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Nikki
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Sweet TEMPTATIONS

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Nikki Winter

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I love *all* of you opinionated-alpha loving-hilariously funny-dibs calling-slightly insane but brilliant-ladies. —Nikki

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A Little Cocoa

“Hey boss, your woman’s here!”

Evan Halima turned around at the catcalls and whistles from his crew. “She’s not my woman, and shut your face, Rod!” Leaving the bull corral, he climbed down from his favorite stallion after locking the corral gate and handed the horse’s reins over to one of the ranch hands. Anticipation built with every step his booted feet took. He’d been looking forward to this all day. Rounding the corner, Evan felt his breath catch when a monstrosity of a Ford truck stopped in the driveway of the ranch house. He watched a pair of the sexiest brown legs he’d ever seen slide from the passenger side, followed by “grab me” hips, a well-toned torso and pillow-like breasts.

When those champagne-colored eyes met his own, he felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him. Dimples peeked out from pretty cocoa cheeks. “Hey jolly green, are you gonna stand there staring or come get your requested cake?” Evan’s best friend, Bianca Grayson, teased.

He’d hinted that tonight he wanted a red velvet cake for dessert, but he’d figured she was too busy working at her patisserie to make him one. As usual, she hadn’t done what was expected of her; no, she’d

gone above and beyond. Not only did she make his cake, but she *brought* it to him too.

Bianca had always been that way. It was in her nature to be sweet when you were sweet to her. Since the first day Evan had met her, back in kindergarten, she'd been taking care of him. They'd only become friends because she'd shared a homemade cookie with him during snack time, and after that, he wouldn't stop following her around. It was a *really* good cookie, and since he'd always been an unnaturally tall and husky child, he was always eating *something*. Bianca had looked up at him with her golden eyes fringed with thick dark lashes, after he'd completely annihilated his own snack, and asked him in the sweetest little lisp if he wanted to share her cookie. Of course he'd said yes, eager to make a new friend and even more eager to get to that cookie.

From then on they'd been inseparable. If you saw her then he wasn't far behind, and vice versa. Rain, sleet, or snow, he was going to see her every chance he got. The problem with that? Her parents didn't seem too fond of having some strange little white boy following around their precious baby girl. Yes, a *white* boy. Not just any white boy, but a Southern-bred, down-home, country-fed, big-for-no-reason-other-than-genetics white boy. In Texas, with its population of many different shapes, sizes, and

colors, his race wasn't a problem per se. No, it was his intentions that were in question.

He was, of course, named after his father, a good and bad man. His father was good because he loved Evan enough to raise him to be a good man when his mama skipped town like a thrown stone does over a creek; at the same time, he worked hard to run a successful cattle ranch. His father was bad because, well, Evan Sr. had a bit of an issue with staying out of other men's homes *and* out from under, over, and beside their wives and any other female he could get next to. Evan's papa spread his wild oats far and wide and finally stopped when his oats created Evan's younger brother Dane. Still, Evan Sr.'s bad reputation followed his son around like flies on a horse's ass and reached none other than Rayford and Fiona Grayson, Bianca's parents.

Ms. Fiona seemed to like Evan enough, and so did the Grayson's oldest daughter, Brianna. They even thought he was sweet, but Mr. Grayson watched him the same way a hawk would watch a snake. Rayford made damn sure that none of Evan Sr.'s frisky tendencies rubbed off on his son. Evan Jr. made sure he never gave him the slightest indication that he *would* get frisky, and Rayford grudgingly accepted that he was, in fact, a good kid.

The one thing Evan was determined never to do was lose Bianca's friendship. She was the only one who understood him, made him feel normal, and adored him despite the fact that he wasn't so normal. Bianca Grayson was a diamond, and he loved her. The problem with that? He was also *in love* with her, something she was completely oblivious to—and she would remain that way. She didn't need him. No, she needed some weak little prissy-handed male whom she could control, someone she could bat those pretty lashes at and get what she wanted.

He was *not* that man. Evan was an alpha and knew it. Though he tried his best not to be a jackass about it, some people just brought the jackass right out of him. She was too independent and ran at any sign of what she called "being hemmed in." He wouldn't tell her the way he really felt and risk losing the one person in his life who meant more than anything, even if he wanted her so bad that sometimes he ached.

He could still recall the two *longest* years of his life, when she attended Culinary Institute Alain and Marie LeNoitre all the way in Houston so she could get her Associate in Applied Science Degree in Baking and Pastry Arts. She had only been a phone call away while he was on the campus of Texas A & M, but being

physically separated from her for so long had made him crave her presence just that much more.

He'd sucked it up, knowing that her goal was to own a patisserie and he couldn't be selfish by begging her to stay with him. Once she graduated, she took a pastry chef's position at a local restaurant, lived at home with her folks and saved until she was able to buy and remodel an old bakery in mid-town. By that time Evan had graduated and his father had handed over the ranch to him. Since he knew Bianca would never take money from him, he'd pulled some strings to get a few business investors; ones his papa knew were looking for a new venture, to give her business a chance.

When Bianca found out about his hand in her newfound success, she'd stayed pissed with him for about two weeks before showing up at the ranch one day. He'd assumed she'd come to cuss him out just one more time for good measure, so Evan had taken her inside the ranch house. As usual, she had surprised the hell out of him by getting the softest look in her eyes and kissing him on the cheek before saying, "Thank you." That was the day, two years ago, when he'd realized he was in love with her. Since then, her patisserie Sweet Temptations had become not only one of the best bakeries in Damon, but he would argue that it was the best in Texas, period. He also found the

name very fitting, since she happened to be the sweetest temptation that he'd ever encountered.

Snapping out of his daze, he headed for where she was parked. "I wish you'd stop calling me that." Evan leaned his tall frame over her five ten height and kissed her cheek, and then he made his first mistake: he reached for the gleaming chrome handle of her truck's rear door.

Bianca's hand blocked his so quick that he took a step back. Her eyes were narrowed when she looked up at him. "Are you insane? You know my rules, Evan! Unless you were born Hugh Michael Jackman and you are known as 'Wolverine,' you *do not ever* touch my precious baby without washing your hands first, especially when they're dirty, filthy horse-scented hands!"

Evan didn't wonder why she assumed he was in the middle of working the corral; Bianca knew he was out and going from sunup to near sundown. However, he *did* wonder when she would eventually get over her love for Hugh Jackman. The obsession was becoming slightly unhealthy. He couldn't count how many nights she forced him to watch the *X-Men* trilogy or any other movies the well-known star was in. "Sugar, I had on my gloves." Pulling them from his back pocket, he waved them in her face. "See?"

Her head tilted and she pointed to her face, which was in fact quite impassive. “No, do *you* see, Evan? Do you see the face of your killer if you reach for that door handle again without having clean hands?” Her voice was soft, her shoulders tense.

Evan sighed. He had no doubt that she would hit him right in his solar plexus without one thought, since she’d done it before. Risking his precious, beautiful body at the hands of this slightly unstable woman didn’t sound appealing at all. She had what he would describe as an unnatural love for her truck. He stared at the huge burnt orange Ford F150. It *was* a damn good-looking truck, but her obsession with it was a little much.

“Sugar, you’re doing that thing again.”

Raising a brow, she questioned, “What thing?”

“You’re off-road driving on my last damn nerve.”

Her chuckle washed over him. “That’s not very different from any other day. Okay”—she clapped her manicured hands together—“I’ll open the door and hand you the cake.”

