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COWBOY CRAVINGS



Morgan Ashbury

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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage Amour

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Copyright © 2009 by Morgan Ashbury

E-book ISBN: 1-60601-662-8

First E-book Publication: October 2009

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

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DEDICATION

As ever, to my biggest fan, David.

COWBOY CRAVINGS

MORGAN ASHBURY

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Chapter 1

Jesse Conrad wondered if Annie's nipples were coral-tipped, or a dusky rose. He wondered if her breasts would feel soft and supple in his hands, if they would taste sweet and addictive to his tongue. He wondered how it would feel to sink deep inside her, to have her hot tunnel convulse and squeeze his cock.

Most nights, wondering about Annie Rutherford followed him into sleep, where that wondering fueled his dreams in living, breathing Technicolor. Lately, his dreams had shown him what it could be like to have Annie spread out on his bed, gloriously wild and wet while he and his best friend, Grant, feasted on her.

Those dreams always brought him awake with a raging hard-on that he needed to get rid of the only way he knew how.

Turning his head, he focused on the glowing green numbers on his bedside clock. At four-forty-three on a Sunday morning, it was way too early to get out of bed, and he was way too horny to even try.

Reaching down the front of his body, he fisted his stiff cock. The need for an orgasm was an almost constant state of being these last few months. He didn't worry that he'd somehow morphed into a sex addict. He knew the where and the when and the why of this near constant state of arousal.

With the first rough stroke on his dick, he closed his eyes and thought of Annie. He imagined her there with him, leaning over him as she caressed his cock with her soft, hot hand and whispered kisses across his face and down his neck. He imagined the brush of her silky hair against his chest as she nuzzled his nipples, nipping lightly as she teased and aroused him. He inhaled, breathing in her woman scent, her passion a musky aroma of heat and need. In his mind's eye, he ran his hand down her bare back, caressed gently around the curve of her naked ass, dipped his fingers into her slit, testing the moisture of her passion. She dripped for him, for the both of them. The image formed, Grant sprawled out on the other side of Annie, head propped up on one hand, watching her, watching *them*.

"I want to taste you," her words, soft as a summer evening breeze, brushed his belly as he felt her ease down his body. Her hot, moist breath bathed his flesh as she pleaded, "Let me take your cock in my mouth. Let me drink your pleasure."

"God, *yes*."

Jesse groaned as his seed erupted, as the power of the climax surged out of him with a speed that would have embarrassed him if Annie really *had* been in his bed.

As he reached for the box of tissues on his bedside table, he gave thanks that this infernal waiting was nearly over. He wanted Annie.

Want. What an insipid word for the burning need that ran hot through his body for that woman. No, he didn't simply want her, he *craved* her, in the same way a parched man in the desert craved a drink of cold, clear water.

Her sweet, round face, those hazel eyes that could smile in a heartbeat, and the way her auburn hair seemed to flicker red in the sunlight all combined to intrigue and delight him. Her appearance caught his attention, but the whole of her captured him, heart and mind, body and soul. Her gentle nature and wounded spirit were matched by a quick wit and a keen mind. Everything about her

touched everything in him with a kind of simpatico he never believed in before meeting her.

He knew his best friend, who had been more like a brother than friend to him all his life, felt exactly the same way. He and Grant Douglas had seen her for the first time together. They'd both fallen instantly and hard, together. And together, they'd made a pact. Since they *were* best friends with no intention of ever letting anything come between them that could ruin that friendship, Annie would be off limits to them both. As they got to know the lady, as both of them decided to be her friends if they couldn't be her lovers, they discovered their pact had more or less been moot.

The lady, already widowed nearly a year when she arrived in their part of the country, let it be known she had absolutely no intention of having a relationship with any man or getting married ever again.

Jesse didn't need to look at the calendar to know the day Annie had arrived in town and settled in his heart was exactly one year ago today. In that year, neither he nor Grant had dated anyone. Neither of them had wanted to.

Then, just a few weeks ago, sitting out on Grant's front porch, enjoying a few beers at the end of a long, hard day, they'd spoken quietly, honestly, about their feelings for Annie, and especially about the woman herself. About all the little pieces of her past they'd gleaned over the last year. In the soft glow of the Wyoming sunset, with the Western wind kissing them and their land, they'd come up with a plan. Since they saw each other every day, they honed that plan, looked for flaws. There really was only one: the lady herself might say no.

They would do their best to convince her to say yes. Jesse thought it might not be as impossible as they feared. He felt pretty sure Annie was aware of them both as men. He'd caught the odd glance when she didn't realize he was looking. Once in a while, when he drew her attention back to him when it wandered, a sparkle would light her

eyes and a faint pink color her cheek. He bet she felt an attraction to them both regardless of her determination to remain single.

Jesse threw back the blankets and bounded from the bed. He'd shower and eat. Then he'd head on over to Grant's, wake him up out of a sound sleep if necessary.

Today was the day they'd chosen to put their plan into action. He couldn't wait another day.

* * * *

Annie Rutherford opened her eyes to a brilliant day. The bright yellow light of sunrise washed through her window. The sunspot that formed midway down her bed felt warm and comforting.

Birdsong sailed on the ever-constant breeze, drifting over the bed to serenade her. A year of living in the small town of Branchton, Wyoming, population six hundred and twelve, and she still found it strange, at odd moments, to accept the total lack of city noise.

She'd never aspired to be a country girl.

No, I aspired to be a wife and mother and look how that turned out.

Annie shook her head and pushed away the melancholy. Enough of melancholy, enough of mourning what could never be. This date on the calendar represented the first anniversary of her arrival here, the day she officially 'started over'. It was time she allowed herself to fully acknowledge her new beginning.

There were still times when the enormity of what she'd done astounded her. She'd never made any bold moves before, never dared to reach out and take something *just* for herself. Until one year and one month ago.

After her husband's death, she spent some months healing physically and getting used to being free for the first time in her life. She had no idea what would come next. She could return to her part time job as a clerk at De Luca's, a small dollar-type store in Queens.

Life could go on as usual, different, but following basically the same path as always. That would have been the easiest choice, but the image of trudging through the same old, same old just didn't feel good. Then one evening, casual surfing on the Internet led Annie to wonder about retail stores in other parts of the country. Through the vagaries of cyberspace, she'd landed on a 'for sale' listing for a general store in Branchton, Wyoming.

The sale of the business included the building that housed it with an apartment on the upper floor. Meeting the seller's price would eat three-quarters of the insurance settlement she so recently received.

Annie bought it, sight unseen.

A month later, she'd cut all ties to both her own family and to her late husband, Jim's. Without a moment's hesitation, she burned all her bridges behind her. She bought a used car, packed it with her clothes, a few books, and her childhood teddy bear, Mr. Tinkles. Everything else she left behind. The five day journey west brought her farther than just the eighteen hundred or so miles she traveled.

Annie had never looked back.

Sliding out from under the blankets, she stood, stretched, and wandered over to the window. The air smelled different here in Branchton than in New York City.

Pushing the window up all the way, she inhaled deeply. She recalled the first morning she'd smelled this very fragrance from this very window. She tried to identify the scent because it brought back wispy memories of being a little girl, of walking with her mother to the park in on the outskirts of Albany, where she grew up. Then she realized that the scent was *fresh air*.

Outside her window, Branchton slowly began to come awake. Somewhere near the edge of the small town, a dog barked. Annie smiled. That would be Elmo, little Judy Fraser's two-year-old Golden Retriever. Judy got the dog as a puppy for her sixth birthday from her maternal grandfather, who brought the animal all the way from his ranch outside Boulder, Colorado. Elmo always wanted out first thing

in the morning, and always barked at any small creature that came within sniffing range.

Some of the townsfolk would be heading into Laramie for Sunday services. Some would just spend a lazy day at home, maybe doing yard work, maybe catching a football or baseball game on television. In New York City, Sunday had been just another day. Here, Sunday actually was a day of rest.

Sunday was also the only day she didn't open her store. Her usual day-off routine consisted of tidying and laundry. She didn't really have much of either since she lived alone. Annie wished she could find something more to do, more to keep her mind busy so it couldn't dwell, as it had been doing lately, on how sterile her life had become.

She winced, wondering why her mind chose to think *that* word, specifically.

Turning, she reached for her robe, intent on following her usual routine of shower, dress, and eat.

The cry of a wild eagle cut through her thoughts, and her eyes were drawn once more to the world outside her window, a world she never imagined would ever be hers.

Sometimes, she thought she didn't really deserve this fresh chance she'd taken for herself. She didn't deserve the laughter she enjoyed from time to time, the friends she'd made here, or the peace she found.

Every once in a while, a little voice inside her said she didn't deserve to heal. Annie was getting better and better at silencing that little voice.

She'd made one bad choice when she was far too young to know better, just *one* bad choice. In a bid to escape from her father's house and the emotional battering he heaped on her for the crime of being born his daughter and not his son, she ended up marrying a man who turned out to be just like him. For the next ten years, she endured more of the same verbal and emotional abuse until that one terrible day when her world shattered.

When she awakened from the coma, she learned her husband had been killed at work during an attempted robbery. His employer carried insurance as an employee benefit, something Annie hadn't known about until the check arrived a couple of months later. She considered it an act of cosmic justice that handed her the means to escape. Released from the hospital, free from verbal abuse, she discovered the jagged pieces of her self-respect and finally began to put those pieces together.

Hot water showered down on her, and Annie closed her eyes and focused on trying to relax. As she felt the tension leeching from her muscles, as the grip of the past eased, the sense of loneliness that was never far from her conscious thoughts took its place.

Annie didn't often waste time on thinking about what might have been. But since coming to this new and interesting place, she'd had time on her hands, time she filled primarily with reading and thinking and, she guessed, healing. She tentatively made a few friends. She met and liked sleek, sophisticated, worldly Veronica, who had arrived from the east coast just a few months after Annie. She was assistant manager of the local branch of the Hopkins-Wyoming Bank.

Incredibly, the two people Annie considered herself closest to were men. Despite the fact she felt a hum of attraction for both of them, she hadn't dated either one. She didn't really plan on dating anyone, ever. It didn't seem to make any sense, starting a relationship that had nowhere to go.

As far as sex was concerned, while she couldn't claim to actually miss it—her late husband hadn't been at all interested in her pleasure—she couldn't help but wonder, now and again, just what she *had* missed. Jim said she was frigid, but as she managed to give herself an orgasm or two since coming West, she figured he probably lied about that as another means of beating her down. She'd begun to really understand in the last few months that he'd lied to her about everything, really.

Maybe she was better off not knowing what she'd missed. She wished she could turn the wondering off the same way she turned the shower off.

Besides, if she got into some kind of a relationship and started having sex, sure as hell the man involved would start to act as if he owned her. No. She'd sworn off relationships and for sure sworn off marriage. Best to leave that door closed.

Grabbing a towel, she blotted the water from her skin and did her best to blot thoughts of what she might have missed from her mind.

Maybe she would take a drive into Laramie and look for a used book store. She might grab a bite to eat before she came home. That would be a much better use of her time than thinking about the sex she wasn't likely to have anytime soon, or what might have been if she had made different choices in the past.

Neither would she allow herself to think about the stray images assailing her at the oddest times, of actually getting close to either of the two men she called friends.

Surely, if either Jesse or Grant had been interested in her in *that* way, they would have said something by now. Since they hadn't, she best concentrate on the here and now. Housework and shopping. She would leave her focus on those and leave it at that.

To do anything else would just be borrowing trouble.

Chapter 2

Rick Rutherford hated the sound of the buzzer, hated it with a passion. That one sound symbolized his life for the last two years, two months, and twenty-one days.

If he got his way, he would never have to hear it again.

“I’d wish you good luck, Rutherford. But I’m laying odds you’ll be back here before the year is out.”

Rick turned to look at the guard whose job it was to escort him to the gate. His sentence was served, every last stinking day of it. He flashed his legendary smile, the one his mother once said was a blessing and a curse. He said, “Fuck you, asshole.”

It felt good to call that screw Kowalski that and know he wouldn’t be getting a club in the gut for it. He was free, finally. He planned on staying that way. In fact, he planned on more than just being free.

Before the year was out, he would be living like a king on some Caribbean island. He didn’t give a flying fuck which island, either, as long as there was plenty of warm sand, cold drinks, and hot pussy.

The steel mesh gate creaked as inch by inch it slid back, creating an opening, a clear path between incarceration and freedom, between then and now.

Rick walked slowly, relishing the transition. According to the laws and statutes of the great state of New York, his debt to society was paid in full.

Society could go fuck itself, too.

His gaze tracked to the parking lot ahead, and the man leaning against an aging Chevy. He hadn’t seen Squirrel since he’d gone inside. He would never tell a soul he was half afraid when he woke up

that morning that he would have to hoof it to the nearest town once released. He wouldn't have been able to hitch-hike. There were signs on the interstate warning drivers against picking up strangers, and the good state of New York sure as hell wouldn't waste gas trucking his ass to town.

He ambled toward his buddy, whose real name was Eugene. Nobody called him that. He'd been Squirrel since kindergarten, the moniker earned because of the way he used to squint, before his ma got the state to get him glasses.

"Squirrel."

"Rick."

"Thanks for coming."

"Where the fuck else would I be? You're my bud."

Rick tossed his knapsack into the backseat. He took a moment, just one moment, to look back at the facility that had been his home for the past two-plus years, the medium-security pen, situated right behind the big one called Attica. A shiver wracked him and he tossed it off.

Then he got into Squirrel's car.

"So, where to? Do ya want a burger? Fries?"

"Shit, Squirrel, it's eight o'clock in the fucking morning."

"So? Got a cold six-pack under your seat. Thought beer and a burger would be a great way to celebrate getting out of that hell hole."

Rick fished under his seat, latched onto a chilled can, pulled it out. He waited until Squirrel had passed through the last security gate and was on public land before he popped the top and guzzled.

"Damn, that tastes good. Thanks, Squirrel. This'll be fine until we get closer to the city."

"So where am I taking you? Your mom's?"

That would be a good start. He knew his mom would welcome him with open arms, fuss over him as she always did. Especially since Jimmy bought it a year ago. So, yeah, he would begin there. After he

showered and shaved, he'd go over and pay his grieving sister-in-law a visit.

He and Annie had unfinished business. He nearly nailed her once, a couple of years back, just before he went to prison. If Jim hadn't gotten home from work early, he would have been banging that little cock-teaser. Probably would've given her a better ride than his prick of a brother ever managed.

Rick had been a long time without pussy with a lot of fucking to make up for.

After he fucked her, he'd persuade her to tell him where his brother hid the goods. Wouldn't be hard. Annie was a born doormat.

To hell with waiting until the right buyer could be found. Besides, with Jimmy gone, who the fuck could look for a buyer? He'd grab the stuff, roll it. They made a pact to wait it out so they could get premium dollar. But that was when the take would be split three ways. With his brother dead, that cut it down to two. He was all for making it just one, himself. No need to share anything with their other 'partner'. That had been Jimmy's deal, anyway.

"Yeah, take me to Mom's. She'll be glad to see her baby boy."

He sat back, the feeling of freedom better than the beer in his blood to give him a high. He'd been patient, though it had been hell, and now he was just days—maybe only *hours*—away from having that patience rewarded a hundred times over.

Maybe he could get Squirrel to stop, so he could pick up one of those travel magazines on the tropics. He could almost hear the pounding of the surf. He could hardly wait.

* * * *

The sound of footsteps coming up the back stairs made Annie's belly clutch for one horrible instant. Then she exhaled on a laugh, shaking her head slowly. That was a New-York-City-girl reaction, the first in a long, long while. She turned her attention to her screen door

at the same time two tall, muscle-bound cowboys appeared on the other side of it.

“Now what’s a pretty lady doing indoors on such a glorious Sunday morning?” Jesse asked.

Annie couldn’t hold back her smile. She had no idea why Jesse Conrad and Grant Douglas decided to visit, but in the last year she came to value their friendship, their quick wit, and from time to time, their strong backs.

She took the two steps necessary to flick open the hook that kept her screen door closed. She locked the door not to protect herself, but because the sometimes strong breeze would whip it open, scattering leaves and dust into her kitchen.

“I’m doing my usual day-off chores, cleaning and laundry. What’s a pair of ruggedly handsome cowboys doing away from their horses on such a glorious Sunday morning?”

Teasing banter had taken her a while to relax into, but both Jesse and Grant teased so often and so easily—not to mention so good-naturedly—that by now she was quite used to it *and* them.

“Well now,” Grant said, “it just so happens that we’ve come calling to give you these, and to invite you to come out to play with us today.”

They each extended a bouquet of flowers, yellow sunflowers and the blue-purple daisies she saw nearly every day growing wild in the fields around Branchton.

“Oh, my...thank you.” They completely surprised her. “Both of you. They’re beautiful.” She was afraid to say anything more because she felt perilously close to tears.

No one had ever given her flowers before. She swallowed against the tightness in her throat and offered her visitors a smile that felt wobbly.

“You’re welcome,” Grant said.

Jesse just tossed her a wink.

She guessed by the tender expression on both their faces that she wasn't fooling either one. Turning away, she took the flowers over to her sink.

"I'll just put these in water." She didn't have any vases, unless she went down to the store and purloined a couple. She *did* have clean, used jars on the shelf under the sink.

One large jar proved sufficient to hold water and both bouquets. She fussed over them until she felt her emotions were in check. It was only as she turned, bright smile in place, that she recalled what Grant had said.

"You want me to come out and play?" The notion struck her as a strange one. It seemed ages since she'd done anything that could even remotely be considered playing.

"We do," Jesse said. "It's been a year now, a year that you've lived in Branchton."

"This means that you're now an official Wyomingite. You're no longer an 'Easterner'." Grant's pronouncement made 'Easterner' sound like something she didn't want to step in or touch with her bare hands.

Annie set the vase of flowers onto her tiny kitchen table, right next to the cutting board she used as a center piece, then turned and leaned against the table and folded her arms in front of her chest. "I suppose you're going to tell me there is some sort of ceremony involved in becoming an official Wyomingite?"

"Oh, indeed there is," Jesse agreed.

She performed as their straight-man long enough to have provided that opening automatically. Truthfully, she hadn't blown off a day since coming to Wyoming. Looking around her small apartment told her she really could forgo cleaning this once. Alone, she didn't tend to make much of a mess. So what if the kitchen floor didn't get washed today? She could always do it tomorrow after she closed the store. The same held true with her laundry.

Why not accept their offer to go and play for a few hours?

“And this ‘ceremony’ requires that I accompany you?” She knew they could see the laughter in her eyes because both Jesse and Grant’s smiles widened.

“It does. And you don’t even need to don any protective gear.”

“Well, that’s a relief because I left my pepper spray and my panic whistle back in New York.”

Jesse’s eyes gave away a flicker of horror before he got his expression back under control. His smile was smooth and his expression more than a little flirty when he said, “I guarantee you won’t need them or anything else. Grant and I will keep you safe. That’s a promise.”

“I know you will. Do I need to change?” She put on a t-shirt and denim jeans after her shower that morning. Although it was the middle of July, the temperature rarely got as hot here as it did back in New York.

“Not one damn thing,” Grant replied. She heard a husky quality to his voice that sent a shiver of awareness skittering up her spine. That voice didn’t belong in her kitchen in the middle of a summer Sunday morning. It belonged to the twilight world of half-sleep and fantasies, the world Annie sometimes floated in as she was sinking into slumber. That voice could whisper to her softly while her hand wandered down her body to stroke and tease her sex into orgasm.

Annie blinked, unwilling to allow that thought any more room. Looking at the men, her senses told her that something was different, something had changed about the way they stared at her. Both Jesse and Grant continued to grin with those nearly identical mischief-making smiles. Did the blue of Jesse’s eyes somehow seem darker? Did Grant’s smile look sultrier than just a few moments ago?

What was in that cleaning compound I used on the kitchen counter this morning? She just barely resisted the urge to shake her head to dislodge these bizarre thoughts and half-formed images. Instead, she straightened up and dropped her arms to her sides.

“Just give me a couple of minutes to run a comb through my hair and put on some lipstick, then.”

“Take whatever time you need,” Grant said. “We’ll wait right here.”

In her bedroom, she took a look at her reflection and decided she needed a clean t-shirt, too. She picked the kelly-green V-neck top because it was close at hand, *not* because it made the green flecks in her hazel eyes sparkle. Smoothing the garment into place, Annie decided to ignore the pink tinting her cheeks. Moving quickly, she stepped into the bathroom and ran a comb through her auburn hair. She never bothered to use her curling iron, or makeup for that matter. A part of her felt those female accessories belonged to her old life. Jim would get angry if she didn’t dress herself up just so when they went out.

No. Those thoughts didn’t belong here and now. She need only please herself these days. Well, herself and those two cowboys waiting for her. And they never gave any indication she didn’t measure up.

She used a wet face cloth to remove whatever bits of dust or dirt might have found her since her shower. A few drops of moisturizer and a swipe with her lip gloss, Barely Toffee, and she was good to go.

It felt more than a little disconcerting to step back into the living room—back into their view—and have their gazes on her as if fixated, waiting on her entrance.

“Will I need my purse?”

“Nah, just your keys to lock up.”

Curiosity began to curl inside her the moment Jesse opened the passenger door of Grant’s enormous pick-up truck and she slid to the middle. No surprise they arrived together. She rarely saw one without the other. From what she understood, their ranches bordered each other’s before they merged them into one operation.

“I happened to hear you chatting with Mrs. Bishop a while back. You told her you’ve never ridden a horse, and that the closest you’ve been to one was when you drove past some grazing in nearby fields.”

Annie turned to face Grant. He spoke without looking at her, his focus on the road.

“There aren’t a great many horses in New York City, unless you want to count the ones pulling carriages full of tourists through Central Park or the few used by the police department.”

“We’re not being critical, Annie. I know that I, for one, sometimes take my horses for granted. I’ve always owned them, always been able to head out for a ride whenever I’ve wanted to be off on my own. They’re such an important part of life here we thought it time you had the chance to get a little closer to them than the side of the road.”

“You’re going to show me your ranch and your horses?” She often wondered exactly where that ranch was. Seeing their home and their livestock up close sounded like a wonderful way to spend a Sunday.

“We’re not just going to show them to you, Annie,” Jesse said, his tone taking on a teasing lilt. “We’re going to take you for a ride.”

Chapter 3

“Ohmigod!” Annie squeaked when the horse beneath her started to move.

“It’s okay, Annie. I have you.” Jesse knew she could hear the laughter in his voice. He was trying very hard to keep his amusement under wraps, but he wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

“I know. I trust you. I do. And I don’t even blame you for laughing. But holy cow, this is really high up off the ground!”

Annie clutched onto Jesse’s thighs, which was fine by him. He could feel the sweet curve of her bottom pressed up against his sex. He was more than semi hard, and wondered when the woman sitting in front of him on his horse, Drifter, would notice that.

He’d put a blanket on his stallion but not a saddle. He figured this way the ride would be more comfortable for Annie. Grant prepped his horse the exact same way and would have her with him on the way back to the ranch house.

Since all of the crew bunked at Grant’s, they began their ride from Jesse’s. Neither man wanted Annie to feel self-conscious with strangers looking her way.

“It’s not really that high up, honey,” Grant said from beside them. “The deck out your back door is over twice as high as that horse you’re sitting on.”

Jesse could tell his best friend was having as much trouble keeping a straight face and an even tone as he.

“That’s true.” Annie replied. “Of course, my deck doesn’t tend to move while I’m standing on it, either.”

She leaned back just a little more against Jesse, and he thought she might be starting to relax some. Their destination wasn't that far away, and it wouldn't take them more than fifteen minutes, all told, to get there. He and Grant didn't know how Annie would take to being on horseback, so they chose their spot as well as their method of riding with that in mind.

"Guess it would be a little bit scary if your deck *did* move," Jesse conceded. "But you don't have to worry. I won't let anything happen to you." To prove his point, he took the reins in his right hand and wrapped his left arm around her from behind, tucking her in closer. It sure wasn't a hardship having his arm around her waist and her sweet bottom nestled tight in the V of his legs.

Because he paid attention, he heard the little catch in her breathing, felt her pulse jump. He'd been thinking about this for so long, though, that he couldn't completely trust his perceptions. Annie still leaned against him, one hand braced on his thigh, but the other one settled against the arm around her waist.

Her ass nestled so wonderfully tight against him, she *must* feel his stiff cock.

The day had turned sweet and warm, the breeze a light one, a perfect summer day for a picnic. No rain threatened—not a lot of problems with that in their part of Wyoming, anyway—and the temperature promised to stay warm without inching into hot.

As they crested a small hillock, Jesse felt Annie fully relax into the rhythm of the horse. He said, "If you find you don't mind being on horseback, Grant and I thought we could teach you how to ride. If you're open to new experiences, that is."

"Now that I'm a little bit used to it, I think I like it. And I guess it would depend on the new experience you're referring to, but I like to think I have an open mind."

He shot a look at Grant whose twinkling eyes told him he caught that bit of teasing she'd thrown out.

Jesse couldn't be happier.

“There’s our picnic place just up ahead. Let’s get settled and then we can talk about new experiences, and just what you might be open to.”

He and Grant had scouted this spot earlier in the week. Here by the creek, the grass grew just a little more lushly, making the ground feel softer. On either side of the waterway, the run-off from one of the many springs on their land, cottonwoods and willows provided plentiful shade.

“It’s pretty. More....”

She stopped in mid sentence and Jesse laughed. “More like what you’re used to back east?” He finished for her.

“Yeah. I am used to seeing a lot of trees, even if I did live a dozen years in one of the boroughs of New York City.”

Her face was flushed. He gave her a hug and found he had a hell of a time keeping it friendly. “My mother used to call this area Whispering Springs. She said sometimes when she and Dad would come out here on a summer evening, they could hear the springs whispering the secrets of the universe.”

“Whispering Springs. Isn’t that what you named your business?” Annie asked him. Her voice went quiet, and he gave her an extra squeeze to acknowledge the tenderness in her tone.

“Yeah. Seemed like the thing to do.”

Grant dismounted and looped his reins over a low hanging branch. Sandstone, the chestnut gelding he’d ridden, was a gentle old horse, quite content to stay where he was put. Grant flexed his shoulders so the straps of his backpack slid down his arms. He set the bag on the grass, then came over to Jesse and Annie.

“Lift your leg over, honey,” Jesse instructed as he helped her raise her right leg over the horse’s back. He only let go once Grant had his arms up to receive her.

“Oh!”

Jesse flicked his glance down. He figured Annie's startled exclamation had been prompted by being held close by Grant, sporting as big a hard-on as he was.

"My legs are a little stiff," she said when the other man set her down.

Jesse caught the nervousness in her voice. He couldn't help but smile. Any doubts about Annie's awareness of both himself and Grant as men were gone now. When he spoke, he let the hunger he felt for her come through in both his expression and his words.

"That's just because you're not used to having your legs spread, honey."

Grant hadn't stepped away from her once he set her on the ground. He stood just on the other side of her. Jesse knew his best friend was on the same page when he said, "If you let us, we'd both like to help you with that."

* * * *

Annie felt her heart thud heavily in her chest. She knew her mouth hung open in shock, but she couldn't seem to close it. This was not what she expected when these two handsome devils came calling. They said they wanted her to come out and play, but of course they hadn't said what kind of play they had in mind. It took some effort to close her mouth. She let her gaze wander from one man to the other.

"We know how you feel on the subject of marriage and relationships," Grant said in his quiet, thoughtful way, "because over the last few months, you've said some things, and we've put two and two together. But you're far too young, and far too responsive to want to live the rest of your life like a nun."

Since both men made a point of looking at the way her nipples pebbled under her T-shirt, she couldn't deny the accusation of being responsive. Neither did she think it would be smart to tell them she only seemed to be responsive to them.

“We’ve both been drawn to you, right from the beginning, from the first moment we laid eyes on you. But we’ve been best friends forever and had no intention of letting anyone get in the way of that friendship,” Jesse said.

“When we realized our feelings for you weren’t going away, and that you didn’t want any kind of committed relationship, we thought that maybe there was a way for all three of us to enjoy ourselves without either getting mired down with expectations of marriage, or damaging a life-long partnership,” Grant said.

“We could all just be friends together...friends with benefits,” Jesse finished, flashing the sexiest grin she’d ever seen.

For a long moment, Annie couldn’t think of a thing to say. “Wow,” she finally exhaled, “that is a lot of thinking.”

“We’ve done ours. Now you do yours. Jesse and I will get our picnic set out.”

Those two rogues did *not* just propose they both become her lovers and then move right along to setting out food! Annie shook her head, a small chuckle escaping. That was exactly what they were doing.

Both men still sported erections that tested the strength of their denim, and both wore engaging, nearly cheeky grins.

Both looked at her as if she was the tastiest thing on two legs and she was about to become dessert.

A year ago, Annie would have said she was done with men and sex forever. A year ago, she *had* said that. She figured if anyone knew all she’d been through with that bastard Jim Rutherford, they certainly wouldn’t blame her. Hadn’t she just affirmed to herself this very morning that it would be best all around if she forgot about sex and relationships completely?

Over the last few months, she *had* begun to heal. And she had begun, albeit tepidly, to explore her own sexuality.

She'd masturbated for the first time in her life just a few weeks before. Annie turned away as she felt her cheeks heat at the recollection.

One of the things she'd vowed when she moved West, she would always be scrupulously honest with herself. Though difficult, she applied that principle now. She'd begun pleasuring herself for the first time one night when thinking about these two men had gotten her aroused.

"Annie? Come and eat, honey."

