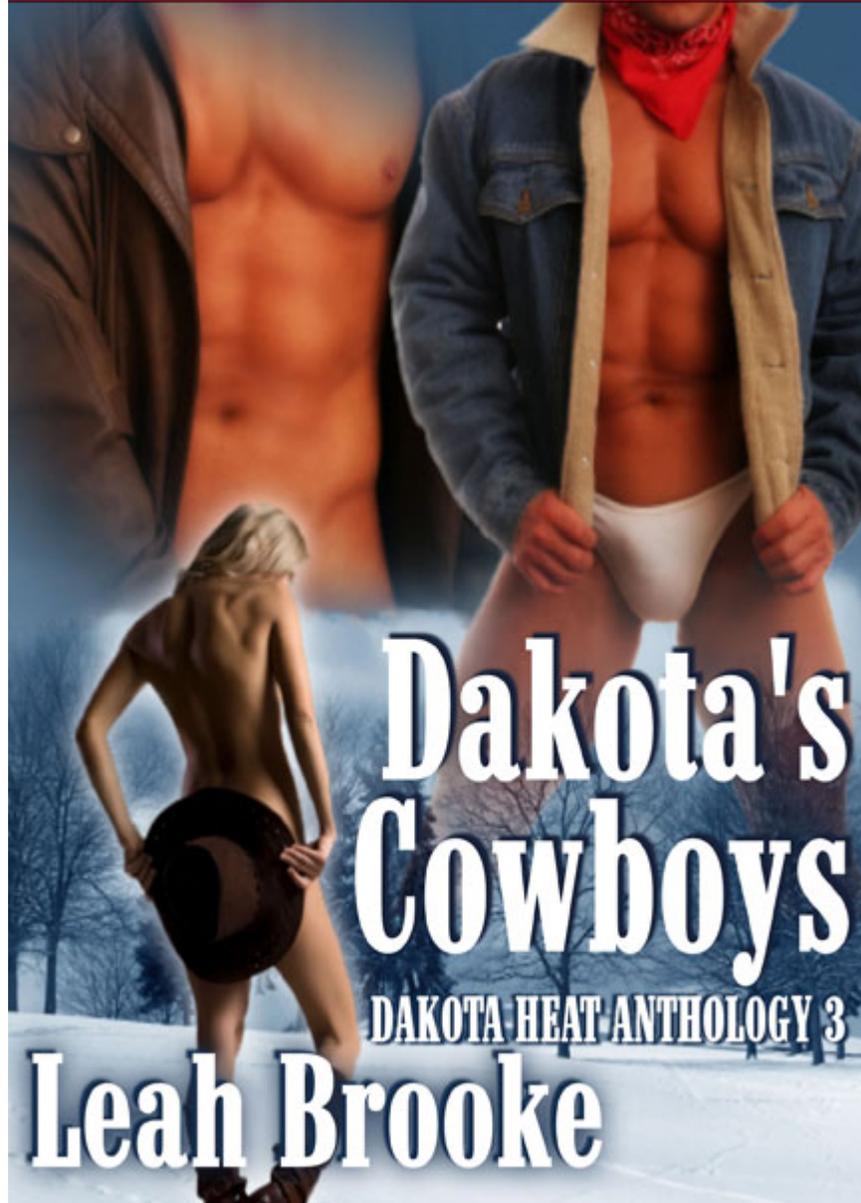


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DAKOTA'S COWBOYS

Dakota Heat 3

Leah Brooke

MENAGE AMOUR



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DAKOTA'S COWBOYS

Dakota Heat 3

LEAH BROOKE

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Chapter One

Dakota Wells braced her feet and looked down the barrel of her shotgun. “Get off my land.”

The two men who’d just gotten out of their dilapidated truck halted in their tracks. Both lifted their hands, their surprise apparent. They shot a quick glance at each other before the one who’d gotten out on the driver’s side spoke. “Ma’am, Mr. Tillman from the feed store told us you might be looking for hands. We were hoping you’d hire us.”

His deep, husky tone sent a shiver through her. Dakota fought to ignore it and concentrated on studying them. Both looked to be a couple of inches over six feet tall. The shearling jackets they wore had been left open, giving her a glimpse of their powerful builds. The graceful, controlled way they moved warned her that they could strike out like rattlers. She definitely didn’t want them to come any closer.

Their hair hung below their hats, the driver’s a deep brown, the other’s blonde. Their cowboy hats shaded their faces, preventing her from seeing their eyes. She’d learned to tell a lot about a person by watching their eyes. She tried to ignore the fluttering in her stomach as they both continued to stare at her. Inwardly cursing for allowing herself to be distracted, she forced herself to focus on their faces. The

smiles they shot at her looked out of place and forced. Planting her feet more firmly, she narrowed her eyes.

She'd seen enough snakes with fake smiles to last her a lifetime.

When the blonde spoke, she shifted her gaze to him, keeping the gun aimed at the driver. "We know everything there is to know about horses. We also know about cattle, but Tillman said he didn't know if you still had any."

"I don't."

"Well, we can help with the horses and anything else you need help with." He gestured toward the porch she stood on with half the railing missing. "We can fix the porch for you." He pointed to the roof. "You got some shingles missing, and we could chop wood for your fireplace."

"I don't need any hired help, and even if I did, I can't afford to pay you. Goodbye."

The driver of the truck took a step closer and lowered his hands. "Ma'am, we'll be happy to work for room and board. We have no place to stay and can't afford one."

Dakota tightened her grip as the other man also dropped his hands. "I have no place for you to sleep."

The other man took a step toward her. "We'd be happy to sleep in the bunkhouse."

"Burned down."

When the driver started to take another step, Dakota pumped a cartridge into the chamber. "Close enough, cowboy."

He froze, lifting his hands again, looking more frustrated than afraid. "Ma'am, we'd be happy to sleep on the porch or in your stable. We just need meals and a place to shower."

Dakota eyed them warily. They didn't have the cocky attitudes the men Ed Franks usually sent over did. Far from it. These two looked hard and cold, but polite and respectful. Other than frustration, they showed no emotion at having a loaded shotgun pointed at them. The men Ed usually sent over would have already been inching toward

their truck and either spurting threats or lewd comments.

It had been a long time since she'd been around a man with any balls. Other than her father and Ben Parson, the town deputy, her neighbor was the only formidable man she'd ever met. But Ed's courage came from his money and the men he constantly surrounded himself with.

In contrast, the two men standing in front of her would have been right at home in the old west. These two looked more than capable of taking care of themselves.

But could she trust them?

She cocked her head, gesturing toward the neighboring ranch. "I saw your truck going up to Ed's place the other day. What were you doing there?"

The driver shrugged. "Looking for work."

"And he didn't hire you?"

"No, ma'am. Said he didn't want any strangers around and to come back next month."

Damn it. That meant Ed didn't want any witnesses around. Now more than ever it would be good to have another set of eyes around. Or two.

"How do I know you didn't take a job with him and he's the one who sent you over here?"

He frowned at her as though confused, making her wish once again that she could see his eyes. "Why would he hire me and send me over here?"

Instead of answering him, she lowered the gun. "Look, I'm sorry you're having a hard time right now, but maybe you'd be better off finding some kind of work in town. Being out here with me could be dangerous."

The blonde flashed her a grin, which did strange things to her insides. "You're a tough woman, ma'am, but I think Joe and I can handle any danger from you."

Dakota narrowed her eyes again as his seductive tone shot heat

straight to her slit. She shifted, uneasily. “That’s not the kind of danger I’m talking about. But if you’re thinking along those lines, then it’s best you be on your way.”

The driver stepped forward and Dakota raised the shotgun again. “I said that was close enough, cowboy.”

He held his hands out again, shooting a look at his friend. “I can’t deny you’re a fine looking woman, but chasing you around doesn’t put food in my belly. My friend doesn’t mean anything by what he said. It’s kinda hard to see any danger around here, except for falling off a horse, something I haven’t done since I was four.”

Her daddy had told her to always go with her instincts. She couldn’t quite associate these men with Ed Franks. They just didn’t seem like the kind of men who would blindly follow orders like the men Ed surrounded himself with.

She lowered the gun again, hoping like hell she wasn’t about to make a huge mistake. “Before you decide to stay, you should know that Ed Franks,” she gestured toward the ranch next door again, “is doing his best to run me out. Your lives may be in danger, no, make that *will* be in danger when he sends his flunkies over again.”

The blonde frowned and pushed his hat back. Getting a good look at his face for the first time, she barely smothered a gasp. Tight features made him look cold and ruthless, but the gentleness in his gaze nearly undid her. “Are you telling us that the men over there are causin’ you trouble, ma’am?”

Dakota blinked, trying to remember what they’d been talking about and smiled humorlessly. “You could say that. If you stay here, he’s gonna have his men try to scare you off, buy you off, or kill you. Hey, if you can get past the scared, you’ll be making money after all. I’m not sure how much he’ll offer, but it’ll be a helluva lot more than room and board. If you want to work until then, fine.”

The blonde stepped forward. “My name’s Colt Mason and this is my friend Joe Taylor. You don’t have to worry about him buying us off ma’am. We won’t leave as long as he’s bothering you.”

Dakota laughed. "Sure you will. Don't forget about the scaring you off part. You've got to get past that before you get the money."

The driver, Joe, narrowed his eyes. "We won't be taking any money from him and we don't scare easily."

Dakota nodded, not believing him for a minute. "We'll see."

"Yes, ma'am. You will."

* * * *

Joe came out of the stable and headed around the side of the house as soon as he heard the truck approach. He knew Colt had been out front for a while now looking at the porch, but also to watch out for anyone coming up the drive. He had no idea how far Dakota's neighbor had gone in his threats to her, but he would find out.

He knew how far he and Colt would go to stop him.

His opinion of Dakota had gone up considerably. The horses had been well cared for, and the stable, although old, appeared immaculate. The tack had also been kept in good condition. Dakota Wells knew her horses.

As he turned the corner of the house, he saw the woman who got out of the pickup point a shotgun at Colt. Colt stopped and raised his hands, much as they had earlier with Dakota. What the hell kind of danger had these women faced at the hands of that bastard?

Dakota came out the front door. "It's okay, Jill. These men work for me."

The cute brunette looked reluctant to put away the gun.

Joe stepped forward to stand next to Colt. "Ma'am, if it makes you feel better to hold onto the shotgun, fine, but can you point it away from my friend and me?" They hadn't come this far to get accidentally shot.

Dakota turned to face them, her blonde hair gleaming in the sun. The other woman was cute, but couldn't hold a candle to their employer, who looked like a damned wet dream. With luscious curves

and a killer grin, she stirred him up in ways he hadn't been stirred in years.

If things were different, he and Colt would have had a hard time keeping their hands off of her.

Hell, who was he kidding? Already they had a hard time keeping their hands off of her.

But they could do nothing to jeopardize their reason for being here.

“Jill, this is Joe and Colt. I hired them this morning.”

The brunette looked them over and apparently liked what she saw because she smiled flirtatiously. “They look tough enough. Did you warn them?”

Looking amused, Dakota smiled at her “How much do I owe you?”

When Dakota reached for one of the bags of groceries, Joe stepped in front of her and gripped her arm without thinking, cursing the thick jacket that kept him from feeling her skin. “We'll get this. Why don't you and your friend get inside out of the cold while we take care of this?”

The stunned look on her face and the way her breath quickened gave him an immediate erection despite the cold weather. Lust slammed into him as he watched her eyes go dark. The slight catch of her breath tightened his groin and brought his cock to full attention.

Surprised to see how tiny she really was, he stared down at her. She'd looked taller as she stood on the porch pointing a gun at him.

Her lips parted, the full bottom one trembling slightly, and it took every ounce of self control he could muster not to bend and claim it for his own.

But he and Colt had come this close to getting their revenge, and he couldn't let himself get side tracked. For a second, a split second, she'd made him doubt his dark intentions for revenge, the need that had driven him for years.

Shocked, he realized she'd done that with just a look.

He stared down at her, wishing things had been different. Wishing that he and Colt had met her after they'd finished their business. Wishing they had the freedom to give her all their time and attention and be what a woman like her would need. His chest tightened as he stared down at her. Her eyes took on a soft, dreamy look that called to every masculine instinct he possessed.

Her eyes, a clear, deep blue, darkened even more. Her long blonde hair, pulled back into a ponytail, looked so silky his hands itched to reach out and touch it. Her skin, clear, smooth and an adorable pink, appeared to be as soft as velvet making him ache to know what it felt like under his lips. Her shoulders looked too narrow to carry the burden she'd handled alone.

They stood that way for what seemed like an eternity. Her friend's tug on her arm had her blinking and pulling away, and only then did he realize the other two stood there watching them.

Dakota gulped. "Oh, uh, fine."

Joe watched her go back into the house, watching her tight ass sway as she took the steps and went inside. Not until she closed the door behind them could he look away.

Colt cursed under his breath. "Of all the fucking times to meet a woman like that, it has to be when we're so close."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Fate really has it in for us, huh?"

Joe sighed. "Yeah. What else is new? Let's get the truck unloaded. Tonight I want to find out just exactly what's been going on around here. We have to figure out the best way to get to him."

Colt sighed as he lifted bags of groceries. "Why in hell is she getting things delivered instead of going out to get them for herself?"

Joe hefted a bag of feed. "I don't know. It's another thing we're going to have to ask her tonight."

Colt paused and turned, looking around. "It's a shame we can't stay. This would have been a nice place to settle."

Joe started for the back with the feed. "It's kinda hard to kill a

town's most prominent citizen and expect to stick around.”

Chapter Two

In the kitchen with Jill, Dakota tried to keep her attention on their conversation instead of sneaking glances at Colt as he carried in the groceries. She couldn't help but admire his tight butt as he walked back out to get another load.

There hadn't been a man around the house in quite a while, and Lenny had been nothing like the two men she'd just hired on. He would have found something else that needed his attention while she unloaded the truck. Like a beer.

Lenny had been all mouth, talking a mile a minute about his favorite subject. Himself.

These two had spoken no more than necessary since she'd hired them.

She'd always been a sucker for the strong, silent type.

Walking past the sink, she glanced out the window and couldn't look away from the sight of Joe carrying sacks of feed across the yard. Wearing jeans, a shearling jacket and a cowboy hat that had seen better days, he looked so damned sexy she wanted to run out, tackle him to the ground and have her way with him.

"They're really hot, aren't they?"

Dakota spun. "What?"

Jill smiled knowingly. "Your new hands. Damned fine looking cowboys. You going to let one of them in your bed?"

Dakota shushed her when she heard the front door open again. She felt her face burn as Colt walked into the kitchen. She couldn't think of a damned thing to say to break the silence, and Jill just sat there smiling. The uncomfortable silence seemed to last forever.

Colt obviously noticed. He looked at her curiously, and she could have sworn she saw his lips twitch as he put the bags on the table and walked back out again.

“I saw that look the dark haired one gave you outside.”

“Joe.”

“Yeah, and the other one, what was it? Colt? He eyed you up and down every time he came in. If you hadn’t been staring at his chest, you probably would have noticed.”

Dakota carefully kept her voice low, glancing at the doorway. “I hired them to help with some things around here. They’re drifters, and they needed a place to stay. They get room and board. That’s it. You know as well as I do they’ll be gone within a week. Just because you have a new boyfriend every other week doesn’t mean everyone does.”

“You’re just jealous.”

Dakota smiled at her best friend as she put groceries away. “I could never be as carefree as you are, Jill. I tried it once and look where it got me.”

“Lenny was an asshole and you know it. These two are nothing like him. Why not have some fun with them? Who knows when you’ll get the chance again?” She pulled Dakota to the kitchen window. It had started snowing again as Joe and Colt carried in the last bags of feed. “Those two are real men. I’d bet they have staying power. I’d love to be around when Ed’s men tangle with them.”

Dakota reluctantly turned away from the window and got the big pot out to start some beef stew. “We’ll see.”

“Come on, Dakota. Take a chance. You’re a beautiful woman, and you don’t even have to try to be. If I wasn’t your best friend, I might just hate you. Ever since your momma died, your daddy kept you sheltered. All he wanted for you was the ranch.”

Jill reached into the cupboard, getting glasses and opening the refrigerator for orange juice as she spoke. “When all that trouble started with Ed, your daddy hovered even more. Then he got sick and died. You never go out, and I’m the only friend you’ve got. You need

to live a little, damn it.”

Handing a glass of juice to Dakota, she gestured toward the window with the other. “If the way those men look at you is any indication, I think you’re going to be in for a big surprise.”

Dakota set her glass on the counter and started cutting the beef into cubes for browning. With the men here, she might get a chance to run into the next town to shop for more food. She hadn’t counted on feeding two other people when she placed her order, especially two big men. “Jill, what I know about men could fit on the head of a pin with room left over. Besides, if I start messing around with one of them, it’s bound to cause problems. In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve got enough of them. Who cares how they look at me? They’ve probably been alone for awhile. I’m sure they look at any halfway decent woman the same way.”

“Do you think I’m halfway decent looking?”

Dakota laughed at that. Her best friend in the world had had members of the opposite sex chasing her ever since high school. “You’re too damned beautiful for your own good and you know it.”

“Then why didn’t they give me any more than a quick glance? And that was only when I had a gun pointed at them.”

Dakota grinned, something inside her warming. “That’s the same reception I gave them.”

Jill hugged her. “You look sexier handling a gun than I do. I’d better get going, before I get snowed in. Jeff’s coming over tonight, and I’m hoping he gets snowed in with me.”

Dakota hugged her friend back, holding on longer than usual. “Thanks again, Jill. I don’t know what I would have done all these months without you.”

“You’re the strongest woman I know, Dakota. You would have found a way. Don’t forget what I said. Live a little. See ya, honey.”

Dakota walked her friend out, waved her off and went back to her stew. Once she had it bubbling, she collected fresh sheets for the beds in the spare bedroom. As cold as it had gotten outside, she couldn’t let

Joe and Colt sleep on the porch.

Maybe she should consider letting them sleep in the stable with the horses. At least there would be someone out there watching them. She paced, wondering what the hell she should do. If they worked for Ed, her horses could all be gone by morning.

Why the hell had she hired them when she didn't trust them?

She'd gone with her gut, that's why, she reminded herself. She could almost hear her father's voice telling her to listen to her instincts. She hadn't listened with Lenny and look where it had gotten her.

Besides, her horses were defenseless. She slept with a gun.

Hearing a knock on the back door jerked her back to the present. Dropping the sheets on the bed, she went to answer it. Both men stood on the back porch, which was nothing more than an enclosure for storage.

Joe took off his hat, knocking snow from it. "Ma'am, the horses are down for the night, and we brought up some more firewood."

Dakota stepped back. "Come in. Have some coffee. The stew will be ready soon." She gestured toward the hooks on the wall. "You can hang your coats and hats there to dry." She watched as they hung them and removed their boots. "Have a seat. We have to talk."

She got them each coffee as they sat down, pouring herself one for something to do with her hands. "It's too damned cold for you to sleep outside. I was just getting ready to make up the beds in the spare bedroom. But I'm warning you now, I sleep with a gun."

Both kept their eyes on her as they sipped their coffee. Finally Colt spoke. "Ma'am—"

"Stop calling me ma'am. It's Dakota. If we're going to live in the same house, you can't call me ma'am or knock on doors. But if you step out of line—"

Joe's jaw clenched. "We're not rapists."

Dakota nodded. "Just saying."

She couldn't help but notice their hands as they wrapped them

around the thick mugs. They both had the hands of working men, scarred and callused. She couldn't help but wonder what they would feel like stroking her, holding her.

Damn. She couldn't allow herself to think about that.

"Dakota," Colt began again. "What's going on around here? Why did your friend bring supplies instead of you going out to get them? Why do you sleep with a gun?"

She sighed. "I told you. Big Ed next door is giving me a lot of trouble."

Joe leaned forward. "What kind of trouble?"

Dakota pulled out a chair and sat down, wrapping her hands around her own mug. "He burned my barn down. He stole my cattle. He sends his men to threaten me. He tries to steal the horses, or sometimes, just scares them. His men have shot out windows, put sugar in the gas tank of my truck, and cut down fences. Still want to work here?"

Colt's eyes flared. "And nobody stopped him?"

Dakota shrugged. "Well, he practically owns the town. A lot of people owe their livelihoods to him. Those who don't, he threatens. No one in town is allowed to sell me anything, or do business with me. Hell, they're all afraid to talk to me for fear of what Big Ed would do to them. Jill lives in the next town and brings supplies out to me once a week. I'm scared to leave the ranch. I have no idea what I'll find when I come back."

Joe covered her hand with his. "Why is your neighbor doing this to you?"

His touch felt so warm, so *capable*. They were the hands of a strong man, something she hadn't felt in...ever. It had been so long since another man had touched her, and she had to fight the raging need his casual touch aroused. She pulled her hand away. "He wants my land. He bought out or scared off all my neighbors to get the land he has now. But my land is the one he wants the most. It's the one with the pond on it, and he wants the water. He cut down my fence to

let his cattle use it.”

Colt got up to pour himself another cup of coffee. “Have you ever tried to stop him?”

“Yep. And while I was down at the pond, he had other men busy stealing my cattle. I can’t be everywhere at once.” She rubbed her arms, suddenly chilled. “They’ve been in my bedroom.”

* * * *

Fury gripped Colt. No longer able to sit, he got up and moved to the window. “How do you know they were in your bedroom? What did they do?” The thought that men had done something so invasive to her brought all of his protective instincts to the surface.

“They messed up my bed, like somebody laid on it. They went through my things, messing them up and emptied my underwear drawer onto the bed and pawed through it.”

