

Prologue

Hugh Coker closed his folder and looked up at the five pairs of eyes staring at him.

“So there you have it. I met with this private investigator, Rico Claiborne, and he’s convinced that you are descendants of someone named Raphel Westmoreland. I read through his report and although his claims sound pretty far-fetched, I can’t discount the photographs I’ve seen. Bart, every one of your sons could be a twin to one of those Westmorelands. The resemblance is that strong. I have the photographs here for you to look at.”

“I don’t want to see any photographs, Hugh,” Bart Outlaw said gruffly, getting out of his chair. “Just because this family might look like us doesn’t mean they are related to us. We are Outlaws, not Westmorelands. And I’m not buying that story about a train wreck over sixty years ago where some dying woman gave her baby to my grandmother. That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.”

He turned to his four sons. “Outlaw Freight Lines is

a multimillion-dollar company and people will claim a connection to us just to get what we've worked so hard to achieve."

Garth Outlaw leaned back in his chair. "Forgive me if I missed something, Dad, but didn't Hugh say the Westmorelands are pretty darn wealthy in their own right? I think all of us have heard of Blue Ridge Land Management. They are a Fortune 500 company. I don't know about the rest of you, but Thorn Westmoreland can claim me as a cousin anytime."

Bart frowned. "So what if they run a successful company and one of them is a celebrity?" he said in a cutting tone. "We don't have to go looking for any new relatives."

Maverick, the youngest of Bart's sons, chuckled. "I believe they came looking for us, Dad."

Bart's frown deepened. "Doesn't matter." He glanced at Hugh. "Send a nice letter letting them know we aren't buying their story and don't want to be bothered again. That should take care of it." Expecting his orders to be obeyed, Bart walked out of the conference room, closing the door behind him.

Sloan Outlaw stared at the closed door. "Are we going to do what he says?"

"Do we ever?" his brother Cash asked, grinning while watching Hugh put the papers back in his briefcase.

"Leave that folder, Hugh," Garth said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I think the old man forgot he's no longer running things. He retired a few months ago, or did I imagine it?"

Sloan stood. "No, you didn't imagine it. He retired but only after the board threatened to oust him. What's he's doing here anyway? Who invited him?"

"No one. It's Wednesday. He takes Charm to lunch on Wednesdays" was Maverick's response.

Garth's brow bunched. "And where is Charm? Why didn't she attend this meeting?"

"Said she had something more important to do," Sloan said of their sister.

"What?"

"Go shopping."

Cash chuckled. "Doesn't surprise me. So what are we going to do Garth? The decision is yours, not the old man's."

Garth threw a couple of paperclips on the table. "I never mentioned it, but I was mistaken for one of those Westmorelands once."

Maverick leaned across the table. "You were? When?"

"Last year, while I was in Rome. A young woman, a very beautiful young woman, called out to me. She thought I was someone named Riley Westmoreland."

"I can see why she thought that," Hugh said. "Take a look at this." He opened the folder he'd placed on the conference room table earlier and flipped through until he came to one photograph in particular. He pulled it out and placed it in the center of the table. "This is Riley Westmoreland."

"Damn," chorused around the table, before a shocked silence ensued.

"Take a look at the others. Pretty strong genes. Like I told Bart, all of you have a twin somewhere in that family," Hugh said. "It's—"

"Weird," Cash said, shaking his head.

"Pretty damn uncanny," Sloan added. "Makes the Westmorelands' claims believable."

"So what if we are related to these Westmorelands? What's the big deal?" Maverick asked.

"None that I can see," Sloan said.

"Then, why does the old man have a problem with it?"

"Dad's just distrustful by nature," Cash answered Maverick, as he continued to stare at the photographs.

“He fathered five sons and a daughter from six different women. If you ask me, he was too damn trusting.”

“Maybe he learned his lesson, considering that some of our mothers—not calling any names—turned out to be gold diggers,” Sloan said, chuckling.

Hugh shook his head. It always amazed him how well Bart’s offspring got along, considering they all had different mothers. Bart had managed to get full custody of each of them before their second birthdays and he’d raised them together.

Except for Charm. She hadn’t shown up until the age of fifteen. Her mother was the one woman Bart hadn’t married, but the only one he had truly loved.