"I don't know how you can expect me to eat after that bombshell proposition you just dropped on me!" She turned and headed toward them. They'd set out a pretty blanket and were on the ground beside it. There were zipper bags with sandwiches and a bag of cookies. A large thermos sat off to the side, and they'd even thought to bring paper cups.

"Aren't you hungry?" Grant asked that with just enough of a twinkle in his eyes to tell her he knew she was feeling off balance.

"I'm not sure I know many women who would be hungry for *food* immediately after being propositioned with a *ménage* by two sexy studs."

"Wanna have sex, then?" And oh, didn't Jesse look just the right amount of hopeful to make her laugh? She accepted his hand and settled on a corner of the blanket, effectively between them.

"I'm thinking about it. I've never done anything like this before."

"Neither have we," Grant said. "And believe me, coming to the decision to give this a try wasn't as easy for us as you might think."

Annie stretched her legs out, sighed, and accepted a sandwich from Grant. She would have thought she would feel all sorts of uncomfortable talking with two virile, ruggedly handsome men about having sex. Especially about her having sex with *them*. She did feel some nervousness, but who wouldn't?

"I've only had sex with one man in my life. It was nothing to set off fireworks, let me tell you. He convinced me I was frigid."

“You’re not frigid,” Jesse said.

“Damn right you’re not,” Grant said.

She heard absolute certainty in both their voices.

Annie began to eat her sandwich, a pretty tasty ham and cheese, as she worked at processing the proposition she’d been handed. “The thing is, I’m not very experienced at sex. There are a whole lot of things I’ve heard about, but never done.”

“Don’t even think for one second that you would in any way disappoint us. Not going to happen.” Jesse’s vehemence coaxed a smile out of her.

“You may believe that, but I won’t hold it against you when you discover differently.” Memories from the past rushed up to flood her thoughts. Jim had left no doubt about the depth of his disappointment in her. Even before they moved to the city and he began drinking, he spared no opportunity to berate her for being a complete and utter failure as a woman. Near the end, his words had been especially cruel, his actions as he forced himself on her especially painful.

Then came the attack that changed her forever, the one that made his label of ‘failure’ become more than just a label.

There must have been something in her expression, because in the next instant Grant had her left hand in his and brought it to his lips while Jesse stroked a gentle hand down the center of her back.

“Someday, honey, when you’re ready, you’ll tell us about it,” Grant said quietly.

“It?” The painful memories evaporated. Annie’s attention focused on the two men who had turned tender in a heartbeat and were lavishing her with more pure care than she knew could exist in the world.

“The thing you think about every now and then that puts those haunted shadows in your eyes,” Jesse said.

Their sensitivity amazed her. She’d grown up with a father who had never seen her and a husband who’d never bothered to look. Neither one of them had cared about her one iota.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. She'd never told anyone about those last months, not even Veronica, the one female friend she'd made in Branchton. Maybe the past needed not so much to be shoved in the back corner, but dragged out in the light of day and treated to a full dose of sunlight.

Could she tell these men what she never before discussed with anyone? "Maybe," she said softly. But not today.

"Fair enough. In the meantime, you just said 'when we discover differently' and not 'if', which means to me that you've already decided to take us for a ride." Jesse sounded smug.

Annie blinked, her gaze going from one smiling hunk to the other. Mentally replaying her words, she realized she *had* said that. More, she understood that she *was* going to take these two cowboys up on their outrageous offer. How were they going to make that happen, exactly? They couldn't mean...her gaze wandered down to the soft, pretty blanket she was perched on.

"Here? *Now*?"

"Well, if you insist on here and now, God knows we're both ready," Grant said, popping the last of his sandwich in his mouth.

"But we'd actually prefer our first time with you to be in a more private place, like a bedroom. And on a more comfortable surface, like a bed." Jesse's voice dropped down to an almost reverent whisper. "Say yes, Annie. Say yes, then come and lay with us."

Chapter 4

Annie couldn't think, she could barely breathe. She knew if she said no to these men and what they offered, there would be no repercussions. She knew beyond a doubt that if she shied away, if she refused, they would treat her the same way they'd always done, with kindness and respect and friendship. She knew she could say no and that would be the end of it.

God help her, she didn't want to say no.

"Come on, sweetheart." Jesse's breath warmed her lips as he leaned closer, almost but not quite kissing her. "Just one word. All you have to do is say one word and we'll take care of the rest."

Oh, how tempting that sounded! How many times had she longed for someone to step in and 'take care of the rest'? She'd done every hard thing, and done it on her own. She'd lived with an abusive father, an abusive husband, and survived. But there'd been a tiny part of her, a Cinderella part longing for Prince Charming, and a fairy godmother or two, and the luxury of being taken care of.

She wasn't absolutely certain, but she thought that maybe she'd healed enough in the last year to send that Cinderella dream packing. There were possible consequences to the choice she was about to make. She would face those consequences, whatever they turned out to be. She didn't want shielding anymore, at least not from this. "I'll say the word, but I'll play an equal role in this, in whatever it is we make between us."

Jesse leaned in closer, his scent so potent her mouth watered. Beside her, Grant stroked the back of her hand, his thumb strong yet gentle, the heat of his body so close, filling hers with longing.

“Say it, Annie.”

Annie met Jesse’s gaze. Needing to taste him, needing to sample the heat and the passion she read in his eyes, she licked suddenly dry lips and said softly, “Yes.”

He moved slowly as if he would give her one more chance to change her mind. She didn’t, of course, change her mind. Instead, she stretched up to meet his lips with her own.

She expected a gentle kiss, a first kiss like the kiss-and-run she got from Pete Barton in tenth grade when he cornered her in the gym after the spring dance. This was no questing foray. This kiss was full blown, open-mouthed, go-for-the-gold splendor.

Annie sank into Jesse’s kiss, into a world of oral pleasure. Hot and wet, his mouth mated with hers, his tongue stroking her lips then plunging when she opened to him. For just one instant, she felt overwhelmed. She’d never been kissed like this, with heat and passion, as if the taste of her was *vital*. Then Jesse’s hands cupped her face, their fine tremor oddly soothing. She relaxed into the caress, into him, blocking the rest of the world from her mind.

He tasted like heat and heaven, delight and danger. His tongue didn’t coax, it demanded. Smitten, lured by the promise of ecstasy, she leaned into him, offering more, offering everything.

If he’d laid her down, stripped her naked, and taken her then and there, she would have given him a wet welcome and begged for more.

He lifted his lips from hers, his hands still on her face, his thumbs stroking her cheeks with restrained passion. She opened her eyes and felt her excitement climb at the look of glittering arousal in his. No man had ever looked at her that way, as if she was the sun and the moon and all the stars combined.

A hand stroked her back, down, then up and around to cup her shoulder. Jesse relinquished her and Grant used a single finger to turn her head, bring her attention to him.

The fire of need burned no less brightly in his eyes. Drawn, she placed her left hand on his face and moved closer, moved in.

Grant's kiss felt and tasted different from Jesse's. Annie took one second to register that fact, and then became captivated by his softly wooing touch. Here she found the questing, the sampling, the gentle persuasion. Sweet and subtle, his tongue slid and stroked, touched and tasted, teaching hers the rhythm of the dance. The heat of his arm surrounded her, and the compelling scent of his woodsy cologne combined with the power of his kiss to seduce her completely. When he eased back, she leaned forward, reluctant to let him go. When the absence of his chest plastered against hers registered, she moaned in disappointment.

"You taste good, Annie," Grant said as he rested his forehead against hers. "But if I don't stop right now, I'm going to have you naked and under me in the next two minutes."

Annie never believed herself capable of inspiring even mild passion, let alone the kind that could overwhelm a man's best intentions. But obviously she could, here was proof in duplicate. Today repudiated years of insecurity. She couldn't hold back her smile.

"Look at that siren smile," Jesse teased. Then, as if he couldn't resist, he swooped in for another quick nibble and lick of her lips. Annie wanted more and fisted his tee-shirt.

He gave in to her, but just for a moment. This time when he thrust his tongue into her mouth, hers met it with equal fervor. She blinked when he pulled back, then licked her lips to capture more of the taste of him.

"You do taste good. The reality of being with you right now is better than my dreams, and I've enjoyed some pretty damn hot dreams lately." He looked around, then put his focus back on her.

"I'm pretty sure we wouldn't be interrupted here, honey. But Grant and I don't want to take that chance. What we're planning for the three of us is way outside of convention. But it's our choice, and nobody else's business. We want to be able to guarantee you privacy, behind closed doors."

“And if we put this stuff away and get a move on, that privacy can happen in about twenty minutes,” Grant added. “If you’re sure you want us both.”

“If I’m sure?” Annie didn’t have to think about it very long or hard. She was going to be thirty-two on her next birthday and she’d lived up until today believing herself incapable of passion. To some extent, her past determined her future. She would never marry again, never have a family. There would be no hearts and flowers and happy endings for her. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy a physical relationship with two men—*two men!*—she both liked and respected. It didn’t mean she couldn’t grab whatever happiness life decided, at this late date, to hand her.

“I’ve never been this sure of anything. I want you, both of you. I know it’s outside convention. We’ve known each other a year, and I’ve been attracted to you both from the beginning. I know this won’t be permanent, but it won’t be a one night stand, either. I can’t see any reason to wait any longer. So, yeah. Let’s get a move on.”

The men had the remains of their picnic stowed in their backpacks in record time. Grant *vaulted* onto his horse. Jesse spun Annie into his arms and kissed her. Hot, hard, impassioned, he imprinted himself on her. A little taste of him to carry with her while she was riding with Grant, she thought. Her nipples peaked so hard, they pinched. Jesse broke the kiss, looked down at her breasts, and ran one hand over them.

“No one night stand, Annie. That’s a fucking promise. You’ll have us. We’ll have you. Soon, baby. Very soon, and I’m hoping, very often. Now up you go.” He lifted her into the other man’s arms.

Grant’s chest against her back felt as enticing, as hard as Jesse’s had been during the ride to this oasis, and the impression of his erection against her bottom felt just as potent and appealing. Annie became so hot, so excited, the movement of the horse beneath her was no longer a cause for concern. Instead, the motion seemed to

accelerate her arousal, the gentle back and forth swaying of her hips feeding the flames of sexual need these men had ignited within her.

She closed her eyes, worked with that motion, but couldn't quite take herself to the next level. She must have made some sort of sound, some kind of desperate whimper in frustration, because Grant wrapped one arm around her and pulled her tighter against him as he surged his hips forward. "I know, Annie. Just a bit longer. I'm going to bury my cock so deep inside of you, sweetheart, I swear you won't know where you end and I begin."

Annie wondered if she could have an orgasm just from listening to them talking about it. Grant's husky bedroom voice vibrated right through her to her sex, teasing her pussy with promises of attention to come. If she didn't feel so desperate, so needy, she'd laugh. After a lifetime spent thinking sex the ultimate overrated experience, she was acting like a nymphomaniac!

"I know you may not believe me, but I don't usually behave like this. You two have got me so aroused, I'm shaking with it." She held her hands out in front of her so they could see she wasn't joking.

"Believe me, baby, we know," Jesse said, guiding his horse closer. "It's the same for us. Good thing we have most of the rest of the day to spend together, because I think it's going to take us at least that long to quench the craving we have for you, and the one you apparently have for us."

"You don't have to worry, either, about protection. Jesse and I have been stocking up on condoms the last few weeks. We got them over in Laramie, of course, so no one around here would know."

Annie nearly told them protection wasn't necessary, but then she recalled that in this day and age there was more than unwanted pregnancy to guard against.

Just then, the path they were on curved to the left and Jesse's house came into view.

Was she crazy? She'd just made a conscious decision to have sex with two men at the same time. Not even in her wildest dreams had

this scenario ever surfaced. Even if she nurtured a cherished fantasy of having two men, she certainly never would have had the self-confidence to suggest acting on that fantasy.

Yes, she'd been attracted to both men on sight. And as she'd gotten to know them, she understood that she'd come to care for them equally. She never would have been able to choose between them. How very lucky for her she wouldn't have to.

Two barns stood well back of the house. Jesse once told her that when he and Grant decided to merge their operations, they'd chosen Grant's ranch as their headquarters. The Douglas spread had always been a bit bigger than the Conrad's, and while Grant's dad had done what he could to keep Jesse's property viable after the death of Jesse's parents, there'd been no capital improvements done during his stewardship. The year before Jesse turned twenty-one, Grant's father erected a new barn and modern bunkhouse on his own property.

"I'm almost tempted to leave the horses," Jesse murmured as they neared the barn. "But it won't take us long to see to them."

Annie thought they worked very quickly.

"What are you doing that for?" she asked as each man set to lifting his horse's legs, one at a time, and proceeded to use what looked like a pick of some sort on the hoofs.

"Checking for stones. Anything gets lodged in here, a horse can go lame," Jesse said.

Despite their obvious desire to be alone with her, both men were patient and gentle with their animals. It was clear to Annie that they cared about their horses.

She waited until the horses were in their stalls before she closed in on the men. She felt bold and sexy as hell. A novel feeling, she decided to take full advantage of it.

"We smell of horse, honey," Jesse warned as she put her arms around his neck.

"I don't care. Kiss me."

He did, his lips and tongue seeming eager to taste her again. Grant came up behind her and pressed close, his hands running up her sides, then into her hair.

She never would have thought it would be a turn-on to kiss one man while being fondled by another. She gently pulled her lips from Jesse's and stretched her neck back to find Grant's lips.

As she sucked Grant's tongue into her mouth, she felt Jesse pulling her T-shirt out from under the waist band of her jeans. His hands fluttered across the front of her breasts, his fingers dipping down to tease and stroke her nipples beneath the light fabric of her bra.

Grant pulled her shirt all the way to her neck, then used his right hand to cup and squeeze her right breast just as Jesse pressed a hand against the denim at the juncture of her thighs. It was a tease of the worst kind, drawing a moan from deep inside Annie as she surged her hips toward his touch. He obliged, rubbing back and forth.

Grant reached into her bra and pulled at her nipple, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. "Maybe the barn is private enough." Grant's words sounded as strained as his pants must have been, judging from the size of the erection he pressed against Annie's bottom.

"Yeah," Jesse agreed, and yanked open the snap of Annie's jeans. "Maybe it is."

Annie wasn't particular—bedroom, barn, as long as they did something *now*. She needed to feel their hands on her flesh. She needed them to stoke the fires they'd lit inside her.

"Shit!" Grant's soft curse snapped the thread of her arousal. Both men went stock still. At first, Annie didn't understand. And then she heard the unmistakable sound of gravel crunching under tires as a vehicle approached the barn.

Chapter 5

Jesse reluctantly lifted his hands from Annie's delectable breasts, his sigh enormous. But there was no help for it. His spread, his responsibility.

"I guess the barn *wasn't* a good idea after all. I'll get rid of whoever it is."

He took some comfort from the fact that Grant wasn't going to carry on without him, though he thought maybe he might have felt all right about it if he did.

Watching the way Annie snuggled against his friend's cock as they rode back to his ranch hadn't produced the waves of jealousy he'd feared. It only made him hornier. Despite all their discussion and planning, it was good to know the green-eyed beast wasn't going to rear its ugly head.

With one last look over his shoulder at Annie and Grant, he headed out the door to give the bum's rush to whoever had come to visit. At least he didn't have to worry about hiding his erection. Threat of discovery had deflated it in a heartbeat.

After the cool dimness of the barn's interior, the bright sun of early afternoon made him blink. In the seconds it took him to focus his eyes, both the driver and front passenger's doors of the white Cadillac opened.

"Oh, goody, we hit pay dirt on the first stop!"

Jesse looked into the delighted face of Maeve Bishop, one of the county's leading citizens—and his late mother's best friend—and he knew his plans for the afternoon had just undergone a major change.

Outside the passenger's side of the car, and looking just as delighted, stood Pam Gilchrest, the pastor's wife.

"I baked a cake and planned to surprise that sweet Annie Rutherford. She's been with us a year today, can you imagine? And just as we were getting out in front of the store, Ned Foster told us that he'd seen you and Grant driving off with Annie earlier. I said to Pam, I'll bet you those sweet boys decided to bring Annie out to one of their ranches for the day to celebrate her first year here in God's country!"

Before Jesse could think of something clever to say, Annie and Grant emerged from the barn. Jesse ran a panicked eye over them both, though he knew they wouldn't have come out unless they put themselves together first.

"Did I hear the word 'cake'?" Grant asked, his smile wide enough, Jesse thought, to hide a multitude of sins.

"You did indeed. I baked a lovely Cherry Delight cake, to celebrate Annie's first anniversary as a member of our community."

Mrs. Bishop was well noted for her Cherry Delight cake. Though the confection was definitely delicious, it certainly wasn't in the same class as tasting Annie would have been. Any protest Jesse might still have been harboring vanished at the look of pleased surprise on Annie's face.

"You baked a cake for *me*? No one has ever baked a cake for me. Thank you, Mrs. B!"

"I've got tea and coffee up at the house if you ladies would like to come in? And the cake is invited, too, of course."

Both Mrs. Bishop and Mrs. Gilchrest giggled at Jesse's invitation. Then they accepted, getting back into the car and driving it over to park it closer to the house, but not before they talked Annie into getting into the back seat so they could begin to have their 'visit' right away.

“Hell,” Grant grumbled as he strode up to Jesse. “Looks like we’re not going to have the dessert *we* planned on. At least, not right away.”

Jesse clapped his hand on Grant’s back. “Probably not today, period. Unless you can come up with a *really* good reason why those ladies should *not* save us the trouble of driving all the way into town to take Annie home when they have to go that way anyway.”

“Oh, hell,” Grant repeated. “You’re right. I have a good reason, just not one I want to share with two ladies, one of whom is a pastor’s wife.”

Jesse laughed, but only because he’d long ago discovered that misery really did love company. “Well, look on the bright side,” he said as they headed toward his house. “At least there’s cake.”

* * * *

“Hey, Billy. Hear you had yourself a good time Saturday night.”

Billy Woods looked up from his morning paper, cup of coffee in hand. He beamed a smile at Harry Gray as the older man sat down on the stool beside him. Sadie’s Café was filling up as it always did at eight o’clock on a Monday morning. Most folks hereabouts seemed genuinely glad to see the beginning of another work week. Billy thought that a marvel.

He waited until Mary Lou stopped on the other side of the counter in front of them, poured coffee into a fresh cup for Harry, and topped up Billy’s.

“The usual, Harry?” the busy waitress asked him.

“Please.”

Most people who came into Sadie’s had a usual. Billy knew that Harry’s was three link sausages, scrambled eggs, and toast. Mary Lou nodded, then made her way down the counter to serve a couple of other newcomers.

Business was brisk but never hurried at Sadie’s.

“Saturday night?” Harry reminded him, his tone quiet.

“It’s not gentlemanly to kiss and tell,” Billy said.

“Aw, come on, Billy. Have a heart. Me and Phyllis have been together for nearly thirty years. I love that woman, and I never even look much when another one walks by. The least you could do is tell me a little bit about your exploits.”

“Exploits?”

“Rumor has it you left The Powder Keg over in Laramie Saturday night after your gig in the company of not one, but *two* spectacular looking blondes. And you were nowhere to be found yesterday, which implies you didn’t sleep in your own bed. This isn’t the first time you’ve scored a double, either, the rumor mill claims. Come on, Billy, give me *something* here.”

Billy knew Harry was mostly just teasing him, though he didn’t doubt the man would appreciate a couple of details. To satisfy his audience of one he gave what he hoped sounded like a lustful sigh. “Mandy and Candy, bless their frisky little hearts. Yes, the rumors you heard were true.”

“I knew it! And?”

How much to tell? Billy set his cup down, his insouciance one of his most recognized trademarks.

Or it had been since coming to Branchton, Wyoming, six months before. He’d found his niche, too, which was really saying something. *Mother would be shocked to see how well I fit into the role of all-around handyman and local Lothario.*

Considering some of the reasons for his being the topic of conversation so often, he wouldn’t be telling his mother about *that* part of his time in Branchton any time soon. He couldn’t hold back his smile as he thought of the wild time he’d enjoyed over the weekend.

“I can tell you only that I enjoyed one of the most memorable nights of my life Saturday night.”

“Wow. My Phyllis is enough woman for me. I can’t even imagine...um...*entertaining* two ladies at the same time.”

Harry’s voice dropped to a mere whisper. Billy really *didn’t* like to kiss and tell. Sometimes, it was tough staying in character. He leaned forward and gave him just one tidbit more.

“It takes balance, timing, and stamina.”

“Oh, man. I think I’m going to start a Billy Woods fan club.” He took a sip from his coffee cup. “At least now I understand why Frank, over at the Broken Axel, won’t hire your band. I’m amazed he lets you work the bar Wednesday and Thursday nights.”

“Never seems to happen when I’m just slinging beer. Only happens when I’m behind the drums. Must be the way I handle my sticks.”

Mary Lou plunked a plate down in front of each of them as the bell over the café’s door jingled. The scent of jasmine followed the woman into the place, and with his peripheral vision, he watched as other diners checked her out.

Billy took the opportunity to admire the tall, sleek form of Veronica Ferris as she walked over to one of the tables beside the window, just behind him. He didn’t preen, nor did he hunch his shoulders. He lived so far off her radar, he doubted she even knew he existed. To her, Billy figured he was just one more hick taking up a stool in this modest café.

“She ever catch you and the guys playing a gig?” Harry asked, obviously referring to Veronica.

Billy chuckled. “Are you kidding? Ms. Ferris wouldn’t be caught dead in any of the great establishments where John and Phil and I entertain.”

Veronica was nice to look at, all Monday chic, and could have taken a seat at any of the finer bistros in any major city in the world, fitting right in. Billy had heard several of the locals comment on her ‘highfalutin’ ways’. Frank once bet him two hundred the lady would never step foot inside The Axel.

That had been shortly after Billy arrived in Branchton and begun his stint as bartender at the local saloon, which not-so-coincidentally happened to be about a week after Ms. Ferris arranged to transfer to the Hopkins-Wyoming Bank in beautiful downtown Branchton.

“She is a snooty bit of goods,” Harry agreed. “Nice enough when she’s at the bank, on duty. But outside those walls? I’m surprised she’s let down her guard enough to have coffee with Miss Annie.”

Harry’s voice took on a softer tone when he spoke of the other woman. While most of the locals treated Veronica as if she was a prissy visiting great-aunt, Annie Rutherford had pretty much become the entire community’s baby sister.

The two women made themselves comfortable, turning their coffee mugs over on their placemats for when Mary Lou made her way to them. Though the differences between them seemed too numerous to name, they did have a few things in common, coming from back East being the major one. Billy wondered at the speed with which the sophisticated Veronica had latched onto Branchton’s newest business owner. But careful reconnoitering on his part had told him exactly how she’d done it. He gave her credit. She was a clever one.

But was she clever enough?

Billy bet she wasn’t. Only time would tell if his bet would turn out to be an example of the canny use of insight, or a bust. Things had been motoring along at a steady, nothing’s-happening pace for the last few months.

That was going to change sooner, rather than later. Billy casually turned his head, blinked as if just seeing the women seated at the table behind him. Then he winked at Annie.

“Good morning there, Annie. You look all fresh and chipper today. Good morning to you, too, Ms. Ferris.”

Veronica only nodded and offered him a polite smile. Annie’s greeting was friendlier, more genuine, and took in Harry, as well.

“Hey, Billy, how are you? Hi, Harry. How’s Phyllis?”

“Just great, Miss Annie. Oh, she said she was going to pop in to the store today, on account of it being your one-year anniversary in business and all.”

“I’ll look forward to seeing her.”

Like himself and the snooty Ms. Ferris, Annie was a former New Yorker. Billy figured her blush came from a combination of shyness and still not being used to the familiar ways of the people in this town.

He turned himself back around and appeared to focus on eating his breakfast. He ate slowly, as if he had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do. Harry also devoted his attention to his food, which Billy appreciated because it allowed him to listen closely to the conversation between Annie and Veronica. Not that he expected to learn anything significant, because she was too careful and too cagey for that. But you just never knew, so it paid to pay attention.

Fifteen minutes later, the only thing he had learned was that Mrs. Bishop had baked a cake for Annie and that she’d accepted an offer from Jesse Conrad and Grant Douglas to take riding lessons— though why it would take two men to teach the woman how to ride was beyond him.

The women were fixing to leave to begin their respective business days, so Billy paid for his food, gave Mary Lou a wink and a dollar tip, and left the café.

He had two lawn mowers and one toaster to fix in his motorcycle repair shop. Good thing he wasn’t counting on his jack-of-all-trade dollars to keep body and soul together. Just as he neared his place, his right thigh vibrated.

He stepped through the door then opened his cell phone.

“Yo.”

“He’s out. Yesterday mid-morning. Tried to call you but there was no answer.”

Billy blushed. He’d forgotten his cell phone when he went to Laramie Saturday night. He’d have to make sure he didn’t forget it

again. The voice on the other end didn't sound overly annoyed, though. Besides, Billy was the boss.

"We knew he was getting out Sunday. He recover it yet?"

"No. His buddy Squirrel picked him up. After a burger stop, they drove to his mom's. Right now, it looks like he's on his way into New York City. I'll let you know if it seems he's moving to recover it. Personally, I don't think he will. Smarter to let the statute of limitations run out."

"Smarter isn't his style," Billy said. "Keep on him, and keep me informed."

Billy shut the phone and slipped it back into his pocket. Yep, things were going to start hopping soon. And he was good and ready for it.

Chapter 6

Nothing could have prepared Annie for Monday. It seemed everyone who'd ever stepped foot inside her store and lived in the Branchton area made a special point of coming in to wish her a happy anniversary.

All through the morning, she did her best to be gracious and patient. For the most part, her customers made that easy. Yet inside, she shivered with anticipation.

As she'd been getting ready to leave Jesse's house Sunday afternoon he whispered, "Monday after six". Those three words had been nearly enough to short-circuit her brain. She hoped her conversation with Mrs. Bishop, as that kind woman had driven her home, hadn't suffered unduly.

Jesse's parting words and the sly, sexy look he'd given her had kept her in a state of anticipation ever since. She had never experienced anything like the raw sexual hunger she'd tasted Sunday afternoon with Jesse and Grant. She wanted to sample that again. Hell, she wanted to gorge on both those sexy cowboys until she walked with a limp and could no longer see straight.

She could easily have lived the rest of her life never knowing this kind of craving, but now that she'd tasted them, now that she knew she was capable of such hot sexual arousal, she wanted more.

"Why just look at that nice healthy glow in your cheeks, Annie Rutherford. I think living in Wyoming agrees with you!"

Annie felt her cheeks color even more as she met the open, sunny smile of Phyllis Gray. Short and plump with a happy face and short,

curly red hair, Phyllis always reminded Annie of a younger Mrs. Claus.

“Hello, Phyllis. I saw Harry at Sadie’s Café this morning. He said I could expect a visit from you today.”

“That man of mine does love his Monday mornings at Sadie’s. Well, land sakes, look at all these flowers! I’d say you’ve been visited by a lot of folks today.” Phyllis laughed, then handed over her own bouquet of posies.

“Thank you so much! Everyone has been so kind. I’ve never seen so many flowers in one place before.”

“Oh, that’s only on account of no one’s passed on since you’ve been here in Branchton.”

Annie laughed even as she set this latest bouquet into a jar and added water. “I think next year I’m going to have to have a special anniversary sale.” She put Phyllis’s flowers on the counter.

“That’s a fine idea. But to tell you the truth, coming into this place always feels like a sale day since you took over. Old Mr. Cuthbertson never was very pleasant to deal with. I ask you, why own a store if you don’t like people? It got so if a body needed something he sold, why, you were just as likely to get one of the men folk to drive you on out to the Walmart in Laramie. But since you took over, we just come right in, never have to think twice about it. Coming in here feels just like visiting with a friend.”

“That’s so sweet! Thank you. Would you like a glass of iced tea?” Annie always kept a pitcher of iced tea on hand to serve her customers.

One of the things she learned during her brief stint as a store clerk in Queens was that customers appreciated the little things. Despite the warnings of hard times from Mr. Cuthbertson when she met him at the lawyer’s office to get the keys, business had been good this past year.

“Thank you, no. I have to be on my way. Have an appointment to have my hair done. Lisa Cantrell does it from her home these days.

You know Lisa? She and her husband have a ranch about ten minutes out. You can see it right from the road. It's the place right before you get to the Conrad place."

"I think I saw it yesterday. Frame house with pretty yellow shutters?"

"That's the one. I heard you spent some time out there yesterday. At the Conrad place, that is."

And there it was, the same note of speculative interest she'd heard from just about everyone who'd dropped by today.

She'd come very close to confessing the full truth of her activities the day before to Veronica this morning over breakfast. Though she didn't consider them to be as close as she thought Veronica sometimes did, the other woman was about her own age and came from the same geographical area of the country. Truthfully, she supposed Veronica *was* the closest thing she'd ever had to a best friend. Jim hadn't encouraged her to socialize much.

But at the last moment, she changed her mind. She wanted to keep the miracle of attracting two handsome hunks to herself. So she ended up giving Veronica an abridged version of the truth, and had been repeating *that* story about every half hour or so since. What she shared with one and all formed a part of the truth, just not all of it. Maybe she was guilty of lying by omission, but who could blame her?

"I did! What a surprise! Jesse and Grant thought that in honor of my one year anniversary, and thereby becoming a 'real Wyomingite', they'd teach me how to ride a horse. When they found out I'd never even been up close to one before, they took me for a short ride with them, first just to make sure I didn't have any height or allergy issues."

