on her."

"How much have you won so far?" Tory began counting her own winnings.

"Same as you. I'm up twenty-five dollars."

"Give it to me."

Leah clutched her winnings to her chest. "Why?"

"We're betting all our winnings on number seven."

Leah looked skeptical at Tory's sudden change of heart.

"All of it? You're betting on her, too?"

"How can I not bet on a horse named Leah's Pride?"



The larger colts jostled for position after they broke from the gate, boxing the smaller filly in the middle of the pack. She dropped to the rear as they rounded the first turn and moved to the outside.

Tory groaned. Already at a disadvantage against the longer-legged colts, Leah's Pride would have little chance of gaining ground while running the extra yards on the outside. But the plucky little filly wasn't giving up.

Leah's fingers dug into Tory's biceps as Leah's Pride began to gain ground along the backstretch. "Come on, sugar, you can do it, come on," Leah chanted. They watched her breeze down the backstretch past the colts jockeying for position, then eat away at the distance between her and the leaders.

They jumped to their feet when the pack began to round the second turn and Leah's Pride moved over to nose between the rail and the three leaders. The four galloped into the homestretch in full, ground-eating stride. One horse began to fade, dropping back as Leah's Pride shouldered past the number-two horse and challenged the leader. They thundered toward the finish line, neck and neck.

Tory and Leah were both yelling at the top of their voices when the colt's jockey went to work with his whip. But the speed he had used at the beginning of the race was now taking its toll. The filly edged forward in the last few yards to cross the finish line a nose ahead.

"Whoo-yeah! Girls rule," Leah yelled and launched herself into Tory's arms. Tory staggered backward, then laughed and wrapped her arms under Leah's hips to lift her up and spin them around. Leah

grasped Tory's face in her hands and planted a long, firm kiss on her lips. Her eyes were shining when she pulled back. "Thanks for betting on my long shot," she said.

Tory stared at Leah's lips. She wanted another taste.

"Uh, Tory?" The lips were talking.

"Huh?" She was suddenly aware that Leah's legs were wrapped around her waist.

"You can put me down now." Leah dropped her feet to the ground and pushed back gently. "I'm going to cash in our tickets."

Tory nodded, but didn't say anything. When Leah disappeared at the top of the bleachers, Tory sank into her seat. Her heart thumped like *she* had been in the race.

This was such a bad idea. It was like basking in the warm sunshine even though you knew you would get burned. Like eating spicy food, even though you knew you would suffer acid reflux later. Still, she couldn't deny the delicious anticipation of the rest of their weekend.



Leah collected their twenty-five hundred dollars in winnings and they headed to Chincoteague, where they ate dinner at Etta's Channel Side Restaurant. The family atmosphere was noisy, but Tory's badge identifying her as a volunteer veterinarian got them a table that overlooked the Assateague Channel and the famous Assateague lighthouse. Leah was delighted with the house-special crab cakes while Tory opted for the oysters.

They checked into the bed-and-breakfast owned by some friends where Tory had standing pony swim weekend reservations for the only room with two double beds.

But the evening was still young, so they drove to the beachfront and Tory explained exactly where the ponies would swim over. Police officers were patrolling, telling people they couldn't sleep on the beach.

"People will start staking out a spot before daybreak," Tory explained. "By about two o'clock, when the ponies begin to swim over, every inch of this shore will have someone standing on it. The worst part is the lack of bathroom facilities."

"Tell me you have some special reserved spot for us so we don't have to get up in the middle of the night and sit out here."

Tory nodded. "I have two seats reserved on the ferry that runs alongside the ponies as they swim. It'll get you close enough to shoot some pictures if you have a decent zoom."

"Yes. I'm so excited about tomorrow." Leah caught Tory's hand to give it a squeeze. "Thanks for letting me come along."

Tory wrapped her fingers around Leah's, refusing to relinquish the slender hand that fit so perfectly in her own larger one. "You may not be thanking me after spending hours in a dusty paddock, vaccinating wild ponies."

They walked silently through the sand for several minutes, still hand in hand. A multitude of stars blinked in the dark velvet sky above them. The continuous sound of waves crashing matched the thumping of Tory's heart.

When they came upon a jetty of large boulders, Tory stopped and turned to rest her butt against the biggest of them. She pulled Leah close.

"Don't," Leah whispered, her dark eyes searching Tory's.

"Don't what?" Tory asked, her voice low and husky.

"Don't kiss me."

"Why do you think I want to kiss you?"

"Because I can see it in your eyes. Because I want to kiss you back."

"So why is this a problem?"

Leah stepped forward between Tory's legs. She wrapped her arms tight around Tory, resting her cheek against her chest so Tory couldn't see her face.

"I have so many things going wrong in my life right now, Tory. God, you're the sweetest, sexiest woman I think I've ever met, but I can't handle one more complication. And you, sugar, would definitely be a huge complication if I let you kiss me."

They stayed like that for a while, Leah clinging to Tory while Tory idly stroked Leah's back. Finally, Leah stepped away. "Friends?" Her eyes were vulnerable and pleading.

This complex woman had so many constantly changing facets, Tory felt she was in a swirling whirlpool that was slowly sucking her

in. She steadied her emotions. She knew she would hate herself for what she was about to do next. Still, she stood and draped her arm over Leah's shoulders to guide her back down the beach.

"Let's go get some shut-eye, friend. We've got a long day ahead of us."

They spoke little as they returned to the bed-and-breakfast and readied for sleep. When they slid into their respective beds, Tory turned out the light and they lay there listening to each other breathe.

"Good night, Tory," Leah finally said.

"Good night," Tory answered, staring into the dark and wishing desperately she could either ignite or douse the painfully smoldering attraction between them.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Tory and Leah rose early the next morning to breakfast with their hosts, a couple of entertaining guys who had been partners in life as well as business for more than twenty years. The guys packed them a gourmet lunch in a small cooler since the restaurants would be swamped by lunchtime.

Leah had an interview scheduled with the president of the Chamber of Commerce for her travel piece, and Tory had to check in with the fire department, which coordinated the pony swim every year.

Tory thought Leah was impossibly sexy in her low-cut jeans, Western boots, and tank top. She had pulled her silky brown hair through the back of a blue ball cap with *Dixie Chick* scrawled across the front in pink lettering. It took every ounce of Tory's willpower to resist the urge to fasten her lips on the tasty juncture of Leah's shoulder and slender neck.

"Cute," she commented.

Leah smoothed down her makeshift ponytail. "When we were kids, Jessica called it my rooster tail. That's why she calls me Rooster sometimes."

"You can be like a bantam rooster."

"Ha. You're too funny, Doc." Leah raked her eyes over Tory's usual outfit of Oakley sunglasses, button-up 501s, and paddock boots. Today, she wore a racer-back tank top that accentuated her wide shoulders and carried a ball cap with *Greyson Veterinary* embroidered on it. "You're kind of cute yourself this morning."

"Why, thank you, ma'am," Tory drawled in her best Texas imitation, adjusting her cap low over her sunglasses. She grabbed the cooler and headed for her truck while Leah boarded one of the many shuttle buses that had been running since five a.m.



They met up again near the wharf and picnicked on the carnival grounds. While they ate, Leah chatted about the interview she had just finished. "Did you know they have Misty and her baby, Stormy, stuffed and on display in a museum here on the island?"

Tory chuckled. "Yeah. I'm afraid most people are disappointed when they see them. The illustrations in the book looked more like a sleek Welsh pony. The Misty they stuffed for the museum had her long winter coat and looks pretty small and scruffy."

Leah made a comical face. "I think I'd rather keep the vision I've had in my head since I was a child. I loved those books."

"I know what you mean."

Leah smiled to herself.

"What's that smile for?"

"Just remembering something."

"Share."

Leah chuckled. "Well, after reading Misty, I wanted a pinto so bad that I rode Nighty over to the drug store, bought a bottle of Miss Clairol bleach, and talked Jessica into helping me turn him into a pinto." Leah shook her head. "Nighty didn't mind once the bleach smell wore off, but Gram made me wash the dinner dishes for the rest of the summer."

"I'll bet you were a handful when you were a kid."

"Weren't you, too?"

Tory shrugged. "Nah. My younger brother was always giving my parents such a hard time that I tried not to give them too much grief. I was always the kid who did the right thing. I still resent it sometimes."

"Then don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't always do the right thing. It can be really freeing." Leah tossed the remains of her lunch to a noisy group of seagulls sitting beneath



a sign that said “Please don’t feed the birds” and headed toward the dock.



The sun was blazing, but the ocean breeze made for a pleasant cruise. Leah pulled out her camera and shot dozens of photos when a small school of dolphins joined them as they rounded Chincoteague and headed for the Assateague Channel.

The ferry idled for more than an hour among a flotilla of coast guard boats and other ferries licensed to shadow the swim as the Chincoteague firemen herded the wild ponies together.

“Aren’t the tides too strong for the babies?”

“No. We’re waiting so the tide is at its lowest point. Any that are too small will be cut from the herd and held back when the others swim,” Tory explained, pointing to a group of mares with very young foals that were being separated from the larger group.

Suddenly a shout went up and the main herd headed for the water. Their ferry-boat captain jockeyed for position, and Leah snapped photos nonstop.

It was over all too soon and they were chugging back around the island. The ponies would be rested for an hour, then herded through town to the pens where they would be examined and vaccinated. Those eligible for the next day’s auction were culled from the horses returning to Assateague to continue their wild existence.

Leah was incredulous. “I can’t believe people stood on that beach for hours and hours to watch a five-minute event.”

Tory laughed. “They do it every year. Well, probably not the same people, but another twenty thousand or so will come out next year.”



They arrived at the pens well before the ponies. Tory showed Leah how to draw up the vaccination shots while she examined each horse, then how to chart whatever information Tory called out for her to write down.

When the ponies did arrive, Leah found out that Tory wasn’t

kidding about the dust. She pulled the dust mask Tory had supplied over her face when it got too bad.

Burly firemen roped and led the ponies to them one by one and steadied them for examination and vaccination. Though wild, most were accustomed to being handled each year and presented little problem. The ones who put up a fight were led into a tight chute that penned them safely.

Leah watched and charted the information on each horse as Tory meticulously checked heart rates, listened to lungs, peered into eyes, ears, and mouths, and studied legs and feet. Then she handed over the vaccination shots she kept prepared. Leah was amazed at Tory's lightning reflexes. She could administer an injection so quickly, the horse barely had time to react before it was over.

It took two beefy firemen to drag over a stubborn little pinto mare who could have easily been the direct descendant of the famous Misty. The mare stood rigidly and glared at Tory throughout the examination.

When Tory bent to examine her hooves, the mare kicked out, narrowly missing her shin.

The little horse vainly struggled against the men's tight hold on her, but still refused to let Tory examine her hooves. Leah could see the terror in her eyes at being restrained, and couldn't bear to watch it any longer.

"Wait," she ordered, handing her chart and syringes to one of the firemen. "She's just afraid, aren't you, sugar." She approached the mare slowly, crooning to her. She stroked the mare's neck and took the lead rope from the fireman, nudging him out of the way. She continued talking and stroking until the mare began to relax. Her head dropped lower and her ears twitched forward to catch the soft cadence of Leah's voice. "Now, try her feet," she said, careful not to change her tone.

The mare stiffened again at Tory's touch on her leg. "No, sugar, Tory won't hurt you. She just wants to look at your feet," Leah crooned.

The mare relaxed her leg and allowed Tory to lift it to examine the bottom of her foot. They went slowly, hoof by hoof, with Tory taking extra time on one of the front feet.

"Put this one in the auction pen," Tory instructed the men when she was finished.

"You sure, Doc?" It was an unspoken rule that any mares appearing to carry the Misty gene should be kept with the herd for breeding.

"Yeah. See that front foot?" Leah stared at the hoof Tory pointed out to the man. It was a bit oddly shaped, but looked otherwise okay. "This horse carries the gene for a club foot. Hers isn't bad, but you wouldn't want her to pass that gene along in the herd. You'd run the risk of a badly crippled foal or two."

Leah watched them lead her away. "So what's going to happen to her now?"

"Somebody will buy her for their kid and she'll live the cushy life that her ancestor Misty did."

"Will her foot be a problem?"

"Nah. She'll be fine. A good farrier can trim it so it doesn't give her any trouble."

Tory pulled off her ball cap and ran her fingers through her sweaty hair. "That was the last one. Are you hungry? We can walk over to the carnival. There are lots of food booths with just about anything you want to eat."

Leah was hungry. Tired and dirty, but very hungry. "That sounds like a great idea to me. After that, I want to be the first one to get a long hot shower."

Tory laughed. "Only if you beat me to it."



After they ate and showered, they fell into bed and went promptly to sleep. Unlike the night before, they didn't toss and turn from sexual frustration.

They dressed and ate quickly the next morning so they could beat the crowds to the eight o'clock auction. Still, the area teemed with people staking a claim in the limited bleacher seating.

Tory was waved through to park her veterinary truck in a huge lot where horse trailers waited to haul away the purchased ponies. She pointed out that a few of the really large trailers belonged to professional haulers who would deliver a pony to its new home for a fee. A grizzled older man stood next to a trailer that touted Ride a Real Chincoteague Pony and had the metal rigging strapped to the top that would assemble

into a giant wheel, the kind that ponies were hooked into at the fair so they walked in circles for hours with children clinging to their backs.

The auctioneer's nonstop chant blared over the loudspeaker, and people crowded around and hung over the four-foot chain-link fence of the small enclosure where the horses were brought one by one for bidding. Almost all of those auctioned were yearlings or younger. Only a few older horses were brought up to be sold.

When Leah's mare was dragged in, she reared and rolled her eyes in fear. The announcer dutifully noted her club foot and cautioned that she should not be bred. He started the bidding at \$3,000, but nobody took the offer.

The mare bucked and planted her feet, refusing to be led around the paddock. The auctioneer dropped the price to \$2,500, but there were still no takers.

"Come on, folks, with a little work, this mare would make a good riding horse."

He dropped the price to \$1,500.

Tory could feel Leah shifting restlessly at her side.

"What if nobody takes her? What will happen to her?" Leah finally asked.

"Somebody will take her," Tory reassured her. "They're just waiting for the price to drop. Some go for less than five hundred dollars."

"All right, folks, somebody make me an offer for this little Misty look-alike."

The pony ride man held up five fingers.

"Now we're talking," the announcer encouraged. "I have five hundred, do I hear seven?"

"Tory, that's the pony man. We can't let him buy her."

"He's here every year, but he never pays over twelve hundred. Somebody else will outbid him," she said. *Christ, I hope somebody does.*

"That's five hundred going once, going—"

Leah's hand shot up.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not going to let him have her."

"Leah—"

"I've got seven hundred, do I hear eight hundred?"

The pony man raised his hand.

“Eight hundred dollars, do I hear nine hundred?”

Tory grabbed and held Leah’s right hand, so she flung her left hand up to signal a bid.

“Folks, I’ve got nine hundred dollars from the little lady in the Dixie Chick cap. Do I hear a thousand?”

The pony man glared at Leah and lifted his hand.

“One thousand dollars, do I hear eleven hundred? How about it, Dixie Chick?”

Tory grabbed both of Leah’s hands and shook her head at the announcer.

“One thousand, going, going, one thousand dollars to the man in the blue jacket.”

“What the fuck are you doing?” Leah spat, pushing Tory away from her.

“What were you doing?”

“We have twenty-five hundred.”

“Half of that is mine.”

“You said he never bids over twelve hundred. I still could have outbid him.”

“Yeah, and then what? Did you forget that you’re planning to sell your grandmother’s farm? You already have to find a home for the three horses there now.”

Tory watched as the fury on Leah’s face changed to defeat. She reached out to pull her into a hug, but Leah wheeled and disappeared into the crowd. Tory started after her, but the crowd was thick and she quickly lost sight of the Dixie Chick ball cap.

“Christ almighty.” Tory headed back to the truck, hoping Leah would return there once she cooled off.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tory waited at the truck for most of the afternoon, the wounded look on Leah's face burned into her brain. She felt so sick with guilt that she wanted to throw up. She had to do something to make this right.

She combed the carnival area but found no sign of her. The crowds were thinning as the tourists loaded up and headed off the island. Deciding to leave the truck where it was parked in case Leah returned, Tory caught a shuttle back to the bed-and-breakfast. But Leah hadn't been there either.

She took the shuttle to the beach where the returning ponies were getting ready for the swim back to Assateague. The crowds were still thick there, and she talked an old guy into letting her stand on top of his battered pickup so she could scan for Leah's cap. Still no luck.

Growing desperate as the sun sank lower in the sky, Tory jogged down to the jetty where they had talked the first night. Relief flooded her when she spotted a slender silhouette in the fading light, sitting on their boulder. It was definitely a woman.

"Leah..."

The person turned toward Tory and she could see it wasn't Leah. Her heart fell.

"Sorry," she said. "I thought you were someone else."

She walked slowly back to the shuttle stop and boarded a bus to the holding pens. She didn't know whether to stay there all night or go back to their room and hope Leah turned up. She was about to unlock the truck when a slight movement caught her eye.

The mare stood in the corner of a temporary enclosure, nostrils flared to suck in the salty breeze as she stared longingly out over the sea channel. Leah stood close by, a shadowy figure in the soft light of the rising moon.

Tory approached slowly. The iron railing of the pen was cool when she laid her hand on it. The shadows hid Leah's face when she spoke.

"She had everything going for her—a life of freedom, the shelter of the herd. As much as she looks like the original Misty, she must have thought she was golden. She would never be cut from the herd. Then she finds out she isn't perfect. Suddenly her world is upside down. Her future isn't open pastures full of sea grass, but a noisy fairground where she'll be forced to walk in a circle hour after hour, carrying squealing children on her back."

"Leah..."

When Leah looked up, the moonlight illuminated the tears tracking down her cheeks. "I grew up with my parents constantly telling me I was doing everything wrong, but when I started working as a reporter, people said I did everything right. I was the golden child. I worked my ass off to get on the investigative team. Do you know how long some reporters struggle to reach that level? Most never do get there. But I was golden. Then the economy went to hell, and the next thing I know, I'm standing on the street corner with a severance check in my hand.

"I go home to tell my girlfriend, and she ditches me like a bad habit. So I run to the only other refuge I've ever had in my life, my grandmother. But even she's checking out on me."

Tory pulled Leah into her arms and held her tight while she sobbed.

"You were right about buying the mare. I don't know what to do with Gram. I don't know what to do about me. I've always had a plan, Tory. Then one day I wake up without one. I don't know where I'm going or what I'm going to do. I sure as hell don't know what I'd do with another horse, no matter how badly I want to rescue her."

Tory stroked Leah's back and kissed the top of her head. "Shh. It'll be okay. I've been looking for you to tell you something."

Leah sniffed for a moment. "What?"

"I used our cash to buy her from the pony man. He made a



thousand-dollar profit in just a few hours, and I had just enough left over to have her shipped to the equestrian center.”

Leah looked up, hope flooding her eyes. “Jess’s farm?”

“Skyler’s a great trainer. I’ll talk her into making the mare into a schooling pony. She’ll still have to haul kids around, but they’ll be well supervised and she’ll have plenty of pasture time with lots of horse friends.”

“You are so damn sweet.”

Leah pulled Tory’s head down. Her lips were hot on Tory’s, her tongue seeking. She tasted like the powdered sugar the carnival vendors sprinkled on the funnel cakes. When Leah pulled back and rested her cheek on Tory’s chest again, Tory was sure she would feel the hardness of her nipples, the frantic thumping of her heart.

“I’m so tired, Tory,” Leah said softly. “Will you do one more thing for me?”

“Anything.”

“Will you take me back to our room and hold me tonight?”

“All night.”



They didn’t speak as they readied for bed. It was still early, but the emotions of the day had left them as exhausted as their physical labors had the previous one.

When Leah emerged from the bathroom in a soft nightshirt, Tory had already pulled on the boxers and T-shirt she’d been sleeping in.

When Tory held the covers up for Leah, she went willingly into the warm shelter of Tory’s arms, their legs tangling together as she snuggled against Tory’s side and nestled her head in the well of Tory’s shoulder.

“Something about you makes me feel so safe,” Leah whispered. Tory kissed the top of her head. “My mother told me that sometimes all you need to find peace is to feel another heart beating along with yours.”

It was the last thing Leah remembered before she dropped off to sleep, her heart beating in perfect synch with Tory’s.



They had been asleep only about two hours because the clock read half past twelve. High and full, the moon poured so much light into their room Tory wondered if that was what woke her.

Then she shifted, suddenly aware of the wetness, the throbbing between her legs, the warm hand that had found its way under her T-shirt, and the soft fingertips brushing against her painfully hard nipple. She looked down and into Leah's eyes, dark liquid pools that made her want to drown herself.

"Make love to me, Tory," Leah said softly.

It was a bad idea. It was the wrong thing to do. "Leah—"

"Please, Tory."

God help her. She was powerless to resist. She pulled them both into a sitting position, then yanked her shirt over her head and tossed it aside. Tory gave Leah a moment to stare at her small, high breasts and tight bands of abdominal muscles. Then she gently lifted Leah's nightshirt.

She was exquisite. Where Tory was muscled, Leah was lean, but soft, so soft, and smooth.

Tory brushed her lips against Leah's, pressing her down to the bed. They moaned as their breasts barely met, nipples touching, caressing. The moments flowed like poured honey as they explored each other thoroughly, tongues swirling, mouths sucking, teeth nipping.

Tory combed through Leah's silky hair and traced the outline of Leah's delicate ear with her tongue, then moved to the slender throat she'd been dying to taste for the past three days. While she kissed her way across the sculpted collarbone, she reached down and shed her boxer shorts, then shifted to a kneeling position between Leah's legs.

She paused to confirm the heat, the desire still burning in Leah's eyes, and removed the black lace panties that were the last barrier between them.

Leah pulled her back down for another deep kiss. Her lips moved to Tory's breasts, her nails scraped along Tory's back, her heels dug into Tory's thighs, and her wetness coated Tory's stomach.

Desire, hot and consuming, thrummed through Tory, but she was

determined to take her time. She tasted every inch of skin from Leah's mouth, to her ear, to her neck and along her shoulders. She spent a long time sucking her full breasts and tonguing the erect nipples.

Leah whimpered, her hands pushing downward on Tory's broad shoulders. "Please," she begged. "I need you now."

She felt the proof of her own arousal trickle down her thigh at Leah's pleading. *I need you.* Her clitoris was distended, heavy between her legs. She ignored the hands pressing against her shoulders and moved up again to delve into Leah's mouth. Her hips jerked at the warm tongue that bathed hers. She nearly came as she moved her hips to rub her engorged erection against Leah's hot sex. Not yet. Too soon. So she released Leah's mouth and backed away from their coupling.

"No-o-o. So close." Leah grasped weakly at her, her pelvis still thrusting, seeking.

But Tory kissed her way down the soft abdomen, pausing to run her tongue across the sensitive navel. She could smell Leah's arousal as she lay open to her, hips lifting in silent supplication. Her own juices dripped down her thighs as she lowered her mouth to feast on Leah's turgid tissues.

Leah's moans became louder and she swelled under Tory's mouth. She slid one finger, then two into Leah's heat and kept stroking, her thumb replacing her tongue on Leah's clit as she moved up to straddle and thrust against her thigh.

"Don't stop." Leah whimpered, pressing her thigh harder between Tory's legs and raking her nails sharply across Tory's buttocks.

"Come with me," Tory groaned, lowering her mouth to swallow Leah's cries when their bodies went rigid with the pleasure that rose and burst to flood through them.

They had barely recovered their breath when Tory realized her orgasm had not slaked her passion for Leah. Touching her, tasting her had fed Tory's need so that it burned even hotter, even brighter than before. She flipped Leah facedown and began again. She sucked her neck and earlobe, then kissed her way across the slender shoulders. "You have beautiful shoulders," she breathed in Leah's ear, drawing a shudder from the body beneath hers.

Tory had been careful the first time, caressing gently, going slowly

to savor each touch, each moment. But now she gave in to the urgent passion, the need to take, to claim this woman who seemed to have already claimed her soul.