“As your lawyer, what do you want me to do?” Hugh asked. “Send that letter like Bart suggested?”

Garth met Hugh’s gaze. “No. I believe in using more diplomacy than that. I think what has Dad so suspicious is the timing, especially with Jess running for senator,” he said of their brother. “And you all know how much Dad wants that to happen. His dream has been for one of us to enter politics. What if this is some sort of scheme to ruin that?”

Garth stood and stretched out the kinks from his body. “Just to be on the safe side, I’ll send Walker to check out these Westmorelands. We can trust him, and he’s a good judge of character.”

“But will he go?” Sloan asked. “Other than visiting us here in Fairbanks, I doubt if Walker’s been off his ranch in close to ten years.”

Garth drew in a deep breath and said, “He’ll go if I ask him.”

One

Two weeks later

“Why are they sending their representative instead of meeting with us themselves?”

Dillon Westmoreland glanced across the room at his cousin Bailey. He'd figured she would be the one with questions. He had called a family meeting of his six brothers and eight cousins to apprise them of the phone call he'd received yesterday. The only person missing from this meeting was his youngest brother, Bane, who was on a special assignment somewhere with the navy SEALs. “I presume the reason they are sending someone outside their family is to play it safe, Bailey. In a way, I understand them doing so. They have no proof that what we're claiming is the truth.”

“But why would we claim them as relatives if they aren't?” Bailey persisted. “When our cousin James con-

tacted you a few years ago about our relationship with them, I don't recall you questioning him."

Dillon chuckled. "Only because James didn't give me a chance to question anything. He showed up one day at our Blue Ridge office with his sons and nephews in tow and said that we were kin. I couldn't deny a thing when looking into Dare's face, which looked just like mine."

"Um, maybe we should have tried that approach." Bailey tapped a finger to her chin. "Just showed up and surprised them."

"Rico didn't think that was a good idea. From his research, it seems the Outlaws are a pretty close-knit family who don't invite outsiders into their fold," Megan Westmoreland Claiborne said. Rico, her husband, was the private investigator hired by the Westmorelands to find members of their extended family.

"And I agreed with Rico," Dillon said. "Claiming kinship is something some people don't do easily. We're dealing with relatives whose last name is Outlaw. They had no inkling of a Westmoreland connection until Rico dropped the bomb on them. If the shoe was on the other foot and someone showed up claiming they were related to me, I would be cautious, as well."

"Well, I don't like it," Bailey said, meeting the gazes of her siblings and cousins.

"We've picked up on that, Bay," Ramsey Westmoreland, her eldest brother said, pulling her ear. He then switched his gaze to Dillon. "So when is their representative coming?"

"His name is Walker Rafferty and he's arriving tomorrow. I thought that would be perfect since everyone is home for Aidan and Jillian's wedding this weekend. The Atlanta Westmorelands will be here as well, so he'll get to meet them, too."

“What does he intend to find out about us?” Bailey wanted to know.

“That you, Bane, Adrian and Aidan are no longer helions,” Stern Westmoreland said, grinning.

“Go to—” Bailey stopped and glanced at everyone staring at her. “Go wash your face, Stern.”

“Stop trying to provoke her, Stern,” Dillon said, shaking his head. “Rafferty probably wants to get to know us so he can report back to them that we’re an okay group of people. Don’t take things personally. Like I said, it’s just a precaution on their part.” He paused as if an idea had come to him. “And, Bailey?”

“Yes?”

“Since you’re the most apprehensive about Mr. Rafferty’s visit, I want you to pick him up from the airport.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. And I expect you to make a good impression. Remember, you’ll be representing the entire family.”

“Bailey representing the entire family? The thought of that doesn’t bother you, Dil?” Canyon Westmoreland said, laughing. “We don’t want to scare him off. Hell, she might go ballistic on him if he rubs her the wrong way.”

“Cut it out, Canyon. Bailey knows how to handle herself and she will make a good impression,” Dillon said, ignoring his family’s skeptical looks. “She’ll do fine.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dillon.”

“You got it, Bailey.”

Bailey knows how to handle herself and she will make a good impression.

Dillon’s words rang through Bailey’s head as she rushed into the airport fifteen minutes late. And she couldn’t blame her delay on traffic.