"Well, for goodness sakes! I didn't know you'd never been up close to a horse before. Those boys are just the sweetest things, aren't they? You know, they've been close as brothers all their lives, even before poor Jesse was orphaned as a teen when his folks were killed by that drunk driver over near Cheyenne. Thick as thieves, the two of

them, and if one got himself into mischief, there was the other one right alongside. Well, good for them offering their services that a way. What did you think of your first ride?”

Annie did her best not to laugh or blush. “I liked it a lot.”

“Bet you’re eager to get mounted up again!”

Oh, my. If things kept up in this vein she was going to have to close early today. She didn’t know how much more she could take. Swallowing her laughter and her embarrassment, she said, “Yes, as a matter of fact, I am.”

“Well, I always figured new experiences kept a body limbered up and young. Now, since I’m here, I was wondering if you got in any of that embroidery thread we talked about the last time I was in?”

Annie had to send away for the thread and pay retail because so far, she didn’t have enough demand for it to qualify her orders for wholesale pricing. Embroidery thread was one of the handful of items she sold at cost as a service to her customers. That didn’t bother her. She was able to make a living with a small profit on everything else, and that was all she cared about.

“It came in first thing this morning, Phyllis, and I just managed to set it out.” She accompanied the woman over to the corner of the store that held all the sewing notions, and listened politely while Phyllis went on about her twin grandsons, now eight and living in Utah.

After she rang up the sale, and waved Phyllis off, Annie took the opportunity to sit down on the stool behind the counter. Both hands cupped her face, as if by touch she could tone down her blush. She looked at the clock. It wasn’t even noon yet. She had hours to go before she could close her store and drive out for her ‘riding lesson’.

She only hoped she could get through the rest of the day with her dignity intact.

* * * *

“This has been the longest damn day,” Grant said to Jesse when he arrived at his friend’s ranch around five-thirty.

“Tell me about it. I went out chasing after those stray cows that got through the fencing on the north pasture and I didn’t think I’d get back here in time.”

“You going to shower?” Grant laughed, because his friend looked as if he’d put in a long hard day on the range.

“Yeah, heading there now. Just wanted to wait for you to get here first.”

“Is there a problem?”

“Nope. I didn’t want the lady to arrive with neither of us in sight is all.”

“You’re worried she’s going to change her mind?”

“Maybe a little. That was kind of a jarring interruption yesterday. I was afraid the combination of Mrs. Bishop and the preacher’s wife might have seemed like an omen of some sort to her. Maybe given her second thoughts.”

“I started to think that way, too. Then I decided I wasn’t giving Annie enough credit.” In fact, Grant had thought of little else once he returned home Sunday evening. If the three of them had started to make out spontaneously, or if he and Jesse had taken advantage of Annie’s hormones, then he supposed they would have cause to worry the lady might change her mind.

But as much as they lit her fires yesterday, as well as their own, he knew Annie had made a conscious decision to start an affair with them.

At least he hoped so.

Jesse headed into the house to take a quick shower. Restless, Grant left the porch steps and walked toward the corral.

At odd moments, he noticed how still everything was here. When he and Jesse combined their businesses a couple of years ago, they chose to have just one base of operations—at the Douglas homestead. As Jesse had pointed out at the time, it made sense to have their crew

combined and in one location, and since Grant's father had recently built a new bunk house, the choice of where seemed obvious.

Still, it didn't take much to look back over time and to remember the years before Brian and Beth Conrad had been killed. The quiet here, the lack of activity, just felt *wrong*. It felt as if the ranch was in limbo.

The sound of a car coming down the drive pulled Grant out of the past. Annie's ten-year-old Buick slowly approached. He began to walk toward the porch at the same moment Jesse emerged from the house. His hair still looked damp, and he buttoned his jeans as he walked. Grant looked at his watch. Showered and dressed in under five minutes. Well, when a man was motivated....

They reached her at the same time. Jesse opened the car door, and Grant reached in, unfastened her seat belt, and eased her out of the vehicle.

"You wouldn't believe the day—"

Grant didn't give her the chance to finish her sentence. He hauled her into his arms and kissed her. She wrapped herself so sweetly around him and he lost himself in the heat and the flavor of her. The first time he kissed her yesterday, she'd been shy in her response. Not now. Maybe having been interrupted the day before had been a blessing in disguise. As frustrated as he'd been at the time, he couldn't deny his craving for Annie had grown in the interim. The way she clung to him, the salacious stroke of her tongue against his own and the seductive roll of her hips as her mound cradled his erection told him in no uncertain terms her hunger had done the same.

He swept his hands down her back, taking the opportunity to cup the cheeks of her ass and give them an impassioned squeeze. Then he drew his lips from hers and took a small step back.

Jesse gathered her in, and proceeded to greet her the same way. While she was in his friend's arms, Grant shut the door to her car. Her response to Jesse was every bit as hot as her response to him. He

couldn't resist stroking his hand down her hair, letting his fingers comb through the silken strands as Jesse continued to kiss her.

Jesse lifted his lips from Annie, and as one they moved her back a couple of steps so she leaned against the side of her car.

"You're as hot for us as we are for you," Jesse said.

"I thought this day would never end!" Annie laid a hand on each of their faces. Grant turned toward her palm, kissed it, then grasped her wrist lightly with his right hand.

His left he played down the front of her, caressing her breast, continuing on down to brush at the juncture of her thighs, hidden from his view by the worn denim of her pants.

"Neither did we," Jesse said, his hand just as busy caressing and teasing Annie through her clothes.

"I wanted the clock to move faster," she whispered. Turning toward him, she stretched up and placed a kiss on Grant's mouth. When he opened to her, she only allowed a tiny dip into her mouth with his tongue before she turned to offer Jesse the same endearment.

Grant didn't think, he just moved closer. He could feel the heat from Jesse's body as they bracketed Annie. His rapid breathing was echoed by the other two. They should probably move, get inside the house, but the only thing Grant could get his body to do was cling to Annie, run his hands up and down her wonderful curves, and press his hard cock against the side of her hip.

Moaning in response, Annie let her head fall back against the roof above the driver's door as her hand traced down his chest until she stroked the denim-covered ridge of his erection.

"I thought I was frigid, and here I am making out in the middle of the day with the two hottest studs I've ever met. I've been thinking about us, about this, all day."

"You want to talk about hot?" Grant all but panted the words against the side of her neck as he angled his head to lick her creamy skin.

“Grant’s right. Annie, you’re the hottest woman either of us has ever met. Let us show you what you do to us. Let us show you what we can do to you.”

Her groan as they moved her slightly so she stood with her legs parted was all the permission they needed.

Grant stroked her crotch, the heat pulsing back at him so amazing, he bet she’d soak right through her denim before they got her naked. He slid one hand up to tangle in her hair and gently guide her face to his. His tongue swept the inside of her mouth, the rhythm the same he wanted to use as he fucked her. He didn’t know how much longer he could wait to get them all naked and horizontal.

Dragging his lips from hers, he said, “Let’s go inside.”

Jesse gathered Annie in for another kiss, his hand sweeping between her thighs and rubbing. Annie cried out, a uniquely feminine sound that told them how aroused she’d become, how close to climax she was.

“Good idea,” Jesse agreed, his breathing ragged.

They stepped back from Annie, neither of them relinquishing her completely. Grant knew he needed to keep his hand on her, keep that touch alive. He needed her, more than he’d ever needed a woman in his entire life.

He thought he might just explode if he didn’t get her in the next few minutes.

“Well, holy hell, give me a fucking break!”

Jesse’s curse and the stiffening of his body made Grant turn around to see what had irked his friend.

Not one, but two cars had turned into the lane and were headed straight for them.

Chapter 7

Annie hated being the center of attention. She felt nervous enough sitting all by herself on the back of Sandstone, the horse she'd ridden with Grant yesterday.

She really could have done without the impromptu audience of four that arrived earlier.

Jesse and Grant had stood for several moments, leaning with their front profiles against the side of Annie's car, exchanging pleasantries over the roof of the vehicle with first the Grays and then Mrs. Bishop and Billy Woods, whom the matronly woman brought along with her.

"We wanted to come and give Annie our encouragement on the occasion of her first riding lesson," Mrs. Bishop announced, a pleased smile on her face. The Grays both nodded their heads, having obviously been of the same mind.

"Me, I just tagged along for the ride because I'm nosy," Billy said.

Annie had been torn between hysterical laughter and extreme embarrassment. She'd turned innocent eyes on Jesse and Grant. She probably should have told them word about their 'riding lessons' had spread throughout the day. Actually, she had planned to do just that.

But once she'd arrived, she'd been distracted. Besides, they hadn't really let her say a word.

"Right. Well, I guess we should get started," Jesse finally said. Grant only nodded.

Annie felt such fondness for them both. Neither of them acted impatient or short with the unexpected guests. Instead, they were kind and acted genuinely pleased to see them, especially Mrs. Bishop,

whom Annie learned had been a particularly close friend to Jesse's mother.

Jesse brought Sandstone out of the barn, and together he and Grant had shown her how to saddle the gelding, and then how to mount up.

Before long, between the two of them, she'd learned how to hold the reins, how to keep her knees in and heels down, and how to coax the beast into a walk around the corral.

"You fellers should have told Annie to wear some riding boots," Harry Gray called from his perch on the top rail of the corral fence.

Phyllis gave him a swat, and Jesse chuckled. "She's likely telling him we probably did tell you and you forgot, and not to go embarrassing you that a way," Grant said quietly.

"Probably is," Jesse agreed.

"I can still recall the first time my daddy got me up on a horse. Scared the living daylights right out of me. I was only about three or four at the time," Mrs. Bishop said. "Don't ride any more, of course," she added, and Annie could hear genuine regret in her voice. "The rheumatism, you know."

"Doesn't that horse have more than one speed?" Billy asked when Annie walked Sandstone past him.

"Oh, now you hush-up, Billy-Boy," Mrs. Bishop, swatted the tall, lanky man as if he were her own son. "You're from back East, too. How many horses you ever ridden?"

"Actually, quite a few. My mother put me in dressage when I was ten. I think she had Olympic dreams on my behalf."

"You're just full of surprises there, Billy-Boy," Harry quipped.

Annie couldn't hold back her smile. She hadn't just crossed the country a year ago, she'd entered a totally different world. A world where strangers became friends, and everyone cheered everyone else on. These people had taken both her and Billy into their hearts. She figured if her fellow, former Easterner lived in Branchton the rest of his life, he'd still be called Billy-Boy when he turned ninety.

“Hope you’re enjoying yourself,” Jesse said so only she and Grant could hear. “I planned on giving you an entirely different kind of ride.”

“No kidding,” Grant commiserated. “Twice in a row. What are the odds?”

Oh, they were sweet all right. And so just exactly what she wanted and needed. “Don’t you worry about that. You will. I have it all figured out.”

For the rest of the lesson, she tuned out thoughts of other kinds of rides and focused on paying attention to her teachers—all six of them—and her horse.

The sun was sinking toward the horizon when Jesse said, “I think that’s good for the first day. I don’t want you to be sore.” And didn’t he wink at her when he said that?

“I don’t mind a little pain in a good cause,” she teased in return. “But I will bow to your expertise.”

She guessed by the way his eyes widened, he got her intentional double entendre.

“You want we should wait around, follow you home? I know you’re not overly familiar with these country roads, and it’s going to be dark soon.”

“No thanks, Harry. I told the boys here I wouldn’t take riding lessons for free. I promised after we were done in the paddock that I’d take care of their appetites for them.”

“Hope you’re fixing to make lots,” Mrs. Bishop said. “Working men can eat a mountain of food.”

“Isn’t that the truth!” Phyllis agreed.

Annie heard the approval—they did believe in returning favor for favor—and had to work extra hard at keeping a straight face. “I think I have everything covered,” she said.

Grant looked as if he were about to choke on his tongue. Jesse just smiled, looking cheeky as hell. Then he said, “We warned her how

much we could gobble down, Mrs. Bishop. And don't you worry none, we'll see Annie gets safely home when we're done."

"Never doubted it," Mrs. Bishop said. "You did pretty good for your first time, Annie. Reckon once you get yourself broke in better, you'll be able to stay in the saddle longer. Stamina builds up over time. It's all practice."

"Yes, ma'am, I hope so." Annie was going to lose it if these good-hearted people didn't clear out soon.

As if moved by her unspoken plea, the uninvited guests said their good nights and headed to their cars. With final waves and toots of their horns as they passed, they were on their way back down the lane in mere minutes.

"Um, can I get down now?" Annie asked after a moment.

"You'd better. Unless you're fixing to take care of our appetites from on back of old Sandstone, here" Jesse said.

"Oh, nothing fancy for me just yet. Not until I'm broke in better."

Jesse and Grant looked at each other, then dissolved into a fit of laughter.

* * * *

The door closed behind her and the sudden silence was palpable. Annie had taken only a couple of steps into the kitchen. She turned to look at them when she sensed they'd stopped moving and felt immediately caught by the two men who stood motionless just inside the door, staring at her.

She read hunger in their expressions, raw and visceral, and for one instant terror kissed her flesh. She knew their hunger had gone beyond merely feral and bordered on the primal. In that moment, she understood that, stripped to the basics, she was female, and these two males were about to claim her in the most elemental way possible.

The terror passed, of course, had been nothing more than the basic animal within her reacting to the animal she sensed in them. Annie

knew she was more than just a physical being responding to the instincts nature had bred in her. She was a woman with needs never met and hungers never fed.

But on this day, with these men, all that would change.

Jesse took one step toward her, and then another. And then he gathered her in, his mouth settling on hers, his kiss hot and carnal, his tongue sleek and sensual as he tasted her, as he opened himself to be tasted. Her arousal surged.

Annie wrapped her arms around him. She ran her fingers through his hair, loving the silkiness. Unable to do anything else, she pressed close to him, wanting to savor the sensation of his body tight against hers. He was hard, his cock tenting his jeans. Her pussy sensed its nearness. She felt herself grow wet, could feel her labia convulse and open in anticipation.

How could a body that had never truly known sexual pleasure understand that this time would be different?

Jesse's lips left hers to caress and sip at her cheek and neck. Grant's hand in her hair turned her head so his lips and tongue could claim hers.

Surrounded by primal male heat and desire, she surrendered to the need she felt pulsing deep within her. Her tongue stroked and tasted, swept and tangled. Her hands petted and caressed two heads, two faces, two bodies.

When they coaxed her to step back, she did. Cool air caressed her chest, and she moved her arms so that the blouse they'd opened could slide off her shoulders to the floor.

Grant unsnapped her jeans, slid the zipper down at the same time Jesse reached behind her and unfastened her bra.

Annie's knees went weak when she felt masculine hands cupping her naked breasts, long male fingers tugging and pinching her nipples. She groaned, the sound signaling the escape of feminine cravings from the dark, dank prison they'd been trapped in all her adult life.

One mouth, and then another latched on to her nipples. Teeth nipped, tongues laved, mouths suckled.

“Oh, *please*.” She knew what she needed, but could do no more than beg for it. The tug of her jeans down her legs barely registered. But then she felt her cotton panties being pulled down, felt them drop to her feet, and she knew what she sought was very, very near.

“Up, baby.”

Jesse’s urgent whisper enflamed her, and she helped as they lifted her to sit on the edge of the table. Then Grant eased her down, supine. Jesse spread her legs and she rejoiced in being naked and open wide before them. She was theirs. Maybe not forever but definitely for now, and she willed them to take what they would.

Grant bent over to feast on her, his mouth hot and wet, devouring hers. The slide of flesh, tongues, and lips sparked heat and a shivery kind of excitement that electrified her, drew her in to the maelstrom of sensations like a moth to a flame.

Jesse inserted a finger into her pussy and she bowed off the table, whimpering in need as her passion spiked, internal flames shooting for the sky.

“You are so wet, baby, so ready for us.”

She sensed Jesse stepping back, and that image became swamped by Grant’s mouth as it continued to seduce her, his hand as it wandered from breast to breast, then down, slyly, to test her liquid heat for himself.

He groaned against her lips when he inserted his fingers into her slick passage.

Jesse stepped back between her splayed legs. Grant traced his hand back up her body. She felt the brush of the back of Jesse’s hand against her opening.

Then his hot, latex-covered cock pressed against her, feeling impossibly large as he grasped her hips, leaned forward, and slowly began to enter her.

It felt as if every nerve she possessed rushed to her pussy. Gasping, she broke away from Grant's hungry mouth. "Hurry, oh please, hurry."

"Don't worry, baby," Jesse's voice sounded strained with self-mockery. "It's going to be in a hurry. I'm so damn triggered, it won't take....oh, *yeah*."

Annie couldn't manage more than a moan of bliss as Jesse's cock sank deep inside her, filling her completely. The heat of his groin against her labia, the sway of his balls against her ass as he pulled out and then sank into her again, and then again, the friction of his cock moving against her tunnel, turned her on more than anything she'd ever imagined.

Grant straightened beside her, but kept his hand busy stroking and kneading her breasts. She could see him watching Jesse and her, watching Jesse *fuck* her. She, too, turned her gaze on the man inside her. Such a look of absorption, of pure pleasure lit his face that her breath caught.

"You feel so good around my cock, baby," he whispered. Then he leaned over her, opened his eyes.

She could see the strain of his control. Sweat dotted his forehead and one bead of it slid off him, landing almost exactly between her breasts. Annie reached out to him, curling her fingers in his hair. She tugged and he came forward, heeding her unspoken demand.

Her mouth fastened onto his, her tongue drinking his flavor, stabbing and swirling greedily. And as she took Jesse's taste into her mouth, his cock into her pussy, her other hand stroked down Grant's chest, down until she brushed against the denim covered ridge of his erect penis. He leaned against her touch, and his cock grew larger.

She weaned her lips from Jesse's, met his gaze. Plying rarely used muscles, she convulsed her sheath around his cock. "Fuck me harder," she said.

"Oh, God."

She saw his control snap. Eyes glittering, teeth bared as if in pain, Jesse withdrew from her body and surged home again and again. She felt the tension in him, could smell him, the musky scent of his sweat and his sex, as he drove into her, as he pleased them both.

Then he reached down, found her clit with his thumb, and began to rub.

Annie came hard and fast, her orgasm so damn big that she wondered that she didn't fly right off the table. Jesse's one hand anchored her hips even as he continued to thrust into her and rub her clit. Grant caressed and pinched her nipples, his hands anchoring her as he bent down to take one hard pebble into his mouth and suck strongly.

Annie didn't recognize the sounds she made as ecstasy flooded her body, emptied her mind. Jesse pressed forward, a feral growl emerging from his throat. She felt his cock pulse inside her, knew he was coming, filling the latex that protected them both. She hooked her legs around his ass and lifted her pussy to press more completely against his groin, wringing every drop of pleasure from her orgasm that she could.

Annie closed her eyes as Jesse collapsed over her, his breathing as rapid and harsh as her own. She felt movement beside her.

"Nothing has ever turned me on the way watching Jesse fuck you just did," Grant said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Here, baby. I'm so horny. I need to feel your sexy mouth on my cock."

Annie turned her head, the sight of Grant's hard, naked cock instantly rekindling her fires. She'd never done this, never believed she'd want to. Yet now her mouth watered, and she could think of nothing she wanted more than to slide that hot flesh between her lips, taste Grant's essence as she pleased him.

She met his gaze and gave him a smile that felt wicked. She only needed to shimmy over toward him a couple of inches.

Trusting her men to keep her from falling, she stretched out, nuzzled his cock. Inhaling, she took in his scent, an aroma that inspired images of afternoon trysts and heated couplings.

Grant hissed in a breath and his cock twitched from the brush of her nose and the moist heat from her mouth.

Sighing, she extended her tongue, lavishing a long, slow lick as if he were an all-day sucker and she had just that long to devour him.

Then she closed her lips over the head of his cock and sucked him into her mouth.

Chapter 8

Grant closed his eyes in ecstasy as Annie's hot, wet mouth closed over his cock. She played her tongue up and down his shaft as her mouth sucked gently. The strength left his knees and he had to brace himself against the table.

He'd never felt anything so damn wonderful.

"Mmm."

The vibration of the sound she made added another dimension of pleasure. Unable to help himself, he began to thrust. Using every ounce of willpower he possessed, he kept the motion gentle. Not for anything would he hurt her, but *man* was it hard not to give in to the urge to plunge and plunge and plunge.

He opened his eyes and encountered Jesse's heated stare. He recognized the look, for he'd worn one just like it moments before. His friend was getting as turned on watching them as he himself had earlier.

Annie chose that moment to reach out and caress his balls.

"*Sweetheart.*" He couldn't form any more words. One hand stroked her hair, his fingers combing through the delicate strands while the other caressed her breasts, pinching her nipples lightly. She opened her eyes then, and for a long moment their gazes locked. Heavy lidded, passion-filled, her eyes told him she enjoyed tasting him, pleasuring him.

"I'm close, Annie." He told her, giving her warning. Some women didn't care, but they were few and far between, in his experience. His focus was on Annie, on the pleasure on her face, on the way her cheeks hollowed just slightly with every suck. Then his attention was

drawn to Jesse. His friend stepped away to dispose of the condom, but he'd returned, once more standing between Annie's legs.

Jesse was obviously aroused. It felt strange, looking at his friend sporting a woody. They'd been naked together plenty of times through their lives, countless times skinny dipping and then one memorable jerking-off contest when they were fourteen.

The strangeness passed, and the reality of the moment surged. They were both finally having the woman they wanted, and they were having her together. Jesse's gaze was fastened on Annie's mouth. His hand reached down, began to caress her pussy.

Annie sucked just a bit harder and lifted her mound toward Jesse's touch.

Grant thrust his hips, willing her to take him just a bit deeper. He looked at Jesse, and their gazes connected for just a moment.

Then Jesse smiled that cheeky grin of his, leaned over, and put his mouth on Annie's cunt.

* * * *

Veronica counted the rings, hanging up after the tenth one. Annie's apartment wasn't that big. She would have answered the phone if she'd been home.

Monday nights were the worst in this Podunk little town. Friday, after work, she could head for the slightly brighter lights of Laramie. Few of the locals asked, but when they had, she lied, telling them that she had cousins there. She figured the people here would understand the obligation of family. And she'd been right, because after the first couple of times, no one bothered to ask again.

At least in Laramie, she could go out to a halfway decent bar, hook up with someone who didn't work outdoors, and have some fun.

Restless, edgy, Veronica paced her small living room. There was nothing on television worth watching, and she'd already seen every movie she owned twice.

God, I miss New York.

There was always some place to go, someone to see, something to do in New York City. *Unlike in Branchton, Wyoming, where they rolled up the sidewalks at eight in the evening.* Well, there was that hole-in-the-wall saloon, but she wouldn't be caught dead in there.

If she had known things would turn out this way, that she'd end up in a hick town and bored out of her skull, would she have made the choices she'd made, taken that transfer six months ago?

She felt the smile slide onto her face as it always did when she focused on her goal. Yes, even knowing all that, she would have done everything exactly as she had. The payback at the end of it all was absolutely going to be worth the ennui of these last few months.

How did Annie manage to survive here? She'd grown up in Albany, moved to Queens. It wasn't just that Branchton was in another part of the country from New York—it was on another fucking planet! Yet Annie Rutherford had been here nearly twice as long as Veronica and seemed to be thriving in this backward environment.

At first, Veronica thought the other woman was a hell of a good actress with a well-honed, fine-tuned plan much like her own that allowed her to accept the bare-bones reality of life in this town with equanimity. But over time, Veronica came to the conclusion that Annie had no plan and certainly wasn't acting.

Her thoughts touched on the other former New Yorker in Branchton, Billy Woods. What a loser! She'd been suspicious when he first came to town, barely two weeks after she arrived. Three people from the same place all ending up in dot-on-the-map, Wyoming. What were the odds? He told all and sundry that he'd been drifting for a number of years, trying to find himself. Branchton was just his latest stop. Was there anything he hadn't done? Bartending, motorcycle racing, small engine repair. Hell, he even played in a band.

Couldn't be a very good band, though, because the local bar where he worked wouldn't even hire him. As weeks had turned into months and she'd seen the way he'd settled into the community here, made friends, and particularly given the fact that he tended to by and large ignore her, her suspicions had dissolved.

And why am I thinking about that loser right now, anyway?

Veronica shook her head. She turned and walked the few steps needed to enter her kitchen. She reached up to the top shelf over the stove, pulled down the bottle of scotch she kept there.

Her thoughts were disjointed because she sensed that her time in this go-nowhere place was finally coming to an end.

Something was going to happen soon. She knew of recent events back in New York. Probably any day now the shit would hit the fan. She'd covered herself, of course, but she couldn't let her guard down, not for one moment. She had to be ready to take action.

Amber liquid spilled into her glass. Holding the bottle up, she noted that it was three-quarters gone. When had she purchased it, anyway? She made a mental note to take a drive after work the next day and pick up another couple of bottles.

She would hate to run out.

Veronica's mind wandered to her work. Her duties as assistant manager of the local branch of the Hopkins Bank, grandiosely called the Hopkins-Wyoming Bank of Greater Albany County, were far less than in the Hopkins bank's head office in Manhattan. But the position here *was* considered managerial. Management positions on her résumé were necessary if she wanted to hike up that corporate ladder.

Not having put in for a transfer at some point would have looked suspicious to those back home who knew she harbored aspirations for bigger and better things. As it turned out, the opportunity that brought her here had been fortuitous, to say the least.

Veronica Ferris was on a direct path to a much better life and nothing was going to stand in her way.

So if she had to spend a little more time in this Godforsaken place, she would.

Taking her glass with her back into the living room, she eyed the phone, and then the clock. It was nearly eleven in the evening. Surely by now Annie would be home?

She dialed the number by rote and listened to the rings. Her brow furrowed when she once again reached ten with no answer.

She'd been told often enough that she was a control freak. She didn't like not knowing where Annie was, or what she was doing. Despite the rustic surroundings, this ballet she danced required intricate execution. There could be no missteps.

She watched the scotch swirl in her glass, then downed it in one gulp. Tomorrow, she'd go over to Annie's store on her lunch break and find out where Annie had been tonight. Maybe the woman was finally developing a social life. She seemed a bit different at breakfast this morning.

Actually, that would play into Veronica's hands very nicely. She'd encourage some girl-to-girl chit-chat, get an idea of when Annie would be off with her paramour, and not at home. In fact, she'd convince the other woman that it would be better to meet at his place—whoever he was—rather than have him stay with her in town. She was a business owner, after all, and needed to be careful of the image she projected. Then Veronica would know when Annie's place would be unoccupied.

The time fast approached when she'd have to get in there, and she'd rather do it with no one at home.

* * * *

Water poured down over her in a gentle trickle. Hot male bodies bracketed her. The shower, the biggest one Annie had ever seen in someone's house, easily held the three of them.

Jesse stood in front of her and Grant behind. Jesse had just finished washing her breasts and pussy with wet, soapy hands. Grant's hands were languidly caressing and cleaning her back and butt. Her hands were busy spreading soap bubbles on Jesse's cock and scrotum.

And all these years, she thought showers were a bore.

"I want your mouth on my cock, Annie," Jesse said.

Annie thought that was a fine idea. She cupped her hands to capture fresh water and rinse him. Then she started to lower herself to the shower floor.

"No, no," Grant said. "Just bend over. And spread your legs a little."

The sound of a packet being torn open told her why Grant made that request. Bending over, she took hold of Jesse's cock in her right hand, opened her mouth, and slid his cock between her lips, using her tongue to caress his shaft. He shivered in pleasure. As a reward, she used her left hand to caress and gently squeeze his balls.

Grant clamped his hands on her hips and thrust his cock into her from behind, one powerful surge that buried him to the hilt. Annie's juices flowed, her arousal igniting, her belly clutching as tiny spasms of pleasure shot through her. She sucked harder, Jesse helping her as he thrust into her mouth with almost the same rhythm Grant used.

She felt a finger slide up and down over her anus. She groaned, the spike in pleasure nearly enough to make her come.

"Oh, baby," Grant's voice rough and tremulous, "you want cock there too, don't you?"

Did she? She'd never considered it before, but the tease intrigued her. Just then, Jesse threaded the fingers of both hands through her hair, grasping hard, and Grant reached around and found her clit with his finger.

Hands on her hips and rough words, the sensation of two cocks, hot, hard, and twitching in the first stages of ejaculation proved the

last trigger she could take. Annie's orgasm overwhelmed her, tremor upon volcanic tremor of pleasure that nearly brought her to her knees.

* * * *

The bedroom was lit by only the soft glow of the light from the hallway. Annie blinked sleepy eyes and took a moment to appraise her situation.

One hot, naked male body pressed against her bare breasts, and another snuggled up against her back. Her hair still felt a little damp from her hot, steamy shower, and her body felt loose and limber from hot, steamy sex.

"What time is it?" her voice came out more like a cat's purr, and that fact pleased her immensely.

"Mmm. Nearly midnight." Jesse's voice, coming from behind her, sounded just as sleep-sexy. Annie smiled. She couldn't deny she had satisfied both of these strong, virile men. *So much for being frigid.*

"I feel that grin of yours against my back, baby," Grant said.

"I'm going to be grinning for a month," Annie responded. She yawned, then stretched.

"I hope by that comment you don't think this was just a one-shot deal," Jesse said. Annie wondered about the trace of steel in his tone.

Grant chose that moment to turn over, and Annie found herself flat on her back looking up at her two lovers who both focused on her, frowns on their faces.

"I know it wasn't. You both shot twice," Annie quipped.

"Our woman is a smart-ass," Grant said. "I like that."

Annie knew something more was called for. The truth was the sex between them had left her shaken.