Standing behind her, Colt couldn’t see her face but heard the fear and disgust in her voice. His jaw clenched when she rubbed her arms again. Damn it, wasn’t there anyone to protect her? “Did you call the sheriff?”

He shot a glance at Joe, to see his best friend watching Dakota, his own face hard and unyielding. Colt knew that look well, having been witness to it countless times over the years. It didn’t bode well for the next man who decided to cause trouble for Dakota. It infuriated both of them when bullies picked on those weaker.

“Big Ed bought the sheriff off a long time ago. The only one who watches out for me is Ben Parson, the sheriff’s deputy.”

Colt didn’t care for the affection in her tone for this unknown deputy and didn’t take the time to ask himself why. He took his seat again, wanting to see her face. “Does this deputy have designs on you?” He slid a glance at Joe when Dakota shot out of her chair.

“It’s none of your damned business.”

Colt blinked as Joe flew out of his chair and was on her in an

instant. Joe gripped her arms, his jaw clenched so tight, Colt wondered if he'd crack a tooth. He didn't often see Joe lose control, and it stunned him whenever it happened. Joe shook her once. "Are you fucking this man to help you?"

Dakota paled. "How dare you! Get out of my house."

Joe kept his voice dangerously low. "If you don't want us in the house, fine. We'll sleep in the stable with the horses. But we're not about to leave you here defenseless, and we're not going to stand by and watch this deputy take advantage of you, either."

* * * *

Dakota fought against Joe's hold and her own reaction to it. "He doesn't take advantage of me. He's a *friend*. I'm not a fucking whore, and I'm not defenseless. Didn't I hold the two of you off earlier?"

The ice in his eyes would have frozen her if it hadn't been for the heat pouring off him in waves. She glanced over to see Colt watching them, frowning.

Joe released her, leaving her feeling both relieved and bereft. "We'll be watching him."

"I told you, he's my friend. If you insult him, you're going to piss me off. He helps me as much as he can." She stepped back, turning away, needing to put some distance between them. Keeping her back to them, she stirred the stew and collected the ingredients for the biscuits. "Neither one of you know what it's been like around here, and you're not going to be here very long. If you start making even more trouble for me, you're gone. Mind your own business and take care of the horses, and we'll get along fine."

She could feel their stares as she started measuring out flour, and resisted the urge to turn around. She didn't care for the way they filled the kitchen with their presence, making the small space feel even smaller.

Her movements stiff, Dakota stirred the buttermilk into the dry

ingredients and waited. A touch on her arm made her yelp and jump, flour flying over the countertop.

Colt grimaced. “Sorry. Do you mind if we get cleaned up before dinner? Afterward, we’ll go out and bed down in the stable.”

Dakota turned back, giving the biscuit dough far more attention than necessary. “No. Yes. I mean—” She drew a shuddering breath. “The towels are in the shelf in the bathroom. And you don’t have to sleep in the stable. *Yet.*”

“Thank you,” Colt said softly, his breath warm on her ear, making her shiver. He straightened and turned, allowing her to finally breathe. “Joe, if you give me the keys, I’ll get our gear from the truck.”

She watched through her lashes as he walked out of the kitchen. A minute later she heard the front door close. Rolling out the dough, she could feel Joe’s stare. She tried to think of something to say to break the tense silence, but her brain had gone numb. Joe’s gaze heated her skin as she heard the front door open again. She glanced over in time to see Colt pass by the doorway on his way to the bathroom.

“How long has Ed Franks been in Fairview?”

Joe’s low tone caused an ache, which started at her nipples and worked its way down to her slit. Her mouth went dry. “I guess it’s been about ten years now. Why?” She glanced over her shoulder to find him watching her intently, his gaze roaming over her bottom and heightening her awareness of him even more.

“How did he start out?”

Dakota shrugged and turned back to her biscuits. “I don’t remember a lot of it. My daddy was sick, and I’d just graduated from high school. I heard Ed was new in town, flashing a lot of money and looking for a place to settle. The Wilsons used to have the property next door and were looking to sell. They wanted to go up north to be close to their daughter and grandbabies. They sold it to him and left.”

Using a glass, she began cutting out biscuits and putting them on a baking sheet. She heard the shower start and closed her eyes, trying to fight off the image of Colt standing under the spray, the water making

his skin gleam, the trails of soap bubbles traveling—no. She took a deep breath and tried to remember what she'd been saying. Ed Franks.

She cleared her throat. "Big Ed, as he said he liked to be called, hired everybody who needed a job, getting as many people dependent on him as he could. He started building that big house that's there now, and as soon as it was finished, tore down the old one. Then he started taking over."

"Taking over how?"

She shrugged as she finished with the biscuits and washed her hands. "He demanded cheaper prices for anything he bought. He threatened to fire people when they didn't do what he wanted. He made offers for some of the properties bordering his. Two families took his offers, but the rest of us didn't. Fred Tillman, the man who owns the feed store, the one who sent you here, has a son who worked for Ed. He threatened to fire him if Tillman didn't stop selling to those of us who held out."

"So he stopped?"

Dakota stirred the stew, doing anything to avoid looking at him. "Not at first. He said he would sell to anyone who came in. Big Ed fired his son, John. John had a wife and two kids to feed and really needed the money but agreed with his father. So John started working at the feed store but didn't make as much. So Big Ed had the feed store burned down."

Dakota turned when Joe said something under his breath. "What?"

Joe shook his head. "Nothing. So Fred rebuilt and promised not to sell to you anymore?"

Dakota shrugged again and sat back at the table. Picking up her coffee mug, she carefully avoided his eyes. "I can't really blame him. He needs that money to survive. But everyone knew then what Big Ed was capable of. After that, all he had to do was to tell somebody to do something, and they did it."

"What did the sheriff do about him burning down the feed store?"

Dakota shook her head, finally looking up at him. "No proof.

Could have been anything. Called it an accident and went home to eat supper. He and Fred have been friends a long time, and he knew who did it, but it didn't matter. Big Ed controls everything in this town, and nobody can do a damned thing about it."

Joe just stared into his coffee cup for quite some time, while Dakota did her best to ignore the sounds coming from the bathroom. When Joe looked up, she barely smothered a gasp at the ice in his eyes. "We'll take care of Big Ed for you. I don't want you to worry about him anymore."

"Look, I don't want you to do anything. I'm just trying to get by. You don't know him."

Joe shook his head. "He'll do anything to get this place, and with everyone in his pocket, he'll think nothing of having one of his men kill you to get what he wants. I'm amazed that you've lasted this long. Where's your dad now?"

Dakota tried to swallow the sudden lump in her throat. "He passed last summer. He's the one who held Ed off. Ed was scared of daddy. After daddy died, Ed left me alone for a while, I guess because he knew the neighbors would be upset if anything happened while I was still grieving. He didn't start up again until about three months ago. That's when he had his men cut the fence and steal the cattle. What he didn't steal, I sold so he couldn't get it. About two months ago, he burned down the barn." She glanced at him. "If he finds out I hired you on, he's going to send his men to threaten you."

Joe sipped his coffee. "I told you, we don't scare easily."

Dakota nodded. "Then he'll buy you off."

"I won't be bought."

Dakota shook her head. "You don't know Big Ed."

Joe's jaw clenched. "You don't know me."

Chapter Three

The second she heard the shower turn off, Dakota blinked and rushed to take the biscuits from the oven. Colt had finished making up the beds that he and Joe would use and came back into the kitchen just as she closed the oven. She hadn't done a damned thing since he'd asked where to find the bedding, except to stand there and listen to the sound of the shower running and imagining Joe naked only feet away.

Colt looked around. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Jolted out of her reverie, she put the hot tray of biscuits on the counter and began to set the table. "No, nothing. Just have a seat." She didn't want to accidentally bump into him as she moved around the kitchen. The highly charged atmosphere made her jumpy already. During the last few months of her father's life, he'd usually been sitting or in bed. She wasn't used to having two virile, healthy males around, and it gave her the jitters.

It also aroused the hell out of her. She found herself wondering what it would feel like to be held against one of those hard bodies and forget about everything else.

She couldn't help but sneak glances at Colt as she set the table. His hair, still damp, had been combed back, highlighting his mesmerizing eyes. The hazel green shot with gold appeared to glitter at times. His expression remained guarded as he watched her, his lips twitching, making her wonder what he'd been thinking.

Not until Joe came back into the room, did she realize she'd been listening for him ever since she'd heard the shower turn off. Without a word, she ladled the stew and served it, nerves making her clumsy.

The men ate heartily, plowing through their food as if they hadn't eaten in weeks, which made her feel guilty as hell.

"I'm sorry. I should have realized how hungry you were earlier and offered you a sandwich. You unloaded all those things for me while you were half starved."

They both stopped eating to look at her, staring at her silently for several long seconds. Finally Colt spoke. "Sorry. I guess we're just used to eating in a hurry. We're fine. We had a burger in town before we got here."

"Oh, uh, okay." Dakota had never considered herself a woman who gave much thought to the opposite sex. She'd worked on the ranch instead of dating and had never owned a hair curler. She'd only been intimate with two men in her life, a boy from high school because she was curious to know what all the fuss was about, and Lenny.

But as she sat there, picking at her stew, she couldn't keep from watching them and wondering. She couldn't help but look at their hands and imagine what they would feel like on her body. Watching their throats work as they ate, she wanted to lean over and put her lips to them. She'd never been turned on by a man's forearms before, but staring at theirs made her hot as hell.

Her insides got all tied up in knots. She had trouble sitting still and popped up out of her seat as soon as their bowls had been emptied. "I'll get you some more."

Joe gripped her arm to keep her in place. "You don't need to wait on us. We'll help ourselves, if you don't mind."

Dakota trembled at his touch. The light contact sent her imagination soaring, wondering what it would feel like to have that firm touch elsewhere. She pulled her arm out of his grip and sat back down before she gave in to the urge to lean into him. "No, I don't mind if you help yourselves."

They did and returned to the table after offering to refill her bowl. Refusing, she ate slowly, not really tasting anything. Finally, with her

nerves stretched to the breaking point, she jumped up. "I'm going to go check on the horses."

Colt stood, blocking her exit. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to go out there alone. It's getting dark, and the wind has picked up. If your neighbor decides to come by to test our mettle, we don't want you caught in the middle."

She hadn't expected that. The spurt of anger that he would try to tell her what to do was tempered by admiration at men who acted like men. Because of that, her words didn't come out as harshly as she'd meant them to. "I appreciate that, but this is my ranch, and I'm not going to stay inside because it's dark and cold outside. I've been dealing with Ed and his men for a long time. Like I told you before, you don't know him. I do. I'll be fine."

Aware of their gazes as she donned her boots and jacket, she determinedly kept her own averted, afraid her need for them showed plainly on her face. Damn it. At this rate, she'd be hopping up to run out to the stable constantly just to get some air and cool her lust.

Jesus, she had to get a grip before she did something she might not be able to handle. But then again, maybe Jill was right. Why not take pleasure where she could? As she walked out the back door, she automatically glanced to her left. She could see Ed's men on horseback in the distance, several looking in her direction.

No. Now she had to be more alert than ever, and those two damned cowboys sitting in her kitchen had her distracted at a time when losing her focus could cost her dearly.

She pushed away the niggling suspicion that Ed had sent them. She would have to rely on her instincts. They'd carried her this far.

She just hoped like hell she was right.

* * * *

Joe stood before the door closed behind her. He and Colt put on their boots, grabbed their hats and coats and started out.

As they followed Dakota's progress to the stable, Colt looked over his shoulder at the neighboring ranch. "She's wrong. We know what he's capable of. If he's going to be bothering her, I don't see the need to scope out his place like we planned. If she's right, he'll be the one to come here. If we're caught, we have no reason to be there."

Joe kept a watchful eye on Dakota as she struggled against the snow and wind ahead of them, careful to keep his voice low. "Agreed. I want to avoid letting too many of them get a good look at us. The men he'll send won't know us, but he still has Buck with him. I don't want to take a chance that either of them will recognize us until it's too late. I also don't want to leave her alone. I'd never forgive myself if they choose to pay her a visit and we're not here."

Colt nodded. "So we wait. He'll send his flunkies first. See if they can scare us off without him being directly involved. If what Dakota says is true, next they'll try money. When that doesn't work, he'll get curious, especially when we send his men back to him in pieces. He'll want to hire us to do his dirty work. He won't do that until he meets us face to face."

"Exactly. Then we'll kill him."

"It's a shame, huh?"

Joe came to a halt and turned to him, keeping Dakota in his sight. "You change your mind about killing him?"

Colt looked at him incredulously. "Are you crazy? After what we've been through because of that asshole? No. It's a shame we won't be able to stick around and get to know Dakota a little better. She's tough, isn't she? And that body. Jesus."

When Dakota slipped Joe raced forward, but she got up and hurried ahead before he could reach her. He turned to Colt as he caught up. "Looks like she's had to be tough. At least we can make her life easier while we're here and get rid of her biggest problem before we go."

"Yeah, but damned if I wouldn't give a lot for a taste of her."

Depressed now, Joe stepped into the stable, lowering his voice

even more. “We’ll never have somebody like her, Colt. Just forget it.”

“I know, but wouldn’t you like to—”

“More than anything.”

* * * *

Dakota stumbled into the stable and leaned against the wall to catch her breath. The wind had really picked up. She would have to string a line to the house so none of them got lost if this turned into a blizzard.

She’d seen that Joe and Colt followed her and grimaced. She’d wanted a few minutes away from them to get herself back under control. She sure as hell didn’t want to be in the stable with them. Damn it. What the hell was wrong with her? She had enough problems in her life without adding two more. And that’s what they would be if she let them.

Shaking her head, she checked the stalls for feed and water. Joe and Colt had already taken care of everything, but she felt better for checking. The door to the stable opened, letting in a gust of frigid air. She turned and saw them walking down the row of stalls, obviously deep in conversation, but their voices were so low, she couldn’t make out what they said.

Joe turned abruptly and went out, leaving her alone in the barn with Colt.

She continued down the row, watching him unobtrusively as she checked on each of the horses. Since she only had six left, it didn’t take long, and all too soon, she had no choice but to look up at him. “Everything looks great. So you two know a lot about horses, huh?”

Leaning against a post, Colt nodded. “Yes, ma’am. We were both raised around them.”

Joe came back through the door, holding onto it as the wind tried to whip it out of his hand. “You ready to go back in?”

Dakota nodded. “Yeah, I should hook up the line—”

“Already done. Ready?”

Getting back to the house turned out to be far more difficult than leaving it. The wind had picked up considerably in the last few minutes and blew against her now, ice stinging as it hit her face. It made walking more difficult, especially with the wind strong enough to knock her off her feet. She slipped and would have fallen if they hadn't each grabbed onto her. Joe pulled her against him, pulling her face into his chest as he half carried, half dragged her back to the house.

They went through the back door to the porch. Colt grabbed the door before it could be ripped out of his hand and pulled it closed, locking it behind him. “Damn, it came in fast, didn't it? On the radio, they said snow, not a fucking blizzard.”

With a hand under her chin, Joe studied her face. “Are you all right?”

His cold hand seemed to warm almost instantly against her skin, his touch making her tremble as she looked up into his eyes. They warmed as they searched her features and when his eyes darkened, she felt the pull all the way to her center. Colt came up beside him and touched her arm, overloading her senses.

She pulled away from both of them. “I'm fine, thanks. We'd better get inside.” She shook off the snow before she walked into the house and took off her boots and coat. “Have some coffee and warm up. I'm going to go take a bath before we lose electricity.”

She left the room without looking at either of them, not wanting them to see the need she knew had to show on her face. Gathering her things, she headed for the bathroom, making sure she locked the door behind her.

Soaking in the hot water, she wondered what the hell she could do about them. She'd been around men her whole life, but had only ever been attracted to two, but neither had ever made her feel as feminine as Joe and Colt did. With them she trembled like a damned little girl and lost focus, feeling the way her friend Jill did with her boyfriends.

It was an entirely new and pleasantly uncomfortable situation for her.

For perhaps the first time in her adult life, she wanted to play.

Dakota sighed and sunk further into the hot water. She wished she could be that carefree, but too much rode on her staying focused. Now that her daddy was gone, she'd learn to rely on only herself. If she didn't have to worry about Ed, she would be on those two in a heartbeat. She deserved it.

Just as Dakota stepped out of the tub, the lights blinked twice and went off. Damn it, she hadn't been quick enough. Now she would have to go out and start the generator. Standing in the dark, she dried her skin briskly, dreading going back out in the cold after finally getting warm.

Hurrying to get dressed, she reached for her clothes and fell as the towel slipped out from under her feet. She yelped in surprise and pain as she landed hard on her hip. Hearing footsteps race down the hall, she groaned. Great. Just what she needed.

"Dakota, are you okay?"

She scrambled for the towel she'd dropped, cursing under her breath when she found her socks instead. "I'm fine, Joe. I'll be out in a minute."

"We heard you fall. Open the damned door."

Dakota couldn't prevent a moan as she stood. In a hurry to cover herself, she hit the same hip on the side of the cabinet she used for storage, knocking bottles of shampoo and bars of soap to the floor. "Damn it."

"Dakota, open this door right now!"

"I'm fine, damn it. Just clumsy. You're making me nervous banging on the damned door. Go away. I just have to get dressed, and I'll be right out."

Another knock on the door and Colt's desperate plea. "Dakota, can you open the door, please before Joe breaks it in?"

"I'm trying to get dressed, Colt. I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute." Where the hell was her underwear? Why the hell hadn't she brought a

flashlight with her? Because those two hunks currently standing outside the door had addled her brain, that's why. Wait, didn't she have a flashlight under the sink?

She crawled to the cabinet and of course, hit her head on the corner of it.

"What was that?"

Dakota slumped next to the cabinet, and hissed as she held a hand to her head. Jesus, what else?

"Dakota? Are you close to the door?"

"No, I'm—"

A well placed kick had the door slamming back against the wall. Joe and Colt pushed their way in, each holding a flashlight. Seeing the towel, she grabbed it off of the floor to cover herself. "Why the hell did you do that? I told you I was fine and would be out in a minute."

Joe ignored her. Dead silence filled the room as Colt and Joe ran the flashlights over her bare legs.

Dakota didn't move, afraid she would expose something. She held her breath when the light from the flashlights lingered on her thighs much longer than necessary. "I'm fine."

"Colt, hold the flashlight on her so I can see if she's hurt."

Thankfully, the light moved to her arms. Shivers of delight shot through her when she felt Joe's hands move over her skin. Little tingles of pleasure erupted wherever he touched, and she gripped the towel even tighter in reaction. Trying to keep her voice firm, she did her best to glare at him. "I'm not a child. Just give me one of those flashlights, so I can see to get dressed." Being naked in their presence made her skin hyper sensitive. She could feel the heat from his body as though it reached out and caressed her.

Joe glared back. "If you don't tell me where you're hurt, I'm going to take the towel off and find out for myself."

Shaken by her body's incredible response to his threat, Dakota gulped in air. "Damn you. Get out."

He lifted a brow. "Last chance, Dakota."

Dakota squeezed her thighs closed, trying desperately to relieve her throbbing clit. “Fine. I hit my hip when I fell, and I hit my head while I was looking under the sink for a flashlight. How did you find the flashlights?”

Joe waved that off. “Most people keep one in their kitchen. I found them in the pantry before the lights went out. We have a fire started, too. Which hip?”

Her knees shook, making her grateful that the light stayed higher. “I’m fine. Just leave one of the flashlights so I can get dressed.”

“Which hip?”

Colt chuckled. “You’d better tell him. One thing about Joe is when he sets his mind to something, nothing gets in his way.”

Dakota sighed. “My left one.” She uncovered it just a little as the beam of light focused on it and saw that it had reddened and already started to bruise.

“Shit,” Joe muttered and moved the towel to uncover a little more, pulling the towel from her grasp and uncovering her breast in the process. The sudden stillness that came over both of them made her tremble.

Dakota rushed to cover herself but his hold on the towel prevented it.

The silence in the room became deafening, broken only by the pounding of her heart and the howling wind. Dakota swallowed the moan that threatened to escape and forced herself to remain perfectly still.

She sat there, staring down at the dark hand moving over her hip, tightening her thighs as the moisture flowed from her slit. She fought to keep her breathing even as her heart nearly pounded out of her chest.

Mesmerized, she watched his hand trail higher, Joe’s finger skimming lightly over her nipple. She jolted at the exquisite sensation, arching into his caress. Enough light reflected that she could see his face. She didn’t know which one of them was more

surprised.

His eyes widened as they met hers before lowering his gaze again.

Squeezing her eyes closed and holding her breath, she waited expectantly for the next touch on her breast. Thankfully she didn't have to wait long. When a rough finger circled her nipple she couldn't hold back a moan. She tightened her thighs against the throbbing of her clit as Joe lightly teased her nipple.

Colt's voice sounded rougher than usual. "Jesus. Pinch it a little."

Dakota cried out when Joe did just that.

Joe cursed and jerked his hand away, breaking the spell. "Let me see your head."

Dakota fought for composure, covering herself once again. "It's nothing, just a bump. Just leave me a flashlight and let me get dressed, and I'll be right out."

Silence followed and nobody moved for several long seconds. Finally Joe handed her the flashlight, his hand lingering longer than necessary before he released it. "We'll be out in the living room. Come out there when you're done, and we'll put some ice on that hip and the bump on your head."

Dakota shuddered just thinking about it. "No. We won't."

"But it—"

"I just got warmed up, damn it, and I'm not putting ice on anything." As hot as she felt now, it would melt as soon as it touched her.