That morning she had been called into her boss’s office to be told she’d been promoted to features editor. That

called for a celebration and she'd rushed back to her desk to call her best friend, Josette Carter. Of course Josette had insisted they meet for lunch. And now Bailey was late doing the one thing Dillon had trusted her to do.

But she refused to accept that she was off to a bad start...even if she was. If Mr. Rafferty's plane was late it would not hurt her feelings one iota. In fact today she would consider it a blessing.

She headed toward baggage claim and paused to look at an overhead monitor. Mr. Rafferty's plane had been on time. Just her luck.

Upon reaching the luggage carousel for his plane, she glanced around. She had no idea what the man looked like. She had tried looking him up online last night and couldn't find him. Josette had suggested Bailey make a sign with his name, but Bailey had rolled her eyes at the idea. Now, considering how crowded the airport was, she acknowledged that might have been a good idea.

Bailey checked out the people retrieving their luggage. She figured the man was probably in his late forties or early fifties. The potbellied, fiftysomething-year-old man who kept glancing at his watch with an anxious expression must be her guy. She was moving in his direction when a deep husky rumble stopped her in her tracks.

"I believe you're looking for me, Miss Westmoreland."

Bailey turned and her gaze connected with a man who filled her vision. He was tall, but that wasn't the reason her brain cells had suddenly turned to mush; she was used to tall men. Her brothers and cousins were tall. It was the man's features. Too handsome for words. She quickly surmised it had to be his eyes that had made her speechless. They were so dark they appeared a midnight blue. Just staring into them made her pulse quicken to a degree that ignited shivers in her stomach.

And then there was his skin tone—a smooth mahog-

any. He had a firm jaw and a pair of luscious-looking lips. His hair was cut low and gave him a rugged, sexy look.

Gathering her wits, she said, "And you are?"

He held his hand out to her. "Walker Rafferty."

She accepted his handshake. It was firm, filled with authority. Those things she expected. What she didn't expect was the feeling of warmth combined with a jolt of energy that surged through her body. She quickly released his hand.

"Welcome to Denver, Mr. Rafferty."

"Thanks. Walker will do."

She tried to keep her pulse from being affected by the throaty sound of his voice. "All right, Walker. And I'm—"

"Bailey Westmoreland. I know. I recognized you from Facebook."

"Really? I looked you up but didn't find a page for you."

"You wouldn't. I'm probably one of the few who don't indulge."

She couldn't help wondering what else he didn't—or did—indulge in, but decided to keep her curiosity to herself. "If you have all your bags, we can go. I'm parked right outside the terminal."

"Just lead the way."

She did and he moved into step beside her. He was certainly not what she'd expected. And her attraction to him wasn't expected, either. She usually preferred men who were clean shaven, but there was something about Walker Rafferty's neatly trimmed beard that appealed to her.

"So you're friends with the Outlaws?" she asked as they continued walking.

"Yes. Garth Outlaw and I have been best friends for as long as I can remember. I'm told by my parents our friendship goes back to the time we were both in diapers."

"Really? And how long ago was that?"

"Close to thirty-five years ago."

She nodded. That meant he was eight years older than she was. Or seven, since she had a birthday coming up in a few months.

“You look just like your picture.”

She glanced at him. “What picture?”

“The one on Facebook.”

She changed it often enough to keep it current. “It’s supposed to work that way,” she said, leading him through the exit doors. And because she couldn’t hold back her thoughts she said, “So you’re here to spy on us.”

He stopped walking, causing her to stop, as well. “No. I’m here to get to know you.”

“Same thing.”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t think it is.”

She frowned. “Either way, you plan to report back to the Outlaws about us? Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Her frown deepened. “They certainly sound like a suspicious bunch.”

“They are. But seeing you in person makes a believer out of me.”

She lifted a brow. “Why?”

“You favor Charm, Garth’s sister.”

Bailey nodded. “How old is Charm?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Then, you’re mistaken. I’m three years older so that means she favors me.” Bailey then resumed walking.

Walker Rafferty kept a tight grip on the handle of his luggage while following Bailey Westmoreland to the parking lot. She was a very attractive woman. He’d known Bailey was a beauty because of her picture. But he hadn’t expected that beauty to affect him with such mind-boggling intensity. It had been a while—years—since he’d been so

aware of a woman. And her scent didn't help. It had such an alluring effect.