Evan’s brows almost touched his hairline. “You’ll let my dirty, filthy horse-scented hands touch the cake but not your truck?”

Her smile was bright, her dimples in full bloom. “See? You *do* understand.” She waved her hands in a shooing motion. “Now move back.”

Deciding not to argue with her, he stepped out of her way while she wiggled into the backseat and came out with a very pretty cake. Luckily enough, his reaction time was quick, and she didn't catch him staring at her ass in the khaki short-shorts she was wearing. In Damon, Texas during the summer months, you'd better have some shorts or other cool clothing, otherwise you'd fry like Canadian bacon. It was May and the temperature was already in the eighties, so Evan wasn't surprised at her apparel.

Bianca was one of those women who had legs which fantasies were made of. They were long with strong thighs and shapely calf muscles, and she had *no* qualms about showing them off. Evan felt the back of his neck prickle and turned his head just to see half of his crew watching her the same way he had been. His smart-mouthed foreman Rod was leading the group of perverts and grinning ear to ear.

Snarling a little, he turned fully toward the group and watched them disperse after seeing the look on his face. Rod was the only one bold enough to actually walk over. "How are you today, Ms. Bianca?" he asked her.

She turned back around and smiled at the foreman, and Evan made himself *not* shove one of his size fifteen booted feet through the idiot's colon.

"Hi, Rod. I'm fine, and you?"

The worker took his Stetson off and grinned back. Evan's tic started up—the one right above his left eye that signaled he was about to start dismembering. His gaze raked the other man. Rod was what he would describe as a “pretty boy.” He was blond with oversized blue eyes that Evan had seen many a female fall victim to. Knowing the man for many years now, he was aware that Rod was a good worker, but the foreman was also a flirter who had his eyes on Bianca. Evan would inform him soon enough that if he didn't get those eyes off of her, then he would lose them and possibly his whole head with them.

“Just fine, Ms. Bianca. You're looking mighty lovely today, as usual,” Rod answered.

And there went the lash batting. “Thank you. Are you coming inside for some cake?” She handed the two-layer confection over to Evan.

“Well, it does look mighty good.”

“Rod, don't you still have some corral work to do before you're off?” Evan cut in.

“Evan, he can take a small break and have a slice, can't he?” She asked *him* the question, but she was staring at the pretty boy.

“No,” he answered flatly, not liking the way she and Rod were looking at each other.

She took the cake from him, glaring like *he* did something wrong, and then she faced his foreman.

“When the tyrant decides to lift his stringent laws, you can come and have a piece of cake.” And with that, she sashayed—and it *was* a sashay—her shapely hips up the walkway and into the ranch house.

“Aw, c’mon, boss—that cake looked good. Just give me a ten-minute break,” the idiot pleaded. Rod *said* cake, but what he really *meant* was Bianca’s behind looked good.

Evan kept his face blank and voice low when he said, “You know what else would look good?” Leaning in particularly close, he watched understanding finally dawn in Rod’s eyes, the understanding that Evan’s control was dangerously close to snapping. “You without a face if you don’t get back to the corral. Now.”

The foreman raised a brow. “And I thought she wasn’t your woman, boss.”

Gritting his teeth, he replied, “No, she’s not, and she’ll never be yours either, so get back to work before I get cranky. You don’t want me cranky, Rod.” The other man really didn’t, since Evan was like the Hulk on steroids.

Smirking, the foreman walked backwards until he was a safe distance away before he turned around and threw over his shoulder, “Whatever you say, boss, whatever you say.”

She could hear Evan's big booted feet stomping through the house before he even reached the kitchen. His six-foot-eight-inch frame almost took up the whole door of the entrance when he finally reached her. Jade green eyes glared down at her from beneath the brim of a worn Stetson.

"What?" she asked in all innocence, knowing that his problem stemmed from Rod and his shameless flirting. Bianca would never try going out with the foreman, but since she'd been out of the dating game awhile because the men interested in her were idiots, it was fun to be giggly and sweet every now and then.

That just seemed to make him scowl harder. "You really shouldn't encourage Rod into thinking he has a chance with you."

Brows furrowed, she gazed up at him. "And why is that, oh dictator?"

"Because then he would stop his stupid flirting."

"Who said I want him to?" And there went what she took great pleasure in calling "the apple face." Evan's face would turn a deep red from the tips of his ears all the way to his neck. This often happened when she was doing something dangerous or *really* stupid. It also happened at times like now when she purposely pressed his buttons. Having known him twenty-four

out of her twenty-eight years, Bianca found pushing his buttons fun and easy to do.

Whenever Evan said don't, she did. When he said stop, she kept going. When he hushed her, she got louder, and during times like these when he tried to put on his "I am man, my rule is law" voice and tell her what to do, she did the opposite. Why did she push his buttons? Simply because everybody else ran from that scowl of his, but she just smiled when he got that expression. Evan learned early on that he couldn't intimidate her, but *she* could definitely talk him into almost anything she wanted. It was a gift that she delighted in using.

"Bianca." His calling her by her name was a warning. He'd been calling her "sugar" since elementary school and when he didn't use the endearment, it usually meant she was in trouble.

"What, Evan?" She turned away to put the cake on the dish she'd bought for him in the center of his kitchen island.

"Stay away from Rod. He's no good, and I'd hate to have to break his knees."

Busting out into laughter, she asked, "Break his knees?"

Evan lifted his giant hands and cracked the knuckles. "Yep, I'd break them and I'd do it mafia

style, with somebody holding him down while I took a baseball bat to them.”

Bianca shook her head and did what came naturally to her; she washed her hands and started cleaning his kitchen. Evan’s home was a beautiful two-story, remodeled house from the 1980s. He’d grown up in it with his father and brother as a kid, when his papa was still a rancher. Once Evan Sr. retired and moved to a nice little condo, he’d handed the reins of almost sixty acres of land over to his oldest son, and of course Evan had accepted it. That was six years ago, when he’d graduated from Texas A&M University with a Bachelors in supply and chain management.

He ran his ranch like a well-oiled machine. His cattle produced some of the best beef in Texas, and he’d even managed to strike a deal with a few well-known meat suppliers to sell his product. As a rancher, he worked hard and more than enjoyed what he did. Most days after work, if she got the chance, Bianca would ride up to the house and just sit and watch him work the corral. She could admit that the fluid grace he had when riding one of his stallions was absolutely beautiful. When he handled his bulls and cows with a gentle strength, she found herself staring more often than not.

His physique was incredible; his shoulders were broad and muscular, while his pectorals, abs, and the

rest of his torso were proportionately toned to perfection. It all tapered down to a slim waist that his specially made jeans usually rode low on, allowing her to occasionally glimpse the defined edges of his pelvic bone. She knew from watching him that his behind was good and tight, as were his strong thighs and calves. Lately, since her dating pool had been narrowed, Bianca found herself staring more and more.

Scrubbing harder, she tried to remind herself once again that they were the best of friends. He watched Hugh Jackman marathons with her until the wee hours of the morning and took care of her when she was sick. Evan always made sure she ate right if she got busy with projects at work and *made* her close down and take breaks when he saw that she was tired. Hell, he had even seen her throw up everything in her stomach but hadn't blinked an eye. No, he was off-limits because he was the only man in her life besides her daddy whom she allowed into her space.

