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The background of the cover features a photograph of two young boys sitting on a wooden chair. The boy in the foreground is looking towards the camera, wearing a white t-shirt and denim overalls. The boy behind him is wearing a straw hat and a grey vest over a white t-shirt, and has his arm around the first boy's shoulder. The setting appears to be indoors near a window with a plant visible in the upper right corner.

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USA TODAY Bestselling Author

Tina Leonard
A CALLAHAN OUTLAW'S TWINS

CALLAHAN
Cowboys®

Tina Leonard

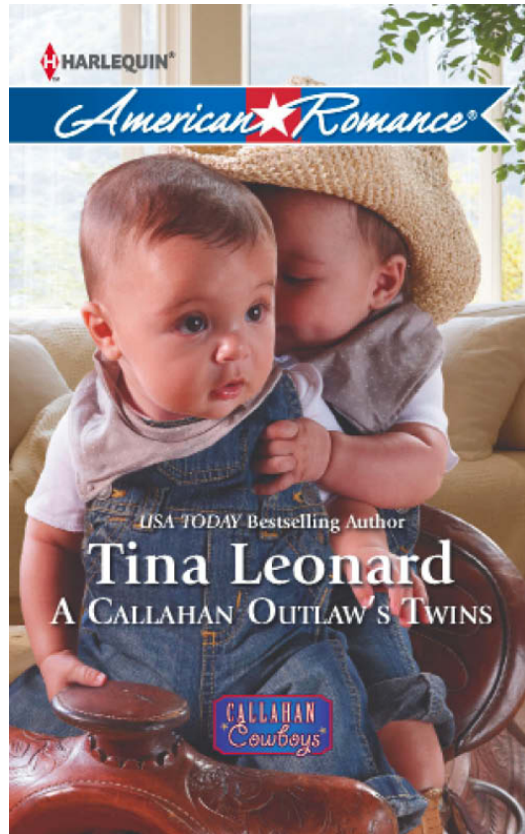
A Callahan Outlaw's Twins

«HarperCollins»

Leonard T.

A Callahan Outlaw's Twins / T. Leonard — «HarperCollins»,

A Lonesome Cowboy Finds His Destiny Former Navy SEAL Sloan Callahan lives by his own rules, free and alone. But now urgent family business brings Sloan and his brothers and sister to New Mexico—and the cousins he'd never met. That isn't all he finds on Rancho Diablo, where a petite blonde is about to completely upend Sloan's world. As the liaison between the two branches of the Callahan clan, Kendall Phillips' job description doesn't include being bossed around by one ex-military cowboy. It's hard enough to concentrate with the sparks she and Sloan are creating together. Now the sexy rebel has two more lives to safeguard: the baby boys Kendall's carrying. No way is Sloan allowing danger to touch Kendall and the twins. His new mission: To protect his loved ones as he gets ready to change the course of Callahan destiny forever!



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"I don't need a psychological evaluation. I need you."

He was only so much of a saint. In fact, he wasn't a saint at all. "Kendall, you're scared. I understand that. But I'm not the answer."

"I'm not looking for answers." She ran her palms up his back, pressing him closer. "You treat me like a china doll. As if you're afraid of me."

"I'm not—" She did scare the hell out of him. They had nothing in common except Rancho Diablo, which wasn't even his home, or hers.

The problem was how much he wanted her.

"I want you, Sloan."

He didn't reply. In the darkness, Kendall couldn't read his face. He'd tensed up, a hard stone fortress in her arms—but then his lips touched hers, seeking, before turning demanding.

Sparks shattered inside her. She kissed him back, drawing him to her, not about to let him get up on his good-soldier horse and ride away.

Dear Reader,

I love the Callahans, and I'm thrilled you have found a place for them in your hearts, too! The New Year starts off with Sloan's story, as he and his family meet their Callahan cousins at Rancho Diablo. Sloan never dreamed he'd find himself battling to keep the Callahan legacy secure—let alone falling for the beautiful, sexy Kendall Phillips. But the biggest shocker of all for Sloan is discovering how much he loves the idea of being a father, when he never saw himself settling down. How can he resist falling for the woman who makes him realize the last thing he wants is to be a lone wolf?

I hope you enjoy this new chapter in the Callahan saga. This is the first of seven new stories, where the Chacon Callahans are brought into the fold, where love and land intertwine to forge new ties for them all. As we meet these Callahan cousins, it's my fondest wish that you will love, laugh and enjoy their journey home with them.

Best wishes to you all,

Tina

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A Callahan Outlaw's Twins

Tina Leonard



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tina Leonard is a USA TODAY bestselling and award-winning author of more than fifty projects, including several popular miniseries for Harlequin American Romance. Known for bad-boy heroes and smart, adventurous heroines, her books have made the USA TODAY, Waldenbooks, Ingram and Nielsen BookScan bestseller lists. Born on a military base, Tina lived in many states before eventually marrying the boy who did her crayon printing for her in the first grade. You can visit her at www.tinaleonard.com, at www.facebook.com/tinaleonardbooks and www.twitter.com/tina_leonard.

Many thanks and much love to the readers who have supported my writing with such devotion and generosity. Your enthusiasm is the reason I write.

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[Prologue](#)

Chief Running Bear looked out across the canyons as he sat astride a black Diablo mustang. He looked to the east, then the west, and finally northward. A huge plume of dust rose on the horizon, painting the New Mexico sky an ominous gray. The air stirred, unsettled. The chief knew what the signs meant.

What was coming could not be stopped, nor changed. The past was rising to meet them, just as before.

He turned the Diablo mustang south, and they melted into the canyons.

There was no time to waste.

[Chapter One](#)

“All I can say is that the Callahans are unafraid to live by their own rules, no matter the consequences. It makes you want to live a little harder yourself. I call it Callahan fire.”

—Bode Jenkins, when asked by a reporter
about his neighbors

Sloan Chacon stared at the note tacked to the door of his isolated cabin, an event that had happened three times before in his life. This time it had been placed while he was sleeping. Highly trained and decorated Navy SEALs did not normally find themselves in the presence of someone stealthier than they.

Sloan pulled the note off the rustic wood. It was from Chief Running Bear, the connection to his old life, and his paternal grandfather.

The instructions, as always, were cryptic.

There are many mysteries in a man's life. You are needed now, to protect the family and your heritage. Go to the Callahan ranch in New Mexico. Near the canyons you will find seven large stones, one placed for each of you. This ring of stone will be your home from now on, in your heart.

He'd known this day was coming, from the day his parents had left. They'd said “the chief will guide you”—and they'd disappeared. He and his brothers and sister had split up, moved in separate directions when they were old enough. Life in the tribe was over.

He hadn't understood much then. But his parents had been right: the chief had guided them.

He'd just resented the hell out of it.

* * *

JONAS AND SAM CALLAHAN stared across the ranch land of Rancho Diablo toward the canyons. Jonas lowered the night-vision binoculars. “I see a circle of seven large rocks, and a small fire in the center. My guess is it's the bat signal, with our grandfather starring as Alfred.”

“Chief business,” Sam said.

Jonas nodded. “The chief's not holding a séance, so something's up.”

Sam took the binoculars. “I knew the peace couldn't last forever.”

Jonas waited for Sam's assessment of the fire and ring of stone.

“There are eight people. Six dudes, the chief and what may be a reasonably decent-looking chick with spiky light hair. Around our age, but hard to tell. They look fit.”

“You mean they look like they're strong enough to tote diaper bags and baby gear,” Jonas said. “I've bulked up with the nineteen kids on this ranch.”

“Exactly. Shall we butt in?”

“I thought you'd never ask.”

Sam set the binoculars down. “The chief wouldn’t have let us see him if he didn’t want us to know something’s going on. That means he expects all of us to show.”

“I’m on it,” Jonas said, sending a mass text to the brothers.

Cut yourselves loose. Chief situation.

“Here we go,” Sam said.

“Ever think what our lives would be like without the chief?” Jonas asked his brother, hearing a rumble of thunder deep in the heart of the canyons that could only be the mystical Diablos running, a portent of things to come.

“Yeah.” Sam slid into a leather jacket, stuck a small pistol in the back of his jeans. “Boring as hell.”

But boring had been nice for the past year.

* * *

SLOAN FOUND THE SPOT easily enough—the small fire was an excellent marker. He put his pack down and eyed the dark landscape around him, checking for danger. His heart beat hard, adrenaline kicking in. “You can come out. Let’s get this party started.”

His five brothers slowly materialized from the shadows. Sloan waited. A few seconds passed, then his slightly built sister stepped close to the fire.

“I’m here. Now the party can get rocking,” Ashlyn said.

They embraced each other. Cold night air blew down his jacket collar, but Sloan didn’t care. It felt too good to be with his family again. They’d waited a long time for this moment.

He wished they could stay together forever.

But they weren’t alone. Sloan stood still as six tall men appeared out of the darkness like night specters. The two groups stared across the fire, sizing each other up.