"So do you live in Fairbanks?"

He looked at her as they continued walking. Her cocoa-colored face was perfect—all of her features, including a full pair of lips, were holding his attention. The long brown hair that hung around her shoulders made her eyes appear a dark chocolate. "No, I live on Kodiak Island. It's an hour away from Fairbanks by air."

She bunched her forehead. "Kodiak Island? Never heard of the place."

He smiled. "Most people haven't, although it's the second largest island in the United States. Anchorage and Fairbanks immediately come to mind when one thinks of Alaska. But Kodiak Island is way prettier than the two of them put together. Only thing is, we have more bears living there than people."

He could tell by her expression that she thought he was teasing. "Trust me, I'm serious," he added.

She nodded, but he had a feeling she didn't believe him. "How do people get off the island?"

"The majority of them use the ferry, but air is most convenient for me. I have a small plane."

She lifted a brow. "You do?"

"Yes." There was no need to tell her that he'd learned to fly in the marines. Or that Garth had learned right along with him. What he'd told her earlier was true. He and Garth Outlaw had been friends since their diaper days and had not only gone to school together but had also attended the University of Alaska before doing a stint in the marines. The one thing Garth hadn't done with Walker was remain with him in California after they left the military. And Garth had tried his hardest to talk Walker out of staying. Too bad he hadn't listened.

He'd been back in Alaska close to ten years now and he

swore he would never leave again. Only Garth could get him off the island this close to November, his son's birthday month. Had his son lived he would be celebrating his eleventh birthday. Thinking of Connor sent a sharp pain through Walker, one he always endured this time of year.

He kept walking beside Bailey, tossing looks her way. Not only did she have striking features but she had a nice body, as well. She looked pretty damn good in her jeans, boots and short suede jacket.

Deciding to remove his focus from her, he switched it to the weather. Compared to Alaska this time of year, Denver was nice. Too damn nice. He hoped the week here didn't spoil him.

"Does it snow here often?" he asked, to keep the conversation going. It had gotten quiet. Too quiet. And he was afraid his mind would dwell on just how pretty she was.

"Yes, usually a lot this time of year but our worst days are in February. That's when practically everything shuts down. But I bet it doesn't snow here as much as in Alaska."

He chuckled. "You'd bet right. We have long, extremely cold days. You get used to being snowed in more so than not. If you're smart, you'll prepare for it because an abundance of snow is something you can count on."

"So what do you do on Kodiak Island?" she asked.

They had reached her truck. The vehicle suited her. Although she was definitely feminine, she didn't come across as the prissy type. He had a feeling Bailey Westmoreland could handle just about anything, including this powerful-looking full-size pickup. He was of the mind that there was something innately sensuous about a woman who drove a truck. Especially a woman who was strikingly sexy when she got out of it.

Knowing she was waiting for an answer to his question, he said, "I own a livestock ranch there. Hemlock Row."

"A cattle ranch?"

“No, I raise bison. They can hold their own against a bear.”

“I’ve eaten buffalo a few times. It’s good.”

“Any bison from Hemlock Row is the best,” he said, and didn’t care if it sounded as if he was bragging. He had every right to. His family had been in the cattle business for years, but killer bears had almost made them lose everything they had. After his parents’ deaths he’d refused to sell and allow Hemlock Row to become a hunting lodge or a commercial fishing farm.

“Well, you’ll just have to send me some to try.”

“Maybe you’ll get to visit the area one day.”

“Doubt it. I seldom leave Denver,” she said, releasing the lock on the truck door for him.

“Why?”

“Everything I need is right here. I’ve visited relatives in North Carolina, Montana and Atlanta on occasion, and I’ve traveled to the Middle East to visit my cousin Delaney once.”

“She’s the one who’s married to a sheikh, right?” he asked, opening the truck door.

“Jamal *was* a sheikh. Now he’s king of Tehran. Evidently you’ve done research on the Westmorelands, so why the need to visit us?”

He held her gaze over the top of the truck. “You have a problem with me being here, Bailey?”

“Would it matter if I did?”

“Probably not, but I still want to know how you feel about it.”

