

DogDaze

By Rae Renzi

Chapter One

Usually when Ditsy was anxious, she rooted out the source, stomped it to smithereens, and cheerfully carried on. Unfortunately, eradicating the root of her current torment would be a capital crime—patricide having been frowned upon since the beginning of time.

For now, temporary release would have to do.

The magnificent assemblage of long legs and bulging muscle rocked smoothly beneath her, a living and breathing embodiment of liquid power. He was exhilarating and dangerous, and it was gratifying that she could control him with a mere twitch of her thighs. His pace was breakneck, just as she wanted, no holds barred, no quarter given. She slid her hands down his sleek muscled neck, feeling the heat from his exertion as the ground beneath her thundered by. The chill wind pummeled her face, cleanly blowing regrets out of her head.

How she'd missed this! A thrilling ride, a test of nerve and skill, and, at the end, the afterglow of accomplishment without complications. Her life in America didn't allow for such indulgences. It was a disappointment she'd had to bury deeply to pursue her passion, but coming home, breathing the clean air, galloping through the English countryside, had brought it all back; a flutter of joy tethered to a persistent ache in her chest.

Someday, she'd have it all again. Someday.

First, though, she had some dreams to follow. One was almost as old as she, the other new but compelling. It was the latter that was currently giving her the hives.

She slowed to an easy canter to let Traveler catch his wind. The landscape was beautiful, even this early in the year when winter had not yet fully relinquished its grasp. It was stubborn—not unlike her father—and, like him, it was fighting a losing battle. The bare twigs of winter-stripped trees were swollen and ripe, ready to burst into bud, and the sod under Traveler's hooves was springy with a faint cast of green. A blackbird perched

on a fence, an early suitor to some feathered flirt, and sang his heart out for his unseen belle. Whether winter liked it or not, change was in the air.

A little nagging worry rolled into her mind.

She'd left the two most important men in her life together, alone. At the time it had seemed like a good idea, a necessary rite of passage. Now, it felt like the result of momentary madness, the prelude to disaster.

Her strategy had been to force her beloved but ridiculously rigid father to become acquainted with Nocona, because anyone who spent time with him would surely, as night follows day, come to adore that man. Perhaps not with the same reckless abandon that *she* did, but it was inconceivable that his thoughtfulness, his keen intelligence and insight, all housed in the most splendid physical form imaginable, would fail to make a favorable impression. Even her father, stubborn and old-fashioned as he was, couldn't ignore the evidence before his eyes.

Nocona Wiley was everything a father should want for his daughter. He was smart, strong, kind and drew people like a magnet. He had everything. Except birthright: he was an American. Still, no one in their right mind would turn their back on such a prize.

A hurdle raced towards her, a hedge against a fence, seeming small at first, gaining size by the second. If she skirted around to the side, she could breeze through the open gate. She was alone, no one in sight—risking a jump over the barrier hedge wasn't a sensible thing to do.

A smile cracked her face as she bent over her horse's neck and angled him away from the gate, towards the barrier. Traveler was eager; she could feel it. His ears were forward, his nose reached for the fence. His hooves hit the sod in a pounding rhythm, and she felt his muscles bunch under her legs in anticipation of the leap. She shifted in the saddle and tightened the reins, gathering in his stride.

One...two... She gave him his head and crouched in her stirrups, ready for the jump.

A black shadow darted from beneath the hedge with a frightened yelp. Traveler skittered sideways and Ditsy went flying over the hedge—without her horse. Before she hit the ground, she briefly had time to thank God her mishap was not witnessed. Being unsettled by the men in her life was bad enough, but being unseated by her horse? Absolutely humiliating.



“So, it’s your money or her life.” Nocona was having a hard time keeping his words in check. They wanted to spew out like gunfire. Instead, he tried to ease them out one by one.

“I would say it’s my money *and* her life.” The Earl of Cromleigh stood across the room facing Nocona, his back to the window, his hands clasped behind him. Raindrops whipped against the glass panes, blurring the landscape and calling up a chill. A cup of tea, untouched, sat on a polished mahogany side table nearby. They had talked of the weather, the flight over, the relatively safe topics of religion, politics and war, until the tea had been served, the housekeeper had left and the gloves had come off.

Now it was just the two of them, knocking heads in a study that had been old before the American States were United.

The earl continued, “My daughter’s place is here, at Cromleigh, not gadding about in America. I’ll no longer support her in that folly. It’s time she settled down. In any case, she made a promise that she’d return.”