Sloan had no idea how long the chief had been standing next to him. His grandfather’s face gave away nothing, and Sloan wondered why they’d all been called to this remote location.

“This is Callahan land,” the chief said. “You are all Callahans.”

Sloan looked at the impassive faces gathered around the fire. If this was family, it felt very strange to learn about it now. “We are Chacon.”

“Chacon Callahan. You are related by blood. Your fathers are brothers.” The chief met the gaze of each of them in turn. “One of you is the hunted one.”

Sloan stared at the chief. “What does that mean, hunted?”

“It means one may die if the thirteen do not work together. No matter what, nothing can separate you from your purpose.”

“Which is what?” Sloan demanded.

“Protecting the family.” The chief looked at Jonas.

“Is there another mercenary coming?” Jonas asked.

“There was never only one,” the chief said. “You knew they would send more. They are nearing Rancho Diablo even as we speak.”

“If these guys have a problem, what does that have to do with us?” Sloan asked.

“Callahan is Callahan. The fight is the same.” The chief gestured one last time at the clan gathered in a circle. “Get to know each other well. A single stick can be broken, but a bundle not so easily.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Sloan said. “Any further intel would be appreciated.”

“Your home is here,” the chief said. “Keep the ring of stone and fire in your hearts. Across the canyons, a few miles as the eagles flies, lies danger.”

“If we’re supposed to be a bundle,” Jonas said, “I assume they’re staying with us at Rancho Diablo? They’re welcome to, of course, though we can take care of ourselves.”

“For now they stay here.” The chief squatted next to the fire, waved a hand over it. “You have nineteen children, six wives and two elderly people on the ranch, Jonas. It is best to have your cousins remain in this place so they can keep a lookout.”

“I’d watch calling Aunt Fiona and Uncle Burke elderly,” Jonas replied. “Chief, we can establish our own lookouts.” He glanced across the fire at his new kin.

Sloan knew exactly how Jonas felt. “Why again is this our problem?”

“Brother takes care of brother.” The chief let that sink in for a moment. “Remember that only blood matters. Stay together and yet separate. There is strength in all of you, but even a chain can be broken if the weakest link is not reinforced,” the chief said, rising. “Here the past and the future become one. What comes now will change you all.”

He disappeared, and the fire dimmed. Hoofbeats echoed eerily in the darkness.

Sloan had little patience for open-ended missions with little purpose, and slackers who couldn’t take care of themselves. He appointed himself troubleshooter, deciding to go ahead and shoot this trouble in the head before it took over their lives. “I take it you’re in some kind of jam, cousins,” he said. “Not really sure we can help you.”

“I’m Jonas Callahan. And as far as I knew when I woke up this morning, the only jam in my world was on my toast. We thought we were doing just fine until you showed up.”

Sloan took the hand stretched out to him, giving it a brief shake. “Sloan. These are my brothers and sister. Falcon, Galen, Jace, Dante, Tighe and Ashlyn.”

Ashlyn’s diminutive size caught Jonas’s attention. He glanced at Sloan.

“She’s not the weak link,” Sloan said drily. “Trust me on that. Five feet two of meanness if you cross her.”

“Good,” Jonas said. “No offense, Ashlyn.”

“Not a problem,” she said.

Jonas looked at Sloan. “These are my brothers. Creed, Pete, Sam, Rafe and Judah.”

“Seven of us, six of you?” Sloan asked.

“Guess your father was more prolific,” Jonas said.

“Or he was determined to have a girl,” Ashlyn said, her tone sweet.

Jonas eyed Sloan. “We’ll head on now.”

He nodded. Sloan glanced around at the rest of the Callahans on the opposite side of the fire. There was definitely a strong resemblance, but they didn’t feel like family.

Yet they were supposed to fight for a common cause, against something dangerous that affected all of them.

Sloan didn’t get it. Frankly, if the seven of them had been brought in to help these six, he wasn’t all that interested.

His family could stand on their own.

Too bad if theirs couldn’t.

Chapter Two

Kendall Phillips looked down at the sleeping man, unsure how to wake him. He slept like he was dead, which he probably should be, considering he’d spent the night on the ground at Rancho Diablo. In the not-quite-dawn light, she saw that the fire had gone out, perhaps hours ago.

The next thing Kendall knew, she was flat on her backside in the dust. “Ow!” Her fanny smarted—and now this guest of Jonas’s was on her very bad side. “Let go of me, you gorilla!”

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” he demanded.

She noted he didn’t release her, and she squelched the great desire to pull off one of her high-heeled Manolo Blahniks and pierce him with it. “I’m Kendall Phillips. I was sent with coffee and to bring you in to meet the family while it’s still dark. Let go of my ankle!”

She slapped his hand, but he didn’t seem to mind. He slowly released her, his fingers lingering against her skin—as if he wasn’t used to feeling anything soft.

Chills ran up her legs.

“Sorry,” he said. “Not used to a chuck wagon showing up to greet me, nor a female.”

Kendall stood, turning to look at her white Chanel skirt, which now bore a target-size dirt mark on it, very visible despite the dimness still covering the ranch. “Apology not accepted. I was trying to wake you gently, you...” She sized the man up as he stood. “You do look like a Callahan.”

“That’s because I am.” He glanced around. “Do me a favor. Don’t tell my brothers and sister you made it to the fire without me taking you out.”

“I beg your pardon,” Kendall said, “but I can assure you that you and I will never be going out.”

“It’s okay. We had a bead on her all along,” a female voice said. Five large men and one much smaller woman appeared out of the darkness. Kendall thought it was amazing how silently they could move.

“You sleep like a bear in winter,” the petite blonde said to her brother, who looked embarrassed at her comment. “If she can sneak up on us in those shoes, you’re going to stink as a lookout. That’s got to change.”

“This is all very nice, but not my issue,” Kendall said. “Do you want coffee or not?” She put full-force attitude into her voice, letting these people know that she might have gotten dumped on her butt, but it wouldn’t happen again.

“Sure,” the blonde said. “You’re kind of fancy for a rancher, aren’t you?”

Kendall was about to let her have it—she hadn’t driven a military jeep out to the corner of nowhere to put up with this—but just then her twin brother, Xav, rode up on his big stallion, and the little blonde’s eyes went huge in her face.

“Everything all right, Kendall?” Xav asked.

She nodded. “We’re getting to know each other, all of us,” she said, her gaze on the man who’d spilled her on the ground. “It may take a while. We have different methods of saying hello.”

Sloan shrugged. “Where’s the coffee, Barbie?”

Kendall sucked in a breath. “Did you just call me Barbie?”

The big man looked at her curiously. “Is that a problem?”

His brothers shifted, and as slight streaks of dawn began slowly lighting the sky, she realized that all these people looked very Callahan—and a little dangerous.

Darn Jonas for saddling me with this mission.

“My name is Kendall Phillips,” she said. “This is my twin, Xavier. We help out at the Callahan ranches.”

“Not dressed like that, you don’t,” Sloan said. “Unless you’re the party planner.”

“That’s right,” Kendall said. “That’s what I am, the party planner.” She glared at him, not caring that he was disgustingly handsome even after sleeping on the ground all night. “You’re going to miss the party if you don’t all introduce yourselves, because I’m going to drive off in the only mode of vehicular transportation that can make it out here, with your stupid pot of coffee. And you won’t eat the hot bacon and eggs Fiona Callahan has waiting on the stove. You don’t really know what you’ll be missing,” she added. “I’ve done my job. The party planner’s jeep leaves in five seconds.”

“Sloan, Tighe, Dante, Falcon, Galen, Jace and Ashlyn,” Sloan said. “Since we need cover of darkness, we’d better get a move on.”

He had a nice voice. A little rough and gravelly, maybe, but she thought he’d be appealing if he relaxed.

He didn’t look as if he relaxed much. “Can’t they speak for themselves?” Kendall demanded.

“Kendall,” Xav said, laughing, still astride his horse, “cut them a break. They’re not aware of the game rules.”

“Yes, we are,” Ashlyn said to Xav. “We make the rules.”

“Great,” Kendall said. “Nothing but fun times ahead, I can tell.”

Sloan looked at her. “We appreciate you coming out here. We just weren’t expecting company.”

She nodded, backing off just a bit. “Let’s get you that coffee.”

He smiled, and the effect was devastatingly, hauntingly beautiful. As if he didn’t smile often, so when he did, the smile came from deep in his soul. Kendall caught her breath—and then remembered that when he’d held her ankle in his strong hand, capturing her, she was pretty certain his fingers had stroked her skin as he’d finally released her.

It had felt nice.

“Sorry about your skirt,” he told her. “I’d brush it off, but I think the dirt—”

“Don’t you dare,” Kendall said. The thought of him brushing her fanny with his big, rough hand alarmed her. It didn’t ring a long-forgotten bell of sexual desire at all. “I mean, thank you, it will be fine. Nothing the dry cleaners can’t handle.”

His dark eyes squinted at the corners, as if he might be trying to smile again but the action was just too rusty for the muscles to obey. He ran a hand through his messy dark hair, waiting for her to lead the way.