Men tried to control, and she'd been through enough messed-up relationships to know that eventually the late nights got to be too much and the forgetfulness became an annoyance. Evan needed someone who wouldn't get crazy whenever the mood suited her. Bianca was too independent to be hemmed in by any man, and she enjoyed her space more than

she would enjoy someone taking it up. *That* was why Evan was off-limits.

He was too precious to lose, and if they got involved eventually he *would* be lost to her. It would be just a matter of time, and she simply couldn't let that happen. She loved him too much for that. Evan was a contradiction: a sweet giant with alpha male tendencies that broke through every now and again just to remind her who she was dealing with. Bianca pushed his buttons for fun, but she knew he loved her enough to want to protect her from what he deemed dangerous.

His sigh was long and heartfelt when he finally spoke again. "Sugar, the kitchen is already spotless, so you can stop scrubbing like some clean freak."

She looked back up at him and intoned in all seriousness, "Your kitchen can never be too clean."

Evan tried and failed to swallow his smile. He was laughing at her. "I think it can be when I never use it." He reached into a cabinet to pull out a small snack cake.

Bianca's gasp cut through the kitchen as she abandoned her task to snatch the small package from his hands. Indignant now, she shook the unhealthy snack in his face. "What is this?"

"It's a Swiss roll." He spoke as if he were talking to the mentally impaired.

“I know that, you super-sized idiot! Why is this *thing*, that’s full of artificial flavors and preservatives, in *your* cabinet?!”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe because I like to eat them occasionally.”

Bianca was just a few seconds away from kicking him in the shin. “This”—she shook the plastic-wrapped package for emphasis—“is junk, something that you eat when you want to die early.”

Evan’s face was a mask of confusion. “But they’re so tasty.”

Outraged, she stepped back as if he’d slapped her. “You would eat *this* when I bring you *fresh* pastries almost every day?”

“Sugar, I think you’re overreacting. It’s just a small snack I eat from time to time.”

“How long, Evan?”

There went that confused face again. “How long what?”

“How long have you had this habit?”

“Oh good Lord, it’s a snack cake, not crack!” he said, throwing his hands up in the air.

“It might as well be! Do you know the type of crap they put into this?”

“Bianca, you make the same things at Sweet Temptations!”

She dropped the snack cake, aghast. “I make my delicacies with *fresh* ingredients, Evan, and I make them *daily*. If they aren’t fresh, then they *do not* leave Sweet Temptations.” She shook her head. “If this is what you think I create for a living, then you don’t know me at all.”

Evan resisted the urge to laugh for all of two seconds before it slipped past his lips and he let go. “You’re really upset about this, aren’t you?”

“Pissed is way more like it, Evan Jacob Halima Jr.” She snatched her keys from the kitchen counter along with her perfect, beautiful cake. “I can’t talk to you. I need to go.”

When Evan called her name, she ignored him and kept going, insulted beyond all reason.

Some Vanilla Extract

Brianna Grayson felt her face heat right before she shouted, “He said what?!”

Bianca seemed grateful to have someone on her side as she cut Bri another slice of New York-style cheesecake and sat down next to her in the empty kitchen of Sweet Temptations. As usual, Bianca had roped her into bringing over dinner while supplying dessert. “Bri, he actually had the audacity, the gall, and nerve to say *I* serve the same crap, which he eats from those boxes, in *my* establishment.”

Brianna, a chef with her own successful restaurant, was equally outraged. She knew how much work any chef put into their creations to make them the best, and for Evan to compare Bianca’s pastries to something off of a grocery-store shelf... Bri shuddered, wondering what her sister’s reaction had been. “You’re cutting him off, aren’t you?”

Bianca’s brows lifted to her hairline, a haughty expression that Bri had seen many times over the years. “You’re damned right I am. Until he apologizes and *means* it, he shall not taste another one of my delicious confections.”

Snorting, Brianna wasn’t surprised. Over the years, she’d learned her baby sister had a sore spot when it came to anyone not taking her skills seriously,

but she'd never thought *Evan* of all people would be the one to screw up. The man adored the ground that Bianca walked on. Anybody with eyes could see that, but because her sister was so pigheaded and determined not to be "hemmed in," she was completely oblivious. Bri took a bite of her cheesecake and sighed. "Oh well, more desserts for me."

Bianca chuckled. "Oh, and you should have seen the way he got all puffed out when Roderick was flirting with me yesterday."

"Roderick Hines?"

"Yes, Mr. Baby Blues himself."

Bri whistled low. "I don't blame Evan. Rod's a whore." And since she'd had firsthand experience with him and his whorish ways, which she would never tell a soul of, she knew she was telling Bianca the truth.

"Brianna!"

"What? He is! The man will sleep with almost anything that has a warm moist cavern on its body."

"And it's times like these, when you say disturbing things like that, when I wish Mama and Daddy would have kept their clothes *on*."

Cuffing the back of her younger sibling's head, she replied, "Then you wouldn't be here, butt face."

"Yes I would, because whereas your conception was an unexplainable oddity in nature, *I* was *meant* to bring joy and light into this world."

Could Bianca really fault her for laughing and not being able to stop?

The laughter was really starting to piss him off. He had no idea why he'd told them in the first place, but after a day of not talking to Bianca, he had to ask somebody for help. It was a real shame that this was where he was trying to get it from.

Evan watched his Papa's large shoulders shake with the force of his chuckles. The old man was enjoying Evan's misery far too much, and his younger brother was *not* helping. He'd decided to plan a lunch with the two of them at his father's house and try to get some advice. Now he could admit it was a stupid thing to do. Dane had started this little rally of joy by laughing first. Soon Evan Sr. joined in, and for the last ten minutes neither had stopped.

"You two do realize that I could always reveal you've been eating all kinds of premade snack cakes, and you'd both be cut off too." He said it so easily that all laughter stopped. Evan Sr. had a love for Bianca's cookies, while Dane adored her whoopie pies.

His papa's green eyes narrowed. "You always did have a mean streak."

"That just ain't right, Evan." Dane shook his head sadly.

He cuffed his younger brother. "Then stop laughing at me and tell me how to make up with her." He knew he used the wrong words when the two faces similar to his own perked up in question.

"Making up is for couples, son. You and Bianca started dating?" his papa asked.

"No sir. What I meant was I want her to stop being pissed at me," Evan answered.

"Good Lord, man, it's only been a day." This came from Dane.

Nodding, Evan agreed. "True, but with Bianca you never know how long one of her bouts of anger will last, and I can't take the risk that I'll never taste another red velvet cake again."

The other two men nodded in understanding. His papa and brother had been eating any and all things she had baked for them over the years. "When are you gonna tell her that you're in love with her?"

He stared at his younger brother. Dane had a habit of blurting out the first thing that came to mind. "I'm not in love with her." Okay, that was a lie and they both knew it, but if he admitted his feelings, his sibling would do one of two things: torture him with his knowledge or run and tell Bianca.

"You should really work on having a better poker face when you lie, son. It'll help make it more believable."

This time when the laughter commenced, Evan decided that it was best just to *not* tell them anything else.

A Lot of Sugar

Bianca looked up when the bell above her shop door rung and watched trouble walk in. Finishing up with an order, she smirked at Roderick Hines when he reached her. His baby blue eyes lowered to half-mast as he took a big inhale of the smells floating around the patisserie. “Mmm-mmm, it always smells so good in here, Ms. Bianca.”