She'd never craved the way she had when they all stepped into the kitchen tonight. Neither had she realized how strongly these men hungered for her. Her desire to have Grant's cock in her mouth shocked her. And when Jesse put his lips and tongue on and in her

pussy, she thought she must surely be going to die soon, because that had to have been the biggest high in all the world and nothing could ever feel better than that.

These two cowboys already engaged her emotions. Jesse made her laugh, and appealed to the care-free, slightly mad-cap side of her. Grant's deep brown eyes held promises of tenderness and care and a kind of bedrock stability she'd longed for all her life. If she wasn't careful, she would fall in love with these men and expect more than the pleasurable interlude they offered. That would never do. So her sense of humor had stepped into the breach, but she never meant to make light of what passed between them tonight.

The gazes staring down at her prompted her to set humor aside. She was glad she had two hands. One to gently caress each face.

"I do know this wasn't a one night stand. But I can't say exactly what it *is*. I don't have a lot of experience, and until very recently, never thought I would ever take even one lover, let alone two. I'm out of my depth, here. So if I come off a bit flippant, I'm sorry. I don't mean to."

Jesse bent over and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. She thought it might have been a kind of an apology for his edginess.

"Grant and I have the advantage of time over you. We've thought about having you right here, with us both, for a while now. But that doesn't mean we really have any more answers than you do," Jesse said.

"The only thing we ask," Grant added, then mimicked his friend and kissed her lips, "is that you keep an open mind."

"I can do that." Annie sighed, because although this king-sized bed was a lot more comfortable than her own, much smaller one, she knew she needed to get out of it. "I need to get home."

"Yeah. Grant's going to drive with you in your car and I'll follow, so I can bring him home. How do you feel about coming here again Wednesday night? You can have a second horse-back riding lesson, then dinner. We'll cook. And we'll see what happens from there."

“Sounds good.”

Actually, it sounded better than good. Annie had never experienced such pleasure, such bone-melting bliss as she’d just shared with these two men.

She might not have any answers, but she knew one thing with absolute certainty. She wanted to experience it again.

Chapter 9

Rick Rutherford was not a happy man.

For the last two years, two months, and twenty-one days, he'd had a plan. Yes, that plan had been altered slightly when his asshole brother got himself killed. *Stupid bastard.*

More than a year later and Rick still couldn't think of his brother's death without shaking his head at the great cosmic irony—Jimmy getting himself shot and killed during a heist at the jewelry store where he'd worked.

Mentally going over his plan, moment by moment, step by step, helped Rick survive that fucking sentence in that stinking pen. His goal had been to take the first step in that plan within a couple of hours of tasting freedom.

Here it was, his third day of the rest of his life, and *nothing* had gone right for him. His cunt of a sister-in-law had disappeared as if she'd never even fucking existed.

He came very close to decking his mother for the first time in his life when he found that out, especially when he found out his mother had known all this time she'd left.

"What do you mean you don't know where she is? She's your daughter-in-law!" He'd seethed while his mother looked at him as if she didn't know what he could possibly be upset about.

"After your brother died, she never had the time for me. It was like she blamed *me* for that fancy woman your brother had taken up with. Or for that other thing that happened, just before he died. Imagine her nerve trying to tell me my Jimmy pushed her down the stairs, causing her to lose the baby. She just wasn't woman enough to

carry a baby to term, *that's* what. Little tramp just tried to blame my boy for her being a failure as a woman."

Rick knew who his mother meant when she said 'fancy woman', of course. Jimmy never had been very good at keeping it in his pants, or keeping his mouth shut when he was getting some on the side. But in this case, the 'fancy woman' wasn't exactly a piece. Or maybe, he thought, she wasn't *only* a piece. As for the other, his brother never could control his temper, either, so he likely *had* pushed his wife down the stairs. He wouldn't share his opinions with his mother, of course. Jimmy had always been Mommy's favorite, but he was gone now.

"The super at their old apartment said Annie's been gone a year, that she took next to nothing with her and never left a forwarding address. Why didn't you tell me she moved? You must have known."

"What could you have done, being in jail? Besides, my Jimmy is dead. What do I care about his so-called wife? Like I said, she couldn't even make him a father."

If he'd known she'd lit out, he could have contacted people, found out where she landed, saved himself a shitload of time. But he couldn't tell his mom that, either. Rick just shook his head in disgust. Sometimes, talking to his mother was a complete waste of time, and this was one of those times.

Annie's leaving the way she did made Rick think that maybe Jimmy *had* told her what was what—even though he'd sworn, on his last visit upstate, that his wife remained in the dark about everything.

No, Annie likely knew, and the fucking bitch had probably fled, thinking she could get away with taking *his* loot with her.

So he borrowed Squirrel's car and was on his way to visit Annie's mother. He didn't believe for one minute that a mousy little bitch like Annie would pull up stakes and not tell her own mother where she'd headed.

No, Mrs. Smith knew where her little girl had gone. Before he left Albany, Rick would know where she'd gone, too.

He knew Annie's mother could be cowed into keeping silent about his visit. Hadn't her old man managed to keep her in her place all those years? He didn't want Annie to know he was on to her, or that he was coming. He wanted to make his reappearance in her life a complete surprise.

Rick grunted and adjusted his cock. He started to get hard just thinking about the kind of reunion he planned to have with sexy little Annie. One of the other things he spent a lot of nights dreaming about to help pass time in the pen after Jimmy died was how he would stick it to Annie.

Never far from his thoughts was that time he very *nearly* had Annie under him. If Jimmy had been just ten minutes later coming home that day, he'd have fucked her good and proper. She fought him, of course, but he'd known then she really wanted it. Really wanted *him*. All women were whores, and Annie was no different.

Maybe she'd fight him now, even though she was no longer hooked up with Jimmy. Couldn't say he'd mind if she did. He felt pretty pissed about this runaround. Her fighting would give him the perfect excuse to get rough with her. Hell, maybe he'd get rough with her anyway. *Yeah, I really like that idea.*

The loud blare of a car horn brought his attention back to the road. He'd put thoughts of fucking Annie aside for now. Maybe, if she was a good little cunt and made it up to him, if she sucked his dick real good and freely offered him her asshole, he'd take her with him to the Tropics. And when he was tired of her, he might give her ten grand or so, just so she could get herself home. He could be a generous man if she took good care of his cock.

Yeah, that sounds good. But first he needed to find her. He passed a sign that told him he was only about fifty miles from making that happen.

* * * *

“Well, girlfriend, I hear you took a riding lesson last night.”

Annie looked up into the laughing eyes of Veronica Ferris. She’d seen the woman come into the store a moment ago, and noticed that she hung back until Annie finished ringing up Mr. Busbies’ purchases.

Veronica carried a bag that smelled suspiciously of hamburgers. Obviously, she’d stopped at the café before coming to visit. Annie could count on sharing lunch with Veronica at least a couple of times a week.

“Does my getting one of those burgers hinge on whether or not I confirm what I imagine everyone in town already knows and has shared with you freely?” Annie asked. Her tummy growled and her mouth watered. She’d slept later than usual—probably thanks to the unaccustomed activity the night before—and therefore missed breakfast. She hoped she would have a slow day so she could run upstairs and at least make a quick sandwich, and to have time to put her mind back on the events of last night. But business had been booming this morning, largely due to gossip. Every single customer had remarked on her taking riding lessons from ‘the boys’, as Jesse and Grant were collectively known.

“No, I don’t need that gossip confirmed. I’m convinced of its veracity. As far as it goes, at any rate. I brought you a burger as a bribe for you to fill in the missing details. I called your place last night, hoping to talk you into coming over to watch a movie with me. But you weren’t there.”

“No. I, um, fed the men after my riding lesson. And what with one thing and another...” Annie knew the blush coloring her cheeks and her inability to put together a coherent sentence were not good signs. In the face of Veronica’s laughter, her *savoir-faire* completely disintegrated.

Veronica’s eyes fairly sparkled. “I see. Well there’s riding, and then there’s *riding*. There’s feeding and then there’s *feeding*. The rest of the town doesn’t know that you didn’t get home until well after

eleven, girlfriend, which was the last time I called you. But I do. So 'fess up. Which one of those studly cowboys were you riding and feeding last night?"

Oh, my. At that moment Annie was very grateful Veronica didn't tend toward spreading gossip. In fact, in the course of their friendship she'd not heard one word about another person pass that woman's lips.

Under the current circumstances, that was a very good thing.

"Which one?" Annie felt like a parrot, repeating Veronica's question. Why did her voice have to pick just that moment to crack? She cleared her throat, meaning to divert the question, but what came out was, "Which one—"

"Oh, my God! *Both* of them? Oh, Annie!" Veronica paused as if looking for just the right word. Then her lips curved into a definite feline smile. "Congratulations."

Annie figured there didn't seem to be much point in denying it as the truth must have been written all over her face.

"You are now my hero," Veronica continued, a thread of awe in her voice. "Here, maybe you want my burger, too? To keep up your strength? "

Annie burst out laughing, covering her mouth with both hands when it felt as if she wouldn't be able to control her mirth.

"No, just one burger, please, and thank you," she managed at last.

Veronica came around the counter to perch on the second stool Annie kept there. Opening the bag, she handed Annie one foil pouch and pulled one out for herself. Annie walked over to the soda cooler and took out two chilled bottles of water, handing one to the other woman.

"Both of them," Veronica repeated once Annie was sitting next to her. "However did you manage to talk them into that?"

"It was their idea. I'm still not really sure what the heck is happening, to be honest with you. I'm just so pleased that I *could*—" Annie had always found it difficult to talk about intimate matters. One

night, a couple of months ago during an evening of chick flicks and wine with Veronica, she let slip that she believed herself to be frigid. When prodded, she'd confessed why.

"See? I told you! From all I've heard and read, men who are selfish or controlling lovers accuse women of being frigid to excuse their own piss-poor performances. Very few women truly are frigid. So, what happens next?"

"I have no idea. They both made it perfectly clear that last night was not a one night stand. So I guess I'm just going to have to take it one day at a time, and see."

Veronica burst out laughing at her unintended pun. Annie wondered what she would have said if the door to her store hadn't opened just then. Billy Woods ambled in, looking, as he always did, to be in no particular hurry. He had his MP3 player hooked to his ear, a usual sight. Sometimes she thought he would nod his head to the beat when there wasn't even any music playing.

She knew Veronica thought the man was slow and lazy, but Annie liked Billy.

"Don't interrupt your lunch, ladies," he said, flashing them a smile. "I'll just look around a bit. Hey, Annie, are you sore today after your exercise yesterday? Or did the boys give you a break and tell you how to take care of that?"

He stood waiting for an answer and Annie felt at a complete loss. Beside her, Veronica made a strangling sound as she choked back more laughter.

"Ah, no, I seem to be fine. No, um, soreness at all. In fact, I think I could have ridden even longer than I did." *Oh, my God, I did not just say that.* She was bad, bad, bad.

"Stamina's an important quality to develop," Billy agreed. "But it's probably best to build up your time gradually until you get used to the action."

Annie felt on the very verge of losing it. She swallowed, and tried to change the subject. "I was probably as surprised as everyone else

last night to hear that you've spent some time in the saddle yourself." *Oh, that didn't come out right at all.* Billy's eyes twinkled, as if he shared her joke. But surely not. No, that was likely a figment of her just-slightly-guilty conscience. Not guilty for having ridden two saddles the night before, but rather for her conversational coquettishness.

"My mother held cherished dreams of an Olympic gold medal hung around her son's neck. Me, I just liked the feel of having a fast, hot animal between my legs. Ah, well, here I've interrupted your lunch after all. You go ahead and eat now, Miss Annie. I'll have a look-see for the items I came in for. Not even sure if you can meet my needs, but I've been constantly and pleasantly surprised every time I've come in this store." Then he paused and nodded to Veronica "Afternoon, Ms. Ferris."

Billy turned and wandered to the back of the store, the area where all the tools and odd pieces of repair parts and other gizmos were kept.

Annie slapped a hand over her mouth for the second time in a half hour. She looked at Veronica, who crossed her eyes, then laid her head down on the counter. The other woman's shoulders shook with silent laughter.

Annie could only hope Billy took his usual long time finding what he'd come in for. She needed every moment she could grab to corral the imp that had made her say those things and get herself back under control.

* * * *

Billy peeked around the shelf to check on the women. Veronica had her head down on the counter and Annie looked like she was about to choke. *Oh, well, it couldn't be helped.* Well, yes, it could have. He didn't have to choose just those *exact* words a few moments ago. But it had been kind of hard to resist.

As he listened to the expert way Veronica goaded Annie into confessing all, he felt his temper spike. Personally, he didn't care if Annie played hide the snake with both Jesse and Grant. How could he, considering he often entertained more than one bed mate at a time? Billy could be called a lot of things. A hypocrite wasn't one of them.

But he absolutely *hated* that female pit viper pretending to be Annie's friend and sucking up all those intimate details.

He put his hand up to the pod attached to his ear and adjusted the volume. This handy little device cost him a small fortune about a year ago, and had since proven to be well worth the expense. He'd worn the other one—the one that actually played music and looked identical to this one—right from the first moment he arrived in town. People were used to seeing him with it day and night. Now that things were beginning to move, he could wear this one so he could keep track of things. He'd placed two "bugs" in the store, one in Annie's apartment, and one in Veronica's. He'd hidden another couple around town, too, just in case.

When he heard Veronica was going to drop in on Annie, he'd been ready.

Between the message he'd received earlier when he'd gotten to his shop and the vibes he'd been picking up lately, it looked like things might be heating up fast. If everything went south at the same time, he didn't know if he'd be able to keep it all under control.

The time might be coming to call on some re-enforcements.

Chapter 10

Jesse watched Annie with Grant. His best friend was giving their woman another riding lesson. This time, Grant sat upon Sandstone, his preferred ride. Annie sat atop a pretty little palomino filly named Razzamatazz.

Later, they would tell her they acquired the horse especially for her. The blond quarter horse made a perfect beginner's mount. Jesse had purchased the spirited, but well-mannered, mare from a ranch just outside of Cheyenne.

Jesse folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the doorframe. Annie paid rapt attention to Grant's instructions, absorbing every bit of information he gave her. Since Annie enjoyed her first lesson Monday night, he and Grant decided to take turns giving her further instruction.

Dinner was ready. Cooking had always been a hobby Jesse enjoyed. His thoughts carried him into the past. As much as he worked hard with his dad, out on the pastures when he'd been a young teen—riding fence, chasing after wayward cows—he'd looked forward to Sundays, to time spent with his mom in the kitchen.

Jesse's attention was pulled back to the riding lesson in progress. His gaze wandered down the lane. He knew they were all pleased they hadn't drawn an audience again this afternoon. Annie seemed a little nervous when she first arrived, casting furtive glances back toward the county road that was just visible from the paddock.

Who could blame her? None of them wanted a repeat of Monday's events. None of them thought they could manage that kind of tongue-in-cheek banter a second time.

Grant looked over and nodded. Jesse left his perch, taking the steps two at a time.

They were still working their way through the parameters of this relationship, still cautiously on guard against feelings of jealousy. There hadn't been any yet and Jesse couldn't be happier.

"Molly here's been in the kitchen rustling up some grub for us," Grant announced to Annie as Jesse approached them.

"Homer's just jealous because he can't cook." Jesse teased in return, easily throwing back the familiar insult.

"I'm no great chef either," Annie said, "so I do admire a man who can cook."

"Okay, I'll learn," Grant returned, deadpan.

Jesse leaned against the corral, his right foot on the bottom slat, his arms folded on the top.

"So what do you think of your horse?" Jesse asked.

"She's a sweetheart," Annie replied. She leaned forward and ran a hand down the palomino's neck. Jesse imagined her hand running down his body in much the same way and shivered. His gaze flicked up to Grant and he could see his best friend was having the same thought.

"So what's for dinner?" Grant asked, his voice sounding a bit strained.

"Roast chicken and vegetables. It's done, in the oven, on low. It'll keep a while."

Annie must have caught the arousal in his tone. She looked at him, then over at Grant. When she met his gaze again he could tell it wasn't just the men in this ménage whose fires had been lit.

"After I take care of my horse, I'd love a shower." Annie's voice turned sultry, kicking Jesse's arousal up a notch.

"Well now," Grant said. "Water sports."

"I'm thinking one just like we enjoyed the other night," Annie said. "That is one very jazzy bathroom you have there, Mr. Conrad."

When Jesse came into his inheritance, one of the things he'd done was to renovate the master bedroom, installing an ensuite bathroom complete with a nice, round Jacuzzi tub and a shower large enough to hold a party in. Definitely money well spent.

It didn't take much for him to conjure the image of the three of them Monday night. That had been one hell of a party, no question about it. The thought of a repeat performance made him hard.

"Yeah," Jesse said. "Let's all go get wet and wild."

* * * *

Annie hadn't expected such an oasis of luxury in the middle of Wyoming cattle country. This bathroom—somehow *that* name really didn't fit—felt like uptown Manhattan meets gracious country living. No, she'd think of this lavishly appointed room as a spa—her own personal spa with her own personal attendants.

As she stretched, arms above her head and eyes closed, she imagined herself a pampered princess from early Roman times. Two virile, naked men ran soap-covered hands over her, touching every part of her body. One pair of hands cupped and tweaked and cleansed breasts and nipples, the other traced her body's curves between her legs, back and forth from belly button to ass-dimple.

A shiver wracked her and she wondered how long she'd be able to keep standing.

"Gotta love that smile," Grant's whispered words came from in front of her.

"I'm imagining you both as my sex slaves, ministering to my every want and whim."

"Works for me," Jesse's voice from behind her held the trace of a laugh, "as long as next time, you're ours."

"Oh, yeah," Annie purred, not only in response to the sensation of male hands on her flesh, but because she could picture herself as their personal sex slave, and loved the image.

“You have to say ‘master’ and everything,” Grant teased. “Maybe you can disobey us. Then we’d have to...punish you.”

Annie laughed. She never imagined sex could involve teasing and laughter and be so much fun.

Jesse wrapped one arm around her at the same moment Grant speared his fingers into her pussy. Annie cried out as the sudden orgasm swamped her. Letting go, she rode the wave, knowing her men would keep her safe, knowing this was just a tiny taste of pleasures yet to come. Grinding her hips against Grant’s busy hand, she felt her body gift him with her moisture.

“You’re so responsive to us,” he whispered, then covered her mouth with his. Hot and wet, arousing all on its own, Grant’s kiss awakened senses that had mellowed under the heat of water and glide of hands.

Jesse’s hand slid between her legs, barely brushing Grants, then back and up. One finger rubbed across her anus. Grant had touched her there the last time they’d been wet and wild together, and the sensation had shot her instantly higher. Today wasn’t any different.

Jesse began to press inward. “Okay, baby?”

She never imagined a lover touching her there, let alone using it to give her pleasure. In the last few days, her entire body had evolved into one giant erogenous zone. His touch thrilled her, reigniting her inner flame. “Mmm, yes.”

“I’ll be careful.”

She felt the tiny opening spread, felt a single finger begin to breach that ring and sink into her. Annie never imagined when she headed West that she’d be crossing so many new frontiers.

Grant rubbed her pussy lightly, his fingers tracing over her clit. Arousal climbed, and Annie obeyed her body’s urge to follow the source of the thrill. She undulated her hips slowly forward to meet Grant’s caress, back to enjoy Jesse’s, and groaned in response to the delicious sensations combining and swirling within her.

Her arms came down and her hands gripped Grant’s shoulders.

Jesse's arm felt snug around her waist. He kissed her shoulder. "Lean forward, lean on him more," he said. Annie had no thought but to comply, to bend forward, giving Jesse freer access to her ass.

He began to move his finger in and out of her in a rhythm that caused a shudder to caress her spine. Grant still had his fingers inside her pussy, but because she leaned on his shoulder, his gaze no longer locked on hers. She sensed he watched what his friend was doing to her, because he shivered, then turned his head and nipped her shoulder.

"How does that feel?" Jesse asked, his voice husky with arousal. The water continued to shower down on them, the steam swirling in the air.

"Oh, God," she responded. Needing more, Annie put more desperation in her motions.

"Brace her," Grant said as he eased her away from him to lean on Jesse. He reached up to the shelf, to where he'd put a couple of condoms.

He put the protection on in seconds. When he stepped forward, when he spread her legs, she looked down, watched as his latex-covered cock caressed the folds of her pussy.

He surged into her and Annie sighed in bliss. He moved inside her, pulling out nearly all the way and then pushing deep. The combination of the sensation of his thick cock caressing the inside of her pussy and the sight of it moving had her on the verge of climax in record time.

Jesse's chin rested on her shoulder. Knowing he watched Grant take her as intently as she did pushed her over the edge. The orgasm possessed her, every part of her, in tingling, throbbing ecstasy. Electric shocks buffeted her flesh, pebbling it, chilling her, until there existed nothing but these spasms. Wanting only to grab as much rapture as her body could absorb, she exerted muscles, closing around Grant's cock in her pussy and Jesse's finger in her ass, squeezing them as if to draw the essence of the climax out of them and into

herself. She heard a feral noise, half grunt, half scream and realized the sound came from her.

“Yes.” Grant grabbed hold of her hips, his control shattering as her climax triggered his. He thrust into her hard and fast, the expression on his face one of harsh concentration as he rode his own wave of rapture.

Annie stretched back, her arms once more going above her head, this time her fingers locking behind Jesse’s neck. Jesse wrapped both arms around her, holding her secure.

Grant braced his legs further apart, increasing the power of his penetration. Closing her eyes, she reveled in the movements of Grant’s cock and the feel of Jesse’s arms around her.

The water turned tepid and someone turned it off. Grant’s heavy breathing bathed her face when he rested his forehead against hers.

“Holy crap.”

Annie sighed. “Yeah, that about sums it up.”

He stepped back from her, then reached out and stroked a finger down her face.

“My turn,” Jesse whispered. He moved his hand up to cup one wet breast. “But I think we should move Act Two to the bed.”

“Good idea. I’m not sure how much longer my legs will hold me.”

* * * *

The reality of the three of them was so much hotter than his dreams. Stretched out on his bed, Annie rose above him. Her sexy, sultry smile warmed his heart and fired his blood. Fanning his fingers through her hair, he gripped her head and brought her down for his kiss. She was his new favorite flavor, spicy heat and cotton-candy combined.

He stroked his hand from her head to her breasts. Her nipples—dark coral as he now knew instead of only imagined—had already

stiffened with arousal. The areolas, pebbled, drew his attention, and he rubbed his finger over them.

“I want to taste you.” Not a plea, or a request, but a declaration of intent.

“I’m all yours, angel.” He needed her to know that whatever claims he and Grant wanted to make on her, she could make on them in return.

Her hair brushed his chest as Annie leaned down and began to kiss him. She swirled her tongue over his nipple. He sucked in air, the jolt going straight to his groin. He’d had no idea he could be aroused that way.

On the other side of the bed, Grant propped himself up on his elbow, intent on watching Annie, appearing totally comfortable in his own nudity.

Jesse experienced a sense of déjà vu. *Just like my favorite dream only much, much better.*

As Annie slithered down the bed, his hand trailed up her back until once more his fingers combed through her hair.

Her breath brushed his scrotum, her tongue stroked his cock. Jesse couldn’t hold back the groan. Closing his eyes, he laid his head back on the pillow, all his focus on enjoying Annie’s eager tasting of him.

“She’s got a great mouth,” Grant said.

“A fabulous mouth,” Jesse agreed.

“Mmm...never did this before you two came into my life. No pun intended.”

The combination of the vibration of her words and her wet tongue against his achingly hard dick nearly made him climax as fast as in his dreams.

“We know, sweetheart,” he said, needing to give her this. “We know that it’s a measure of how much you care for us and how much we turn you on.”

Annie lifted her head to meet his gaze, her expression thoughtful. “I do care, and you do turn me on. I don’t understand it, but I do know I couldn’t be with both of you this way if it wasn’t true.”

Annie bent back to her task, opened her mouth wide, and sucked his cock deep. Anything Jesse would have said in response to her heart-felt words was swamped as lust, sharp and heady, swamped him.

With hands and lips and tongue she worked him hard and fast. His orgasm exploded out of him, beyond anything he’d ever experienced before, completely above all of his expectations, totally beyond his control. He felt her swallow each stream as it left his body, and when he looked down, when he could look down, the pleasure on her face satisfied him that she’d enjoyed the experience nearly as much as he had.

His gaze flicked over to Grant. That man’s focus was Annie, and although he was hard—Jesse still found it odd that he would even look in that direction—he knew his friend’s desire wasn’t to take, but to give.

As soon as Annie raised herself on her hands and knees, Grant moved. Both hands on her hips, he turned her, laid her flat, and buried his face between her legs.

“Oh, God,” Annie obviously thought she’d stretch out for a short nap, but Grant’s mouth and lips, tongue and teeth, sent her climbing the ladder of heat and arousal once more. Jesse could see Grant’s tongue in her pink folds, became fascinated by the slide and swirl, the plunge and suck. Her back bowed off the bed. Her hips began to thrust against Grant’s face in short, fast jabs.

Jesse placed an arm across her chest, just under her breasts. His action joined Grant’s in holding her fast and sure against the mattress.

“Take what he gives you, baby,” Jesse murmured.

Grant moved, sliding his fingers into her. Jesse knew the other man was feeling her g-spot, stroking it back and forth, just as he himself had done the other night. A wave of climax washed over her,

making her jerk and shiver. Tiny feminine mewls turned into rising grunts of pleasure, and Jesse felt the same satisfaction as if he'd made her come himself.

Chapter 11

“At the time, it was quite the scandal. Brian Conrad was ten years older than Beth,” Mrs. Bishop confided a week later as she perused the tray of cotton thread, slowly picking out the colors she wanted. “I can still recall the day she came over, stars in her eyes, day after the Harvest Festival. She was walking on cloud nine because Brian asked her to dance, and after that dance, though she was only sixteen, no other man in the world ever existed for her.”

Annie’s heart softened. Mrs. Bishop seemed lost in her memories. Clearly, she still mourned her best friend, nearly eighteen years after her passing.

“There’s a picture of the two of them hanging in the parlor at the ranch,” Annie said. “They have their arms around each other, looking at the camera with soft smiles. You can just see they belonged together. Jesse looks like his mom.”

“Yes, he does. And he possesses her kind heart, too. But that devil’s grin and penchant for mischief? That’s all Brian. A hard worker and a sober man for the most part, was Brian Conrad. But my, could he be full of piss and vinegar when he wanted to be.”

Annie laughed, and suspected the older woman chose that old expression for precisely that effect.

“Jesse has shown me that side of himself. He and Grant seem to balance each other out perfectly.”

“They’ve been practically inseparable from the first time their mothers put them together in the same play pen at Sunday school. They couldn’t have been more than a few months old. Their birthdays

are only two weeks apart, they tell you that? Grant's the older of the two."

Mrs. Bishop flashed Annie a smile, then handed her the spools of thread she'd selected. It only took a few moments to ring up the sale and slip the thread into a small paper bag.

Mrs. Bishop scooped up her parcel. "Well, I'm off. Going to spend the rest of the day relaxing in my backyard, doing my needlepoint. Tomorrow, my oldest and his family are coming for dinner. Going to make pot roast. My Ernie really loves his momma's pot roast. You have yourself a good weekend, Annie."

"Thanks, I will. And you enjoy those grandchildren."

Sometimes, it amazed Annie how well she fit into the community and way of life here in Branchton. Customers came in, but unlike the ones she'd known in Queens, these ones seemed to have all the time in the world to visit as they shopped. Once in a while, someone would be in a rush, and full of apologies for it. That didn't happen very often. By chance or by fate, Annie had landed in a real community with real people who *cared*. People who made room for her, and made her one of their own in a way that seemed so easy and natural, she'd hardly noticed it happening until it was done.

The bell over the door jingled and she looked up. Veronica didn't often step into her store on Saturdays. Usually, she was up and off early, on her way to spend the weekend with her cousins in Laramie.

Annie guessed she wanted to get as much visiting in while she was still assigned to the bank here. She didn't kid herself. She liked Veronica, but the other woman wasn't destined for a lifetime in the wilds of Wyoming. Likely, it wouldn't be long before her sophisticated friend transferred to a new city and a new bank. If anyone had been made for climbing the corporate ladder, for bright lights and glitter, it was Veronica Ferris.

"Hi there. You don't usually spend Saturday in town," Annie said.

Veronica wrinkled her nose. "I know. Nothing against Branchton, really. But my relatives are gone for the weekend. So that leaves me

at odds. I was wondering if after you closed the store, you'd be interested in having a movie night?"

"I'm sorry. I've already got plans. I'm going out to Jesse's. Actually, I'm spending the night. I want to see if I can do that without anyone really noticing."

Veronica smiled as she waved her hand. "Don't apologize. If given the choice between spending an evening with you or playing mattress aerobics with two handsome, hunky men, I sure know where I'd be, and it wouldn't be perched in front of the television."

Annie's face heated. Funny, but she didn't feel this embarrassment when she was with her men. *Her men*. She really liked the sound of that.

"Thanks. Maybe we can, you know, plan something for next weekend. It *has* been awhile since we've had a movie night."

Veronica's smile seemed different for just a moment. Then she nodded. "Yeah, maybe we can."

As the bell jingled following the other woman's departure, Annie wondered if there was something bothering her friend. She seemed a bit distracted the last couple of times they'd been together.

She'd ask her when they went for breakfast on Monday. Since Veronica had agreed to keep her confidence, the least Annie could do was return the favor.

That's what friends were for.

* * * *

Part of the old fence line still stood, where their grandfathers first erected it when they'd established their ranches in the late nineteenth century. It stretched for about a quarter of a mile in this east-west direction, before ending at the north-south boundary line.