Kendall marched the procession to the jeep and the coffee, more than ready to hand the big man and his rowdy band off to Jonas.

Party planner, my foot. Barbie?

What an arrogant devil. Cute, though, I suppose.

If one likes their men rough and tough—and I don’t.

* * *

THEY FILED SILENTLY into their cousin’s house, somewhat awed by their surroundings. Their grandfather had said Rancho Diablo was five thousand acres, but it felt bigger. A couple of small oil derricks worked in the distance. The house was Tudor, almost British in style, supposedly Jeremiah Callahan’s dream house. Sloan couldn’t think of his family as having anything in common with these Callahans. He was pretty certain none of his family had ever been in anything like this joint. There were seven chimneys, for Pete’s sake. It was like a ghostly castle rising up off the New Mexico landscape, banked by dark spools of canyons.

A small, gray-haired woman stood at the door to greet them. She wore green rubber boots appropriate for walking in mud or to the barns and a pink apron with red hearts fashioned into the fabric. The apron looked as if it might have been made by small hands in a school project. Sloan thought it had probably been made by one of the many children he’d been warned were here, a veritable army all their own.

But on this cold early morning the ranch was silent except for workers he could see in the distance.

“Come in,” the woman said. “I’m your aunt Fiona. Welcome to Rancho Diablo.”

Sloan and his siblings went into a grand foyer in which a massive iron chandelier hung overhead. He glanced at the others, who shrugged at him.

“It’s not home,” Ashlyn said, “but it’s not bad, either.”

“Follow me,” Fiona said cheerfully. “I’m sure you’re cold and hungry. The chief says I can only keep you here an hour before you must depart.” They trailed after her into a large kitchen where the fragrance of eggs and coffee and toast permeated the room. Sloan’s stomach rumbled to get at the food.

He glanced at Kendall. Now that they were in a well-lit room, he realized the dirt mark on her skirt was huge. That spot was never coming out without professional assistance. Of course, the spot only made him realize what a really nice fanny she was packing.

“I have to admit that the chief pulled a shocker on me. Still, we’re always delighted to have family about. Rancho Diablo is a family place.” Fiona looked around the room with a smile. “In the future, Kendall will be your liaison. Anything you need, you let her know. Grab a plate and tell me your name as you fill up,” the older woman said. “This is dine and dash, I’m afraid. We’re just lucky it’s the darkest part of the year. It gives you a little more time.”

Sloan's gaze went to Kendall's. She raised a shoulder as if to say, "You blew your shot with me, dude. Don't look my way."

His brothers and sister wasted no time taking their plates and introducing themselves to Fiona and her husband, Burke, as they went by in the line. Sloan went over to talk to Kendall, hoping to make amends.

"Let me pay for cleaning the skirt."

She wrinkled her nose. "Don't worry about it."

"Stubborn."

"You should talk." She gestured toward the food. "One thing you'll learn about being around this branch of the Callahan family tree—if you're hungry, you'd best get to the front of the line. The men in this group eat. Last one in line gets a short stack."

He grinned. "I'm not used to eating a lot."

Her gaze floated down his body. "You're thin," she agreed. "All the same, this is the only food you'll get for a while."

"It's fine. There's always something to eat."

"Not unless you like snake." She grabbed a plate, handing it to him. "I don't eat snake, so I'm going to eat your share if you don't get a move on."

He didn't have to be told twice. He let Fiona fill his plate, murmured his thanks and seated himself at the long table with everyone else.

"This is very nice of you," Ashlyn said. "Thank you, Fiona."

"I don't understand," she replied, "why you can't just stay on this ranch." She studied the group. "Jonas! Why can't they stay here? Why is the chief complicating things? If we need protection, shouldn't they be here? We certainly have the room," Fiona muttered. "It's twenty-nine degrees outside, for heaven's sake, well below freezing."

Jonas pulled up a chair near his aunt, shrugged at his cousins. "If I had a dime for every time someone tried to figure out the chief, I'd be a wealthy man."

Fiona sniffed. "You are a wealthy man, don't be an ass. Now," she said, staring straight at Sloan, "wouldn't you rather stay here than out in the cold?"

He gulped his coffee. "Ma'am, I'm just following orders."

Fiona frowned. "Good soldier."

Kendall met his gaze, blinking. A good soldier probably wouldn't keep staring at the pretty ranch employee.

"It's okay," Ashlyn said hurriedly. "We're used to surviving in remote locations. We wouldn't feel right staying here. It's not our assignment."

"Assignment!" Fiona glanced around the table. "You're family! Burke's never going to rest knowing you're all out there sleeping on the hard ground. He's going to think he needs to join you."

With an under-her-breath murmur, Fiona cracked more eggs into a bowl. Sloan tried not to shovel food into his mouth. He was hungrier than he wanted to let on, and this was the best food he'd had in a long time.

Kendall brought a basket of muffins to the table, sliding in next to him.

"Chocolate chip or blueberry? Fresh-baked, so take your pick. Then pass the basket."

He did exactly as she told him, although with Kendall sitting next to him, his attention was on her instead of the muffins.

Okay, so she was hot. He'd seen hot before. The worst thing he could do was mess up a mission by thinking the woman next to him was hotter than the muffin he'd just deposited on his plate. He passed the basket, gulped some orange juice. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me, thank Fiona. She was suffering last night, worrying about your family out there in the cold." Kendall didn't look at him. "We baked muffins this morning to take her mind off

things. It was the only way I could calm her down. Anyway, we had no idea you were coming here until the chief showed up, so please feel free to share any details you'd like to."

Fiona stopped stirring to listen. Jonas glanced over with curiosity. Sam, Rafe, Creed, Pete and Judah had draped themselves over different spots in the kitchen, surreptitiously eyeing their new cousins. Sloan felt the men looking at them, trying not to stare, but the tension was thick as canyon dust.

"Sure," Ashlyn said. "I'm the youngest. I'd like to say it was hard being the youngest, and the only girl in a family of men, but I'm harder on them than they are on me." She smiled. "I'll do the other introductions, because my big brothers are modest and you won't get much out of them."

Polite laughter from the other Callahans met his sister's words. Sloan was just glad for the chance to eat, if Ashlyn was going to do the chatting. Kendall picked at a biscuit and sipped some water, and Sloan thought she seemed anxious about something. Then again, maybe she was one of those women who didn't eat much and ran on nervous energy. He gazed at her, trying to define her aura. She glanced at him, and he realized she'd thought he was staring at her. Which he was, but not because he was attracted to her or anything. Definitely not.

Although she was quite beautiful, in a polished, cosmopolitan sort of way. Silver water to his family's rough stone darkness.

"That's Galen over there," Ashlyn said. "He's the oldest, thirty-five. He's a hard-ass and a daredevil at times, but he's a great guy to have at your back."

"Easy, sis," Galen said. "They don't want a bio on us."

"It's not name, rank and serial number," Ashlyn retorted. "This is long-lost family."

Silence met Ashlyn's comment. Sloan cleared his throat.

"Jonas is eldest at Rancho Diablo," Kendall said. "He's my direct boss, and something of a nerd. He has a darling wife named Sabrina, whom he worked very hard to win."

Sloan examined the eldest Callahan, a little surprised when Jonas laughed easily at Kendall's words. The tension in the room evaporated just a bit.

"I don't know if I've won Sabrina yet," Jonas said, "but I'm trying."

Sloan thought that was an amazing sentiment. He hadn't had a serious relationship in so many years that he felt a little pang at the difference in their circumstances. What must it be like to live in this mansion, on this enormous ranch, with a wife and kids you adored?

"Falcon's thirty-three," Ashlyn continued. The brother in question inclined his head to Kendall, then looked around at his new cousins. "Falcon's a bit wacky. He's smart as hell. Can wear you out with minutia. Loves puzzles. Will go off for days when he's thinking about something." She grinned at him. "Isn't that right, Falcon?"

Falcon grunted at his sister, who was delighted with her teasing. Sloan squirmed a bit, knowing he was up next on the roll call. No one could ever be certain what Ashlyn was going to say.

"Sloan's my hero," Ashlyn told Kendall. "He's third in the family tree, thirty-one years of loner tough guy. Can go for months without talking, can't you, Sloan?" she asked, winking at him.

"Not months," Sloan said.

"Okay, he'll allot himself a word a day." Ashlyn shot him a gleeful look. "He's picked up a few decorations, is a really good shot with just about any gun on the planet—"

"That's enough," Sloan said. "They don't want to hear everything about me."

Beside him, he could feel Kendall's eyes on him. "I don't know," she said. "It can't hurt to know more about the family I'm in charge of. Every detail helps."

He looked at her. "In charge of?"

Kendall nodded. "Jonas has assigned me to seeing to your family's comfort. 'Liaison' really means 'take care of.'"

“Here’s the thing,” Sloan said, addressing his remarks to Jonas, but looking at Kendall, since he just couldn’t seem to help himself. “We don’t need anyone assigned to us for our comfort. No offense, Kendall.”