Colt chuckled. "Hurry up and get dressed, but be careful. If you're not out in a few minutes, we'll be back."

Holding onto the flashlight, Dakota watched them leave. When they disappeared from view, she let out a shaky breath, on the verge of coming. Holy hell.

Trembling, she found her underwear and started dressing, donning a warm sweat suit and thick socks, trying her best to ignore the way the soft material caressed her skin. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out into the hallway, grimacing at the broken lock and splintered

frame.

The closer she got to the living room, the warmer it got, thanks to the raging fire they'd started in the fireplace. It burned just as hot as the fire they'd started in her body. Hurrying toward it, she came to an abrupt halt when she saw what they'd done.

The mattresses from their beds had been placed in front of the fireplace. They'd moved the coffee table and one of her chairs out of the way in order to have enough room. Both had removed their flannel shirts, wearing only jeans and t-shirts and thick socks. They looked up as she entered and Colt smiled at her, a smile she felt all the way to her toes. "There's no point in starting up the generator just to go to sleep. We can all bed down here tonight."

Chapter Four

She swung her gaze to Colt's, looking for calculation, but finding none. "I'm not sleeping with you." Cursing herself because it had come out sounding breathless instead of the firm tone she'd strived for, she plopped into the chair, curling her legs under her.

Colt frowned at her. "It's warmer out here. Your bedroom's going to be freezing in a little while."

Dakota's gaze kept sliding to the mattresses, already made up with blankets and pillows. An image of lying naked between the two of them in front of the blazing fire emblazoned itself on her mind and sent her pulse racing. She wanted to crawl in so badly she shook. Her damned clit throbbed steadily and her panties dampened even more. She stood, intending to escape before she gave into temptation. "I have blankets. I guess I'll see you in the morning."

Joe came toward her and held out his hand, clearly frustrated. "At least sit here and get warmed up first."

Dakota shook her head and backed away. One touch from either of them would have her begging them to take her. "No. I'm warm enough now. Good night."

She hurried down the hall before she gave in, the difference in temperature making her shiver already. She got an extra blanket out of the closet and crawled into bed, shivering again at the sound of the howling wind. She'd closed and locked her door and now wondered if it would have been better to keep it open and let some of the heat in from the living room.

Crawling back out, she unlocked it and opened it just a few inches. She wanted the heat but didn't want it to look like an

invitation. Opening the drawer in her nightstand, she took out her gun, made sure the safety was on, and placed it under her pillow.

Her father had bought it for her before he died because of the trouble Big Ed and his men had been making. He'd wanted to buy her a watch, but they didn't have a lot of money. When it came down to the watch or the gun, he'd bought her the gun.

"A helluva graduation gift for my little girl," he'd told her, shaking his head sadly.

She smiled as she remembered her answer. "It shows you love me, Daddy. This thing just might save my life one day. Besides, what do I need a watch for? When the horses are hungry, they don't care what time it is."

Lying there listening to the sound of the wind and the low murmurs coming from the other room, she realized suddenly that she'd thought about her father a lot today, more so than usual. It had to be because of the arrival of the two men currently stretched out by the fire in her living room.

They reminded her of her dad more than anyone she'd ever met before. Maybe that's why she trusted them on such short acquaintance. They hadn't attacked her in the bathroom when she'd only had a towel for protection. They'd followed her to the stable to make sure she was all right.

But she sensed a darkness in them. She noticed that they always stood braced and alert, and one of them always had their back to the door. They both watched everything, and she couldn't help but notice that every time they walked into a room, their eyes swept over everything as though memorizing it and looking for anything out of place. The way they looked at each other told her they were accustomed to communicating wordlessly. They appeared to carry on entire conversations with just a glance.

The icy sheets gradually warmed from her body heat, and she curled into a ball to get even warmer. Instead of being nervous about the two men in her house, she felt safer, and listening to the blowing

wind, drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

Joe glanced down the hall again. “I wonder if she’s asleep yet. I want to open her door all the way so more of the heat can get to her.”

Colt yawned and stretched. “We’ll give it a couple more minutes and check. She should be damned tired with all the work she does around here and all the sleepless nights I’m sure she’s had.”

Joe nodded and sat down, careful not to look at the fire. He and Colt kept looking out the windows and didn’t want to ruin their night vision by staring into the flames. “I just wished she would have stayed out here. It’s not right that we’re out here nice and warm, and she’s gonna freeze her ass off in there. Go ahead and get some shut eye. I’ll take the first watch and open her door when she falls asleep.”

Colt nodded and settled down on the mattress and within minutes, his breathing had slowed. They’d both learned to sleep whenever they could, and each knew the other could be trusted to watch his back.

Joe waited ten minutes before he crept down the hall to Dakota’s bedroom, avoiding the spot in the hallway that creaked. He slowly slid her door open, grimacing when it groaned. At first he didn’t see more than a lump in the middle of the bed. Because of the bright moonlight shining through the window, he could see her blonde hair fanned out on the pillow as he stepped closer. His groin tightened, and he wished like hell he had the right to crawl into bed with her and warm her body with his.

He stood staring down at her for several minutes, just listening to the sound of her breathing.

He could hear her breathing.

He crept to the window and looked out. The wind had finally died down, and it had stopped snowing. The clouds had cleared, and the moon reflected on the snow, making everything appear much brighter than it should have.

Hearing a low moan, he glanced over his shoulder, frowning as he watched Dakota snuggle into a tighter ball. A fist tightened around his heart. One day, some lucky man would have the right to lie next to her and pillow her head with his shoulder as she snuggled against him trying to get warm. If she belonged to them, he and Colt would surround her with their warmth, and she could snuggle all she wanted to. Damn. He had to stop thinking of her in that way. Right now she was a means to an end. He adjusted his jeans, grimacing at the raging hard-on he got every time he got anywhere near her.

Sex had become something he and Colt engaged in to fill a need and nothing more. This need he had just to hold her didn't sit comfortably with him. He and Colt couldn't stay, and he had the unpleasant feeling that he would be leaving a piece of his heart behind when he left here.

Not that it mattered. He doubted he'd ever need it. When he and Colt finished what they had to do, they'd get a ranch of their own and spend their lives doing the only thing they knew how.

They eventually wanted a wife and kids but he didn't hold out much hope. It would take a strong woman to deal with all the emotional baggage he and Colt would bring to a relationship.

Dakota was the strongest woman he'd ever met. He smiled to himself when he thought of how she looked holding them both off with a shotgun. He wondered what she'd think of him if she knew the sight of her holding that shotgun on them, her eyes full of fire, had given him an erection.

Jesus, to think that she'd held off that bastard on her own enraged him. From what he'd heard in town and from Dakota, the whole fucking town had abandoned her. And still she'd survived.

Well, they wouldn't abandon her. At least not until they got rid of her troublesome neighbor.

Big Ed had owned another town once. He and Joe hadn't been as lucky as Dakota had been so far.

Colt's parents hadn't lasted long after he and Colt had been

arrested. His father had suffered a stroke, and his mother's heart had given out as she tried to care for him. Colt hadn't even been able to say goodbye.

Joe's own plans for the future had been destroyed. The girl he'd loved hadn't even come to the trial, and his letters to her went unanswered.

His father, knowing Joe's temper, had believed them guilty from the start and had written him off. His mother and sister had stood by him at first until pressure from his father made their lives unbearable. Their visits came further and further apart until he'd finally asked them to stop coming.

He and Colt had both lost their families and dreams for their future because of the man next door. Hate had burned inside him hotter and hotter every day.

Until it became ice cold.

That's when he and Colt had made a new plan for the future.

Killing the man responsible.

A movement caught his attention. He pulled the curtain back a little more, confident that with the bright moon and the absolute darkness inside that no one could see him. He saw two, no three men heading for the stable, creeping slowly and looking toward the house. They could probably see the smoke coming from the chimney and if they were that bastard's men, they would know that the electricity had gone off. They probably assumed Dakota had huddled next to the fire and therefore would be in the front of the house.

Dakota shifted again, drawing his gaze. She got to him more than he'd like to admit and he'd gotten distracted, something that he couldn't afford.

He leaned over her and put his hand over her mouth, silencing her cry and gripping her hand as she reached under the pillow.

* * * *

Dakota came awake abruptly, terrified. *Calm down. Think.* The hand over her mouth silenced her cry while the other kept her from reaching for her gun. Oh God! Somehow, someone had gotten into her house.

“Shh, Dakota, it’s me. Joe. I didn’t want you to make noise or shoot me. There are some men going into the stable, and I wanted you to know that Colt and I will be out there. Get up. Be quiet and go into the kitchen. Take your gun if you want but don’t shoot us by accident.” He released her and moved silently out of the room.

Her heart pounding, Dakota grabbed her gun and fought the pile of blankets to follow. She ran into the kitchen just in time to see both of them pulling on their boots. They reached for their coats, speaking softly under their breath.

Dakota ran up to them. “Here, take my gun.”

Colt shook his head. “You keep it. We have the shotgun. Stay in the kitchen.”

“Why not the living room?”

“They’ll see your shadow. Stay in the kitchen so we know where you are.”

“I’m coming with you.”

Joe unlocked the door, and pulled it open, not even turning. “No.”

A gust of cold air came in as they slipped through the door and closed it behind them.

Dakota stayed low and looked out the kitchen window, watching them work their way to the stable. To hell with this. This was her ranch, and she wasn’t about to sit here inside while Joe and Colt confronted Ed’s men. They had no idea just how ruthless he could be to men who failed him. So none ever did.

She ran for her own boots, slid them on and shrugged into her coat. With the gun in her hand she started out, trying to be as quiet as possible. She stepped outside just in time to watch Joe and Colt enter the stable.

She had no idea how many men Ed had sent this time. Scanning

the yard carefully she continued to move cautiously forward. She didn't hear anything coming from the stable and remembered Ed's foreman, Buck, and his penchant for knives. If Buck or any of his men had attacked Joe or Colt, she might not have heard it. Her panic rose as she imagined Joe and Colt lying on the stable floor bleeding. Moving as silently as she could, she stayed in the men's footsteps, as she headed for the stable. The sky had cleared, the bright moon reflecting off the snow making her even more cautious. Standing out in the middle of the yard, anyone who looked this way would see her.

Just as she got to the stable door, all hell broke loose.

She heard the sounds of a scuffle and what sounded like a fist connecting. A second later a man came flying through the air out the stable door, slamming into her and knocking her to the ground. The gun flew out of her hand. Landing hard, his considerable weight on top of her, she had the wind knocked out of her. Struggling for air, she pushed at him, fighting to get his weight off of her. She finally managed to move out from under him and scrambled to find the gun.

Seeing it in the snow, she scurried toward it, crying out when the man behind her pulled her up by the hair. She turned and kicked him in the kneecap, getting pulled down with him when he fell. Fighting, she kicked and twisted, trying to break his grip. "Let go of my hair, you asshole. You fight like a girl."

The sound of a shotgun shell being pumped into the chamber made both of them freeze. She looked up to see Joe leading two men out by the back of their collars, both looking a little worse for wear. They looked a little dazed and fell, only to have Joe lift them back to their feet again. One had a bloody nose, the other a bloody lip.

Colt stood to the side and had the shotgun pointed at the man holding onto her hair. "Let go of her right now. Nice and easy."

As soon as he released her, Dakota scrambled for the gun and moved to stand next to Colt. Turning, she got a good look at the men. "The one on the ground is Bart. Eli has the bloody nose and Jasper's the one with the bloody lip. They're Ed's men. What the hell were

they doing in the stable? Are the horses all right?"

Joe shoved the two men he'd been holding on to, and stood over where they lay sprawled in the snow. Eli and Jasper scrambled to their feet, alternately cursing and groaning. Joe stood with his hands on his hips, as though waiting for them to come at him, but both apparently decided against it.

Looking at his face, she didn't blame them. Joe's features appeared to be carved from granite as he moved to stand on the other side of her. "Are you okay?" He reached for her arm to pull her slightly behind them.

Eyeing him with new respect, Dakota stood her ground. "I'm the one with the gun. I can handle them."

Joe disarmed her easily, startling her with just how adeptly he'd accomplished it. "Get inside, Dakota."

Dakota clenched her teeth. That tough guy persona was a hell of a turn on, but she had never been a damsel in distress and had no intention of starting now. "Have you forgotten that *I'm* the boss?"

"No, Dakota. Not for a minute. Now get inside. We'll be right in." He moved like a snake, striking out at Bart.

Something flew through the air as Bart went back on his ass. Bart lunged at him, but Colt snapped the butt of the shotgun out in a move so fast, she barely saw it, and hit Bart in the temple, knocking him unconscious. Her admiration for both men went up considerably, and she couldn't help but look from one to the other as she walked over to retrieve whatever had flown from Bart's hand.

Dakota picked it up, turning it in her hand and came back to stand between Joe and Colt, more than a little stunned. "It's a knife. He was actually going to cut you with this." Shaking her head, she looked at Ed's three men. "They've never gone this far before. They've never actually grabbed me before or pulled out a weapon."

Colt spared her a glance, his expression hard. "Get in the house, Dakota."

Ignoring them, she faced Eli. "What the hell did you plan to do

with my horses?”

He shrugged and if she didn't know better, she'd think he looked a little embarrassed. “We were supposed to let 'em loose.”

“And since you must be the geniuses who put sugar in my tank, I would have no way to catch them, no transportation at all. Does Big Ed have plans to kill me now, too?”

Eli held a handkerchief to his nose to stop the bleeding and stepped forward, only to step back again when Joe shifted his weight. “Miz Wells, why don't you just sell to Big Ed and be done with it. You can take the money and get yourself a fancy apartment in the city.”

Dakota blinked. “What the hell would I do in a city? And who the hell do you or your sleazy boss think you are to try to make me leave my home? I'm not going anywhere.”

Jasper opened his mouth to say something, but a glance at Colt had him snapping it shut.

* * * *

Joe had seen and heard enough. His blood boiled at what had been done to Dakota and by what he knew would have happened tonight if they hadn't been around. He spared a glance at her to see that she looked shaken to realize that Big Ed had just stepped up his game.

“Get inside, Dakota.” Joe ordered over his shoulder. When she hesitated, he took a step back and lowered his voice. “If you don't move right now, I'm tanning your backside.”

She blinked up at him and he met her gaze coolly, watching as her eyes lit with anger. Good. It was a hell of a lot better than the way she'd looked before. If he could piss her off long enough to get her into the house, it was worth it. She moved closer to whisper to him.

He had to bend to hear her, simultaneously taking the knife from her.

She glared at him, glancing quickly at Ed's men. “I'm only going

in so you're not distracted, but don't ever think to boss me around again."

When she stomped back to the house, it took tremendous effort not to turn and watch her tight ass. Not hearing the porch door open, he shot a warning glance over his shoulder. He couldn't see her face clearly at this distance, but her jerky movements as she turned and went in, letting the door slam behind her, told him just how pissed she was. Good.

Assuming Bart to be the leader of the three, he turned his attention to him. "We're letting the three of you leave in one piece because we want you to deliver a message to your boss for us. The next man he sends to cause Dakota Wells any trouble is going to have to get through us to do it. We're a lot meaner than the men in town he's steamrolled and aren't going to go down easily. I want you to tell him that." Joe folded the knife and stuck it in his pocket with his own.

Colt lowered the shotgun slightly, his grin lethal. "Oh yeah, and tell him we can't wait to meet him."

* * * *

Dakota stood just inside the porch as Ed's men ran back to their horses like their asses were on fire. Joe and Colt stood with their hands on their hips and watched them until they disappeared from view. Only then did they turn toward the house and start for the back door, where she waited.

Joe grabbed her arm and hustled her through the porch and into the house. "You don't listen worth a damn. We told you we would take care of them." Releasing her, he yanked her coat off and hung it before removing his own.

Dakota glared at him before bending to remove her boots. "I've been taking care of myself for a long time. I'm not a little girl who needs somebody to take care of her."

Colt gripped her arm and pulled her through to the living room. It

infuriated her that her struggles didn't even slow him down. "Get by the fire. You could have been hurt out there or distracted us enough that one of us got hurt. Face it, we're bigger and stronger than you are and a hell of a lot meaner. And you can't stay awake twenty-four hours a day to watch the house."

Joe had followed them into the room and stood with his hands on his hips. "You're soaking wet. Get out of those wet clothes and get in front of the fire. Now, Dakota, or I'll strip you myself."

Dakota blinked at his bossiness, but he didn't seem to notice as he continued.

"I woke you up so you would know what was going on and not rush outside if you heard something. I didn't want you to be lying in bed if one of those men got past us. Next time do what you're told. Now get those wet things off and get under the blankets."

Dakota poked a finger at his rock hard stomach. "Don't tell me what to do. I run this ranch, and you work for me. I'm going back to bed."

Colt blocked her. "You hired us to handle things. That's what we're doing. We're going to take care of you, whether you like it or not. We're not about to let Ed get to you, and we're not going to allow you to do anything to hurt yourself. Including getting sick. Your bedroom is freezing by now. If you go in there, we're just going to carry you back out here." He pulled a flannel shirt out of his bag and tossed it to her. "We'll go into the kitchen while you change and get under the covers. If you try to get past us, we'll just haul you back."

Stunned, angry, and somehow touched, Dakota watched them walk away, shouting after them. "What did you say to Ed's men?"

Joe kept walking, glancing over his shoulder. "Get those wet clothes off. Call us when you're under the blankets, and we'll tell you."

Since she'd started shivering, she threw off her wet clothes as soon as they left the room and donned the flannel shirt. She wrapped her arms around herself, pulling the warmth and softness of the shirt

closer to her skin.

Crawling beneath the covers, she moaned softly as the warmth from the fire and the warm blankets touched her skin.

Throwing caution to the wind, Dakota stretched out, laying her head on the pillow. "I'm ready."

Chapter Five

Dakota settled the blankets around her as both men walked back into the room. Feeling too vulnerable lying down, she sat up, making sure she stayed completely covered. “So what did you say to them?”

Joe sat in the chair at her feet. “I told them to give their boss a message for me. If he sends any more of his men back over here, we’ll send them back looking a lot worse than they did.”

A shower of sparks from the fireplace made her jump.

Colt poked at the fire and straightened, replacing the poker before turning to her. “We also told them if we saw them around again, they’d get more of the same. We didn’t break any bones this time, but will if they come back. Their boss isn’t going to get much work done if his hands are all beat up.”

Dakota wrapped her arms around her blanket covered legs. “He’s got about fifty hands. If he decides to send more than three at a time, we’re going to be in big trouble. In the past, he hasn’t because he didn’t need to. Now he will.”

Joe stood and pulled off his socks, leaving only his t-shirt and jeans. Lying flat on his back next to her, he closed his eyes. “Don’t worry about it. Go to sleep. I’m beat.”

Colt sat in the chair Joe had just vacated. “I don’t think anyone will be back tonight, but I’ll keep watch for the next couple of hours.”

Dakota’s body came to life as his gaze swept over her. Wearing nothing but a pair of panties under the flannel shirt, her breasts had been left free, allowing her pebbled nipples to brush against the flannel as she shifted. Already sensitive, they became even more so.

Joe hadn’t bothered with the blankets, affording her a good close

up look at his body. The huge bulge in his jeans, only inches away, captured her attention and seemed to grow even larger under her gaze. “Go to sleep, Dakota.”

Dakota’s gaze flew to his face, meeting his heavy lidded gaze. Knowing she’d been caught, her face burned as she glanced over to see that Colt still watched her steadily. “I, uh, goodnight.” She turned her back to Joe and lay down facing the fire. Closing her eyes, she willed herself to sleep. Extremely aware of the two men so close, she held herself stiffly. When neither did or said anything, she began to relax. The heat from the fire and Joe’s body soon warmed her completely and she drifted off.

* * * *

Moaning, she snuggled into the warmth surrounding her. A light touch on her breast made her arch, seeking more of the delicious contact. The thudding beneath her head both comforted and excited her, and she shifted to get even closer. The touch on her nipple made her moan. It felt so good. Incredible. She moved against it, wanting more. Rubbing her thighs together, she tried unsuccessfully to ease the ache that had settled there.

Something hard and warm touched her bottom and she pushed back until it pressed more firmly against her. Something firm and warm settled around her waist, pulling her back against even more heat. The heat at her waist moved lower, smoothing over her abdomen, slowly moving downward and inside her panties. It kept moving lower, forcing her thighs to part as it worked its way between them. She parted them eagerly, needing more and moaned as it grazed over her clit.

A series of bit off curses woke her abruptly from her erotic dream to find it hadn’t been a dream at all. Opening her eyes, she looked up to see Joe watching her, his eyes blazing with need. With her head pillowed on his chest, she could hear his heart beat even faster. His

hand had worked its way under her shirt and covered her breast.

Colt, obviously awakened as she'd been by Joe's cursing, remained motionless, with his hand down her panties and his finger on her clit. Pressed firmly against her back, his breath warm on her neck, he leaned down to kiss her shoulder. "This wasn't planned, Dakota. I was asleep when I reached for you. If you want us to stop, we will."

His sleep roughened voice caused her juices to flow freely. More aroused than she'd ever been, Dakota couldn't lie still. Shifting restlessly, her hips tilted of their own volition. "I don't have any condoms." She groaned, arching to push her breast further into Joe's palm.

Joe leaned over her, pushing her onto her back. "We do. Do you want this?"

Dakota shuddered as his hard body covered hers. She couldn't believe this was really happening. If it was a dream, she didn't want to wake up. "God yes."