“Higher education isn’t usually considered ‘gadding about,’” Nocona pointed out, as respectfully as he could. “As far as settling down, I’m guessing that’s why she asked me here.” He couldn’t comment on the promise—this was the first he’d heard of it.

“That alone is suspicious,” her father said. “She generally prefers to keep her friends far away from the family. Claims we’re all barking mad.”

Nocona’s hands unclenched a little. Humor was a good sign. “She did mention something to that effect.”

“Yes, well. Not so much lunatic as eccentric, I think, and more on her mother’s side than the Tarkingtons. Too many generations of idleness, in my opinion.” He picked up his tea and took a sip. “And your family? Any disposition towards that sort of thing?”

Here it came. The inquisition. At least Ditsy’s father hadn’t taken one look at him and booted him out.

Swirls of steam curled up from Nocona’s cup, snaking towards the ceiling. He tracked the baroque pattern upward until the miniscule water drops were absorbed into the hungry air, leaving nothing. Nothing at all, except a faint fragrance of tea.

He briefly considered the meaning of *disposition towards* and *that sort of thing* before answering. “Not in my current family.”

The earl glanced over at Nocona from under impressive brows. “One usually has a family and sticks with it. Not like changing out an auto every few years, now is it?”

“Not usually, no. I’ve had the same family since shortly after my birth, when they found me and my brother abandoned on their doorstep. My adoptive family is great. I have no idea about my biological family. Luckily, they say only about twenty-five percent of behavior is genetic.”

Nocona’s hands had re-curved into fists, in spite of his lame attempt at humor. He knew the next part of the script. It would have to do with his heritage, certain aspects of which were obvious—his dark hair and copper skin didn’t exactly suggest an Anglo-Saxon gene pool.

But the earl surprised him. He walked over to ease into the wingback chair opposite Nocona’s. The crackling fire lent a cheery glow to his face. “You look fit enough. Military?”

“Yes, sir. Tactical forces. Opted out a couple years ago.”

The older man nodded. “Shows in the set of your spine. What do you do now?”

Nocona’s shoulders settled a notch. Safer territory. He reached for a scone. “My brother and I started a security business. In Los Angeles.”

“And is the business successful?”

“Enough for me to get by until I get my law degree.” The business was actually doing pretty darn well, but Nocona sensed that the grit and grub of physically working for a living was a topic he should avoid.

“You’re studying law?”

“Not yet. I take the entrance exam in a couple of months.”

“You’re confident you’ll be accepted.”

Nocona answered carefully. “I have a good record of accomplishing my goals, sir.”

Lord Cromleigh flicked an eyebrow. “I take it that one of your goals is my daughter.”

His bold words set Nocona back. To give himself a little time, he finished his bite of scone and placed the rest on his plate before he answered. “Your daughter and I have a mutual goal. We want to be together, and if all goes well, we want to be married.”

“And just how do you propose to accomplish that? It would appear that you are established in Los Angeles, at least for the next few years, what with your school and so forth, and she’ll be here. This is her home, not America.”

Nocona mentally scrambled to catch up. He’d been prepared to do battle to overcome one hurdle or another, but this one had seemed trivial. True, he had a business in Los Angeles, and he hoped to enter law school there soon. Although she’d finished school, Ditsy didn’t have a job yet, so wasn’t committed to any particular location. She’d been clear that that wasn’t a problem—her trust fund would keep her afloat nicely until she found a job in L.A. She’d even offered to support the two of them until he finished law school so he could get through faster. That wasn’t going to happen, of course. He needed her, not her money.

“She’s willing to move to Los Angeles.”

“My daughter is headstrong and given to rash actions. She’s young and she hasn’t thought it through.” Lord Cromleigh picked up his tea. “You must be aware that you’re not exactly suited to be the husband of an earl’s daughter.”

Nocona held his tongue. He’d lived with prejudice his whole life, so the bald statement wasn’t a surprise. Except he’d expected, or maybe hoped, that Ditsy’s family would be above all that, would be more like her.

Taking his silence for disagreement, the earl continued to urge Nocona to cut out his own heart. “See here, young man. I can’t control you or, God knows, my daughter. But let me be clear: I’ll do everything in my power to keep her here.”

Well, that was pretty damn clear. Nocona stood slowly and slid his hands into his pockets, reminding himself not to growl or pace like a caged tiger.