She drew a wet trail down Leah's spine with her tongue, dipping into the dimples at her lower back before continuing her exploration. God, Leah had a great ass. Tory put her teeth and tongue to work nipping and sucking at the sensitive buttocks while she massaged her way up the inside of Leah's thigh. Leah was hot and slick when Tory thrust her thumb inside and slid her fingers against Leah's clit.

"Oh, God, yes." Leah lifted her hips as Tory penetrated her.

Her blood pumping and her own clit throbbing, Tory bit down on the smooth buttock, then moved up to thrust herself hard against the faint teeth marks she had left there. She covered Leah's body with her own. Sweat-slicked, she slid against her, breast to back, her stiff nipples raking against Leah's shoulder blades with each thrust.

Tory's last bit of control disappeared as Leah's whimpers grew louder. The hard, now-frantic pounding of her hips against Leah's buttocks, the rough thrusting of her hand into Leah's wetness rocked the bed and thumped it against the wall in cadence with Tory's staccato grunts. Leah reached back, slid her hand between their bodies, and felt for Tory's clit. When her fingers found their mark, Tory jerked and dug her teeth into the skin and muscle of Leah's shoulder and neck, muffling her howl as the consummation of her heart and body flamed up and burned through her.

"Tory! Oh, God." Leah shuddered, then convulsed beneath her as she cried out and her orgasm soaked the sheets and Tory's hand.

They collapsed, trembling together. Tory's heated body still covered Leah's as they gasped for breath and waited for the pounding of their hearts to slow. *Mine*. Tory's thumb, still encased in Leah's warmth, twitched, and Leah groaned.

"Out, out," she ordered, clutching her crotch when Tory withdrew. She rolled onto her side with her back to Tory.

"Are you okay?" Tory asked, appalled that she might have been too rough in her passion. "Did I hurt you?"

"Oh, God, no. I don't think I've ever come so hard. I'm just so sensitive right now. If you touch me there again, I'll hit the ceiling."

She reached back and pulled Tory forward to spoon against her. “I need some recovery time after that, baby,” she mumbled sleepily.

Tory drew the covers over their cooling bodies, then wrapped her arm around Leah’s waist to pull her tight against her. Leah guided Tory’s hand up between her breasts, cuddling it against the now-soft pulse of her heart.

“Sleep,” she muttered.

So Tory closed her eyes, too, and they did.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When Tory woke again she was alone, though the pillow she was hugging to her body still smelled like Leah's tropical-scented shampoo. She cursed herself for not waking up earlier, then closed her eyes and let her mind, like virtual hands, run over a warm, naked Leah's slender hips, full breasts, beautiful shoulders—

The bathroom door banged open and Leah stood at the end of the bed, showered and fully dressed.

Tory gave her a sultry smile. "Hey," she said. She patted the empty space next to her. "Bed's still warm."

Leah swatted Tory on her sheet-covered butt. "Get up. We've got a long drive, and I want to go by the pens to check on Long Shot before we leave."

"Long Shot?"

"Our mare. We bought her with the money we won on a long shot, so that's her new name. Now, get up."

"You're no fun in the mornings." Despite her complaining, Tory liked the way Leah said, "Our mare."

Something unreadable flashed across Leah's face before she walked over to her suitcase and began packing to leave. "I have to get back to Gram so my sister can head back to Tennessee, Tory." Was that a trace of regret in her voice?

"Okay, okay. I'm getting up."

Tory made no effort at modesty as she threw the sheet back and sauntered naked over to her suitcase for some clean clothes. She wanted

Leah to get a good look at what she was missing this morning. And she did. When Tory headed for the bathroom, she caught a glimpse of Leah in the bedroom's full-length mirror. She was biting her lip and definitely checking out Tory's backside.



They made a quick stop by the pens where the hauler Tory had hired to transport Long Shot was beginning to load up for the trip. Leah was pleased that it was a woman, and she seemed very adept at handling animals that had never ridden in a trailer before. She loaded a couple of yearlings first. Long Shot, seeming eager for the company of her herd mates, was hesitant but willingly stepped up into the trailer to join the others.

On the trip back, Tory was hyperaware that Leah, who routinely touched people, even strangers, when she talked to them, was skillfully avoiding any physical contact between them.

She seemed to relax a little after they left the island and were speeding down the highway toward Cherokee Falls. Tory began to gently probe to get Leah to open up.

"So, where'd you go to college? I didn't notice any mascot tattoos on you last night."

Leah ignored the reference to them being naked together. "I got my undergrad degree from University of Maryland and my master's from Columbia."

"That's impressive."

"Yeah, well, it got me hired with no real experience at the Dallas paper. But I had to work my butt off to get on the investigative team. The newsroom has about two hundred fifty reporters, and the investigative team consisted of only four people."

"What's so special about the investigative team?"

"For starters, you don't get grabbed to do the story of the day—weather, lost dog, stuff like that. You get months to really investigate something. I'm kind of a computer geek, so my specialty was interpreting database and public-record information to sniff out inconsistencies."

"Sort of like an auditor?"

"Something like that. Once I dug out the information, the team



would go after the people at the heart of the problem, setting up interviews and figuring out what other information we needed to request.”

“Do you consider yourself a reporter more than a writer?”

“Hmm. That’s a good question. Writing comes naturally to me. I never had to work at it very much. I guess I’ve concentrated on investigating because it was a skill I had to develop.” Leah sighed. “But since I’m out of a job and real journalism seems to be a dying industry, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“You could be a cop. You certainly seem at ease with weapons, and you could finally fulfill that handcuff fantasy you mentioned.”

Leah laughed for the first time in days. “I don’t really have the temperament to be a police officer. Some scum would piss me off resisting arrest and I’d just shoot his ass rather than haul him back to the station.”

“You may be right about that.” It felt good to hear Leah’s lilting laugh again.

They were quiet for a while, Leah staring out the window.

“Tell me about Dallas,” Tory said.

Leah took a deep breath and blew it out. “George W. Bush happened. But I won’t get into all that. Basically, newspapers make their money by selling advertising, not by selling subscriptions. When people began to max out their credit cards and default on loans, they quit buying things. When they quit buying things, the companies that advertise quit making money and cut back on their advertising budgets. Then newspapers lost money and they laid off reporters.”

“The economy will eventually recover. It always does. Any chance they’ll rehire you when things get better?”

“No, I don’t think so. The legitimate media will survive this, but it’ll be forever changed with people moving to the Internet for their information. The Internet is like television, all about sound bites, with no real investigation.”

“Shows like *60 Minutes* do investigating.”

“Yeah, on a national level. Newspapers have always borne the responsibility for being the public watchdog on local issues.”

“Who’ll be the public’s watchdog now?”

Leah shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“You said that you had a girlfriend. How long were you together?”

Leah stared out the window again. “Not long. We cohabitated for about eighteen months.”

“What happened?”

“I came home with the contents of my desk and a severance check in a cardboard box and explained that we’d have to relocate when I found another newspaper job. She had different ideas. She wanted to get me a job loading trucks where she worked at FedEx. She grew up in Dallas and didn’t intend to move. So I packed up and left.”

Tory chewed on that for a while. Leah seemed to have a pretty casual, live-in-the-moment attitude about relationships. Was that what last night was to Leah, a moment? She wanted to ask, but couldn’t muster the courage.

When they pulled up at Gram’s house, Tory put the truck in park and they just sat there.

Leah finally spoke. “Thank you for this weekend. For making it so much fun, for doing what you did for Long Shot.” She grasped Tory’s hand. “For chasing my demons away for a short time.”

Tory stared down at her lap, picking at a spot of mud that had splashed and dried on the leg of her jeans. “Is that all we were doing?”

“You’re so very special. But I’m just not in a place in my life where I can be what you deserve. What I really need is a friend.”

Tory started to protest, but Leah cut her off. “I know I said this before and then crossed the line. But I really need for us to just be friends.”

“I can’t stop thinking about last night,” Tory confessed. “About touching you.” She closed the distance between them, intent on tasting the sweetness of Leah’s mouth one more time. She paused at the first touch of their lips, but Leah didn’t pull away so she moved to deepen the kiss. A loud rapping on Leah’s window startled them both.

“Shit! That’s Debbie, my sister.” Leah’s very angry sibling stood just outside the window. Leah held up a finger, signifying that she needed one more minute. She turned back to Tory. “I can’t do this, Tory.”

“Leah—”

“Just be my friend.”

Rap, rap, rap!

"Just a fuckin' minute," Leah yelled at Debbie. She turned back to Tory.

"Please."

Over Leah's shoulder, Tory saw Debbie getting ready to bang on Leah's window a third time. She grabbed the handle on her door and pushed it open.

"I'll get your bag out of the back for you," she said, sliding out of her seat.

Leah and Debbie were furiously arguing in low voices on the other side of the truck, so Tory carried Leah's luggage to the porch and turned to watch them. She was surprised when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Willie, I'm so glad you're here."

She looked up to see Gram smiling at her.

"I've been waiting for you," Gram said. "I need your help in the barn."

"But..." Tory pointed toward Leah and Debbie.

Gram grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the barn. "Oh, don't mind them. They argue all the time. It's time for the bossy one to go home," she declared.

Tory raised her eyebrows, surprised. "You mean Leah?"

Gram laughed and entwined her arm in Tory's as though she was being escorted to a social. "No, silly. I mean the other one. Oh, I can't ever remember her name."

"Debbie, isn't it?"

"That's it. Debbie. She takes after her father. Leah's much sweeter. Smarter, too." Gram smiled up at Tory. "She takes after me."

"Ah. Now I see where she gets her charm."

Gram giggled. "You're quite a charmer yourself," she said shyly.

They stopped in front of Nighty's stall. "What's the problem here?" Tory asked. "Are his feet getting worse?"

It was an old barn, so the stall was constructed simply out of waist-high board fencing. Nighty moved restlessly around, pushing at the locked door.

"Poor dear," Gram said. "He wants to be out with the other horses, but I can't find the key to this lock."

"I know he hates staying in here," Tory said. "But he has to until his feet get better. Then he can only be out in the pasture for a short time every day. Maybe twenty minutes."

Gram wrung her hands. "Oh, my. I guess if you're sure. You always did know a lot about the horses."

"I'm sure. It's very important that he doesn't get out and eat too much grass. It'll make him very sick."

Tory led Gram back to the house, but Leah and Debbie apparently had gone inside.

"Come in and have some pie, Willie," Gram encouraged.

"Thank you, but I should go. Please tell Leah I said good-bye."



"How dare you leave with some woman when I was coming for the weekend?"

"You said you wanted to help with Gram. Watching her for me over the weekend was a big help."

"We were supposed to find a place to move her, but you decided to run off and do God knows what. I don't want to even think about it. It's disgusting."

"It makes me kind of sick to think about you and fat boy doing the dirty, too. So we're even."

Debbie glared at her, then marched into the house. Leah followed and watched as she dug through her purse. She pulled out a business card and thrust it at Leah.

"Call this man. He's a developer. He's offering a small fortune for this property, but he wants to sign a contract as soon as possible."

"I'm still researching care homes for Gram, Debbie. I won't sell this farm out from under her without finding a place where she can be happy."

"She won't know any difference, no matter where you put her. She's crazy as a bedbug. I found her out there trying to pry the boards off that stall at midnight last night to let that pony out."

"She gets her days and nights mixed up sometimes."

"I haven't been able to sleep all weekend because I was afraid she'd wander off. It's worse than having a toddler in the house."

"If you sleep on the couch, you can hear her if she gets up during the night."

"Call that man, Leah. Daddy wants this taken care of."

"Why should he care? It's not like the money's going in his pocket."

Debbie didn't answer because Gram came in the front door and settled in her rocking chair in the small sitting area off the kitchen. She stared blankly at the television as she rocked. "That picture just keeps moving and moving," she said absently.

Debbie sighed and went into the bedroom to retrieve her suitcase. When she came out, she went over and kissed Gram on the cheek. "I've got to go, Gram. I'll give Albert and the boys your love."

Gram looked at her blankly. "Willie had to leave."

Leah went to the door. Tory's truck was gone. Damn it.

Debbie patted Gram on the arm and motioned for Leah to follow her out to the car. She waited until they were outside before she spoke. "Daddy's lawyer says that if we have Gram evaluated and declared permanently incompetent, they can go ahead and execute her will."

"Why would y'all want to do that?"

"This man is offering over two million dollars. That's more than enough to take care of Gram for the rest of her life and pay for a new Christian-education building for Daddy's church. He'll name it after Grandpa, of course, because this is really Grandpa's farm."

Leah realized her teeth were grinding together. "How convenient. Well, you can just tell Daddy that as long as I'm alive and have her power of attorney, nobody will get a goddamned penny of Gram's money until she's dead and gone and doesn't need it anymore."

She stepped onto the porch, but stopped and turned back to Debbie. "And you can tell him that what's left is going to the Human Rights Commission."

"What's that?"

"Google it," Leah snarled before going into the house and slamming the door behind her.



Leah threw her bag on the bed and began yanking her dirty laundry out of it to add to the week's wash. When she came across her camera comfortably cushioned among the clothes, she abandoned her unpacking, grabbed her laptop, and headed for the kitchen table.

Work was what she needed to take her mind off everything. She'd start the article on the pony swim. She downloaded the pictures from her camera and began deleting the shots she didn't like. A photo of Tory popped up, standing on the ferry with those green eyes staring at her, and Leah's breath hitched. With her hand that had been hovering over the Delete button, she reached out as if to brush back the shaggy locks the wind was blowing across Tory's forehead. She wanted so badly to run into the safety of Tory's arms. But it was wrong. She knew it was wrong. She would be leaving, and it wouldn't be fair to use Tory that way.

She closed her photo program. Working on the Chincoteague article reminded her too much of her weekend, too much of Tory.

Glancing at her watch, she realized it was time to eat. Gram had to eat so she could take her medicine. She got up, opened the refrigerator, and spotted a large bowl of spaghetti sauce Debbie had apparently made over the weekend.

"How about some spaghetti for dinner, Gram?"

"That's fine, dear." Gram was busily crocheting patterned squares.

Leah put a pot of water on to boil for the pasta and joined Gram in the sitting area. "What are you making there, sugar?"

"I'm crocheting Willie an afghan. She's always loved my afghans."

Leah raised her eyebrows at the "she," then decided it was just part of Gram's confusion over Tory, who was definitely female, and this guy named Willie from Gram's past.

"That'll be pretty."

Gram straightened the portion she'd already completed. "It matches Willie's eyes."

Leah stared at the rich green color of the soft yarn. Yes, it did.

"You've got some mail over there," Gram suddenly said.

"Really?" Leah grabbed a stack of mail piled on the counter. Among the water and light bills, she found a padded yellow envelope

addressed to her from the Virginia Secretary of Health and Human Services. There were no papers inside, just a disc. Hmm. This was different. She'd expected printed reports with large chunks of them blacked out so she couldn't read confidential patient information.

Leah dropped the pasta into the boiling water and loaded the disc into her laptop.

"Holy shit." Some clerk had just copied ten years' worth of uncensored inspection reports onto the disc. When she scanned through them, she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Fines of only a couple thousand dollars had been ordered for incidents that ended in patients' deaths. In some cases where coroners' reports noted excessive bruising and untended fractures, there were no fines.

She quickly prepared Gram a bowl of spaghetti and helped her take her medicine. Then she returned to her laptop, where she set up a database to chart the information from each report and settled in for a long night of work.





## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tory drove aimlessly, looking for a distraction, any distraction. She had always enjoyed spending some chill time at home, sitting beside the pool with a good book. But today, it just seemed like an empty house. She didn't want to be alone with her thoughts, her memories of Leah's laugh, her Texas-Tennessee drawl, her dimples that showed when she smiled, those dark eyes searching hers.

So she drove by the clinic. She frowned at the scraggly grass and weeds gaining ground in the flower beds, and the eight trays of pansies wilting in the shade while they awaited planting.

The truck parked outside belonged to the young veterinarian Tory employed to see the small-animal patients. Horses were Tory's passion, but dogs and cats were the real profit maker. She found Dr. Marissa Toliver in the back of the clinic, checking on a few patients, administering their medicine and changing bandages.

"Hey, Rissa. How's it going? Need some help?"

Marissa, a tall attractive mocha-skinned African-American, looked up from the dog she was holding while she put some drops in his eye.

"Thanks, but I've got it. This guy's a sweetheart. What are you doing here?"

"I own the place, remember?"

"I mean, I thought you were in Chincoteague this weekend."

"Just got back. I stopped because I was riding by and noticed the grass is ankle deep out there. Is my brother not showing up for work?"

Marissa busied herself checking the dog's ears, not looking directly

at Tory. “Sometimes. I only had to feed the horses once last week. He’s usually here to feed twice a day and clean the stalls. I haven’t seen him on the mower, though.”

It was a beautiful day, and Tory decided that mowing would give her something to occupy her mind. “I’ll take care of it,” she said.

Marissa returned her patient to his pen and turned back to Tory, her hands on her hips. “When are you going to stop covering for him? He’ll never grow up with his mother and sister always making up for his slack ass.”

Tory waved her off as she walked out the door. She didn’t have an answer to that question.

Four hours later, she wiped the dust and sweat from her face and surveyed the neatly trimmed lawn and adjacent newly mowed pasture with satisfaction. Her physical labors had temporarily kept her mind busy and, she hoped, had tired her enough to sleep without reliving the previous night in her dreams.

The flower beds still needed to be weeded and the pansies planted before they completely died, so she left a note for Joyce to dock David’s pay for the time it took her to complete the mowing and headed for her parents’ house.



She found David in her parents’ den, watching a baseball game with their father.

Phillip Greyson stood to give her a hug. “Hey, baby. How’s my favorite daughter?”

“Dad, I’m your only daughter.”

“You’re still my favorite. What have you been doing? You better not sit in that chair in those dirty pants. Your mother would have a fit. Let me get something for you to sit on.”

“No, that’s okay, Dad. I just came by to talk to David.”

“I’m watching the game,” David replied, waving at Tory to move from in front of the television.

“I could be watching the game, too, if I hadn’t just spent the entire afternoon mowing the clinic lawn and paddocks, a job I’m paying you to do.”

"I was going to do it tomorrow."

"You need to mow every week, David."

He ignored her, staring at the television.

"I want those flower beds weeded and the flowers planted in them tomorrow."

"I told my buddy I'd come over to discuss the game we're planning."

"You can do that after work."

He didn't answer.

"David..." Their father's tone was stern, but David just rolled his eyes.

"Okay, I'll plant the damn flowers tomorrow."

"I ought to fire your butt," Tory muttered as she turned and headed for the kitchen.

"Mom won't let you," he called after her.



Alma was mixing up a new pitcher of sweet tea when Tory stomped into the kitchen and flung herself into a chair.

"Hello, my daughter. What's got you grumping around?"

"Your lazy son. I don't know why I let you talk me into hiring him."

"You did it because he's family and you," her mother planted a kiss on top of Tory's head, "are a good person."

"I'm tired of being a good person. It never gets me anywhere."

Alma braced her hip against the kitchen counter and crossed her arms over her chest. "Okay. This isn't just about your brother, is it?"

Tory used her thumbnail to pick at a dot of glue permanently stuck on the tabletop, a by-product of one of her mother's many craft projects.

When Tory didn't answer, her mother did what mothers do. She began to pry.

"You went to Chincoteague this weekend, didn't you? Did Skyler do something to hurt your feelings again?"

"No. Skyler cut her hand and couldn't go with me."

"You went by yourself?"

“No.” Tory hated that her mother was making her feel like a twelve-year-old confessing a crush on a classmate.

“Do you want to play twenty questions, because you know I can do that. Or do you plan to act like an adult and spit it out?”

“I’m so sick and tired of hearing ‘it’s me, not you, but can’t we just be friends?’”

Her mother was quiet for a moment. She loved her daughter, but her religion made it hard for her to accept Tory’s sexual orientation. Still, she didn’t want to be excluded from her daughter’s life.

“Is that what Cheryl’s cousin told you?”

Tory was surprised. “How do you know Bridgette?”

“I saw Cheryl in the grocery store.”

Tory shook her head. Like the old men who gathered to gossip at the feed-and-seed store, the women gathered at the grocery store. Everybody knew who shopped on what day of the week and what time. So if you wanted to bump into someone, you just made an extra trip to the grocery and pushed your buggy up and down the aisles until you found them.

“No, Bridgette didn’t tell me that. Leah did.”

“Who’s Leah?”

“She’s Lorraine Montgomery’s granddaughter. She subbed for Sky this weekend.”

“I don’t remember you mentioning her before. Did she just move here?”

“No, she’s just visiting.”

Once Tory started, she couldn’t stop from telling her mother everything. Well, everything but the details of their last night together.

Her mother listened intently.

“Mom, what’s wrong with me? I’ve got enough friends. I don’t want to just be friends,” Tory said in a flare of anger. She stood and walked over to the window to stare into the backyard. “I want to settle down with someone I’m crazy about and build a life and a partnership like you and Dad have.”

“Maybe you haven’t found anyone because you should be dating young men, like God intends for all young women to do.”

Tory didn’t answer. They’d had this argument too many times.

Her mother sighed. “Honey, it sounds like this Leah is only here

for a short time, and she's got so many problems. Do you enjoy being friends with Cheryl's cousin?"

Tory shrugged. "She's pretty. We've had a good time together. She moved here to teach art at the college."

"She sounds lovely. Why don't you call her? Cheryl said her cousin had a good time with you, too."

Tory debated. Did she really want another woman to wash away the memory of her night with Leah? A big part of her wanted to hold on to those moments, to relive and savor each one. But her mother was probably right. And she knew what Skyler would say. "When you get thrown off, get right back in the saddle before you have time to let your fear take root."

"Okay. I'll call."



A series of emergencies in addition to her heavy schedule of appointments kept Tory busy, so it was Sunday again before she called. Bridgette was quick to accept Tory's invitation to come to her house for dinner. In fact, she insisted on bringing something they could grill on Tory's patio because it was a beautiful evening. That gave Tory time to shower and pick up around the house before Bridgette arrived.

When Tory answered the doorbell, Bridgette stepped inside and gave her a sweet kiss before setting down a medium-sized cooler.

"What do we have here?"

"Shrimp-and-scallop skewers. I brought some chicken breasts, too, in case you don't like seafood."

"I love seafood."

"Good. I hope you have a charcoal grill."

"Oh, I see. Another of those purists who don't like gas grills. I have both, but we'll have to wait for the coals to get hot."

"Then you can go get the coals ready. I work alone when I'm creating, whether it's in the studio or in the kitchen."

Tory hesitated, watching her remove the items and place them on the kitchen counter. The last item was a large pitcher. "What's that?"

"Tea. Pour yourself a glass and go relax on the patio after you start the charcoal."

“You didn’t have to bring that. I have tea in the fridge.”

“This is a special tea. The kind they make on Long Island.”

“Ah. The alcoholic kind. Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“It depends.” Bridgette stole another kiss. “Do I have to promise not to take advantage of you later?”

Tory laughed nervously. Christ. She had been making love to Leah only a week ago. She was certainly no nun, but, hell, she’d never slept with two different women in the same month, much less the same week. On the other hand, Leah didn’t want her. Bridgette did.

*You’re so damn sweet.* Leah’s words echoed in her mind. Maybe that was the problem. Women saw her as sweet, like a sister. If she wanted to be considered sexy, maybe she needed to be a little bad. She reached into the cabinet and brought out the plastic drink cups she used around the pool.

“No promises required.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Leah had worked all week, charting incident after incident in the database. She buried herself in research again on Sunday night to block the memories of where she had been the previous weekend—making love with Tory. When her thoughts wandered to Tory’s mouth on her body, Tory’s hands between her legs, her fingers stroking and probing, Leah would clamp her thighs together to stop the throbbing and stare harder at the numbers on her chart.

Dawn was brightening the sky outside when Leah finally sat back and rubbed her eyes, but her chart now revealed a clear pattern of abuse. The state board charged with inspecting the extended-care facilities across the state was staffed by the very people who owned many of the businesses. Their facilities were consistently let off with little or no fine, even in the most severe cases. Other rest homes, specifically two owned by national companies trying to get a foothold in the state, were frequently inspected and heavily fined.