Her smirk grew into a grin. “It’s a bakery, Rod; it’s supposed to smell good. What can I do for you?” As she asked, she wiped down her display case, watching regular and new patrons come and go.

Rod leaned toward her. “I figured since you’re around dessert all day, I can take you out to a meal that involves steak and potatoes. I know a real great place we can go.”

She leaned forward a bit also. “And when Evan takes your body apart like a puzzle and rearranges the pieces, that real great place will have one less regular customer.” Aside from that statement being funny, it was true. Bianca saw the way Evan bristled when *any* man tried his hand at dating her, so Rod was *definitely* a no-no. She’d always figured Evan’s intense dislike of her dating partners stemmed from not wanting his best friend too occupied with somebody else to feed him.

“Now see, I always thought you and the boss weren’t involved,” he responded smoothly.

“We aren’t, Rod, but Evan is too protective to ever let his *little red* go out with a wolf.”

His grin was predatory. “Who said he had to know?”

“Well, I’d be more than glad to tell him just to watch him beat you beyond recognition, but then I’d have to lock him up for assault,” a familiar voice chimed in. Bianca glanced away from Rod and laughed when she saw Sheriff Dane Halima standing right behind the other man. Dane raked a scathing gaze over Rod as the foreman turned to face him. “Although,” he continued, “I could always look the other way.”

“Sheriff, I don’t think my asking Ms. Bianca out has anything to do with you.”

Okay, so Roderick was stupid. He had to be, to try puffing up in front of Dane. Although Evan was the taller of the two siblings, Dane was built like a fullback: all shoulders and untamed muscle.

The sheriff’s green eyes narrowed, and for a second his scowl looked so much like Evan’s that she felt sorry for Rod. “Son, you don’t want me to *make* it my business, so I’d advise you to either get something out of that display case or be on your merry little way.” He looked below Rod’s wrists. “Prissy hands.”

Perhaps she shouldn't have laughed so hard or so long, and maybe, just maybe, she should have tried to call Rod back when he stomped out, but she just couldn't find it in herself to do so. *Did that make her a bad person?* It probably did, but when Dane flashed a grin and asked about her whoopie pies, well, she couldn't be bothered to care.

Okay he had a plan. He would walk in and make up with Bianca by telling her he burned all the boxes of snack cakes he'd had in his cabinets. Then he would say something to make her laugh, and she'd forgive him. They'd be back to normal, and all would be right in the world. That was a good plan if Evan did say so himself. It was after hours and the door was locked, but she'd given him a key long ago when Sweet Temptations first opened. Taking said key out, he simply unlocked the door and closed it behind him.

Evan whistled, knowing that after they made up, he'd have a spot at his favorite island, with his favorite chef feeding him his favorite treats. Smiling now, he headed toward the kitchen and came to a screeching halt. The bastard was sitting at *Evan's* favorite counter, with *Evan's* favorite chef, eating *Evan's* favorite treats. For the first time since Dane stole his

favorite Stetson, Evan wanted to rip his brother's spleen out through his face.

Bianca was even smiling at the turd and laughing at whatever turdy thing Dane said while said turd enjoyed a few of her freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. Taking in a deep breath and trying to keep his homicidal rage to a minimum, Evan cleared his throat. She and Dane paused mid-conversation to look over in his direction.

"Dane," he asked way too brightly, accompanying the question with the most easygoing smile he could muster, "what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be out patrolling our streets and keeping us safe?"

Instead of picking up on the underlying threat, Dane grinned, and Evan felt that tic that he *thought* had disappeared reappear full throttle. "It was the end of my shift, and I thought I'd spend a little bit of time with the prettiest pastry chef in Texas before heading home."

Evan's eyes narrowed to slits when Bianca giggled. "Dane, you're just kissing up because you want some of my red velvet whoopie pies."

The angry expression leaving his face, Evan stared at her in surprise. "But you only make those for me."

“Not anymore, traitor. Ask your girlfriend *Little Debbie*,” she threw back as she folded her arms across her chest.

“But you’re gonna make them for *him*?” He waved his hands in Dane’s direction.

“Aw c’mon, big brother, you can share the love with me, can’t you?” Dane was goading him and knew it. Ever since he’d tried getting Evan to admit his feelings, he’d been doing this, purposely pushing his buttons about Bianca.

A violent but highly enjoyable thought suddenly occurred to Evan, and he grinned his bloodthirsty “pillage everything” grin. Dane’s smile suddenly faded. “Sure I can, little brother,” Evan said as he moseyed over to Bianca and kissed her cheek. “Sugar, could you please, please, please stop being pissed at me long enough to make some of those cookies? I’ll owe you big, and you can collect payment later.” He made sure to give his full-on “I’m a puppy so you have to love me” look.

She smirked. “That look only works sometimes, Evan.”

He turned up the wattage, making sure he looked more pathetic than puss in boots. “I promise you’ll never catch me with premade snack cakes again. I gave up the habit, sugar, but I can’t give up your creations. It might stop my heart.” Leaning his head

on her shoulder, Evan nuzzled his cheek against hers. Since she kept her curly hair cropped short to her scalp, it allowed him free range to get in close without getting hair in his face.

Bianca groaned, her head going back, her pretty brown throat showing, and he managed to stop himself from swiping his tongue over it. "Fine!" she finally said. Poking a manicured finger into his head, she emitted a cartoon movie cackle. "But I will be collecting, and you shall pay what I want."

He raised a brow. "I'm sensing imminent doom here and yet another Hugh Jackman movie marathon."

"You should. Now sit."

Evan had no problems obeying. When she turned toward the back cabinets to get ingredients out, Evan reached over and gripped the back of Dane's neck. Then he pulled a fist back and thumped his brother in his forehead, hard enough to hurt but not do any real damage. Just for good measure, he did it twice more before letting go.

Bianca turned back at Dane's grunt of pain. Her expression broke into concern when she saw him rubbing his temple and cringing. "What happened to you?" As she asked, she reached across the counter to gently grip Dane's head.

Evan asked sweetly, “Yes, Dane, what *did* happen to you?”

He knew his brother saw the warning in his eyes. Dane winced and rubbed his temple again. “I, uh...I tripped getting up.” He looked over at his older brother’s challenging gaze. “Fell right into the counter,” he added quickly.

It was her turn to wince. “I’d better get you some ice for that. It looks like it’s starting to swell.”

One side of his mouth kicking up, Evan said, “Yes, why don’t you go and get some ice and leave me here *all* alone with Dane.”

She looked at him strangely before replying, “Okay, I’ll be right back.”

Dane jumped up. “Don’t!” he barked. Bianca stopped in her tracks. Snatching up his Stetson, he placed it on his head. “I had a long day anyway, so I’ll be going.”

“Are you sure? It won’t take but a few minutes to get that ice pack.”

Evan looked at his brother. “Yeah, Dane, it’ll take just a few minutes for her to go into the freezer and get that ice pack while you stay out here...with me....alone.”

Dane shook his head almost frantically. “No, no. I’m fine. I’ve gotta go.” He headed for the door as quickly as his long legs could carry him.

“But what about the whoopie pies?” Bianca called after him. Dane just ignored her and kept moving.

Smiling now, Evan looked back at his best friend. She had a look of intense confusion on her face when she said, “I can’t prove it, but I’m almost certain that you had everything to do with him leaving.”

His grin just broadened. “Now sugar, I’m offended. I just *love* having my baby brother around.”

Bianca shook her head and walked back toward the cabinets, but he could still hear her muttered, “Damn liar is what you are.”