“None taken,” Kendall said. “I’m just following orders.”

He recognized his own words coming back to him. “We can survive no matter the terrain, and you wouldn’t see us for six months.”

“That’s kind of creepy, though a great talent,” Kendall said. “Jonas, this is your call.”

Sloan wasn’t certain how he felt about the tiny doll calling him creepy. He glanced around at his brothers and sister, puzzled.

“It is creepy,” Falcon said. “I mean, when you think about it, on the surface.”

Ashlyn laughed. “Actually, it’s not creepy to Sloan. He likes roughing it. When we were kids—”

Sloan put down his napkin and pushed back his chair. “Fiona, thank you kindly for breakfast. It was delicious.”

His brothers nodded in agreement.

“Jonas, can I talk to you? Privately?” Sloan asked.

“Sure,” Jonas said.

Kendall watched the two big men go off together. “Well,” she said, “Mr. Stoic certainly wants to talk now.”

Ashlyn craned her head to stare after Sloan, who’d cornered Jonas in the den. “He’s going to be hard to drag in from the cold. Me, I’m never going to pass up delicious food.”

Fiona smiled at her. “I’ll put some meat on your bones.”

Kendall laughed at Ashlyn’s perplexed expression. “Fiona wants to put meat on everyone’s bones.”

“Okay,” Ashlyn said. “If you think you can, I won’t say no.”

“I won’t, either.” One of the Callahans who hadn’t gotten an introduction yet reached across the table to shake Kendall’s hand. “I’m Jace. Sorry about my brother’s rudeness. He’s pretty much the lone wolf in the family.”

Kendall sneaked a peek into the den at the lone wolf. As wolves went, Sloan wasn’t all that feral. In fact, he was darn handsome, even better than she’d originally realized, now that she could see him in good light. “Hi, Jace. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Jace is our earth soul,” Ashlyn said. “He’s about to hit the big three-o, so he spends a fair amount of time with the ladies.”

“Ash,” Jace said, “it’s all friendly. Although, if you have a sister, Kendall…”

Everyone laughed at Jace’s obvious hint to Kendall. She felt herself blush a bit.

“No sister. Sorry. It’s just me and three brothers. You’ll meet them soon enough.”

“Your twin, Xavier, came out to our campsite with you this morning,” Ashlyn said.

Kendall nodded. “And then there’s Gage and Shaman. They’re around here somewhere, probably out feeding the horses at this hour.”

“Don’t mind Sloan.” Another Callahan reached over to offer his hand. “He’s a little harder to get to know than the rest of us. I’m Tighe, by the way, and Dante here is my twin.”

Hot as the dickens, both of them. Kendall shook their hands, ignoring the words about not minding Sloan. Why should she? She didn’t know any of them. Getting bent out of shape about Sloan’s obvious prickliness would be unprofessional.

“Wild at heart,” Ashlyn said, pointing her fork at Tighe, “will never settle down. A shame, because he’d make a great husband for some lucky woman, and that’s not just a sister’s pride talking.”

Kendall smiled at Tighe. “Be warned that men seem to drop like flies around here, if you’re really determined to hang on to your bachelor status. Fiona has a major matchmaking streak going.”

Tighe went a little pale. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And Dante,” Ashlyn said, “let’s just say that he’s the head of mischief in our family. Great to have at your side in a fight, but isn’t above letting you sweat it out, either. And if you don’t like snakes or other creepy-crawlies, don’t tell him. He’ll put them in your bed just to give you a little fright.”

Kendall leveled round eyes on Dante. “Remember I hold the key to the breakfasts, Dante.”

He laughed. “You’re safe.”

Sloan slid back into the seat next to her.

“Get it all worked out?” Kendall asked.

He looked at her. “Jonas has pointed out a few things I was overlooking.”

Kendall smiled. “So you’re stuck with me.”

His lips twisted. “It appears that way.”

“I won’t wear any more white skirts around you.” Kendall sipped her coffee, her expression innocent.

“You’ll stay in good enough condition as long as you don’t sneak up on me,” Sloan said.

“I’ll wear a bell around my neck,” Kendall said, and Ashlyn said, “That won’t be necessary. Now that you’ve caught Sloan napping, you’ll never get within a hundred feet of him again without him knowing.”

Annoyance crossed Sloan’s face. “I wasn’t expecting a woman to sneak into camp.”

His brothers stared at him. Sloan looked a bit edgy. Kendall went back to picking at her food, not certain why Sloan didn’t seem to like her. But he didn’t, that was clear as day. Jonas glanced her way, shrugging.

There was nothing that could be done about it. They were all going to have to get along, one big happy family, until whatever reason these new Callahans had been sent here no longer existed.

“It’s so nice to meet all of you,” Kendall said politely. “Welcome to Rancho Diablo.” She went to help Fiona clean the kitchen. This was just a job, and if she was a pain in Sloan’s hiney for some reason, then the feeling was certainly mutual.

Chapter Three

Two days later, Kendall stood at the far end of Rancho Diablo, snapping photos of the location where Jonas wanted his new bunkhouse. It was to be a big one, with almost twenty rooms. Two stories high. It would be built well away from the main house, to give everyone a bit more space. With five thousand acres, Jonas had the land to spread out, but this project was big, even by Callahan standards. It was almost an apartment complex, and Kendall looked forward to helping decorate the abode.

Gazing to the west, she noticed something strange—seven stones placed in a circle near the same location where the bunkhouse was planned. She checked her notes again, making certain she had the correct aerial photographs and surveyor’s map, before realizing that this was exactly where Sloan had been sleeping. The large gray-white rocks were about fifty yards away.

A shadow crossed her, briefly blocking the sun on the already cold November day. A tingle touched her skin. She put the camera back up to her face to snap another photo, feeling suddenly nervous about being this far from the main house. She knew the Callahan cousins might be around here somewhere. Still, something made her feel...uncomfortable.

She heard a noise that sounded much like a rock dropping behind her. But the area where she stood was dotted with little more than the odd cactus. Possibly a bird had landed and then flown away.

No. The shadow had been too large to be a cloud or even a bird. Goose pimples rose on her arms, and she began to walk quickly toward the jeep. Something jumped out of nowhere, ramming the jeep as she got in. It slashed at her calf and Kendall shrieked, tossing her camera into the passenger seat and jamming her keys into the ignition. Gunning the engine, she shot away from the stone ring, spraying sand and dirt in her retreat, her only thought to get back to the ranch.

“Whoa!” Sloan shouted. She’d nearly run him over as he was leaving the main house. Kendall jammed the jeep into Park and jumped out into his arms.

“Uh, Barbie,” Sloan said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Kendall shivered, laying her head against his chest for just a second as she caught her breath. “I don’t know.”

“Good,” Sloan said. He rubbed her back. “Nice to know you’re not just trying to run me down.”

She pulled away, his joke fortifying her. “If you ever call me Barbie again, I will stab you with the nearest sharp object. And you won’t like it.”

“I know.” He laughed, setting her away from him. “I’ve got to go, beautiful. Are you going to be all right?”

She took a deep breath. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look like you’re fine.” He gazed at her closely. “What the hell happened?”

“There was something there.” Kendall tried to remember, forcing herself to think beyond her panic. “I don’t know. There was a shadow, and then...something attacked the jeep.” She glanced down at her leg.

Sloan knelt to look at her calf, squinting as he ran a gentle hand along her bare skin. “Let’s get you inside where I can see it better.”

Kendall’s teeth began a nervous staccato chatter. “You’re not supposed to be here in daylight. You’d better go.”

“We’re not bats,” he said wryly. “Besides, apparently Fiona worked her magic on the chief. We’re staying in the bunkhouse now.”

“Here?” Kendall blinked. “You’re not going to be the secret Callahans anymore?”

He nodded. “Come on. More walking, less chat. I’ll explain everything when we get inside.”

“You’re bossy.” She followed until he scooped her into his arms, which she started to protest, until she realized she was shaking and had lost a shoe. “I’m not helpless.”

“I know. Humor me.”

He was just like Jonas. “I don’t understand. What could Fiona possibly have said that changed things with Running Bear?” Kendall tried not to focus on how strong Sloan was, and the fact that she could feel impressive muscles in the arms wrapped tightly around her.

“Let’s worry about your leg.” He took her inside the house, and she didn’t complain anymore, feeling a bit woozy.

“What happened?” Fiona asked, coming over with Jonas to look at her leg.

“I don’t know exactly.” Kendall leaned in to see what everyone was staring at as Sloan laid her carefully on the sofa. He tried to lean her back against the pillows and she waved him away. “Oh, my. That is not pretty.”

“What got you?” Sloan asked, peering closely at her skin.

She wasn’t sure she liked being the object of so much of his attention. “I’m not sure. It happened so fast.”

Sloan looked up at Jonas. “Can you call my brother Galen? We might as well let the doctor take a look at this.” He smiled. “He’s actually a pretty good medicine man.”