Before he’d made the decision to link his life with Ditsy’s, he’d worked through every tough scenario he could imagine. Careful planning was second nature to him, both from his training, and his personality. His conclusion? No matter what angle he looked at it from, being together was better for both of them than being apart.

And yet, here in Ditsy’s home, in her country and immersed in her culture, a flaw in his crystal vision had been revealed. Her family didn’t want him. Her *family*.

Ditsy’s father watched him like a hawk. “I’m aware that other factors may be a consideration, so I’m prepared to make accommodations.”

Nocona lifted his head in surprise. Given the general drift of the conversation, Nocona had been sure Ditsy's father would deny them his blessing. But this sounded as though he wasn't entirely against them. Relief washed over him.

He smiled at the older man. "Thank you. I was hoping this meeting would end well. You won't regret it."

The earl nodded, looking grim. "I hope not." He stood and reached into his pocket, withdrawing a slip of paper. A check. He held it out to Nocona. "Law school is expensive, I hear."

An engagement present? Nocona was conflicted. His pride demanded that he turn it down, but rejecting a gift from his future father-in-law would be an insult, plain and simple.

He took it, but the earl noticed his hesitation.

"Go on. Three hundred thousand pounds. I should imagine that will ease the pain of leaving my daughter behind considerably."

It took a moment for the earl's intent to sink in. A chill crawled through Nocona, followed by burning anger, and, after that, despair and resignation. All in a matter of seconds.

Without a word he folded the check and put it in his pocket.

Nocona wanted to hate him. He wanted to pretend that his offer was malicious. But the man who stood before him in his country gentleman's jacket and his expensive shabby shoes was merely protecting his own heart with the weapon he knew best.

Nocona picked up his cup of tea, took a sip and carefully returned it to its saucer. If he'd closed his fist around the cup, as thin as eggshell, it would have shattered. Its fragility forced restraint. Clever people, these British.

He inclined his head at Lord Cromleigh—shaking hands right now was too great a risk. "I'll take my leave, then."

"You're going to Abbeymere shortly?"

"Yes. We leave within an hour."

The earl gazed into the fire for a moment and turned back to Nocona. "Mr. Wiley, believe this: I lost my wife in America. I'm damned if I'll lose any more of my family to that place."

Nocona gazed into the Earl's blue eyes for a long, hard moment. Then he nodded and left the room.



Nocona's heart was in a vise grip, pinched tight between iron jaws that wanted to crush it in two. He paced, he packed and then he paced some more. He spent long minutes staring into space, trying to ease the cut-glass edge of his torment. Ditsy's father had to be desperate to try to bribe him into leaving her. Beyond desperate.

When he couldn't delay it any longer, he walked outside into the sodden gray day to find Ditsy. Ignoring the threat of rain, she'd gone riding when he went to speak to her father, saying it would keep her mind off things, adding that waiting for them to talk was worse than waiting for the dentist. Despite her flippant words, it was clear Ditsy cherished her father and wanted Nocona to like him, too. Nocona hadn't understood her anxiety then—he pretty much liked everyone, so why should her father be different?—but he got it now. Oh, yes, he got it. Like a knife in the gut.

He found her limping back from the barn through the cold drizzling rain, soaked to the skin, clutching a shivering bundle of black fur. One side of her, from her hip to her boot, was covered in mud. Her hair had come loose and hung in long mahogany strands, dripping over her shoulder and down her back. A smudge of mud decorated her face, giving her the look of a street urchin.

Even in this state, she was the most beautiful thing in his universe. She smiled weakly at him, and his world fractured.

He walked through his pain to meet her, and cupped his hands around her face. The smell of wet dog greeted him. "Rough ride?"

Her blue eyes twinkled. "Oh, par for the course, with a little added excitement." She held up the bundle, which resolved into a whimpering half-grown puppy. "This little fellow managed to send me in one direction, my horse in another, and generally wreak havoc." The pup flapped a frantic tongue towards Nocona.

Nocona laughed and reached out to pet the puppy. "Like a little tornado with four paws."

“Yes, just like a tornado.” Ditsy dimpled, but only for a second. Then her face slipped into worry. “And how did the chat with the *paterfamilias* go?”

“It was...enlightening.”

“Enlightening...in what way, exactly?” Her voice was suspicious.

He gazed down at her, and his chest ached, like he couldn't get enough air. He bent and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “Let's get on the road. We'll talk later.”

“Right. I'll have to shower and change. But first, I need to see to this little troublemaker.”