He chose to keep his chuckle to himself, lest she try and take away his whoopie pie privileges. “You still mad?”

She raised a brow. “That depends. Did you really give up your snack cakes habit?”

This time Evan did chuckle as he raised his hands in surrender. “Yes, her products are officially banned from my home.”

Bianca grunted.

“What was Dane doing here, enjoying *my* perks, anyway?”

“Well he showed up earlier and decided to stick around after Rod came by...” He watched her shoulders tense before she abruptly stopped talking.

“Bianca.” Evan stood and made his way around the island. “Why was Rod here?”

Laughing airily, she tried to brush off her earlier comment with, “Oh, no reason. You know Rod’s a regular customer.”

He turned her to face him and knew she was lying by the way she widened her eyes in her “innocent” face. “Yeah, he is, but if Dane felt the need to stick around, then that means there’s something you aren’t telling me.”

Bianca’s “innocent” face got worse. She shrugged her shoulders. “Nope, Dane was just trying to get me to make whoopie pies.”

Dane stared and waited.

“Stop looking at me like that! I told you why Rod was here!”

He just stared and waited.

Stamping her foot, she growled, “That damn look doesn’t scare me, Evan. I don’t have to tell you anything!”

He was still staring and still waiting.

“All right, all right, Rod came by to ask me out. Now stop looking at me like that!”

Evan was *definitely* done looking at her. In fact, he was seeing pure red. His long legs carried him quickly toward the door, but there was something

holding his shoulders and blocking his way. He looked down into Bianca's panicked expression.

"Evan! You gotta calm down. I told Rod no! I knew you wouldn't want me dating him."

"I don't give a damn what you told him. I told him to stay the hell away from you! Now I have to go rip his arms off his little body and beat him unconscious with them!" He picked Bianca up and put her down behind him before going for his goal, but all she did was grip the back of his shirt and drag her feet, trying to desperately hold him in place.

"Rod needs his arms, and I need you to stay outta jail, honey, so that means you have to calm down. I turned him down just like I turn down men every other day."

Evan stopped when Bianca abandoned her attempt to hold him and just threw her body weight at his back, wrapping herself around him. "What in all hell are you doing?"

"I'm keeping you from committing homicide."

Turning his head slightly, he stared her in the face. "Sugar, I gotta tell you, this is a really bad try."

"Is your vision still blood red?" she asked.

"No."

"And are your ears still ringing?"

He just shook his head.

“Then my plan worked.” Then she smiled, that dimpled smile, the one that made his heart beat just a little bit faster. He’d had dreams of waking up to that smile as long as he could remember, and every single one of them was coming to the forefront of his mind. Then he stopped to think about what she’d said. Bianca had told Rod “no,” instinctively knowing that he wouldn’t want her going out with him, knowing that he really didn’t want any man near her.

Her subconscious loyalty to him made him love her all the more and also made him want to kiss her. Moving on pure instinct to claim what he deemed his, Evan gripped her around the waist with one arm and pulled her to the front of him before he slammed his mouth right onto hers. Her surprised gasp gave him the perfect opportunity to slip between her pretty lips and tangle his tongue with hers. Bianca’s hands went from pushing at his shoulders to gripping them as Evan plundered her mouth relentlessly.

He groaned, thinking that she tasted just as sweet as the confections she made every day. Why was it that he’d never done this before? Currently he couldn’t think of one good reason not to, especially with the way she rubbed up against him and sighed into his mouth with a contented purr. Evan’s hands slid from her toned shoulders and down her lithe back,

around her thick hips, and zeroed in on the ass he'd been watching ever since his hormones kicked in.

Good Lord the woman felt good, all soft and plush. He loved her curves and loved even more that she embraced them. Some men might have liked walking sticks for their bed partners, but Evan was above the average size of a grown male and needed a woman who wasn't breakable. No, that wasn't right—he needed *Bianca*.

She suddenly pushed at his shoulders and pulled back, panting. “Wait...wait a second, Evan.”

He growled, not enjoying that his two favorite things, her lips, were being taken away. Pulling her to his chest gently but firmly, he took her mouth again.

Bianca responded to his kiss another few seconds before she pulled away *again*. She tried to leave the circle of his arms by backing up, but he just gripped her lovely behind harder and followed. “Evan, this isn't right...I mean this is strange. We—we're best friends.”

“Sugar, best friends don't kiss the way we just did.” His gaze zeroed in on that delicious mouth, Evan kept backing her up until she was pressed against a wall. Then he slid his body closer to the front of hers.

Bianca's eyes widened when she realized she was trapped. “Stuck between a rock and a hard place, huh, sugar?” He watched recognition dawn in her gaze as

she looked down to where Evan's erection melded to her core.

“Uh, Evan, I think we need to talk.”

He shook his head. “Uh-uh, sugar. We’ve spent twenty-four years talking, hanging out, laughing, and goofing, but now”—he pressed himself closer to her and delighted in her whimper—“now I don’t want to talk.” His lips swooped down on hers so swiftly that she had no time to protest.

Shouldn’t she be stopping him by now? Or at least trying to push him away? She probably should, but his hands felt so good, and his hard body pressed against hers felt even better. And good Lord the man could kiss! No, that was an understatement. He wasn’t kissing her. Evan was taking her mouth like it was the last thing he’d ever do.

It would be so easy to lock the shop doors, turn off all the lights, and... And do what? Ruin an almost thirty-year friendship because the both of them were horny? Reality splashed over her like cold water, and Bianca pushed at his shoulders until eventually he let go.

“W-we can’t do this.” Bianca said when Evan finally pulled back.

“Why not?”

The shudder that ran through her from his lips caressing her throat would do nothing but encourage him. Shoving harder, she managed to wiggle out of his trap and get herself on the other side of the kitchen.

“Because we’ve been friends for too long to sleep together just to regret it later, and after whatever we did ended, we’d have to face the reality that things would never be normal again.” That was a nice, normal, rational explanation.

“Bull.”

Startled, Bianca snapped her gaze to Evan’s. “What?”

He crossed those long arms across his massive chest. “I said that was bull.” Stalking her around the kitchen, he watched her like prey.

Licking suddenly dry lips while trying to keep him from getting too close, she managed to squeak out, “Why would you say that?”

“It’s very simple, sugar. See, in my opinion we’ve been fighting this for years now. It’s always been under the surface.”

Even though he was dead on with that statement, she shook her head. “No, this is the first time—”

“The first time, what?” he interrupted. “The first time we kissed? Yeah, that’s true, but it’s not the first time I’ve wanted to kiss you. That’s for sure.”

“What?” Bianca reared back.

Evan just nodded. “Yeah, sugar, open your eyes. I’ve been dying to do that since I was able to get my first hard—”

Unable to take that much information, she threw up her hands to stop him. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, that’s just going too far, Evan!”

“Why, because you don’t want me to?” He suddenly stopped his pursuit, a wolfish smile spreading across his face. “Or because you do?”

Yes, she wanted him to. Man did she want him to, but it was best not to reveal that. She lifted her chin and stared at him head-on. “No, Evan, I don’t. We’re *friends*,” she said, making sure to stress the word.

He just snorted. “No, sugar, I’ve been *your* friend, but you’ve always been so much more to me than that.”

The admission seemed to surprise him as much as it surprised her. His eyes widened in time with hers, and then he seemed to firm his resolve and stood a little taller. “Yeah, that’s right, I said it. You mean *everything* to me.”