He watched her nibble her bottom lip as if considering what he’d said. He couldn’t help studying the shape of her mouth and thinking she definitely had a luscious pair of lips.

“I guess it bothers me that the Outlaws think we’d claim

them as relatives if they weren't," she said, her words breaking into his thoughts.

"You have to understand their position. To them, the story of some woman giving up her child before dying after a train wreck sounds pretty far out there."

"As far-out as it might sound, that's what happened. Besides, all it would take is a DNA test to prove whether or not we're related. That should be easy enough."

"Personally, I don't think that's the issue. I've seen photographs of your brothers and cousins and so have the Outlaws. The resemblance can't be denied. The Westmorelands and the Outlaws favor too much for you not to be kin."

"Then, what is the issue and why are you here? If the Outlaws want to acknowledge we're related but prefer not to have anything to do with us, that's fine."

Walker liked her knack for speaking what she thought. "Not all of them feel that way, Bailey. Only Bart."

"Who's Bart?" she asked, breaking eye contact with him to get into the truck.

"Bart's their father," he answered, getting into the truck, as well. "Bart's father would have been the baby that was supposedly given to his grandmother, Amelia Outlaw."

"And Amelia never told any of them the truth about what happened?" Bailey asked, snapping her seat belt around her waist. A waist he couldn't help notice was pretty small. He could probably wrap his arms around it twice.

He snapped his seat belt on, thinking the truck smelled like her. "Evidently she didn't tell anyone."

"I wonder why?"

"She wouldn't be the first person to keep an adoption a secret, if that's what actually happened. From what Rico Claiborne said, Clarice knew she was dying and gave her baby to Amelia, who had lost her husband in that same

wreck. She probably wanted to put all that behind her and start fresh with her adopted son.”

After she maneuvered out of the parking lot, he decided to change the subject. “So what do you do?”

She glanced over at him. “Don’t you know?”

“It wasn’t on Facebook.”

She chuckled. “I don’t put everything online. And to answer your question, I work for my sister-in-law’s magazine, *Simply Irresistible*. Ever heard of it?”

“Can’t say that I have. What kind of magazine is it?”

“One for today’s up-and-coming woman. We have articles on health, beauty, fashion and, of course, men.”

He held her gaze when the truck came to a stop. “Why ‘of course’ on men?”

“Because men are so interesting.”

“Are we?”

“Not really. But since some women think so, we have numerous articles about your gender.”

He figured she wanted him to ask what some of those articles were, but he didn’t intend to get caught in that trap. Instead, he asked, “What do you do at the magazine?”

“As of today I’m a features editor. I got promoted.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” An easy smile touched her lips, lips that were nice to look at and would probably taste just as nice.

“I find that odd,” he said, deciding to stay focused on their conversation and not her lips.

The vehicle slowed due to traffic and she looked at him. “What do you find odd?”

“That your family owns a billion-dollar company yet you don’t work there.”

Bailey broke eye contact with Walker. Was he in probing mode? Were her answers going to be scrutinized and reported back to the Outlaws?

Walker's questions confirmed what she'd told Dillon. Those Outlaws were too paranoid for her taste. As far as she was concerned, kin or no kin, they had crossed the line by sending Walker Rafferty here.

But for now she would do as Dillon had asked and tolerate the man's presence...and his questions. "There's really nothing odd about it. There's no law that says I have to work at my family's corporation. Besides, I have rules."

"Rules?"

"Yes," she said, bringing the truck to a stop for a school bus. She looked over at him. "I'm the youngest in the family and while growing up, my brothers and cousins felt it was their God-given right to stick their noses in my business. A little too much to suit me. They only got worse the older I got. I put up with it at home and couldn't imagine being around them at the office, too."

"So you're not working at your family's company because you need space?"

"That's not the only reason," she informed him before he got any ideas about her and her family not getting along. "I'm not working at Blue Ridge Land Management because I chose a career that had nothing to do with real estate. Although I have my MBA, I also have a degree in journalism, so I work at *Simply Irresistible*."

She was getting a little annoyed that she felt the need to explain anything to him. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions about my family and I'm certain Dillon will be happy to answer them. We have nothing to hide."

"You're assuming that I think you do."

"I'm not assuming anything, Walker."