Grant had spoken to his parents on the phone last night, and one of the things he asked his father about was this fence line. He wanted

to take it down. Actually, he had something else in mind for this spot. He couldn't share that with the parents yet.

"Hell, son, it's *your* ranch." His father had laughed when he'd said that.

Grant countered, "Yes, but this is still your home."

In fact, the two-bedroom grandparent's house, the original ranch house his grandfather built, still stood waiting to be used when his folks, or any family, came to visit.

"Yes, it is. And when we come and visit at Christmas, we'll admire all your changes and innovations. Just as my father did mine, from the dining room table, when you tell me about them."

"Been thinking about this spot," Grant said now to Jesse.

The two men sat side by side on horseback. The sun had begun its afternoon descent. Their work day was done. In truth, only the most essential chores were done on Saturday. They'd taken to giving the crew both weekend days off, unless something demanded immediate attention.

"Yeah? What have you been thinking?"

"It's a pretty spot."

Grant watched as Jesse looked around. From where they stood, looking to the west, the trees that lined the creek where they'd taken Annie for their picnic two weeks ago Sunday were visible. Two creeks meandered within a short distance of this spot. The land here had a slight roll to it, so that it seemed maybe there might have been a ridge at one point, but that the streams that had once been rivers when the land was new had worn it down.

"It *is* a pretty spot. Nice views in every single direction. That's important"

Grant smiled. "So you've been thinking the same thing I have."

"When have we ever *not* thought the same thing?"

"Never any time important," Grant conceded. He turned his eyes back to the land. "It wouldn't be too difficult building here. There's lots of shade, and any trees planted would likely grow."

“Not too far from the road, either. Carve out a lane, maybe two.”

“One branching off yours and one off mine.” Grant nodded. “It wouldn’t have to cost that much, all in all. We’re both kind of handy, and for what we can’t do, we know those who can. Not much about this would be difficult, except maybe one thing.”

“Annie.” They said her name in unison, then laughed.

“It’s probably way too soon to speak to her about this,” Grant said. “She has it in her head that what we have together, the three of us, can’t last.” Then he looked at Jesse. “I just needed to see if you were of the same mind.”

“I don’t want another woman,” Jesse said, quietly. “I was pretty sure I was all the way in love with her before we made love.”

“Yeah, that about sums it up for me, too. I figured if we built her a place out here, then her comings and goings and ours wouldn’t be subject to gossip. In fact, we could actually all live together. Folks might talk some in town, but likely not to her face, or ours.”

“Nobody’s damn business what we do, but yeah. Our relationship is a little out of the box, so it’s probably a good idea to provide Annie with the means to protect her privacy.”

Grant nodded, satisfied. He took one more look at the views, then clicked his tongue at his horse to get the animal to move. “I wonder how long it’s going to take until she can accept that we’re in it for the long haul?”

“Of the two of us, I’m usually the impatient one,” Jesse said, sidestepping a direct answer.

Grant chuckled. “I know. Never felt this kind of antsy feeling before. Don’t like it much, I can tell you.”

“Well, shit, man, don’t go off half-cocked.”

Grant jerked his head around to look at his friend, who at the same time realized what he’d just said. They burst out laughing, causing their horses to fidget.

“I’m going to head on home and shower,” Grant said, wheeling Sandstone around to face the north. “I’ll be over after that. Anything you want me to bring for tonight?”

They’d pretty much decided to keep their time with Annie at Jesse’s. That way, there was less opportunity for tongues to wag. But Sunday, they were going to have dinner over at his place. He’d asked Rosa, his housekeeper and ranch cook, to prepare a dinner for the three of them.

“No, Homer, I think I have everything covered. And just so you don’t go feeling all inadequate, I thought we’d just heat frozen pizzas for dinner tonight.”

“Well, thank you, Molly. I do appreciate the gesture.” And he might, or might not, tell his best friend that he was taking cooking lessons on the sly.

* * * *

Rick Rutherford kept his hat pulled down and his sunglasses in place as he drove down the main street of Branchton, Wyoming. He’d flown into Cheyenne early this morning, after a trip that had begun Thursday afternoon in Buffalo. He rented a car and drove to Laramie, where he checked into the cheapest motel he could find. There he’d crashed for a couple of hours. He was still dead tired, but figured he could sleep later. It had taken him a week to get things together, scrape up the money, figure it all out. But he was here, finally, and now that he was he sure as hell couldn’t see the attraction.

He never would have figured Annie to hide herself away in such a place as this. But he supposed when a fortune in diamonds hung in the balance, a person could do just about anything.

Like serving a full sentence rather than go for parole, so that once I was out I didn’t have to check in with anyone on a regular basis.

Rick laughed when he found out where Annie had lit out to. The medium security facility that had been his home until two weeks ago was called Wyoming.

If he believed in crap like fate and destiny, he'd figure it for a sign. But he didn't go in for that New Age bullshit. He trusted no one and believed only what he could see. And he counted on nothing, so he was taking everything one step at a time.

He hadn't told his mom anything about where he'd been headed. She'd fronted him most of the money, anyway. Plus, he had some cash put away from before he went to prison. He borrowed a few hundred from Squirrel, too. Pathetic bastard was always eager to please. Rick had enough, he figured, for a few days stay at that no-tell motel, and to get his ass to Mexico once he got his hands on the gems.

It shouldn't take him that long to persuade Annie to hand over the necklace.

He slowed as he neared the center of the town and saw her store on the first pass. Branchton General Store. *Well that sure as hell was creative.* As he passed, he turned and looked. There she stood, just on the other side of the glass of the front door, turning the hanging sign from 'Open' to 'Closed'. Their gazes met for the barest of moments, and then he motored past.

He didn't think she recognized him, wouldn't have even thought he could be here, on her doorstep so to speak. His cock stirred to life with that fleeting glimpse, and it was all he could do not to turn the car around and pound on her door, then pound into her.

He would, but first he needed to case the area.

There'd been a truck stop restaurant out on the interstate, nearly all the way back to Laramie. He'd eat there, then come back. He'd hide the car, walk to Annie's, and spend a couple of hours casing the place.

Mrs. Smith only had the one address for her baby girl, and it hadn't taken much muscle on his part for her to give it to him. *Weak-willed spineless bitch.*

So he knew Annie lived in a tiny apartment above the store. If he was satisfied that things checked out, maybe he'd break in and surprise his little sister-in-law. They could have their reunion party right there in her bed tonight.

Yeah, that sounded like a real good plan.

Maybe he'd take her with him, and maybe he wouldn't. Either way, before too many more hours had passed, he sure as hell was going to take her.

Chapter 12

Uneasiness crept up her spine.

The road had become familiar to her, and Annie found it easy to allow her mind to wander just slightly as she drove out to Jesse's ranch. It hadn't taken her long after closing the store to get herself ready and out the door. It had only been ten after five when she got into her car and headed out of town.

A shiver wracked her as she descended the stairs to the empty lot behind her building where she kept her car. She couldn't say why she felt nervous, on edge. She just did. It was the kind of feeling she hadn't felt since leaving New York City. She felt as if danger surrounded her, and she needed to move quickly. As if eyes watched her every move, tracked her.

She felt like she'd been back in Queens.

She hated that feeling, couldn't understand how she'd been able to live like that for so many years. She never wanted to live like that again.

Something about the way that man looked at me as he drove past the store frightened me. She'd immediately directed her gaze to the car's license plate. Seeing the familiar cowboy on the bronco comforted her. She'd thought the symbol a horse, but had, of course, been corrected soon after getting her own Wyoming license plate.

Jesse's lane came into view, and Annie exhaled, and then immediately laughed. She hadn't realized until just then exactly how unsettled she'd actually been.

Maybe it was to be expected. Maybe the reality of having taken two lovers upset her psyche.

So what if it has? I'll get used to it. She felt the smile take over her face, and knew it was a raunchy one. She would get used to having Jesse and Grant both, because no way in hell would she give them up.

At least not until the time came for everyone to move on. Which she hoped would not be anytime soon.

The front door opened before she turned off the car.

Just look at them. Who could ever imagine that those two handsome hunks could be turned on by me?

Annie experienced another 'pinch me' moment, just a flash of seconds when she wondered if this was all a dream.

One look into the eyes of her lovers and she left her musings and her car behind.

"'Bout time you got here, woman," Jesse said as he rocked back on his heels. The motion drew Annie's attention down to his feet, which were bare.

"Time's a wasting," Grant agreed.

"I thought everything was slower paced out in the great wide West," Annie chided them as she walked toward the porch. "If I wanted break-neck, I'd have stayed in Queens."

"Thank God you didn't," Jesse quipped.

"Yeah." That was her feeling on the subject, too. *Thank God* she'd found the courage to grab a life for herself. She would never know why that ad for a general store in a small town in Wyoming had drawn her. She'd never know what had made her believe that if she just reached out, she could have a life completely different than all she had lived to that point, when all she'd ever known, really, had been a pathetic kind of hopelessness.

"Hey."

Annie came back to the present and noticed her men looking at her with twin expressions of concern. She'd come to a standstill only a few feet from the porch steps.

“Hey,” she answered back. Her smile had slipped. Realizing that, she bolstered it.

“We’ve got pizza and wine. How about we put the first in the oven, the second in some glasses, and celebrate the end of the work week?”

She tilted her head at Grant’s suggestion. It sounded good, but usually they couldn’t wait to get her naked.

“We have all of tonight and all tomorrow. We don’t want to scare you away by giving you the impression that *all* we’re interested in is sex,” Jesse explained.

Not even two full weeks, and already her men could not only read her moods, but understand them. “No need to worry about scaring me away,” Annie replied truthfully.

“But still.” Grant smiled as he said that.

Annie felt herself begin to frown and deliberately relaxed her facial muscles to prevent it. She had defined her relationship with these two men as friendship before the sex entered into it. She supposed if she wanted to maintain their friendship when the sex became history, some time spent together chatting and drinking wine was in order.

“What kind of wine?” she asked as she moved to join them.

“We’ve got red, white, and Zinfandel. We didn’t know which you preferred.”

“Cowboys who drink wine,” Annie teased as she reached the top of the steps. “Who would have ever guessed?”

She stretched up to kiss Jesse, a light, playfully teasing brush of her lips with just the barest stroke of her tongue. Then, because she was an equal-opportunity sort of gal, she treated Grant to the same greeting.

“Hey, we got couth,” Jesse complained good naturedly. Opening the door to his house, he held it for her.

“Yeah, we shower once a week and everything,” Grant added.

“Well, aren’t I the lucky one?” Annie tossed back. Usually, she got to play straight man to their vaudeville comedy routine. Not too often they let her have the punch line.

“Nah, we’re the lucky ones,” Jesse said.

“And with the right amount of wine, hoping to get luckier.”

Laughing at Grant’s quip, she held up the small canvas backpack-style bag she carried.

“I hope so, because I brought my toothbrush and a change of clothes.”

“No pajamas?” Jesse asked.

The teasing banter gave way to a ripple of arousal. Annie licked suddenly dry lips, and met first his gaze, and then Grant’s.

“Hoping I won’t need them. Hoping if I get cold in the night, the two of you will take care of it.”

“Count on it.” Grant’s voice sounded husky, and heat lit not only his eyes, but Jesse’s, as well.

Good to know she wasn’t the only one aroused. She felt her smile forming, a full smile this time, and rejoiced in the smugness of it.

“Now that we have that out of the way, let’s drink some wine.”

“Out on the back deck,” Jesse directed.

Annie set her bag down in the hallway and headed for the back deck. The nerves that had attacked her earlier had been completely vanquished, replaced by a subtler, and perhaps just as annoying, sensation.

Determined to keep things light, Annie pushed away the feeling of having just come home. Dreams of happy ever after and picket fences were for other women.

Women who could offer the ones she loved a future.

* * * *

The pizza had been reduced to crumbs. Not wanting to have to wash plates, Jesse had used paper. But since wine didn’t taste quite

right in plastic, he'd used his mom's good crystal. The sun fired the sky a soft pink-orange and the heat of the day, what there'd been of it, had passed. They'd been making small talk, just sharing each other's company. But he had in mind to share something more, so he let the silence linger for a few minutes more before he began.

"I'll never forget the day I found out my folks were gone." Jesse let the memory take him. This he allowed rarely, and only with a select few. Those he didn't know so well, those he held at arm's length, had no idea that he still mourned, that he still thought about that day when his world changed forever. His past was a part of him, had made him the man he'd become. If he wanted to give Annie all of him—not just his body, but his heart and his soul—then he had to give her this, too. And if he wanted her to share *her* inner demons, then he needed to prove to her that sharing would be safe.

"Grant and I had camped out by Stillman's Creek. It's about a half day's ride south of here. Camping out was something we did often back then. Just another Saturday night for us."

"We'd talked your dad's foreman into giving us a bottle of Jack," Grant remembered.

When Jesse met Grant's gaze, he knew his best friend understood his mood and his thoughts. Jesse smiled, because not every part of this memory was painful. He hadn't allowed the tragedy of what had happened to taint the memory of what had been.

"Two young men, nothing but open skies and a bottle of booze," Annie said softly. "That's a story written in one form or another a thousand times every year."

"Well, it was *our* first time with the liquor," Grant allowed. "But not our last."

"We awoke with the sun, feeling like we'd been rode hard and put away wet. We threw up most of what we'd guzzled the night before." All these years later, Jesse could close his eyes and see that morning play out, clear as if it had just happened.

Grant picked up the tale. “We headed back to my place because Jesse’s folks weren’t expected back until later in the day. They’d gone to Cheyenne to celebrate their wedding anniversary with a weekend at a fancy hotel, and a night on the town.”

Though it had been his parents who died, Jesse knew Grant suffered from their loss, too. Grant had been as close to his folks as he was to Grant’s.

“We knew Mom would fix us something for our hangovers,” Grant continued. “Then the house came into sight with the sheriff’s car in the driveway. We set our heels to our horses and raced for home.”

“But I knew,” Jesse said. His voice quieted as it inevitably did when speaking of that morning. “Call it intuition, call it what you will, I knew the moment I saw that black and white car sitting there that something bad had happened to my folks, that they were gone. Later, when the shock wore down, I thought it was right they’d died together. Maybe that sounds strange, but I don’t think either one of them would have wanted to go on without the other. They were that much in love.”

“I’m so sorry you lost them. From what you’ve shared, you must have been a very close family.”

Annie’s words were a balm on a wound not quite as healed as he liked to believe. When she stroked his arm and then linked fingers with him, he brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it.

“I’ve never lost anyone I loved like that.” Annie’s declaration fell into the silence. Other than to tell them she’d been widowed when they first met, she’d never talked about her past.

Jesse caught Grant’s gaze. He hadn’t planned it, but after the lost look he’d seen on Annie’s face so many times in the past, the opening was just too good to pass up.

“You’re a good woman with a good heart, Annie. You’re warm, and giving, and passionate as hell. But when we first laid eyes on you, the wounds you carry with you were almost visible. They’re there,

they're real, and Grant and I can both see them. Tell us about him, Annie. Tell us about you, and about what happened to put that haunted look in your eyes."

Her admission had been involuntary. He knew that even before she closed her eyes in the wake of his request. Would either of them push her if she refused? One look at Grant and he knew the answer to that, for both of them, was no.

She opened her eyes. Embarrassment played across her face. "I don't know how to answer that without...well, without risking your respect for me."

"There is nothing you can say that would do that," Jesse said.

"Not one damn thing," Grant agreed.

"Let's see if you say that in a few minutes."

Jesse hated like hell to see the trace of fear in her eyes. He still held her hand. He rubbed the back of it with his thumb, squeezed her fingers, the only way he knew to let her understand that he was there *for* her, and not to judge her.

"I married Jim to escape my father's house."

"I happen to know for a fact you're not the only woman to have ever done that," Grant said quietly. "I can name at least three girls we went to high school with who did the same."

"Yeah, but did they discover they ended up marrying a man just like the one they were trying to escape?"

Neither he nor Grant said anything, just let their patient silence speak for them.

"Well I did, but I didn't know what I could do about it. My mom just took the garbage her husband spewed, and I'm ashamed to admit that for a long time, I did the exact same thing.

"When we moved to Queens, things just got worse. Jim had been a successful jewelry salesman in Albany. He thought that in New York, he'd immediately rise to the top, that in the more cash heavy market his commissions would naturally soar. Only that didn't happen and he started to drink."

When she stopped talking, when a single tear slid down her cheek, Jesse's heart broke for her. On the heels of that sadness came quiet rage.

"Did he hit you, sweetheart?"

Grant's voice held suppressed fury. Jesse never doubted Grant was every bit as much in love with their woman as he. But it was good to hear the evidence of it.

Annie's nod was jerky, her eyes staring, unseeing he'd bet, at the ground. "Just once. Just once. He was dead a couple of days later."

"Once is one time too many," Jesse hoped to hell she wasn't suffering any kind of misplaced guilt because of that bastard's death. And then a sudden thought had his belly clutching.

"How did he die, Annie?" Jesse had to ask, because he realized he didn't know. But if Annie had fought back after being attacked and the result had been her husband's death, he'd move heaven and hell to help her see she should feel no guilt for that.

When her answer came, her voice sounded nearly toneless. Her hand turned cold, and he rubbed it gently.

"During a holdup. Jim worked at one of those tony stores in downtown Manhattan. The kind that always had lots of expensive baubles. But the last time I saw him was the night he hit me."

"Because you walked out on him?" Grant guessed.

For a long moment, Annie didn't answer. Then she said, quietly, "No. I was in the hospital because his punch sent me down a flight of stairs in our apartment building. I'd hit my head in the fall and was unconscious for a couple of days. I was seven months pregnant."

She looked up and the misery on her face burned a hole in his gut. "I awoke from surgery a widow, my baby dead, and my womb sterile."

Chapter 13

Annie didn't fight it when Grant scooped her up into his arms. She hadn't meant to let the memories pull her into the vortex. Though it happened less and less, there were still times when remembering would simply break her. She never knew when it would happen, either. She would literally be fine one moment and weeping uncontrollably the next.

She wished it hadn't happened now. The last thing she wanted was to reveal her past to her lovers. The past belonged *in* the past, and her lovers were the here and now. They were today.

"God, sweetheart, I am so, *so* sorry." Grant's words, just above a whisper, brought unexpected comfort, comfort she hadn't realized she craved. In the aftermath of her loss, there'd been no one to hold her.

Until today.

"Shame the bastard's dead," Jesse said. "Deprives us of the pleasure of beating the shit out of him."

With shock, Annie realized this was the first time anyone had not only offered her sympathy but had stood staunchly at her side, *on* her side. Her mother hadn't even bothered to visit her in the hospital. Finally free of an abusive husband when Annie's father died six months before, her mother behaved even more the prisoner, rarely leaving her house.

No one in Jim's family came to visit her, either. How they'd managed to get that memorial service done and the bastard buried without her was something she'd never know. But it had been the first kind thing they'd ever done for her.

Of course, his brother had still been in jail, thank God. If he'd shown up to visit her, she would have had hospital security throw him out.

Annie shivered, the image of the car that had driven slowly past her store just as she flipped the sign coming front and center in her thoughts. *That's* why she'd been unnerved. Something about that driver's profile reminded her of her former brother-in-law.

Grant must have felt her shiver because he tightened his embrace of her. "We're sorry you went through that, sweetheart. But we're very glad you survived, that you're here."

Jesse's warm hand caressed her back, stroking gently.

Annie pushed to sit up and Grant eased his hold of her. Jesse handed her one of the unused napkins left over from their pizza feast. She used it to wipe her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to fall apart like that."

"Hell, don't apologize, Annie." Grant stroked her leg. They each had a hand on her and she found she liked it a hell of a lot.

"Did you completely burn your bridges moving here?" Jesse asked.

"Yeah." Because of the comfort they gave, she found a small smile to offer them. "My mom and I pretty much don't communicate. Haven't for a long while. As for Jim's family, he only had a mother and a brother. His mom thought he walked on water. As for his brother, if I never see him again, it will be too soon. He's in prison. It's where he belongs."

"You don't need anyone else. You have the town of Branchton, if the number of bunches of flowers lining your shelves the week before last was any indication. And you have us."

Annie rested her head on Grant's shoulder. Her hand found Jesse's and she linked fingers with him.

"Good thing. Actually, it's kind of funny now. But earlier today, just for a split second, I thought I saw Rick Rutherford." And saying that out loud coursed another shiver down her spine.

“Really?” Jesse asked.

“Yeah, but it couldn’t have been him. As I said, he’s in prison. And the car had Wyoming plates. Must have just been my imagination playing tricks on me.”

“Did he hurt you in the past? The brother?”

Trust Grant to ask that. How could she answer?

“Don’t edit it for us, Annie. Give it to us straight.” Jesse’s tone, though gentle, sounded lined with steel.

“You guys aren’t going to let me get away with even a shred of my dignity intact, are you?”

“From where I’m sitting, sweetheart, you haven’t lost so much as an ounce of that. Spill it.”

“It only happened once. I was at home, alone. A Friday night. Waiting for Jim to get home from work. Rick showed up. He...he made a pass at me and when I pushed him away, he tried to force himself on me. If Jim hadn’t come home when he did....” She would not finish the sentence, or even the thought.

Jesse hissed in a breath. Beneath her, Grant tensed.

“You’re sure it wasn’t him you saw this afternoon?”

“Just my mind playing funny games. Besides, the car *did* have a Wyoming license plate.” This was *so* not where she wanted to be right now. She turned on Grant’s lap, so that she straddled him. Her gaze went from him—he moved his chair back just slightly from the table to accommodate her action—to Jesse, who’s dark gaze met hers.

“Could we change the subject now?” she asked. And decided the matter by whipping off her t-shirt.

“Feeling a little frisky, are you?” Jesse asked.

“I am. Question is, what are you two studly cowboys going to do about it?” She felt brazen and more than a *little* frisky. Jesse and Grant could turn her on with just a look—and wasn’t that a marvel?

“Whatever you like,” Grant murmured. He reached around her with a lazy kind of nonchalance and unfastened her bra. Jesse plucked it from her body.

“See, now that’s just it. I’m not really sure yet what all I like.” Annie let the coquette in her emerge. Her arousal needed no more than the heated looks being sent her way to fan it into flames.

“Is that a fact?” Grant’s tone, half teasing, half distracted as he used one finger to trace around her left breast, put a smile on her face and moisture on her panties.

“That is a fact. Any suggestions?”

“Since you ask,” Grant said. He leaned forward and captured her nipple into his moist, hot mouth and suckled strongly. Annie arched her back, a zing of heat zipping through her body, gathering low in her belly and tickling her pussy.

Her gasp came involuntarily. She felt Grant’s smile against her flesh.

He stood, wrapping his arms around her. Her legs dangled just off the ground. Jesse came up behind her, reached around and opened the snap on her jeans. The slide of the zipper sent a shiver across her skin. One strong tug and she was naked.

“Let’s move this party to the bedroom.”

Annie wrapped her legs around Grant’s hips. “Yes, let’s.”

* * * *

A sense of wonder filled Grant as his hands trailed down Annie’s body, mapping her. Soft and silky, lovely and lush, the sensation of her flesh under his fingers filled him with so many emotions. Hunger. Lust. Love.

“Let me look at you, baby. Let me look and touch and taste.” He made his words soft, his tone reverent because anything else would be wrong.

He loved the way she blushed when he adored her, when he let her see what being with her like this did to him, meant to him. Propped on his elbow, naked on the bed beside her, he stroked and caressed and set about arousing them both.

They were alone in the bedroom. Jesse would join them, but *after*. This was their first time alone together. Tomorrow, Jesse would experience the privilege of having their woman all to himself.

Grant enjoyed the time the three of them had spent together in love play. He looked forward to many more sessions in this big bed, or wherever else they happened to be when the need overwhelmed them. But he rejoiced that there could be times like this, too. Times when it would be just him and his lady. Together and alone.

“You make me feel so special,” Annie said. The pink decorating her cheeks warmed his heart and infuriated him at the same time. She deserved to be cherished. That she hadn’t been, that she’d been abused, wounded him. He wouldn’t think about that now. Thinking about all that she’d shared with them earlier would just make him angry. It wasn’t his anger Annie needed right now. One thing was certain, though.

No one would ever hurt her again.

Grant pushed all else aside. Only Annie mattered. One response came to mind, and he needed her to know the truth. “You are special. You’re *wonderful*.”

Leaning over her, he traced a line from just under her eye to just below the sweet little bow of her mouth. Her lips parted slightly and her tongue, glistening wet, stroked her bottom lip.

Drawn, he kissed her. Light, tasting, his lips sipped, his tongue caressed the trail hers had left. When she inhaled, when she opened, he drank in all of her. Warm, wet, her flavor burst in his mouth, a sexy-sweet confection he wanted to gorge himself on again and again.

Heat shot up in him, waves of sexual heat that whispered demands, curled in sensual images so that he could do nothing else but touch her, love her. Annie responded to his touch, her nipple peaking, her back arching. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers playing through his hair as she returned his kiss. She knew just how to taste him now, understood that she could demand as much as he, and he found her slight aggression very arousing.

Needing more, he broke the kiss. Rising up on his knees, he maneuvered so that he knelt before her. He lifted her legs, parted them, and splayed them on either side of him.

He saw the moment she realized how open she was to him. For one instant, her legs tensed, as if she would close them, shield herself from his sight.

"It's all right, Annie. You're safe. And this is so pretty." He reached down, drew one finger from just above her clit, downward, stroking her pussy. He grinned as her labia convulsed in response to the teasing touch, those luscious lower lips seeming as if they would suck his finger right inside.

"No one has ever said that," Annie said. "No one has ever looked or touched the way you do. It gets me so hot."

"Yeah?" He'd been stroking his finger up and down in a light caress. He felt her moisture increase as it gathered, preparing her.

He pushed forward, his finger going in, going deep. Sleek and sultry, her flesh closed around him, the ripple of inner muscles a siren call to his cock. Looking down, he caught sight of the bead of moisture on its tip, his own body's way of preparing to plunge into female flesh.

"Grant!" Annie bowed off the bed, her hips pushing forward, her sex chasing his finger when he withdrew it. When he pushed it into her again, she made a needy sound at the back of her throat.

"Yes, Annie?"

As a rule, he wasn't much of a kidder the way Jesse could be, but he could certainly see the appeal in playing coy.

"More. Give me more."

"You want two fingers? You've got it, sweetheart."

She was hot enough and wet enough that two fingers slid into her easily. Once inside, he spread them, stroking the walls of her canal. Annie whimpered and panted, pushing harder against him in her need for even more stimulation.

This kind of love play had one drawback. Grant didn't know how much longer he could resist what he needed most—sinking balls-deep into her.

He used his thumb to stroke her clit. The light abrasion coaxed the small bud out of hiding, until it stood erect and swollen. Annie pistoned her hips, her breathing ragged as she neared her climax.

Grant leaned forward, his left hand snagging the plastic packet on the bedside table. His fingers continued to work her as he used his teeth to open the package. He rolled the latex on with one hand.

"Do you want more, baby?"

Annie focused on him, then reached for his cock. Her hand sliding against the condom sent shivers through him. His cock twitched, needy and greedy, and ready.

"Inside me. Now."

Grant needed no further urging. Pulling his fingers from her hot, slick pussy, he leaned forward. Her hand guided him to her opening.

He rode one long silky glide to heaven.

"Oh, yes," Annie cried out. She wrapped arms and legs around him, her limbs holding him as surely as her velvety tunnel throbbed and held his cock. He rode her orgasm, pulling out and sinking home, again and again as the waves of rapture drenched her. He felt that moment when her climax began to ebb. Sliding an arm under her bottom, he lifted her to him as his lips found hers and his hips began to thrust in rapid rhythm.

Grant wanted a long slow climb. Instead, he came hard and fast, the explosion of his orgasm so fierce, it put stars behind his closed eyelids and made his ears ring. Nothing else mattered but the electrifying ride, the amazing sensation of being inside his woman, of coming inside her. All restraint left him, all control shattered. For this moment, for right *now*, he allowed his inner beast free rein and gave himself up to ecstasy.

* * * *

Annie lay on the bed, half-dozing when the right side of the bed dipped. A strong masculine hand found her feminine folds and stroked.

“Jesse.”

On the other side of her, Grant stirred, rolling to his side so he could watch. The moon sent dazzling silver to play against their flesh. The night had a surreal quality to it.

“I need you, Annie.”

The honesty of Jesse’s words touched her heart. “Then take me.”

He rolled on top of her, gently, holding the bulk of his weight on his own arms. When his cock slid into her, she wrapped around him, arms and legs, and pulled him fully onto her.

“Fuck me,” she whispered.

The feral sound he made stirred her juices, a primitive part of the mating ritual that hid beneath the veneer of civilization. Hot and hard, his latex-covered cock filled her completely.

Jesse usually waited for her, but this night, he seemed unable to control his thrusts, his paces. That pleased her. She wanted to just give to him, let him take what he needed to have, however he wanted to have it. When he stiffened inside her, when she felt the perspiration break out on his skin, when that deep groan tickled the skin under her ear, she felt filled with satisfaction. *She* had made him lose control. *She* had given him release.

When he rolled to the side, he brought her with him. He withdrew from her, gently, then moved her leg atop his hip.

Why became clear a moment later when she felt Grant move in behind her, felt him stroke gently against her anus.

“Will you let me take you here, Annie? I’ll be gentle.”

“Yes.” She hissed with pleasure when he spread a chilly, silky lubricant on her, working his finger back and forth and then in and out.