Ditsy found her father in the study, gazing absently out the window at the rain.

“Father, I found a stray puppy over near the third gate. Would any of the neighbors be missing the little creature?”

“Good heavens, child. What on earth happened to you?”

“Minor mishap, nothing of concern. But this pup needs to be dealt with.”

Her father waved an impatient hand. “Give it to one of the stable lads to find out who it belongs to.” He looked closer at the squirming puppy, who seemed bent on wriggling out of Ditsy's arms. “Has the look of a purebred, although what breed I couldn't say. Weatherill will know.”

“I'm sure it belongs to someone around here, so it would be an unkindness to haul it over to Abbeymere. I'll just ask Jennings to see to it.” She placed the bundle of fur on the ground and walked away. The little thing chased after her, nipping at her boots and falling over its feet. It sat down abruptly and yipped.

“Oh, very well.” Ditsy scooped it up in her arms. “Someone has a decided attitude of entitlement. I'm quite sure you're to the manor born, and have strayed,” she told the pup, gazing down into its button-black eyes. “They must be desperate to get you back. Don't worry, Jennings will get you to your proper home.” It struggled to lick her chin, making her laugh.

An hour later, she and Nocona took their leave of her father. It was her first indication that something had gone terribly wrong with their meeting. Strain was etched into every line of Nocona's body, and Ditsy's father could scarcely look Nocona in the eye. After they shook hands, Nocona lost no time in getting out the door to load up their bags, in spite of ample help from the household staff.

“What did you do?” she hissed at her father when Nocona had gone outside.

Her father, looking weary and worried, shook his head and heaved that so-familiar sigh. “I did nothing but tell him how things are. Which you should have done, had you given the situation any thought.”

“What situation? There is no situation, unless you make one.”

Her father sighed. “Ditsy, try just once to think beyond the moment, beyond your immediate wishes. There is such a great cost...”

“Cost of what? Of my being independent? Of wanting a career? I’m not a child anymore, Father. I make my own decisions.”

He frowned and folded his arms. “Do you now? As far as I can tell, you make decisions about where to spend money, and little more. Independent? You are entirely dependent on me for support, if you recall.”

“I don’t need your money, or your meddling. Do not interfere with my life.”

Her father’s face grew stormy. “If you truly want to be independent, that can be arranged. But you won’t like the consequences.”

“I’m looking forward to finding out. With Nocona.” Without looking back, she stormed towards the door.

Her father called after her. “He’s not the man you think he is. He can be bought, like anyone else.”

She paused with her hand on the door. “What do you mean?”

Her father sighed. “You’ll find out. As I said, it’s for the best.”

She didn’t even glance at her father but pulled open the door and marched out.

The tension in the car was thick when she and Nocona passed through the gates of Cromleigh and hit the main road. Nocona drove, his mouth set in a straight line, his eyes doggedly forward.

After a few silent minutes of traveling through the countryside, he said, “This was a mistake.”

“Yes. You’re right. We should have gone straight to see my uncle at Abbeymere, rather than stepping into the line of fire at Cromleigh. My father’s difficult—I know that, and I do apologize. Actually, my mother’s family—the Weatherills—are just as crazy, but more amusing than troublesome. And you’ll love Uncle Archie’s old place. It’s much smaller than Cromleigh, but lovely—it’s been the Weatherill home for ages. We used to live there, you know, before Father came into his title and we moved to Cromleigh, that

dreadful monstrosity. And there's the most gorgeous little collection of nineteenth century romantic paintings. Even a Constable and a Corot. You'll see—everything will be better when we get there. Of course, there is Uncle Archie, something of a crackpot in his own right, but the poor old fellow's ill, so he won't be up to his usual antics—”

“Ditsy.”

His tone froze the words in her mouth.

She couldn't think what to say, so she reached over to stroke his face, letting her fingers slide down his angled cheekbone to his squared jaw and down his neck. The corded muscles softened, and his shoulders relaxed. She shifted closer and nuzzled his ear, then nibbled it.

He made a soft noise and slid his hand onto her leg. “You're trying to distract me,” he said, but his hand inched up on her thigh, sending electricity thrumming through her.

“Yes.” She trailed her hand down his chest and loosened a button so she could feel his skin. “Christopher Columbus insisted that by prevailing over distractions, one might unfailingly arrive at one's destination. I interpret ‘prevailing’ to mean ‘indulging in.’” She tugged his shirt out of his pants and dipped her fingers beneath his beltline.