How was she supposed to take that? Her *best friend* had just in so many words admitted that he was in love with her. Bianca wasn’t an expert on relationships, but when somebody confessed their love, she was pretty sure panic attacks weren’t the

proper reaction. Taking a deep breath, she broke their staring contest.

Evan had to be the most intense person she knew. After all it took for her to gain her independence, she wasn't ready to give it to him. He wasn't controlling, but he was pure, undiluted alpha male, and when he said something people moved like they had a purpose. How was she supposed to be involved with him and get him to understand that she couldn't be tamed? The issue was that Bianca shouldn't *have* to explain that. He *knew* her.

"I can't do this."

"Oh, you can. It just scares the hell out of you that you want to," he retorted, getting ever so close to where she was standing.

"I'm trouble."

Chuckling, Evan replied, "On two legs." He took another step.

"I'm difficult."

"Yes, you are." His slow stride gained him a closer range. Bianca watched his lids lower. His breaths came out deeply, as if he were trying to keep himself in check.

"I'll never let you touch my truck." Was it a stupid fact on her list of objections? Yes, but she was grasping for anything at this point. One of them had to have some sense and reason.

“Sugar, the last thing I’m worried about is touching your truck.” By the time he made that statement, she realized that her back was firmly placed against another wall. She had nowhere to go, *again*.

Before his lips lowered she tried one more time. “You *will* regret this.”

Evan smirked. “Sugar, I can say in all honesty that I will *never* regret having you.”

“Damn.” That was the last thing she got to say.

And a Good Amount of Mixing

Was it normal to want someone as much as he wanted Bianca? Could she be disturbed by the way he ripped her tank top off with one tug and flung it over his shoulder? And the way her bra soon followed? He didn't give himself a long time to bask in the fact that he had his living fantasy half-naked in front of him; he just got to work. Before he knew what had happened, he had her bent over his favorite island with her shorts around her ankles and himself more than ready to take her—but he stopped.

Evan stopped to look at their clothes mingled together and thrown all over the kitchen. He stopped to listen to the way she panted and watch how her back rose and fell with each breath. What if this wasn't what she wanted? What if he didn't regret this tomorrow, but she *did*?

Taking in gulps of air, Evan stood behind her, his shirt and hat long forgotten, jeans and briefs around his ankles and his erection so hard that it hurt. And even with all that, he still managed to ask, "You still with me, sugar?"

Desire-glazed eyes looked up at him as Bianca turned her head to peer at him over her shoulder. "Evan"—she spoke through clenched teeth—"we are in the sanctuary of my *kitchen*, the one place that is

cleaner than a damn Lysol advertisement, the one place, other than my truck, that I love with all my heart. If I *wasn't* still with you, I would not be about to let you screw me like a bunny across a counter that I clean three to four times a day. Shut. Up. And. Get. To. Work.”

Couldn't she just have said “yes”? Yes, but that mouth was a part of what made Bianca—Bianca. So he wouldn't fault her for it, but he would...

“Ow! What the hell?!” She glared up at him while rubbing the spot on her ass that he'd brought his hand down on.

He just smirked. “No mouthing off. During this”—he rubbed himself between her legs and delighted in the way she moaned—“*I* am in charge, sugar, and I say that'll I'll get to work when I feel like it. Maybe I'll just take my sweet time.”

Her gaze narrowed, but she smiled none the less. “Whatever you say, Evan.” He had all of two seconds to be suspicious before she reached back and gripped him in her hand.

Breathing was impossible now. “Sugar—”

“I want it. Please don't make me wait for it.” Her thumb rubbed over the sensitive head, once and then twice. And when she licked her lips as she watched herself stroke him, that was all he could take.

Bianca grunted when he pressed her chest back down onto the smooth granite of the island before entering her silken heat in one thrust. She cried out when he pulled out just to slam back in, careful to keep a hand in front of her stomach, bracing her from the impact. His jaw tightened at the way she felt gripping him; her walls contracting around his shaft had his eyes almost rolling to the back of his head.

Evan rode her hard, with no mercy, and she returned his movements in kind. Sitting up from the counter, Bianca grabbed one of his hands, moving it to her breasts, and put the other one between her legs to stroke her clit in time with his thrusts. Her hands found their way to gripping the back of his thighs.

“Faster,” she demanded, and he complied.

The only sounds to be heard in her usually busy bakery were their combined pants, along with their moans, and the sound of his thighs slapping against the back of hers. Evan almost chuckled when he realized they sounded like an X-rated orchestra, but the laugh got strangled in his throat when Bianca managed to reach between them and gently grip his scrotum before rolling the globes in the palm of her hand. Knowing that if she didn’t stop, he’d be coming without her, he grabbed both of her hands and placed them on the countertop, holding them with his as he bent both of them back over.

“Oh...” Her breathy sigh made him pump harder.

“Evan... I think...I’m about to...to...” Before she could complete her sentence, her body stiffened and contracted so hard around him that for a moment he could hear harps playing. Her scream of release was drawn out when he didn’t stop but kept pushing until she gripped him just as hard three more times. On that final contraction of her muscles, he let go and came so long and so hard that he couldn’t reopen his eyes for at least a minute when he was done.

“Wow...just wow,” was all that Bianca said, so his laughing became inevitable.

Makes Something Real Sweet

Bianca's eyes finally slid open as an orgasm rocketed up her back and tore a hoarse cry from her throat. *Again?* This man was going at her, again? After a night of loving each other some more in her kitchen at Sweet Temptations, and then doing it all over his home, she would think Evan would be trying to recover or at least be in a coma by now. Her sight finally adjusting to the streams of light that were invading their private haven, she bit her lip and looked down just to glimpse his head of black hair between her legs. A groan escaped when his tongue flicked out to pay homage to her clit, and he looked up with a smug smile firmly in place. "Morning, sugar."

Swallowing to regain moisture in her mouth, she answered, "Good morning...wait...what are you doing?" Her question was ignored as he slid onto his back and lifted her above him. His member slid into her nice and easy, which wasn't a surprise since they'd spent so much time getting their bodies acquainted. Any and every hour of the previous night that Bianca gave even the slightest indication that she was awake, Evan had taken full advantage of. They'd done every position their two minds could come up with until she finally begged him to let her sleep.

“Ah.” He sighed and stared up at her as he put his hands behind his head in a relaxed position. Bucking up once, he demanded, “Ride me again.”

Bianca rolled her eyes heavenward. “What’s the magic word, Evan?”

His face took on a boyish appearance. “Spanking?”

Despite her attempt to stop it, a snort still slipped out. “No.”

“Handcuffs?”

“No.”

“Uh...lube?”

By this time she was resting against his chest and trying to stop laughing. “No.”

“You in an elaborate nurse’s uniform, giving me a very dirty sponge—”

She sat up and popped his forehead. “That’s a whole sentence!”

He let out a weary sigh. “Okay, fine...please?” He punctuated the sentence with another thrust upward that had her gripping his shoulders and grinding down on him.

“Yeah”—she panted—“that’s the one.”

Evan’s large hands found the mounds of her ass and gripped, bringing her down harder on him, and her mouth opened. “Oh, that feels good.” Nails biting

into his shoulders, she did her best to pick up her pace.

“Yes. It. Does.” His thrusts were earnest now, and she could feel herself hurtling toward the edge quickly but couldn’t quite go over.