But the worst part of the information she was deciphering was the pattern of rampant abuse and neglect among the facilities that took care of the poorest patients, those surviving only on Medicaid.

Other things didn’t add up. Several of the facilities seemed to collect Medicaid payments for months after some patients died. She could finally smell that Pulitzer she had been stalking. The only problem was getting her findings published.

Leah made a list of what to do next—track down and interview the families of several deceased patients, request some Medicaid payment

information to compare with death certificate dates, and then find a buyer for her research.

She needed the name of a news agency, state legislator, or some national nonprofit watchdog group behind her before she began to confront those people in charge of the current system. She remembered too well what her mentor had told her about his house being burglarized and his laptop and files stolen when he was working on a story that involved millions of misspent federal tax dollars.

She wanted to call Tory and tell her what she'd found, but Leah was sure she'd be sleeping at this hour. Besides, she didn't even know if Tory still wanted to talk to her. She had never answered when Leah pleaded for them to be friends, and she had left without saying good-bye.

Leah let out a long sigh. She'd think about that later. For the moment, she was dead tired, the adrenaline from her initial discovery long spent. She carefully saved the information and closed her laptop. She still had a few hours to catch some sleep before Gram got up.

She curled up on the couch and started to empty her busy mind. But she just couldn't lock away one thought, the memory of how Tory felt, spooned against her back with her strong arms holding her close and sheltering her from her worries. She'd never experienced such a sense of security except when she retreated to the haven of Gram's farm as a child.



The sun was high and beaming through the window hot enough to make Leah sweat uncomfortably. She wasn't sure if it was that or the quiet of the house that woke her. She stumbled into the bathroom to relieve herself and splash a little water on her face. When she looked up at the mirror, she was startled to see the sad, hollow-eyed person staring back at her.

What did she have to be sad about? She finally had her hands on a story that would be her ticket to a new reporting job, maybe even a shot at the big time.

Not only that, the information had helped her identify a handful of facilities with only a few minor, or even no violations. Now she



could begin an earnest search for Gram's new home. She also needed to contact that developer. The sale of the farm for several million would ensure Gram the very best care.

Hell, if she couldn't find a place Gram liked, she would just take Gram along when she got a new job. With the kind of money they would make off the farm, she should be able to hire someone full-time to care for Gram while she worked. Yeah. Maybe she should explore that option.

Leah watched her eyes grow wide in the mirror. Gram. Where was Gram?

She checked the bedroom. No Gram. In fact, she was nowhere in the house. She wasn't on the front porch, either. Then Leah remembered Debbie saying she'd found her trying to let Nighty out of his stall.

She hurried out to the barn, where she found Gram talking quietly to the pony as he ate from a full bucket of grain.

"Gram, sugar, what are you doing out here?" She snatched the bucket of grain up before the pony could eat any more.

"Nighty was hungry, so I got him a bucket of sweet feed. I can't seem to find the key to this lock. Do you know who put this lock on his stall?"

"I did, Gram. Nighty has to stay away from the grass because he's on a special diet. Have you been coming out here and feeding him every day? No wonder he isn't getting any better."

"He's hungry." Gram frowned.

"I know, sugar, but it's for his own good. Don't feed him any more, okay?"

Gram's frown deepened. "Where's Willie? I think we should ask Willie about this."

Leah watched Nighty lie down again to relieve the pressure on his feet. Tory had told her that she could increase Nighty's dose of anti-inflammatory once more if he showed signs of getting worse. Maybe calling Tory wasn't such a bad idea. Just to double-check.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The sun was so bright. Tory scrunched her eyes closed to escape the thumping in her head and groaned. Her mouth felt like cotton. Her lower back ached like she'd been slinging hay bales for a week.

The bed shifted as the weight pinning her facedown in the pillows lifted from her back. Tory's mind raced. Bridgette. Christ. Had she embarrassed herself last night? God, how many glasses of that tea had she drunk?

She remembered having one while they were grilling. The second went fast while Bridgette made a game of feeding her morsels of shrimp dipped in a hot Cajun sauce. She thought she recalled a third one while Bridgette's hands were on her shoulders, kneading away the tension from Leah's rejection and her brother's lazy lack of respect.

"You must have had a stressful weekend," Bridgette said. "Your shoulders are tight as bowstrings."

"I'm tired of being everybody's friend," she muttered, more to herself than anyone else.

"That's good. Because I definitely was planning on being more than just a friend," Bridgette replied.

It was the fourth tea Bridgette poured for her that was responsible for them ending up naked in the pool. They swam like mating dolphins, rubbing their bare bodies together in the warm water until Bridgette wrapped her long legs around Tory's waist and said, "Your fingers, inside me, now."

When Bridgette screamed out her climax, Tory dimly remembered being grateful that her house sat on five acres so there were no neighbors within hearing range.

After they emerged from the pool, Bridgette's eyes were hot on Tory's body as they dried themselves. "God, you're magnificent," she said, taking Tory's hand and leading her, still naked and still throbbing for her own release, into the house.

Bridgette grabbed her book-bag style purse. "Bedroom?" she asked.

Tory wordlessly pointed down the hallway, letting Bridgette take the lead. When they stood beside Tory's bed, Bridgette dropped without ceremony to her knees. Tory gasped as she felt Bridgette's hands on the back of her thighs, pulling her close, and then Bridgette's warm tongue on her clit.

She was hard and wet and more than ready. Her head was still spinning from the alcohol and her quick climax when Bridgette dug into her bag and pulled out a thick strap-on dildo. She stood and pressed her long body against Tory's. "I'm assuming a stud like you knows how to drive," she said in Tory's ear.

Wasn't there some kind of etiquette that dictated you waited until you knew each other before you did this? But maybe that was her problem with women. She was too old-fashioned, too vanilla. Enough thinking. It was making her dizzy. Her inhibitions dissolved by the alcohol, Tory took the prosthesis and strapped it to her narrow hips. She could be a stud if that's what Bridgette wanted.

She lay back on the bed and guided Bridgette to straddle her hips. The dildo easily slid into place and Bridgette's full breasts danced across Tory's chest as she began to move. They kissed deep, tongues battling, until Bridgette pulled back, panting as her arousal climbed. Tory flipped them over and began to pump in earnest.

"Oh, God, yes," Bridgette moaned. "Harder."

Tory pushed Bridgette's knees up toward her chest and thrust in long, forceful strokes, flesh slapping against flesh. Bridgette arched and again screamed with her release, but Tory kept thrusting. Her own climax remained frustratingly elusive until she closed her eyes and it was Leah underneath her, dark head thrown back, moaning out Tory's

name as she opened and offered herself. Suddenly, Tory's orgasm swarmed in her belly and exploded through her body until everything went black and she collapsed, limp and sweaty, pinning Bridgette to the bed.

Well, all that thrusting would explain her sore back, but that was the last thing she remembered. She didn't recall withdrawing from between Bridgette's legs, or divesting herself of the dildo, or crawling under the covers. Did she pass out? How could she face Bridgette after behaving like a cad and promptly falling asleep? Maybe she had left.

Tory cautiously opened one eye. Thankfully, the blinds had been closed so the sun's glare was no longer a knife stabbing into her brain. A weight settled on the other side of the bed and she slowly rolled over, the sheet twisting around her waist. Bridgette was smiling, fully dressed, and handing her several pills and a bottle of water.

"An antacid for your stomach and a pain reliever for your head," she said. "And I brought two bottles of water. You need to drink them both."

"Thanks." Tory accepted the medicines and guzzled the entire bottle of water to wash them down. She offered Bridgette a weak smile. "Did I embarrass myself last night?"

"You were spectacular, right up until the moment you passed out."

"God, I'm sorry."

"I took it as a compliment, and maybe a little admonishment for pouring so much of that tea into you." Bridgette chuckled. "It's probably a good thing you passed out before I could beg for another round. If I had, I'd be even sorer than I am today."

Tory covered her face with her hands. "I am so sorry."

Bridgette pulled Tory's hands down and kissed her. "Don't be. You were incredible."

Tory blushed and glanced over at the clock. "Christ. I've got to get moving. I have appointments this morning."

"Would you mind if I came along again?"

"After landing in that pile of manure last time, you sure you want to?"

Bridgette laughed. "I think I learned my lesson about grabbing

foals. Classes start next week, then I won't be free to do it again until after the semester. I brought my sketch pad and was hoping to draw a little at some of the farms you visit."

"You're more than welcome. I need to grab a shower first."

"Go ahead. I saw you have some bagels. I'll toast us a few while you get ready. You need something in your stomach."

"Yes, Doctor."

"It doesn't take a medical degree to know how to cure a hangover, just a little experience," Bridgette said over her shoulder as she headed toward the kitchen.

"If you mix that tea up very often, then I'm betting you have lots of experience with hangovers," Tory muttered.

Her thoughts were jumbled as she stood under the hot spray of the shower. Bridgette was pretty, and damn hot. Better yet, she was obviously interested. So why did Leah pop into her head when she was naked with Bridgette? *Leah is opinionated and stubborn and lost...and cute and so sexy...and so lost.* Tory sighed. She turned off the shower and her thoughts. She had to just let it go and let things happen with Bridgette.



Her schedule was fairly light that morning, so they had time to dawdle and give Bridgette a chance to sketch a few scenes she planned to paint later: a barn cat sitting atop a fence post and batting at the nose of an inquisitive horse friend, a young equestrian hugging her favorite pony. Bridgette was fast at sketching and an instant hit with Tory's clients. She promised them the original sketches once she had transferred the scenes onto canvas.

Tory's hangover had disappeared after a few hours and she was enjoying how easy it was to hang out with Bridgette. It was midafternoon, as they were leaving her last appointment, that Tory's cell phone rang.

"You want to tell me what I'm supposed to do with this runt of a mare that was delivered here last week?"

Tory laughed. Now she knew what it sounded like when she called Joyce and began talking without the proper preliminary pleasantries. "Good afternoon, Skyler. I'm fine, thank you for asking."

"I didn't ask."

"I thought Jess was working on improving your social skills."

"I'm hopeless."

"Obviously. The mare is a long story, but I'm done for the day, so we'll head over. I want to check her out."

"We? Sounds like Chincoteague went well."

"Bridgette's with me."

There was a moment of silence as Skyler digested that information. "Okay. The mare's at Creek Barn."

"On our way."



Long Shot, still wearing her halter for the trip from Chincoteague, was pacing in a round pen next to the barn while Jessica and Skyler watched. Jessica greeted Bridgette warmly, but Skyler grabbed the long lunge whip propped against the barn and nodded toward the pen. "You ready to check her out?"

"You in a hurry?" Tory was irritated that Skyler didn't acknowledge Bridgette's presence. She glanced back to see Bridgette grabbing her sketch pad and climbing with Jessica onto the bed of the large pickup parked next to the round pen. They settled into two lawn chairs Jessica had placed there earlier so they could watch Skyler and Tory work with the mare.

"I just want to know what the story is here."

They both studied the mare. She'd stopped pacing and was staring out at the other horses grazing in the adjacent pasture.

"Not a lot to tell. Leah and I went to the track and bet on a long shot named Leah's Pride. We won a chunk of money and ended up spending it at the auction to save this mare from the pony-ride man. Thus the name, Long Shot."

Having assisted more than a few times at the pony swim, Skyler detested the pony-ride man. "That's it?"

"I had her shipped here because I thought maybe you could turn her into a schooling pony. I'll swap you vet services in exchange for her board. I don't want to keep her at the clinic because I don't have the kind of pasture space she's accustomed to. She needs a herd she

can belong to, Sky, not the endless rotation of client horses that come through the clinic.”

“Why’d you cull her from the herd? She’s a dead ringer for Misty.”

“Bad genes. Her right front is club,” Tory said, pointing toward the mare.

Skyler nodded after squinting at the indicated foot for a moment. She held out the whip.

But Tory shook her head. “If you don’t mind, I’ll just watch. I had a little too much to drink last night and I don’t think my stomach could take turning around in circles. It makes me sick just to think about it.”

Skyler looked like she wanted to ask more, but Jessica and Bridgette were within earshot now, so instead she opened the gate and moved to the center of the pen.

The little mare laid her ears back and turned her rump toward Skyler, horse-speak for “I’ll kick you good if you mess with me.” Undaunted, Skyler moved so Long Shot could see her from the right side. She flicked the long whip against the ground and stepped forward to encourage the mare to move off to the left against the fence.

Tory watched Long Shot closely for signs of lameness from her trip as she moved around the pen.

Skyler continued to walk in a small circle as Long Shot ran along the larger outer circle around her. She occasionally flicked the whip against the ground when the mare slowed.

Long Shot galloped around the ring ten or twelve times before Tory nodded and Skyler stepped back to allow the mare to slow to a trot, then a walk. When Long Shot finally stopped, snorting and shaking her head, she turned toward Skyler and waited. Skyler stepped backward a bit, but Long Shot stood still against the fence. Skyler again stepped forward, this time to the left, and flicked the whip to move Long Shot in the opposite direction.

Bridgette had been drawing furiously on her sketch pad, but stopped, flipped to a clean sheet, and watched for a while. “Why are they running her around a ring? Shouldn’t she be resting in the pasture with the other horses after a long trip from the coast?”

“A lot of reasons,” Jessica replied. “First of all, we board a lot of



high-dollar horses here, so we have to isolate her for a few days until we're sure she didn't pick up some contagious bug while traveling. She was in a trailer for several days, visiting different farms as the other horses in the trailer were delivered to their new owners. They would have had to board at some of those farms overnight, where she could have picked up a lot of germs."

"So why is Skyler making her run around the pen?"

"Tory isn't just watching. She's looking for signs of lameness that could indicate she was injured during the trip. Also, Skyler's establishing dominance over the new mare. Horses are social creatures and establish definite hierarchies within their herds. They need to know where they fit in the herd for them to feel secure. By making her move in the direction Skyler dictates, Long Shot is learning that Skyler is the boss of this farm's herd."

Tory nodded again, and Skyler let the mare slow to a stop. This time, Skyler turned her back to the mare and walked to the opposite side of the pen. Long Shot hesitated, her head held high and her sides heaving from her exertion, and then she lowered her head and followed.

"Skyler turning her back and walking away in a non-threatening manner is an invitation in horse language. Long Shot recognizes she's alone and that there's safety in numbers. She's following," Jessica explained, "because she now sees Skyler as a capable leader and is accepting the invitation to be part of her herd."

"That's really interesting," Bridgette murmured, starting a new sketch. "I had no idea they were such complicated animals."

"Actually, they're very simple compared to people. Their body language, if you understand it, speaks loudly and always truthfully. They don't understand the concept of deception."

Tory had stepped into the pen and was running her hands down Long Shot's legs, feeling for signs of inflammation while Skyler kept her uninjured hand on the mare's halter to hold her steady.

"Looks like they're finishing up," Jessica said. "Let's join them."

They hopped down from the truck and walked over to the pen where Bridgette propped her pad on the top rail and continued to sketch. She looked up at Tory and Skyler when they released Long Shot and exited the pen.

“Everything check out okay?”

“No problems I could find,” Tory said. “Can I see what you’re drawing?”

Jessica chimed in. “I’ve been dying to ask, but didn’t know if I should.”

“They’re just rough sketches at this point, but you’re welcome to look,” Bridgette said, handing the sketch pad to Tory.

Jessica and Skyler shifted so they could look over Tory’s shoulders at the sketch Bridgette had been working on. It was a portrait of Long Shot, the moment she hesitated before accepting Skyler’s invitation to follow.

“Wow,” Skyler said, looking up at Bridgette with a new respect.

She had captured that moment of indecision—eyes wide, nostrils flared, one ear forward and the other flicked back—with chilling accuracy.

Tory had glanced over Bridgette’s shoulder as she sketched earlier that day, but this one was breathtaking. She looked up for permission, then flipped to the previous page.

“Oh my God,” Jessica breathed. It was a lifelike sketch of Skyler and Tory, forearms resting on the top rail of the round pen, discussing Long Shot. “I’ve got to have a copy of that.”

Bridgette nodded. “I’ll make you one after I’ve polished it.”

Tory flipped the page again to reveal the picture of the young client and her horse from earlier. She had already seen those sketches, so she handed the book to Jessica.

“These are so good, Bridgette,” Jessica said. “I don’t know what you’re doing teaching at a small college here in Virginia. You should be selling paintings in New York.”

“Actually, I have a friend who owns galleries in New York, Boston, and Provincetown. She’s managed to sell enough of my work that I’m financially comfortable. I’ll never be really famous, though, because I hate the schmoozing required to move in the top art circles.” She shrugged. “I teach because I love it. It’s a life choice. Not everybody, including my friend, understands that.”

Jessica flipped another page. “Oh, my.”

Skyler looked down and her hands came up quickly to cover Jessica’s eyes.

Jessica laughed. "Skyler, stop that."

"What? Let me see," Tory said.

Skyler took the sketch book from Jessica and handed it over.

Bridgette covered her smile with her hand, obviously waiting for her reaction.

Tory looked down at the sketch of her in bed. She was lying on her back, nude, the sheet barely pulled up enough to cover her thighs. Her eyes were dreamy and her hand outstretched across the bed as if beckoning the artist to come lie with her.

Bridgette smiled. "That's part of my private collection, not intended for public viewing."

Tory glanced at her before she flipped the page. It was a sketch of her sleeping on her stomach, the sheet draped across the back of her thighs. She jumped at the sound of Skyler's voice right next to her ear.

"What's that on your butt?"

"Nothing." Her scowl couldn't hide the blush she felt creeping up her neck.

Skyler stared at her for a moment, then held up her bandaged hand and jerked her head toward the barn. "I need a hand getting some hay and water for your mare." She turned abruptly. Tory handed the sketchbook to Bridgette without looking at her and followed.



Skyler dragged an empty twenty-gallon rubber water tub from the storage room. She pointed toward a bale of hay resting at the bottom of the hay chute, but put her hand out to stop Tory before she picked it up.

"So what's the story here, T? And I'm not talking about the horse."

"I don't know what you mean."

Skyler gave her an amused smile. "Let's review. Last time I saw you, a very hot little firecracker was hanging on your arm and flirting her Texas ass off with you. She leaves the party, and you get all warm with Picasso there and leave with her. Then you spend the weekend with the firecracker. And a week later, you turn up here with pretty

Miss Picasso again, who obviously has had the opportunity to see you naked.”

“Bridgette and I are dating. Leah and I are just friends.”

“Try again, and remember who you’re talking to. You were practically drooling when the firecracker was hanging on your arm.”

“Stop calling her that. Christ. Okay. I slept with Leah in Chincoteague. Then she got up the next morning, said she wouldn’t be hanging around town much longer and just wanted to be friends. Well, I’m sick of being ‘just friends.’ So when Bridgette came over last night, I got a little drunk and slept with her. She wants me and Leah doesn’t. It’s just that simple.”

Skyler nodded thoughtfully. “So what’s on your butt?”

“Nothing, I told you.”

“It looks like something to me, but I can’t quite make it out.”

“It’s a tattoo.”

Skyler punched Tory lightly on the arm. “You have a tattoo on your butt and you didn’t tell me?”

“Why would I do that?”

“I told you when I got one.”

“You got a phoenix tattooed on your leg. Big deal. It’s not like everybody who saw you wearing shorts didn’t already know about it.” Tory separated the bale of hay and picked up half of it, and they headed back out to the round pen with Skyler dragging the empty water tub behind them.

“So? Come on. What do you have tattooed on your butt?”

Tory knew Skyler wouldn’t drop the issue. If she didn’t answer, they were likely to end up in a wrestling match with Skyler trying to yank her pants down to see for herself. That’s what she’d do if she thought Skyler was hiding a tattoo there.

“I got it while I was a student, when I was drunk one night. It’s the college mascot, okay?”

“You went to that Catholic place. Their mascot is...” Skyler laughed. “You have a leprechaun tattooed on your ass? A leprechaun? Oh, that’s sexy.”

“Shut up. Tell me again why you’re my best friend?” Tory growled. She threw the hay into the round pen and headed to retrieve the water hose that was hooked to an outdoor spigot. She was seriously

contemplating turning the hose on Skyler instead of filling the tub. Skyler was saved by the buzzing of the pager clipped to Tory's waist. She sucked in her breath when she checked the number. It was Leah.

Tory hurried over to Bridgette and Jessica.

"Hey," Bridgette said. "Jessica has invited us to stick around for dinner."

"Jess, thanks, but sorry. I just got beeped for an emergency." Tory looked at Bridgette. "I don't want to spoil your evening, though. You could stay. I'm sure someone could run you home later if I don't get back."

"No, I'd rather go with you."

Tory made a show of flicking through the messages on her pager. "I'm afraid I can't take you on this one. The client is an elderly lady who suffers from dementia, and strangers sort of spook her. She knows me."

"A demented lady called you?"

"Well, no. Her granddaughter, who looks after her, did. But the first time I went over there, the old lady didn't know me and got the shotgun after me."

"Oh, no!"

"Yeah. So you'd do better to stay here or let me take you home."

"Only if you tell me the story about the shotgun and the demented grandmother."

Tory laughed. "That would take most of the afternoon."

"Then I'll accept a promise to tell me the story when we have time."

"I promise."

Bridgette turned to Jessica. "Thank you for inviting me, but I'd better let Tory drop me off so I can get some work done on my lesson plans. Classes start next week."

"You are very welcome," Jessica replied. "We'll do it some other time. I really would love for you to sketch Skyler for me."

Bridgette winked. "Take a photo. I can make a sketch from that so Skyler wouldn't have to pose for me."

Jessica's eyes lit up. "Really? That's a great idea."



Jessica watched Tory's truck disappear down the driveway, then walked over to where Skyler was shutting off the water spigot and winding up the hose.

"She's taking Bridgette over to Leah's?" Skyler asked.

"No, she's taking her home before she goes over there. She said a stranger on the farm would upset Mrs. Montgomery."

"You mean the same little old lady who was having the time of her life at our party filled with fifty strangers?"

"Uh-huh."

"Bridgette bought that?"

"I don't think she made the connection that it was the same grandmother and granddaughter. Actually, I don't think she was ever introduced to Leah and Mrs. Montgomery before they left the party."

Skyler moved to stand behind Jessica and wrapped her long arms around her, resting her chin on Jessica's shoulder. They watched Long Shot munch hay for a few minutes before Jessica spoke again. "What was the emergency? I hope Nighty hasn't gotten worse."

"Don't know. Tory didn't call to find out. She just saw the name and phone number on her pager and lit out like her tail was on fire."

"Really? It might not even be an emergency."

Skyler gave her an affectionate squeeze. "Yup. That's exactly what I was thinking."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Leah was deep into her research when a car door slammed. Gram hurried to peer out of the living room window. “Willie’s here!” she announced.

Leah couldn’t stop her smile or the surge in her pulse as she saved her work session and headed for the door. She had been a little worried that Tory wouldn’t respond to her page. Her sister had interrupted them before Tory replied to the offer to still be friends even if they couldn’t be lovers. She had hoped for a phone call, another chance to make things right between them. Tory showing up in person was even better.

Tory climbed the steps to meet them at the front door. “You rang?”

Leah was relieved. Tory didn’t seem angry. “Yes, but you didn’t have to come all the way over here. You could have just answered my question over the phone.”

Tory shrugged. “I was in the neighborhood. How may I be of service?”

Leah could think of a few hundred ways, none of them involving horses and medicine dosages. God, she had to stop that. But every time she was with Tory, her resolve weakened. Unleashing her libido and getting involved with Tory would just make it harder to leave when the time came. Friends. She had to keep this on a friendship level.

“Nighty. I don’t think he’s improving. You said we could increase his medicine dosage, so I was calling to ask about that.”

“Let’s take a look at him, okay?”

Gram shyly touched Tory's arm, looking up at her. "Could you stay for dinner? Leah cooked up a pot of that chili they make down in Texas, and I have some pies freshly baked."

Tory looked toward Leah. "I'm not sure if I have time."

"Please, we'd love to have you stay," Leah said.

Tory looked back at Gram. "Then I'd be happy to, under one condition. You have to dig up some pictures of Leah when she was a kid."

"I know exactly where they are," Gram said before hurrying into the house.

Leah stared after her grandmother. "Of all the things she can't remember, you'd think she'd at least forget where she put those hideous pictures."