Then his finger left her. His cock was there, gentle but persistent. He pressed forward, one hand on her hip, holding her still, bracing her.

Annie moaned, the sensation of this profoundly personal touch arousing and painful at the same time. Burning, stretching, her body slowly opened to allow his invasion.

Jesse pulled her leg just a bit higher on his hip, the motion spreading the cheeks of her ass just a bit more, but it was enough.

“Oh God,” Grant swore.

Annie felt his cock go deeper, slowly, and the arousal was different, not better but different and keener and centered lower in her body.

“Don’t move,” he said as he rested his forehead against the back of her head. “If you move, I’ll lose it.”

“Please.” She needed more, needed something.

“Stop?” Grant asked, and Annie knew he would if she gave the word.

“No. I need....”

She never finished the sentence. Just then Jesse stroked her pussy, taking her clit between his fingers, caressing it, his touch light and fast.

Annie screamed as she came.

Chapter 14

Veronica killed the lights on her Caddy as she turned off Main Street. The moon shone bright enough for her to see her way as she edged her car onto Back Street. Within moments, she'd reached the parking area behind Annie's store. She'd planned to walk over from her apartment, but at the last minute she'd been swamped by an overwhelming urge to be certain Annie was at the Conrad place, and not at home.

It wasn't much past eleven. Veronica had driven out of town, taking the county road that wound past the ranch. She'd seen Annie's car parked by the porch, the yard light glinting off the creamy Pontiac. As she let her vehicle idle on the side of the road, trying to decide if she should stay or go, the lights in the house went dark.

Barring anything unexpected, Annie should be staying put until morning. Which meant it would be as safe as it was ever going to get for a little innocuous break and enter.

This was her first, and would likely be her only, opportunity to search Annie's small apartment above the store. She'd been hoping for chance for the last six months, but, until very recently, Annie rarely left home.

Not to discount the true-to-life maxim that timing was everything, but if *anything* was going to happen, it would be within the next few days.

That moron is too stupid to play it safe and wait. No question about it. Things were about to break.

The answer must be *here*. Everything had happened so suddenly back then that there had been no time for any kind of shrewd moves.

Besides, the poor bastard hadn't had a shrewd bone in his body.

Fifty dollars paid to the landlord got Veronica into the three story walk-up the Rutherfords had occupied in Queens the day after Annie left town. She'd had a full day to search that cramped, two-bedroom apartment, and had come up completely empty-handed.

Hopefully, she'd have better luck tonight.

She closed the car door softly, then stood still for a minute, looking around. The stores on Main Street each had a small back lot serviced by the narrow Back Street. Her eyes were drawn to the heavens. Another cloudless night—no surprise there. The climate was so damn dry here, there were rarely any clouds. Her gaze took in the carpet of stars. Even from the small town of Branchton, where some ambient light flickered into the dark, a million stars could be seen. She'd lived most of her life in large cities, the last dozen years before coming here in New York.

She would have sworn that stars were only a myth.

The cry of a coyote, somewhere north of town, sent a shiver down her spine. She listened, waiting. The answering howl came, a haunting sound that cried out to the primitive human within her. Shaking her head and shaking off the unwelcome sensations, she focused on listening for closer sounds. The wind whispered softly, of course. Rarely did the air remain still. But no sounds of man disturbed the night. The occasional car would drive down Main, but at this hour, most people here in Hicksville were tucked safely into their beds. Annie's was the only occupied second floor on this side of Main Street.

They really did roll the sidewalks up in Branchton. She couldn't wait to put this town and this state behind her.

Satisfied that no one would see her, she made her way across the dirt lot to the stairs leading up to Annie's apartment. She climbed quietly, conscious that she was trespassing. She suppressed the twinge of guilt and stayed vigilant. She'd left her purse in the car so she

tucked her keys into her left front jeans pocket. From the right one, she extracted a small tool and a keychain penlight.

Inserting the pick into the lock, she had the door open in seconds. She closed it softly behind her.

Veronica didn't turn on the lights. Annie had left her curtains open—another indication the woman really *had* left Queens far behind, mentally—and the moon shone into the kitchen, illuminating the room.

Veronica got right to work. Turning on the penlight, she clamped it between her teeth so that it lit only the immediate area. She began with the drawers under the counter, looking through each one, pulling each out, and looking underneath for anything that might be secreted there. Veronica really didn't expect to find the goods, but she thought there might be some sort of key. She could imagine that a safety deposit box held what she was looking for, and she could even imagine Jimmy getting one, even though a thorough search of bank records had come up a big fat zilch.

Next, she went through the cupboards, dragging one of the chairs from the table so she could reach the upper shelves. She checked the fridge, the freezer, the stove. She moved the washer and dryer, though if Annie had been sly enough to tape the key on the inside shell of the dryer, Veronica wouldn't find it. She had no clue how to get the appliance apart. She even picked up the cutting board Annie kept in the middle of her small kitchen table, examining it under the tiny light she'd brought, searching for a seam or some indication that the board hid a secret pocket. Nothing.

Veronica gave the rest of the apartment an exacting search. Annie didn't have a lot of stuff or a lot of storage space.

She thought she hit pay dirt when she found an envelope at the bottom of a metal box full of photos. The envelope, small and white had Annie's name written on it in her late husband's hand. But all it held was a pair of ticket stubs to a Yankee's game.

The bedroom was the last room Veronica searched. She sat on the bed while her mind turned over the possibilities.

She'd had no indication that Annie was hiding a secret agenda. The assumption had all been hers, based on the fact the woman had more or less run away from her past.

But if Annie didn't know anything about what her husband had done in the two years before he died, then what? If Jimmy had stashed the goods, Annie would have found it, or, given the time she'd spent on the search, Veronica would have. So nothing had been left in an obvious place. It must have been hidden, either in a safe place back in New York, or maybe secreted somehow amongst Annie's stuff.

She couldn't very well tear Annie's things apart. So that left only one option. She would wait and watch. If that moron showed up, she'd know—and go from there.

Veronica reminded herself of one very important fact. The man might be a moron, but he also might know where the goods were. And if he showed up, then they had to be here.

* * * *

Rick left his car on one of the side streets and walked back toward the store. He figured there must be a back entrance if Annie lived there. He found it in no time.

He couldn't imagine his little sister-in-law living in this dry-as-dirt, wind-always-howling piece of Nowhere, Wyoming. She was New York born and bred, just like him. He'd only been in the area a day and already his skin was crawling. Give him traffic, tall buildings, and that old concrete jungle any day.

No cars were parked on the dirt lot behind the store, though there was one behind the next building. He didn't actually see any people, but just because he didn't see them didn't mean they weren't there, looking out, spying on him.

The smart thing to do would be to wait in the shadowy corner by the shed just over to his right. Wait and watch, see what was what.

Rick hadn't always done the smart thing. But he planned to, beginning the moment he'd walked out the gate of that prison. He could stand in the dark for an hour or so. Hell, he'd waited all those stinking days and nights behind bars, and had already come across the country. What was waiting out in the night shadows compared to all of that?

It would be easy to just barge right in on Annie, but he didn't know if she was alone or even if she was home.

That quick flash of her in the window as he drove by earlier had been a hell of a tease and a hell of a turn-on. And not nearly enough to satisfy the wanting that had built up while he'd been away.

The sound of a car engine got his feet moving. He trotted over to the shed, slapped his back against the wall and sucked in his belly just as headlights swept the tiny street behind him. Then they cut off even as the car moved closer. For one wild second, he figured he'd been seen, that someone had called the local cops.

Fuck. What the hell is this? The late model Caddy coasted past him, stopping not far from the bottom of the stairs that lead up to the second floor. In the light that flashed in the quick moment when the car door opened then closed softly, Rick caught a glimpse of sleek black hair pulled up in a clip and white creamy flesh.

Now isn't this interesting? He watched the woman, watched as she looked around. *Skulking.* A howl cut the night, the piercing cry making the woman jump, unsettling her. Him, too. He hoped to God whatever that had been was far away and not hungry.

After a few moments, she went up the stairs to Annie's apartment. She paused at the door, looked around, then bent down. Then she was inside.

Rick waited but no lights came on.

Working on a hunch, he crept over to the car. One eye on the apartment upstairs, he looked inside.

A woman's purse lay on the front passenger's seat. Rick tried the door handle. Unlocked.

City girl should know better.

Quick and quiet, he scooped the bag, then shut the door softly. He kept a lookout as he reached in, extracted the wallet. Flipping it open, he found the driver's license. Daring to take his eyes for a moment off Annie's apartment, he pulled out his cigarette lighter. Squatting down, he flicked it, quickly scanning the information in the flickering flame. He didn't know the town, but it was so freaking small, he wouldn't have any trouble finding that address.

He returned the wallet to the bag and put it back on the car seat. Shutting the door silently, he slid back to his hiding place.

Annie obviously wasn't home, or Veronica Ferris wouldn't have just pulled that little B & E.

He'd wait and see what the Ferris woman came out with. And if she hit the mother lode, he'd simply relieve her of the goods.

Twenty minutes later, the door opened and the woman emerged. She carried nothing in her hands. The moon spotlighted her silhouette as she descended the stairs and headed for the Caddy. Her clothes clung tight, he could see she had nothing in her pockets but the keys she pulled out.

Rick was in no hurry to follow after she drove off. He knew where she lived. Casting a glance up toward Annie's place, he considered searching the place himself, then shook his head.

He'd wait, catch Annie at home. Besides, he had an idea where the stones were. He really did want to spend some time one-on-one with Annie. If the little cunt knew what had gone down, knew about the gems, he'd soon know. If she didn't, then he'd find what he was looking for on his own. Checking around him, he could see no sign of anyone lurking about. Anxious to get back to some semblance of civilization, he headed back to his car.

He'd have to figure out where Annie was, and when he could get her alone. Then he could get on with the rest of his life.

* * * *

From his position in the field just a half dozen yards the other side of Back Street, Billy Woods lowered his binoculars and rolled over onto his back. *I'm getting too old for all this skullduggery.* He had a kink in his neck, one in his back, and could only be grateful the grass hadn't been thick with dew.

He also had one hell of a dilemma.

It looked as if Annie Rutherford really was smack dab in the middle of this mess when he would have sworn she wasn't. It also looked as if the players were a bit more desperate than he calculated. If he weren't careful, all the work of the last seven months would go into the toilet and the fortune he'd been counting on would slip right through his fingers.

He sat up, massaged his back, and got to his feet. For a long moment, he contemplated his next step.

Then a smile ghosted across his face. The way he saw things, he had one chance to do what he'd set out to do when he'd left New York.

It was time to get to work.

Chapter 15

Annie came awake to the twin sensations of being cuddled between two hard male bodies and having a work-roughened male hand stroke down her naked back.

“Mmm.” She wished she could offer more articulate conversation than that, but words were beyond her.

“It turns me on that between us, Grant and I can reduce you to incoherent sounds.”

Annie laughed, the sound low and sultry even to her own ears. “What time is it?”

“Can’t see the clock from here. Besides, I am too busy looking at your luscious ass.” Jesse spoke softly. Annie turned her head toward the other side of the bed, where she knew a clock kept time on the bedside table. She felt her smile soften as she realized Grant was asleep. She cast her gaze to the time. It was just past midnight.

Sighing, she turned her head, laid back down on her pillow, and looked at Jesse. Beautifully naked, he lay on his side, propped up on his right hand. The look of male smugness on his face gave her a warm sensation in the pit of her belly. He looked like a man who had just had himself one hell of a good time.

Which she could attest was nothing but the truth.

“What are you smiling at?” he asked, his own grin widening.

“You and that smug look you’re wearing.”

“You *should* smile over that, sweetheart. You put it there.”

“Yep. That’s why I’m smiling.” She felt her teasing mood slip just a notch. She let it. Focusing on his eyes, she said, “Do you have any

idea what a wonder it seems to me that I can satisfy you both? That I can have orgasm after orgasm without having to reach for them?"

"I meant what I said earlier, Annie." It would seem the teasing mood had slipped just a notch within Jesse, too. His grin smoothed into an expression she could only call contemplative. "I don't like to talk in disrespect of the dead, but that asshole you were married to needed to have a beating laid on him for how he treated you, and what he did to you."

"I'll remind you that I chose that asshole. So part of the blame is mine."

"For being deceived?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe a part of me recognized my father in him and decided escaping home was worth the bullshit I'd go through with Jim. Which makes me responsible not only for what happened to me, but for my baby's death, too."

"Bullshit."

Grant's one-word epithet cut into the night. She felt him shift on the mattress.

"We all make errors in judgment, Annie. That's not the same as being guilty in the sense you mean."

Grant copied Jesse's pose. Anne turned onto her back so she could look at them both. They were strong men, both more muscular than Jim had been. Yet not one ounce of fear stirred in her. She lay more vulnerable than she'd ever been in her life and felt completely safe.

"Stop beating yourself up, sweetheart," Jesse said

"It's how I feel."

"Yeah, we got that. Maybe after a while, we can get you feeling some other way." Grant smoothed the sheet she'd automatically hugged to her breasts when she turned onto her back. Then he pulled it to her waist. "Given enough time, I bet Jesse and I could get you feeling nothing but very well loved." He began to caress her breast, nearly robbing her of all thought.

"Yeah? You figure by the time I have to leave tomorrow?"

“Oh, no,” Jesse, mirrored Grant’s petting. “No, we’re not short-term thinkers here. We’re talking years.”

Annie felt her throat tighten. They were the sweetest men she had ever met.

“Years? That is a nice thought.”

“You sound doubtful,” Grant observed.

“No, not doubtful. Just realistic. One day a couple of pretty young things will catch your eyes, and then you’ll be off getting married and making babies. And that’s as it should be,” Annie concluded around the lump that was catching fire in her chest. Of course that was as it should be. Men wanted sons. Well, most men did. To carry on their names, follow in their footsteps.

The silence stretched out long enough that Annie came out of her thoughts. Jesse and Grant were staring at each other.

“Looking to get rid of us already?” Jesse asked. Something about his smile stirred her belly. She recognized the hint of vulnerability around the edges of his mouth, and in his eyes. He seemed so self-assured, it never would have occurred to her that he could be unsure ever. But maybe the words she’d meant as a caution to herself had hurt him.

“No.” Annie turned her gaze to Grant and saw he wore as serious an expression as she’d ever seen on him.

“No,” she repeated. “I don’t want to get rid of either of you. I want to stay right here. I want more.”

“Good.” Jesse pulled the sheet off her completely. They spread her legs gently, played their hands up and down her body, caressing her until arousal pushed every thought from her head. “That’s real good, Annie. Because here is where we want you and more is what you’re going to get.”

* * * *

“It’ll only take me a couple of minutes to do these dishes up,” Annie said. “You made dinner and breakfast. Come on, fair is fair.”

“Which is why I’ll throw everything in the dishwasher while you and Jesse get the horses saddled,” Grant said.

Jesse chuckled. “Give it up, sweetheart. No one wins an argument with Grant. Not even me.”

When Annie put her hands on her hips and frowned, Grant said, “You can clean up after lunch. Deal?”

“Why do I have the sneaking suspicion that when lunch time rolls around, one or both of you will distract me while the other does the work?”

“Because you’re coming to know us very well?” Jesse suggested. Then he forestalled further arguments by grabbing Annie up into very hot and very delicious kiss. Jesse knew he was becoming addicted to the taste of her, and that didn’t bother him one bit. He guessed he ruined the effect of it a little, because he was laughing when he stepped back.

“Come on, woman. Let’s go get the horses ready while Homer here plays maid.”

Grant’s response was to grab the dishtowel and flick it at him. Jesse held the door open for Annie, then turned a level look on Grant. His best friend returned it with a brisk nod.

They had an ulterior motive for not wanting Annie to stay in the house and do the dishes. While they were out saddling the horses, Grant was going to call the Albany County Sheriff’s office. They’d both known the sheriff, George Slater, since junior high. They counted him a good friend and knew he’d help them out.

Jesse had gotten a tight feeling in his gut last night when Annie mentioned that she thought she’d seen her former brother-in-law. Not surprisingly, Grant experienced that same feeling. They’d let Annie dismiss the observation, and not for the world—or at least, not until they knew otherwise—would they disabuse her of the conclusion she’d made.

Maybe Annie hadn't seen the bastard cruising past her shop yesterday afternoon. Maybe he was still rotting away in jail in New York State.

And maybe he wasn't.

A phone call to George, who as Sheriff had access to all that information, was a simple enough step to take.

Jesse stopped behind Annie, who paused to tip her head back, face into the wind.

"Of all the things I thought I'd encounter moving out West," she said when he ran his hand down her back, "the one that surprised me the most is this. The almost constant wind."

"It can be a bitch in the winter," Jesse agreed.

"Yes. I didn't test that piece of information. Once the first snow fell, just about every one of my customers warned me about how bad the snow could suddenly drift onto the highway between here and Laramie. Since I didn't have a lot of driving experience before moving here, I took their advice as gospel."

Jesse was in no hurry to move them to the barn. They were out of the house and that was all that mattered. "When we get word a winter storm is going to hit, we set up guide wires from the house to the barns, and from the bunkhouse to the barns, as well. I do that here, and we do it at Grant's. It wouldn't take much to get turned around and lost, end up freezing to death. It's happened, so we all take extra care."

Annie shivered, and he hated to scare her. But he knew what she didn't, that if he and Grant had their way, she'd be living out here with them before the end of next summer.

"I'm perfectly content to stay inside where it's safe and warm when the winds howl and the snow flies. Does that make me a wimp?"

"No, it makes you a smart woman."

"Who is also a wimp." She turned and headed toward the barn, getting a few steps ahead. He hurried to catch up.

“I really wish you’d stop trash-talking yourself, honey. Pisses me off.”

Annie stopped and turned to face him. A frown marred her brow, and her pretty lips were drawn tight, a sure sign that she wasn’t happy. That bothered him because he understood she wasn’t happy with *herself*.

“I don’t mean to piss you off, but I feel as if, just recently, I’ve opened my eyes after a lifetime of living with them glued shut. How the hell could I have allowed myself to stay married to that loser for so long? Why did I believe him when he said I was cold and a lousy lay, useless and worthless?” Shaking her head, she turned and took one step toward the barn.

Jesse grabbed Annie’s arm, and eased her around until she faced him again.

“You only know what you know, Annie. People aren’t born with self-esteem. They aren’t born knowing how to make the right choices in life. Those are things we learn. And how the hell can we learn them if no one is there to teach us?”

Annie turned her gaze away from him. The pink washing her cheeks told him more than her words how disappointed she was in herself. How could he get her to see that disappointment was a waste of time? How could he make her understand how he felt, how he knew Grant felt?

His words came, and with an ease that amazed him. “Maybe, just maybe, you could consider this. Without that, without all that you went through, you would never have come here to Wyoming. I’m not saying you should ever look on the loss of your unborn baby as something positive. Just like I’ll never look at the death of my parents that way. But everything we’ve all been through, good and bad, has brought us to right here and right now. Everything we’ve lived, the three of us, has brought us to the place where we could be together.”

“I want to believe that. I want to believe that somehow I deserve to be here with the two of you. But that’s not how it feels.”

“Believe it,” Grant said as he approached. He sent Jesse a slight nod, then stroked his finger down Annie’s face. “Life isn’t about penalties and punishments, sweetheart. It’s about living and loving and laughing. And we all deserve every good thing, and every bit of love we can grab.”

Annie looked from Grant to him. Her expression had cleared, the self-reproach he’d seen in her eyes replaced now by something so soft, it warmed his heart.

“Every time we’re together, it seems you’re spoiling me, taking care of me. Your kindnesses wow me, and your tenderness melts me. I never expected anything like this. I never expected you. What am I going to do with you two?”

“Oh, well, that’s easy. You’re going to go riding with us,” Jesse said.

“After which you’re going to eat lunch with us,” Grant added.

“And then we’re going to eat you.”

It was a completely satisfying way to answer her. Annie’s face turned crimson and her words seemed to have run away from her, because all she could do was laugh and sputter.

“The pink on your cheeks suits you. Gives you a very healthy glow.” Jesse bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

“It’s not the blush that’s giving me a glow. It’s all the riding I’ve been doing lately. I’m starting to feel right at home in the saddle. Just gets a little tiring always remembering knees in and heels down.”

He looked over at Grant, his grin as wide as his friend’s. Then they both burst out laughing. He hooked his arm around Annie, hugged her tight as all three finished their walk to the barn. “Now, if that’s a complaint, Annie, you know we’re more than happy to let you ride double.”

“Or better yet just lay back and let us do all the work,” Grant said.

“After all,” Jesse beamed, “our state’s motto is ‘Equal Rights’.”

“Huh,” Annie huffed just before she gave them a laughing smile.

Her eyes were sparkling with good humor, and that was a whole hell of a lot easier to look at than her expression of self-loathing.

“And here I thought it was ‘Save a horse, ride a cowboy’.”

“Maybe you could take up a petition, present it to the state legislature,” Grant suggested. “Who knows, with the progressive history Wyoming has, they might just adopt it.”

“Maybe I will.”

Jesse pulled the door open, the familiar scents of hay and horse wafting out as warm summer breeze blew in. He watched as Annie went right over to her horse, greeting the filly with soft words, a softer touch, and a piece of apple she’d filched from the fridge.

The words she’d spoken earlier about him and Grant finding wives came back to him. Maybe it wasn’t too soon to show their own little filly a particular plot of land.

Chapter 16

Never count on a loose cannon being predictable.

Billy had long ago taught himself how to chill out, cool off, and wait. Not a patient man by nature, it had taken him some time to master that particular skill. Yet every once in a while, he developed a sense way down deep, a kind of shivery certainty that logic couldn't shake, that patience was not only undesirable, but dangerous.

That feeling began to blossom inside him as he drifted off to sleep the night before, and by mid morning, it had become a throbbing presence in his psyche. As he looked out over Main Street from his apartment atop his fix-it shop, he realized he'd left a couple of bases uncovered.

He'd followed Rutherford to the Super 8 just off I-80 outside Laramie, satisfied the man would remain there for the night, confident everything and everyone was where they belonged for the moment.

He reasoned he'd have time to line all his ducks in a row, but there was one thing he hadn't done.

Shit. It wasn't yet noon. If he headed out, there was no guarantee he'd be able to take care of that one detail.

Turning away from the window, he went to his bed and pulled the black case out from under it. Inside, there were handy little technological gadgets, though not nearly as many as there had been before he'd set foot in Branchton. *This job has cost me a fortune.*

Needing to remind himself of the reason he'd spent that fortune, he sat down at his computer, clicked on a bookmarked site.

They said the necklace was so delicate, so beautiful, it must have been created by the gods. Featuring fifty of the most exquisite tear-

drop diamonds cut by ancient hands, delicate gold strands and settings, the necklace known as Aphrodite's Tears shimmered in the one photograph taken of it in modern times, for the auction at Sotheby's where it was purchased by billionaire industrialist and sometime-diplomat Algernon Piers. He presented it as a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary gift to his wife, Gladys Hamilton Piers. The couple had hosted a lavish party at their Park Avenue penthouse to mark the occasion, where they received well wishes and gifts and, apparently, a first-class surveillance. Two days later, the penthouse was broken into and the necklace stolen.

That had been three years ago.

There'd been no sign of the necklace since. Algernon—who was nobody's fool—had made sure the expensive bauble had been properly appraised and insured before presenting it to his beloved wife. He collected a tidy ten million dollars from Lloyd's of London as consolation for his loss.

Billy had no idea whether Mrs. Piers had been gifted with that money, or not.

The necklace's value, if indeed it was still intact, had only increased despite the current economic downturn. He'd listened to rumors, of course, and the gossip that traveled the circles that wound just under the veneer of polite society. Smart man's money was on the stones having been removed and moved, the gold melted down and sold.

He believed the necklace was intact.

Billy sighed. He *really* wanted that necklace. He entertained a fleeting image of his mother draped in Aphrodite's Tears, likely paired with her classic black Dior.

Then he laughed. He loved his mother, but not that much.

His gaze flicked to the bottom right of his computer screen. Time had a disgusting habit of marching on, even when it would be more convenient all around if it would just chill for a few. Billy logged off the computer then spun his chair around.

He tried not to wince as he took the five thousand dollar GPS tracker out of his case. Thank God he had his friend Nigel, who could supply underground and often illegal equipment in exchange for cash. So he'd be able to replace this beauty, as he had the uncomfortable feeling he might not get it back.

He removed the rest of what he needed, preparing to be on his way. The sound of his cell phone blaring out Coldplay's *Viva La Vida* stopped him in his tracks.

That ring tone belonged to only one caller, an old friend who'd become a cop. His very own deep throat—sort of.

“Yes?”

“I thought you'd like to know there's been a search requested through NCIC. Whoever asked for the information must have some favors owed, because the Bureau has put out feelers looking for Rutherford.”

“He was serving time in the state minimum security. How'd he end up with the Feds tracking him?”

“Logically, someone in the Bureau must have had their eye on him.”

Billy rubbed his chin. “Fuck, do you think he was into shit we don't know about?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. All indications to date are that he's a two-bit player who just happened to hit it lucky with the Piers heist. No one could possibly believe he's smart enough to have planned it.”

“No.” But having him entered into the NCIC raised the game to a whole new level.

“Do you have any idea who requested the info?”

“No, but I'll find out. Watch yourself. There could be another player you don't know about.”

“Thanks for the heads up.”

“Hey, that's what partners are for.”

Billy closed his phone. *Partners*. He didn't think so. The way he saw it, he'd been the one to do all the work. He should be the one to reap the rewards.

Shaking his head to dispel useless thoughts, he checked to see he had all he needed. Things had just potentially gotten more complicated, which was the last thing he needed. But that internal alarm also just got a bit louder.

He had the feeling he didn't have a moment to spare.

* * * *

Annie loved riding with her men almost as much as she loved having sex with them. She enjoyed their easy moods, their senses of humor. She enjoyed talking with them, exchanging ideas about anything and everything.

She also loved her horse. Razzmatazz seemed the perfect name for the mare. Her coat gleamed shiny blond, and sometimes, when Annie spoke to her, the horse would almost prance, as if she were a Hollywood starlet—or a Las Vegas show girl.

Those emotions were notable enough, and her heart felt fuller than it ever had. But the most surprising thing of all was that Annie had fallen in love with the land.

She'd grown up on the edge of a large city, and then moved to the largest city in the eastern United States. She'd never felt any desire to get away from the urban sprawl and concrete jungle, had been perfectly happy where she'd been planted for most of her life.

Her westward migration had been brought on by grief, by her desire to start fresh, and it had been a matter of pure luck she'd landed in Branchton, Wyoming. She'd never camped, never done anything that could be considered even remotely 'outdoorsy'.

Yet she was falling in love with the land. *Falling in love, period*. She shoved that last thought away. She could not, *would* not fall in

love. Being in lust was enough, and more than she dreamed possible just one year ago.

The Medicine Bow Mountains rose up in the west, and Annie couldn't help being moved by them. Used to towers of cement and steel, Mother Nature's skyscrapers seemed grander, almost spiritual. Used to an abundance of trees, the grasslands at first seemed strange and barren. Yet now, as she rode with her lovers across their land, as they came upon the streams and creeks that flowed and bubbled, she appreciated the grasses, flowers, and trees that lined those natural waterways.

For the past few minutes, the men led the way, side by side. Following, she felt free to admire them. Talk about Mother Nature's masterpieces. Each possessed unique qualities. Each had found different ways to endear himself to her. Looking at them now, fresh from their bed, she honestly couldn't say that she cared more for one than the other.

She loved them equally.

She loved them. Closing her eyes for a moment, she allowed herself to revel in the truth. Yes, she did love them, and that was a miracle. But she wouldn't look to the future. She would only take each day as it came. Eventually, they would move on. But until then, she would enjoy them.

Grant turned in his saddle, looked at her. "Jesse and I have something we want to show you."

"Alright."

She nudged Razzamatazz forward, and when her men maneuvered their horses to make room for her between them, that's where she planted herself.

"This is the line where our ranches join," Jesse said, leaning forward on the saddle horn. He met her gaze, then looked again at the land. "In this area, we took down the fence when we decided to merge our operations. This spot right here was where we were when we

made the decision to form a single company. This also used to be our favorite camp-out area.”

Annie didn’t know much about camping out, but she thought she understood why the area would have appealed to them. Before her lay what appeared to be an open meadow, fairly flat, with lots of nice long grass. Ringing the meadow were trees. A couple of evergreens, of course, but closer to the stream she recognized Rocky Mountain maple, and her newly favorite tree, peachleaf willow. For the camper, there’d be water, shade, and relatively soft ground to sleep on.

“Since we were old enough to ride off on our own, whenever one of us was pissed, or needed space, this was where we’d come,” Grant took over. Annie heard pleasant memories in his tone. “And on those few occasions we snuck out late at night, here was where we’d meet up.”

“Your lands have many pretty spots,” Annie said. “I like this one. Not just its appearance, but what it stands for. Thank you for showing it to me.”

There must be something more they wanted to say, because they looked at each other and seemed to come to some sort of unspoken agreement.

“It may not seem like it, because of the back and forth path we’ve been riding for the last hour, but the county road is due west of this spot, about a quarter of a mile. In fact, if we ride to the crest of that little hill over there, you can see it.”

Puzzled by a strange, almost hopeful note in Jesse’s voice, Annie cocked her head.

“So it wouldn’t be very expensive to have materials trucked in. Jesse and I are both really good with our hands.”

“I noticed.”

The men laughed, and it seemed the laughter cut through their nerves. Annie had no idea what they’d become uptight about. She gave them an encouraging smile.