“Evan...” She knew he could hear the frustration in her voice.

Bringing his left hand up from where it was, he put his thumb on her lips. “Suck.” Bianca pulled it in, swirling her tongue around the tip, and watched his jaw clench as he looked at her. He pulled it from her mouth and placed it up against that special detonation button between the folds of her sex, rubbing in quick circles. That was all she needed for her body to shatter.

Catching his breath, Evan had her flat on her back with her ankles as earrings before pounding into her so hard that his mattress shook. Bianca’s back bowed high enough that she almost threw him off when she came again. Her head shook from side to side. “No more, Evan. I can’t do it again.”

His smile said otherwise as he turned his hips in an angle and spread her legs wider. Giving his member the chance at tunneling deeper, she felt him hit a place in her core that had her eyes opening wide when she realized he’d managed to do the one thing no other man had. He’d found her g-spot.

Tears of pure pleasure ran down the sides of her face as he rubbed against that spot over and over again, making her body contract so many times that her stomach started to clench. Evan's face was tight, his grunts coming out louder until they mingled with her cries and they both exploded. She felt her canal draining every drop of cum from him, and it didn't bother her. They'd discussed the fact that she was on birth control long ago.

She welcomed it when he lay between her legs and wrapped his arms around her, his head resting on her breasts. "Comfy?" Bianca teased.

He chuckled. "Yes'm."

Smiling now, she ran her fingers through his hair. "This is the last place I thought we'd ever be."

Evan's sigh was contented. "Yeah, your daddy's gonna kill me."

"Yeah, and I'm gonna miss you."

He glared at her. "Is that supposed to be comforting?"

She shrugged. "Yes, but I guess it's not working."

Eyes narrowing, he said, "I want a simple service. Not a lot of hollering, and keep Dane from stealing my stuff."

Her smile coaxed one out of him. She brushed a stray lock of hair off his forehead. "I'll convince Mama to get Daddy to make your death quick and painless."

“That’s all I ask,” he intoned with a serious face.

A few seconds were all they could take before they were chuckling. Suddenly his face held warmth that stole her breath as he looked down at her. “You know, if we got married he might be less inclined to murder me.”

And she knew he felt it when her whole body stiffened. “Are you proposing?”

“I might be,” Evan replied, shrugging.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she said the words that were almost hard to get out. “Evan, I can’t.”

“*Evan, I can’t.*” The words rang so loud in his ears that he wanted to bang his head against something to get them out. After Bianca’s admission, he’d separated himself from her by heading into his bathroom and locking the door. Was it immature? Yes, but what did she expect him to do? Evan had done *everything* over the years to show her that he loved her. When would she get that? He’d tried to be her friend, tried to stay away from what he craved, but it was as impossible as not breathing. He *needed* her. Wishing that he could convince Bianca of that, he thought about how much it hurt to see that she was gone when he finally came out of the bathroom.

She had left a little note that said, “*I’m sorry.*” He was sorry too; sorry that he didn’t tie her ass to the

bed and make her scream until she was hoarse and admit that she wanted to be his wife as much as he wanted her to be. Now, Evan's gait was easy as he walked the grassy terrain of his ranch, his mind going a mile a minute.

"Hey, boss! Boss!" He turned at the shout and saw Rod running toward him. Eyes narrowing, he folded his arms across his chest.

The foreman stopped in front of him, winded, and took a step back. He raised his hands and waved them. "You can stop looking at me like that. Ms. Bianca has made it real clear that she ain't interested."

"What do you want, Rod?" Evan asked, speaking through his teeth.

"I came to tell you that two of your bulls are going at it. We tried to get into the corral to separate them, but they ain't having it, keep charging us. We figure if anybody can handle it, it would be you."

Not surprised, since it was rutting season and male bulls tended to get ornery if they felt like they were being challenged, Evan headed for the corral with Rod following behind him. He reached the corral just as two of his ranch hands started preparing ropes to lasso the fighting bulls. Running, he got a rope from the man nearest to him and was brought a horse. Wasting no time, he got Rod to open the gates before he charged in and roped the bull closest to him.

Evan yelled for everyone to get out of his way and lead the snorting beast into a bullpen. The gate to the enclosure was closed, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he dismounted. The angry bull charged the gate repeatedly, but he figured it would eventually get tired and give up.

“Wow sir, you’re *good*.”

Chuckling at the enthusiastic words from his youngest ranch hand, Josh, he handed the mare he’d ridden over to him. “I try to be, son. I try to be.”

Josh grinned before taking the horse back to its stable. Heading off from the corral, he started thinking up ways to get Bianca to love him the way he loved her when he noticed some of the men waving their hands in the direction behind him and yelling. Brows furrowed, he turned around and froze.

The big bronco hadn’t calmed down, but it *had* managed to waltz right through that gate, and Evan realized for the first time that he’d closed the pen but hadn’t *locked* it. And as the bull’s head lowered, his last conscious word was, “Damn.”

If he lived, she was going to kill him! What did the dumbass think he was doing by not checking the lock on the gate?! It had to be the *dumbest* thing Evan had ever done, and she’d been with him while he was going through his “fanny pack” phase. Hands gripping

the steering wheel of her truck, Bianca followed behind Dane to Gulf Coast Medical Center in Wharton.

Dane had been the one to come and find her at Sweet Temptations. Hearing that Evan was hurt, she'd dropped everything to go to him. She had been in the kitchen beating the hell out of herself for turning him down that morning when she knew good and damn well that she loved him as much as he loved her. That was the reason her relationships never worked out. None of her boyfriends could handle her being so close to Evan, and she wasn't willing to give him up. He meant *everything* to her, and although she was a bit slow on the uptake, she could see that now.

They managed to get to the medical center in good time. Since Bianca had free cookies delivered to a lot of the local hospitals for the sick kids who had to endure being prodded at daily, the nurses that she regularly interacted with had no problem letting her head to Evan's room—especially when Dane's expression and words made it clear that she was family. She stopped in the doorway, not exactly sure what she might see. He *had* taken an ass whooping from a bull, after all.

"You gonna go in?" Dane asked from behind her.

"How bad is it?"

He blew out a breath. “It ain’t pretty, honey. A few cracked ribs and a concussion. He’ll hurt like hell and cuss for weeks on end, but he’ll live. Rod and the rest of the hands say that the bull only got the chance to hit him once because he got out of the way before a horn could gore him. They got it before it could do more damage.”

Bianca released a breath that she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “Good—then he’ll be around for me to put my foot in his ass for being so damned reckless.”

Ignoring Dane’s chuckle, she pushed open the door and headed toward Evan’s bed. He was laid out staring blankly at the ceiling, bandages covering a good portion of his torso. Sighing, she closed the room’s door. She definitely had a few words for Mr. Halima.

Evan took in a long breath and almost gagged at the smell of bleach and antiseptic.

“Glad to see that you’re up and alert.”

Eyes squinting, he turned his head at the sound of that very familiar voice, and there she stood, with the scariest scowl he’d ever seen on her face. A little frightened, Evan looked toward the closed room door.

“That ain’t gonna help yah, buddy.”

Closing his eyes, he reopened them to look back at Bianca and her “scary” face. He cleared his throat. “Sugar.” It was impossible to not call her by the endearment, especially with the way her jaw was flexing while she tried to pretend she hadn’t been scared for him. He could see it in her eyes as clear as day.

“Dumbass,” she responded.