Tory laughed. "I bet you were an adorable kid."

Leah shook her head. "It depends on whether you find a tomboy with no front teeth and mud up to her eyebrows adorable. You know this means I'll have to visit your mother for pictures."

"My family didn't take photographs. It's a religious thing."

"Y'all are Catholic, sugar."

"My mother's relatives are gypsies. They believe photographs are bad luck."

"You're such a bad liar."

Nighty was lying down when they entered the stall and uncharacteristically didn't rise to his feet until Tory nudged him up. That wasn't a good sign.

"He should have improved more by now," Tory muttered, bending to pick up each hoof for examination. "There's still a lot of inflammation here. You are sticking to his diet?"

Leah stepped into the stall and scratched Nighty's forehead the way he liked while Tory completed her examination. "I've followed your instructions to the letter. I did catch Gram giving him some grain the other day, but I don't think he got more than a handful or two before I stopped her. And he hasn't been out on the pasture at all."

Tory straightened up and chewed her lower lip thoughtfully. "Maybe she's sneaking out here more than you realize." She wrapped a long arm around Leah's shoulders and squeezed her. "I know she means well, but she's intent on stuffing me with pies and Nighty with



grain. Why don't we put a lock on the feed bin, too, just to be safe? You can his medicine, too."

Leah couldn't stop herself from melting into Tory's one-armed embrace. With everything pressing in on her—Gram's illness, the farm sale, her research and derailed career—it felt good to have someone else come up with a plan, even if it was only for the smallest of her worries.

"Okay. I bought a lock to replace yours that we put on Nighty's stall. We can use that, and I'll buy you another."

"I thought I made it clear you didn't have to replace that lock. It wasn't expensive."

"You don't get to decide that. I'm buying you a lock." *You don't get to decide about us, either. I can't afford to let you unlock my heart.*

Tory shook her head, but smiled. "Hardheaded woman."

After installing the new lock and feeding Nighty his medicine, they worked together in the kitchen, laughing and chatting while they finished preparing the meal. Tory mixed up her Mexican cornbread and slid it into the oven while Leah set the table, grated cheese to top the bowls of chili, and made a pitcher of sweet tea.

When they all sat down and dug into their dinner, Tory hummed in appreciation.

"This is great, but not all that hot. I thought you Texans prided yourself on making the hottest chili around."

Leah cocked her head and raised an eyebrow, but didn't answer. After a moment, Tory's eyes began to water and her nose run. She grabbed her tea and gulped it down.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," she wheezed. "You should have warned me about the afterburn."

Gram and Leah laughed.

"It's the cayenne pepper. Everybody expects to taste the chili pepper, but it's the cayenne that kicks in late. I learned that from an old Cajun when I interned at the *Times-Picayune*."

Tory smiled sheepishly and refilled her tea. "It's really good, though. I like it hot, but I'd have appreciated a little warning."

Leah served up what she hoped was a good imitation of her sweetest smile. "And miss that look on your face? Where's the fun in that?"

When the food was put away and the dishwasher churning, they settled on the sofa with Gram in the middle and a photo album on her lap.

Tory laughed and teased, and Leah scowled and blushed as Gram turned page after page of family photos. She paused at one page and slowly traced her finger over a black-and-white photograph taken more than fifty years earlier.

“Is that you, Gram? How old were you?” Leah asked.

Gram smiled wistfully. “I was nineteen. Willie was only a year older.”

Leah peered at the photo. “Willie was a woman?”

“Yes. Her real name, Millie, didn’t fit her at all, so I called her my Willie. She called me Lori, even though Mama insisted that everybody call me Lorraine. She was tall and smart and handsome. We spent every moment we could together.”

Gram, her eyes sad, looked up at Tory. “You’re not my Willie.”

Leah, too, stared at Tory, whose eyes were fixed on the photograph. It was remarkable how much she favored the woman in the picture. No wonder Gram had confused them.

Tory’s smile was soft. “No, ma’am. I’m not Willie, but I’m honored that you thought I was.”

Leah rubbed her grandmother’s back. “You said before that y’all were in love, Gram. What happened?”

“Things were different back then. I didn’t believe that two women could live together as a couple. Your grandfather was pressing me to marry him, and I didn’t have the courage to choose Willie instead. When I told Willie I was going to accept his proposal, she couldn’t bear to see me with someone else. She joined the army and left. I only heard from her once, a postcard sent years later. She said she was working in a military hospital in Italy. I guess she became a nurse.”

Leah kissed Gram’s cheek. “I’m so sorry, sugar.”

Gram patted her on the arm. “Don’t be. Your grandfather was a good man. He loved me and I grew to love him. Not like I loved Willie, but he gave me children to fill up my life.” She wrapped her gnarled fingers around Leah’s hand. “If I hadn’t married, I wouldn’t have you.” Gram reached with the other hand to clasp Tory’s. “But times are different for you girls. Oh, I know some people still don’t understand

love between two women or two men, but don't let other people's expectations—or even your own—stop you. Have more courage than I did, and fight for love when you find it.”

Leah glanced up and her heart leapt at the emotion she saw in Tory's eyes as they bored into hers. She looked away. No, she couldn't, she wouldn't. She had a lot of things to fix in her life, and she refused to let her emotions derail her.

Gram released their hands, and Tory stood quickly to help as she pushed herself unsteadily to her feet. “Time for this old lady to go to bed.”

“Do you need some help, sugar?”

“So sweet.” Gram patted Leah's hand. “No, I think I can manage.” She turned to Tory and touched her face. “So much like Willie. Tall and smart and handsome.”

Tory blushed but bent down to kiss Gram on the cheek. “Thank you. Good night, Mrs. Montgomery.”

They watched Gram toddle down the hallway to her bedroom.

“She seems so lucid at times,” Tory said.

“Yes, she does. But in the next moment, she can be in an entirely different world. It can give you whiplash.”

“Have you had any luck yet finding a place for her?”

“You won't believe what I've found.” Leah spent the next twenty minutes outlining what she'd discovered in her analysis of the information she'd been sent. Tory listened and nodded.

“This is my ticket to get my career back on track, Tory. This story has award-winner written all over it.”

“How do you plan to get it published?”

“I'll write a summary of my analysis, because I wouldn't want to give away all my information. Then I'll use it to leverage a job.”

Tory nodded. “I had heard a little of this from my great-aunt. She owns an extended-care facility.”

“In this state? What's the name of it?” Leah asked cautiously.

“Greyson Estates.”

Leah was relieved. “That's one of the few with a stellar record.”

“Well, it's not from lack of trying to find something wrong with it. It took a team of lawyers and several years just to get the permits to build because of the politics involved. Then they constantly sent

inspectors until they realized she only wanted to build that one facility and not a chain that would take money out of their pockets.”

“Why did she want to build only one place if it’s so successful?”

“She lives there.”

“She lives there?”

“Yeah. Long story.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before? I’d like to check it out for Gram.”

“Greyson Estates has a long waiting list, but I have a feeling my aunt might make an exception for Gram. It’s about a forty-five-minute drive. I could take you there for a tour. Let me talk to Joyce about my schedule, and I’ll call my aunt to see when she could meet with you. I need to head home now, though.”

They stood and walked out to the porch. Leah reached for Tory’s hand. “Thanks for all your help.”

Tory didn’t answer. She just pulled Leah into her arms and hugged her tight. Leah sighed and hugged back. They stood there for several long minutes, reluctant to part. When Leah finally pulled away, she refused to look up at Tory’s face. She knew what she would see. And if she looked upon the passion, the affection she knew would be there, she would be helpless to do anything other than kiss her. Friends. They could only be friends.

“Good night, Tory,” she said, turning quickly and escaping back into the house.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The small oval intercom device dangling from a towel rack beeped, and the room's only occupant shuffled over and pressed the device's button.

"Yes?"

"Dr. Greyson, young Dr. Greyson is here. She wanted to be announced so you would have a chance to chase the women out before she came in to visit."

Millicent Greyson, most often referred to as MG, chuckled at the sarcastic tone of her irreverent head nurse, Della. "Tell Tory to have a seat in the sunroom. I'm getting dressed and will be out in minute."

"Do you need some assistance?" Della asked, her tone abruptly changed to concern.

"No, thank you. I'm having a pretty good day. I think I can manage."

MG leaned heavily on a cane to walk into her bedroom and sit on the bed. She pulled on a loose pair of jeans that closed in the front with Velcro. The special closure was necessary to accommodate hands misshapen by the rheumatoid arthritis that had ravaged her body in recent years. She carefully pulled a soft cotton T-shirt over her head and settled it down her long, thin torso before adding an open green chambray shirt that reflected the color of her eyes. Next came the intercom device that always hung on a heavy silver chain around her neck for easy access. She awkwardly picked up a brush and ran it through her short white hair. MG winked at her reflection in the mirror.

“Lock up the women, here I come,” she joked to herself.



Tory stood when her great-aunt rode into the large communal sunroom on an electric scooter chair like those constantly advertised on television. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes, yes. Don’t get all excited. That last knee replacement is taking a while to heal, and it’s a long walk to this sunroom. I preferred to ride rather than hobble.”

“I could have come to the residence.”

The residence Tory referred to was a luxury apartment that took up an entire wing of the extended-care facility. There were four wings altogether, two each sprouting off to the left and right from a central building that contained offices, physical therapy facilities, a dining hall, sunroom, and even a small private movie theater. Each of the other three wings offered temporary and long-term-care rooms on a variety of levels to accommodate rehab, elderly, and hospice patients. Between each wing were beautiful gardens dotted with comfortable sitting areas.

MG waved off her concern. “This is better. I like to get out and see people.”

They settled into a group of comfortable overstuffed chairs in a somewhat private corner. Her aunt was popular with the residents and staff. If they sat in the middle of the room, they would be instantly joined by whoever wanted to enjoy MG’s sharp wit.

“What have I done to deserve this visit?”

“Do I have to have a reason to come visit my favorite great-aunt?”

MG rolled her eyes. “Relax. I haven’t changed my will. And, yes, you do need a reason during your busy season. By the way, how’d Chincoteague go this year? You and Skyler win anything?”

“Skyler cut her hand pretty bad and couldn’t go. She’s okay, though.”

“You didn’t stop off at the track?”

“Yeah, I did. I won a couple thousand on a long shot.”

MG’s expression changed to a delighted smile. “You must be finally

loosening up. I've never known you to stray from your handicapping formula."

Tory's cheeks warmed. "Uh, the horse had the same name as a friend who went with me in Skyler's place."

MG wiggled her eyebrows and hooted. "You're a chip off the old block. I never could resist a pretty woman either."

"What makes you think it was a woman?"

"You're blushing and getting that dreamy-eyed look. She must be a looker."

"I am not dreamy-eyed."

"Uh-huh. If you say so."

"That's kind of what I came to see you about."

"You need woman advice?"

"Since I'm in my mid thirties and still single, I probably do, but that's not why I'm here, Willie."

MG stared, the shock evident on her face. When her eyes became watery, she blinked and turned her head to gaze at the summer flowers through the thick glass wall next to them. Tory waited for MG to compose herself, wondering if she should have let old memories stay buried for her aunt's sake. But Leah would have eventually come check out Greyson Estates and surely decide it was the best place for her grandmother. Tory needed to forewarn her.

"Only one person ever called me that." MG's voice was low and soft. Tory waited patiently, watching a mixture of emotions play across her aunt's expressive face in the morning sunlight. "We were so young. Lori was so pretty. I wanted to spend every minute with her. Just thinking about her made my heart sing. We'd meet at a pond on the back part of her daddy's property every day. I'd fish and she'd talk. God, that woman could talk the paint off the side of a barn."

MG smiled. "She loved flowers. I'd walk for hours, picking wildflowers for her." She chuckled. "One night, I even snuck into Mrs. Henderson's yard and cut every single rose off her prized bush and gave them to Lori the next day at the pond. The grocery-store crowd buzzed for weeks about whatever could have happened to Mrs. Henderson's roses. But Lori never told anyone."

She fell silent, clearly gathering those memories like the flowers and holding them close.

“You were in love,” Tory prodded.

MG nodded. “At first, we didn’t know what it was. Then, one day, I borrowed Papa’s old truck and we drove to the shore. We spent the day walking on the beach, enjoying the sun, wading in the surf. When we sat on an outcropping of rocks, I took a chance and kissed her.” MG shook her head. “It was the sweetest kiss I’ve ever experienced. Even after all these years, and a long list of women since.”

Tory flashed back to Chincoteague, Leah in her arms, their lips caressing, tongues dancing. “What did she do?”

“She kissed me back. We were both scared to death when we finally realized what it was between us.” MG looked back at Tory. “You have to understand that we didn’t know there were other women like us. But even though we were terrified, we couldn’t stop those feelings once we unleashed them. We declared our love for each other that day and continued to meet at the pond. Once, I took her dancing at this little roadside diner out on the highway. I think it’s still there. The sign said Edwina’s Place, even though neither of the women who owned it was named Edwina. Anyway, after the supper hour each night, they locked the front door and opened the back door and it became a private women’s bar. We danced our shoes off that night. Lori got grounded for two weeks because we got in so late, and I got a whipping from Papa. But it was worth it to us.”

Her eyes watery again, MG blinked and a single tear trailed down the side of her face. “We were so naïve and scared that it took months of kissing and fumbling before we finally made love on a blanket beside the pond. We were still lying there naked, wrapped in each other’s arms, when we heard Lori’s mother coming down the trail, calling her. We didn’t have time to get dressed, so we jumped in the pond just as she showed up. She was appalled that we were naked in broad daylight and ordered Lori to the house. I always wondered if her mother didn’t realize there was more than skinny-dipping going on.”

She wiped the tear away and cleared her throat. “I went back to the pond every day for the next three weeks, but Lori never came again. I finally worked up the nerve and went to her house one afternoon. I could hear Lori arguing with her mother. I almost left right then, but knocked on the door before I knew what I was doing. Lori came to the door and stepped out onto the porch. Her eyes were red. She had been



crying. I asked her to come to the pond with me so we could talk, but she refused. She told me she was going to marry Earl Montgomery the next month and couldn't go fishing anymore. I was devastated. I hung around until the day of the wedding and stood across the street from the church. When she arrived, she got out of the car and looked right at me. Then she walked into the church, and I drove to the bus station. I bought a ticket to Richmond where I signed up for the army."

"Her granddaughter is the friend who went to Chincoteague with me," Tory said. "Mrs. Montgomery still lives in Cherokee Falls, you know."

"I know exactly where she lives. I always have. I know how many kids she had, when her parents died, and where she goes to church."

"Then you're aware that Earl Montgomery died some years ago. Haven't you wanted to contact her?"

MG looked up, her gaze strong and steady. "Every day of my life since the moment I saw her walk into that church."

"Then why haven't you?" Tory asked, puzzled.

"She probably doesn't even remember me."

"She does. I can bring her here."

"No."

"Why not?"

MG struggled to her feet and used her cane to hobble toward the window, then changed her mind and abruptly limped back. Her voice was hard. "Look at me. She remembers a strong, athletic nineteen-year-old. I'm an old cripple now. I've got more artificial joints in me than real ones. Some days, I can't get out of bed, much less shower and dress without help." She held up her hands. "Do you think she'd want these gnarled old paws to touch her?"

"She's not young either, MG. Her body is healthy, but her mind is going."

MG's brow wrinkled with concern. "Alzheimer's?"

"Dementia. She bounces from the past to the present so fast it makes your head spin. She's been calling me 'Willie' for a month. It wasn't until she showed me a picture of you two that I realized why. You're one of the few memories she's managed to cling to. Don't you think that says something about how she still feels about you?"

MG shifted her feet, obviously wavering.

“She needs you, MG. She needs Greyson Estates. Her mind has gotten too bad for her to live alone any longer. Her granddaughter, Leah, is staying with her temporarily while she searches for a facility where she’s sure her grandmother can be happy and well cared for.”

“What if she doesn’t recognize me, Tory?”

“Whether she realizes who you are or not, you’ll know that she’s living out her last years comfortable and safe.”

MG nodded and returned to her seat. “Getting old is hell. Yes. Okay. You’re right. It’d kill me to think she was alone in one of those places that would lock her in her room for twenty-four hours a day or let her wander off and get hurt.”

“Excellent. I’ll talk to Leah about coming out to see the facility.”

The decision made, MG was eager to hear more. “Now tell me how you met Lori, and everything about this granddaughter who obviously has your attention.”

Tory laughed. “Well, it all started with a foundered pony and a wounded leprechaun.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

When Margaret came by and offered to take Gram with her to the beauty shop for a trim and fresh gossip, Leah gratefully accepted so she could have some time for herself. The trouble was, now that she had that time, what would she do with it?

Her first impulse was to call Tory. She missed those green eyes, her smile, that long, beautiful body. She had indulged herself several times lately by opening up the photo of Tory on the Chincoteague ferry and staring at it. But she was a little miffed that Tory hadn't called about when they could go out to her aunt's care facility. So she decided to visit Long Shot instead.

When she parked next to Creek Barn, she waved at Jessica, who was schooling a group of youngsters in the outdoor ring, then headed toward one of the two pastures located behind the barn where she could see Long Shot alone next to the fence.

The little mare had been dozing in the sun, but pricked her ears forward as Leah approached and stopped at the fence a few feet away. "Hey, girl, how's it going here for you? I see you're in the big pasture now. How come you're not hanging out with the rest of the horses?"

"I'm afraid she doesn't get along with the young bully who's been boss mare in this pasture since Summer has been in the paddock recuperating from an injury."

Leah wheeled to find Skyler standing behind her, Oakley sunglasses temporarily slipped down her nose while she typed a quick text message on her cell phone. "Jess texted me that you were here." She clicked the cell phone shut and slid the sunglasses up to cover her

eyes again. "She's picked that up from the kids and drives me crazy sometimes sending messages."

Leah liked Skyler. She was an interesting mixture of intimidation and charm, a big, sexy prowling puma that Jessica had turned into a purring pussycat. It was so cute.

She considered for a moment what type of animal Tory brought to mind. A German shepherd, perhaps. *That's it. A sleek, handsome guard dog.* She certainly had Skyler's same physical presence, but instead of giving off an aura of danger, Tory made her feel safe and protected.

Leah shook off her thoughts. "I had a moment and dropped by to see how Long Shot's doing."

"Haven't you talked to Tory?"

Leah scowled at the reminder that Tory hadn't called and shaded her eyes against the sun as she gazed up at Skyler. "Not for about a week. I guess she's been busy."

Skyler shifted to stand with her back against the fence so Leah could turn away from the sun. "Yeah, she came out the other day to check on Summer, and she was really backed up with work."

"She accepts too many appointments. She needs to grow a little backbone and learn to say no." Leah was surprised at the irritation in her own voice. But, damn it, a week had gone by without even an e-mail. She had thought they parted on good terms for the first time.

Skyler nodded, appearing to carefully consider what Leah had said. "That may be true. On the other hand, she didn't have any trouble saying no last week to that artist who wanted to ride with her over to your place."

"What artist?"

"The same one Tory brought to the cookout. You didn't meet her? Looks sort of like that actress, Amy Irving. Dark blond hair. Real pretty. She made some great sketches of Tory and Long Shot."

"Tory brought her by to see Long Shot?" She didn't like the idea of sharing their horse with some artist woman.

Skyler nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, she did. I think the artist has her eye on my buddy."

Leah propped her elbows on the fence. She was beginning to catch on to Skyler's not-too-subtle game. "You don't say?"

“Yeah, it’s pretty obvious. I don’t know that Tory is all that interested, though.”

Leah could easily see where Skyler was leading, but she couldn’t stop herself. “Why do you say that?”

“Seems she’s hung up on some Texas firecracker who can’t see what a prize she’s passing up. She’s just going to get her heart broken.”

It irritated Leah that Skyler thought she was using Tory. “Like you and Jessica hurt her?”

Skyler pulled her sunglasses down her nose again, her eyes as dark as a thundercloud. “Tory’s one of the few really good people in this world, Leah. But she’s had too much pain in her life. Yes. I’ve been personally responsible for some of it, but I don’t want my best friend to hurt anymore.”

The hair on the back of Leah’s neck bristled. The dangerous puma was back, her growl a soft but unmistakable warning. She looked away, fixing her gaze on Long Shot. It was obvious that Tory had confided to Skyler about what went on at Chincoteague. That meant Jessica knew, too. Damn it. She had to finish this business with Gram and get the hell out of town.

“Tory and I are just friends. I haven’t even talked to her but once since we got back from Chincoteague,” she said. “I’ve been expecting her to call because she was going to take me out to look at her aunt’s facility for Gram.”

Skyler slid her sunglasses back in place and nodded. “I’m guessing that you’re taking off as soon as your grandmother is situated?”

Leah looked back at Skyler. Was that it? Was that why Tory hadn’t called? She didn’t want to seal the deal that would mean Leah could leave? She pushed down the joy that sprang unbidden from her heart. Damn it. She needed to go before she got in deeper.

“Yes, I’m leaving,” she said. “I care about Tory, but I can’t stay here. I’m just a few steps away from the story I’ve been working toward for the past ten years. You know what that’s like, don’t you? Did you let anything get in your way when you won your gold medal?”

Skyler stepped away from the fence and straightened to her full, intimidating height. Leah could see her own reflection in the Oakleys as

Skyler gazed down at her, a slow smile spreading across her handsome face.

“You think that medal is the grand prize in my life? You are so wrong. I wake up every morning and wrap my arms around the one single accomplishment that makes my life worth living. I’d give up a hundred gold medals to keep Jess in my life.”

Skyler turned and began to walk away without waiting for a response. Suddenly, she stopped and turned back to Leah. “Oh, I almost forgot. Tory says Long Shot is pregnant. She’s not happy about it, but it’s too far along to stop.”

Having delivered her messages, she intercepted Jessica, who was heading their way, and pulled her toward the barn.

“I was just coming to see Leah,” Jessica protested as Skyler guided her into the barn office.

“I think she needs some alone time to mull things over,” Skyler said, flopping down onto the old leather couch and pulling Jessica with her.

“Alone time?”

Skyler nodded. “But I could use some together time. You can sit right here and give me a kiss of appreciation.”

Jessica promptly tucked herself against Skyler’s side and kissed her soundly. When she pulled back, she stroked Skyler’s smooth cheek. “Do I get to ask what I’m rewarding you for, other than being the sexiest thing in riding breeches and handy around the farm?”

Skyler was smug. “I just took care of that sensitive talk you were planning to have with your friend out there.”

“*You* had a sensitive talk? With Leah?”

“Yes, I did.”

“About Tory?”

“Yep.”

Jessica looked doubtful, like she wanted to bolt back outside to administer emergency damage control. “How’d it go?”

“I surprised myself. You should be proud of me. You should kiss me again.”

Jessica laughed. “A kiss is all you want?”

“Just until the kids clear out for the day. Then you’ve got some serious thanking to do.”



Long Shot was pregnant. Leah's mind whirled around this new information. Weren't foals born in the spring rather than the fall? She'd have to Google that. What were the chances that Long Shot's baby would have a club foot or, worse, be horribly crippled? She'd look that up, too.

Damn it. Why didn't Tory call and tell her? She could have answered all Leah's questions. Was she too busy with that artist to even make a phone call? She felt kind of sick at the thought.

Leah slipped through the gate and stood just inside the fence. She and Long Shot stared at each other for a long moment, then the little mare surprised her by walking over and standing next to her.

Long Shot's musky horse smell was a comforting reminder of the simpler days of her childhood when she and Nighty explored winding trails on endless summer afternoons. She loved that smell. Leah reached out a tentative hand and scratched Long Shot's withers, the same spot another horse would nibble to convey affection. Long Shot dropped her head to rub her forehead against Leah's knee, and the bond was complete.

They were a pair. Two wild, independent hearts that somehow had become lost.

With a foal on the way, Long Shot knew she wanted the security of a herd, but still she resisted. Likewise, Leah honestly didn't know anymore what she wanted. She had thought she knew. That is, until she met Tory. *You think that medal is the grand prize in my life?* Was she resisting, too?