Colt touched her cheek, sliding his hand from between her legs to make room for Joe. "We didn't intend to get you aroused, honey, but we can satisfy you without taking you if you don't want to do this."

In answer, Dakota reached up and grabbed fistfuls of Joe's hair and pulled him down. His kiss made her soar, so hot and possessive it took her breath away. His arms came around her, pulling her close. She kicked out, fighting the blankets that kept her from putting her legs around him. She couldn't get close enough.

Still kissing her, Joe moved back to the side and she felt the blankets being pulled down to her feet. Joe held her slightly away from him as Colt reached between them to unbutton the shirt she wore and part the sides.

Joe lifted his head, his eyes glittering darkly as he looked down at what Colt had exposed.

Dakota trembled as Joe used the tip of his finger to trace a nipple, gasping at the arrow of pleasure that shot straight to her pussy.

He smiled faintly. "I haven't been able to get the sight of your beautiful breasts out of my mind."

Colt touched her cheek, turning her toward him and swallowing her moan when he covered her mouth with his own.

Hands moved over her breasts, tweaking and lightly pinching her nipples and sending her into a frenzy of need. Colt's hair felt silky under her hands as she tangled her fingers in it to pull him even closer. He ran his tongue over the seam of her lips, nibbling teasingly, chuckling when she groaned in frustration. "You're greedy. I like that in a woman."

Her stomach quivered when she felt her panties being removed. Colt had to have felt it.

He lifted his head as he ran a hand over her belly. "Do you have any idea what we're going to do to you?"

Joe tossed her panties aside and looked down at her slit hungrily.

Dakota parted her trembling thighs, gulping in air. "Do your worst."

Joe's eyes flared as he ripped off his t-shirt and lowered his head.

Colt leaned over her, grinning. "Yes, ma'am."

She cried out at the first touch of Joe's mouth, gripping Colt's shoulders as hot tingles radiated from her slit outward. Joe ate at her hungrily and she tightened her hold on Colt as her defenses crumbled all around her. Holding her buttocks in his hands, Joe lifted her to get better access and simply devoured her, robbing her of all reason.

Colt's mouth moved over hers, brushing his lips against hers and down her jaw to her throat while his hand stayed busy on her breasts. Suddenly, a large swell of pleasure washed over her, stealing her breath as she arched, her body tight.

Joe held onto her, his mouth gentle as he brought her down so slowly she thought it would kill her.

"Damn, you're beautiful," Colt told her against her lips as he took them again.

Joe released her and she heard the sound of their duffle bag being

unzipped and then the rip of foil. When Colt lifted his head, she looked down to see Joe rolling on a condom.

Joe's jaw clenched as he ran his hands from her knees to her thighs. "I've never wanted a woman as much as I want you."

Dakota lifting her hips in invitation. Her entire body had gone up in flames and she wanted more. Wanted it all. "Take me."

Colt lay next to her, watching her face and running his hands over her thigh as it wrapped around Joe. It felt so erotic and naughty to look into one man's eyes as another man began to fill her.

Dakota turned her face to watch Joe's eyes as he slowly began to enter her, so slowly she didn't know if she would survive it. She struggled to accept him. His size and the fact that she had been celibate for some time made his possession deliciously snug. She lifted her hips higher, trying to take even more of his thick heat into her.

Joe brushed her hair back and tilted her face to his. "Easy, Dakota. I don't want to hurt you."

"Please. You're killing me. More." His thick length burned inside her, each bump and ridge of his cock delighting her.

"She's so fucking tight," he told Colt through clenched teeth. "Dakota, look at me, honey."

Dakota lifted her gaze, rocking her hips to take even more. "God you feel so good. Stop treating me like a baby, damn it. Show me how much you want me."

His eyes flared. A heartbeat later his lips covered hers again, taking her mouth with none of the finesse he'd used earlier. His strokes came faster now, each pressing more of his cock into her. He ended the kiss to stare down at her.

Her breath caught at the heat in his eyes. It erased any inhibitions she may have had. She couldn't believe how good it felt, each stroke taking her higher and higher. Her body began tightening again and she thrashed on the pillow to fight it, not wanting the magnificent feeling to end. He relentlessly dug at a spot inside her that gave her no

choice but to surrender.

Braced on his elbows above her, Joe kept his eyes on her the entire time. "Go over, Dakota. Don't you dare fight it."

He spoke through clenched teeth, and she could see he was barely hanging onto his own control. Leaning to one side, he slid a hand under her bottom and lifted her into his thrusts. "You're so damned hot."

Colt's hand slid over her hip and thigh before he reached up to cover a breast, running a rough thumb over her nipple. "We won't let you fight it, Dakota. You're gonna come, honey. Let go. Let us make you feel good."

Joe thrust to the hilt inside her and she couldn't help but cry out at the pleasure. She tried to pump her hips but he held onto her, controlling her movements. Those little sparks got stronger and started to spread far too soon.

"No. Not yet." She moaned, thrashing on the mattress. She dug her heels into his taut buttocks, lifting herself even more. "It's too good."

Joe groaned harshly. "Incredible."

Dakota gripped him tighter as the wave of pleasure crested, washing over her so completely she felt it in her toes. Her body bucked and jolted helplessly as Joe thrust harder. She gloried in his possession, losing herself to the pleasure as his control finally snapped.

He covered her body with his, burying his face in her hair as he thrust, stroking his hot length deep inside her. Groaning, he slid his arms under her, pulling her even closer as he found his own release.

Colt's hands ran over her, firm but gentle.

Running one hand over Joe's back, she reached for Colt with the other one, gasping for air. "Why doesn't it feel wrong to have Colt touch me while you're still inside me?"

Joe lifted onto his elbows again and gave her one of those rare smiles. "Because he's as crazy about you as I am."

Dakota cupped his cheek, thrilled that she had the freedom to do so, at least at this moment.

Colt leaned down to brush his lips over her shoulder.

Joe kissed her again and withdrew, moving away and allowing Colt to take his place.

Covering her body with his own, Colt bent to kiss her, all teasing gone as he claimed her mouth possessively. Lifting his head slightly, he murmured against her lips. "You are so fucking beautiful."

He'd already undressed and rolled on a condom, so she lifted her hips in invitation.

Instead of entering her, he slid his hands beneath her, lifting her to lie over his arm and closing his lips over a nipple. Joe came back to join them, lying next to her and reached out to lightly pinch the other.

The combined sensations drove her wild and she gripped them both tightly, whimpering at the exquisite pleasure. Joe's hand slid over her stomach and down to her slit, which dripped with her juices.

Colt lifted his head. "She's so fucking responsive. As soon as we touch her, she goes up in flames. Look at her."

Joe lifted his head to look down at her, smiling indulgently. "Wait until you get inside her."

Their words sent a thrill through her and she cried out as Joe gave his attention to her clit. "Take me, damn it."

Colt bent to nibble at her lips, chuckling and deftly avoiding her as she tried to deepen the kiss. "Greedy little thing, aren't you. Do you want more?"

"Yes, damn you." Dakota groaned as Joe teased her clit, giving her enough friction there to keep her climbing, but just when she thought she'd go over, he slid his hand up to rub her stomach again. "Stop teasing me."

Colt scraped his teeth over a nipple, making her gasp. "How would you like to have your ass stretched so we can both take you next time?"

"No, Colt." Joe's tone was adamant. "I don't want to hurt her."

Dakota trembled as a combination of fear and lust went through her. She'd heard about anal sex but she'd never experienced it before. With them she wanted to experience it all. "Yes, anything. Everything."

Colt cupped her face, running a thumb over her lips as he gradually began to press his hot length into her. "I saw some oil in the bathroom."

Joe slid his hand away from her clit again as Colt continued to press forward. Her entire body shook with need, anticipating the pleasure to come.

She panted, breathless as Colt filled her with his cock. It felt long and thick, hot as it stretched her. She rocked her hips, crying out hoarsely as he slid into her all the way. "Oh God, it feels so good."

"You're so tight and hot, Dakota. Jesus. Joe, go get the oil."

Joe bent over her and dropped a quick kiss on her shoulder before standing. "If you don't like what we do to you, Dakota, just say so and we'll stop."

Dakota groaned, crying out as Colt filled her again. He moved so slowly, she thought she would die. "Faster."

The head of his cock rubbed along that place inside her that Joe had found and she gripped him on every thrust to intensify the sensation.

Colt chuckled. "No you don't. Not yet."

Dakota's breath caught as he shifted their positions until she lay sprawled on his chest. Tightening her thighs on his hips, she sat up to ride him, groaning when he pulled her back down and held her tightly to his chest to stop her. "Damn it, Colt." She struggled, but he only tightened his grip.

"Easy, honey. You can ride me cowgirl, just as soon as Joe works his finger up your ass."

"Oh God." Dakota groaned and buried her face in his chest. "I've never done this."

He smoothed a hand over her hair. "You'll love it, I promise."

She couldn't prevent a shiver when Joe's hand ran over her bottom.

"Just relax, honey. I'll go nice and slow."

Dakota clenched on the cock inside her, drawing a groan from Colt.

Colt looked over her shoulder at Joe. "Not too fucking slow. Neither one of us can stay still much longer."

Held firmly against Colt's chest and straddling his hips, Dakota was wide open for Joe's ministrations. She jolted at the first touch of his oiled finger at her puckered opening. She panted as he pressed slowly into her, adding even more oil. The oil dripped to her slit and she moaned at the unfamiliar feel of having something push into her bottom. The completely alien sensation startled her, and she couldn't prevent the whimper that escaped.

Joe crooned to her, speaking so softly she couldn't make out his words, but just his tone reassured her. He rubbed her bottom with his other hand as he continued to work a thick finger into her.

Dakota drew several unsteady breaths as she struggled to adjust to such an erotic feeling. With both openings filled, she couldn't stop clenching her inner muscles, which made it feel even tighter.

Colt continued to stroke her as he held her against him. "You like that, don't you, honey? Just think how good it's going to feel when Joe and I take you together, one cock in your sweet cunt and another in your ass."

Dakota couldn't think. Joe's strokes and the feel of a hard cock filling her made her wild. The image Colt created in her head made it even worse. "I'm going to come. I have to—I need to—Ohh!"

Colt released her and helped her to sit up. "Ride me, Dakota." He gripped her hips tightly to help her, lifting his hips to thrust into her.

The finger pressing deep into her bottom, and the devastating strokes of Colt's cock turned her into a mass of mindless need. Her coordination gone, she let the men guide her, each downward stroke driving Colt's cock into her pussy and Joe's finger into her ass.

Within only a few strokes she felt that wonderful tingling feeling, and then that glorious pleasure that swept through her system. Her body jolted and bucked, and she rode Colt even harder. Her cries and Colt's deep groans filled the room.

Sparks raced through her, touching her everywhere and she clenched repeatedly on both men. The too full feeling, the delicious forbidden sensation of having her bottom invaded set her off again. She screamed her release, her body bowing as Colt surged into her one last time, pulling her hips down to fill her completely.

They froze that way for several moments, reveling in the pleasure, both trembling and moaning, the tortured sounds coming from both of them making it all the more erotic.

Joe kissed her shoulder, wrapping an arm around her waist to steady her as he withdrew, before lowering her gently onto Colt's chest. Patting her bottom, he bent to place a kiss on her back. "You're incredible, honey."

Struggling to catch her breath, she lay collapsed on Colt, watching Joe's naked butt as he walked down the hallway.

Colt ran a hand over her back soothingly as they both struggled to catch their breath.

She'd never had this kind of attention after sex before. It gave her a warm fuzzy inside, and she smiled as she snuggled closer.

Colt tightened his arms and rolled her onto her back. "Joe and I will go take care of the horses and start the generator. I'll put another log on the fire as soon as I get dressed. Why don't you stay here and keep warm?"

Dakota smiled up at him and pushed back the lock of hair that hung rakishly over his forehead. "Why don't we all go back to sleep?"

Colt chuckled. "It's morning, sleepyhead."

Dakota arched her neck to look at the window to see that the sky had started to lighten.

Joe came back into the room. "Before you get dressed, let me see that hip."

Colt cursed and jumped up. “Shit, I forgot about it. I’m sorry, honey. I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

Dakota grinned and sat up. “I never even felt it. It’s fine.” She reached for her clothes. “I’ll get dressed and start the coffee.”

Joe held her down easily and ran a hand over her hip, inspecting it before frowning. “I still think you need to put ice on it.”

Dakota shuddered, just thinking about it. “No way. I’m nice and warm, and I’m not putting ice anywhere.”

Colt chuckled. “I can make you change your mind about that.”

Joe smiled and kissed her hair. “Why don’t you stay where you are while Colt and I go take care of the horses and start—”

“The generator,” Dakota finished for him. “Colt just said the same thing. I have a great idea. Why don’t the two of you go do what you have to do while I stay here by the fire naked and warm? Then whenever you’re ready, here I am.”

Colt laughed as he fastened his jeans. “Great idea.”

Dakota shook her head, smiling. “Idiot. I have a ranch to run. I *did* manage to do it all by myself until you two came along.”

Colt pulled on his t-shirt. “Does that mean you’re not going to stay naked and wait for us?”

Joe chuckled softly. “Dakota, all teasing aside, what just happened meant a lot to both of us. I don’t want you to think it was just a lay. But I want you to know that we can’t stay here forever. We’ve got some things to do, though, before we leave. But I promise you we’ll take care of you while we’re here and make sure you won’t have any more problems with your neighbor before we go.”

Dakota forced a smile. “I know you’ll leave. I guess we’ve all been lonely too long—”

“Don’t.” Joe’s face tightened. “Don’t diminish what we just did. I’d do anything to be able to stay. You’re a helluva woman, Dakota.”

Joe bent, kissing her forehead before handing her the panties he’d removed earlier.

She watched them dress as she pulled her panties and sweatpants

on, warmed by the way they watched her.

Colt finished dressing and turned her toward him to button her shirt. "All day I'm going to be thinking about how great it felt to be inside you." After kissing her softly, he and Joe turned to leave.

Rooted in place, she listened to their low murmurs as they donned their boots and coats. Hearing the back door open and close, she raced to the kitchen window.

Dakota watched them walk across the yard with a sinking feeling in her stomach. She knew they'd eventually leave. She'd told them so herself yesterday, but she thought it would be because of a payoff. She no longer thought that and wondered why they felt as though they still had to go.

She couldn't regret what they'd just done. She'd never experienced anything like that before, and she would make love to them as often as she could as long as they stayed.

Something about both of them drew her as no man ever had, and she promised herself that she would enjoy it to the fullest for the time they were here.

Chapter Six

Since the men started the generator first, Dakota had time to have a hot breakfast ready by the time they came back in. Hearing them come into the porch, her body reacted immediately. By the time they walked into the kitchen, her heart raced, and she felt flushed and tongue-tied.

Both men had red faces from the cold, their hair windblown and both looked good enough to eat. Setting the table, her eyes kept shifting to them as they hung their coats and pulled off their boots, speaking to each other under their breath. Neither said a word as they washed up at the sink, but both kept glancing at her, their eyes possessive as they moved over her.

Taking the bacon out of the pan and putting it on paper towels to drain, her eyes were drawn to their hands and forearms as they soaped them, remembering far too clearly just what those sturdy hands had done to her earlier. Her nipples tingled and beaded when she remembered how they'd touched her. Eyeing the way Joe's shirt pulled across his broad shoulders, she couldn't help but remember what it had felt like to hold onto them as he gave her pleasure like she'd never known before.

Joe finished and went into the living room, glancing at her unsmilingly as he passed. He seemed to be deep in thought about something, and she wished she could ask him what bothered him. It seemed strange to have been intimate with both men but still be virtual strangers.

She turned her attention to Colt as he washed up. Neither acted as though they were angry with her, just distant. She wondered if they

regretted this morning. Although she didn't have a lot of experience, she'd never known of a man regretting getting laid.

Maybe this was their way of showing her that it hadn't meant any more to them than that and didn't want her to get any ideas.

She couldn't hold it against them. What could she expect after having known them for only a day?

She usually had no problem dealing with men. She just didn't know how to deal with men like them. Their presence made her uncomfortable and clumsy, a sensation she didn't have much experience with. She could talk cattle and horses, but when it came to anything intimate, she had a little more trouble.

Her ex-boyfriend, Lenny, had been nothing like them. He'd always been upbeat and happy go lucky. Lenny's life's mission had always been to have a good time, and she never had to worry about talking. He did enough for both of them.

He'd taken Ed's money and gone to work for him in a heartbeat. The payoff and steady paycheck from Ed meant he could go into town and get drunk every weekend, and with a pocketful of money, he always had women surrounding him.

Joe and Colt were the exact opposite, and she really didn't know how to handle them. She would be more comfortable facing Ed's men than trying to figure out these two. She poured two cups of coffee and set them on the table, glancing at Colt warily. His continued silence made her uneasy.

By the time Joe came back into the room and joined Colt at the table their cool demeanor had started to worry her.

"Is something wrong? Are the horses okay?"

They both glanced at her and nodded. Colt smiled faintly. "Everything's fine. Joe and I just have a lot on our minds."

Joe continued to stare into his coffee cup as though looking for something. Or trying to avoid looking at her.

Mentally shrugging, she finished the pancakes and placed the big platter of them on the table along with the plate of bacon.

Joe and Colt ate in silence. Like the night before, they shoveled food in as though it would be their last meal and finished before she had even finished half of hers.

There were a few more pancakes on the plate in the center of the table. “Would you like some more?”

They shook their heads, their faces red when they looked at her plate. Colt got up to get more coffee. “No. We’re just used to eating fast. Sorry about that.”

The phone rang before she could reply, and she got up to answer it. “Hello?”

“Dakota, Sam and I are on our way. Coupla hunters got themselves lost.”

“Sure, Bob, no problem. How many horses do you need? Are just you and Sam going out?”

“Yeah. The guy at the lodge is letting us handle it.”

Dakota smiled at the sarcasm in his voice. “He usually does.”

“We’ll need four. They went out on foot, and they’ll need a ride back.”

“Make sure they know what they’re doing. If they hurt my horses—”

Bob laughed. “We always take care of your precious horses, darlin’. We’ll be there in about an hour.”

“Okay, Bob. Thanks.”

She hung up and turned to find both men watching her, their eyes narrowed.

Joe stood and moved to the window, looking out at the stable. “Who do you think is going to hurt the horses?”

Dakota smiled, shaking her head and went back to her breakfast. “That was Bob Miller. He and Sam Jackson are trackers, and there’s a lodge across the ridge.” She gestured toward the ridge behind the stables. “They cater to hunters and some of them are always getting lost. Bob and Sam are going out to find two more. They use my horses instead of bringing their own because it’s easier and it gives

me an income. Plus, they were friends of my dad. The lodge pays me.”

Joe nodded. “This Sam and Bob, they can be trusted with the horses?”

Dakota smiled again. “Of course. They do this all the time. And they *hate* Big Ed. I think they started using my horses just to make him mad, but it works out.”

She wanted so much to go up to him and put her arms around him, but he and Colt once again had assumed that cold, solemn look. If not for the way her body still hummed and the sensitivity between her legs, she could almost believe their lovemaking this morning hadn’t happened.

Colt reached for his boots. “How long before he gets here?”

Dakota couldn’t help but admire the way his shirt pulled over his big shoulders. She thought about how those muscles had bunched and moved under her hands as she bent over him, riding his cock to completion.

“Dakota?”

Snapping back to the present, she jumped up, moved to the sink and squirted soap onto the dishes. “He’ll be here in about an hour. I’ll take care of the horses. Both of you lost a lot of sleep last night. Why don’t you catch some sleep now, while I’m awake to watch things? Besides, if Big Ed’s men see Bob’s truck here, they won’t do anything. They like to make trouble when they’re sure no one is around. They can’t afford any witnesses.” She snapped her mouth closed when she realized she was rambling.

Joe leaned back against the counter, watching her again. “We’re not about to go to sleep while you’re expecting someone. We’ll sleep later. How many horses does he need?”

“Four.” She wiped her hands and started for her boots when Colt stopped her, blocking her path. “What?”

“We’ll take care of it. Isn’t that what you hired us for?”

Dakota sighed and plopped into a chair. “I hired you because I felt

bad for you and because I thought it would be nice to get a couple of nights sleep before Ed buys you off. I figured once he gave you the money, you'd at least be able to afford a place to stay."

Colt came closer and knelt in front of her, lightly gripping her arms. It was the first time either of them had touched her since they came in. "We're not taking Ed's money. We'll get rid of him for you, and then you can live in peace."

"What do you mean 'get rid of him'?"

Colt shook his head. "Nothing. We'll just make sure he doesn't bother you anymore. Joe, let's go get the horses ready."

Dakota went to the window to watch them cross to the stable. For the first time since she hired them, she felt uneasy and it scared her.

He father's advice about following her instincts went through her mind yet again.

"Daddy, what the hell should I do when my instincts tell me they're the best thing that ever happened to me, but at the same time, they're hiding something from me?"

* * * *

Joe waited until they walked some distance from the house before he turned to Colt. "What the hell are you thinking?"

Colt scraped a hand over his face. "I know. I know. She's got my brain scrambled. I haven't felt like this since before—"

"We can't afford to get attached to her." Joe tried to ignore the heavy weight that settled in his stomach. He already had.

"You're already attached to her, the same as I am. Don't try to deny it. I was there with you, remember? I saw the way you looked at her."

Joe walked into the stable without answering. That was the problem with having a friend who knew you as well as Colt knew him. They'd been friends ever since they could remember, and circumstances had led to them spending far more time together than

most friends did. They'd been able to read each other perfectly for so long he couldn't remember a time when they hadn't.