“I—”

“‘Am a dumbass,’ should be strategically placed on the end of the sentence,” she interrupted.

His scowl matched hers. “Is this supposed to be good bedside manners? Because I am certain that this is bad bedside manners.”

She was out of her seat with her finger in his face faster than he could blink. “You idiot! What the hell were you thinking about that you couldn’t focus long enough to lock the gate?! You could’ve been killed!”

Railing at him was her goal, but Evan noticed the tears shimmering in her golden eyes, and it broke his heart. “I was thinking about the fact that you don’t love me the way that I love you,” he answered.

She seemed to deflate and then poked him in the forehead. “Ow! I have a concussion, you psycho!”

“And it serves you right! I may be slow, but I’m not stupid, Evan. I do love you!”

“Then why in the hell did you say what you did this morning?”

“Because I don’t want to run you off!”

“What?” he said, looking up at her.

“I’m not normal, Evan.”

Snorting, he replied, “Like I didn’t know that,” which managed to earn him another poke.

“Ow, dammit, stop doing that!”

“Stop interrupting me!” Bianca snarled, and he clammed up.

She took a deep breath. “Now as I was saying. I’m not normal.” Looking him in the eyes, she continued. “Nor will I ever be. You’ll never get to touch my truck, there will continue to be many nights I discuss the wonder that is Hugh Jackman, and I will constantly bug you about things for the kitchen. My daddy will probably do worse to you than that bull did, and I’ll *always* push your buttons just for giggles.” Her eyes and face went soft as she gazed at him. “But I’ll also *always* love you. There will *never* be anybody as good to me as you are, and if I can prevent Daddy from putting you on a feeding tube for the rest of your life, then I’ll be more than happy to marry you.”

Evan bit his lip to keep from shouting out and smiled at her. “Does this mean you’re going to be my naughty nurse maid now that I’m injured?”

Bianca shook her head and laughed. “No, but I’ll make you take your medicine and keep you from slipping into a coma until your concussion passes.”

His grin was wide when he grabbed her arm and pulled her face close to his, whispering before he kissed her, “Sugar, that’s all a man can ask for.”

That Everyone Can Get a Piece Of

Three years later...

“You know that we don’t have to do this, right? We can turn around and they will *never* know.” Bianca tried just *one* more time to get him to consider it.

Evan just shook his dark head and gripped the steering wheel. “No, sugar, we made a commitment. We can’t back out now.”

“But why not?” Was she whining? Why yes, yes she was, and she was doing it with good reason. Evan had committed once again to the one thing that she kept *begging* him not to: Sunday dinner at her parents’ house, along with his brother and papa. Her daddy’s threats of death and dismemberment had stopped, but he still looked at Evan as if he had plans to make him disappear. Papa Halima was just sweet, which made her daddy go for his rifle every time the other man came around her mama, even though Evan Sr. had long ago given up his whorish ways.

Dane and Brianna fought like they *weren’t* ripping one another’s clothes off every chance they got, something Bianca had the displeasure of witnessing with her own eyes. And all this took place while she was trying to keep a now mobile two-year-old from destroying the whole house and a three-

month-old baby from screaming it down. Shaking her head, she looked over at her husband. They were sitting in the driveway of her parents' home and debating whether or not to drive back to the ranch like the police were one their asses. "Evan, this is by the far the *dumbest* thing you have ever done."

Smirking at her, he replied, "I thought my bullfight was the dumbest thing I'd ever done."

Reaching over the space in between the front seats of *his* truck, because he *still* wasn't allowed to touch hers, she gripped his T-shirt and pulled his face close to hers. "This beats that, and I could beat *you* for it." She cringed and let go when she heard their son Elijah's giggle from the backseat; the little boy had been asleep just a few minutes ago.

"Beat Daddy! Beat Daddy! Down, I want down!" Her son chanted, pumping his little fists in the air and wiggling in his car seat. Elijah's green eyes, set in a sweet caramel face, begged her to unlock that seat belt and let him loose.

Shaking her head again, she stared at the little terror, praying that he didn't start screaming and wake his baby sister. "Not on your life, kid." Bianca turned back to Evan. "*You* can take your spawn, and I'll get the princess," she said, referring to their daughter, Bailey.

“Why is he *my* spawn who inspires terror when he’s on a rampage, but he’s *your* ‘precious baby boy’ when he decides he wants to behave?”

Raising a brow, she looked at him. “Because I said so, and my rule is law.”

Evan chose to keep his laughter to himself as he climbed out of the truck to grab their son. Elijah wasn’t a bad child; he was actually really sweet, but he was also *really* energetic. Bailey, on the other hand, with her pretty champagne-colored irises and adorably plump and dimpled cheeks, was ruler of the house and knew it. If his princess called, they answered. Sighing, he opened the rear truck door and unlocked the little boy, grabbing him before he could make a mad dash out of the vehicle.

Bianca easily grabbed Bailey’s car seat, and together they made the slow stroll up the walkway to the two-storied home. The large mahogany door swung open, and there stood a *very* large, *very* intimidating male who had his daughter’s eyes. However, where hers were warm, his were hard.

“Boy,” Rayford said, looking him up and down. “What took you so long to get here? Defiling my precious baby girl again?”

“Daddy!”

Rayford ignored the admonishment in his daughter's voice. "You'd better get inside. Your papa's here, and my trigger finger is getting mighty itchy."

Evan smiled at the older man; despite his hard exterior, Rayford Grayson had a good heart. Bianca's father would never admit that he actually *liked* Evan. But that didn't matter because he *knew* it, and that was so much better than him saying the words.

"Yes sir." Evan handed Elijah off to Rayford and walked past Bri and Dane, who were arguing in the living room, heading into the kitchen where his papa was saying something to make Bianca's mother giggle.

"Ms. Fiona." He kissed his mother-in-law's cheek before grabbing his daddy by the elbow and taking him into the living room where Dane and Bri were. Sitting Evan Sr. down in the middle of the bickering pair, he said, "Papa I think it'd be in your best interest to make Dane blush and giggle instead of Ms. Fiona." Then he grabbed Brianna's elbow and took her into the kitchen to sit next to her mother. "Bri, if you and Dane keep fighting and get the baby upset from the yelling, I'm certain that Bianca is going to come after you...and hurt you...badly."

Once it appeared that everyone would listen to his quick advice, he headed back toward the foyer where his wife, father-in-law, and kids were watching

with amused expressions. Rayford gave a grudging smile. “You’re good son, you’re good.”

Grinning, he grabbed a wiggling Elijah from the boy’s grandfather. “I try, sir, I try.”

Mr. Grayson clapped him on the back and headed for the kitchen while Bianca came to stand next to him. Her smile was warm when she leaned up to kiss him. “The fact that you put up with this while I’m ready to run screaming still amazes me.”

“I’d put up with anything for you.” And what he said was true. She was, in fact, his sweet temptation.

★ ★ **NW** ★ ★

Nikki Winter

When Nikki wrote her first story in the tenth grade, she knew without a doubt she was destined for greatness. Now if she could just convince everyone else...

Buckling down, she's taken the time to polish what she refers to as her "writing superiority." She hopes that the tales she has created grab the readers' attention, and make them devoted ~~slaves to her will~~ fans. If you want to let her know just how absolutely, positively awesome she is, you can always e-mail her at nikkiwinter19@gmail.com, friend her on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/people/Nikki-Winter/100002445230428>, or follow her on Twitter as @NikkiWinter19.