*Sometimes all you need to find peace is to feel another heart beating along with yours.* Leah shook her head. She had slept next to more than a few women and never felt that way. *Beating along with yours.* Except when she had lain in Tory's arms, sated and safe, like all of her was in one place for the first time.

No. That wasn't in her plan. Tory had the artist. Stick to the plan. Find Gram a home. Find a new job. Get the hell out of Cherokee fucking Falls.





## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Wow. This place looks like something you'd see in a movie. I had no idea these existed in Cherokee Falls. Being an art teacher must pay really well."

When Bridgette called to offer dinner on Friday night at her newly acquired home, Tory readily accepted.

She had expected one of the small houses being renovated near the college campus or a quaint apartment in a subdivided Victorian mansion downtown. She had not anticipated this roomy loft unit, carved into the corner of a former tobacco warehouse.

The walls were mostly brick with burnished wood beams and an occasional exposed water pipe or electrical conduit suspended sixteen feet overhead. A huge bedroom and master bath were delineated by eight-foot-tall, smoky-glass-cube walls. Windows, framed in wood that still smelled faintly of curing tobacco, reached almost from floor to ceiling to illuminate the interior in natural daylight.

"It has a mortgage, not a lease," Bridgette explained. "Well, at least it will. I'm renting it this month until we can get the paperwork together to close the mortgage. I was storing my furniture with a moving company here, so they delivered it right away and Cheryl had me unpacked in almost a day."

"Huh. I wondered how you moved in so fast. You know, I've never really understood the concept of buying an apartment. How can you buy something when you don't own the land under it?"

Bridgette took the box of Chinese takeout Tory held and moved over to the kitchen area. "Think of it like a thirty-year lease where the monthly payment can't go up."

"That makes sense. Also, you get to deduct the interest on your taxes."

"Exactly."

"But when you rent, you can just load up your stuff and hit the road. A mortgage means you have to find a buyer or keep making the payments."

Bridgette stopped her dinner preparations and cocked her head, staring at Tory thoughtfully. "I've bounced around the New York and Boston area for about fifteen years. When I realized I was ready to settle down, I wanted something quieter, smaller, with a tight community of friends." She smiled at Tory. "I think I've found that here in Cherokee Falls."

Tory shifted nervously from one foot to the other, crossing her arms over her chest and tucking her hands in her armpits.

Bridgette laughed. "Relax. My version of settling down is getting serious about my painting and teaching. I'm not looking to set up housekeeping with anyone."

Tory was embarrassed that her body language was so easy to read.

Bridgette set plates, cloth napkins, and silverware on the table, then added two candles and lit them. She walked over to Tory and pulled her close, resting her arms on Tory's shoulders. "You're handsome and fun and sexy, not to mention a great lover even when you're drunk." She gave Tory a soft kiss. "But I'm really hard to live with. I teach part-time so I can play loud music and paint all night if I'm inspired to do so. One thing that attracted me to you was that you have an established life already and aren't driving around with a U-Haul behind your truck like a lot of lesbians."

She kissed Tory again, this time with meaning, and pressed their hips together. She smiled when they finally pulled back. "Did I mention that you're very sexy and a great lover?"

"I have a bad memory. Maybe you should repeat it frequently."

Bridgette laughed and moved back to the kitchen area and rummaged through a drawer. She located a corkscrew and handed it to Tory, along with a bottle of chilled wine. "I'll see if I can do that, but only if you promise to refresh my memory on a regular basis."

Tory went to work on the wine while Bridgette located some

glasses. She looked up after a moment. "So, you don't think you'll ever live with a partner, wedded bliss and all that?"

Bridgette sat down at the table and accepted the glass of wine Tory poured for her. She took a sip, savoring it, then sat back in her chair. "After I graduated from art-and-design school in New York, I traveled with a classmate. We had been lovers for nearly a year. We went back to her home in Tibet, where I studied for another year in a monastery. I learned a lot more about life there than I did Eastern art techniques. The monks teach that each person has a road to travel in life. Your life will intersect in many places with many people. When you're at the right point in that journey, you may find that your road has converged with another's. The mistakes we make in life happen when we try to veer from our destined path to avoid or force an intersection or a convergence with another's path."

She looked at Tory, the candlelight flickering across her face as dusk dimmed the room around them. "I hope I experience a committed relationship before I die. But I'm not looking for it. It will happen when it happens." She raised her wineglass and held it toward Tory. "Until then, I intend to enjoy the intersections in my life. And you, my handsome veterinarian, are something to enjoy."

Tory raised her glass and touched it to Bridgette's. "To enjoyable intersections."

They both took quick sips of their wine.

"Now, you promised to tell me the story of the demented grandmother and her shotgun," Bridgette said as she filled her plate.

The conversation flowed easily as they ate. Bridgette was a good listener, asking questions in the right places until she had pried loose the story of Tory's first trip to the Montgomery farm and the weekend trip to Chincoteague. Tory carefully omitted, however, the intimate moments between her and Leah.

Bridgette asked about Tory's family, Tory's friendship with Skyler, and how Jessica and Skyler became a couple.

When they finished eating, she offered to give Tory a grand tour of her new loft apartment. Tory had seen the open area that held the kitchen, living room, and dining area. She was curious, however, to see where the storage space was built in this kind of place, and which glass wall hid Bridgette's studio area.

They never got past the bedroom. This time, Tory concentrated on Bridgette's pleasure. She touched her and kissed her in all the right places, bringing her to orgasm twice before she finally let Bridgette slide down to reciprocate. To her dismay, when she closed her eyes and concentrated on the waves of pleasure Bridgette's tongue was coaxing from her clit, she envisioned Leah's face between her legs and Leah's hands holding her thighs apart as her orgasm swelled and washed through her.

After the last spasms abated, Tory tugged Bridgette up to lie beside her. But she caught Bridgette's hand when it crept downward again. "Nuh-uh. I'm only good for one a night when I'm sober. Too sensitive."

Bridgette relented without question and instead curled herself against Tory's side. Tory was relieved that Bridgette didn't argue.

It wasn't long before Bridgette's deep, even breathing indicated she was asleep. Rest didn't come so quickly for Tory. She thought about her road in life. She thought about MG and Leah's Gram. Had their paths come full circle to finally converge? She knew she should call Leah and arrange to take her and Gram out to Greyson Estates. But she had put it off because Leah would leave as soon as Gram's affairs were settled. How long after she was gone would Leah continue to haunt her intimate moments with other women?



The next morning, Bridgette brewed coffee and made Belgian waffles while Tory showered. It was Saturday, so Bridgette had softball practice later that morning and Tory had paperwork and laundry to do at home. But there was no hurry. They ate in companionable silence, sharing sections of the morning paper. It felt comfortable.

Bridgette insisted she would wash the dishes later, taking Tory's hand and leading her around the massive fireplace to another open area. Blank canvases were stacked against the wall, as well as some completed paintings. Several easels held works in progress, and a table in one corner of the room held a large clay sculpture and a variety of carving tools. The sculpture also was a work in progress, but the head and shoulders of Long Shot, caught in that moment of indecision, had

emerged from one end of the clay block. The sketch Bridgette had made at the farm was tacked on the wall nearby, as well as different variations of the drawing from other points of view.

"Wow. I knew you sketched and painted, but I didn't know you sculpted, too."

"Working in different media is a challenge. It keeps me from getting bored."

"This is going to be wonderful. I'm no art critic, but you seem to be very talented."

"Thank you. I enjoy my work. That's the most important thing. I love the smell of fresh paint and wet clay. I love seeing things come to life under my hands." They were quiet for a moment. "Tell me what you enjoy about your work, Tory."

Tory's mouth curled with the beginning of a smile, her eyes drawn back to the sculpture. "I love working outdoors, the smell of fresh hay and horses. I don't show much any more, but I grew up on horseback. I like delivering foals and seeing them mature into beautiful, powerful animals." She laughed. "Skyler says we must have been horses in a past life, that's why we still seek their company."

"Do you believe in reincarnation?"

Tory shrugged. "I was raised Catholic, but I often think it must be a small piece of the big picture. I don't really dwell on it much." She pointed to a carefully penned quote taped to the wall among the sketches.

*"The thing is to find a truth which is true for me..."*

"Another piece of philosophy you learned in Tibet?" she asked.

"No. It's from a Danish existentialist. It's just something to ponder while I work."

"It would make my brain hurt to have all those deep thoughts all the time."

"It balances out being a natural blonde and an artist. You know, a ditzzy Bohemian."

Tory laughed. "After getting to know you, I'd never describe you as ditzzy."

"Admit it, though. When you asked me out that first time, it wasn't because you thought I could discuss the true meaning of life."

"I asked you out because you're very sexy. Is that wrong?"

“Hmm. Not where you’re concerned. I’d love to explore those more animalistic impulses, but,” Bridgette looked at her watch, “I’ve got to hurry or I’ll be late to practice.”

“And I’ve got two weeks of laundry waiting for me at home. I’ll walk out with you.”



Leah visited Long Shot several times, the little mare following her like a puppy but still shunning the other horses in the pasture. She tried to research club feet in horses but decided it was just a crap shoot as to whether Long Shot would pass her bad gene to her offspring. Fall foals, she learned, were rare and inconvenient, but shouldn’t be a problem since the Virginia winters were relatively mild and the equestrian center had ample shelter.

She looked for the familiar veterinary truck each time she visited, but two weeks slid by with no chance meeting, no call, and no visit from Tory.

Leah was done waiting. She made her own appointment with the administrator of Greyson Estates for the following week, then set up a Saturday meeting with the developer who wanted to buy Gram’s farm.

She received several responses to the feelers she sent out in hopes of leveraging her research into a new job. Every news agency she contacted was under a hiring freeze but wanted to talk to her about freelancing the story to them. Surprisingly, she did get two invitations to talk about possible jobs, one from a national nonprofit advocate group for the aging and one from a Virginia congresswoman who had a special interest in health-care issues. The journalist in Leah screamed that accepting a job with either of these political groups would be selling out, but she thought she could enjoy living in Washington, D.C.

At any rate, things were finally starting to align so that she could get the hell out of Cherokee Falls and run from the nagging desire to see Tory again.



Tory met Bridgette several times in the next week for lunch, and she finished work early enough on Friday to catch Bridgette's softball game. They went out with the team afterward for pizza and beer before ending up at Bridgette's loft again.

On Saturday morning, Tory found herself wide awake and staring at the ceiling, thinking that she needed to call Leah. She hadn't even told her that Long Shot was pregnant. What did it matter, anyway? Leah was leaving. She might never even see the foal.

Bridgette stirred beside her. "Hey, how long have you been awake?"

"Just a little while."

Bridgette cuddled against Tory's side, her hand finding Tory's breast.

Tory gave her a quick kiss. "I'm starving. How about you?"

Bridgette raised an eyebrow, but clearly got the message. Her hand abandoned Tory's nipple and, instead, patted her stomach. "I'll get up and make us some breakfast as soon as I wake up a little more."

"How about we give you time to wake up, and I take you to breakfast?"

"You've got a deal."





## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Downtown Cherokee Falls was busy when Leah strolled down the street humming to herself. The meeting with the developer had gone very well. He had made a smug offer he seemed sure Leah would jump to sign. What he hadn't counted on was Leah having researched his project and the amount of money he would make off the deal. By the time she was done, he was agreeing to her demands that he significantly up his initial offer. His office would be faxing the paperwork to Leah's attorney on Monday. The cool \$2.7 million would buy Gram the best available care for the rest of her life.

She was headed to a local hot spot for a celebratory coffee and pastry when she nearly collided with Jessica, who was exiting the bookstore, her nose stuck in a book.

"Oh, hey, sorry. I didn't mean to run you over," Jessica said, juggling her packages.

"Hey, Jess. That must be a really good book if you can't wait to get home to read it." She was glad to see her. She wanted someone to share the news of her successful morning before she had to tell Gram, who wouldn't like selling the farm, at any price.

"I love this author and I've been waiting months for her new release."

Leah took the book from Jessica and read the back cover. "You're a fan of lesbian romance?"

"Okay, I know that must be below you, Miss Hot-Shot Journalist. But don't knock it until you've read a few."

Leah laughed. "I've got every book this author has written. I can't believe I didn't know this was due out this month."

Jessica laughed, too.

"What? You thought I read the *New York Times* for relaxation?"

Leah sighed. "Sometimes a girl just needs to escape. Not all of us live in a happily-ever-after world like yours."

Jessica hooked her arm in Leah's and guided her back into the bookstore. "First, we'll get you a copy. Then we'll have coffee and a little girl talk to catch up."

Leah hesitated. Gram was fine with Margaret, so why not? "Thanks. I could use a little sane company for a while."

The coffee shop was busy, but they managed to find a table without waiting long. Since the day was beginning to heat up, they both ordered iced lattes and cinnamon rolls and settled down to talk.

Even though Leah had been at the farm several times over the summer, Jessica was busy with running it or teaching riding classes, so they really hadn't had a chance to visit. Jessica listened thoughtfully as Leah spilled everything about the strain of keeping an eye on Gram twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, having to tell Gram about selling the farm, and trying to find a solution to her job situation.

"So my life pretty much sucks right now," Leah concluded.

"If you do find a place for Gram here in Cherokee Falls, I want you to stay at our farm when you come to see her, as long as you like. We've got all those empty bedrooms. You don't even have to call first. Consider it your home here in Virginia."

"Thanks, Jess. I really appreciate that. I'm sure I'll take you up on the offer."

Jessica sipped her drink before speaking again. "You know, if we'd been sitting here eighteen months ago, I'd be the one saying that my life sucked."

"No way. You have the perfect life. You have the farm and Skyler—you made a good choice there, by the way—and you have a job you love."

Jessica shook her head. "Eighteen months ago, I was only a few months out of the hospital after two surgeries on my leg. My horse I had practically lived with and expected to take me to the Olympics had been euthanized on the steeplechase course after a bad spill broke his

leg and mine. I came crawling to Kate with a pocket full of painkillers, a bum knee, a new horse, and about nine months to train for the trials. She matched me up with a cranky, arrogant trainer whose womanizing had gotten her blacklisted on the eventing circuit.”

“Skyler? I can’t believe it.”

“Yes, Skyler.” Jessica chuckled. “We were like oil and water at first.”

“Being with you obviously has changed her a lot.”

Jessica laughed again. “I definitely put a stop to the womanizing. But it’s really Skyler who saved *me*.”

“What do you mean?”

“Being blacklisted isn’t what made her not want to return to the eventing circuit to train me. She said that winning a gold medal was all about looking back at what you’ve done. Rescuing troubled kids through the center’s equestrian program is about looking toward the future, helping them establish the self-esteem they need to grow into good adults. That’s what makes her really happy.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Leah said slowly. “Aren’t you afraid that somewhere down the line, you’ll resent Skyler because you gave up your dream to live out hers?”

Jessica shook her head vigorously. “It wasn’t Skyler that stopped me. It was finally blowing out my knee so bad I’ll never jump horses again.”

“Oh, sugar. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Don’t be. It made me open my eyes to what really is important—waking up next to Skyler every morning and living on the farm I loved so much as a kid.”

“I’m glad it worked out for you.”

Jessica gave Leah a long look. “Shit happens, Leah. It’s really crappy that you lost your job, but don’t miss this chance to stop and reconsider what’ll really make you happy.”

Leah shrugged and looked away. For some reason, her thoughts turned to Tory. Just when she was about to ask Jessica if she’d seen her, Tory walked into the coffee shop trailing an attractive blonde.



Tory's heart dropped when she saw who was sitting at the table with Jessica. Could she turn around and escape without being seen? Before she could flee, Bridgette grabbed her hand to tug her toward the very table she wanted to avoid.

"Jess, hey!"

Jessica turned at the greeting. "Hey, Bridgette, Tory. What are you guys up to?"

"I guess Tory wasn't impressed with my cooking last weekend, so she insisted we go out for brunch."

Tory shifted uncomfortably, avoiding Leah's gaze. The implication was clear that they had spent the night together. Not only last night, but last weekend, too.

"I heard you had found an apartment. Are you getting settled in?" Jessica asked.

"Yes. I bought a loft in that new development in the tobacco district. I love it."

"Sounds like you're planning to stick around for a while."

"It's fantastic here. I like the college, and I've made a lot of friends through the softball team already." Bridgette smiled at Tory. "Everybody's so sweet."

Leah suddenly stood. "I should go. Margaret will be returning home with Gram soon."

"Sorry, I seem to have misplaced my manners." Jessica made quick introductions. "Leah, this is Bridgette. She'll be teaching art classes at the college. Bridgette, this is my old friend, Leah Montgomery. She's been in town this summer to help settle some of her grandmother's business."

"Nice to meet you," Bridgette said. She pulled Tory forward. "Do you know Tory?"

"We've met," Leah said curtly.

Tory was sheepish. "Sorry I haven't gotten back to you. I've been really busy."

Leah looked pointedly at Bridgette. "I can see that. No matter. I made my own appointment. I couldn't wait any longer for you to call. My lawyer will be looking over the papers Monday for the sale of Gram's farm."

Tory folded her arms over her chest to stop the sudden pain there. "You're leaving that soon?" she said weakly.

"As soon as I get Gram settled and tie up loose ends."

Tory was aware that Bridgette was watching them closely, but she didn't care. "I'm sorry to hear that. When's your appointment next week? I'll arrange my schedule so I can go with you. I can probably help you place the horses in new homes, too, if you haven't promised them already."

"That's not necessary."

"I want to, damn it."

Jessica jumped in to stop the argument. "Speaking of horses, I haven't had a chance to tell you guys that Long Shot has finally made a friend at the farm. We put Summer back in that pasture, and they immediately became best buddies."

Before Leah could answer, her cell phone rang. "What do you mean she's gone? Damn it. I can't believe she found those keys. I didn't even know that old truck would still run. Which direction did she head? I'm sorry. It's not your fault. Don't worry. I'll call the sheriff. Can you stay there just in case she comes back to the house? Thanks." Leah closed her cell phone and looked up. "Gram found the keys to the old farm truck while Margaret was in the bathroom. She's taken off to God knows where. I've got to find her before she hurts herself or somebody else."

Tory had seen the color drain from Leah's face and the fear cloud her eyes. "I'll go with you." She turned to Jessica. "Can you get Bridgette home?"

"You don't have to help me," Leah said weakly.

"For once, don't argue with me," Tory said, pulling Leah toward the door. "You can call the cops while we head toward your place. We'll take my truck because I've got a police scanner in it. We can turn it on and listen in case they find her before we do."

Jessica and Bridgette followed them outside, but Tory and Leah had leapt into the truck and were tearing off down the road before they could reach the curb.

"Uh, Tory is such a do-gooder," Jessica said in apology. "Let a crisis pop up, and she's instantly in rescue mode."

"I've got a feeling there's more than that going on here." Bridgette looked at Jessica. "That was Leah whose grandmother who is suffering from dementia, isn't it?"

"What has Tory told you about her?"

"More than she realizes. She told me about Leah's grandmother shooting her in the butt. She also told me about them winning at the track, then using the money to save that mare from the pony-ride man. It wasn't her words that gave her away, though. It was the way she lights up when she talks about Leah."

"Leah's leaving town," Jessica pointed out.

"Maybe," Bridgette replied.

"I'm sorry," Jessica said, wondering why Bridgette didn't seem too upset about being left on the sidewalk.

Bridgette shrugged. "Tory needs to make peace with herself before she can find her way to someone else. We'll remain good friends, I hope."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

While Tory sped toward the Montgomery farm, Leah called Jimmy and told him that Gram was on the loose. Tory turned on the scanner and adjusted the frequency just as the call was going out to all law enforcement currently patrolling the county.

When they arrived at the farm, Margaret was nervously rocking in one of the porch chairs. “I’m so sorry,” she said to Leah. “I was only in the bathroom a few minutes. I was looking for her in the house when I heard the truck, but by the time I got outside, she was headed down the driveway.”

“It’s okay, Margaret,” Leah reassured her, despite her own worry. “God knows she’s slipped out on me a few times. We’ve called the sheriff and they’re looking out for the truck.”

“Did she say anything about wanting to go somewhere?” Tory asked.

“Well, we were in the beauty shop and Florence started talking about how she remembered the day Lorraine married Earl. That seemed to upset Lorraine. I thought maybe she still misses Earl, but I couldn’t get Florence to shut up. Then Lorraine jumped up and said we had to go. She said it was a mistake to marry Earl, and she had to go find Willie. I don’t remember anyone named Willie.”

“Oh, no. She could be headed anywhere,” Leah moaned as she turned back to Tory’s truck.

But Tory stopped her. “No, wait. Is there a pond somewhere on this farm?”

Leah thought. “Yeah, it’s probably still there. But we could only

get to it by foot when I was just a kid. I'm not sure there's even a path to it anymore. Gram left in the truck. Come on."

Tory thought hard as she drove. Where else would Gram go to find Willie? She drove by the old place where MG had lived as a child. The house had burned down years ago. Nothing remained but a chimney and the rubble of a stone foundation. There was no sign of Gram anywhere near.

They had been searching for over an hour when the scanner crackled to life and a state patrolman reported having seen the truck headed down old U.S. 33 about thirty minutes earlier. Tory knew where Gram was going.

"Hold on," she warned Leah as she did a U-turn in the middle of the road and gunned the engine.



The freshly painted sign on the weathered building still said *Edwina's Place*, and Gram's battered green farm truck was parked in front of the huge plate-glass window. Leah jumped from the truck, but Tory stopped her.

"Hold on a minute," she said when Leah tried to pull away and run inside.

"I have to make sure she's okay," Leah insisted.

"We're going inside, but you need to calm down. Margaret said Gram was already worked up about finding Willie. We don't want to upset her more."

Leah looked away, her eyes filling with tears. "You're right. I was just so scared I'd lost her."

Tory hooked her fingers under Leah's chin and turned her face up to brush at the tear trickling down her cheek. She waited until Leah's eyes met hers. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," Leah answered without hesitation.

"Then let me handle this. Please."

Leah nodded, and Tory led her inside.

The interior fortunately didn't look as weathered as the outside. The small restaurant was laid out in an L shape. Directly in front of the door was a long lunch counter where patrons could sit on red vinyl bar



stools. Off to the left was a second room lined with wooden booths that were thick with yearly layers of varnish. In one corner sat an ancient jukebox that still played old country tunes.

They paused at the entrance to that room, spotting Gram huddled in a booth close to the jukebox.

“Y’all come for Lori?”

Tory and Leah turned to the woman wiping down the counter with a gray dishrag. She and an old man sitting at the end of the counter were the only other people there. Her gray hair was short, and her bulky figure was draped in men’s pants and a faded T-shirt.

“You know her?” Leah asked.

“Naw. She came in here a little while ago all worked up and looking for someone named Willie. So I said, ‘What’s your name, honey?’ She told me her name was Lori. I could tell she was confused, so I sat her in the back with a cup of coffee. If someone hadn’t come looking for her pretty soon, I was going to call Beatrice down at the sheriff’s department to see if anybody had reported her missing. I don’t suppose one of you is named Willie?”

“No, but I do a pretty good imitation. Let’s see if it works now.”

Gram was picking at some sugar packets, trying to tear them open although five empty packets already lay next to her coffee cup. She didn’t look up when Tory and Leah approached, so Tory slid onto the bench opposite her. “Hi, Lori. Whatcha doing?”

Gram looked up and smiled shyly. She didn’t seem to notice Leah standing a few feet away. “I knew you’d come, Willie.” She shoved a dime across the table toward Tory. “I’ve been saving this dime so we could dance. I never got to dance with you again except that one time we came here.”

“Would you like to dance now?”

Gram nodded, and Tory helped her stand. It had been a while since the price of a song was ten cents, so Tory dug some quarters out of her pocket and slid them into the machine. “How about if you punch up our song,” she prompted Gram.

Gram made her selection and, after some whirring and thumping, Patsy Cline’s “Crazy” filled the room. Tory held out her arms.

Lori moved into Willie’s gentle embrace and closed her eyes as they swayed slowly to the music. “My Willie. I could dance forever

with your arms around me, Patsy singing, and your heart beating so strong against my cheek,” she murmured. “Remember when we were here before?”

Tory kept her voice soft. “Tell me what you remember, Lori.”