He didn't say anything while she resumed driving. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw he'd settled comfortably in the seat and was gazing out the window. "First time in Denver?" she asked.

"Yes. Nice-looking city."

“I think so.” She wished he didn’t smell so good. The scent of his aftershave was way too nice.

“Earlier you mentioned rules, Bailey.”

“What about them?” She figured most people had some sort of rules they lived by. However, she would be the first to admit that others were probably not as strict about abiding by theirs as she was about abiding by hers. “I’ve discovered it’s best to have rules about what I will do and not do. One of my rules is not to answer a lot of questions, no matter who’s asking. I put that rule in place because of my brother Zane. He’s always been too nosy when it came to me and he has the tendency to take being overprotective to another level.”

“Sounds like a typical big brother.”

“There’s nothing typical about Zane, trust me. He just likes being a pain. Because of him, I had to adopt that rule.”

“Name another rule.”

“Never get serious about anyone who doesn’t love Westmoreland Country as much as I do.”

“Westmoreland Country?”

“It’s the name the locals gave the area where my family lives. It’s beautiful and I don’t plan to leave. Ever.”

“So in other words, the man you marry has to want to live there, too. In Westmoreland Country?”

“Yes, if such a man exists, which I doubt.” Deciding to move the conversation off herself and back onto the Outlaws, she asked, “So how many Outlaws are there?”

“Their father is Bart and he was an only child. He has five sons—Garth, Jess, Cash, Sloan and Maverick—and one daughter, Charm.”

“I understand they own a freight company.”

“They do.”

“All of them work there?”

“Yes. Bart wouldn’t have it any other way. He retired last year and Garth is running things now.”

“Well, you’re in luck with my brother Aidan getting married this weekend. You’ll see more Westmorelands than you probably counted on.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Bailey was tempted to look at him but she kept her eyes on the road. She had to add *sexy* to his list of attributes, no matter how much she preferred not to. Josette would be the first to say it was only fair to give a deserving man his just rewards. However, Bailey hated that she found him so attractive. But what woman wouldn’t? Manly, handsome and sexy was a hot combination that could play havoc on any woman’s brain.

“So were you born in Alaska or are you a transplant?” she asked him out of curiosity.

“I was born in Alaska on the same property I own. My grandfather arrived in Fairbanks as a military man in the late 1940s. When his time in the military ended he stayed and purchased over a hundred thousand acres for his bride, a woman who could trace her family back to Alaska when it was owned by Russia. What about your family?”

A smile touched Bailey’s lips. “I know for certain I can’t trace my grandmother’s family back to when Alaska was owned by Russia, if that’s what you’re asking.”

It wasn’t and she knew it, but couldn’t resist teasing him. It evidently amused him if the deep chuckle that rumbled from his throat was anything to go by. The sound made her nipples tingle and a shiver race through her stomach. If the sound of his chuckle could do this to her, what would his touch do?

She shook her head, forcing such thoughts from her mind. She had just met the man. Why was she feeling such a strong attraction to him? This wasn’t usually how

it worked with her and men. Most of the time she thought of them as a nuisance, not an attraction.

“You okay?”

The truck had slowed down for traffic again and she took a quick look over at him. She wished she hadn’t when she met those gorgeous dark eyes. “Yes, why would you think I’m not?”

“You shivered just now.”

He had to have been watching her mighty close to have known that. “Just a little chill.”

“Then, maybe I should turn up the heat.”

Turn up the heat? She immediately jumped to conclusions until he reached out toward her console and turned the knob. *Oh, he meant that heat.* Within seconds, a blast of warmth flowed through the truck’s vents.

“Better?”

“Yes. Thanks,” she said, barely able to think. She needed to get a grip. Deciding to go back to their conversation by answering his earlier question, she said, “As far as my family goes, we’re still trying to find out everything we can about my great-grandfather Raphel. We didn’t even know he had a twin brother until the Atlanta Westmorelands showed up to claim us. Then Dillon began digging into Raphel’s past, which led him to Wyoming. Over the years we’ve put most of the puzzle pieces together, which is how we found out about the Outlaws.”

Bailey was glad when she finally saw the huge marker ahead. She brought the truck to a stop and looked over at him. “Welcome to Westmoreland Country, Walker Rafferty.”