“What Grant meant was that we’re both good at building things. We also know people who could come in and lend us a hand. It’ll take us most of the fall and probably into the spring to finish it, of course. But by this time next year, it should be ready.”

They were both smiling at her, waiting for her reaction. Excitement hovered between them. She hated to disappoint them by not sharing that excitement. She must have missed something, because she didn’t have a clue what they were talking about.

“What should be ready by this time next year?”

“Your new house. Well, our house, actually. A place where the three of us can live together,” Jesse said.

“You want to build me a house?”

“Yes, we do,” Grant confirmed.

“But...why?”

The men looked at each other for a long moment. Finally, Jesse turned his horse around so that he faced her.

“Because we love you. We want to live with you. Not just for an overnight here and there, but for every night. What you said about us eventually falling in love, getting married? We’ve both already fallen in love. With you.”

“You’re it for us,” Grant said. “We want to live here with you and build a life with you. Out here, right here, in this spot that means so much to us both.”

Annie shook her head, not certain she heard them correctly. Their smiles told her she had. Shock roiled within her and she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “The three of us can’t live together!”

“Sure we can if we want to. Besides, Wyoming is a very progressive state,” Jesse said.

“Not progressive enough to turn its back on three people in a ménage relationship openly living together!” Annie had never heard of anything so preposterous in her life. It was one thing for them to carry on this affair in private. Yeah, one woman, two men, that was a

bit out there. But she figured what the three of them did in private behind closed doors was no one's business but their own.

"We Wyomingites are a forward-thinking people," Jesse replied calmly.

"We are," Grant agreed. "Forward-thinking is in our history. Why, when the Wyoming territory was organized in 1869, Wyoming women were the first in the entire nation to vote."

"Wyoming elected the first female governor in the nation, too, in 1925," Jesse said.

"And the only place in these United States that has a statue erected to a prostitute is right here in Wyoming."

Annie's laughter exploded from her. "You made that last one up!"

Jesse laughed and Grant blushed. Then he shook his head. "No, honey, I didn't. But maybe I could have chosen a better example."

"The thing is," Jesse said, his laughter gone, "we want you and we want to live with you. Make a family with you."

Annie shook her head slowly. Her throat stung, the backs of her eyes itched, and the sight of her men blurred before her.

All she'd ever wanted, all she'd ever dreamed of, was what Jesse and Grant were offering her right here, right now. She would give three decades off her life to go back, undo the mistakes she had made, then come forward. They offered her that dream, but it was too late for her. Making a family with the men she loved was the *one* thing she could never do.

"No." She swallowed hard, vowing not to cry. "I can't. I can't make a family with you. I can't make a family with anyone."

Chapter 17

One appetite fed, one to go.

Rick Rutherford rubbed his belly as he exited the restaurant just down the street from his motel. Maybe going back for a fourth plate of food had been a mistake, but hell, the all-you-can-eat Sunday brunch buffet was too good to pass up. A couple of years of eating nothing but prison food with puny portions made a man eager to just stuff himself when the opportunity arose.

Now that one craving had been satisfied, it was time to do something about the other. It wouldn't take long to drive to that pissant little town Annie had run off to. Only two things he needed to decide, and that was what time he should go there and whether he would fuck her *before* he collected his stuff, or after.

Decisions, decisions.

He snickered as he walked across the restaurant parking lot. He'd go back to the room, shove his stuff back into that single duffel bag he'd brought. That would take maybe a minute. He'd find himself a mall, pick up some cologne. He was going courting—that image made him snicker again—the least he could do was smell good. Then he'd put this town behind him. He figured he and Annie could spend a nice Sunday evening having their reunion. Yeah, it would probably be best to wait until sundown to announce his presence. Her store wasn't open on Sunday anyway, but still, it would be a good idea to wait for the sun to set. Most folks would be at home then, less chance of anyone stopping by, interrupting them.

One thing he *had* decided. He wouldn't take Annie with him when he left for Mexico. She'd just be a drag on his time and his resources. He wanted the gems and he wanted his freedom. Besides, he really didn't need more than one taste of his sweet little sister-in-law. Thinking about her got him hot and hard, but he figured that was mostly because he'd been without pussy for so long. He didn't really want *her*, he just wanted one little sample of what used to belong to his dear older brother.

He passed a couple of old farts bent together, talking low as they shuffled toward the restaurant. The wife seemed to be supporting her husband even though the old boy leaned on a wooden cane. He hoped he never got that feeble that he needed some broad to help him get around.

A younger man lounged against the back of a Ford Taurus parked just down from his rented wheels. The guy had one of those weird doo-hickeys stuck in his ear, his head bouncing to the music as he stood there, eyes closed, probably zoned out on weed or crack, or both.

Rick shook his head as he passed the guy. Maybe he wouldn't ever be nominated as citizen of the year, but at least he'd never wasted his brains or his body on drugs and music.

Packing was a matter of tossing his gear into that duffel bag. He considered for a moment, then decided he needed to use the john.

Fifteen minutes later, he unlocked his car and got behind the wheel. Wonder boy was gone and so was the Taurus. It was none of his never-mind if the asshole wanted to drive, stoned. He just hoped the pot-head wasn't going to be driving anywhere near him.

He drove as far as the Conoco. It would probably be smart to fill up. Then he wouldn't have to stop once he got the loot. Not for a good long time. He figured he'd drive the rental until the middle of Colorado. Then he'd boost a car, change the plates.

There were only two states between Wyoming and Mexico. He'd looked it up on the map. Didn't look like the trip would be very difficult. He'd be home-free in no time at all.

* * * *

"That went well," Jesse said, his words at odds with his tone.

Grant grunted, the sound the only possible response he could make at the moment. Annie had lit out as if a band of terrorists had been after her. The sun wasn't even kissing the horizon yet and they hadn't even eaten dinner.

"Maybe we moved too quickly," he said. He pulled his Stetson off, allowing the breeze to ruffle his hair. He banged the hat a couple of times against his leg. *Not enough*. Spinning on his heel, he kicked the porch step, hard. Then he turned to look in the direction of the county road, the direction Annie's car had gone.

"*Fuck.*"

That helped some. He rubbed at the tightness in his chest, a sensation that felt very much like fear. Turning to look at Jesse, who stood uncharacteristically still and quiet, he asked, "What the hell are we going to do now?"

"Give her just a tiny bit of space. And I mean tiny."

Since not even the dust raised by Annie's car was visible any longer, he turned his back on the road again. The look of determination on his best friend's face helped. Clearly, Jesse felt as he did. They weren't going to let Annie go. At least not without a fight.

He headed up the porch steps, Jesse beside him.

Once inside the house, Jesse set about making a pot of coffee.

Grant sat down to think. "She's scared," Grant reasoned aloud. Annie hadn't rejected them. She'd turned tail and fled because she was scared to reach out for what she wanted.

He could understand how a life of being knocked down would make her afraid to trust.

“That’s what I figured,” Jesse agreed. “And maybe she doesn’t yet believe that we could love her as much as we do.”

“Maybe we ought to phone Aunt Bev and ask her advice,” Grant said.

Jesse laughed. “I know her erotic romance novels kind of got us thinking outside the box. Neither of us had ever considered that we *both* could have Annie until we read your aunt’s books. But I’m not altogether certain she could help us out of this pickle.”

Grant chuckled. He’d been kidding, of course. No one else in the family except him and Jesse—and everyone in the Douglas clan considered Jesse one of theirs—knew about Aunt Bev’s books. Her pen name was Buffy La Fleur, and according to one review site Grant had visited, she was the “First Goddess of American Erotica”. Grant had gotten a kick out of that, as Aunt Bev was sixty-three and had been single since Uncle Harry had died suddenly some twenty-five years before. To Jesse, he said, “Seeing as the woman’s lived like a nun these past many years, you have a point. So, what are you figuring? Give Annie until just after dinner time?”

“Yeah. Just enough time for her to relax, for her to believe she’s gotten away clean. Sooner or later, she’ll figure out we’re not going to change our minds about her.”

“That’s going to take time. It was dumb to think we could rush her. We knew better.” Grant for sure wasn’t going to make that mistake again.

“No, that wasn’t our brightest moment, Homer.”

Grant liked the idea that they weren’t going to give Annie much wiggle room. Of course they would if she ever indicated that she was tired of them—Grant gulped silently and prayed *that* never happened. Or if she just plain flat out didn’t love them.

He knew she *did* love them. In fact, he was willing to bet that one of the reasons she’d turned tail and run was because she loved them

both very much. Damn fool woman probably thought she was being noble.

Fuck noble. Grant nodded once, an affirmation that all would soon be as it should be.

* * * *

Annie used both hands to scrub at her face, as if that action alone could stem her tears and wipe the memory of them away. She figured it would take her men—*God, I have to stop thinking of them that way*—about a week to figure out that this afternoon, when she left them, she'd really been saying goodbye.

Ending it was the right thing to do. She couldn't allow them to tie themselves to her. They'd said they loved her and she believed them. But their relationship was just beginning. Leaving them before they got in any deeper was the best thing for all of them. Maybe they believed it when they said they didn't care that she couldn't have children. But maybe they were just caught up in the newness of their passion. If she stayed with them, and they decided down the road that she'd been right, wouldn't it hurt so much more to lose them then? *No, better to end it before it really got started.*

Jesse and Grant deserved the chance to find women of their own to love and to cherish. Ones they could marry, ones they could make babies with, raise a family with.

She couldn't give them that.

Why now? Why did I have to find the perfect men for me when I can't even give them what they deserve?

When she'd awakened in that intensive care unit and been given the news that she not only lost her baby, but undergone a hysterectomy, her heart broke. But never once had she wondered 'Why me?'

But here she was now, healed, whole, and that was the *only* thing she could think. No one had to tell her life wasn't fair. That was

something she'd always known. And something she'd never spent much time questioning or thinking about. Until now.

Her apartment echoed with the loneliness that already was filling her heart. Where just a few weeks ago these cozy rooms above her store had been her sanctuary, tonight they felt foreign.

Annie stopped in the middle of her kitchen. Her utensil drawer was open about half an inch.

"Huh." Usually nearly compulsive when it came to keeping drawers and cabinets closed, she figured she must have been more anxious than she realized last night.

Last night.

Last night had been so perfect. Snuggled in that bed between Jesse and Grant, the heat of their bodies warming hers, the scent of their lovemaking a subtle perfume that kept her fires banked, had been the most wonderful thing she'd ever experienced. With no effort at all, she could conjure the feel of Jesse's hand stroking her back, Grant's fingers tracing a pattern on her bottom as they dozed in the afterglow.

A shiver wracked her and Annie hugged herself. She felt cold, alone, and oddly threatened. The impulse to run back to that warm bed, to that sense of perfect peace and contentment, surged and she steeled herself against it.

She'd been weak all her life, doing whatever was easiest, thinking that if she just gave in, if she just went along, then everything would be fine. That thinking, that flaw, had cost her the chance to ever be a mother.

This time, doing the hardest thing would cost her the men she loved, but the gift to them—their freedom, and the opportunity to have what she could never have—was far more important than any amount of pain or loss she suffered.

Early evening shadows filled her apartment. Though she'd had nothing since lunch, Annie wasn't hungry. Nor did she have any energy to do the load of laundry that awaited her, or even channel surf for something to watch.

She *wanted* to crawl into bed and have a good cry.

Listless, she turned away from her kitchen—she'd close the utensil drawer later—and wandered through her living room to her bedroom.

Like the rest of the apartment, the space seemed empty and haunting, the comfort and sense of security she'd enjoyed for the last year missing.

I've never been a fanciful person before. Of course, I've never turned my back on something I wanted with every fiber of my being before, either.

Annie flicked on the light just inside the bedroom door, went to her dresser and reached for the drawer she kept her nightshirts in. On top of her dresser, good old Mr. Tinkles smiled out at her with his one eye.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up and her heart thudded heavily in her chest. Her beloved teddy bear beamed at her from the *left* side of the mirror, not the right.

Someone had been in her apartment. Someone had been in her bedroom.

Revulsion rolled in her belly and fear snaked up her spine. Fear blossomed to terror, flooding her. *Run!* Her mind screamed at her legs, and for a long moment she stayed frozen, unable to move.

One step back, another to the side. Pivoting, she ran toward the kitchen, toward the door and the stairs and safety.

A figure loomed just inside the doorway, and Annie froze. Horror rose up to swallow her at the sight of the man who stood just inside her apartment door, an evil, lurid, *familiar* smile on his face.

“Well, hello there, Annie. Why don't you come over here and give your loving brother-in-law a great big kiss?”

Chapter 18

The last thing Jesse wanted to do was stop and help a stranded motorist. All he wanted was to put his foot into the floorboards and get to Annie's. He couldn't explain the sense that had grown in the last few minutes that he needed to be with her *now*. He hadn't mentioned that feeling to Grant, but apparently the other man had been experiencing it, too.

"Son of a bitch."

Yep, Grant sounded just as impatient as he felt. He pulled up in front of the Ford Taurus, recognizing both it and the driver. Which was why he couldn't just motor past and head on into Branchton.

In Wyoming, you stopped to help a neighbor even when it was inconvenient. If he didn't, he'd expect Mrs. Bishop would run up one side of him and down the other when she found out about it.

He and Grant got out of the truck at the same time and headed over to look under the raised hood.

"Hey, Billy. Trouble?" Probably a stupid question, Jesse thought.

"Hey, Jesse. Yeah, damn thing quit on me. Just up and died." He nodded at Jesse, then Grant.

Then he looked over his shoulder at Jesse's truck.

He turned back to inspect his car's engine. "You boys headed over to the truck stop on the interstate?"

Jesse understood the reference, of course. Other than The Axel, the saloon that was open every night but Sunday, there was no place to buy alcohol in Branchton. The town wasn't dry, there just happened to be no place to buy the stuff, and the closest place to pick

up beer to take home was ten miles to the northwest, by the on-ramp to the interstate.

“No, we’re on our way into town.”

“Left Annie sleeping at your place, huh?”

Jesse felt his cheeks heat. He’d known that at some point people would begin to make the connection, as he and Grant planned to spend every spare minute with their woman. Sooner or later, folks would begin to wonder and go fishing, the way Billy had just done. He and Grant talked about it some and decided the best way to handle it was to be honest, but not chatty. He hadn’t thought, however, that such a fishing expedition would embarrass him. He looked at Billy’s face, and relaxed when he saw nothing more than mild interest in the man’s expression. Of course, considering Billy’s reputation for having more than one bed partner at a time, he hadn’t really expected him to be judgmental.

Before he could respond, Grant reached under the hood toward the distributor cap. “Here’s your problem, Billy-boy. One of your lead wires came loose.”

“Well, shut my mouth and call me Nancy,” Billy muttered.

Jesse wondered that the man didn’t seem more chagrined that he’d missed something so basic.

“Well, Nancy, that should get you on your way.”

“Thanks for stopping. This heap will run now. You go on and get those libations and get back to your lady.”

“No libations,” Grant said, standing back to give Billy room to finish reconnecting the lead. “And no Annie back at the ranch, either.”

“What?”

Billy’s quicksilver change from affable goofball to man on the edge had Jesse taking a step back.

“Annie’s at her apartment.” Jesse knew his tone reflected his confusion.

“Shit! Damn it to hell. I thought she was safe and sound back at your ranch. Couldn’t the two of you have kept her busy in your beds for just one *damn* day?”

He slammed the hood down but Jesse moved just as fast, using his left hand to shove Billy against that hood.

“Excuse me?” Every one of Jesse’s senses flashed red alert. He felt Grant tense beside him, and made room for the other man when he stepped forward. They were a solid unit and if Billy possessed even half a brain, he’d realize they could have him on the ground hurting without breaking a sweat.

Billy put his hands up in surrender. “Back off. I didn’t mean any insult. But we’ve got a potential problem.”

Just then a loud buzzing sound broke the tense silence. Billy visibly paled.

“What the fuck was that?” Grant asked.

“GPS signal. Set to go off when the device reached specific coordinates. Okay, forget potential problem. We’ve got to move, *now*. Annie could be in serious danger.”

Billy shook off Jesse’s hold and ran for the truck. Jesse didn’t waste any time arguing, and neither did Grant. Spinning on his heels, he ran to the driver’s door and wrenched it open. “You better tell us what the fuck is going on, Billy.”

Billy all but dove into the cab from the passenger side, sliding to the middle of the bench seat, so Grant could get in. “I will. I’ll tell you everything on the way to Annie’s.”

* * * *

“What are you doing here, Rick?”

Annie tried to keep the fear out of her voice. Rick Rutherford had a gun in his hand. Jim’s brother had always scared her more than a little, even without a weapon in sight, even before he tried to force

himself on her. And she knew, looking in his eyes, that he was recalling that time even as he his insolent gaze raked over.

“Now is that any way to greet a member of your family, babe? After all, now that poor Jimmy boy has gone to his reward, I’m the head of the Rutherford clan.”

Annie decided to ignore that. As far as she was concerned Rick had never been a member of *her* family. But she figured saying that would only piss him off. Instead she asked, “When did you get out of prison?”

“Two weeks ago today. Want to hear something funny? That hole I was in was called ‘Wyoming’. And then here I found you’d run away all the way out here, another Wyoming.”

“What are you doing here, Rick?” she repeated.

“One thing about being on the inside, you learn how to work the system. Like you got extra points if you attended Sunday services. So over the last couple of years, I’ve had a lot of Bible reading crammed down my throat. They knew how to do things in those Old Testament days, did you know that? Guy dies, his brother takes over his stuff—including his wife. Maybe I’m just here to do my Christian duty. Or maybe I want to take my turn being your Teddy Bear. You still have that ratty old thing, Annie? I promise I’ll be a better bed mate than he has been this last year.”

A cold dread settled in the pit of her stomach. Annie felt terror wind through her, a black fog that slithered and churned. She couldn’t let him see her fear. But how to answer him? How to respond in a way that wouldn’t set off his temper or let him scent her terror? Words and phrases and attitudes she’d seen Jim employ in the past rushed into her mind. She seized them, the only lifeline she had.

“So you came all the way out west just for a piece of ass? I find that hard to believe. I know Jim had to have told you what a failure I am in the sex department.”

Rick laughed, but the humor didn’t reach his eyes.

“Old Jimmy, he was a real son-of-a-bitch, wasn’t he, babe? Of course, Ma thought the sun rose and set on his asshole, but you and me, we know different.”

Annie’s terror climbed, and so did the certainty that she was in very real danger. “I want you to leave, now.” She would fight him, if it came down to that. She would fight and claw and kick with every bit of strength she possessed. She’d never fought back in the past, never fought against the verbal and emotional abuse, and that failure had eventually led to much, much worse.

Never again.

By God, no man was ever going to hurt her again without getting something back in return.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m going to leave. Eventually. After I’ve had my fill of your cunt...and your mouth, and your ass. I like it nice and rough and before I’m done, I can guarantee you’re going to like it that way, too. But before we get to the fun and games, we’ll take care of business first.”

“We have no business between us. And I’m not going to let you touch me.”

“Oh, honey, you won’t be able to stop me.” He waved the gun he held for emphasis. “But as I said, business first. I’ll take the necklace.”

“Necklace?” Annie didn’t have to feign confusion. *Necklace?* What necklace? “I don’t have any jewelry. Despite the fact that Jim worked in jewelry stores for all the years of our marriage, he never once bought me any jewelry. If you think he did, maybe he gave it to one of his girlfriends.”

“So you knew about the bimbos? Thought you did. See, Jimmy wasn’t as smart as he thought he was. And neither are you, although you’re good. Really good. But, of course, I mean the glittery and expensive gems we stole just before I got sent away.”

When Annie only stared at him, he shook his head.

“What do you know? Innocent little Annie really is in the dark, and Jimmy did keep his mouth shut for a change.”

“Jim stole something from the store? When? How?”

“You really don’t know about it, do you? Well, that’s all right. You don’t need to know all the hows and the whys. Just get me the piece, I’ll take a few more pieces, and be on my way.” He leered at her, and Annie’s stomach turned over. She wondered if barfing on him would deter him.

“You’re crazy. I don’t have any necklace. Now get out of here. I’m expecting friends.” The lie slid easily from her lips. “You’ll be in deep shit if you get charged again, won’t you? Threatening, attempted assault. That gun you’re holding will make it all the worse for you. Maybe this time, they’ll lock you up and throw away the key.” Too late she realized letting him see her loathing was the wrong move.

“Bitch. Maybe the necklace can wait after all. You’ve been living without a man’s hand for too long. Sounds like you need a good going over, with my belt *and* my cock.” He pointed his gun at the ceiling, and Annie heard a click. Then he laid the weapon on the kitchen counter.

Rick moved so fast, Annie didn’t get a chance to try and escape. Clamping both hands on her arms, he dragged her forward.

Annie screamed, and he spun her around, slapping a hand over her mouth. She struggled, but she was no match for his strength. He pulled her back flush against the front of his body. The ridge of his cock pressed against her bottom, and terror gave her added strength. She dislodged his hand and screamed again.

He threw her to the kitchen floor, hard, falling on top of her. Winded by the fall, Annie struggled for breath. Rick pushed himself up, roughly turned her over so she lay on her back, and straddled her. He put one hand over her mouth again and reached for her blouse with the other.

She heard fabric tear and felt cool air wash over her bra-covered breasts. He grabbed her left breast and squeezed hard. His eyes

glittered with arousal, his pants tented with his erection, and Annie knew without a doubt he was going to rape her.

He must have read her thoughts in her eyes, because he grunted and reached for the waist of her shorts.

“Let’s get these off you. First, I’m going to fuck you. Then I’m going to beat you.” He levered up just a little as he worked her shorts down and then off her. He missed the thin silk of her thong, but of course that garment would be no protection for her or barrier to him. He flicked his gaze down at her, and stroked his fingers over her mound.

She bucked and thrashed, desperate to escape his touch.

“Eager little cunt, aren’t you? Let’s see if you can move that well when my cock is buried deep inside you.”

Struggling, screaming against his hand, Annie’s vision blurred from her tears. Rick raised himself up on his knees, and she heard the sound of his zipper opening.

Annie fought to breathe even as the panic tightened her chest, made the blood roar in her ears. Her heart pounded, louder and louder, until it rivaled a crack of thunder. Above her, Rick stiffened, his face a mask of surprise. His hand slid away from her mouth and she desperately sucked in air as he crumpled, half-trapping her with his weight. Crying, desperate, she pushed to get out from under him, wiggling until she broke free., Skittering back, she realized he hadn’t moved. A red stain grew on the back of his shirt below his right shoulder blade. Annie jerked her gaze toward the door.

Veronica stood beside her kitchen table, gun still pointed in a two-handed grip.

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God.” Annie wiped at her tears.

“Are you all right, Annie?”

“Yes. Yes.” Shaking, she reached for her shorts, but couldn’t seem to be able to stand up to put them on. So she wiggled into them as she sat. Rick hadn’t moved, and she was shaking too much to tell if he was breathing or not.

“Is he dead?”

“I really don’t care one way or the other,” Veronica said in an oddly detached voice. “There’s only one thing I care about.”

Annie’s relief turned to confusion, and then horror, as Veronica slowly pivoted to aim the gun at her.

“I’ve waited long enough to get what’s coming to me. I had hoped to accomplish my goal and move on before that piece of slime even got out of prison. Oh, well. I’ll take what I can get. But there’s one thing I need, the one thing I followed you here to this hick town for in the first place. Get me the necklace, Annie. *Now.*”

Chapter 19

“Veronica? What...what are you doing?”

Shit, shit, shit. Veronica’s gaze drifted over to where Rick Rutherford lay, unmoving. Had she killed him? She’d never killed anyone before. Come to that, she’d never even shot at anyone before. But she’d had no choice. She couldn’t stand by and let him rape Annie.

“Look, Annie. I’m sorry. Really. You’re a nice woman. I even kind of like you, which is unusual for me. I don’t generally like women. But I’ve got to have that necklace.”

“I don’t understand any of this.”

Annie had moved away from her brother-in-law so that she sat against the archway between the kitchen and living room, but didn’t seem to have the energy to move much further. Veronica considered for one moment what the best course of action would be. Generally, there weren’t too many people in the center of town at this time on a Sunday night. Only Annie, who lived over her store, and that goof-ball Billy Woods, who had a room above the shop he rented a couple of blocks away, actually lived in what was laughingly called the ‘downtown’ district of Branchton.

There were always people in the fields outside of town, taking target practice or actually hunting. One shot on a summer Sunday evening wasn’t going to raise any alarms or make anyone even wonder what was going on. So Veronica probably had a bit of time. And after what Annie had just been through, she didn’t mind giving her an explanation. She was already working the angle in her mind,

what her story would be if she got stopped later. She'd be out of the country with the goods within twelve hours, but she wanted to go back to New York. She'd say she shot Rutherford out of fear for her friend, and then she'd become so unnerved, she'd run. Necklace? What necklace? Annie must have been confused by the trauma she'd suffered.

It could work.

"Okay, likely no one in Hicksville here is going to investigate the sound of a gunshot, so I can spare a minute or two. About three years ago, I met this smooth talking salesman on a Friday night when I happened to be bored and looking for a little action. I was at a bar in Manhattan, The Euro, and this guy looked good, smelled good. I didn't know at the time that he was married."

"Jim." Annie's voice sounded flat, and Veronica winced.

"Yeah. Anyway, we sort of hit it off and stumbled into an affair. Then, one night when he was trying to impress me, he told me how he was being entrusted with a special assignment. Algernon Piers, the owner of Piers Telecom and Piers Data Net, had requisitioned a special cleaning and inspection of Aphrodite's Tears."

"He wanted to inspect...what?"

Veronica's patience began to waiver. She needed to get this done and be gone. "Aphrodite's Tears. It's a necklace, gold filigree and tear-drop diamonds, dozens of them. Legend has it that the necklace was a gift to Paris, an apology of sorts for the trouble the goddess had brought him, and a token he was to bestow on the woman Aphrodite had given him—Helen of Troy."

"Helen of Troy?"

Annie's tone of disbelief grated. "Look, the legend is just bullshit, we both know that. Bullshit the rich attach to their baubles to make them sound more important than they really are. But the necklace is worth more money than either one of us could normally hope to see in a lifetime." Veronica wasn't a villain, had never set out to hurt anyone. She'd only seen a chance to grab something for herself. The

gems in the hands of a perennial loser like Rick Rutherford might fetch him half a million. He'd have to break the piece, sell off the diamonds which in turn would need to be re-cut.

But sell the necklace whole to a collector—to the *right* collector—and the profit would be in the millions.

Veronica had already contacted such a collector who lived in the Cayman Islands. The man was Greek and ridiculously sentimental when it came to ancient gods and goddesses, which was good for her.

All she had to do was get the necklace to him and she would have everything she had ever wanted for the rest of her life.

“Veronica, I’ve never *seen* this necklace. I didn’t even know it existed until tonight. I had no idea Rick had gotten Jim involved in one of his schemes.”

“No. It was *my* scheme. Rick was all for stealing it from the store, but that would have been stupid. Instead, we waited until the day after it was returned to the Piers penthouse apartment. A security consultant was arriving that afternoon to change the set up for the safe. Fools should have seen to that *first* instead of having that big party. They deserved to have it stolen. So in the wee hours of the morning, after everyone in residence was either passed out from too much booze, or exhausted from cleaning up after the rich and bored, Rick broke in and stole it. My plan, not Jimmy’s and certainly not *his*.” Veronica gestured at the still unmoving man on the floor. It looked like he was still breathing, so she guessed he wasn’t dead yet. “The plan was to keep the gems hidden for a couple of years until the best buyer could be located. A buyer who coveted the thing and wouldn’t care if it was stolen. But then Rick knocked over that 7-Eleven and ended up back in prison, and Jimmy...I won’t lie and say I’m sorry he’s dead. By then, I’d discovered what a bastard he was.” Veronica shook her head. “Look, Annie. I just saved your ass. Give me the necklace and I’ll be gone.”

“I don’t *have* the necklace. I keep saying this, but no one seems to be listening to me.”

“Rick seemed to think you did. He might be a prick, but he’s not completely stupid.” Veronica believed Annie hadn’t known about the necklace. But if Rick thought she had it, then it had to be among the things she’d brought with her from New York.

“Okay, time’s wasting. Get up. We’re going to have a look for the gems. You have them, even if you don’t know you do. They’d be hidden in the stuff you brought with you, of course. So let’s get to work. Or rather, you get to work. I’ll observe and keep this gun on you. I don’t want to hurt you, Annie. I really don’t. But if it comes down to a choice between you and me getting what I want....Well, I’m a survivor.”

* * * *

Annie had trouble gaining her feet. The shaking had subsided, but hadn’t left completely. At least she knew Veronica wouldn’t inflict the kind of humiliation on her Rick planned. But she thought she just might be in more danger than before the other woman had ‘saved her ass’.

“Okay, what did you bring with you from New York? And before you suggest it, you should know that I went through all the crap you left behind the day after you headed West. I spent the better part of a day going through everything, so I know you must have it with you.”

“Um...just give me a minute to think.” Annie’s mind raced. She figured no one in the area thought much about that gunshot, because long minutes had passed and her phone hadn’t rung, and no sirens screamed. Her instincts screamed at her to buy time, though why, she had no idea.

“I brought a box of photos, my report cards, yearbooks, personal mementos. Some clothes. Some books. There are still a couple of boxes in my bedroom closet. One of books and pictures, one of clothes. Maybe....” She stopped mid sentence and frowned.

“Maybe what?”

“Well, maybe I don’t have the necklace itself. Maybe it’s like a note or something saying where it is.” Annie thought the suggestion sounded reasonable. With such an idea firmly in place, they could search every page of every book, eating up a mountain of time.