He groaned and, a second later, jerked the car back onto the road after it had drifted onto the verge. “Wait.” His eyes sharpened like a hawk as he took in the surrounding countryside. Ditsy had no trouble imagining him on a mission reconning enemy territory. He gunned the car forward and swerved onto a dirt track that led through a gap in a hedgerow and into a field. No one was around except a herd of sheep in the distance.

Nocona turned off the car and reached for Ditsy in the same fluid movement. She didn't argue but melted into his arms. Everywhere he touched her was molten, the heat swimming through her, delicious and divine. She released the rest of his buttons, and yanked his shirt down over his luscious muscled shoulders, fettering his arms. God had surely hit a high note with Nocona, she thought, as she sat back to survey her captive.

Nocona wasn't inclined to sit passively and be admired—he obviously had something else in mind. He shrugged impatiently out of his shirt and lunged for her with a touch of desperation, catching her up in a heated kiss.

All her worries fled. Whatever had happened at Cromleigh, it couldn't compete with this. She gave herself over to his passion, and matched it, bite and kiss. He made her

greedy with need; she couldn't get enough of him. She yanked at his belt as he slid his hand between her legs, seeking her warmth with gentle fervor.

A rapping on the window shattered the spell.

Ditsy peeked over Nocona's shoulder to see a pair of bright blue eyes over a nose sprinkled with freckles and pressed against the window.

Nocona gazed down at Ditsy longingly for a second, and rolled down the window to address their young visitor.

"Yes?"

"Excuse me, sir, but I was going for the herd and saw you here. Are you all right? Is your auto broke? I can go get help. My brother's good with machines and the like."

Ditsy turned away to stifle a frustrated laugh. Nocona ran his hand through his hair. "Yes, we had a little trouble. Lucky for us you came along just now. I'll try it again before you run off." He threw another anguished glance at Ditsy and turned the key.

The car, of course, started right up.

"There. It looks like we're fine now. Maybe you can tell me where I can turn around without damaging the field."

The boy stood back and pointed to a wide spot in the track, a satisfied smile on his face.

Ditsy wanted to laugh and cry at once. Nocona hid his frustration and waved to the boy as they drove off.

"So much for prevailing over distractions," he said.

"Yes. Perhaps a new quote is in order. How about, 'Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.'"

"That sounds like a consolation prize."

"Not a consolation—a promise."



Nocona was in a better frame of mind when they turned onto the long, winding, tree-dotted drive to Abbeymere, the seat of the Weatherill clan, Ditsy's mother's family. Some of his mood was no doubt the weather—it had finally cleared up. The rest—well, it could be the surge of optimism that always came when Ditsy was in his orbit. Physical

contact hadn't hurt, though his urgent need for her was only temporarily dampened. He'd have to do something about that soon.

The car had no sooner stopped than Ditsy bounded out of it, laughing. She held out her arms and twirled around.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Her face glowed, setting off the fire in her hair. She was irresistible.

He extracted himself from the car and looked around. Constructed of cream-colored stone covered with ivy, the place looked old and impenetrable, but was half the size of Cromleigh Croft, and seemed less regimented, more friendly.

His hopes crept upwards. Maybe things weren't as bad as they seemed. Maybe *this* side of the family was loving and accepting, a little more flexible than the Tarkingtons. If the Weatherills took to him, and allowed that Ditsy could live in America and still be part of the family, then maybe her father would eventually come around. He had to.

A middle-aged man with the bearing of a soldier opened the solid wood door and stepped out.

"Lady Edith, so good to see you. Welcome home to Abbeymere Manor."

Ditsy spun around and bestowed a dazzling smile on the gentleman. "Thank you very much, Stevens. It's so good to be here." She introduced the two men and then asked Stevens, "How is Uncle Archie—is he up to receiving visitors?"

"He's resting at the moment, my lady, but was adamant that he'd like to see you in the garden a little later for tea, if that suits?"

"Lovely! If you'll see to Mr. Wiley's things, I'll take him on a tour of the place."

They spent the next couple of hours wandering around the grounds. Ditsy first showed him the gardens, with their neat paths edged in herbs just beginning to show a little green, then the stables, which were very nearly empty, except for an old draft horse named Sturgeon and an amiable pony called Dirk.

"They're more pets than working horses these days, aren't you Sturgie?" Ditsy cooed at the big horse before placing a kiss on his noble Roman nose. "I promise I'll bring you an apple later. You too, Dirks. There's my fine boy."