There was a good deal of blood running down her leg. Kendall glanced at Fiona. “May I borrow a towel, please? I don’t want to bleed on the sofa.”

“You poor thing!” Fiona exclaimed, running to fetch one as Jonas went to yell for Galen.

“Jonas is a doctor. He can figure out if anything is wrong.” Kendall looked closely at her leg, and felt a little faint seeing her own blood. There was so much. She’d thought perhaps it was a scratch, but now realized the tear was long and angry.

“Jonas is a cardiac guy,” Sloan said. “Galen is an internist. And a spirit healer, by the way.”

Kendall sniffed. “There is nothing wrong with my spirit. Just my pride. I must have scraped myself when I jumped in the jeep.”

Jonas came back with Galen, and Fiona handed him a thick fluffy towel and some antiseptic. Galen smiled reassuringly at Kendall before bending to examine her leg.

“Sloan,” Galen said, peering at the wound.

Sloan looked at Kendall, who frowned back at him with some suspicion. “I don’t think so,” he said to Galen.

Galen looked at Kendall’s leg again. “Do it.”

Sloan squatted, placed his palms on either side of the wound.

“What’s he doing?” Kendall demanded, glancing at Jonas, who shrugged.

“Energy transfer,” Galen said helpfully, as if she’d know what that meant. “A little touch therapy in this case. It won’t take long.”

She wasn’t sure she liked having Sloan’s slightly rough palms on her calf and knee. His big hands surrounded the injury without touching it. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath.

“It’s really not that big a deal,” Kendall said. “A bandage ought to do the trick. Maybe a little iodine or something.” She looked at Fiona helplessly, suddenly afraid. For whatever reason, the two brothers acted as if her injury was so serious. “Could have been a wolf, I guess,” she said slowly, knowing very well that something huge had hit the jeep. Something that had meant to harm her.

A little of the shock began to wear off as Sloan cupped her ankle, sliding his hands back up her calf, his eyes still closed. “Whatever it was, it was big, though I’m not trying to exaggerate.” Sloan’s palms warmed her, and she could have sworn she felt pulses of electricity emitting from him into her skin. Even deeper, into her muscles.

His eyes opened, and she found herself gazing into them. “What is it?” she asked.

“Not a thing,” Sloan said. “Everything is fine. A little rest will make you feel a lot better. Rest. You will wake up soon, and all will be well.” He slowly moved his hand in a circular motion in front of her face, and that was the last thing Kendall remembered.

* * *

“I KNOW IT’S A HUMAN attack, but what else can you discern?” Galen asked as Sloan carefully eased Kendall’s head back onto a pillow so she could sleep comfortably. He estimated that between the shock and the blood loss, the hypnosis might keep her out for an hour—hopefully long enough to get her to the hospital.

“This is a knife injury.” Sloan pointed to specific areas of Kendall’s leg. “As Galen said, this wasn’t done by an animal or even by Kendall scraping herself on something on the jeep. You can sense the dark power radiating here and here,” he said, pointing for Jonas’s and Fiona’s benefit. “My guess is that they were planning to take her hostage.”

It bothered him to say that. Kendall was a free spirit. And delicate. Maybe too delicate to survive on this ranch now.

“How can you tell all that just from looking at her leg?” Jonas demanded.

Sloan shrugged. “It’s in between what she said and what she didn’t say happened. What she remembers and what her subconscious recalls. Put your hands here,” he told Jonas, “and you can feel more. Notice the smooth cut in the skin, which indicates a sharp edge of some kind. Very likely a knife. But here, where her skin is torn, you’ll note a slashing and tearing effect. Jagged. As you probably know, that has the markings of a military weapon. Something a commando might carry.”

Jonas looked at him. “And the rest of the oogie-boogie?”

Sloan smiled. “Close your eyes. See what you see.”

Though he appeared doubtful, Jonas placed his hands where Sloan had, and closed his eyes.

He opened them after a moment, shaking his head. “I don’t see anything. I feel warmth in her skin, like infection might be threatening.”

Sloan nodded. “That, too. You’ll need to ascertain when she had her last tetanus shot. Galen can handle the stitch-up and bandaging.”

He stood, not wanting any part of stitching up Kendall. A woman like her who wore figure-hugging suits and sky-high, parrot-colored heels probably wouldn’t be pleased with the cosmetic results, though Galen was very good with a needle.

Galen wrapped Kendall's leg efficiently. "I don't want to do it," he said. "She's not going to thank whoever does the surgery."

Sloan nodded. "Wise decision." He looked at Jonas. "You should take her to your local hospital, but be prepared to answer questions, based on the severity of the injury."

Jonas nodded. "I can take her."

"Oh, my," Fiona said. "I don't think anyone knew that the danger was this close. Poor Kendall!"

Sloan looked at the sleeping woman and her now-bandaged leg. Blood would soak through fast enough. Kendall would likely be annoyed when she awakened; it didn't take someone skilled in touch therapy to sense the general impatience and suffer-no-fools sentiment in her personality. And she was brave as hell for going through what had happened without panicking.

"I'll come with you," Sloan told his cousin. "Just in case."

"Just in case what?" Jonas said. "This is Kendall. She's gentle as a summer day."

Sloan smiled. "You want to be the only one around when she wakes up at a hospital with stitches in her pretty leg?"

Jonas looked a bit unhappy. "I guess not."

"Neither would I." Sloan picked Kendall up gently, placing her against his chest and carrying her outside. He settled her carefully in the seat of the sedan Jonas had brought around. They got in and shut the doors.

"So you're really riding along to make sure nothing else happens to her," Jonas said. "You're certain of your kidnapping theory, aren't you?"

He was surprised his cousin had picked up more than he said. "I think she's an easy target."

"You don't know Kendall very well."

This was true. "Her size, her general innocence, lends your employee a vulnerable air."

Jonas sped onto the main road. "She's not very vulnerable."

But she wasn't prepared for whatever was determined to get to the Callahans, either. "She's vulnerable," Sloan said, "and she's not as sweet as you're painting her. I didn't see you raising your hand to stitch her up."

Jonas smiled. "True."

"So don't try to sell me on your employee," Sloan said, "because I'm not buying."

"Just checking," Jonas said.

Sloan was glad to see that they were soon pulling into a community hospital parking lot. "I'll stay outside."

Jonas got out, indicating he needed a wheelchair and assistance from the emergency staff. "You sure?"

"Yeah." Sloan looked at Kendall as she was gently placed into the wheelchair. "Good luck."

Jonas grimaced and went off. Sloan glanced around the hospital grounds, looking for shadows. He figured one would be there somewhere. Whoever attacked Kendall knew they'd gotten in a good hit; they'd be expecting her to show up at the E.R. It was another reason he hadn't pressed Galen to do the stitch-up. Sloan wanted to get a look at whoever was planted at the ranch, before they realized the Diablo Callahans had reinforcements. He hoped to get the jump on them.

He pulled his hat down low and tugged his bandanna up a little more around his neck, and waited.

Chapter Four

Kendall woke up, not happy with Callahans in general, whether Rancho Diablo Callahans or the Callahan cousins. Jonas and Sloan were both on her bad list. "Ouch."

"Only nine stitches," Jonas told her.

"Nine?" She lifted her knee to peer at her calf. "Guess I'm lucky." Fear seeped back into her as she remembered the rush of something dark and sinister coming at her...

“You’re lucky.” Jonas sat next to her on the hospital gurney. “No more hanging out alone for you.”

“What do you mean?” Kendall was outraged. “You sound like Sloan. Where is he?” She glanced around. “I have something to discuss with him. Specifically, that hypnotism thing he pulled on me. Like I’m a baby that needs a nap to calm down.”

Jonas grinned. “He’s in the parking lot.”

“Doing what?” She glared at Jonas.

“Waiting on you. Let’s go.” He helped Kendall off the gurney and walked her slowly outside.

Sloan was near the E.R. doors, just as Jonas had said. He looked as if he was on security detail, alert, watchful and dangerous—and Kendall realized Sloan was looking for something. Someone.

“You don’t think it was an accident, do you?” She got in the car, and Sloan slid in next to her.

“No. How’s the leg?”

It hurt. “Never mind. I’ll live.” She moved to get a bit more comfortable on the seat, and Sloan pulled her leg across his lap.

“Keep it up to help the swelling,” Sloan said.

She wanted to argue, but it did feel better to have her leg elevated. His fingers on her ankle, keeping her leg steady, were warm and comforting. Kendall sighed as a wave of tiredness swept over her. “Look, Callahan, you and I are going to have words in the very near future.”

He smiled, and she closed her eyes. He didn’t seem as worried as he should be about her temper. It was a strange thing. She was in charge of a global company that made and shipped large construction equipment. Her phone rang constantly with business deals. But Sloan seemed to think she was a helpless woman.

I’ve got a lot to discuss with that handsome rebel. Male chauvinists are not an attractive species.

But right now, he seemed pretty nice. His hand felt good on her ankle, and she knew she should chew his butt, but for some reason, her leg seemed to hurt less now that he was touching her.