God, I wish my men were here. Not that she needed them to rescue her. Exactly. But in the last half hour, she’d had her entire world turned upside down and her life had literally flashed before her eyes. Looking down the barrel of a gun, she finally understood what was really important in life.

She didn’t care about schemes or gems or the money they would bring. She cared about being loved, and loving in return. That had been her dream all her life, and though the relationship she shared with Jesse and Grant *was* unconventional, it made that dream come true in a big way. That’s what mattered more than anything else. If she got out of this mess, she was going to take the chance of a lifetime. If they still wanted her, then she was going to trust them to know their own minds. If they still wanted her, she was theirs.

“That would make sense, Annie, except I really don’t think Jimmy foresaw his own death, do you? We pulled off the heist about a year before he got shot in that hold up. The plan was to sit on the gems. I was supposed to keep them, but Rick bitched about it so Jimmy said he’d stash them, that he had the perfect place in mind. I had planned to wheedle the location from him one night with a combination of booze and sex. But of course, his dying changed that.”

“Oh.” *Hell.* Annie felt her spirits drop as she moved slowly toward the bedroom.

The sound of heavy foot falls on the outside stairs chilled her to her bones.

“Annie, sweetheart, I know you’re up there. Don’t be mad at me, baby. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

* * * *

Billy shot his companions an assessing glance. He wouldn't doubt their ability to come through for him under any other circumstances. But he understood how much they cared for the woman in that upstairs apartment.

He'd already taken all the time he could to assess the situation. From the bug he'd planted in Annie's place, he knew Veronica was up there, that something had happened to Rutherford, and that Veronica had a weapon of some kind—most likely a gun.

There were only two ways into Annie's apartment. Up the stairs or down the roof and through the living room window.

According to Jesse, there used to be a set of stairs from the store to the apartment, but the old buzzard who'd owned the place before Annie had taken them out and sealed the door.

"Damn place is a fire trap with only one exit," Billy grouched.

"Fine. Let's get her out of there. *Then* you can report it to the sheriff," Jesse replied tightly.

"I've already called the sheriff. He's about twenty minutes out."

"Fuck that," Grant said.

"Exactly. Gentlemen, here's what we're going to do." Billy realized as he mapped out his plan that either or both of these men could challenge his right to be in charge. If they did, he was toast. He didn't have a badge or a gun. But he did have reams of experience. Okay, not in this exact situation, maybe. But this was more up his alley than it was either of these two cowboys.

"Damn it," Jesse said when Billy finished. "I don't like this one bit. If that bitch shot Rutherford, how the hell do you know she won't shoot Annie?"

"I don't. I didn't catch all that she said," Billy touched the Bluetooth that allowed him to continue to listen in on the conversation in Annie's apartment. "I would have banked on Veronica being almost no threat at all. In fact, I had." He shook his head.

They stood behind the shed at the edge of the back parking lot. They could see the lights on above the store, could see the apartment,

but nothing of what was going on inside it. “I think she told Annie that she’d saved her ass, so maybe she only shot the bastard to protect your woman.”

“And might shoot again to protect *herself* when we do what you want us to do,” Grant said.

“Yeah, maybe. You have any better suggestions?”

“No.” Jesse and Grant exchanged one long look. Billy guessed that when a person knew a man all his life, he got to the point where he could know his thoughts without a word being spoken.

“You do glib better than I do, Jesse,” Grant said. “I’ll go with Billy.”

“Okay. Let’s just get this done,” Jesse said.

Billy led the way down the road and across to the back of the dry-cleaners. He was grateful that Grant climbed as quietly as he did.

The silent cowboy gave him a boost onto the roof, and Billy admired his strength when he then hefted himself up with no help. They crept along the crest, careful to keep their balance and their silence.

When Billy reached what he judged to be the right spot, he sat straddling the peak and tried not to look down. He really didn’t care too much for heights.

Grant got busy with the rope they’d taken from the truck, working quickly to form a slip-knot. Billy slid it over his head and snugged it under his arms. Grant shimmied forward and nodded. Billy inhaled deeply and worked his way down the roof, until he was at the very edge facing Main Street. Looking down, he could see the light through Annie’s living room window. He nodded to Grant, who in turn lifted a hand to signal Jesse.

The clear night amplified sound, and Billy could easily count the steps as Jesse climbed the stairs.

“Annie, sweetheart, I know you’re up there. Don’t be mad at me, baby. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

Chapter 20

Annie thought she would have a heart attack as Jesse's words accompanied him up the stairs. Even though she'd only just wished her men were here, the last thing she wanted was for them to be in harm's way.

She'd die before she let anything happen to them.

Veronica was beside her in an instant. Annie felt the gun pressing against her back.

"Get rid of him." The other woman hissed.

Then he was there, opening the screen door, stepping inside. Annie's heart was in her throat. If Jesse turned his head to the right, he'd see an unconscious man bleeding on her floor. Instead, he shot a wide smile at her and Veronica.

"Why, hello there, Ms. Ferris. I guess you ladies have a girl's night thing going on, don't you?"

"As a matter of fact," Veronica said.

"Well now, I surely don't want to go interrupting that. I'll let you ladies get back to whatever it was you were doing just as soon as I set things right with Annie. I cheesed her off some this afternoon, telling her she rode a horse like a sissy city girl."

He'd said no such thing. *Oh, God.* He knew! He knew something was wrong and was getting ready to play hero.

Jesse flashed another wide grin. "I am sincerely sorry, Annie. Can't we kiss and make up?"

From behind them, glass exploded. Annie jumped as Veronica squealed. Everything seemed to play out in slow motion. Veronica

spun around on her heels, bringing the gun up to meet the new threat. Jesse leapt forward, arm outstretched, reaching for Annie

No time to think, Annie grabbed the cutting board off the kitchen table, clutching it in both hands. Executing a pirouette that might have gained applause on a ballet stage, she slammed the board against Veronica's right arm, knocking her aim off just as a shot rang out. When she realized the other woman still had hold of the weapon, Annie smashed the board against her again.

Veronica cried out as she fell to her knees, clutching her arm.

"Shit. Holy shit!" Jesse said as he reached her.

The next thing Annie knew, Jesse had his arms wrapped around her. He held her tight, and she wasn't sure who was trembling more—her or him.

"Don't ever get mad at me and come after me with that board, woman. You're dangerous."

Annie laughed, the idea that anyone would think her dangerous somehow delightful. Spotting movement by what used to be her living room window, she lifted her head from Jesse's chest in time to see Grant swing down from the roof and climb into the room.

"Be careful! There's glass everywhere."

"Yes, ma'am."

Grant's softly spoken words emphasized the near shrillness of her own. She closed her eyes for one moment and shivered. She never wanted to go through another day like this one for the rest of her life.

Grant came over and hauled her into his arms. Jesse stayed put, not backing up that one step he usually did when Grant moved in on her. And then she felt his arms surrounding her to create the best group hug in the world.

In the distance, the blare of a siren could be heard.

"That will be the sheriff now," a male voice said.

For the first time, Annie noticed Billy Woods was standing in her apartment. He seemed a little ruffled for having just crashed through the window, feet first, but really none the worse for wear. He'd been

crouching by Rick, checking him over, she supposed. The way he used one of her dishtowels as a compress against the scumbag's injured shoulder told her Rick was still alive. When Billy stood up, she noticed he had the gun Veronica had dropped tucked into his waistband.

Veronica remained crouched on the floor, still clutching her arm and weeping. Annie realized that the danger she'd been in was truly over.

"Nobody is who they appeared to be, apparently," she muttered, giving Billy a sharp look. "Are you a cop? Because if you are I'm going to report your ass for using my men the way you just did, putting them in danger. That woman had a gun!"

"She's a fierce little thing when she's riled," Billy said, aiming his comment at her men. Annie took one step toward him and he raised both hands. "I'm not a cop. I'm a bounty hunter."

"Bounty hunter? Then you're after my worthless brother-in-law?"

"No, ma'am. I'm after Aphrodite's Tears."

* * * *

The only one getting impatient with Annie was Billy Woods. Sitting in Jesse's kitchen, a steaming mug of cocoa in front of her, her men on either side of her, Mr. Tinkles clutched to her chest as he had been during many of the traumas of her life, Annie let Billy's impatience roll off her.

"I'm not implicating Veronica in planning the theft. She had an affair with my husband. She found out about the heist. She decided to try to cash in after his death, by retrieving the gems. Pardon me, but isn't that what you're doing?"

"Yeah, but I didn't just shoot a man."

"The man was trying to rape me." Even now, several hours later, Annie could barely get the words out. She'd given her statement to the sheriff, of course. But she'd omitted any mention of Veronica's

confession. She hadn't planned it, but she did owe the other woman for saving her from a fate that might very well have been worse than death. Under the circumstances, there would be no charges filed against Veronica. She had a broken arm, and had been taken to have that seen to.

Rick, under armed guard, had been transported to the hospital in Laramie where he was expected to make a full recovery. The police had already laid several charges against him. When they'd located his car just a few blocks from her store, they'd found extra ammunition for the gun, and several maps with a route to Mexico marked out. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Rutherford had been shot with his own weapon.

Annie turned her attention back to Billy. "Besides, you said you had my place 'bugged', something I'm pretty sure is illegal and which I can have you charged over."

"I did have it bugged, as you well know, since you made me remove the damn device before we boarded up your window."

"Then if you think she confessed, why don't you just use your copy of the taped conversation to have her arrested?"

He just stared at her and she didn't think he'd answer her. Then, hissing through his teeth, he said, "The tape ran out."

"Can I get you anything, honey?" Grant stroked a hand down her back.

"No, thanks. I'm good." She took a sip from her cocoa then petted Mr. Tinkles' short brown scratchy fur.

Jesse's hand rested on her other arm. Surrounded by love she felt much better.

"Will you two talk some sense into your woman, please? Rutherford isn't a reliable witness. If Annie doesn't come forward to testify, chances are Veronica will never be charged with anything more than unlawful use of a firearm."

"We're planning a long and happy life with Annie," Grant said.

“That means we won’t try and persuade her to change her mind when she appears to be completely set on something.”

“Shit.” Billy shoved his chair back from the table. He paced the kitchen, and Annie couldn’t decide if he was trying to walk off his anger or think of a new argument to try and get her to change her mind.

“So tell me about this bounty hunting thing you do,” she said. “I’ve heard of bounty hunters who go after bail skippers and fugitives. I’ve never heard of one who goes after *things*.”

“Not just things,” Billy said. “You’re really not going to change your mind about Veronica, are you?”

She looked at him for a long moment. She imagined she would be having nightmares for some time to come. She recalled the terror she’d felt as Rick Rutherford lowered the fly of his pants. “Between the time when Rick broke into my place and you guys arrived, nearly an hour had passed. He said he was going to rape me, then beat me. He would have if not for Veronica.”

“Sweet Jesus.”

“Mother of God.”

Jesse and Grant’s oaths echoed softly. Annie hadn’t stopped to think what saying that out loud would do to her men. When they gathered her close, together, she held on until they all stopped trembling.

Annie accepted the tissue Billy held out to her and mopped up her tears.

“Like I said, not just things. I go after heavily insured things that the insurance companies have paid out on.”

“So you recover them and what? You collect a fee? If you find this necklace...”

“Aphrodite’s Tears,” Billy supplied.

“Aphrodite’s Tears. Like a goddess would have given anyone anything in apology. Who thinks these things up?” Annie scoffed. Both her men chuckled, and even Billy smiled.

That was good. She wanted Billy to smile. She needed Billy to smile. “So if you’d recovered Aphrodite’s Tears, the insurance company would have given you a fee?”

“Yes, ten percent of the recovered value. For example, the necklace was insured for ten million dollars.”

“Ten million dollars? *Ten million dollars*? Who in the hell would pay ten million dollars for one necklace? My God, are people *nuts*?” Annie couldn’t wrap her head around it.

“No, Annie. It was *insured* for ten million. But its value, if sold, is far more than that.”

“Does the client get the necklace back if he pays back the insurance money?” she asked. “Depends on the contract. The one Lloyd’s had issued for Aphrodite’s Tears stipulates that if the money is paid out under a claim, then the necklace belongs to the insurance company and can be sold. And not just for the amount Lloyd’s paid out, either. This was a custom policy. Cheaper for Piers that way, but not if the thing was recovered, of course.”

“So if the necklace *was* recovered, and given over to Lloyd’s then it could be sold?”

“Yes. Likely through Sotheby’s at special auction. And the person recovering the necklace would make ten per cent of the sale.”

“Any idea how much it would go for?” Jesse asked.

Annie could tell just by the way he’d asked that he was getting into the spirit of the conversation. However, he still didn’t seem to have any idea where Annie was heading.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on certain websites that ponder just such questions. Latest estimate is between twenty-five and thirty million.”

“Good Lord. So the person who recovers the necklace would get two and a half to three million dollars?”

As she watched, Billy went perfectly still. “You mean,” he said quietly, “that *I* would get between two and a half and three million dollars.”

“Well, yes. If *you* were the one to turn it over to Lloyd’s.”

He sat back, closed his eyes. She knew her men were looking from him to her and thinking— just as she knew Billy was thinking.

Before tonight, she’d never even *heard* of Aphrodite’s Tears. She’d had no idea her husband had been involved in a jewel heist, or that he’d retained possession of the stolen goods afterwards. That they had been in his possession, more or less, when he died. She hadn’t known the truth about him, or Veronica, or Billy.

When first Rick, and then Veronica, demanded she hand over the necklace, she’d been telling the truth when she told them she had no idea where the gems could possibly be.

But a few hours had passed and the shock had begun to wear off. She’d been able to think.

She hadn’t known where the necklace was a few hours ago, but she did now. In fact, Rick Rutherford had more or less told her where it was.

Billy opened his eyes, sat forward. “What do you want?” He flicked a glance at first Jesse, then Grant. When her men just sat back, continued touching and comforting her, he returned his gaze to hers. She shook her head slowly.

“Half.”

“Half. So...you and I would split the fee. Just the two of us. You’d cut your men out of the deal?”

“I know my men,” she said softly.

“After everything Annie’s been through because of that SOB she was married to,” Jesse said, “she deserves every cent recovering that thing will give her. I wouldn’t dream of taking even a penny of it.”

“Ditto,” Grant said.

Billy’s head bowed, as if that had been his last chance to win.

“Cheer up, Billy. Splitting the money only two ways works better for you than splitting it four.”

“True. Okay. Partners, then.”

“Uh uh,” Annie said. “Needs to be written down and notarized.”

“Not very trusting, are you?” Billy asked.

“After tonight’s activities and revelations?” Annie asked.

Though it was nearly ten o’clock on a Sunday night, it didn’t take long for arrangements to be made. Grant placed a phone call to his godfather, who was a Justice of the Peace for the county. Jesse went into his office and wrote up an agreement on his computer, printing out several copies. By eleven o’clock, the document had been signed and witnessed, the Justice of the Peace thanked and sent on his way, and a new pot of coffee brewed.

“You didn’t know before tonight where they were, did you?”

Billy asked that, and his statement of faith in her character pleased her.

“No, I really didn’t. I didn’t even know they existed.” She smiled around a yawn.

“Well? Do we head over to your place now? I know it’s late, but I would like to get this done and over with,” Billy said.

“No need. Does anyone have a pen knife?”

Grant fished one out of his pocket and handed it to her, a shiny one with a tiny blade. She held Mr. Tinkles up, looked into his faithful face for one long moment.

“Sorry, old man. I’ll have you fixed again, I promise.”

She turned the bear over and laid him on the table. She’d examined him carefully earlier—truthfully, the first time she’d done so in years. She noticed the stitching along his spine, newer thread than the rest of him had, and she’d known.

Carefully, so as not to cause any more damage than necessary, she sliced through the stitches on the old bear, opening him butt to neck. Easing back the two sides of fifty-year-old cloth, she reached inside. Mr. Tinkles had been made at a time before modern stuffing and consumer protection laws. What came out of him resembled the grass used to fill Easter baskets, but this was brittle and yellow, and much diminished in volume than in years past. For some of it had been removed and replaced with a small, soft blue felt jewelry pouch.

She handed the pouch to Billy, who laid it on the table and opened it.

Dozens of diamonds held in settings of ancient gold glittered in the kitchen's artificial light.

Chapter 21

There'd been no time or energy the night before for anything but a long, warm snuggle in bed. With a hot, hard male body on either side of her, exhaustion caught up to Annie and she dropped into sleep.

When she opened her eyes the next morning, she saw sunlight streaming into the room, making a sunspot on the floor. As the fog of sleep dissipated and her mind began to work, the reality of the day, and likely the time, intruded. She sat up, looking for a clock.

"Hey."

Jesse had spoken, but Grant was there, too. Each put a hand on her arm and coaxed her back down on the bed.

"I need to open the store."

"Not today, baby," Grant said. "Today, you need to rest and let us take care of you."

"You went to sleep so fast last night, you had us worried," Jesse added.

How wonderful it felt to lay safe and secure and snug between her two lovers! How amazing to reach up with both hands and stroke beloved faces.

"I guess I was pretty stressed out."

"An understatement." Jesse pulled the blankets down, baring her to the waist. Instinct moved her hand, jerking them back into place.

"Annie?" The concern in Grant's tone, the sudden wariness on Jesse's face nearly brought her to tears.

"I have to shower first." She looked from one face to the other. "Please. He *touched* me. I...I don't feel clean."

Grant moved first, hauling her into his arms, squeezing her so tight, she wondered if she'd be able to breathe. When he released her, Jesse stroked a hand over her hair, then bent and kissed her.

"Tell you what. Grant and I will play lady's maid today. We'll bathe you."

"I haven't been bathed since I was a baby," Annie said.

* * * *

She'd imagined lounging for hours in this massive round tub the first time she'd laid eyes on it. Because it dominated half of the fabulous space Jesse had created, the tub—surely an inadequate name—inspired all sorts of decadent fantasies. One image that formed in her mind featured lit candles music playing, fragrant steam and hot water soothing sore muscles.

Reality proved far better than imagination.

Instead of candlelight, daylight softly accented the room. Fresh air, from the constant Wyoming wind, streamed in the open window, carrying with it the rare scent of rain, as intoxicating a fragrance as any scented wax. The heat of water, the jets set on low, and the lush jasmine-scented steam soothed her.

Gentle hands, caressing, laving, healed her.

They'd left her in bed until the tub was ready. Then Jesse carried her into the bathroom. They'd waited until she let go of the sheet he'd wrapped her in.

She couldn't understand why she felt so shy, revealing her flesh to these wonderful men who'd seen and touched every inch of her numerous times already.

"It's because someone tried to take what we have and are to each other and make it ugly," Grant said softly. It amazed her that he understood her emotions when she hadn't understood them herself. He was right. That was exactly why she'd felt shy. No, not shy. *Ashamed.*

“We love you, Annie. No one and nothing could ever change that, or defile that. Never doubt that. Never forget that,” Jesse said.

She hadn’t realized she was bruised. Not surprising, considering the rough handling she’d had last night. There were marks on her face and neck, and on her hips from when she’d been thrown to the floor.

Minor insults compared to what could have been.

“If I had seen these at the time, I’d have kicked his face in.” Jesse’s quiet vow warmed her and frightened her at the same time. His muscles gave him a power she doubted few men possessed. She had no fear that he would ever use that strength against her. But he’d use it to defend her, regardless of the cost to his body, or his soul.

“He’s not worth it, darling,” Annie said. “He’s not worth one more thought.”

And as Jesse lifted her and settled her in the perfumed water, Annie released the tension and the fear that clung to her. The hate and the panic, not just from last night but from the past deserved not one moment more of her time, attention, or care.

Grant stretched her arms out, up over her head, to rest against the rim of the tub. She closed her eyes, anticipating the soap-enhanced stroke of hands on her breasts and belly. Instead, a hand and a foot were taken up tenderly, lathered and massaged in a rhythm that felt almost coordinated.

Annie groaned, the sound one of pure pleasure, coaxed by such loving touches.

“I think our woman likes this,” Grant said quietly.

“So do I,” Jesse said.

Toes and fingers, hands and feet, arms and legs, they washed, caressed, massaged until it seemed every joint in Annie’s body had turned to jelly, every muscle to molten lava.

“Oh, God,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “This feels *so* good.”

“Just enjoy,” Grant encouraged.

How could she do anything but? Stress gone, the sense of shame and dirtiness that the malice of another had created, stood no chance against the outpouring of love her men lavished upon her.

When she heard the rustle of clothing, the slide of zippers, her heart rejoiced. The round tub easily accommodated the addition of their big, strong bodies. Annie licked dry lips as arousal began to curl in her belly.

Surprising her, Grant gently lifted her until she sprawled on him, supine, her back cushioned by his flesh.

They washed and rinsed her, reverently, treasuring her in a way that brought tears to her eyes.

“I want you,” she hadn’t known last night if she ever would again, but now there lived no doubt within her. “I want you both so much. Inside me. I want you inside me at the same time.”

“Yeah,” Grant’s agreement was as much a rumble beneath her as a voice close to her ear. “Then that’s what we’ll give you.”

The growing erection beneath her told her he was more than up to the task.

“You’ll have us just that way,” Jesse added his agreement to Grant’s. “Now, and any time you want for the rest of our lives.”

They rinsed her and dried her. Then Grant carried her back to their bed. He came down beside her, gently turning her face to him. With his lips sipping and his tongue tasting, he kissed her until her blood heated and her flesh tingled. When he sampled her throat, and then her shoulder, Jesse coaxed her face to his, laid his mouth on hers and devoured her.

Passion rose, a swelling of heat and love more powerful than any force of nature. Annie crested the wave of her orgasm from the loving of their mouths alone.

“We’ll give you more,” one lover whispered.

“Everything, we’ll give you everything,” the other vowed.

Caressing and cupping, stroking and sliding, their flesh owned hers so that she couldn’t tell where she ended and they began. Each

touch brought liquid heat and shivering sighs. Each kiss and lick and nip fueled the need in her, so that she wanted more, she craved everything.

Smooth and supple, as if they performed a dance of intricate balance and tempo, they moved and melded, soft, hot, electric.

She heard the sounds, knew they protected her, and the knowledge that they always would wrapped a layer of purest joy around her pleasure.

“Come here, baby, ride me.” Grant’s plea energized her, and she went to him, raising up to straddle him, sinking down, down, until his hot condom-covered cock sank deep into her body.

“Your pussy feels so damn good.” His hands on her hips, he moved her, taking control of their loving with long, measured strokes. “Come down here.” She placed both hands on the bed, bracketing his head, her lips seeking his for another deep, drugging kiss.

She felt Jesse move behind her, his hands gliding up her back and down her ass. Looking over her shoulder, she gave him a smile that felt wild, wanton, and sultry.

His answer was to stroke one finger over the rosette of her anus. The lubricant chilled and heated at the same time, igniting a hunger in her, a hunger to be taken and filled in this most scandalous of ways.

“Fuck me,” she begged him.

“*Lord.*” Jesse breathed and pushed forward.

Hot and hard, he pressed into her, a steady thrust that held her, pushed her down harder onto Grant’s cock, which so magnificently filled her pussy. Her anus stretched, the burning of it adding to her pleasure, the promise of that wonderful cock so enticing she dipped her back, spread her legs just a bit more, giving Jesse total access, denying him nothing.

The head of his penis slipped into her, and when she moved just a little, Jesse groaned, pressed on in one solid thrust that embedded him in her to the hilt. His balls caressed her mons just next to where

Grant's cock entered her body. Pleasure seemed too paltry a word to describe the sheer delight of being completely impaled by her lovers.

"Damn. You're so tight. So hot. So *fucking* good." Even in the heat of near-climax, Grant held still, the only sign of his growing need the trembling of his hands as they continued to clamp on her hips.

"Fuck us, Annie. We don't want to hurt you. Fuck us, take what you need."

"I need more. I need everything."

Down and back, a languid sway of hips that worked slow, steady, she did as Jesse asked. The slide and pull, the push and glide of her lovers' cocks inside her, drove her passion higher than she'd ever imagined. Twinges of pain mixed with the pleasure, and her body responded, separate from thought or logic, feeding the hunger that burned and yearned and churned within her. Faster, deeper, relentless in its compulsion, her body moved, the groans and pleas of her lovers a sexy symphony, an arousing aria.

"God, baby. I'm so close." Jesse hissed.

She felt his restraint, felt him fighting the primal need to take, to plunder, and would have none of it. Perspiration glistened on her flesh, and on Grants. Bending down, she licked the salty sheen from his skin.

"Take me. Take me hard," she whispered, needing to give them the gift not only of her body, but of her trust.

"Hold on."

Two words, the snap of control, the unleashing of the feral. Annie pressed harder down on Grant's cock and squeezed him with her inner muscles at the same time she surrendered control of her ass to Jesse.

"Yes!" Jesse and Grant both grunted their need, their greed, their rapture as together they moved, an almost convulsive pounding that once begun neither could control. Annie's climax exploded, the bliss so fierce, her cry of joy became a scream, a sound so primal, so feminine, her lovers could never mistake it for anything but absolute

satiation. On and on the current sheared through her, stretching her, pressing her to give and give and give.

“Don’t move,” Jesse cautioned what seemed minutes later as he labored for breath and tried to make his arms support him.

“Don’t worry.” The orgasm had stolen every single ounce of energy and strength she possessed. Collapsed on one lover, covered by the other, Annie doubted she’d move anytime in the next week.

“Good God.” Grant’s words, hoarse and strained, brushed her hair.

Eventually, Jesse withdrew from her, easing himself up and off. Annie dozed, the sound of him moving into the bathroom, of the toilet flushing, and water running, familiar sounds that played in the background of her conscious thoughts. The bed dipped, and cool hands lifted her slightly. She felt Grant slide out of her, then from under her, heard him repeating Jesse’s motions as she felt the mattress rise up beneath her, felt Jesse’s solid body against her back as he settled behind her. Then Grant returned, sliding in next to her, facing her.

They were three individuals who had somehow, through love and friendship, become one.

“You’ll let us build that house,” Jesse said. For all of his sweet charm and impish ways, he was pure Alpha male. She loved that about him.

“Yes. I want you to build me a house.”

“And you’ll stay with us.”

Grant could be just as dictatorial when he wanted to be.

Funny, she’d spent the first thirty years of her life only knowing bossy men. Now, she had men of strength and she could attest to the difference.

“I’ll stay.”

“Later, if we decide we want kids, we’ll adopt,” Jesse said. “After the way my life was mended when Grant’s folks adopted me, it’s something I’ve always planned to do.”

“Maybe a baby or two,” Grant said, “but a couple of older kids, too. Kids who maybe have given up on being chosen. Like my Aunt Bev was. Gram and Gramps took her in when she was thirteen. She said they saved her life. She and Uncle Harry adopted a couple of kids themselves. We’ll make it the family tradition.”

Of course! She *could* have that family she’d always longed to have. Why had that possibility never occurred to her before? She would have a family that would be created not by her body, but by her heart, and the hearts of these two men.

“I love you both so much,” Annie said. “I never would have thought it possible to love two men with equal passion and equal heart. But I do.”

“I love you, Annie. You’re ours,” one lover declared.

“I love you, Annie. And we’re yours,” the other lover vowed.

They laid, warm and sated, quiet and loving for a long moment.

“Why did you only want half the money?” Jesse asked. “By rights, you could have claimed it all.”

“I know. But half was more than enough. I wanted something because what you said—about it being owed to me after all was said and done—was exactly right. As soon as I knew I could get that, I don’t know, it felt like a kind of closure. And the other reason was the two of you.”

“I meant it, woman. I don’t want one red cent,” Jesse said.

“No how, no way,” Grant agreed.

“I know. But we’re making a family, and I wanted to come into this family on equal footing, financially.”

She thought they might protest, but they didn’t, proving once again her men really did understand her. Then, thoughtfully, she said, “If Veronica ends up needing a lawyer, I intend to see she gets one.”

“Of course you will. You wouldn’t be you, otherwise.”

Annie smiled. Words spoken the night before at the kitchen table came back to her.

“A long and happy life, huh?”

“Very long,” Jesse said.

“Very happy,” Grant said.

Annie snuggled closer to her men. “With the two of you to satisfy every one of my cowboy cravings, I don’t see how it could be any other way.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan has been a writer since she was first able to pick up a pen. In the beginning it was a hobby, a way to create a world of her own, and who could resist the allure of that? Then as she grew and matured, life got in the way, as life often does. She got married and had three children, and worked in the field of accounting, for that was the practical thing to do and the children did need to be fed. And all the time she was being practical, she would squirrel herself away on quiet Sunday afternoons, and write.

Most children are raised knowing the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. Morgan's children also learned the Paper Rule: thou shalt not throw out any paper that has thy mother's words upon it.

Believing in tradition, Morgan ensured that her children's children learned this rule, too.

Life threw Morgan a curve when, in 2002, she underwent emergency triple by-pass surgery. Second chances are to be cherished, and with the encouragement and support of her husband, Morgan decided to use hers to do what she'd always dreamed of doing: writing full time. "I can't tell you how much I love what I do. I am truly blessed."

Morgan has always loved writing romance. It is the one genre that can incorporate every other genre within its pulsating heart. Romance showcases all that human kind can aspire to be. And, she admits, she's a sucker for a happy ending.

Morgan's favorite hobbies are reading, cooking, and traveling – though she would rather you didn't mention that last one to her husband. She has too much fun teasing him about having become a "Traveling Fool" of late.

Morgan lives in Southwestern Ontario with a cat that has an attitude, a dog that has no dignity, and her husband of thirty-seven years, David.

Also by Morgan Ashbury

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