Nocona smiled at her tenderness towards the animals and her delight in their response. He slid an arm around her shoulders. "An apple would be nice, but I'd settle for a kiss."

She gave him a melting look and warmly obliged until he was on the verge of dragging her off to a nearby hayloft. But she wiggled free with a tempting smile and the promise, “Later.”

As she took him around Abbeymere, Ditsy seemed to gather light. She pointed out nooks where she used to hide from her brother (“Even then he was a brat,” she explained. “Now he’s worse.”), and the special places she and her mother would walk together.

“I’d forgotten how much I love this place. Or, rather, I’d let it be overwritten by grief when my mother died.”

Nocona stroked her hair and pulled her head into his shoulder. “Are you okay now?”

She pulled back to beam at him. “Oh, yes. All the memories I have of her are good. And most of them are from here. I’m so glad I haven’t lost them. I’m so glad to be here. With you.”

The highlight of the tour was the kennels. In his declining years, Ditsy’s great-grandfather had taken a liking to red setters, which penchant had carried down to her great uncle Archie. Abbeymere was known for its highly trainable and sturdy red hunting dogs, and, it seemed likely from Nocona’s point of view, probably famous for the exquisite care lavished upon the dogs, too.

“Too bad your stray pup couldn’t stay here. It’s dog heaven,” he said as he eyed the clean, cozy kennels. Each dog had its name etched on a steel plate above the kennel door, which also had a hook for a leash. A bubbling fountain of fresh water graced each enclosure, as did a bed that appeared as comfortable as any Nocona had slept in. The kennels each had a little door that led to a long, enclosed dog run. Yep, these might be working dogs, but they were pampered working dogs.

“Oh, I’m sure his owners have turned up by now. He’s too cute for someone to abandon.”

No sooner were the words out than she slapped her hand on her mouth. “Oh, bloody hell. I didn’t mean...that is...”

He grinned at her. “Don’t worry. On my hypothetical list of why my parents abandoned me, ‘too-damn-ugly’ isn’t way up there.”

“Yes. ‘Too-bloody-smug’ is much more likely, I’d say.” A bell sounded in the distance, and Ditsy turned towards the door. “We are summoned. Just a word of

warning—Uncle Archie is not of the lovable-old-codger ilk, but he’s more or less good at heart. Sometimes.”

Nocona skirted a look at her. “Oh, great. Now I’m totally relaxed.”

“I’m afraid Uncle Archie has been scarcely fit for human companionship since Mum died. He’s developed an unhealthy habit of excoriating any and all humans who cross his path. As you might imagine, his behavior has not endeared him to the family, but the dogs don’t mind his misanthropic antics at all.”

“Maybe if I bark?”

She grinned. “That’s the ticket.”

They entered the garden through an arched metal gate with a verdigris finish. It creaked when Ditsy opened it, as if long in disuse.

The path they followed wound through dormant herb beds with tiny green sprigs popping up here and there, punctuated with naked shrubs and bushes. It wasn’t yet a cheerful place, but the promise of spring lent it an air of happy expectation.

“It’s about time you showed yourself! An old fellow could expire waiting,” a creaky voice called before they rounded the corner.

A wizened man with a ring of silver hair around a shiny dome peered at them with hawkish blue eyes under wiry eyebrows. He sat in a wheelchair under a leafless tree. In spite of his shrunken body, he somehow gave the impression of static electricity lying in wait for the unwary.

Ditsy skipped over and gave him a careful hug. “Hello, Uncle Archie. Sorry to have kept you waiting.” She glanced up at Stevens, who stood behind the wheelchair. Stevens gave her a restrained wink. “But I’m so very happy to see you.”

“You aren’t a bit sorry, you little snippet. I may be old, but I’m not senile.”

“I think it’s fair to say I’m sorry exactly in proportion to the time you’ve waited, Uncle. Will you accept that?”

The old man snuffled—a kind of laugh, Nocona suspected—and retorted, “You are a bit too smart for your own good, missy. A regular tart.” He called over his shoulder. “Stevens, you go and fetch the tea. And tell Cab Terrell to bring up my pets.”

Stevens nodded at them and left.

“I got it from you Uncle Archie. Now, allow me to introduce someone special. Archibald Weatherill, this is Nocona Wiley from the United States. Please be nice.”

The old man scrutinized him through narrowed eyes. "You're a red Indian."