They prepared the horses with little conversation. None was necessary.

He thought about the way Dakota had looked in the early morning light as he made love to her. Christ, she made him as horny as a teenager, and somehow he'd turned to her in his sleep. He'd been dreaming, fantasizing actually, about touching her, gathering her close and palming the breast he hadn't been able to get out of his mind.

In his dream, her breast had fit his palm as though it had been made for his hand. She'd felt so soft there, so delicate and he'd moved his hand over her gently so as not to hurt her. When she pushed into his touch, the pebbled nipple poking into his hand, he'd used his callused palm to give her the friction he knew would take her higher. Her moan had awakened him and ended one dream only to begin another.

God, she was so sweet. Under that hard shell she used to protect herself, Dakota was so soft and feminine it blew him away. She'd done a fine job in taking care of herself, but he knew it couldn't last. The only reason she'd lasted this long was because for some reason, her neighbor had decided to play with her. Now that Big Ed knew she had company, he would realize his mistake and would become more determined.

When Ed found out the identity of her company, he would get desperate.

He and Colt had to keep her inside and safe as much as possible until they took care of her bullying neighbor.

"Do you think she'd be willing to go with us?"

Joe sighed. The same question had been going through his mind all morning. "I wish I knew. But she seems to really love it here. She told us herself that she hasn't lived anywhere else."

Colt sighed. "And you don't think we'll be able to stay?"

Joe grimaced. "The people here would never accept us. Besides,

can you really picture her tying herself to not one, but two killers?"

"Fuck."

"Yeah."

* * * *

Dakota walked Bob and Sam out to the stable, chatting about the hunters that had gotten lost and where they thought they might find them. She'd already told them about Joe and Colt, who stood waiting with the horses. The older men had questioned her about them, having become protective of her while her daddy was ill, one of the reasons she hadn't told them what Ed had been doing.

Even though both men had reached their sixties, they still acted as though they were twenty years younger. Although both stayed in good shape, she was scared to death that either one of them would get hurt if they faced off with Ed. They were both hard-headed and would waste no time confronting Ed if they found out. When her daddy died, they'd assumed that it had all blown over, and she continued to let them think that.

She walked with them to where Joe and Colt had let the horses out into the small fenced area, the only area she could keep fenced because of Ed.

After introducing them she watched, amused as the men all gave each other a once over before Sam and Bob loaded their bags onto the horses and started out.

None of them spoke as they headed back to the house. When the men went into the living room, she avoided temptation and stayed in the kitchen. She put a roast and potatoes in the oven and went out to the living room with the intention of asking for their clothes so she could start the laundry.

She stopped in the doorway, leaning against it and smiling when she saw they'd both fallen asleep. They'd put another log on the fire, making the living room toasty. Colt slept on the mattress on the floor,

while Joe lay sprawled on the sofa. The laundry could wait until later. Both had to be tired, having taken turns all night watching for Ed's men.

For the thousandth time she thought about leaving Fairview. Why the hell did she stay in a place like this? But where the hell would she go?

She went back out to the kitchen and sat at the table with a cup of coffee, her head spinning with possibilities. She'd been in this town all her life. She'd never seriously contemplated leaving, even when Ed burned down the barn. The people who lived here were plain, hardworking people. She didn't expect them to try to fight a man like Ed Franks, but she had thought they would have stood up to him a little more than they had. But even when the state police had been called in, no one would say a word against him.

But still...this was her home.

Restless, she slipped on her boots and coat and went out the back door. Circling the house, she looked over the place wondering just how much longer she'd be able to hold out. Ed could send a bunch of his men and drive her out at any time, and it made her nervous as hell.

Hearing a truck, she looked up in time to see Ben Parsons coming up the lane. She shaded her eyes against the bright sunshine reflecting off of the snow, smiling as she waited for him to get out. He was gorgeous as all get out, and she'd wished more than once that she felt more than a brotherly affection toward him.

"Heard you hired two hands. Those two men that have been asking questions around town. I want you to get in my truck and stay there."

Dakota blinked. "Hello to you, too. What the hell are you talking about? Why should I get in your truck?"

He gripped her arms, his expression hard as he studied her face. "Are you okay?"

Dakota frowned. "Yes. Why? Ed's men came out here last night and tried to cause some trouble but—"

Ben's jaw clenched. "What happened?"

"Joe and Colt took care of them. Beat the crap out of them and sent them back to Ed."

He shook her. "Damn it, Dakota. Why didn't you call me?"

"Get your fucking hands off of her."

Dakota twisted to see Joe standing on the porch, Colt right behind him pointing the shotgun at Ben. "No! It's Ben Parsons, the deputy I told you about." She turned to Ben, placing her hand over the gun he'd drawn. "They thought you were one of Ed's men. You don't need this."

Ben pushed her behind him and faced Joe, keeping his gun pointed at him. "Pack your things and get the hell out of here."

Dakota fought off Ben's attempt to keep her behind him and came around to face him, standing between him and the coldly furious men on the porch. "Ben! What are you doing?"

Cursing, he lowered the gun. "Do you know who these men are? I followed them in town and got their license plate number. They've been in town for a week, and I never could get a good look at them." He gripped her arm again. "They're killers, Dakota. Convicted murderers. They served twelve years for killing a man. They got out of a maximum security prison three years ago."

Stunned, Dakota turned to the men on her porch, the men she'd had sex with only hours before. A lead weight settled in her stomach as she faced them. She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. "Is this true?"

Colt lowered the shotgun to his side as Joe stood there staring at her, the vulnerability in his eyes a sharp contrast to the hard lines of his taut frame.

Dakota slowly moved forward, shaking off Ben's restraining hand. Staring up at Joe, she caught the softening of his gaze before it became hardened once again, his jaw clenching. She couldn't believe they'd ever kill anyone. When Ed's men had shown up, they could have easily hurt them a lot more than they had. But their concern had

been for her. Still, she had to hear them say it. "Is it true?"

Several seconds passed, and she'd begun to think he wouldn't answer her. She glanced at Colt who took a step toward her and stopped abruptly. The look on his face was terrible to see and with a sinking heart, she knew she already had her answer.

"Yes."

Joe bit the word out, his jaw clenched tight. His face looked as though it had been carved from granite, his eyes bleak as he stared down at her. "I haven't lied to you, Dakota."

His tone had been so low, his words barely carried.

She couldn't help but notice that both men stood braced, as if for a blow. They never even glanced at Ben, so she knew they expected the blow to come from her. A verbal blow.

They might not say it, but if they had to brace themselves for her rejection, they had to feel something for her. Maybe it was just wishful thinking on her part, but she would have to follow her instincts. She wanted to know what had happened. She couldn't imagine Joe and Colt killing someone in cold blood. She couldn't believe it.

She wouldn't believe it.

She couldn't feel this strongly about them if they were truly evil.

If her instincts were wrong...

Ben came forward, his hand resting on the gun he'd holstered. "You two get out of here and get the hell out of Fairview."

Neither man moved other than shifting their eyes to Ben and then back to her. Colt's brow went up. "Your call, Dakota. We'll do whatever you want. No hard feelings."

Ben gripped her arm to stop her as she started toward Joe. "Stay back, Dakota. I'll handle this."

Dakota had just about had enough of bossy men, and she didn't trust the icy look in Joe and Colt's gaze as they sliced to where Ben gripped her arm. "Let go of me, Ben. I'm fine, I promise." Shaking him off, she ignored his curses as she went up the porch steps and

stood toe to toe with them. She let out a shuddering breath and braced herself. She had to know. She didn't know what she would do if they had killed someone. "Did you do it?"

They froze, appearing stunned. Colt finally answered. "No, ma'am."

Dakota kept her face blank, as relief weakened her knees. She believed him. "You plan on killing me?"

Colt's eyes softened and his lips twitched. "No, ma'am."

Joe's eyes glittered as he reached out to touch her cheek, pulling his hand back at the last moment. "I would die to keep you safe."

Filled with such joy she thought her heart might burst, Dakota smiled. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that." She turned back to Ben to try to calm him down. She knew he'd never leave until he could be sure of her safety. "Come on, Ben. Let's walk."

* * * *

Joe forced himself not to move, when everything inside him wanted to run after them, pull Dakota away from the deputy and carry her back into the house.

"She asked if we did it." Colt looked incredulous as he watched them disappear from view.

Joe had a hard time assimilating that fact himself. No one ever had. The sheriff had come and arrested them, pulled them out of his house in the middle of the night, and that had been the end of it. The court appointed attorney had never even asked them if they'd done it, just nodded disbelievingly every time they'd proclaimed their innocence. His own family hadn't believed him.

In their ignorance, he and Colt had believed that they'd be found not guilty and justice would prevail. It hadn't. Neither one of them had believed in anything but each other and their need for revenge for a long time.

Until now. Now they also believed in Dakota.

She really believed them. He could see it in her eyes. Incredible. Love for her washed over him, making him feel cleaner than he had in years.

He believed what he felt for her even if he couldn't stick around.

They would both do whatever they could to keep Dakota safe. But nothing would sway them from killing the man she knew as Ed Franks. He and Colt had made up their minds to it years ago, and it had been the only thing that kept them going. They both knew they could live with murder.

But Dakota never could.

They couldn't ask her to.

So they would have to live without her.

Chapter Seven

The electricity came back on during the day, making it unnecessary for anyone to sleep in the living room. Colt dragged the mattresses back to the bedroom, hoping like hell it would go off again.

After he finished, he sat on the edge of the bed and sighed. Would killing Dakota's neighbor really be worth it? He'd been all for it until he'd met Dakota and had the wind knocked out of his sails. He didn't know yet if they could have a future with her, but the possibility unsettled him. Right now they had a chance to explore what they'd both begun to feel for her, but once they committed murder...

"Can you tell me about it?"

Colt looked up, startled that she'd been able to sneak up on him. Bitterness weighed heavy in his stomach as he thought about how much he could tell her. He couldn't tell her everything. If he did, she would either be forced to report them or would become an accessory.

So he began with the basics. "Joe and I grew up in the same town. We've been friends so long that I don't ever remember not being his friend. I'm an only child, but Joe has a baby sister. I was one of those late in life babies."

Not being able to sit any longer, he got up and started out to the kitchen with Dakota right behind him. He poured them each coffee, needing to wash the bitter taste from his mouth. He looked out the window to see Joe outside with the horses. Without turning, he began again.

"My dad was getting up in years and wanted to sell the ranch to buy a little house in town. I told him I'd take care of it, but he didn't

want me to be tied to the ranch the way he'd been. I told him that's all I ever wanted, but he wanted me to get out and see the world before I settled down."

Bile rose in his throat. It had been one of the last things his father had ever said to him. "My dad never believed in lawyers. While I was out of town he sold the place to a con man and it wasn't until afterward that my father realized the check he'd gotten wasn't a down payment, but the full amount of the sale price. The bastard had bought my dad's ranch and all the horses for ten thousand dollars. Hell, mom and dad didn't even have enough to buy a little house and were out on the streets right away. When I came home and found out, I was in a rage and tracked the guy down. Joe saw me in town and came after me to find out what was wrong."

His chest tightened as he thought about that day. It was a day he'd never forget. He remembered the hot sun beating down on him as he told Joe what Frank had done. He remembered Joe's own anger as he went with him to confront Frank.

He shook his head at his own naiveté. "I was only nineteen years old. Joe was twenty-one. We tracked the man who'd cheated my parents to the feed store. Arrogant and cocky, I walked up to him, demanding that he either gave my parents back the ranch or paid what he owed."

He couldn't turn to face her but from the scrape of the chair, he knew she sat right behind him. "The lawyer in town had gotten paid to write the contract the way F—the bastard wanted it, and since my dad signed it, there was nothing we could do. I went into a rage and started swinging and before I knew it, Joe and I were fighting him and his men. The sheriff was called and broke it up, and Joe and I left. We went to the house my mom and dad were staying in, with one of her friends. He'd made them move right away. I told my mom that I'd go and find a lawyer in the next town and we'd get everything fixed. My dad gave me the money they'd gotten to pay for the lawyer, and Joe and I left. We made an appointment for early the next morning. We

left that night so we could spend the night there so we wouldn't be late."

"What happened?"

He scraped a hand over his face and took another sip of coffee as a lead weight settled in his stomach. "The damned truck broke down in the middle of nowhere, and Joe and I had to walk back to town. We'd just crashed at Joe's when the sheriff broke the door down and hauled us out to his car, asking why we did it. We didn't know what the hell he was talking about. Then he asked why we'd killed F—the bastard that had bought the ranch from my parents."

The surge of rage he felt when he thought of that time nearly choked him. He hadn't been able to help his parents after all. They'd blamed themselves for being conned and for him going to prison. They'd both died feeling like failures, feeling like they'd ruined their only child's life.

Colt could never forgive that.

Locked in prison, he'd been unable to help them. It had been torture knowing what they were going through and of their illnesses and unable to be with them.

His hand tightened, gripping the mug so hard, it surprised him that he hadn't broken it. He carefully loosened his grip and placed the mug on the counter before turning to face her.

Surprised to see her tears, he went forward and knelt at her feet, running his thumbs over her wet cheeks. "Don't cry. I couldn't stand it."

Dakota wiped her cheeks and nodded. "What happened to the man who cheated your parents?"

"They found the ranch house I grew up in burned to the ground. There was a body inside, burned so badly they could only identify him by the ring on his finger. It was the ring that bastard wore. We were charged with setting the fire that killed him."

Dakota laid her hands on his cheeks, and he wanted nothing more than to bury his face against her breasts and hold onto her. "That's

awful! How can that happen?"

Colt laughed humorlessly. "We lived in a backwards town with a sheriff who could be bought. Sound familiar? All of a sudden there were all kinds of people testifying that we'd had a fight with him and that I'd threatened to kill him."

"Yeah, but you weren't even there!"

"We couldn't prove a damned thing. The only alibi we had was each other. And nobody believed us. So they found us guilty and sent us to prison. We served twelve years for murder."

"Oh, Colt." Tears streamed down her face as she leaned into him. Humbled and terrified that her little body shook with sobs, he gathered her close and pulled her from the chair to sit with her in his lap.

"Shh, baby. It's over. We're fine." He cupped her head, rocking her as she buried her face in his neck.

"You must have been so scared. You were so young."

Acid churned in Colt's stomach when he remembered the paralyzing fear that had gripped him when the jury found them guilty. He hadn't thought it would be possible, had hoped that something would happen at the last minute, that the jury would somehow know the truth. He and Joe had been scared shitless, with good reason as it turned out. "Yeah, we were scared."

When Dakota lifted her head, he struggled to keep his face bland. "Did they hurt you in prison?"

Colt stood and placed her on her feet, walking away to look back out the window. "Two kids in a maximum security prison with a bunch of hardened criminals. We were small town boys, and didn't know any more than horses and cattle. In prison, you become cattle. The less you know, the better. Joe and I don't talk about it. But we started lifting weights and soon got strong enough to fight back. Fight dirty. We got mean. And we survived."

Fuck. Thinking about prison made it feel as though the walls were closing in on him. "I need some air."

“Colt?”

He paused with his hand on the doorknob, but didn’t turn, not wanting her to see what the memories did to him. “What?”

“I’m so sorry.”

* * * *

Dakota wiped her eyes as Colt walked out the door, moving to the sink to watch him walk across the yard to Joe. She felt as though she understood them both a little better now. Learning what they’d been through broke her heart.

Clapping a hand over her mouth, she gasped remembering Joe’s initial refusal to touch her bottom and his gentleness when he did.

I don’t want to hurt her.

Had they been raped in prison?

What had been done to them astounded her. She wanted, more than anything, to see them happy. Wanted them to have some joy in their lives.

She just plain wanted them.

Learning the truth left her in no doubt of her feelings. She would do everything in her power to make them happy and hoped like hell she could convince them that the three of them had a future.

But what the hell did she know about what it took to make a man happy?

* * * *

After dinner that night, she watched the men get up from the table to go out to sit on the front porch. An idea to cheer them a little formed. After gathering what she’d need, she went out to the front porch. “How about a game of poker?”

It had gotten too dark to be able to see their expressions clearly, but she was relieved when both nodded and stood.

Dakota divided up the poker chips and began shuffling the cards. She gave Joe and Colt her best smile. “Do you gentlemen know how to play this game, or do you need me to teach you?”

Joe’s lips twitched, but he only nodded, staring into his coffee cup.

Dakota sighed inwardly. “Twos, threes and one-eyed Jacks are wild.”

Colt smiled, giving her hope. “Is that all?”

About to deal, Dakota paused. “I heard sarcasm. When it’s your turn to deal, you can do whatever you want. Right now, I’m the dealer.”

Colt flashed a grin. “Yes, ma’am.”

Dakota won the hand but she knew the reason. Neither man paid much attention to the game. They seemed to be lost in their own thoughts, and Dakota was determined to snap them out of it. “You know, I never gave much thought to big muscles before, but yours turn me on.”

Joe jerked, spilling coffee. Grabbing napkins, he cleaned up the mess and began dealing. “Working out was necessary in prison. Fours are wild.”

Colt shot Joe a look before turning to her, smiling faintly. “I’m glad. We feel the same way about your soft curves.”

Dakota nodded and looked down at her cards. Taken aback by Joe’s abrupt attitude, she remained silent for several minutes, working up her courage to try again. Damn it. What did she have to do to get Joe to smile?

Not looking up, she sorted the cards in her hand. “Maybe next time we should play strip poker.”

Colt chuckled softly. “There’s an idea.”

Encouraged, Dakota looked up at Joe. “What do you think?”

Joe threw down his discard and picked up the deck. “You’d get cold. Colt, how many cards do you want?”

Dakota waited until Colt took one card before laying down her

four discards. “Maybe you’d be the one getting cold. But if it would make you feel better, we could play in the living room with a big fire going.”

Joe raised a brow at the four discards but dealt her four more. “I don’t think so. Colt and I would have you naked in no time.”

Dakota sat back, elated to finally have him talking. “Nope. As soon as the two of you saw my breasts, you wouldn’t be able to concentrate on the cards, and I’d win.” Her nipples pebbled just imagining it.

Colt’s gaze flew to her breasts. “Good point. But you have very sensitive nipples. If Joe and I played with them, you’d forget all about your cards.”

Dakota shook her head, tightening her thighs against the rush of warmth. “There would be no touching during the game.”

Colt frowned. “Then what’s the point?”

“Anticipation.”

Joe and Colt glanced at each other and shifted in their seats.

Dakota hid a smile. “We’d all just sit here playing cards with clothes coming off here and there.”

Joe turned to her and opened his mouth, only to snap it shut again. His gaze dropped to her breasts, making them burn. Turning back, he threw two chips into the pot. “Twenty.”

Through her lashes she watched both Joe and Colt sneak glances at her breasts. Her nipples poked at the front of her shirt and she did nothing to hide it. Laying her cards face down on the table, she stretched her arms over her head, arching her back. Her lips curved when Colt accidentally knocked over his chips.

“Damn it, Dakota.”

Lowering her arms, she did her best to look innocent. “Something wrong?”

Colt began to restack his chips. “I ought to turn you over my knee.”

Joe’s head shot up. “Shut up, Colt.”

Dakota struggled to hide her grin. She'd learned a little about them by now. Their rigid posture and glittering eyes told her just how much her playfulness affected them. "You wouldn't be threatening to spank me, would you?"

If possible, Colt's eyes grew hotter. "Let's just play cards."

"You have something against talking while we play?"

"No. Just talk about something else."

Dakota arched a brow as she placed her own bet. "You don't think I have a right to know if you have plans to spank me?"

Joe remained silent, not looking up, but she could see the muscle in his jaw work and he clenched his teeth.

Colt narrowed his eyes at her. "I didn't threaten to spank you, but I will if you keep it up. Somebody needs to take you in hand. You don't listen worth a damn, and you're too ornery for your own good."

Amused, Dakota leaned forward. "And you think you can 'take me in hand'?"

"I know damned well I can."

"Don't bite off more than you can chew, cowboy."

"I have strong teeth." Colt laid down his cards. "Four nines."

Dakota stared down at her straight and stuck out her bottom lip. "I think you're cheating."

Raking in his chips, Colt glanced at her. "Little thing like you can get herself into some big trouble making accusations like that."

Intrigued, Dakota propped her chin on her hand and stared up at him. This had turned out to be a lot of fun. "Really? What kind of trouble?"

Joe's chair scraped back as he stood. "I'm going to go get some sleep. Colt, wake me in a couple of hours."

The game forgotten, Dakota watched him leave, feeling a lead weight settle in the pit of her stomach. Turning back to Colt, she rubbed her arms, suddenly chilled. "What's wrong with him?"

Colt sighed. "You remind us of what we've missed. Joe and I have a lot of bitterness inside us, Dakota. You make us wish for

things we can't have."

Dakota blinked back tears and had to swallow the lump in her throat before speaking. "Prison is in the past. You can both put that behind you and get on with your lives."

Colt nodded. "We're trying. We have something to do before we can do that."

"What happens after that?"

"We leave, Dakota. And never look back."

Hours later, lying in her bed, she replayed the conversation over and over in her mind. She twisted restlessly, still wanting them. Her traitorous body remembered all too well how much pleasure they could give her and demanded more.

But it wasn't only physical. She wanted to be close to them, fall asleep to the sounds of their heartbeats and steady breathing. She wanted to be in their arms and sleep surrounded by their warmth.

Oh God, she'd really fallen for them. Knowing they would break her heart when they left didn't seem to matter.

She leaned up and punched her pillow again, which was possible only because she'd left her gun in the drawer of the nightstand. With Joe and Colt in the house, she didn't need it. Knowing one of them would still be awake, she tried to be as quiet as possible as she settled back, closing her eyes and willing herself to sleep.