“We danced and danced. Everybody else was gone, so they finally told us we had to leave so they could close up. I didn’t want the night to end.”

She opened her eyes and her steps faltered as she focused on Leah. Tory watched as Gram’s smile faded and her eyes filled with sadness.

Gram looked up at her. “I think I need to sit down,” she said.

Tory led her back to the booth and helped her sit. Then Leah knelt in front of her and looked into her grandmother’s eyes. “Are you okay, sugar?”

Gram patted Leah’s shoulder and looked up at Tory. “So much like Willie, you confuse me sometimes.”

Tory smiled. “I know where to find Willie, Mrs. Montgomery. She wants to see you.”

Gram gasped, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. Leah looked up sharply at Tory.

“Willie’s here?” Gram asked.

“Not very far from here. Would you like to go there now?”

“Yes, oh, yes,” Gram said.

They started toward the door, but Leah grabbed Tory’s arm to hold her back. “This better be good, I don’t want her hurt.”

“You have to trust me,” Tory said.



They climbed into Tory’s truck with Gram seated between them. As she pulled out onto the highway, Leah phoned Jimmy to call off the search while Tory dialed a different number on her cell phone.

“We’re on our way,” she said. “We’ll be there in about twenty minutes.” She listened for a moment before speaking again. “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

Almost exactly twenty minutes later, they pulled up to a fancy wrought-iron gate. The smooth walls of a high stucco fence extended in either direction to surround the property.

A uniformed man stepped out of the gatehouse and greeted them. "Young Dr. Greyson. I thought this was your busy season, but this is the second time you've been out here this month. Is your aunt doing okay?"

"She's fine, Ed. I've just brought some friends out to visit."

"Good. She'll enjoy the company." He stepped back into the gatehouse and pushed a button that opened the heavy gate and allowed them to drive on toward the huge, colonial-style building.

"I feel like I'm in that old TV show *Dallas* and we just drove up to the family mansion. What did they call it? Southfork?"

Tory chuckled. "That's a good one. I'll have to tell my aunt."

"This is the great-aunt you said owns this place?"

"Yes. Dr. Millicent Greyson."

"Ah, that's why they call you *young* Dr. Greyson. Is she a veterinarian, too?"

"Nope. She's a retired surgeon."

They parked and Tory led them inside, where the receptionist greeted them. "Dr. Greyson said to tell you she would be in the sunroom."

While they kept their pace slow for Gram, Leah took in the details of the facility. "This place is swanky," she murmured.

They turned left and stepped into the brightly lit sunroom. Its glass walls were alive with the colors of the flowers blooming just outside.

"This is my aunt's favorite room," Tory said as they moved into its warmth.

In the corner, a tall figure rose and turned to face them. Leah could swear she was looking at Tory forty years into the future. The green eyes, straight nose, and square jaw were the same.

"May I present my great-aunt, the proprietor of this grand place, Dr. Millicent Greyson, better known to everyone as MG," Tory said.

Gram stared, transfixed.

MG smiled. "It's my favorite room because it reminds me of a long time ago when I used to pick flowers to give to a certain very pretty girl."

Gram's breath hitched and her hands trembled at the sound of MG's voice. "Willie, is it really you?"

"Hi, Lori." MG shifted nervously, sliding her hands into the

pockets of her sweater. "I'm not exactly the nineteen-year-old you remember. But it's really me."

Gram moved forward and held out her hand, but MG didn't take it. "Are you still angry with me, Willie?"

"I was hurt, Lori, but never angry." She pulled her hand from her pocket and held it out. "I just didn't think you'd want to hold this crippled old paw of mine."

Gram's smile was tender as she folded MG's large hand carefully in her smaller ones. "Will it hurt if I hold it gently?"

"No. Your hands are warm. It feels good." She looked up at Leah and Tory. "Perhaps Lori and I can visit here while you two take the grand tour."

Leah cleared the lump that had developed in her throat while witnessing their reunion. "I was told the administrator wouldn't be available until next week. I have an appointment with him on Thursday."

MG cocked her head, her eyes twinkling. "If it's convenient for you, I think you'll find that he is available to show you around now and answer any questions you have."

Leah relaxed. "All righty, then. Gram, sugar, will you be okay here for a while?"

"I'm fine, dear. You girls run along and leave us old women to visit," she said, never taking her eyes off MG.



The tour and the discussion about the medical care her grandmother would receive took several hours. The facility had an excellent staff so that the patients were well cared for, and the high fence that surrounded it kept its residents safe without imprisoning them indoors.

The interior was cheerfully decorated, and bulletin boards carried notices of manicure appointments, dance lessons, tai chi class, bridge club, and poker night.

When they left the administrator and headed back to the sunroom, Leah was quiet.

"So, what do you think?" Tory asked.

"It's great," Leah answered. "I keep expecting to run into some old movie stars. I can't imagine being able to afford something like this."

Earlier that morning, the offer on the farm seemed like a lot of money, but it was beginning to feel smaller and smaller. When she asked about the rates, the administrator demurred. "Dr. Greyson said you should discuss that with her."

"MG has never discussed the finances of this place, but I do know that an endowment keeps it running. If it did make any profit, MG would just add another staff person or give bonuses to the people who already work here."

"I know you said she was a doctor, but even doctors don't make the kind of money that supports a place like this. What does she do? Sell drugs out the back door?"

"Always the journalist looking for a story." Tory chuckled. "I'll start with the story MG told me and the rest of what I know of my aunt's life. The day Gram got married, MG caught the bus to Richmond and joined the army. A woman couldn't do much in the service back then. She had two choices, clerical or medical. MG chose medical. After her initial enlistment as a medic, the army paid her way through medical school, then she did her internship and surgical residency in military hospitals. She was working in a MASH unit during the Vietnam War when she and an army buddy—another doctor—developed and patented a technique and a small device that prevented a lot of amputations. Trauma units still use it today."

"So why wouldn't your aunt just take her money and fill her own house with servants? Why build this place?"

"She said she just got used to living around a lot of people after spending most of her adult life in the military."

"This isn't exactly a military barracks."

"No, it isn't." Tory laughed before she continued her story. "Rheumatoid arthritis ended MG's surgical career while she was in her fifties. And her friend who shared the patent learned he was HIV positive. No, he wasn't gay. He got it through a blood transfusion, but the army dropped him like a hot potato when he was diagnosed. His family pretty much deserted him, too. So MG brought him back here

and they built this place together. It was mostly an AIDS hospice at first, but it later evolved to include patients with all kinds of ailments. When he died, he left all of his estate to the endowment.”

Leah squinted in the bright light as they stepped into the sunroom again. “Where’d everybody go?”

Tory looked around the empty room. “It must be lunchtime. Maybe they went to the dining room or the residence.”

When they stepped into the hallway, Tory yanked Leah back out of the path of a speeding electric scooter.

“There they are,” Gram sang out.

The scooter slowed and made a U-turn in the hallway. MG was seated in the padded chair, driving with one hand while her other arm was wrapped securely around Gram’s tiny frame perched atop MG’s long legs.

“MG, Della is going to hide your scooter again if you run over somebody,” Tory said.

Gram giggled. “I told her to go fast.”

Leah laughed at her grandmother, and MG smiled. “I always did like fast cars and fast women, huh, Lori?”

Gram swatted at MG’s arm. “Willie, don’t say that in front of Sissy.”

Leah’s smile faded. Sissy was Gram’s long-dead sister.

But MG didn’t falter. “I wish that was Sissy standing there, sweetie. I’d plant a big kiss on you that would curl her hair. She always did get under my skin with her I’m-better-than-you attitude.”

Gram blushed. “You are so bad,” she murmured.

“I know it,” MG replied. She pointed to Leah. “That’s not Sissy, Lori. Who is it?”

When Gram looked blankly at Leah and Tory for a long minute. Leah started to prompt her, but MG held up her hand. “Who is that, Lori? You know her.”

“That’s Leah, my granddaughter. She wears cowboy boots because she’s from Texas.”

Leah grinned in relief and pulled up her pants leg to reveal her Justin boots.

Gram’s eyes moved to Tory. “You’re not Willie.” She shifted in

MG's lap so that their faces were only inches apart and placed her hands on MG's cheeks. "This is my Willie," she said softly.

MG rewarded her with a soft kiss. "I've always been yours," she said before pointing at Tory. "That's Tory. She's my niece." She stage-whispered in Gram's ear, "Don't tell anybody, but she's got a crush on your granddaughter."

Gram giggled again. Leah and Tory both blushed.

"MG," Tory growled.

"Lunch," MG said, abruptly changing the subject. "We can have it brought to my place, but how about if we join the others in the dining room and I'll give you a tour of my residence afterward?"

They all agreed and MG steered the scooter down the hall at a more sedate pace so Tory and Leah could keep up.

The menu had a limited number of selections, much like other hospital facilities, but the vegetable soup and grilled cheese sandwiches were very tasty.

Gram stayed mostly in the present but occasionally strayed into the oblivion of her disease, remarking about the mansion Willie lived in "with so many servants."

"Why does she call you Willie?" Leah asked. "Why not MG?"

MG smiled. "I began to go by MG when I joined the service. I was just too tall and too butch to fit the name my mother gave me... Millie."

"You were never a Millie," Gram said.

"No. And you were never Lorraine to me." She turned back to Leah and Tory. "She always called me Willie, and I was the only one who called her Lori. Her mother hated it."

They finished lunch and toured MG's residence. It included a spacious open room that held a small kitchen, dining area, and a huge living room with a gas-fueled fireplace. There were two bedrooms, both with handicapped-accessible bathrooms. The larger one was MG's master suite. At the end of the wing was a study and adjacent to it a small, private sunroom with more magnificent gardens planted just outside.

"This is where you live?" Gram asked, staring out at the flowers.

"Yes, it is," MG answered. "I have synthetic joints in both hips,

both knees, and my right elbow. Some days, my arthritis hurts so bad I can't get out of bed, and my hands are so crippled I can't manage buttons and zippers or picking up pills I've dropped. It seemed like with all those joint replacements I was just bouncing from the hospital to rehab to home and back to the hospital. So I decided to bring all that together in one place, and I built this world around me. I have my privacy here in the residence, but friends and dinner company only a few steps away."

She indicated for Gram to sit with her in a comfortable wicker love seat so they could look out over the gardens. MG touched the intercom that hung from her neck like a shiny medallion. "With only the touch of a button, I have as much or as little assistance as I need on an hour-to-hour, day-to-day basis."

"This is so wonderful," Gram said. "Sometimes the farm is just too much for me anymore." She ducked her head and stared down at her hands, wringing them. "Sometimes I find myself sitting on the porch or standing in the driveway and I don't remember how I got there or where I was going. The other morning, I sat on my bed for an hour before I recognized my own bedroom."

MG's gnarled hands covered hers, and Gram's eyes followed as their hands were lifted to MG's lips. "I'm so scared sometimes, Willie. I'm scared that one morning I'll sit there waiting and waiting, but my memory will never come back."

"Come live with me here, Lori. I can be your memory."

"Oh, I couldn't. People would talk," Gram replied shyly.

"Do you still love me?"

Gram blinked as tears gathered, then trailed down her wrinkled cheeks. "I have always loved you," she choked out.

"Then it doesn't matter anymore what other people think," MG assured her.

Leah cleared her throat, reminding them that they weren't alone. "Gram, I was going to tell you when we got home, but I've found a buyer for the farm. It's a really good offer, but I don't know if it's enough to afford a place like this."

MG cradled Gram's hand against her chest. "Even if she isn't comfortable living in the residence with me, she can have any room she wants in the place. We'll let her health insurance pay what it will, but



I won't let her pay a dime. Her money is hers to keep, spend, or give away as she likes."

"That's very generous."

"I could never put a price on what it means to me to have Lori back in my life," MG said firmly. "All she has to say is yes."

Gram laughed with delight. "Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, if I can live here with you in your home."

"That's exactly what I was hoping for."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Gram was so tired when they left that they made a bed for her in Tory's backseat with some pillows and a blanket provided by MG. Leah called Jimmy and told him he could have the farm truck if he'd go get it from the diner. Gram wouldn't need it any longer and shouldn't be driving anyway.

That problem solved, they headed back to town where Leah's Jeep was still parked. Gram was sleeping so soundly, Tory offered to follow so they wouldn't have to wake her until she was home. Even then, they had difficulty rousing her, so Tory picked her up like a child and carried her inside to lay her on the bed. Leah covered her with a blanket and turned on the night-light and left the bedroom door partially open.

It had been an exhausting day for all of them.

"What are you doing for dinner?" Tory was reluctant to leave. The day's events had moved so fast, they hadn't talked about Bridgette and why Tory hadn't called sooner. "I could go get some takeout and bring it back," she offered.

"I've got some pretty good leftovers in the fridge—meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and peas," Leah said. "I can heat that up. That's not much repayment for all you've done for us today, but there's enough for two."

"Leftovers sound good to me."

Leah pulled the food from the refrigerator and filled two plates to heat in the microwave. While the food warmed, she punched the Play button on the message machine blinking on the counter.

“Leah, it’s Margaret. I’m so glad you found Lorraine safe. Please call me if I can do anything to help.”

The machine beeped and a second message played.

“Ms. Montgomery, this is Alan Caldwell. I just happened to be working in my office today when the paperwork on your grandmother’s farm came over the fax machine. It looks like a very good offer to me. I can take care of the paperwork and have a closing set for the end of the week if you like. Call my office on Monday and let us know.”

The microwave beeped at the same time as the message machine, indicating the first plate was hot and a third message was waiting. Leah handed the hot plate to Tory and slid the next one in just as the last message began.

“This message is for Leah Montgomery. This is Sam Foreman from the Associated Press. We found your proposal for that nursing-home-enterprise piece very interesting, and we’d like to set up a time to talk to you about that. If you do have accurate research to back it up, we’d like to talk to you about a possible job with us.”

“Oh, my God! Finally. I can’t believe that after months of worry, it all falls into place in one day.”

The microwave beeped and she grabbed her plate to join Tory at the table.

“That’s great news,” Tory lied. Leah would be leaving soon and was happy about it. Tory had suddenly lost her appetite, but still shoved the food into her mouth and concentrated on chewing and swallowing.

“I need to start a list. I have to decide what to do with all Gram’s stuff, call that Foreman guy back for a meeting, and phone Alan and tell him to set the closing as soon as possible.”

“Are you sure you should jump at the first offer you get?” That was a stupid question in the current job market.

“Oh, it’s not the first.”

Tory was surprised. “You’ve had others?”

“Sugar, when you’re good, everybody wants you. Seriously, I did get an offer from a national nonprofit group that monitors health-care issues and one from a congresswoman to join her staff. Both jobs would be researcher-type positions, but both offers would have a lot of politics attached.”

“Did you hear back from the Richmond paper?”

“Hiring freeze. Just like everybody else. And, hey, I did get one offer right here in Cherokee Falls.”

“You did?” Tory hated that she sounded so hopeful.

“Teaching part-time at the college.” Leah’s sarcasm was clear. “Your artist friend and I could have gone to faculty meetings together.”

“Leah—”

“I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.” She rose abruptly and carried their empty plates to the sink, where she rinsed them and put them in the dishwasher. “It’s been a long day. I think I’ll turn in early,” she said, her back still to Tory.

Tory wanted to protest, but instead she rose to leave. Why shouldn’t she see Bridgette? It wasn’t worth arguing about, anyway. Leah was leaving Cherokee Falls. Tory was halfway across the porch when Leah appeared at the door.

“Tory, wait.”

She stopped and turned. Leah stepped out onto the porch and gave Tory’s hand a squeeze. “I can’t thank you enough for what you did today for Gram. Now I can go on with my life and know that she’s safe and probably happier than she’s ever been.”

Tory pulled her into a tight hug, resting her cheek against the top of Leah’s head.

“And what about you, Leah? Will you be happy?”

Leah burrowed into Tory’s embrace but didn’t answer. After several long minutes, Tory released her and stepped back. “Call me if you need anything, any help.”

“Will you keep in touch? Let me know how Gram and MG are doing?”

“Yes. I’ll keep an eye on them.”

Leah stayed on the porch, but Tory avoided looking in that direction as she climbed into her truck and drove away.



Tory stood outside Bridgette’s door, debating if she should ring the bell again. She had driven around for a while after leaving Leah’s,

so it was late. Bridgette's car was in the parking lot, but that didn't mean she was home. Tory wasn't even sure why she was there. She told herself it was to apologize for her abrupt departure that morning, but truthfully she felt like she was coming to pieces and knew Bridgette would hold her tight and distract her enough to lower the volume of the storm that howled inside.

She had just concluded that nobody was home when she heard the locks being released and the door opened. Bridgette stood there, a paintbrush in her hand.

"I'm sorry. You're busy. I...I should have called first."

Tory felt naked under Bridgette's steady gaze. Could she see the despair that was tearing at Tory's insides?

"I, uh, I just wanted to apologize for this morning. It was an emergency, but I shouldn't have left you stranded."

Bridgette stepped back. "Please come in. I'll only be a minute. I have to put my brushes in to soak." She paused at the entrance of the studio area. "There's a Riesling chilling in the refrigerator. Would you open it and find a couple of wineglasses?"

Tory did as she asked. She was just pulling the glasses from the cabinet when Bridgette reappeared and said, "It's cool enough tonight to sit on the balcony. Bring the wine with you."

Tory followed her through a set of French doors onto a balcony that overlooked a wide rocky creek still visible under the full August moon. The final breath of summer warmed the evening, but a cooling breeze wafted up from the stream, along with the noise of the water rushing over the jagged rocks.

A single, padded chaise lounge sat next to a small, low table that held a thick candle. Bridgette lit the candle and settled into the chair. She took one of the wineglasses from Tory, then spread her long legs and indicated for Tory to sit between them, in front of her. "You can use me for a backrest," she said.

Tory hesitated. It was an unfamiliar role for her. She usually sat in the back and cradled the other person. She was the strong one who weathered everybody else's crises. She was the one who offered friendship to the abandoned, provided jobs, and rescued lost grandmothers.

Bridgette waited patiently until Tory gave in and settled against

her. "Pour us some wine, please," she said, reaching around Tory to hold out her glass.

Tory obliged and set the bottle on the small table. "Bridgette—"

"Shh. I love to sit out here and listen to the music of the evening—the water running, the frogs and crickets. Listen with me for a while."

They sat there for a long time without speaking, and Tory began to relax. They sipped their wine and refilled their glasses.

Finally, Bridgette spoke. "Did you find her grandmother safe?"

"Yes, we did."

"Good."

"Then we took her to the extended-care facility my aunt owns. She lives there, too. They were lovers almost fifty years ago, and we reunited them."

"How wonderful! Tell me all of it."

So Tory started at the beginning. And when she finished, the wine was gone and the story had distracted her enough to temporarily ease the ache in her chest.

"That is a beautiful story," Bridgette said. "Now tell me the hard part."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Tell me about Leah."

Tory tried to pull away, but Bridgette's slender arms held her fast. Surprised at Bridgette's strength, Tory stopped her struggle and slumped back, resigned. "We made love the weekend we went to Chincoteague. It was just that once, and I haven't slept with her since you and I have been together. Is that what you want to know?"

"Not at all. You and I haven't agreed to be exclusive. We're friends, very good friends, I hope."

"Christ. Not again."

Bridgette let go this time when Tory pulled away and stood to walk over to the balcony railing. She stared out into the dark. "I am so tired of hearing the let's-be-friends speech."

Bridgette also stood and came to rest her back against the rail to face Tory. "Our relationship has never felt like it was going anywhere beyond friendship. Not because of me, but because of you."

Tory hung her head. That was true. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's okay. We never put it into words, but your actions were

always honest. I take it you've never had a friend you were also intimate with."

Tory's laugh was harsh. "You mean a fuck-buddy. No, I haven't."

"That's a crude American term for it. In some other societies intimate friendships are common and highly valued."

"I guess I'm just not as worldly as you are."

"Tell me about Leah. Tell me why she's such a source of pain for you."

Tory was quiet for a moment. It seemed weird to be talking to Bridgette about another woman, but it also felt strangely okay. "She's cute and funny, and sarcastic and infuriating. She acts tough on the outside, but is so lost on the inside."

"She has an energy that draws you."

"She's got a job offer, a buyer for the farm, and now, a place to settle her grandmother. She's leaving. Nothing left to keep her here. End of story."

"I see."

The evening warmth had become a night chill, so Bridgette blew out the candle and gathered the wineglasses. "Please stay with me tonight."

"I don't think I'm up for that."

"Just to sleep, Tory. You need a friend tonight. Not a fuck-buddy, as you call it, but a friend."

They went inside and Bridgette turned the covers back and began to strip.

"I thought—"

"I never sleep in pajamas and you don't have any with you. It's not like we haven't seen each other naked. Entire Eskimo families sleep together naked for warmth."

"This isn't Alaska," Tory muttered, but she stripped down to her briefs.

When they settled in the bed, Tory turned on her side and pulled a spare pillow against her chest as if she could hold the pain inside. Bridgette moved to curl around her. Her skin was warm against Tory's back, her easy breaths soft in Tory's ear. Her presence didn't fill the emptiness, but eased it a bit. Wedged between the pillow and Bridgette, Tory finally began to relax and drift into a troubled rest.





Tory woke early and quietly dressed, being careful not to wake Bridgette. She carried her shoes out to the living room and was just putting on her socks when Bridgette's voice came from the doorway.

"You're up early." She was wrapped in a soft robe.

"I'm sorry. I was trying not to wake you. I just couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd go do some paperwork at the clinic."

Bridgette watched her slide on her shoes and tie the laces.

"Thank you for last night," Tory said.

Bridgette didn't answer at first. She waited until Tory stood and walked to the door. "Any time you need a friend, or just someone to hold you, please know you're welcome here."

Tory heard the door close softly behind her as she turned toward the stairway. When she didn't hear the door's locks slide into place, she started to go back. But something stopped her. She smiled. It was just like Bridgette to leave the door unlocked for her.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The next two weeks went by quickly for Leah. She and Gram drove to Greyson Estates almost every day, taking some of Gram's personal things and lunching with MG. She shook her head at the way MG stood by smiling and giving in to every suggestion Gram had for rearranging her residence to become their home.

MG was patient when Gram lapsed into the past and skillful at bringing her back to the present. She had talked with Gram's doctors and consulted several specialists about adjusting her medications. Amazingly, Gram seemed to improve. There was no cure, MG reminded Leah, but doctors were always discovering new ways to slow down the progress of the disease.

Leah also was able to leave Gram with MG for entire days while she took care of the business of selling the farm, sorting through the house to determine what would go with Gram, what would go to charity, and what few items she might want to store for safekeeping. Jimmy agreed to retire the horses at his place, and Leah set up a monthly stipend to pay him for the work involved and finance the horses' expenses.

She finally moved Gram in with MG so she could catch a plane from Richmond to D.C. and meet with the Associated Press editor who had called with a job offer. The position wasn't exactly as an investigative reporter in Washington. It was on the staff in the Wisconsin bureau. But it was a job. She would work her way up again if she had to. She boarded the plane back to Cherokee Falls with a month to move to Madison.

The Montgomery mojo was working again. Everything was falling neatly into place.

So why wasn't she happy? Why couldn't she stop feeling like she wanted to pick up the phone and share her success with Tory? Why couldn't she stop hoping to see Tory's truck every time she drove Gram out to Greyson Estates? Why was she so disappointed when she went to Tory's clinic to have the horses' records transferred into Jimmy's name, and Tory wasn't there?

She sat at the kitchen table, staring at the sofa where she had sat with Gram and Tory to look over Gram's old photographs. The farm house seemed so empty now.

Damn it. She just needed to get over it. She'd managed to forget other women in her past, hadn't she? Hell, she could hardly remember what the lover she left in Texas even looked like. She just needed time. Time to forget that night in Chincoteague and those green bedroom eyes. She'd started several times to remove Tory's picture from her laptop, but when her finger hovered over the Delete key, she couldn't do it.



The night Tory spent with Bridgette had temporarily eased the emptiness in her chest, but in the weeks that followed she steadily declined into a sulking depression. Joyce told Tory that Leah had dropped by the clinic and asked about her. Leah had her cell number. Why hadn't she phoned? Would she call before she left town permanently?