I’ll seriously bawl him out tomorrow.

Jonas, too.

* * *

THE MEETING THAT NIGHT was held in the immense and beautiful upstairs library at Rancho Diablo, apparently a Callahan tradition. Sloan sat on a leather sofa, leaning back, his mind wandering. He couldn’t stop thinking about Kendall, worrying about her, though he doubted she would appreciate his concern. And he was more apprehensive than he’d let on. Although he’d vigilantly studied the E.R. parking lot, he hadn’t seen one thing, one person, that raised his radar.

But he felt a dark presence nearby. Hidden. Watching.

He feared the mercenaries who were now on Callahan land weren’t newbies to the game. Unlike the last merc who’d tried to take his cousins down, whatever was here now was serious. Their grandfather had warned of three—which meant the enemy could gather a lot of intel while husbanding their resources and not stretching too thin.

Sloan’s gut cramped. Kendall had been fortunate.

“I’ll let Sloan fill you in on what happened,” Jonas told the roomful of men and Ashlyn.

Sloan put down his crystal glass. “As you know, Fiona and our grandfather have decided we should stick together. I’m not sure about that,” he said. “With the attack on Kendall, I feel pretty certain she was an intended kidnapping victim. I’ll go with the general vote on whether we go undercover or remain on the ranch.”

He knew everyone in the room had the same thing on their minds: How best to protect the whole family?

“We don’t know what we’re dealing with,” Falcon said. “Kidnappings are a concern.”

“Anything could happen—not to scare the hell out of you,” Galen said.

Sloan saw his six Callahan cousins absorb this. They had families here. His side didn't have skin in the game—no children, no wives. They could pick up and leave tomorrow, and this would have just been a nice vacation for them.

Except Kendall. She needed a bodyguard, in his opinion. She was tough, but a tiny woman like her was no match for a merc. The spirits had been on her side today.

The library doors opened. Chief Running Bear walked in, and everyone stood. Sam handed him a cut crystal tumbler of whiskey.

They all settled into the leather seats. Their grandfather set his glass on a table, his dark face serious. "Everything has changed."

Sloan cast a glance at his cousins. They were serious, alert. Listening.

The chief looked at all of them. "With this direct attack on the ranch, we must change the enemy's focus."

"What are you suggesting, Chief?" Jonas asked.

"Divide and conquer." The old man studied the people in the room, assessing their reaction to his words. He looked grave. "The situation is dangerous. The tactic must meet the moment. All Jeremiah's children and grandchildren must leave the ranch."

Sloan's cousins didn't say a word. He figured that had to be a huge bombshell dropped on them. But he also saw where the chief was going. With no one here, the mercs' purpose was essentially wasted. They were never going to find the Callahan parents; Molly and Jeremiah would never be given up by their sons.

Unless a child was kidnapped. All bets were off if children were involved in a ransom situation. And that was the utmost worry now on the chief's mind, Sloan felt certain, or his grandfather wouldn't have suggested such a radical tactic.

With sympathy, he met Jonas's gaze. But there was nothing Sloan could say. No one had expected the situation to get this dangerous so fast.

"Some can go to Dark Diablo. There's room there for many," the chief said. "Others can go to Hell's Colony. Kendall and her brothers have offered their compound, which she says is large and safe. There's also transport for the children, and a staff to assist with the transition.

"I told her we were looking for a place for the children to go to school, for maybe the next half year. I didn't mention the mercenaries. When she's over the shock of what happened today, perhaps more can be explained. For now, she believes we're looking for a place where the children can also go to school. I was prepared to consider someplace in Canada, but Kendall has convinced me that, between the two locations, the family will be comfortable."

Sloan glanced around at his brothers and sister. Their grandfather's plan meant his family could all go back to their own homes. He would miss spending time with them. He'd thought they would be here longer, have more time together.

The chief looked directly at him. "You will stay here, Sloan, to keep an eye on the ranch. All of you, to watch over the Diablos, and the land."

They all glanced at each other, surprised.

"It's a lot of people to uproot," Sloan said, "much to change. The children's education, their friends." He didn't know why he was speaking up. The chief's plan was clear and concise, his preeminent goal to get the children and women out of the line of fire. Sloan got it—the plan was wise, strategic. Still, he understood how hard this would be on the families.

As a military operative, he'd lived alone for many years. Loneliness was part of the deal. But not for children.

"It's true," the chief said. "But there is no other way. There were no women, no children, before, but now there are many targets. I would not lose any of my family. Or my friends."

The chief meant Kendall. Sloan felt himself tense.

“Well,” Jonas said, “there are two silver linings here. We have places to go, fortunately, because the Hilton would get expensive for as many of us as there are.”

His brothers laughed, the tension lightening just a bit. There was, of course, no Hilton in Diablo, New Mexico.

“And thankfully, we have backup,” he added, looking at Sloan.

After a long moment, Sloan nodded. For him, the mission had not changed all that much.

But it had become more personal than before.

* * *

KENDALL EYED SLOAN when he entered her room upstairs in the main house. “I have no makeup on,” she said, “and I’m just vain enough that it matters. Plus I haven’t showered. And I’m sulking because I’m stuck in here. So you’ve been warned.” Her leg was atop a pillow, and she wore a tiny tank top and some heart-dotted shorts for comfort.

Sloan thought she looked sexy as hell.

He sat in the wingback chair next to the window. Not too close. “You got lucky.”

“I guess.” She winced, not wanting to dwell on the attack. “Anyway, just for the record, I knew you did something to put me to sleep. Don’t do it again. I’m no fainting female who needs to be protected from the scary monsters.”

He considered her. “You’re very brave.”

“It has nothing to do with bravery,” Kendall said, “which is the part that scares me. I just reacted. But what if I’d frozen?”

She’d be dead or kidnapped. Sloan didn’t mention that. Kendall would figure it out in time.

“So what was the meeting about? I heard a lot of footsteps on the stairs.”

He thought her blond hair, which was pulled up into a ponytail, would probably be soft as a bird’s wing if he ever got to touch it. “Jonas should probably be the one to tell you.”

“You go ahead and tell me, soldier. My curiosity is killing me.”

She was just the type of woman who would always want to have all the information. “Not my job, beautiful.”

She stared at him. “Are you patronizing me?”

“Stating a fact. You are beautiful. The truth should not be an intimidating thing.”

“Oh.” She considered him for a moment. “That was pretty smooth for a guy who’s supposed to be a loner.”

He shrugged.

“Anyway, back to the subject matter,” Kendall said. “What happened in the meeting?”

“I think,” Sloan said, “change is in the wind.”

“Because of what happened to me.”

He inclined his head.

“Great.” She sighed. “Sloan, I never got a good look at whatever it was. I feel kind of silly, if everybody’s going to get upset about what happened, when it could have been...” She didn’t know how to finish. It had been huge, and intending harm. New Mexico was fairly new to her, though she’d learned a lot about it in the year she’d worked for Jonas. “My mind keeps stupidly thinking bear, and yet I know it wasn’t that. There are none around here.”

“It was a human,” Sloan said, “and the intent was to take you, hold you for information. Your subconsciousness recognizes this.”

Kendall blinked. “I don’t have any information. Personal family stuff is never discussed with me.”

“Ransom,” Sloan offered. “Information for your freedom.”

That made sense. She hated it, though, hated being party to someone—something—that threatened the Callahans. “So now what?”

“Everyone will move. Decamp to other places.” He stood. “Can I get you a book? Cookies? Fiona is baking chocolate chip cookies, and I’m going to grab some on my way out.”

She frowned at him. “What the hell does ‘decamp’ mean? You mean the whole family?”

“Right. To your compound, and to Dark Diablo. I believe my cousins have gone home to instruct their wives to pack up the children.”

“Well, I did offer the compound to the chief when he told me he needed a vacation home for the clan,” Kendall said, “but I didn’t realize he meant no one would be here. That means me, too?”

He nodded. “Probably you especially.”

“And you?” Her gaze met his.

“I’ll likely sleep in your bed,” Sloan teased, trying to get into her space just a little, to bedevil her, get her mind off the danger the Callahans—and her own family—were in.

And to get his mind off her, too.

“This bed.” She sniffed. “If you like lace and flowers.”

“I’ll sleep very well.”

A reluctant smile touched her lips. “Somehow I don’t think you’re a lace and flowers kind of guy.”

He shrugged. “It isn’t forever.”

Could be forever. There was no way of knowing.

“Take care of yourself,” he added.

“What does that mean? You sound like we’re moving out immediately.”

He went to the door. “You are. In the morning. The danger is here and you have to get away from it.”

Sloan walked out, not wanting to think about how quiet the ranch would be without the children, without all the Callahans, and most of all, without the blonde who loved yanking his chain.

The fact that he might not see her very much—or ever again—after she left Rancho Diablo bothered him.