* * * *

The day had warmed considerably, melting a lot of the snow and in some places, she could see the grass again. She'd just finished cleaning up from breakfast when she saw Bob and Sam coming across the ridge. She turned to Joe and Colt still sitting at the table, drinking their coffee. "Looks like Bob and Sam found their hunters."

Joe stood and moved in behind her, looking out the window himself. "Yeah, it looks like you're right. We'll go take care of the horses."

Dakota had been holding her breath since he'd come up behind her. The heat of his chest against her shoulder and the erection pressing into her hip caused a flutter in her stomach. Without thinking, she leaned into him, closing her eyes as his arms came around her. Breathing in his scent, she sighed. She hadn't known just how much she'd needed this.

His lips brushed her hair as his hand slid over her bottom. His other hand slid up to cup a breast, running his thumb over her pebbled nipple. "The next time you can't sleep because you're aroused, or because you're lonely, come to us and we'll take care of you."

At her gasp, he lightly pinched her nipple. "You tossed and turned all night. We'll go see to the horses. Then we'll be back to take care of you."

When he moved away, Colt came up behind her and slid his arms around her waist, pressing his erection into the small of her back. His warm breath on her ear caused a shiver. "My dick was hard all night, missing your tight pussy. Now that I've been inside you, I want more. And I sleep better with you cuddled against me." He smacked her ass as he walked away, throwing a wink over his shoulder as he followed Joe outside.

Dakota watched them go out, dragging air into her lungs. Damn, they could get to her like no man ever had. She had it bad. Slipping on her boots and coat, she started to follow them out when the phone rang. Backtracking, she went to answer it, glancing out the window, smiling as she watched them cross the yard.

"Hello?"

"Dakota, this is John. John Tillman, from the feed store."

Dakota blinked. Why the hell would Fred's son call her? "What can I do for you, John?"

"My father and I are worried about you. Word is around town that the men he sent up there to look for work are convicted murderers. I want you to know that he didn't know anything about that when he sent them up. We just wanted to help—look, we all feel bad about the

way that Big Ed's been treating you and—hell. Look, we're really sorry. About everything. And we wanted to make sure that you're all right. I can get a couple of men to come up there with me and get rid of them for you if you want."

The thought of John, or any of the other men in town trying to get rid of Joe and Colt made her smile. "That's not necessary, John. Joe and Colt are working out just fine."

"Are you sure? If you're just saying that—"

"I'm positive." Looking out the window again, she watched them deal with the horses. She saw Bob and Sam introduce them to the two hunters, who moved lethargically, obviously exhausted. "They're working out just fine."

"Have Ed's men been harassing you?"

"Of course, John. They've never stopped. If that's all, I've got work to do."

"Dakota, listen. We're all real sorry about the way we've abandoned you." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "I've called a friend of mine, who knows somebody in the FBI. I told him what's been happening around here. He said that somebody's already taking care of it. I don't know when they're going to send somebody, but I'll keep you posted."

Dakota opened and closed her mouth several times, not knowing what to say. It had been a long time, since her daddy died, that she'd even heard from most of the people in town. "What the hell is bringing on this sudden attack of caring about your neighbor? What's going on that I don't know about? Did you hear that Big Ed's going to try to kill me today or something?"

"Damn it, Dakota. No. It's nothing like that. We're just worried about you, that's all."

The last several months of not sleeping and fear for herself and her animals, and the worry her father had endured, had her fury spewing like hot lava. "Since when the hell did you start worrying about me? You and your father won't even sell me feed. I have to get

it delivered. The whole damned town has cut me off because I'm the only one here with enough balls to stand up to Ed. I could have been hurt any number of times already, and not a damned one of you would have cared. Do you know he stole my cattle? Burned down the barn? Tried to steal the horses? Put sugar in my gas tank to strand me here? He sends his men over to bug me at all hours of the night, so I can't even sleep. You and the rest of your pussy friends can go fuck yourselves."

She slammed down the phone and had just started for the back door again when the phone rang again.

Dakota snatched up the receiver. "What the hell do you want now?"

"Well isn't that a fine way to talk to your best friend?"

Dakota smiled at Jill's amused tone. "Hell, Jill, I'm sorry. John Tillman just called." She told her about it and about Ben's visit. She also explained that Joe and Colt had been in prison.

Jill remained silent as she told her everything. When she finished, Jill finally spoke. "Are you sure you can trust them? Listen, what if I come to get you and—"

"No, Jill. They've been nothing but kind to me and if anything, they're overprotective. They explained some of it to me. I know there's more to it, but they're not ready to talk about it yet. When they are, they'll tell me. I trust them. I promise you, if I need you, I'll call."

"I'm coming out there."

"Don't. Ed's already sent a couple of men. This time they had knives. I want you to stay away from here until I tell you it's safe. Promise me."

Jill sighed, and Dakota could well imagine her friend pacing back and forth in her kitchen. "Okay. Okay. But only if you promise me something. You promise to call me if you get the tiniest feeling that something's wrong."

Dakota smiled. "I promise. Thanks, Jill. I love you, you know."

"I love you, too. I mean it. You call me. You know what? I'm

going to call every day to check on you. Oh, and Dakota?”

“What?”

“If John Tillman decides to get some men together and come out there to kick Joe and Colt off the place, you call me.”

Dakota frowned into the phone. “Why?”

“Are you kidding? I’d pay big money to see that. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Shaking her head, Dakota replaced the receiver. She just hoped Jill kept her promise and stayed away. Starting for the back door again, she heard a noise from out front.

What now?

A glance at the window over the kitchen sink showed her that the six men were all still talking. Joe and Colt took the horses into the stable as soon as Bob and Sam unloaded their gear. Walking through the living room, she looked out to see Lenny and Buck get out of Lenny’s new truck. She headed out, in the perfect mood to deal with them.

* * * *

Hearing the sound of a vehicle pulling in out front, Joe gave the reins of the last horse to Colt. “Take care of him. I’m going out front. We have company.”

He started for the front of the house, aware of the men behind him, but ignoring them. His main concern was for Dakota. He heard her voice raised in anger and started to run. At the crack of a blow, he put on a burst of speed and heard a muffled cry as he raced around the corner of the house. Seeing red that someone would dare hit her, he ran to her, looking for injuries, keeping an eye on the other two men.

He came to an abrupt halt between her and the men, one of whom lay on the ground with a bloody nose. He shot her a glance. “You okay?”

She nodded. “Fine. Get out of my way.”

Joe had recognized Buck as soon as he'd turned the corner and now turned to face him fully. He didn't say a word, just raised a brow as Buck continued to stare at him.

The years hadn't been kind to Big Ed's foreman and right hand man. Buck's stomach hung over his belt buckle and his face had gone soft and flabby from too much drink and not enough work. He'd taken a step toward Dakota but had backed off when Joe stepped between them.

Buck tried his best to look tough, but failed miserably. "You one of them convicts everybody's talkin' about?"

Joe allowed his lips to curve slightly. "Yes." He looked at the other man who scrambled to his feet, holding a handkerchief to his bloody nose. He purposely kept his tone cool, his expression amused, hiding his burning rage. "Looks like you have everything under control, Dakota."

The man got up and swiped at his nose again and tried, unsuccessfully, to sidestep Joe. "You hit me! What the fuck is this Dakota? You're my woman. What are you doing, letting two ex-cons live here with you? Get rid of them, Dakota. I mean it."

Dakota laughed. "I'm not your woman, you slimy worm. When Ed bought you off, you were in such a hurry to run over to him, you left a trail of dust. Get off my property before I pop you again."

"What the hell's going on here?"

Joe didn't even turn at Bob's question. "Nothing much. Just a couple of bullies trying to bother Dakota."

Out of the corner of his eye, Joe saw Bob share a look with Sam, drop his gear and start toward them. "Is that a fact?"

Joe kept his gaze on the two men standing in front of him, shifting his weight as Dakota squared off with the younger man. He put out a hand to keep the older men back. "We've got it, Bob. Thanks."

Neither Bob nor Sam paid any attention and stepped closer. Sam gestured toward Buck. "Ain't that Big Ed's foreman?"

Joe nodded. "I believe so." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw

Colt approach. Buck's eyes widened when he saw Colt, who moved past them to stand on the other side of Dakota. Joe bared his teeth. "Who's this guy, Dakota? The one that thinks you're his woman."

Dakota shook her head in disgust. "I was. He took Ed's payoff and went to work for him. His name's Lenny."

Joe looked over the younger man and wondered what the hell Dakota had seen in him. Except for the blood covering the front of his shirt, he looked crisp and pressed. Even his boots had a shine to them. Lenny was obviously no working cowboy. The green fist of jealousy grabbed him by the throat, and he fought to breathe normally as his blood boiled.

It was none of his business, he reminded himself.

Like hell.

Lenny moved forward, only to back off when Dakota balled her hand into a fist. "Dakota, honey, it's not like that." He glanced at Buck, frowning, obviously confused at the way Buck kept staring at both him and Colt. "Why don't you just sell to Big Ed? We can buy a house in Dallas or Houston, you know, the city."

Dakota laughed. "Let me get this straight. You want to use *my* money to buy a house for us in the city? I hate cities and I hate you."

Colt grinned. "That pretty much shoots that plan out of the water. Besides, if you want Dakota, you're going to have to go through us to get her."

Lenny looked from one to the other and then back at Dakota. "Both of them, Dakota? No wonder you never liked sex. You need two men. You're a fucking whore."

The word had barely left his mouth before Joe's fist shot out, clipping him in the jaw and knocking him cold. He turned to Buck. "Get this piece of shit off Dakota's land."

Buck didn't even glance at Lenny. "What's your names?"

Joe bared his teeth. "You know our names, Buck. Tell *Big Ed* we said 'Hi'."

Chapter Eight

Dakota waited until Bob, Sam and the bedraggled hunters left before turning to Colt. She knew it would be easier to get an answer from him than from Joe. “Buck looked like he was surprised as hell to see both of you. How do you know him?”

Colt slid a glance at Joe, who had already turned away to walk back to the stable. “Just a ghost from the past, Dakota. Let it go. We have to go take care of the horses.”

Dakota started after him, his long strides eating up the ground and forcing her to practically run to keep up with him. “Damn it. I want to know what’s going on.”

Colt didn’t even glance at her. “You hired us to take care of things around here. I’ve already told you too much, but I didn’t want you to be afraid either of us would hurt you. Just let it go, Dakota.”

“But I—”

Colt stopped and whirled on her. “No!” He stopped and scrubbed a hand over his face and took several calming breaths. “Look, Joe and I appreciate that you’ve given us a place to stay. We’re attracted to you. A lot. We really like you. A lot. We want you. A hell of a lot. But we can’t tell you anything else. We’ll do what we can to help you around here. That’s it. Leave it alone.”

The misery on his face startled her. Without thinking, she reached out to cup his cheek. “Why? What aren’t you telling me?”

Colt stared at her for several long moments, his eyes bleak. He reached out to tuck a wayward strand of hair behind her ear before shaking his head and turning away. “Let it go, Dakota.”

Dakota followed him into the stable and went to deal with her

own horse, glaring at Joe as he unsaddled Stunner. “Why don’t I let both of *you* go? If you’re going to leave, leave!”

Turning her back to both of them, she took care of settling her horse as Joe fed all of them. Beauty, sensing her mood, grew restless, so she forced herself to calm down. By the time they finished, Dakota’s mood had turned from angry and hurt to just depressed. She couldn’t help but follow their movements as they finished and walked out of the stable. Her stomach knotted. Were they, right now, going inside to pack their things?

It didn’t matter. She’d done fine without them before, and she would do fine without them again.

But as she wandered the stable, dreading walking back to the empty house, she knew she lied to herself. She’d never met men who she could respect, who stood tall and behaved like men, not like little boys who only thought about themselves. Not like Lenny, who only thought about the next good time to be had.

Her heart bled for the boys they’d been and yearned for the men they’d become. Fate must be laughing its ass off at her right now. She doesn’t fall for one man, oh no, not her. She falls for two. And she can’t have either one of them.

She had to stop thinking about them. So what if they were the type of men she thought no longer existed. So what if they turned her inside out. She didn’t need any more complications in her life, and if they wanted to leave, it would be better if they did it now before she could fall even harder for them.

Walking back to the house, she looked up toward Big Ed’s place. Shading her eyes, she watched as two men sat on their horses, looking over in her direction. From this distance she couldn’t be sure, but it looked like Buck and Big Ed himself. She raised her hand high and gave them the finger.

Walking to the house, she sped up when she heard the phone ring. Racing inside, she answered, “Hello.”

“Dakota, it’s Ben. Be careful. Something’s going on between Ed

and the sheriff. A lot of hush hush phone calls. The sheriff finally left to go out there. Do you know what's going on?"

Hearing sounds from out front, Dakota went to the window to see Joe and Colt working on the front porch. She grinned, not realizing how tense she'd been until then. "I have no idea, Ben. All I can tell you is that when Lenny and Buck came over a little while ago, Bob and Sam were still here. Also, it looked like maybe Buck knew Joe and Colt, but neither one of them would tell me anything."

"Damn it, Dakota! Why don't you kick them out? They're trouble, Dakota. I mean it. Get rid of them."

Dakota's temper snapped. "I'm tired of people trying to tell me what to do. They're helping me out, Ben, when everyone else turned their backs on me. And I don't need you or anyone else to try to tell me how to run my ranch." She slammed the phone down and began to pace the kitchen.

She'd had enough of this. Enough of Ed. Enough of the worry about her ranch. Enough of doing nothing about it except surviving and worrying. Enough of those damned cowboys out front turning her inside out. She wouldn't cower. She would take care of Ed on her own. If Joe and Colt wanted to leave, they could leave. She didn't need anybody.

Grabbing her pistol and her shotgun, Dakota went back out to the stable. She saddled her own horse, her movements jerky, and she found herself apologizing to Beauty more than once.

"What are you doing?"

Dakota spun at the Joe's cool tone. "None of your business. I thought I told you to leave." She gathered the reins, ignoring him.

Joe stepped forward and took the reins out of her hands. "I asked you a question."

Dakota tried unsuccessfully to get the reins back. Furious, she shoved him, and it only pissed her off even more when he didn't budge at all. "I'm doing what I should have done a long time ago. I'm going to Ed's and having it out with him."

Joe dropped the reins and moved toward her. “No. You’re not.”

A red haze filled her vision. She couldn’t remember ever being so enraged. “What? You’re not going to tell me what to do! Who the hell do you think you are?”

Colt walked into the stable. His brows went up but he didn’t say a word as he took the reins, led her horse away, and calmly began to unsaddle her.

“Don’t you dare. Leave Beauty alone. I’m going over there, and you two are leaving.”

Joe shook his head. “Wrong on both counts.”

Dakota saw the dark intent in his eyes as he closed in on her but couldn’t move fast enough to avoid him. He bent and put his shoulder into her stomach and lifted her as easily as he lifted the feed.

“Damn you. Put me down.”

She kicked. She punched his back. She wiggled. But she couldn’t get away. When a hard slap landed on her ass, it surprised her enough to render her immobile. “You hit me.”

“I slapped your ass. Stop fighting me. You’re not going anywhere. You’re going to stay right here where Colt and I can keep an eye on you.”

“Keep an eye on me? Put me down, you jerk. I’m the boss here, and don’t you forget it.”

“Yes ma’am, you are. And it’s our responsibility to make sure that you don’t get hurt.”

Dakota punched his ass, both irritated and intrigued to find it firm and muscular. “I didn’t hire a bodyguard, damn it. Put me down.” A firm hand over her legs kept her from doing the damage she wanted to do. Bouncing on his shoulder, she got a firm grip on his belt and bit his back.

Several sharp slaps landed and she bit him harder as he walked into the house. Walking straight to her bedroom, he pushed a hand between her thighs, making her gasp in surprise. As soon as she released him, he tossed her onto her bed and rolled her to her

stomach.

“What do you think you’re doing? Let me up!”

Lying half on top of her, he held her down by half lying on her back and throwing a heavy leg over hers.

Then he started spanking her.

“What are you doing? You can’t spank me. Ow. Stop it. Even my daddy never spanked me.”

“That’s obvious,” Joe replied dryly and smacked her ass again. “Are you going to stay on the ranch until we can deal with your neighbor?”

Furious at both his high handedness and the fact that having her ass spanked was turning her on, she fought him with everything she had. “You have no fucking right to tell me, ow, damn you. Let me up. You’re fired. Get out.”

“No. Are you going to be a good girl and let Colt and I deal with Ed?”

Dakota railed at him. She screamed. She threatened. She tried to escape but couldn’t move at all. Her ass burned, but not altogether unpleasantly, and the heat rapidly spread to her pussy. Her panties had become soaked and she found herself lifting into his heated smacks and trying to rub herself on the bed to get relief.

When she heard Colt walk into the room, it only got worse.

“Well, well, what do we have here?”

Joe paused, running his hand over her bottom. “She wants to go to Ed’s and fight it out. I’m convincing her that it might not be such a good idea.”

“The horses are taken care of, and the doors are locked. How about if I help you?”

Dakota panicked at the dark intention in Joe’s voice and the almost playful threat in Colt’s. Joe’s legs moved off of hers as Colt straddled her and she began to fight again. Lust gripped her by the throat when she felt Colt reach under her to undo her jeans. “Get off of me. Get out. You’re both fired. I don’t want you here anymore.”

Colt chuckled and shifted down her body to remove her boots. “Wound up some, isn’t she?”

Dakota struggled as Colt began lowering her jeans. “Stop it. Leave me alone.”

He didn’t stop until her jeans and panties had been lowered to her knees. “There. That’s much better.”

Joe rolled toward her, his lips warm against her ear. “You’re not going to go to Ed’s. You’re going to let us handle it and when we do, you’re going to stay out of it. Right?”

Dakota shuddered when he ran a threatening hand over her now naked bottom. “Joe, I can take care of it myself. I should have gone over there before. I’m mad at myself because I didn’t.”

His hand slid between her thighs. “You don’t know what you’re getting into. Just stay out of it, and let Colt and me handle it.”

Because of the jeans twisted around her knees, she couldn’t spread her legs the way she wanted to. “Joe, please.”

“Please what? Please don’t spank you anymore. Ahh, you’re all wet, Dakota. I think you like having your ass spanked.”

Dakota couldn’t lie still as the heat from her bottom spread, and Joe’s talented fingers slid through her juices. When he rolled her onto her back, she pulled his head down until their lips touched.

Heat rolled through her, sending her head spinning.

He lifted his head to look down at her, his eyes dark. “I want you. Do you want this?”

She was already pulling her shirt over her head. “God. Yes.”

Joe got rid of her bra while Colt slid her jeans and panties down her legs and off. She moaned, arching when Joe slid a hand over her breasts. The way he watched her as he made love to her heated her blood even more.

Her pussy clenched as Colt spread her thighs and moved between them. His hands slid under her bottom, heating it even more as he raised her slightly and lowered his mouth to her slit. The first swipe of his tongue had her crying out. Her cries and moans mingled as Joe’s

hand slid under her hair and lifted her, covering her mouth with his as he cupped a breast.

He pinched her nipple between strokes, lightly at first, his pinches growing steadily more forceful. When he lifted his head to stare down at her, his eyes glittered with dark intent as he pinched both nipples none too gently. “You like it a little rough, don’t you, baby?”

Dakota couldn’t answer as Colt slid a thick finger inside her at the same time he sucked her clit. Hard. She screamed, the overwhelming pleasure tightening her body and making her arch off of the bed. The mouth on her slit eased its torment, changing to soft little licks as she fought to drag air into her lungs.

Joe brushed his lips over her jaw. “I’ll take that as a yes.” Cupping a hand around the back of her head, he lifted her again, watching her face as she began to come down. “I love watching you come. I’ll have to paddle your ass more often.”

Dakota’s breathing still came out raggedly when she fisted a hand in his shirt. “Try it, cowboy and I’ll—”

Colt moved and flipped her before she could finish and another sharp slap landed. “You were saying?”

Dakota writhed under their hands. Shivers ran through her as Joe fisted her hair and pulled her head aside to nibble at her neck. “Damn you both. If you think you can get your way with, ah, oh God, with, um, sex, hell, I can’t think when you do that.”

Joe chuckled as his finger slipped into her pussy. “You still have a lot of mad to get rid of, don’t you, honey? Let’s see what Colt and I can do about that. Colt, go get that oil.” He covered her legs again with his own when Colt released them, rendering her struggles useless. “If you want it a little rough, we’ll have to see what we can do to give it to you. If it hurts, we’ll stop, Dakota.”

With his weight holding her down, Dakota couldn’t move. But instead of panicking, her struggles against his superior strength turned her on even more. She shuddered when oil drizzled down the crease of her bottom. “I can take anything you can dish out, cowboy.”

Joe nipped her shoulder. “Yes, ma’am. I’m sure you can.” With that, a thick finger pressed against her most forbidden opening, and with the oil easing the way, it slid deep.

Dakota gripped handfuls of the bedding as she panted. Shivers ran through her as every nerve ending surrounding the thick finger came to life. She froze, struggling to adapt to the feelings his far too intimate touch inspired.

Lust. Trepidation. Curiosity. Uncertainty. And to her tremendous amazement, submission.

Her need to submit to their demands, her need to experience the sensations their touch created, her need to surrender to their strength stunned her. She wanted desperately to belong to them, even for a little while. The promise of pleasure in giving herself over to not one, but two strong men, made the decision easy.

She would take whatever they would give her for as long as they stayed.