Tory sulked over Leah's silence as she ate lunch with her family after dutifully taking her mother to Mass on Sunday. She shoved her food around her plate while her brother went on and on about the stupid video game he was designing. He was really getting on her nerves.

"When do you plan to stop playing video games and start selling them?" she finally growled.

"What do you care?" David reached for another helping of mashed potatoes. "I've been keeping your stupid grass cut and the clinic barn clean."

She glowered at him. "I care because you need to grow up and quit mooching off our parents. Who's going to take care of them when

you've eaten up their retirement savings? Have you offered them any of the money I've paid you to help with the groceries you've been consuming around here, you pig?"

"Tory, for heaven's sake, you haven't said one civil word all morning," Alma said. "Whatever you're sulking about isn't David's fault."

She glared at her mother. "I'm not sulking."

"Maybe she's PMSing," David taunted.

"I am not, you lazy little shit."

"Victoria Greyson. You will not use profanity at my table."

"Yeah," David chimed in. "And on Sunday, too."

"Especially on Sunday," Alma confirmed.

Tory stood up. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm not very good company today." She kissed her mother on the cheek before turning to leave. "Thanks for lunch."



Tory didn't really want to go home. She'd been holed up there all weekend, staring at the dishes in the sink and laundry piled on the floor. She didn't have the energy for chores.

She thought about visiting MG, but decided against it. What if she ran into Leah there? She also considered going to the clinic to sift through paperwork. In the end, she turned her truck toward the equestrian center. Even though she didn't want to see Leah, she still longed for some type of contact, and that connection was Long Shot.

She parked her truck at Creek Barn and headed out into the pasture to find the mare. The summer heat had already begun to abate, giving way to the milder temperatures of Indian summer. Normally Tory loved this time of year. But today, she resented the brightly shining sun that clashed with her dark mood.

The pasture spread across ten acres, with a line of trees clustered along a creek that subdivided it. Tory had to hike down to the trees to find the small group of five horses making use of the sunny slope on the other side for an afternoon snooze. Despite her mood, she had to chuckle at the scene before her.

Even in the safest of settings, one horse instinctively stands watch

while the others stretch out on the ground for a nap. Comically, the small, but hugely pregnant Long Shot was guarding four very tall Hanoverians and Thoroughbreds. Another of life's confusing contradictions?

Why did nature bless Long Shot with the coloring that should have ensured her a place in the wild herd of Chincoteague, only to spoil it with a club-foot gene?

Why did Tory want to be with Leah so badly, when she could easily have had Bridgette as a lover?

Why did Skyler do everything wrong in her life, but still find her ultimate happiness with Jessica? Tory did everything right—ran a good business, took her mother to Mass every Sunday, was always a steadfast, forgiving friend. So where was her reward?

She sighed as she rested her eyes on Long Shot. Seeing the mare brought back the weekend at Chincoteague like it was only hours ago. She could feel Leah's arms holding her while the ocean breeze whipped around them. She could see Leah's delight at the ponies churning up the surf just before they plunged into the channel. And despite her gloom, she had to smile at the memory of sliding her fingers into the back pockets of Leah's jeans and bracing herself as a counterbalance when Leah stretched out over the water from the ferry's railing to photograph the ponies as they swam.

"Hey, Tor, I've been looking for you."

Tory jumped slightly at Skyler's voice behind her. "Christ. You almost gave me a heart attack."

Skyler looked at Tory oddly, as if gauging her grumpy mood. "Checking on Long Shot?"

At the sound of their voices, the horses woke and rose to their feet. They associated Skyler with feeding time and began to head over. Long Shot hung back, then plodded after the others when Kate's big mare, Summer, paused and looked for her as though beckoning.

Tory shrugged. "I haven't been by in a while, so I thought I should." She started toward the mare, but Long Shot shied away and moved to put Summer between her and Tory. "Stubborn little ass. I don't know why I bother with you." Tory gave up on her and turned back to Skyler.

"Leah's been by several times. The mare seems to like her. Follows her around like a puppy. I think they've really bonded."

"Doesn't matter. Leah's leaving soon."

"Leaving?"

"Yeah. Her grandmother's moving out to MG's place, and Leah has a buyer for the farm. She's got a job offer, too. In D.C., I think."

"Sorry to hear that. You're kind of hung up on her, aren't you?"

"Jesus. No," Tory lied. "I'm just kind of pissed that because of her, I'm stuck with this horse that doesn't even like me."

"Well, shit. Women. You just have to learn to stand up to them, buddy."

Tory snorted. She was glad to turn the conversation away from herself. "Yeah, like you don't do everything Jess tells you."

"I don't." Skyler punched Tory playfully on the arm.

"I seem to remember you bitching last month because she persuaded you to get up in front of that women's club to talk about your equestrian program. I know how much you like speaking in front of a bunch of people."

"Oh, that."

"Yeah, that. I'm betting you'd have stood up there naked if Jess begged you to."

Skyler laughed. "You're probably right. I don't have much defense when it comes to her."

"So, why were you looking for me?"

"Huh?"

"You said you were looking for me."

"Oh, yeah. I was wondering if you could give the chestnut a ride while I watch. It's hard to judge his form if I'm riding. I need to see what he looks like from the ground."

"Sure, why not." Tory was relieved. This was just what she needed. At a time when she felt like her life had taken a very wrong turn, she welcomed a few hours when she was back in control, putting the young stallion through his paces.

They had been working in the outdoor arena for almost an hour when she noticed Jessica waving from the house. It took a moment for her to realize it was her, not Skyler, Jessica was beckoning. She cantered the chestnut the length of the arena and trotted to a stop.

"You need to go over to the Montgomery farm right now," Jessica said, without preamble.

Tory's stomach tightened. "Is Leah okay?" Christ, what was she thinking? Leah could take care of herself. "Is Mrs. Montgomery missing again? I'll need to call MG."

Jessica waved off her questions. "It's Nighty. Leah said you aren't answering your pager."

"My pager's at home because I'm not on call this weekend. Rob is. The answering service should have told her that."

"She doesn't want Rob, she wants you."

Should she ride to Leah's rescue once again? She wanted to, very badly. But seeing Leah would be like rubbing salt in an open wound. She really needed to stay away from her.

Skyler was looking at Tory expectantly. "You want me to tag along?"

Tory shook her head. "No. I better go by myself."

"Then I'll take care of cooling him down. You head on out."

Tory nodded and dismounted. "Thanks. I'll see you guys later."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tory barely had time to put the truck in park before Leah was at her door, opening it for her to get out.

“Thank God you’re here,” she said, the fear evident on her face. “I didn’t know what to do. I can’t get him up. You’ve got to hurry. I was afraid to leave him in case it’s colic. He could roll and twist an intestine.”

Tory grasped Leah’s shoulders and held her firmly. It worried her that Leah was pale and trembling. “Calm down and start from the beginning.”

Leah took a deep breath. “He was gone when I went out to feed him this morning. I don’t know how he did it, but a couple of the old boards on his stall were pushed out. I looked everywhere and finally found him on the other side of the pasture. I didn’t see him before because he’s lying down. He’s all sweated like he may be trying to colic. I tried to make him stand so I could lead him back to the barn and call you, but I can’t.”

“Is he in a place where I can get the truck close? It’ll be better if I can drive my equipment down there where he is.”

Leah nodded. “It’s just open pasture.”

Tory glanced up toward the house. Depending on the problem, they could be in the pasture for hours. “Where’s your grandmother?”

“She’s all moved in with MG.”

“Okay, good. Open the gate for me, then hop in and show me where he is.”

Leah closed the gate after Tory drove through, then ran to the passenger side and climbed into the truck. She pointed toward a large hill to their left. "On the other side of that rise."

The pasture was freshly mowed, but Tory drove cautiously in case the grass was hiding a deep trench or sinkhole. When they topped the hill, she could see Nighty lying on his side and pulled the truck within a few feet. She didn't have to get out to see the streaks of sweat dampening his dark hide. He was in considerable pain.

Leah rushed to where the pony lay, while Tory opened the back of her truck and quickly filled a syringe with painkiller. This would help, no matter what was wrong with him.

Leah was stroking Nighty's wet neck, murmuring softly to him. "It'll be okay, boy. Tory's here. She'll make you feel better." She watched Tory inject the medicine in his neck. "What's that?"

"Banamine. It'll help him feel better while I figure out what's wrong." Colic could produce painful bloating that could cause a horse's bowel to twist or stomach to burst. The mild cases could be treated with fluids and mineral oils to loosen any impaction. The serious cases could require surgery. Sometimes, colic could be swift and deadly.

His gums were pale, indicating he could be going into shock. Tory checked his temperature and used her stethoscope to listen to his bowel sounds. This didn't feel like a colic case. She ran her hands down his legs, feeling the heat of inflammation when she reached the fetlocks. Nighty grunted and made a weak attempt to pull away when she touched the soft bottom of his right hoof. When she ran her hand under his left hoof, it came away bloody. She looked up into Leah's stricken eyes and shook her head.

Leah pressed her lips together before choking out her last hope. "Does he have something stuck in his foot?"

Tory shook her head again, steeling herself against the pain she knew her diagnosis was about to inflict. "The coffin bones in both feet have rotated down so far I don't need an X-ray to diagnose the problem. The left one has already broken through the bottom of his foot. That's what's bleeding."

"What...what can we do?"

Tory stood and looked at Nighty's blood covering her hand,

thinking she should get a cloth from the truck to wipe it off. "He's in a lot of pain, Leah. He won't get better. I need to put him down."

"Oh, Tory, no!"

Tory walked to the back of the truck and measured out the dosages she would need. The first injection would be an anesthetic to slip him into a deep slumber. The second would stop his heart. It was never easy to deliver this kind of message, but having to tell Leah produced a searing pain she thought would stop her own heart.

Leah was on her knees, bent over Nighty and sobbing into his neck.

Tory knelt beside her. "He's suffering, sweetheart. You don't want him to suffer, do you?"

Leah sat back and shook her head, still sobbing.

"We have to do this for him," Tory said gently.

Leah nodded.

Tory explained the injections, and Leah moved aside to give her access to the large neck vein. She moved to Nighty's head and gently kissed his face as Tory pushed the plunger on the anesthetic. Nighty's body relaxed as his pain drained away, then Tory switched syringes and injected the drug that stopped Dark Night's noble heart.

Tory listened for a moment with her stethoscope to be sure, then stood and helped Leah to her feet. "Come on, baby, he's gone," she said softly, taking Leah in her arms. Silent tears trickled down Tory's cheeks as Leah clung to her and sobbed like her heart would break. When her sobs slowed to hitching snuffles, Tory guided her into the truck and handed her a box of tissues. She pulled a large tarp from the backseat and covered Nighty's body, then climbed into the truck and drove slowly back to the house.

She parked the truck and walked around to open Leah's door, led her to the front porch, and seated her in one of the rocking chairs. "I'll be right back."

When Leah started to protest, Tory pressed her back down into the chair. "I need to make a call, and then I'll get us a beer."

"Grab something stronger out of the cabinet over the stove," Leah said, her voice dull.

Tory called a local contractor to send someone immediately

with a backhoe to dig a hole large enough to bury the pony. Then she rummaged in the liquor stash and pulled out a half-full bottle of tequila and some shot glasses. She found a tray and loaded it with the liquor, some lime slices from the refrigerator, a shaker of salt, and a couple of cold beers for a chaser.

When she returned to the porch, she opened a beer and handed it to Leah. Then she poured two shots of tequila. She reached for Leah's hand that wasn't holding the beer, lifted it to her mouth, and licked it, drawing a surprised gasp. Smiling, she sprinkled a trail of salt on the spot dampened by her tongue and handed Leah a tequila shot. After she prepared her own hand in the same fashion, she held her tequila aloft. "To Nighty, the best pony a kid could ever have."

Leah choked back a sob before following Tory's lead. They each licked the salt, tossed back the shots, and grabbed a lime slice to suck on.

Tory took a long swig of her beer and indicated for Leah to do the same, then she spoke. "We're here to celebrate the life of a dear friend. We're going to drink and cry and laugh while you tell me everything about Nighty. Start with how you met, tell me your favorite moments with him, and even the things he did to piss you off."

Leah laughed through her tears. "You're crazy, you know."

"Not really. The day I buried the terrier I'd had at my side for sixteen years, Skyler brought over the tequila and made me talk through it. It really does help."

She grabbed Leah's hand and licked it again before adding more salt.

Despite the solemn occasion, Leah laughed. "Sugar, are you telling me Skyler licked your hand for you?"

Tory smiled, relieved that she could lighten Leah's despair a little. "Nah. That's my own personal touch. Now tell me everything."

Leah was a natural storyteller, and after a halting start, she warmed to her mission. They laughed and even shared more tears over the stories.

Nighty had been Leah's transportation around town when she visited Gram every summer, starting when she was eight years old. They would trot down to the country store, where they shared her Lance peanuts and RC Cola.

Leah laughed about the time he bit her on the butt because he smelled a candy bar in the back pocket of her jeans. She cried when she reminisced about braiding his mane and tail with red, white, and blue ribbons to ride him every year in the local Fourth of July parade.

She wistfully recalled the long summer days when they joined Jessica and her mount to ride the trails and picnic in the meadows around the equestrian center. Then she chuckled over Nighty's love for swimming whenever he saw a pond, even when she was still on board. After two ruined saddles, she just rode him everywhere bareback.

Tory distracted Leah with questions when the men arrived with the backhoe and went directly into the pasture as instructed. And after the men left, Tory pulled a package of wildflower seeds from her truck that she kept for such occasions. They walked through the gathering dusk to sprinkle the seeds across the freshly dug dirt that was now Nighty's eternal blanket. Neither spoke as they trudged back to the house, hand in hand.

Tory went willingly when Leah led her into the darkened house, into the bedroom, and turned to her. Her lips were salty with tears. Her mouth was sweet. Her skin was warm and soft under Tory's kisses.

Leah's hands began to wander, then became insistent, tugging at her clothes. Tory pulled back and cupped Leah's face to look her in the eyes. She couldn't stop herself from pouring all she felt into her gaze. But when she dipped her head to claim that sensuous mouth once again, Leah pulled back.

"Stop. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have... We can't do this," Leah said.

"It's okay." Tory reached for her again, but Leah turned away.

"I'm sorry. It's just you always seem to be here when I have a weak moment."

Tory stiffened. This couldn't be true. She'd seen much more in Leah's eyes before they suddenly shuttered and she pulled away.

"Is that what I am? A weak moment?" She stared at Leah's back. "You're a lot more than that to me."

"It doesn't matter," Leah said, her head bowed. "I'm leaving in two days."

"Leah—"

"No. I really appreciate everything you've done. Really. But I can't do this again. Please, Tory, please go."

Tory stood, uncertain, in the dark. Her skin still tingled from Leah's touch.

"Please," Leah whispered.

Tory turned and left.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

A pounding headache woke Leah early.

It had begun to rain after Tory left, so she had returned to the porch and stared out into the gloom. She cried some more and finished off the bottle of tequila so she would be numb enough to sleep. Considering the hours of tears, the alcohol, and the weather, it was no wonder her sinuses were throbbing.

She crawled out of bed and washed down some aspirin with an entire bottle of water before stumbling back to the bedroom. She had a million things to do because she planned to leave the next day after signing the final papers on the farm. But she wasn't ready to face all that. She blamed the hangover and the dreary weather for the crushing weight holding her down. Yeah. It was just the hangover. She closed her eyes to avoid the pounding in her head and retreated back into sleep.



The buzzing of her pager wrenched Tory awake. Christ, her neck hurt. She'd fallen asleep upright on the sofa after driving home and sitting in the dark house for hours. Just sitting. Around two a.m., the emptiness inside finally soured the alcohol in her stomach, and she barely made it to the bathroom to throw up.

Had MG felt the same as she'd helplessly watched the love of her life turn from her and walk into that church? As if history was repeating itself, Tory had blown her last chance to stop Leah from leaving. She

had fallen short. Unworthy. The hurt paralyzed her. How did MG bear it? Tory had wanted to cry, to scream. But she couldn't.

She *knew* Leah felt the same way about her. She could see it in her eyes, feel it when Leah clung to her, when they made love at Chincoteague. She could hear the pain in Leah's voice when she asked her to leave. She should have been pissed. Angry. Furious.

But she had felt nothing. Until the buzzing that skittered her pager across the coffee table.

*Fuck.* The word burned through her brain. *Ladies don't use that kind of language.* Her mother had hammered that notion into her since she was old enough to recognize a four-letter word. Tory always did what was right, so she didn't say it, didn't think it. Until now. It felt good. *Fuck that pager. Fuck everything.*

The pager buzzed again. She sighed and checked its readout. It was one of her biggest clients, so she resolutely dialed the number. Because she always did the right thing.



When Leah opened her eyes again, it was late morning. At least, her headache was gone. She headed to the shower, hoping it would invigorate her enough to dress. She had to check on Gram and say good-bye before she left town. She would do that, then come back to the boxes that needed packing.

It was still raining as she drove to Greyson Estates. Her black mood matched the sky that had turned from overcast and wet to angry and threatening.

Ed, the gatekeeper, stayed in his dry gatehouse, motioning Leah through when she arrived. Her Jeep had become a familiar vehicle over the past few weeks. MG had given her a pass for her car that would get her through an automated side gate, but she hadn't stuck it on her window. She wouldn't be around much to use it once she moved to Wisconsin.





Tory threw one last shovel of black mud over her shoulder and slowly straightened her stiff back. An early cold front had pushed out the lingering summer heat overnight, dropping the temperature fifteen degrees and unleashing the storm. She turned her face skyward to take advantage of the fifth downpour since she had waded into the waist-deep mud to tranquilize Raymond Wright's \$50,000 quarter horse so it wouldn't struggle as they worked to free her. The cold rain streaked the mud on her cheeks.

"Ready?" the man next to her asked.

"Yeah. I think we've dug her out enough." She helped him slip a heavy canvas sling under the mare's belly and gave a thumbs-up signal.

Fortunately, her client was a prosperous building contractor. After paging Tory, he called one of his crew bosses to bring a heavy crane from a work site. They had positioned it as close to the pond as possible. Now that the horse's legs were partially free, the crane operator carefully lifted it onto dry land. One of the construction workers drove Tory's truck while she walked the horse up to the barn.

Thankful that her rich client had hot water in his barn, Tory hosed down the horse and herself in the wash stall to remove the worst of the mud. But when the cold wind swept through the barn, she shivered in her wet clothes.

She hastily wrote out a bill for the morning's emergency work. It was a big one because she had stood in the cold mud for hours, even though she'd warned the owner several times to fence off that bog. The farm manager listened intently to Tory's instructions for making sure the mare didn't suffer delayed shock. But when she looked for Raymond to give him the bill, his farm manager just shrugged. He had left, the man said. *Fuck*. She'd have to add it to the already huge amount the man owed her. Ironically, the richest clients were always the last to pay.



Leah grabbed a bag that held a few final requests from Gram and clutched her umbrella as she ran through the rain. She hadn't gotten far inside when Della, the head nurse, stopped her.

“You better let me call ahead before you go in there,” she said.

“Is Gram upset? I was afraid this would happen when it hit her that she won’t be going back home to the farm.” Damn it. Her feelings were too raw to deal with this today.

“No, honey. She couldn’t care less about that farm.”

“What’s wrong, then?”

“You may want me to call ahead to make sure they have all their clothes on.”

“You’re not saying... They’re in their seventies, for God’s sake.”

Della winked. “Well, somebody must have forgotten to tell them that. I think they’re trying to make up for all those lost years, as much as their old bodies will let them.”

“Eww. I don’t need to know that about my sweet little grandmother.”

Della gave a hearty laugh. “Girl, I offered to have an oxygen tank installed in their bedroom to help those two old birds catch their breath. I was just teasing, of course, but MG actually seemed to consider it for a minute. That’s when I decided I wasn’t going in there anymore without calling ahead.”

“Maybe you better call for me, then.”

Della picked up the phone and punched a few numbers. “Are you ladies decent? Mrs. Montgomery’s granddaughter is here. A nap, huh? Is that what you’re calling it now? You can’t fire me. You haven’t rehired me after firing me the last time. I’ll send her along.”

Della hung up the phone, shaking her head. “I don’t know whether to hug you or smack you for bringing your grandmother here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone here loves Dr. Greyson so very much, and we’ve never seen her as happy as she’s been since Mrs. Montgomery arrived. We’re all grateful for that blessing. But the sparks flying off those two has love in the air. The staff has to make extra checks at night to keep the residents in their own beds. Yesterday, an orderly had to break up a fight when one old guy caught another swiping his Viagra.”

Leah chuckled. “They deserve this, Della. They’ve waited a long time for happiness.”

“Yes, they have.” Della gave Leah a one-armed hug. “You go have a good visit.”

A low rumble of thunder sounded as Leah headed down the

hall to the residence. Still, she felt a ray of sunshine filter through the otherwise bleak day. She hit the buzzer at the elegant oak double door and covered her eyes with her hand.

“Are y’all decent, because I don’t want my eyeballs burned.”

Gram giggled and pulled her through the doorway. “We are now,” she teased back. “Your eyeballs are safe.”

MG blushed and reached for the bag Leah held before she changed the subject. “I hope Lori’s favorite pie pans are in here.”

“Yes, they are, although I don’t know why she needs them when you have a whole staff of people to cook for you.”

“Nobody makes lemon meringue pies like she does.” MG motioned for them to all sit down. “And she’s promised to teach her secrets to our chef.”

“I hope I can remember all of them,” Gram said.

Leah gave her a hug. “That’s why I brought your box of recipes, too.”

“You are so sweet.” Gram fussed with some throw pillows to make sure MG was comfortable before sitting as close as possible to her on the sofa. “Now sit down and visit for a while.”

Leah choked up when she gave them the bad news about Nighty, but reminiscing with Tory had lightened her grief. They talked about closing the deal on the farm, and Gram and MG told her they had contacted the lawyer to alter the paperwork so the proceeds from the sale went to Leah. When she protested, MG waved her off.

“I’ve also had my lawyer make the necessary changes to my estate so that Lori’s name is on everything as part owner. She’ll never want for anything, even if I pass away first. If she outlives me, you’re still the executor of her estate. Tory, however, will be the sole beneficiary because the assets will basically be my property that passed to Lori. You will have already inherited her original assets when you sign the papers on the farm.”

“That’s very generous. I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say,” MG insisted. “The papers will be ready for you to sign tomorrow.”

While they discussed legal issues, Gram began to tire. She cuddled against MG’s shoulder.

“I guess I should go. I’ve still got a lot of things to do before I leave,” Leah said.

Gram roused herself. "Are you taking a trip somewhere?"

Leah stood and kissed Gram's soft cheek. "I'm moving to Wisconsin for a new job, sugar. I told you about it. That's why you're going to live here with MG."

"You are?" Gram asked sleepily. "Did you ask Buddy to feed Nighty?"

MG rose slowly and straightened her stiff joints. "It's all taken care of, Lori. You rest here while I walk Leah to the door," she said, covering her with a soft afghan.

"She seemed like she was getting so much better," Leah said quietly as they moved across the room.

"She *is* better since we adjusted her medication."

"She's so lucky to have you."

"It's not all one-sided. There isn't a drug that can completely reverse the damage in my joints either. You haven't seen me during one of my bad times when I can't get out of bed or hold a fork to feed myself. On those days, Lori will take care of me. Together, we'll deal with each other's disabilities."

"Still, you have to know you're setting yourself up for heartbreak," Leah said. "One day she won't recognize even you."

"Her head may not recognize me, but her heart always will," MG said firmly. "We let fear steal years we could have spent together. We've forgiven ourselves, and each other, because we were just kids. We're adults now. We know one of us will have to suffer that loss again. Nobody lives forever. But we choose not to let fear rob us of this second chance to be together."

A loud clap of thunder rattled the windows.

From the doorway, they saw Gram flinch, her eyes wide and frightened. "Willie? Willie?"

MG hurried back to wrap her arms around her. "I'm right here, Lori. It's just a little storm outside."

"They scare me...ever since that tornado when I was a girl."