Ditsy shut her eyes and sighed.

Nocona returned her uncle's gaze a moment before he answered. "Likely. The location of my birth suggests Navajo or Hopi, but I don't know for sure."

"Orphan?"

"Abandoned."

The elder Weatherill pursed his lips. "So you're a stray mutt." He turned to his grandniece. "Where is that Stevens? Lazy bastard. You go on, now, and chivvy him along. And tell him not to forget the biscuits."

Ditsy bit her lip. "He won't forget, Uncle Archie." She shot a nervous glance at Nocona.

"Of course he will! Now shoo!"

She looked like she might protest again, but instead gave a fatalistic shrug and started down the path towards the house, trailing her fingers on a bush here, a tree there, and disappearing through the garden gate.

Both men watched her until she was out of sight. Her great uncle spoke: "She loves it here, you know. Always has. It's in her blood."

"I can see that."

"Don't know that you do. Abbeymere's been in the family for centuries. The ancestral home, so to speak. With your background that's something you can't ken. You plan to marry her? Or will you keep her as a doxie?"

Nocona wasn't sure of the definition of "doxie" but the meaning was clear enough. The old fellow intended to be offensive, but he'd have to work harder to get a reaction out of Nocona. "I plan to marry her." He *needed* to marry her. He couldn't imagine living without her.

"You won't be accepted into the family, mutt like you. Sticklers for bloodlines."

Christ. He was getting tired of this. "It's a chance I'm willing to take."

"*You're* willing? Are you then willing to take all this away from her? Because I'm leaving it to my grandniece, but only if she lives here."

Ah, shit. There it was. He'd let Ditsy's optimism obscure the glaring fact: her family desperately wanted her, but without him. "And what will you do with it if she doesn't?"

The old man lifted a dismissive hand. “I don’t know. Leave it to some charity or another. Or maybe to that sniveling snob, her brother Charles, though he doesn’t much like the place—not grand enough for him. I haven’t decided. Either way, it’ll shatter Ditsy, but that’s the way it is.”

“You’d take Abbeymere away from her.”

“She doesn’t have it yet. I won’t give it to her if she’s got a life elsewhere. What would be the point? So it’s *you* who will seal her fate.”

Nocona felt sick. It was true. He’d known it was true after the encounter with her father. This just hammered it home.

In his personal calculus of life, family and home was essential. He couldn’t take that away from her. He couldn’t ask her to stand with him against her own family. Might as well try to capture a flame under a jar, with about the same result. If he married her and took her to Los Angeles, she’d lose Abbeymere and she’d be cut off from the memories of her childhood and precious reminders of her mother. She’d be cut off from her history.

Oh, she’d go with him *now*, but later, when the fire in her cooled a bit, when the empty place where her family had been began to hurt, when she realized she was truly at ground zero, with no one behind her except Nocona—the cause of her isolation—things would go south. It would be a long, slow slide into discontent and resentment. He knew.

Her great uncle didn’t let it rest. With the single-minded determination of the dying, he pushed his will home. “Either she wants to keep this place in the family or she doesn’t. Her choice. I have an appointment with the solicitor tomorrow.”

During one of their evenings together Ditsy had confided to him that she wanted to be more than a pretty face with noble blood. Her family history had never come up before except in the most oblique manner: the light-hearted jabs at rampant familial eccentricity or self-mocking quips about British propriety and how she’d missed the boat on that.

Now he realized he’d purposely ignored her ancestry, and its possible effect on their relationship. It was completely out of character—he was the deliberator, the one who insisted that for any task, the more knowledge, the better. But in this case, he’d failed. He’d wanted to fail. Because he knew, in his heart of hearts, that ancestry can’t be erased. Even he was marked by his heritage. Unspecified as it was, it was enough to brand him as unsuitable to mingle his mongrel’s blood with that of Lady Edith Tarkington, daughter of the Earl of Cromleigh, no matter how much he loved her.

Her education in America had been an attempt to distance herself from her family—reasoning that had confused him before but was now painfully clear. She wanted distance, not amputation. Family, biological family especially, couldn't be left behind. It was there in the way you walked, the color of your skin, the sound of your voice. It came with you, wherever you went.

And the lack of a family... that clung to you, too.

A round of whining and shuffling sounded from the side gate where Nocona and Ditsy had entered. Three of the long-haired dogs they'd seen in the kennel pranced down the path towards them, wagging feathery tails. They were followed by a sturdy man in a tweed jacket, who held their leashes.