Colt, now naked, lay next to her as Joe moved between her thighs, parting them.

Sliding a hand beneath her abdomen, Joe lifted her slightly and began stroking her anus, slow, deep strokes that wiped away all inhibitions. Trembling helplessly now, she found herself rising into them. Her entire focus came down to Joe’s invasion of her bottom.

Colt ran his fingers over her back, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. Reaching beneath her, he caught a nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “You are so incredibly hot,” he murmured, pinching her nipple more firmly.

Dakota gasped and rose even more, giving both men better access. “What are you doing to me?”

Colt shifted on the bed. He lifted her to slide under her, lifting her arms over his thighs as he settled her on top of him until her face was now only inches from his cock. Mesmerized by the sight of the large, plum-sized head, she traced her finger over it. When a drop appeared, she stuck out her tongue to lick it off, moaning as the finger in her

bottom withdrew. Colt's groan rumbled through her, traveling all the way to her pussy. It clenched desperately, empty and needing to be filled.

Joe chuckled, a sound that was like music to her ears. In the bedroom at least, they both relaxed their guard with her, and she felt closer to them than ever. "Now I'm going to work two fingers into you, Dakota, then three. You're awfully tight, honey. It's going to hurt a little. Whenever you want me to stop, just say the word, okay."

Dakota shivered as more of the oil drizzled over her. "I want this, but I'm scared. Will it hurt a lot?"

Colt fistled her hair with one hand, and with the other began stroking his cock. When she tried to open her mouth over it, he tightened his grip to pull her back, sending a flare of heat through her. "It will pinch as he stretches that pretty little rosebud, then it will burn. Joe's going to use a lot of oil. But I promise you, you're going to come like never before."

Dakota believed him. Already her body was on its way to another release.

Colt loosened his grip on her hair. "Honey, I'm dying to feel your tongue on my cock."

"Let go of my hair, damn you, and let me have it then."

Colt's short laugh sounded tortured. "You were about to dive on it and I want this to last. Nice and easy."

Dakota tried to sneer at him but knew she failed miserably. Joe had poised two fingers now at her tight opening, working more of the oil into her. "Pussy."

With the grip he had on her hair, Colt turned her head, forcing her to look up at him. "Did you call me a pussy? You really want it rougher, don't you honey?"

Almost mindless with need, Dakota leaned down and bit his thigh. "Stop babying me. Are you going to fuck me or not?"

A sharp slap landed on her bottom and a split second later, two large fingers pushed into her anus. Joe rubbed her ass, spreading the

heat once again. “Let’s see how tough you are, little girl.”

Dakota’s cries became muffled when Colt lowered her head onto his cock. She opened wide immediately, wanting to make him as wild as she felt. Her cries mingled with moans, hers and Colt’s. Colt pinched her nipple again as Joe continued his demonic stroking. The burn, the feeling of being stretched and invaded like never before made her clench on him, making the burn even hotter.

Needing to learn every bump and texture, every spot that drove him wild, Dakota tried hard to concentrate on Colt, but Joe’s tight grip on her hip and his erotic invasion drove every other thought from her mind. Instinct and need controlled her actions as she took Colt’s thick shaft as far into her throat as she could. Sucking him deep, she ran her tongue over the underside, thrilling at the groans she drew from him.

“Now three fingers, Dakota,” Joe warned, his voice deep and tight, as though he spoke through clenched teeth.

She moaned around the cock in her mouth as Joe pressed his fingers inside her, the burn stealing her breath. Colt caressed her hair and released her nipple to stroke her jaw. “Let go, Dakota. I don’t want to come until Joe works his cock up your ass.”

The hand on her cheek moved to his cock and pulled it away from her lips. “You’re too fucking good at that. Damn.”

Joe ran his hand over her bottom, delivering small slaps all over it. “She took three fingers. She still tight, but I’ve got her oiled up good. Hang onto her.”

His slaps had effectively reignited the heat on her bottom, which spread quickly. When Joe slid his fingers from her bottom, she clenched uselessly, crying out in protest. “Oh God. What have you done to me? I need it.”

Colt turned her face back up again from where she’d buried it against his thigh. “I want to watch your face while Joe takes your ass.”

He continued to stroke her jaw as Joe began to press into her. It

felt different, the invasion more penetrating, the act more dominant than just using his fingers.

Dakota felt as though she'd been drugged, her senses struggling to catch up as she tried to accommodate him, needing him to fill her. His cock pressed forward, and she cried out when the head broke through the tight ring of muscle at her entrance. "Joe, oh it feels so, ahh, it burns."

He froze, not pressing any further. "Do you need me to stop?"

Colt touched his finger to her lips. "It's going to feel so good, baby. I promise."

Joe started to withdraw. "If it hurts her—"

Dakota pressed back onto him. "I want you to take me, damn you. I have to come. I'm just scared. It's too much."

Joe's hands tightened on her hips. "You want your ass filled, honey?"

She writhed, trying to move on him and at the same time trying to pull away. "Don't let me stop. Help me do this. Oh God, I can't wait. I have to come." Letting Colt take her weight, she reached for her clit, cursing like a ranch hand when Colt grabbed her hand to stop her.

"No, you don't, darlin'. You're not coming until Joe's inside that ass."

Dakota fought him, desperate to reach her clit, even as Joe pushed forward, inch by inch, stroking shallowly. Each stroke took him further inside her, burning her and sending a riot of sensation throughout her lower body. Pulse after pulse of mini orgasms shot through her, making her clench on Joe's thickness and burning her even more.

"Oh God. Oh God. It's too big. Help me. I want it."

Joe's grip on her hips tightened. "You can take me, Dakota. Suck Colt's cock and I'll make you come real good."

Dakota eagerly reached for Colt's thick shaft only inches away. Already she craved the taste of him again and wanted to hear those deep groans and bit off curses that told her just how strongly she

affected him. When those delicious noises came from both of them, it worked like an aphrodisiac, taking her even higher.

They bombarded her senses with so many erotic sensations at once, she simply had no defenses left. Joe's strokes worked his length deep inside her, finally burying himself to the hilt in her bottom.

She felt taken as never before. Submitting to them had somehow given her a feeling of power. The sounds coming from both men became louder and increasingly more desperate, thrilling her even more.

"That mouth, Jesus. I'm gonna come, Dakota. Let go."

Dakota gripped Colt's thighs more firmly to stop him from pulling away. Her bottom clenched on Joe's cock, and she felt the intense wave of release hit her just as Colt's cock pulsed, splashing his seed down her throat.

She barely remembered to swallow as the intensity of her own orgasm stole her breath. She'd never felt anything like it before. Joe held himself deep inside her, his hand covering her mound as his fingers moved on her clit.

Colt withdrew from her mouth, his hands running over her back as she came yet again. This orgasm, though not as intense, proved more devastating on her already battered system.

Minutes later, they dropped on the bed on either side of her. Drowsily, she snuggled into them. Joe got up and she protested when he wiped a damp cloth over her bottom and Colt lifted her into his arms. "I don't wanna go anywhere."

Colt kissed her softly. "Joe's just pulling down the quilt. Go to sleep, baby."

That was the last thing she heard.

When she woke an hour later, both men had gathered supplies from the storage room in the back and were in the process of repairing her front porch. As she prepared dinner, her mind kept replaying the feeling of incredible closeness she'd had with them earlier.

She'd never felt so close to anyone before and was determined to

make the most of the time she had left with them.

* * * *

As they sat down to a dinner of fried chicken and mashed potatoes, Dakota watched both men from beneath her lashes. Although they both seemed a little too quiet, they looked more relaxed since their lovemaking.

She hadn't been able to play for years before they'd arrived. She'd had a lot of responsibility thrust on her and took it seriously. When her daddy died, she'd turned to Lenny. His reluctance to take things seriously meant that she'd had to.

With Joe and Colt it was very different. They took everything too seriously. It freed her from some of the worry and induced her to play, to make them forget about everything else and just have some fun.

Watching as they ate, slower now in deference to her, she smiled to herself. Knowing they'd been in prison, she now understood why they'd eaten so fast. Now they took their time. "How do you two know Buck?"

Both tensed and glanced at each other before looking back down at their plates. Colt shook his head. "Leave it alone, Dakota."

She didn't push, not wanting them to retreat again. Lifting a chicken leg, she tried to appear innocent. "You two are eating like you've worked up an appetite. Did you do anything special?"

Colt's grin nearly stole her breath. "Yes, ma'am. A filly gave us a little trouble."

Dakota nearly choked on her chicken. "Really? What kind of trouble?"

Joe's eyes twinkled playfully. "She's spirited and headstrong. Had to rein her in for her own good."

Dakota took a sip of iced tea. "You break her?"

Joe shook his head. "Don't want her broken. I like spirit."

Dakota's insides quivered at the playful look on their faces.

Placing the chicken leg back on her plate, she slowly began to lick her fingers. “If you can handle spirit, why’d you have so much trouble? Hmm, maybe more spirit than you guys can handle?”

Colt paused with a forkful of mashed potatoes halfway to his mouth. “Oh, she wasn’t that much trouble. We just worked up an appetite reining her in.”

Both Joe and Colt stared at her mouth when she continued to lick her fingers.

She took her time, licking her lips repeatedly. “Reining her in, huh? What if she doesn’t like being reined in?”

Joe reached over and gripped her wrist, bringing her hand to his mouth. Taking her index finger inside, he circled his tongue all around it.

Dakota’s breathing grew harsher as he caressed it with short flicks of his tongue. Remembering what that same action felt like on her clit had it throbbing in response.

Colt leaned forward. “She has to be reined in sometimes for her own good. And I think she liked it just fine.”

Dakota struggled to remember what they’d been talking about. Pulling her hand away from Joe, she reached for her iced tea. “Just because I had an orgasm doesn’t mean you reined me in. You got lucky. Don’t think it’ll be so easy next time.”

Joe picked up his piece of chicken. “We definitely got lucky. Every time we get you naked, we learn more of your sensitive spots. It’ll get easier every time.”

Dakota pouted, more than a little turned on by their playful banter. “That’s not fair. You don’t give me a chance to find yours. One of these days I’m going to get you helpless and torture you. Slowly.”

Both men grinned. Colt wrapped a hand around her neck and pulled her close for a kiss. “I can’t wait. Then maybe Joe and I will do the same to you.”

Dakota tangled her fingers in his hair. “You already do. Two against one is not fair.”

Colt grinned, releasing her. “Life’s a bitch, huh?”

Later that night, she lay cuddled against Joe, his arms wrapped around her and holding her close. Colt had been with her until just a little while ago, but had gotten up to relieve Joe. Smiling into the darkness, she cuddled closer. Colt had also held her close while he’d lain next to her. She wondered what would happen when she finally got a chance to sleep with both of them.

Smiling at the thought of being the object of a tug-of-war, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Dakota smiled as she looked out the window. Joe had taken off his shirt to chop wood, and she stood there enjoying the show. Watching the play of muscle as he worked, she felt the spark of need ignite inside her. She'd been surprised at how muscular they both were. Since she'd learned that they'd started lifting weights in prison in order to survive, she'd quickly dropped the subject.

She hadn't mentioned it again, except to tell them both just how much she got turned on watching their incredible muscles bunch and shift as they moved. She bit into them during sex and held onto them tightly. Hopefully now, they thought of the pleasure she got from their strength and not the necessity for it. Watching Joe chop wood, her eyes slid to where Colt walked back to get another load. He too, had removed his shirt in deference to the warm day and the physical labor. Her nipples tightened in anticipation and little butterflies made her stomach quiver. Hmm, perhaps it was time to check out those muscles again.

It had been more than two weeks since any of Ed's men had come over. Jill called every day, chomping at the bit to visit, but so far Dakota had held her off. Joe and Colt had taken turns taking her to the next town for supplies, with one of them always standing guard at the ranch. Over her protests, they'd bought supplies themselves. She had no idea where they got the money, and when she mentioned it, they'd clammed up.

Each day she felt a little closer to them than the day before, but there were still shadows in their eyes and a lot of things they wouldn't discuss with her. She got a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach every

time she thought about it. One day it would all come to a head, and she would have to deal with whatever secrets they hid.

She knew they couldn't go on this way much longer and wondered what it would take to get them to open up to her. She didn't press. She finally admitted to herself that fear kept her from asking too many questions. Knowing what they had was still too fragile to withstand it, she'd backed off. She knew damned well she acted cowardly by putting it off, but fear of losing them kept her silent, hoping they would one day feel they could tell her.

Drying her hands, she walked out the back door and toward them. At least they no longer spoke about leaving. At times when they became distant, she knew they thought about it.

She left the house, not even glancing next door. All of her attention remained focused on the prime specimens in front of her. Colt passed her on the way to stack firewood, bending down to give her a light kiss as he went by. "Hey, honey."

Joe paused in his chopping when he saw her approach and smiled at her. His smiles came more frequently now, but they were still rare enough to bring tears to her eyes. "Hi."

"Hi yourself. I've been watching out the window."

Joe sobered and gestured toward her neighbor's ranch. "I haven't seen Ed or any of his men staring over this way. The sheriff just went up again."

Dakota raised a brow. "What's that, six times in the last two weeks? Something must be going on. And how do you know you haven't seen Ed? Do you know what he looks like?"

Joe turned away to pick up another log. "I haven't seen anyone except the men we see every day."

Ice formed in her stomach at how deftly he avoided the question. Neither one of them lied to her but both could be evasive as hell. The fact that they wouldn't come right out and lie to her though, told her that her instincts about them had been right after all. Men like Joe and Colt had become rare in her world.

Noticing how quiet he'd become, Dakota circled around him, enjoying the close up view of all those rippling muscles. "Don't you think it's a little strange that nobody's been over for two weeks now? Do you think he's given up?"

The axe came down, chopping the log in two. Joe picked up both pieces and threw them aside. "Nope."

Dakota glanced over at Ed's to see several of the ranch hands working with the horses, but she didn't see Ed at all. "What do you think he's doing then?"

The axe came down on another log. "Planning."

Damn it. Every mention of Big Ed made him distant again. Dakota vowed to fix that. She sauntered over to him and waited for him to bend to pick up another log. When he did, she patted his ass. "I wasn't looking out the window to see what Ed was up to. I happened to glance outside and saw two fine looking cowboys cutting firewood. No shirts. Nice rippling muscles." She walked back and forth behind him, running a hand over his back and shoulders with each pass.

He'd straightened, glancing at her over his shoulder. "Did you now?"

"I did. Couldn't look away. But then I thought, why am I standing there at the window when I could come out and see them both close up? Maybe get a little feel." With that, she squeezed a bicep. "Yes, all those muscles sure do turn a girl's head. Gives her crazy ideas."

Joe's lips twitched. "What sort of ideas?"

Pleased to see that the bulge in his jeans grew as she moved to stand in front of him, she struggled to keep her face bland. "I don't know. All sorts of ideas. Like, what it feels like to mount a cowboy with muscles like that and hold onto them as you go for a ride. Or what it feels like to bite down on them when he's stroking his big, thick cock inside you. Or—Oof."

Dakota's breath left her lungs as he bent, hauled her over his shoulder and headed for the house. She started laughing as he strode across the yard with her, his hand possessively over her bottom. "Put

me down, you big oaf. I haven't finished telling you my ideas."

Joe slid his hand over her bottom again. "That's all right. I have a few of my own."

She heard Colt's chuckle, but couldn't see him.

"What's up?"

Joe kept walking. "Dakota saw us out here working and has some ideas, something about muscles and riding thick cocks."

Colt came around Joe's back and pulled the hair away from her face. "Is that a fact? Well, I guess we'd better keep the boss happy."

Dakota's heart leapt. She felt almost dizzy, not just from being over Joe's shoulder, but from the lighthearted banter. It was fun to play, something she'd almost forgotten how to do. The satisfaction she got at pulling them out of their remoteness, even for little spurts, made it even better.

Joe walked into the house with her and didn't stop until he reached the bedroom. Tossing her onto the bed, he stood with his hands on his hips and looked down at her. "Now, let's see. Where should we start?" He'd just bent to reach for her when there was a loud banging at the front door.

Dakota scrambled off the bed and automatically reached for the gun in her nightstand. "Who the hell could that be?"

Joe and Colt had already started out of the room, all trace of amusement gone. Colt looked over his shoulder. "Stay here."

"Like hell." She started out after them. If someone wanted to cause trouble, she doubted they'd knock at the door, but her stomach tightened as the banging continued.

"Dakota, damn it, open the fucking door!"

Dakota walked into the living room just in time to see Joe open the door. Ben ran into the house and started toward her, brought up short when Joe and Colt grabbed his arms.

"Let go of me, damn it. I've got to talk to Dakota."

Dakota looked on, shocked as Ben broke their hold and started toward her. The look of surprise on both men's faces might have been

funny in other circumstances. She put out a hand to hold Joe and Colt off when they both started toward Ben again. “What is it, Ben? What’s got you so worked up?”

He gripped her arms, his face harder than she’d ever seen it before. “Listen, I don’t know what the hell’s going on, but there’s a lot you don’t know. Ed and the sheriff are planning something, and it’s going down today. I don’t know what it is, but you need to get the hell out of here. Trust me, Dakota. All of this will be over today. Then you can have your life back.”

To her utter amazement, he reached out to stroke her cheek, his eyes fierce with emotion. “I promise nothing will happen to you. After today you’ll know everything. Just come with me. I’ll take you to my place. I’ll come and get you when it’s over.”

Joe grabbed his arm and jerked him away from her. “Like hell.”

Ben shook off his hold. “You’re only going to make more trouble for her, and she’s had enough.”

Dakota jumped between them as Colt raised his fist. “Stop it right now. All of you.” She turned to Ben. “I’m not going anywhere. This is my ranch, and I’m not about to leave it. What the hell makes you think I would? If I wanted to leave, I would have done it before now. What the hell’s going on? What makes you think something’s going to happen today?”

Ben kept one eye on Joe and Colt. “The sheriff tried to send me on some lame errand to get rid of me today. He thinks I’ve left town. I put my truck around the side of the house so no one would see it. I’ve called in some people and they’re going to surround the house, if they’re not there already. You probably won’t see them. But I want you to know that you’re not alone in this.”

Seeing the rage in Joe and Colt’s eyes, she shook off Ben’s hand. “I’ve got my guns, and my aim is real good. I can take care of Ed and his men if they show up.”

“I don’t want you shooting anybody. You’ll probably hit one of my men by mistake.”

Dakota went to the window and looked out but couldn't see anyone. "Ben, you're not making any sense. What men? Where are they from?"

Ben sighed and moved to stand in front of her. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his wallet and flipped it open to show her. "I'm FBI, Dakota. We've been watching Fairview for almost two years, trying to get proof. Ed and the sheriff along with several of Ed's men will be arrested today."

Dakota spun and jabbed Ben in the chest. "Are you fucking kidding me? All this time I've been dealing with Ed with no help, and the FBI knew about it all along and did nothing? The stress from dealing with him killed my father. And you did nothing!"

Ben ran a hand through his hair. "Damn it, Dakota. I couldn't tell you."

Furious, Dakota moved away from him. "That's why you came here, isn't it? You took the job to watch Ed. How did you know? Even the state police wouldn't believe me. Everyone they questioned called me a liar."

Ben shot a look at Joe and Colt. "They hired a private detective when they got out of prison. He called us when they left town. Evidently, he was intrigued enough to keep digging. When we heard his story, so were we. The deputy that was here before has been relocated so that I could take his position. The bureau made sure no one else applied for the job. We've been building a case against Ed ever since but haven't been able to get close enough. Fred and John Tillman also started feeding the bureau information several months ago. But these two are the key. Ed's been in a panic ever since they got here."

Dakota's gaze shifted to Joe and Colt, a knot forming in her stomach when she got a good look at their expressions. She'd never seen them looking so hard, so completely cold. Their eyes had darkened and glittered like ice. "What's going on? What haven't you told me, damn it. Why would you hire a private detective to

investigate Ed?”

Joe looked away. “None of it concerns you.”

She gasped at the kick to her gut. A chill went down her spine at the jagged edge in his tone. She struggled to hide the wave of hurt that washed over her, cursing herself when she felt the prick of tears. She would not fucking cry in front of them. Their expressions and tone told her more than anything else that what they’d had was over. Whatever was going on, they had their own agenda, and it didn’t include her.

Ben faced them squarely. “So you didn’t tell her? Well, that’s something, at least.”

Dakota took a deep breath, hoping to loosen the knots that had formed in her belly. So angry and hurt she could barely speak, she gritted her teeth. “Tell. Me. What?”

Before he could answer, all hell broke loose. The living room window exploded, glass flying everywhere. She found herself shoved to the floor, a hard body covering hers. Joe. Even now she knew the feel of her lover as gunfire rang out from all directions.

Chapter Ten

Dakota fought to get out from under Joe, but he held onto her firmly. “Let me up, damn it. Get the hell off me.”

“Be still and shut up.”

The shooting stopped almost as quickly as it began. Buried under Joe, she couldn't see a damned thing, but she heard a lot of yelling. “Get off of me, damn it.”

To her surprise, he did and took off toward the kitchen. Ben grabbed her wrist and helped her to stand. “Are you okay?”

Dakota shook off the glass that covered her arms. Except for a few small nicks on her hands, she'd come away unscathed. “I'm fine. What the hell happened?” She looked out the jagged glass where her front window used to be to see Ed's men being disarmed and handcuffed.

She started out the front door, and came to an abrupt halt. Joe and Colt had gone out the back. Where the hell would they have gone?

Changing direction, she headed to the kitchen and through the back door. Two men with jackets marked FBI held their guns pointed at someone around the side of her house.