"I know, sweetheart. Remember the song we used to sing when you were scared?" MG began singing a silly ditty about angels and clapping, her voice low and smooth. When she started on the chorus for the second time, Gram haltingly joined in, smiling through the next loud rumbling.

As Leah watched MG chase away her grandmother's fears, she thought of the last time *she* felt so loved. If she closed her eyes, she could feel Tory's arms around her, holding her close. She could see Tory taking away Nighty's pain, then sprinkling wildflower seeds over his grave. She could feel Tory's warm mouth against hers, chasing away her demons. And she could feel Tory's pain, palpable even in the darkened bedroom, when she told her to leave.

Leah slipped silently out of the residence, down the hallway, and out into the storm.



"I *said*, call Raymond Wright's accountant and give him three months to pay their bill with me or I'm firing Raymond as a client."

"That's a lot of money," Joyce said. "He's one of your biggest accounts."

"And I'm the best equine vet in this part of Virginia. He doesn't build houses for free and I don't vet horses for free."

"It's about time you got tough with him. A letter will be better than a phone call. I'll send it today. By the way, I'm glad you called."

Tory pressed the cell phone to her ear, struggling to hear Joyce's voice over the rain drumming against the truck's windshield. A loud clap of thunder drowned out the rest of her words completely.

"What, I couldn't hear you," Tory shouted into the phone.

"Marissa is overbooked because of an emergency surgery, and David hasn't shown up to take care of the horses. She fed them, but their stalls haven't been cleaned. I can call my son to come do it. He's on break from college."

"No, I'm paying David to do the job. I'll take care of it," Tory growled into the phone.

She had woken up tired and in pain. On top of that, she was now so cold and wet her bones had begun to ache. She had mud in places where there should never be mud. Her mounting anger was as jagged as the lightning cutting through the clouds.

"Fuck." This time she said it out loud. She was sick and tired of feeling used.

She slammed through the back door of her parents' home, ignoring

her mother's protest that she was tracking mud on the floor. She took the stairs two at a time to her brother's room where he was sitting on the floor playing a video game, dirty clothes strewn about the room and the bed unmade.

He glanced up before going back to his game, his fingers frantically working the controls. "Dude, what happened to you? You look like you've been mud wrestling."

Tory walked over to the television and yanked out the cords running to the video game.

"Damn it. What'd you do that for? I've been playing all night to get up to that level. I haven't even saved the session."

"You're supposed to be at the clinic feeding horses and cleaning stalls."

"Geez, sis. Got your tampon in sideways today?"

She yanked him up by his T-shirt and body-slammed him against the wall.

"Gross, you're all wet. You're getting mud on me."

"You listen to me, you little screwup. You might be able to mooch off Mom, but you're through mooching off me. You're fired."

"You don't have the balls to say that in front of Mom." He sneered.

"The hell I don't." She grabbed him in a headlock like she had done when they were kids and pulled him down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"My goodness. Tory, let your brother go," Alma said. "What has gotten into you today? You're tracking mud everywhere."

Tory released her grip on her brother and he jerked away, red-faced. "He's fired. Don't ever ask me to hire him again. He's lazy and irresponsible. If you want to continue to enable him to be a screwup, that's your business. It's none of my concern anymore."

She headed for the door, but the buzzing of her pager stopped her. The readout was two words. Long Shot.

Tory clipped the pager back to her belt and stalked out.



Leah was tense during her drive back to the farm. She could barely see the road through the sheets of pouring rain. At one point, she nearly careened off the pavement when a blazing bolt of lightning struck a tree she was passing. It was so close the residual static electricity raised the hairs on her arm. When she finally pulled up in front of the house, her hands were shaking.

She cursed the lightning ripping across the sky and the thunder that was rattling the windows of her Jeep. Slamming her hands against the steering wheel, Leah cursed even *more* the storm that she felt raging inside. She despised the sharp uncertainty that had stabbed at her, the fear that had clapped loud in her ears since the moment that pink slip had landed on her desk.

She was so tired.

She took a ragged breath as she peered through the rain at the old farmhouse. It had always been more of a home than her parents' house. The tears she thought she had exhausted filled her eyes again and trailed down her cheeks.

She was so tired of crying.

Gram was gone. Nighty was gone. Tomorrow, the farm would be gone and she would be headed to Wisconsin...away from Cherokee Falls. Away from Tory.

Maybe she'd see her again, at Gram's or MG's funeral. Maybe Tory would be standing at the graveside with someone else who would be sharing her life, laughing with her, pouring a shot of tequila and crying with her.

Despair settled over Leah like a heavy cloak. She had fallen in love with Tory, and that terrified her. But she was more scared that walking away would be the worst mistake of her life.

And she was so tired of being scared.





## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Turning the heater up full blast in her truck had helped dry the mud to a stubborn, flaking crust on Tory's clothes and skin. She thanked the heavens for a lull in the rain when she pulled up at Creek Barn.

Skyler had closed the heavy barn doors. It would be warm inside, but not warm enough to thaw the cold emptiness, the icy anger that had been growing since she drove away from the Montgomery farm.

Tory grabbed a stainless-steel bucket from the back and filled it with the items she would need to deliver a foal. When she stepped inside the barn, she spotted Skyler and Jessica standing outside a stall at the other end of the building.

Skyler took one look at Tory and laughed. "Damn, Tor. Have you taken up doctoring on pigs? You look like you've been rolling in the mud with a bunch of them."

Tory scowled at Skyler, but didn't reply. Instead, she stepped into the wash stall and filled her bucket with antiseptic and warm water.

She heard Jessica shush Skyler before she joined Tory to watch as she stripped down to her racer-back undershirt and thoroughly washed her hands and arms.

"Tell me what's going on with Long Shot, Jess," Tory said brusquely.

"She's been having contractions for a while. Skyler thinks the baby may be turned wrong. She's been lying down and getting up and lying down."

That behavior was normal for a mare trying to reposition the baby in her womb so it could deliver. "Let's take a look."

Sweating from the pain of the contractions, Long Shot pinned her ears back when Tory joined Skyler in the stall. Skyler held on to her halter while Tory listened with her stethoscope to the mare's belly sounds. She moved her hands over the bloated abdomen, feeling the baby move under the pressure. Long Shot shifted her feet and grunted.

Skyler tightened her grip on the halter when Tory reached for her tube of lubricant and applied it liberally to her arm. Holding the mare's tail to the side, she carefully slid her hand into the birth canal and felt one small hoof, though she should be feeling two front feet and a nose. A new contraction crushed down on her arm and, with a grimace, she pulled back a bit to wait for it to pass.

When she pushed forward again, Long Shot suddenly shifted and kicked out. Her hoof caught Tory on the thigh and spun her around to slam into the wall.

"Fuck." Tory pulled away from the oak partition, holding her nose while blood trickled through her fingers. She stomped out of the stall, Skyler's chuckle following her.

Tory was just returning from her truck with an ice pack wrapped in a clean towel to stop her nose from bleeding when she heard Jessica say, "Go check on her, Sky. She could really be hurt. I'll try to calm Long Shot. And don't laugh. I don't know what's eating at her, but she seems really upset. I've never heard Tory use that kind of language."

Skyler sauntered toward her. "You just can't seem to get women of any kind to warm up to you, can you? Let me see how bad it is." She pulled Tory's hand away from her face. "It doesn't look broken."

"Thanks, Doctor." Tory jerked her hand out of Skyler's grip and headed back toward Long Shot's stall, dabbing at her still-bleeding nose.

Skyler followed. "What the hell's wrong with you, anyway? You strike out with Leah yesterday? That's it, isn't it? Geez, didn't I teach you anything about how to handle women?"

Tory wheeled. The fury had simmered below her surface since high school. It had begun to steam when Jessica ditched her for Skyler. And now, it was finally boiling over. Skyler staggered backward when Tory's fist caught her squarely in the eye.

"You taught me plenty about how to lose out." She grabbed Skyler's shirt and slammed her against the wall. "Every time I fell for someone, it turned out she'd rather sleep with you. And you know what? Even after all these years, I'm still a slow learner," she yelled, banging Skyler several times against the oak boards. "It still hurts. Losing still hurts." She had always been able to blame Skyler, and, damn it, she wanted someone other than herself to blame for losing Leah, too.

Skyler pushed Tory off and neatly stepped around her so their positions were reversed. She pushed Tory, chest first, against the wall and twisted her arm upward behind her back to hold her there. "God damn it. Are you accusing me of cheating on Jess? I'll kick your stupid ass if you are."

"Of course not, but only because you've already screwed every other woman in Cherokee Falls," Tory growled, spitting away the blood that was flowing from her nose. She wanted to strike out again, but Skyler increased the pressure on her arm to stop her from struggling.

"Okay. I probably deserve that. I do deserve that. I'm sorry. More sorry than you know. I can't change what happened back then, but things are different now. I'm different. I wouldn't cheat on Jess."

Tory sagged against the boards, her anger deflating. "I need it to be somebody's fault." She wished for the anger to return. It had been the only thing dulling the hurt.

"What are you talking about?" Skyler eased her grip. "I'll let you go if you promise not to—oof."

Skyler was suddenly gone, and Tory turned to stare into Leah's worried eyes.

"Oh my God, what'd she do to you?" Leah's small hands were cool on her face. "You're bleeding."

Skyler was sprawled on the dirt floor, scowling and cradling her recently healed hand. "She hit me. I didn't hit her." She reached up to touch her swelling eye. "Shit. I need an ice pack." Skyler struggled to her feet and stomped down the hallway to disappear into the barn office.

Leah ignored Skyler and retrieved a clean towel from the wash stall. She wiped away the blood on Tory's face before applying gentle pressure to her nose. "If she didn't hit you, how'd you get this bloody nose?"

“Long Shot did it,” Tory mumbled through the towel. “I thought you were gone.”

“No, sugar. My things are packed and Gram is settled, but—”

Tory pulled the towel from her face and held up her hand. “You know what? For once I want you to just shut up and listen to what I have to say. Really listen, okay?”

Leah dropped her hands to her sides and took an uncertain step back, but silently nodded.

Emotions swirling, Tory paced across the hallway and back to gather her thoughts. She stopped and faced Leah. “What would have happened if Willie had done something different the day Lori got married?”

Leah looked confused by the sudden change of subject. “Willie? What in the world are you talking about?”

“The day Lori got out of the car at the church and saw MG—Willie—standing across the street. What if Willie hadn’t just stood there? What if Willie had come for her, crossed the street to stop Lori from going into the church? What do you think would have happened?”

Leah’s breath hitched as comprehension dawned. Her eyes filled with tears. “If Willie came for her, had stopped her from going into that church, I think Lori would have run right into Willie’s arms.”

Tory took a deep breath. This time, this woman was too important for her to hang back. “I realize we haven’t known each other very long, but I’m so in love with you, Leah. I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.” Tory stepped closer. “So this is it. I’m coming for you. If you feel the same about me, if you think you might love me, then don’t leave. We’ll figure something out. I don’t know what, but don’t leave. Give us a chance.”

Tears spilled over and rolled down Leah’s cheeks. She took a halting step forward, then dove into Tory’s arms.

“I love you, too,” she cried. “That’s what I came to tell you. I’m in love with you.”

Tory hugged her tight. “You love me? You’re not leaving, then?”

“I can’t.”

“You didn’t sell the farm?”

“Yes, I did. But it was Gram who made it feel like home to me, and

she's living with MG." Leah laughed, a bit of her swagger returning. "I'm sure I can stay with Jessica while you woo me."

Tory loosened her hug and looked down at Leah. "Woo you?"

"Yes. Underneath it all, I'm an old-fashioned girl. I want to be wooed."

Tory felt the last piece of what always seemed missing click firmly into place. "It would be my pleasure. I'm a bit old-fashioned myself." But would wine and dining at romantic places be enough to keep Leah happy in Cherokee Falls? "What do you plan to do for a job?"

"Incorporate, sugar."

"I don't understand."

"I was thinking about all the job offers I got because people wanted to get their hands on my story. So I thought, what if I just sell my research services on a contract basis? That way, I'm my own boss and nobody can force me to do biased articles. It's kind of a long shot, but I'm betting I can make it work."

"Can you live here and do that?"

"I'll probably have to travel some to make presentations and sign up clients, but the Internet lets me gather information from anywhere I want to live. The news world is changing. I just had to figure out how to change with it. And I just may write a book."

"You're so smart."

"Not so smart. Leaving you would have been a very dumb thing. It would have ripped my heart out because you stole it from me that first day when I picked buckshot out of your leprechaun."

"It must have been my cute butt."

"It was definitely the sexy tush." Leah pulled a clump of dried mud from Tory's hair. "So, does that mean you're willing to put everything you've got on another long shot?"

"Another long shot?"

"A smart but opinionated, sweet but sometimes irritating, pushy but incredibly cute journalist?"

Tory ducked her head, their lips so close she could feel Leah's warm breath. "You know, I've had good luck lately with long shots," she said, placing her bet with a deep, lingering kiss.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

She's down, Tory. You need to come now." Trotting toward them, Jessica skidded to a stop. "Oh. Uh, hi, Leah."

Tory pulled back from the kiss, her gaze still locked with Leah's.

"You guys, hurry." Jessica turned back toward Long Shot's stall and nearly collided with Skyler as she stepped into the hallway, holding a wet cloth to her cheek. "What happened to your face?"

Skyler glared at Tory and Leah. "Apparently the two of them had an argument, so Tory sucker-punched me and her pushy girlfriend knocked me down. I can't find an ice pack."

Jessica dutifully inspected Skyler's face. "Oh, honey. That doesn't look good." She gave Tory a reproachful look. "You take care of the mare. I'll take care of slugger."

Tory grabbed Leah's hand and tugged her down the hallway.

"Where are we going?"

"Long Shot is foaling."



Tory took a quick look at the mare lying on the floor of the stall with one hoof and a nose crowning the vulva, and turned to the bucket to wash and lube her arm again.

"One of the forelegs may be rotated back. I need to bring it forward for her to deliver. That's what I was trying to do when she slammed me against the wall. I need you to keep her calm."

Leah squatted next to Long Shot's head and spoke softly. The

little mare grunted with another contraction, but her ears flicked toward Leah's voice.

Tory slid her hand in the birth canal again, in search of the errant foot. She felt her way down the foal's neck, groaning when another contraction clamped down hard on her arm. The leg she sought was curled against the beginning of the canal, so she pushed back on the small chest. The slender leg unfurled and she pulled the tiny hoof forward. It finally lay alongside the first leg, and she gathered both in her hand and waited for the mare to push. When the contraction began, she gently pulled the foal forward. Moments later, a small black colt with a large white star on his forehead lay in the straw, taking his first breaths.

"He's beautiful," Leah crooned to Long Shot. "He's so beautiful. You did good, sugar."

Tory heaved a sigh of relief.

Long Shot struggled to her feet and turned to sniff her colt as he gathered his long, spindly legs under him in an effort to stand.

Tory washed her arm clean and Leah went to her, picking up a clean towel to dry her and then wipe the remaining mud and blood from her face.

"I can do that," Tory said. But she readily submitted. She braced her back against the wall and pulled Leah to her. Leah's mouth was warm and sweet.

"I love you," she said, relishing the words as she spoke them.

Leah's gaze was soft, her answer like sun-warmed honey soaking into Tory's soul. "I love you, sugar. So very much."

Tory hugged her and turned so they could watch together as Long Shot nudged her colt to his feet. Instinct led his first jerky steps toward mother's milk, and he poked at her side until his inquisitive nose slid under her belly and his eager mouth latched on to a teat.

Tory rested her cheek against the top of Leah's head. It had been an emotionally draining day, but she'd do it again and again if the outcome would always be Leah nestled securely in her arms.

His belly finally full and his confidence in his legs growing, the colt began to explore his surroundings. Because the Chincoteague ponies shared the wide forehead and small ears of the Welsh breed, his dark coloring made him a near double for Nighty. Tory rubbed her



hands in comforting strokes along Leah's back. She was so quiet, Tory wondered if she also was thinking about Nighty. "What should we name him?" she asked.

Leah pulled back and reached up, her hand warm against Tory's face, the brief caress of her lips soft against Tory's. "Exactly what popped into my mind when I finally came to my senses and decided to gamble on a lifetime with you."

Something tugged at Tory's jeans, and they both looked down to see the colt curiously mouthing the material of her pants. Leah laughed. "Let me introduce you to Sure Thing."



## About the Author

D. Jackson Leigh works as a newspaper journalist in North Carolina, where she feeds nightly off the adrenaline rush of breaking news and close deadlines. She shares her life with her wonderful partner, a Jack Russell terror, and “the cat” that made herself at home when Jackson and the JRT weren’t watchful. Her first book, *Bareback*, was published by Bold Strokes Books in December 2008.



## **Books Available From Bold Strokes Books**

**The Midnight Hunt** by L.L. Raand. Medic Drake McKennan takes a chance and loses, and her life will never be the same—because when she wakes up after surviving a life-threatening illness, she is no longer human. (978-1-60282-140-8)

**Long Shot** by D. Jackson Leigh. Love isn't safe, which is exactly why equine veterinarian Tory Greyson wants no part of it—until Leah Montgomery and a horse that won't give up convince her otherwise. (978-1-60282-141-5)

**In Medias Res** by Yolanda Wallace. Sydney has forgotten her entire life, and the one woman who holds the key to her memory, and her heart, doesn't want to be found. (978-1-60282-142-2)

**Awakening to Sunlight** by Lindsey Stone. Neither Judith or Lizzy is looking for companionship, and certainly not love—but when their lives become entangled, they discover both. (978-1-60282-143-9)

**Fever** by VK Powell. Hired gun Zakaria Chambers is hired to provide a simple escort service to philanthropist Sara Ambrosini, but nothing is as simple as it seems, especially love. (978-1-60282-135-4)

**High Risk** by JLee Meyer. Can actress Kate Hoffman really risk all she's worked for to take a chance on love? Or is it already too late? (978-1-60282-136-1)

**Missing Lynx** by Kim Baldwin and Xenia Alexiou. On the trail of a notorious serial killer, Elite Operative Lynx's growing attraction to a mysterious mercenary could be her path to love—or to death. (978-1-60282-137-8)

**Spanking New** by Clifford Henderson. A poignant, hilarious, unforgettable look at life, love, gender, and the essence of what makes us who we are. (978-1-60282-138-5)

**Magic of the Heart** by C.J. Harte. CEO Susan Hettinger and wild, impulsive rock star M.J. Carson couldn't be more different if they tried—but opposites attract in ways neither woman can resist. (978-1-60282-131-6)

**Ambereye** by Gill McKnight. Jolie Garoul is falling in love with her assistant. The big problem is, Jolie is a werewolf. (978-1-60282-132-3)

**Collision Course** by C.P. Rowlands. Tragedy leaves Brie O'Malley and Jordan Carter fearful and alone. Can they find the courage to take a second chance on love? (978-1-60282-133-0)

**Mephisto Aria** by Justine Saracen. Opera singer Katherina Marov's destiny may be to repeat the mistakes of her father when she becomes involved in a dangerous love affair. (978-1-60282-134-7)

**Battle Scars** by Meghan O'Brien. Returning Iraq war veteran Ray McKenna struggles with the battle scars that can only be healed by love. (978-1-60282-129-3)

**Chaps** by Jove Belle. Eden Metcalf wants nothing more than to flee from her troubled past and travel the open road—until she runs into rancher Brandi Cornwell. (978-1-60282-127-9)

**Lightbearer** by John Caruso. Lucifer dares to question the premise of creation itself and reveals that sin may be all that stands between us and living hell. (978-1-60282-130-9)

**The Seeker** by Ronica Black. FBI profiler Kennedy Scott battles ghosts from her past, deadly obsession, and the evil that haunts her. (978-1-60282-128-6)

**Power Play** by Julie Cannon. Businesswomen Tate Monroe and Victoria Sosa are at odds in the boardroom, but not in the bedroom. (978-1-60282-125-5)

**The Remarkable Journey of Miss Tranby Quirke** by Elizabeth Ridley. When love enters Tranby's life in the form of a beautiful nineteen-year-old student, Lysette McDonald, she embarks on the most remarkable journey of all. (978-1-60282-126-2)

**Returning Tides** by Radclyffe. Insurance investigator Ashley Walker faces more than a dangerous opponent when she returns to the town, and the woman, she left behind. (978-1-60282-123-1)

**Veritas** by Anne Laughlin. When the hallowed halls of academia become the stage for murder, newly appointed Dean Beth Ellis's search for the truth leads her to unexpected discoveries about her own heart. (978-1-60282-124-8)

**The Pleasure Planner** by Larkin Rose. Pleasure purveyor Bree Hendricks treats love like a commodity until Logan Delaney makes Bree the client in her own game. (978-1-60282-121-7)

**everafter** by Nell Stark and Trinity Tam. Valentine Darrow is bitten by a vampire on her way to propose to her lover Alexa Newland, and their lives and love are placed in mortal jeopardy. (978-1-60282-119-4)

**Summer Winds** by Andrews & Austin. When Maggie Turner hires a ranch hand to help work her thousand acres, she never expects to be attracted to the very young, very female Cash Tate. (978-1-60282-120-0)

**Beggar of Love** by Lee Lynch. Jefferson is the lover every woman wants to be—or to have. A revealing saga of lesbian sexuality. (978-1-60282-122-4)

**The Seduction of Moxie** by Colette Moody. When 1930s Broadway actress Violet London meets speakeasy singer Moxie Valette, she is instantly attracted and her Hollywood trip takes an unexpected turn. (978-1-60282-114-9)

**Goldenseal** by Gill McKnight. When Amy Fortune returns to her childhood home, she discovers something sinister in the air—but is former lover Leone Garoul stalking her or protecting her? (978-1-60282-115-6)

**Romantic Interludes 2: Secrets** edited by Radclyffe and Stacia Seaman. An anthology of sensual lesbian love stories: passion, surprises, and secret desires. (978-1-60282-116-3)

**Femme Noir** by Clara Nipper. Nora Delaney meets her match in Max Abbott, a sex-crazed dame who may or may not have the information Nora needs to solve a murder—but can she contain her lust for Max long enough to find out? (978-1-60282-117-0)

**The Reluctant Daughter** by Lesléa Newman. Heartwarming, heartbreaking, and ultimately triumphant—the story every daughter recognizes of the lifelong struggle for our mothers to really see us. (978-1-60282-118-7)

**Erosistible** by Gill McKnight. When Win Martin arrives at a luxurious Greek hotel for a much-anticipated week of sun and sex with her new girlfriend, she is stunned to find her ex-girlfriend, Benny, is the proprietor. Aeros Ebook. (978-1-60282-134-7)

**Looking Glass Lives** by Felice Picano. Cousins Roger and Alistair become lifelong friends and discover their sexuality amidst the backdrop of twentieth-century gay culture. (978-1-60282-089-0)

**Breaking the Ice** by Kim Baldwin. Nothing is easy about life above the Arctic Circle—except, perhaps, falling in love. At least that's what pilot Bryson Faulkner hopes when she meets Karla Edwards. (978-1-60282-087-6)

**It Should Be a Crime** by Carsen Taite. Two women fulfill their mutual desire with a night of passion, neither expecting more until law professor Morgan Bradley and student Parker Casey meet again...in the classroom. (978-1-60282-086-9)

**Rough Trade** edited by Todd Gregory. Top male erotica writers pen their own hot, sexy versions of the term “rough trade,” producing some of the hottest, nastiest, and most dangerous fiction ever published. (978-1-60282-092-0)

**The High Priest and the Idol** by Jane Fletcher. Jemeryl and Tevi's relationship is put to the test when the Guardian sends Jemeryl on a mission that puts her not only in harm's way, but back into the sights of a previous lover. (978-1-60282-085-2)

**Point of Ignition** by Erin Dutton. Amid a blaze that threatens to consume them both, firefighter Kate Chambers and property owner Alexi Clark redefine love and trust. (978-1-60282-084-5)



# *Bold Strokes*

B O O K S

# WEBSTORE

PRINT AND EBOOKS

*Romance*

*Mystery*

*Intrigue*



LIBERTY  
EDITION



*Adventure*

*Erotica*

*Fantasy*

victory  
EDITIONS



*Sci-Fi*

<http://www.boldstrokesbooks.com>