* * *

KENDALL ACCEPTED with a grateful smile the plate of cookies Fiona gave her. “You’re an angel. Thank you so much. I really don’t know what I would do without your cheery face right now.” She hated to think that Fiona would be leaving the ranch. Fiona and Burke were the heart of Rancho Diablo, in Kendall’s mind. They were always there, to comfort, to give a warm word of wisdom, perhaps just an encouraging smile. “Are you going to Dark Diablo or our house in Hell’s Colony?”

“I’m staying right here.” Fiona sat in the same wingback chair Sloan had been sitting in not forty minutes ago. “Burke and I have too much work to do.”

“Did you tell Jonas?”

Fiona nodded, sipped her cup of hot tea. “He’s not happy. But I’m the aunt. I get to do what I want at my age. Anyway, I’m in no danger.” She smiled at Kendall. “How’s the leg?”

“Sore. But not as sore as my ego.” Kendall wouldn’t admit the feeling of helplessness she had from the attack. It was almost as if part of her confidence had been stolen. Her soul.

Fiona nodded. “Perfectly normal. Takes a while to pass.”

“I’m not a good victim. Especially when I don’t know what it was.” Kendall considered Fiona. The wiry Callahan aunt sat smiling, as if nothing was wrong. But she had to be worried sick. “You’re trying to keep my mind off what’s going on.”

Fiona shrugged. “Seems to me we can’t do anything but wait.”

“I don’t wait well.”

“Neither do I. Still, you’ll heal. Your leg, your heart.” Fiona set her teacup in its saucer on the tiny side table. “Where will you go?”

Sloan would be here. There'd be plenty of Callahans on the premises. And Fiona and Burke. "I'm staying right here. I can work from my room. No one will come into this house. I'm safe as a princess in an ivory tower. And you need another female on the ranch to talk to."

Fiona stood. "Good luck telling Jonas. He'll read you the riot act and tell you that as his employee, you have to go. That your insurance is too high to run such a risk. And that he wants you directing the traffic flow of tiny bodies at your compound."

Kendall smiled. "There's an army of people at Hell's Colony who will be delighted to have small feet running around." In fact, it just might bring her mother and new husband home from the perpetual honeymoon they'd been on, leaving Kendall, Xav, Shaman and Gage to manage the compound and Gil Phillips, Inc.

"You know, Fiona, our business is moving large equipment in our cargo planes. Worldwide. If we ever needed to, we could always take the family out of the country, if this goes on for a while."

She nodded. "I pray the day never comes. Surely the danger is just here at this ranch."

Who knew what they were dealing with? Kendall certainly didn't. "Is Sloan still downstairs?"

"Last I saw." Fiona got up, carrying her teacup with her. "Do you need to talk to him?"

Kendall nodded. "Yes, thank you. If you don't mind asking him to come back up for just a minute."

"I'll see you in the morning. Feel better!" She smiled at Kendall. "I don't mind telling you that I'll be glad to have another female on the ranch."

"I suppose Ashlyn will be around somewhere," Kendall said.

"I don't know. We all do what the chief tells us. Well, everyone but you and me." Laughing, Fiona left.

A moment later, Kendall heard Sloan's footsteps on the landing. He poked his head into the room.

She frowned. "Come in, please. Shut the door."

He did, and perched on the arm of the chair. "Talk, Blondie."

"My name is Kendall. Not Barbie, not Blondie."

"Gotcha." He smiled, slow and dangerous, a reminder that she didn't really know this man she was about to give all of her trust.

Kendall knew that, but she'd never run from a fight. "Sloan, after all the Callahans leave in the morning, I want you to take me somewhere."

"Anywhere. Name it."

"The spot near the canyon, where the new bunkhouse will be."

He gave her a long look. "You don't have to face it so soon. Give yourself some time."

"I've lived a long time without you advising me. Either you take me or I'll go by myself."

"You can't drive with those stitches."

"Let me tell you something about me that you don't know. I would bounce on one of the Callahan kids' pogo sticks to get back there if I have to. It's my job, and I will do it."

"Whatever you say."

"Jonas won't like it."

"It's all right. I'll play chauffeur. You rest."

She closed her eyes, suddenly tired. "Thank you."

She felt him near her bed, felt him peek at the bandage covering her stitches, run a palm over her calf, testing for changes in her skin temperature.

"Don't you dare pull any of that mumbo-jumbo stuff on me again," Kendall said. "I'm going to read a book, and I don't want to go to sleep. I'm still teed off with you."

He sat on the edge of her bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. She wished she could open her eyes to glare at him, but she was just so darn tired.

"Rest," he said, and she said, "You're annoying. Has anyone ever told you that?"

But when Sloan touched his palm to her cheek, she relaxed against his hand, drawing in his strength.

It felt good to have someone take care of her just for a moment. Not Kendall against the world... Right now, she let Sloan chase the unspoken fear away.

Tomorrow I'll be strong again.

Chapter Five

Close, close. The wolf was so close, its eyes fierce with anger and malice. It wanted his soul, wanted his lifeblood. Sloan jerked awake, his heart thundering.

He cursed under his breath when he realized he'd fallen asleep in Kendall's bed, against the headboard, her head against his chest, her long blond ponytail trailing to his abdomen.

This was bad. In the military, snipers didn't allow emotions to get in the way of the job.

His emotions were definitely becoming involved. He had to stop it from happening.

Carefully, he disengaged himself from Kendall, laying her slowly back in her bed. God, she was soft. So feminine. She acted so brave, but what had happened had wounded her, revealing the vulnerability she hid so well.

He went downstairs, knowing he had to make sure—damn sure—his unfortunate lapse didn't endanger his senses, his assignment, or her.

"Hey." Jonas filled up a coffee mug, slid it his way. "Let's talk, cousin."

Sloan followed him into a large den filled with dark brown leather furniture and a huge TV. Toys were stacked in a playpen in the corner. Clearly, this room was one of the children's hangouts, no doubt because of its proximity to Fiona's kitchen. Jonas put a tray stacked with his aunt's fresh-baked cookies on the coffee table in front of them. Sloan perched on a chair, wanting a direct face-to-face with his cousin.

"We pull out at 0500. Cover of darkness is essential," Jonas said. "We hope that whoever might be spying on the ranch won't see us leave."

"Good idea."

"We'll be using a series of vehicles. There'll be too many of us to follow, if they should see us leave. As the chief said, divide and conquer."

"Wise strategy." Sloan nodded.

"Some of us will pass around Diablo, double back here. Rafe has the jet ready. Some of the children and wives will travel on it to Hell's Colony. The vehicles we plan to leave in town. I'm asking you to get them back here when you can."

"No problem."

"I'll show you the firearms we have on the ranch. The chief knows where everything else is. Money. Whatever."

Sloan blinked. "We won't need money."

"Someone has to run the ranch."

"Fiona will be here. And Kendall is your employee, right?"

Jonas nodded. "But we all agree we'd feel better with a Callahan heir handling ranch transactions. I don't mean grocery store bills and things that affect the household—Fiona and Burke have been doing that for years. I'm talking about whatever needs to be done to make certain this ranch is kept secure."

"I understand." Jonas wanted them to have whatever they needed to protect the houses, livestock and the wild Diablo mustangs.

"There's a cache of silver in the basement. It has a specific purpose." Jonas looked at him. "You can get the rest of the info on that from the chief. That's just between you and me, cousin."

Sloan nodded again.

Jonas gave him a hard stare. “I also charge you with convincing Kendall to eventually come to Hell’s Colony. I know she won’t leave the ranch now, but that was the drugs talking. It’s important that she not be here. She could have been taken, or worse. It’s not safe for her.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“If you have to hypnotize her again, do it.”

Sloan shook his head. “She asked me not to. Actually,” he said, “she didn’t ask me. It was more like she commanded me never to do it again.” The memory of her ragging him about it made him smile. She refused to admit that she’d been in shock and pain, and relaxing helped. He admired the fact that she would choose pain over giving up any independence. “I can’t do it. She’s not a willing subject.”

“She’s not a willing subject about anything. Why do I always have stubborn women around me?” Jonas asked. But the question was rhetorical, Sloan knew. Jonas was crazy about Fiona, about his wife, Sabrina, who was rumored to have a very stubborn streak, and even Kendall.

“Strong men draw strong women,” Sloan said.

“Lovely. Just once I’d like to have a ‘Yes, Jonas’ type of female in my life.” He got up to pace, so Sloan reached for a cookie, biting into it with pleasure. The simple pleasure of a home-baked cookie was something he hadn’t had in years. Not since—

“Sloan.”

“Yes.” He straightened, focusing on Jonas again. “I’m listening.”

“Whatever you do, you can’t let Kendall run you around.”

Sloan hesitated. “Meaning?”

“She’s bossy. She thinks she can handle herself. And handle anything. The truth is, she doesn’t really know much about what’s been happening here over the past four years. She doesn’t know much about the family.” Jonas paced some more, his body darkly silhouetted in front of the huge window where the moon shone into the den, touching the furnishings with dim light. “She knows a little, but not enough to convince herself she can’t go about her duties the way she used to. I know Kendall. She’ll decide she imagined the whole thing, that she hurt herself on the jeep. Like maybe a big bird flew over and startled her or something. The next thing you know, she’ll be back out there, making plans for the new bunkhouse.”

