

Southern Fried

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My hands grip the reins of Luke's horse. My jaw clinches. His face contorts in discomfort and it's all the validation I need before I toss down the reins and flip my body into the saddle to take off on Captain, my horse. Captain's hooves penetrate the ground on my parent's ranch as I barrel away. Thousands of acres of pasture wiz by as I urge him into a thundering gallop to escape from the familiar hazel of Luke's eyes. Luke, the man who had been my best friend up till that morning. I can distinctly hear hoofbeats following my own, and I turn my head as my long black ponytail flips into my face.

"Stop following me, Luke, You lied. My parents lied. Just give it up," I yell before turning my attention back to urging Captain faster. I yank the reins towards a large clump of forestry I can lose them in. Captain grunts and I cringe at my lack of softness, but I can't slow down or apologize right now. I have to get away from them.

Luke's voice booms out above the pounding of the horses, "No. Damnit woman. You give it up. And listen." He cuts to my right and his horse Regent, jumps in front of Captain before we can disappear into the dense forestry. He knows me too well. Captain squeals and slides to a stop as Luke reaches down to grab his reins.

"Let him go."

"No. for once in your life, Lauren, you're going to listen to me."

I try to yank the reigns away, but he has a firm grasp holding Captain's large red roan head in place. Regent paws at the ground and his black nostrils flare uncontrollably. Both horses dance in place and snort. I jump down from Captain to stomp away. Luke isn't far behind, and before I can even put an ample distance between us, he grabs my shoulder too whip me around.

“You not twelve anymore Lauren, you are a grown adult for God’s sakes. You can’t just run away when something doesn’t go your way,” Luke says.

“Watch me,” I say. I shove him away and turn to continue stomping towards the forestry. Luke pulls me back easily and spins me towards him again.

He glares at me as his brows furrow in frustration. I am all too familiar with that look. He always got that look anytime I would take the last pancake at breakfast when he and his parents would come over. My mom was sure to make a full spread every weekend, but boy, did that man love my mama’s pancakes. Luke sighs. He runs a large hand through his curly brown mop of hair.

“Look, Lauren, I am sorry. I couldn’t tell you because your dad made me promise. After my parents died, your parents were always there for me. With this last year’s drought, the farm just wasn’t doing well. I told your dad I would buy some of the land and Three Strike so he wouldn’t get sold at auction. Is that really such a bad thing?” Luke asks.

I snort out and laugh. “Oh yeah, you have done quite well for yourself, haven’t you, Luke? You can just spend the fifty grand on my horse because my daddy says he needs it. Mind you, without even telling me.”

“I just,” Luke begins but I cut him off.

“You don’t get to talk!” My chest heaves in and out and I look around us. I rip off a twig from a nearby tree and begin ripping off the pine needles as I continue talking. “All I get to see is a trailer loading my horse when I go out to feed this morning. Then you know what my daddy says when I ask?” I lower my voice in a mock attempt to sound like my daddy. “I’m sorry baby.

Luke, bought Three Strike. My horse, the one my best friend helped me train from a foal, the one

that was taking me through to the championship. All because my daddy and my best friend told to tell me everything was fine.”

“I’m sorry. Your dad was going to lose the ranch if he didn’t pay the bank. I bought Three Strike for you,” Luke says.

“Don’t try and justify yourself. You bought him because you saw a good deal. That was your plan from the start wasn’t it? To get your grimy hands on my horse and win in the circuit,” I say as I brandish the now bare stick at him.

“Damnit Lauren, I love you! I always have.”

I jump further away from him at his words and drop the stick. Luke doesn’t seem to notice as he continues. His hands thrust out in a million different directions. The sun lands on his head causing a golden halo and he’s shadowed by the beauty of three thousand acres behind him. Tall grass, blowing in the wind. Pretty long because daddy hadn’t cut it for the hay season yet.

“The fact your stubbornness never allowed you to see it is infuriating. I bought him for you! So, your dad wouldn’t lose the ranch to the bank.”

My hands twitch at the words. My blue eyes widen with shock as I watch in slow motion and Luke advances on me. Before I can say a word, my mouth opens in the shape of a large O. My fists had been clinched but immediately relax at his words. My heart beats in a rhythm like the horses’ hoofbeats. An uncomfortable feeling of realization fills my stomach, and I sigh apologetically. I look suspiciously at the blades of grass blowing in the wind. They wink at me under the glare of the suns fading light.

“I Love you, Lauren, I always have. You’re my best friend. And if that means buying your horse, so he doesn’t end up with some other sticky-fingered jerk and you hate me for it, then so be it. But damnit, for once in your life you’re going to listen and you’re going to hear me. You’re going to feel me. You’re going to feel what I have felt all these years. Only then can you decide if you hate me,” Luke says as he continues to advance on me and I slowly back away.

I gnaw on my lip and his eyes pinpoint the gesture. I release it slowly and his gaze moves back to my eyes, searching for an answer. I ring my hands and close them for a second. When I slowly open them back up, he has continued to advance on me, and I skitter away as if in slow motion.

Every word sends me reeling till my back lightly presses against a tree and his lips are suddenly on mine. Every thought, annoyance, and frustration vanishes as I absorb the confession. The love and light I never allowed myself to acknowledge suddenly bursts forth and my lips open to his in acknowledgement. I do not have to respond, instead my body does it for him.

It is all the “I love you to,” he needs.

In the back of my head there’s a distant thought, I would never let him or anyone else take Three Strike from me. My daddy could lose the ranch because of his gambling, but Three Strike? He was mine.

I shove the thought away disgusted. I pull Luke closer against me, the smell of fresh cut pine, dirt, and horse fills my nose. My back pushes hard against the oak tree. I smile against his mouth before deepening the kiss further.