“Go on, man. Let them off! They aren't going anywhere,” Mr. Weatherill shouted down the path.

The dogs were released and they bounded down the path towards Weatherill, with a fly-by sniff at Nocona.

“These beauties are my pets, aren't you?” A handful of dog bones appeared in Weatherill's gnarled hands. Beaming like a lighthouse, he doled them out to his fawning dogs. It was clear that dogs—not humans—carried the day for the old man.

As the dogs settled at her great uncle's feet, Ditsy returned with Stevens, the tea tray and the private nurse who cared for Uncle Archie. Seemingly immune to his insults and curses, the nurse took his temperature and pulse, and insisted he take some pills. Then she left, with a stern warning that tea should last no more than an hour, and he was not to let the dogs lick him in the face. Weatherill waved her off impatiently and went back to doing exactly as he pleased.

The rest of the time passed pleasantly enough on the surface. The elder Weatherill visibly weakened by the minute but managed to hang on well enough to reminiscence with Ditsy about notable events of her childhood at Abbeymere. And in proportion to Ditsy's mounting delight, Nocona's heart sank. By the afternoon's end, his path was clear, and he loathed it.



Ditsy tried to calm the buzzing in her head, the alarm ringing through her. She'd thought her fears were unfounded, that all had gone reasonably well. Uncle Archie had seemed better-behaved than usual, and as pleasant as one could expect, and Nocona didn't seem angry or offended.

But obviously something had gone horribly wrong, because after tea, Nocona had gathered up his things and told her he had to leave. If she didn't mind, he'd like her to drive him to the airport. Otherwise, he'd call a cab. He was polite and kind, but absolutely unyielding.

"No, Nocona, you can't leave. Please." A huge lump lodged in her throat, threatening to suffocate her. "Please."

He looked ill, but his lips were firmly compressed. He wouldn't budge.

Her shoulders dropped. "Fine. I'll take you. But I want an explanation."

He didn't speak until they approached the airport. Then he asked her to pull off the road into a car park for commuters. Only as the car settled into silence did he soften. He reached for her hand and stroked it against his cheek before he kissed her palm. When he turned to face her, his eyes were tormented. "I love you. I love you so much it hurts. But Ditsy, this won't work."

The desolation in his voice alerted her that more was at stake than a visit with her family.

"Nonsense," she said, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. "They'll come around... they'll—"

"—abandon generations of carefully hoarded bloodlines and prejudices? Won't happen. Believe me—I know more about this than I want to."

"Are you really going to allow my father—or was it my uncle—to chase you off?"

"They were honest, that's all. More than I've been with myself." He stroked her knuckles one by one and looked up, his rich brown eyes bleak. "Can you truthfully say your family would ever welcome me? Or even accept me?"

Ditsy opened her mouth, but the words wouldn't come.

He looked down and nodded wearily.

She felt sick, like she might actually throw up. "They're idiots, the lot of them. You can see that, right? They're crazy."

"Maybe. But they're your family. And there's more at risk than you know."

“What? What’s at risk that could possibly be more important than my life with you?”

Nocona didn’t answer, he just looked miserable. “Your father said you promised him you’d come home.”

“That was ages ago. Years.”

“There’s a statute of limitations on promises?”

“I was trying to recover from my mother’s death, but he was stifling me, out of his own fear and despair. I couldn’t sneeze without his supervision. I would have said anything to get away from Cromleigh just then. Things are different now.”

Nocona shot her a glance. “Different for you, maybe, but not for your father. He’s desperate for you to stay here.”

Ditsy frowned at him. Her father was not inclined to show weakness in front of the family, much less a complete stranger. “And you know this, how?”

He sighed deeply and handed her a folded piece of paper. “Because he gave me this.”

She held the check with her fingertips and read the incomprehensible numbers.

“What is this?” Her hands had started shaking.

“It’s your father’s best guess of what it would take for me to leave you.”

“And...it...worked?” Ditsy could hardly get the words out. Her whole face was numb, frozen in place, her lips barely able to move.

“It worked. Not the money—there isn’t enough money in the world—but what it made me see. What’s been staring me in the face all this time, but I was too much of an ass to accept.”

“No.” Ditsy shook her head, trying to get some control over the situation. “I...no.”

Nocona cupped her face with his hands. “Ditsy, I would do anything for you. *Anything*. I don’t have much, but I can give you this: I can give you your family. Even if it kills me.”