Sloan swallowed. “I’ll get her out to Hell’s Colony somehow.” It would be for the best.

He looked at Jonas. “I think I have an answer to your problem.”

“I would love to hear it,” Jonas replied, appearing relieved. “Please share.”

“Fire her,” Sloan said.

Jonas looked stunned. Then he laughed. “That’s perfect.”

Sloan felt bad, but saving Kendall from Kendall was paramount.

“Wish I’d thought of it.” He got up, slapped Sloan on the back. “I’ll leave you to take care of that tomorrow morning, after we’re gone, cousin.”

Jonas walked out. Sloan grimaced, the delicious cookie no longer appealing.

It was going to be a long night. The dream wolf had long been his nocturnal companion, a shadowy fear that kept peace at bay and shredded his sleep.

But he’d rather face the wolf than the woman who was going to be none too happy when he told her that her services were no longer required.

* * *

“WHAT?” Kendall exclaimed in a shriek. She glared at Sloan. “What do you mean, I’m fired?”

Damn Jonas for leaving this mission to him. Sloan leaned against the wall in Kendall’s room and shrugged—although the last thing he felt was calm and uncaring.

“Fired. Out of work.”

Her blue eyes narrowed on him. “You did this.”

He sighed. “I did.”

Kendall threw the nearest thing that could be used as a projectile, which happened to be her hairbrush, since he'd caught her in the middle of trying to fix herself for the day. The brush bounced off the wall, not one inch from his face. "I'll have you know my services command hundreds of thousands of dollars. If I call up any of the corporations who've tried to lure me away from Gil Phillips, Inc., in the past year, I'll have a position in thirty minutes, and a salary that would make your head swim."

He nodded. "Your right to do so."

She shot a heart-decorated flip-flop at him, followed by its mate. They both missed, but she was getting warmed up, and Sloan figured the next time she'd peg him.

"Get out."

"I'm under orders to get you to Hell's Colony."

"Orders? I've been fired. I don't take orders from Jonas Callahan anymore, that supercilious ass." She hopped out of the bed, her face creasing with pain as she tried to stay off her foot. "And you promised to take me out to the canyons, though I see now you're not a man of your word."

She hobbled to the landing. "Jonas!" she yelled down the stairwell.

"He's gone. They're all gone."

She hopped back into the room, staring at him. "What do you mean, they're all gone?"

"There's no one on the ranch but my family, and Fiona and Burke."

"Oh, my God." She sank onto her bed again, and Sloan felt sympathy for her. He knew how it felt to lose everything. "I didn't know they'd leave this soon. No wonder it's so quiet. I thought the children were all watching a movie in the bunkhouse or something."

He shook his head. "They left before the sun was up this morning."

"I can't believe it. And yet I'm relieved." She gazed at Sloan. "And you're supposed to fire me so I'll leave, too."

"Yeah." He nodded. "Jonas was too chicken to do it."

"I'll bet." Kendall sat silently for a moment. "You're both chickenhearted weasels. But at least you told me to my face."

"I'm a gentleman."

"Whatever." Kendall didn't look at him. "I'm not leaving."

Sloan's heart sank. He should have seen this coming. No wonder Jonas had gone off like a dog not eager to see a bathtub. Swallowing hard, Sloan stared at Kendall, reading her face. She was thinking, thinking hard—and he was in trouble.

"You hire me," Kendall said.

"What?" He blinked, automatically stiffening.

"You're in charge here now. You hire me." Kendall raised a brow, challenging him.

"I can't do that." Sloan shook his head. "I have no authority to make hiring decisions."

"This is a combat zone. You can make decisions without Jonas's okay." Her determined expression said she wasn't about to let this go. "Besides which, you want me here."

His gaze snapped to hers. "I don't—"

"Yes, you do." She crossed her arms. "You'd feel a whole lot better if you could keep your eyes on me."

His eyes and some other things. Sloan resisted his errant thoughts. "No can do, sweetheart. Be a good girl and mind your ex-boss. He knows what's best for you. Me, I'm just an interloper."

"You're a tough guy," Kendall said. "And tough guys like to do things themselves. You want to protect me, don't you?"

He wasn't falling for the boost to his ego. "You'll be safe in Texas. Where you belong." He got up, went to the door. "I'll have one of my brothers take you to Albuquerque so you can catch a plane."

"Sloan."

He wished he didn't have to stay in here with her any longer. She was winding tendrils of temptation around him, and the worst part was, he knew she was doing it. Didn't really want to stop it. "Yeah?"

"I'm staying. I'm going to stick it out with Fiona and Burke. This may not be my home, but I'm not giving up the job I've already put several months of work into planning. And you wouldn't, either, if you were me."

His mouth flattened. "You have to leave. All the rest of it I'm not getting drawn into."

He walked out, feeling a ball of tension knot his neck. Everything she'd said was true: he did want her here. He did think he could do the best job of protecting her. But she'd be safe in Texas, where Jonas said her family had a compound.

The problem was, Kendall knew he'd thought up the plan to fire her, so she knew Jonas still wanted her to finish his bunkhouse—when the danger passed. She didn't consider herself to be in danger, so she saw no reason not to go on with her whatever-the-hell-it-was that she did. Decorating or something. She was fiery like his sister, Ashlyn, and Sloan had plenty of experience with that.

So he knew what the next step was.

"Ashlyn, go upstairs and keep an eye on Kendall for a while, please." He walked past his sister, who'd stationed herself in the kitchen near Fiona and Burke, who seemed pretty content to ignore everything that didn't have anything to do with baking and cooking. "Don't let her talk you into anything. She'll probably try."

"Sure." Ashlyn slid off the barstool and left the kitchen.

Fiona glanced his way. "Problems?"

Sloan took the sack she handed him, which he assumed contained a lunch. "No problems. Thank you for this."

She nodded and he left, not one bit happy with the blonde upstairs. She was right: he didn't want her to leave.

But she was going to, whether he liked it or not.

She didn't understand about the wolf.

Chapter Six

At ten o'clock that night, Sloan took over from Ashlyn.

"I've got it, Ash. Thanks." He slumped into the wingback chair, a semiautomatic tucked into a holster under his arm, hidden from Kendall. The gun was to level the playing field in case they were attacked—though it seemed too soon for the enemy to make a move. They'd be trying to figure out where everyone had gone, and who was left here, and why.

"You're back," Kendall said, opening her eyes to glare at him. "I prefer your sister babysitting me."

He nodded. "Everyone prefers Ashlyn. Now be a good girl and let me sleep."

She sat up. "I don't like your tone, soldier."

"That's a shame." He lowered his hat over his face. Maybe she'd take the hint that it was time for lights out.

"It's condescending. Smacks of arrogance. Like you think you're in charge of everything."

"I am." No further comment needed to be made.

"Bully for you. I'm going to take a shower."

His eyes widened under his dark gray Stetson. He refused to let his mind wander in the direction it wanted very much to go. There was a bath en suite, so she couldn't escape him—but on the other hand, he couldn't escape her, either.

He stayed under his hat, although he couldn't have slept now if he wanted to.

She hummed quietly. He heard her pulling out drawers, choosing clothes.

"Can't forget the panties," Kendall said, and Sloan gritted his teeth. "Although since I'm on bed rest one more day, a bra isn't essential, I suppose."

She was torturing him on purpose.

“Thankfully, I have this leg wrap the hospital gave me to keep the stitches dry,” Kendall said conversationally, as if she wasn’t trying to drive him mad. She lifted the brim of his hat, peeking at him. “Comfy?”

Not really. “I will be when you quit chattering.”

She smiled, her blue gaze sweet. “I’ll call you if I need anything.”

He swallowed, pinned. She dropped his hat back on his head and went humming into the bathroom. The water turned on, and he imagined her dropping her pajama shorts and camisole to the floor. Warmth broke out under his hat, lining his hatband with a trace of sweat.

He turned his focus inside, concentrating on the beat of his heart, the rhythm of his pulse, commanding himself to calm down.

After a moment, the wild feeling passed. He wasn’t attracted to Kendall—not at all—so there had been no reason for the surge of panic. Feeling better now that he was in control of the situation, Sloan leaned back, propping his head against the chair back, and tried to doze.

Kendall began singing a catchy tune, and the scent of strawberry shampoo drifted out to him. He pushed his hat back from his forehead, needing air. The chair was positioned directly across from the bath, so he was right in the line of fire.

There was a reason she was trying to get under his skin, and it had to do with control. But it wasn’t going to work. His self-control was steel forged by fire.

“Sloan?”

He hesitated. Went to the bathroom door. “Yeah?”

“I forgot a towel.”

That was as old as the trees. He wasn’t falling for it. “Drip dry.”

She laughed. “I can’t. I have to dry the plastic sleeve that covers my stitches. I can’t get them wet. My towel is on my bed.”

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