“Drop your weapon.”

“Not a chance.”

Dakota felt nausea rise up in her throat when she heard Joe's refusal. “Joe? Oh God.”

Ignoring the agent's demand that she stay back, she ran around the side of the house and straight into Colt.

Grabbing her arm, he pulled her to the other side as he stood next to Joe. “Stay back, Dakota.”

Big Ed didn't look so tough at the moment. Standing with his hands up in surrender, he looked scared to death as he faced the shotgun Joe had pointed at him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the agents move closer. Breaking free of Colt's grip, she ran behind Joe and faced the agents, their blurred images the first hint that she was crying. "Please don't shoot him. Please. He won't hurt anyone, I swear. Please don't shoot."

"Ma'am, get out of the way."

She turned to face Joe's back, plastering herself against him and standing on her toes to see his face. "Joe, please don't do this. You're not a killer. Let the police deal with him."

"Colt, get her out of here. Hello, Frank. Tell her, Frank. Tell her I *am* a killer."

Ed's eyes nearly bugged out of his head. "It *is* you!" He glanced at Colt. "How did you find me? I covered all my tracks."

Colt tried to pull her away from Joe, but she held on fast. Giving up, he bared his teeth at Ed. "You covered yours, but not Buck's. We found him and there you were. Sloppy, Frank."

Still standing on her toes, Dakota watched everything from over Joe's shoulder, more scared than she'd ever been in her life. Agents, including Ben stood behind Ed, their guns drawn.

Ben took a step forward. "Frank Phillips, you're under arrest."

Dakota slid a glance at Colt. "What's he talking about? His name is Ed. Ed Franks."

Joe tensed under her hands. "Get away from him, Ben. He dies today."

Dakota wiped her eyes, struggling to keep her voice calm. Oh God. She had to get through to him. He couldn't do this. The pieces of the puzzle fell into place, and she knew how much Joe wanted to kill Ed. No matter what he believed, she knew he'd never be able to live with it. And everything they'd begun to build would be over, damaged beyond repair. "Please, Joe. Don't do this. You'll go back to

prison.”

Joe laughed humorlessly. “They can’t even arrest me, can you, Ben? You see, Dakota, Colt and I already served our sentence for killing him. Twelve long fucking years behind bars when he faked his own death. We’ve spent all our adult lives in prison because of him. We paid for it. Now we want what’s owed to us. We can kill him, and they can’t do a fucking thing about it.”

Dakota fought to remain calm while her insides twisted in agony. At least Colt had stopped trying to pull her away from Joe. But a quick glance at his features made her stomach drop. Amusement curled his lips as he watched Ed fall apart.

Tears rolled down Ed’s face as he begged Joe not to kill him. “I didn’t mean for you to go to jail. I just wanted to get away. You two were on to me and so were the McAffertys. I couldn’t hang around anymore. I had to get out and didn’t want anyone coming after me. I’ve been careful since then, got myself a fortune. Name your price. I’ll give you anything.”

Dakota looked at Ben pleadingly, tears running down her face. He gave a short nod and signaled to the other agents to wait.

“I want you dead.”

Dakota shivered at Joe’s tone and hoped like hell she could get through to him. She remembered what Colt had said. Once Joe made up his mind about something, there was no changing it. He’d proven that over and over in the last couple of weeks. Moving to his side, she never even glanced at Ed. “Joe, baby. Please don’t do this. Let Ben arrest him. He’ll go to jail for a long, long time. Make him suffer what you suffered. He’s not as strong as you. He’ll never survive it.”

Joe never took his eyes from Ed. “He can’t possibly suffer what we suffered, Dakota. He’s had a chance to live his life. We didn’t.”

Dakota ran a hand down his chest. “Live one now. You and Colt. Stay here with me. Let’s build a life together, the three of us. I love you, Joe. Both you and Colt. I think you’re both starting to love me, too. Don’t let Ed ruin what we have. Please don’t do this. You’ll

never be able to live with it.”

Colt moved up behind her and touched her hair. “We care for you, too. But we’ve dreamed about this day for twelve years, Dakota. Do you really think we’ll be able to hang around after he’s dead? The folks in this town won’t allow it.”

She looked up at him, gripping the hand that lay heavy on her shoulder. “Do you think I care about them, after the way they’ve treated me? Let’s go away. Let’s leave here and start all over somewhere else. A new beginning for all of us.”

Joe’s gaze slid to hers, his eyes moist. “He deserves to die.”

Dakota shook her head. “He deserves to suffer. Make him suffer.” With tears running down her face, she gripped both of them. “Do you remember when you came here, you said that you would do anything to be able to stay with me?”

Colt gripped her hand and looked at Joe. “Joe? I know we said—Hell, whatever you decide, I’m with you.”

Joe looked down at where Dakota gripped his arm and slid his gaze to Colt, before looking back at Frank. “Do you know how it is in prison, Frank? Can you imagine what it was like for two young boys who’d never been out of the small town they were born in?”

Ed cried pitifully now. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

Colt stiffened. “Shut the fuck up, Frank.” he turned to Joe. “Joe?”

Dakota gripped Joe desperately, shaking so hard her teeth chattered. “Joe, please don’t do this. Please, baby. Stay with me. Don’t let him ruin this for us.”

No one spoke or moved for several long moments as Dakota’s heart nearly pounded out of her chest. Tears continued to pour down her face, but she never let go of either of them and she never took her eyes off of Joe. Her entire life depended on what happened now.

When he finally lowered the gun, the wave of relief turned her knees to rubber, and she would have fallen if Colt hadn’t caught her.

Joe watched Ben handcuff the sobbing man, his eyes full of both pain and pity. They hardened when they slid to Ben. “You’d better

make sure he goes to prison for a long time.”

Colt moved away from her, pushing her into Joe’s embrace, and moved to stand in front of Ed. “If you ever get out of prison and come anywhere near us, remember that we’ve already paid for killing you. I like to get what I’ve paid for.”

Ed crumbled. “You’ll never see me again, I swear.”

Dakota kept her face buried against Joe’s chest, gripping him tightly as she tried to stop crying. He held her lightly, running his hands up and down her back as Ben and the others gathered Ed’s men. She ignored all the conversations going on around her and focused on Joe.

Joe hadn’t killed him. He’d listened to her and hadn’t killed him.

When he held her slightly away from him, she looked up at him in wonder.

The look on his face froze her tremulous smile before it could fully form. His eyes looked wild and the tortured look on his face scared the hell out of her.

“Joe? I can’t believe—”

“Colt, take care of her.”

Dakota spun to look at Colt. The surprise on his face shook her. She looked back at Joe. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Joe clenched his jaw and walked away. A moment later, they heard the roar of his pickup and watched as he sped away.

Dakota spun to face Colt. “Where’s he going? What’s wrong?”

Colt sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “Ben said he wanted to talk to us. I’ll bet Joe goes there but then he’s going to want to be alone. Letting Frank go cost him dearly, Dakota. He’s lived on his hate for that man for fifteen years. That and me are all that’s kept him going.” He pulled her against his chest, burying his fingers in her hair. “He’ll be back. He won’t leave me.”

Dakota opened her mouth but closed it again. Colt had said he wouldn’t leave him, but said nothing about Joe not leaving her.

“Dakota?”

Dakota turned at the sound of Ben's voice. "Thanks, Ben. They would have—" Her voice wobbled, and she had to swallow before continuing. "They would have shot him if you hadn't stopped them."

Some kind of silent communication passed between Colt and Ben. Colt turned his gaze to her, staring down at her for several long seconds. Without saying a word, he bent and kissed her forehead before moving several feet away.

Afraid that he would leave too, she started toward him, only to be stopped by Ben.

"Colt's not going anywhere. He knows I want a minute with you."

Dakota looked up at his handsome face wondering why she'd never felt anything more for him than friendship. Ben was a good man and, for a long time, had been the only one to help her. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Ben sighed. Waving off an agent who approached, he smiled faintly. "I wish things had turned out differently for us, Dakota. I think you know how I feel about you."

Dakota nodded sadly. "I'm sorry, Ben. You've been a good friend, especially since daddy died. I wish I could have..." She shrugged, not knowing what to say.

Ben smiled humourlessly. "So do I."

Dakota's gaze kept sliding to where Colt stood several feet away. Although he spoke to one of the agents, his eyes never left her. The emotion in them did nothing to calm her fears. Joe had looked at her that same way several times and yet had stilled walked away.

Turning away, she faced Ben again. "You're a good man. A wonderful man. What will you do now that this assignment is over?"

Ben nodded to another agent and pointed at his truck. "As soon as all the paperwork's done, I'll go back to the field office and onto the next assignment." Gripping her shoulders lightly, he bent and kissed her forehead. "Be happy, Dakota. You deserve it."

Dakota smiled through her tears. "You, too, Ben. I'm going to miss you." Watching him walk away, she felt like she'd just closed a

chapter in her life. Not knowing how the next chapter would turn out, she rubbed her arms, suddenly chilled. When Colt approached and put an arm around her, she snuggled close, staring at the spot where Joe's truck used to be and shivered.

Chapter Eleven

“Why don’t you go to bed, Dakota?”

Dakota turned from where she’d curled up in the chair, leaning over the back and looked out the window Colt had replaced. She’d dressed in one of Joe’s t-shirts after her bath, and with a blanket wrapped around her, had sat there waiting for Joe for hours. “I don’t want to miss him.”

Colt sighed, lifting her into his arms and sat in the chair, settling her onto his lap. “Neither one of us will leave without saying goodbye.” Tilting her head back over his arm, he lowered his mouth to hers.

Dakota cuddled into him, trying to absorb as much of his heat as she could. She found the hard planes of his body unyielding as she pressed into him, trying to get closer. It helped but she knew the chill she felt came from inside, and she wouldn’t be warm until Joe came back. The hand at her nape held her firmly in place for his kiss while the other roamed over her hip. She squirmed on his lap, desperate in her attempt to get even closer. Not knowing how much time they had left, she wanted to make the most out of every second.

Colt lifted his head, studying her thoughtfully, his eyes moving over every inch of her face. “I’m going to talk to Joe. But if you want us to stay, you know you’ll be taking on both of us.”

Dakota blinked back tears, trying to smile. “I hope so. I can’t choose one of you over the other. If that makes me selfish, I don’t care. It would break my heart to lose either one of you.”

Colt nuzzled her jaw. “I’ll talk to Joe, honey. Not having Joe around would be like losing an arm, but I don’t think I’m going to be

able to walk away from you. I love you too damned much.”

Dakota choked back a sob. She sat up to straddle him, touching her forehead to his. “Oh, Colt. I love you, too. But I’m scared. What if we can’t make Joe stay?”

She hadn’t worn panties so the rough denim of his jeans rasped against her slit. Leaning back slightly, she pulled the shirt over her head and tossed it away. Rocking her hips against him, she tangled her fingers into his long hair, pulling him closer, desperate for him now. “Take me like I belong to you.”

Colt pulled her hands away from his hair and pulled her own head back to look down at her. “If you belonged to me, I would take you in every way. All the time. I can’t get enough of you. I can’t even fucking sleep without you next to me anymore.”

She almost came on the spot as her heart filled with joy. She tried to lean toward him, but the hand in her hair prevented it. “Do it. Take me. I need you so much.”

When he looked over her shoulder and smiled, she tried to turn her head but couldn’t. Before she could react, two rough hands captured her nipples and squeezed.

“If you ever fucking stand between me and an enemy again, I’m going to paddle your ass so hard you won’t sit for a month.”

“Joe!” Dakota tried to turn to face him, but the hold both men had on her didn’t allow it. “You’re back. What—” The tug on her nipples made her gasp.

“Be quiet. If Colt and I stay, you *are* going to belong to both of us. Are you willing to do that? No matter what the neighbors say?”

“Yes. Oh God, yes. I don’t care about anything else.” Happiness like she’d never known consumed her, making her giddy.

Colt released her hair to grab her buttocks, his fingers moving close to her puckered opening, tightening his hold enough to make her opening sting. “Be sure, Dakota. No changing your mind later on.”

Dakota’s breath caught, not daring to believe. “You’re staying? You promise?”

Joe chuckled and lightly bit her earlobe. “Everybody in town is talking about Dakota’s cowboys. How Dakota Wells tamed two hardened convicts and has them eating out of her hand. How anybody who messes with Dakota is gonna have their ass handed to them. We wouldn’t want to disappoint them, now would we?”

Tears of joy rolled down Dakota’s face as her body trembled with need for her lovers. The smile on Colt’s face as he tightened his grip on her melted her heart.

Colt chuckled, bringing one of his hands back around to part her folds while the other traced the crease of her ass. “Is that a fact? You gonna try to tame us, Dakota?”

She grinned at him through her tears, leaning back against Joe. “Hell no. I want you just the way you are. Wild and hard.”

Joe lifted her and pulled her back against him. “Yes, ma’am. Wild and hard it is.” He ran his teeth over her shoulder while Colt reached into his pocket and grabbed a condom before pushing his jeans and underwear out of the way.

She couldn’t look away from his thick cock as he exposed it, her pussy clenching in anticipation of the pleasure only they could give her. When Joe settled her back onto Colt’s lap, she couldn’t help but rub her slit against his hardness, moaning at the friction of it against her clit.

Colt’s hands on her hips aided her movements. “Damn, somebody’s soaking wet. You in a hurry, darlin’?”

Gripping his shoulders, Dakota arched and rocked her hips more frantically. “God yes!” Aware that Joe undressed behind her, she shook as she took the condom from Colt to roll it on him.

Joe pulled her back with an arm around her waist, giving her room. His cock pressed against her buttocks and she couldn’t help but wiggle against it. He waved a tube in front of her face. “When I went for a drive, I stopped in a town about two hours from here. Look what I found in the drugstore there.”

Dakota looked down as Colt whooped. “You bought lubrication?”

Holy hell.”

Joe chuckled in her ear and opened the tube.

She watched as he squeezed some out onto his fingers, her bottom tightening involuntarily.

Recapping the tube, he tossed it aside. He used his lips on the sensitive spot on the back of her neck as he showed her his lube-coated fingers. “Guess where this goes.”

Thrown off kilter by this new, playfully wicked Joe, Dakota’s arousal grew until she shook with it. The hard edge was still apparent in both of them, something she would work on smoothing, but she knew it would always be a part of them.

Need hardened Colt’s face as he lifted her and poised her over his cock. His eyes flared as he slowly lowered her onto it.

Dakota moaned as he filled her, as he stretched her inner walls inch by inch with his delicious heat. She held onto Colt’s shoulders as he filled her completely, arching as Joe’s hand came around to cup her breast. She clenched on the thickness inside her, the myriad of emotions racing through her already taking her to the brink of orgasm.

When she would have moved on Colt, Joe wrapped his arm around her from behind to stop her. “No. Not yet. Not until we both fill you, Dakota.”

When a thick lubed finger pressed steadily into her bottom, Dakota couldn’t hold back her cry of pleasure. Without warning, her first orgasm hit her and she screamed, gripping Colt even tighter.

Colt pulled her against his chest as Joe worked more lube into her. “Already, baby? You *do* like it hard and wild, don’t you?”

Joe held onto her shoulder as he began to press the head of his cock through the tight ring of muscle. “We’ve only just started, honey. Let’s see how hard we can make you come when you’re filled everywhere.”

Dakota whimpered as Joe pushed forward, the burning, too stretched feeling much more intense than before.

“So fucking tight,” Joe groaned, as he pressed another inch of his

cock into her anus. “You okay, baby?”

Dakota squeezed her eyes closed and tried her best to relax her bottom. “Don’t you dare stop. I can take anything you, uh, ahh God, dish out, c-cowboy.”

Colt caressed her bottom, pulling her more firmly onto him.

Dakota rocked her hips as much as she could in time with Joe’s shallow strokes. Joe’s steady stream of curses and erotic promises and Colt’s praise and encouragement poured over her.

Joe groaned. “Her ass is milking my cock already. Colt, hold her still, damn it.”

Colt’s arms tightened around her. “Try to be still, baby. Christ, we’re all going to come before Joe can even get inside you.”

Dakota whimpered in her throat, fighting to move. “I’m coming again. Oh God. Oh God. Take me. Hurry. Ahh!”

Joe slid a little farther into her as she shuddered in release. He started moving again before she had the chance to come down completely. His strokes got deeper. “Fuck, you’re tight. Come on, baby. You can take me. That’s it. That’s my girl. So fucking tight. Your ass is perfect, baby. Just a little more. That’s it. I’m in. Fuck.”

Colt lifted her slightly, his eyes glittering wildly. “Ready darlin’? Come on, cowgirl. Just hang onto me and let Joe and me do all the work.”

Dakota threw her head back in ecstasy as Joe’s hands covered her breasts. After a few strokes, they established a rhythm and took her like she’d never been taken. With her ass and her pussy full of hard, thick cocks, and her heart full of love, she felt as though she might burst at any moment. Their strokes intensified, quickly driving her over the edge yet again.

Their strokes stopped abruptly, their breathing harsh as they both held onto her, cursing ripely.

Joe buried his face in her neck, his voice sounding tortured. “Don’t you fucking move. Fuck. Dakota, if you move I won’t last. Stay still, baby. I want you to come again.”

Dakota opened her eyes and looked down to see that Colt had squeezed his shut, the agonized look on his face telling her just how close he'd come to losing control. "I'm so full. It feels so good. I want to move."

Colt tightened his grip. "So fucking tight. Give us just a minute, honey, and we'll start again. Then we'll all come together."

Held securely by both of them, Dakota tried to concentrate on breathing. Moaning in frustration, her focus remained on the two cocks inside her. She couldn't stop clenching on them, the incredible fullness and the strength of their grips as they held her immobile keeping her on the edge of release.

She couldn't believe she'd survived her entire life never knowing this feeling. Vulnerable, yet powerful. Taken completely, while demanding everything.

Joe lightly bit her shoulder as the stroking resumed. "Come hard, baby. Take us with you."

Their strokes were more demanding this time, harder, faster and her cries filled the room. Nothing existed but the hot shafts filling and stroking her pussy and anus. Fire raced through her as they groaned and cursed, caught up the tremendous pleasure.

Those warning tingles had barely begun when a wave of the most indescribable bliss washed over her, making her scream and tighten on both of them. Her skin tingled everywhere. She became so lost in sensation she couldn't even scream.

Startled at the whimpering moans that came from her, she held on tighter to Colt as her body shook with the force of it. Everything splintered around her, and if not for the hold the men had on her, she feared she would have shattered into a thousand pieces.

Hearing their harsh groans, she gasped as they surged deep inside her as they followed. She could feel every bump and ridge on their cocks as they pulsed their own releases.

Completely spent, she collapsed against Colt's chest, snuggling into him as his hard arms came around her. Groaning as Joe withdrew

from her, she panicked and jerked herself up, grabbing for him when he started to move away. “Joe.”

Pulling her back against him, he nuzzled her neck. “I’m not going anywhere. Come take a shower with me.”

Relief weakened her knees. She nodded and leaned forward to kiss a grinning Colt before Joe lifted her from his lap and carried her to the shower. As much as the sight of his naked body drew her attention, she couldn’t keep her eyes from his face as they stood under the spray. “You left.”

Joe nodded and pulled her lightly against him, stroking her hip. “I needed some time alone. I’ve spent most of my adult life planning my revenge and when it was gone—” He released her and shrugged, turning away to face the spray.

Dakota’s stomach knotted. “It was the right thing to do. You know that. You couldn’t have lived with the fact that you killed him in cold blood that way.”

Joe turned to face her, wiping the water from his eyes and pushing his long hair back. “Yes, I could have. But you couldn’t.” Leaning over her, he braced his hands on the wall behind her. “And I don’t want to live without you. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me. Frank already cost me most of my life. I couldn’t let him take you from me, too.”

Dakota’s eyes welled with tears as she took his face in her hands. Although she opened her mouth, sobs clogged her throat, preventing her from speaking. Her breath caught when he smiled as he wiped her tears away. Finally she managed a shuddering breath. “You’ll really stay?”

“If you’ll have us.”

Dakota grabbed handfuls of his hair and kissed him deeply, putting everything she felt for him into it.

Joe’s chuckle didn’t last long as he met her heat with heat of his own. When she jumped up and wrapped her legs around him, he caught her against him and pressed her back against the shower wall.

When he lifted his head, the intent in his eyes made her smile as need slammed into her. “Again?”

“Absolutely.”

The shower curtain opened and Colt stood there grinning. “So, we’re both staying?”

Joe pulled her away from the wall and lowered her to her feet so Colt could climb in behind her. “I couldn’t let Frank mess this up for us too.”

Colt wrapped his arms around her from behind and covered her breasts with soapy hands, massaging gently. “Well, if we’re going to stay with Dakota permanently, she needs to learn that she can’t always have her way.”

Joe chuckled and nodded. “I agree. I thought about it a lot today. Dakota likes to be the boss. We’re going to have to teach her differently.”

Dakota looked from one to the other, narrowing her eyes. “Dakota is standing right here, you know.”

Colt slid his soapy hands down her body as Joe poured shampoo into his palm and began to message it into her hair. Colt’s hands slid around her, one in front and one behind.

Dakota’s breath caught and her head fell back against Colt’s shoulder, as one slick finger slid into her pussy while the other pushed into her bottom. He spoke to Joe as if he hadn’t heard her. “This should be a lot of fun. I say we start right away.”

With his hands in her hair, Joe tilted her face up for his kiss as the first orgasm washed over her. “Agreed. Dakota needs to learn her place.”

Colt’s thumb flicked over her clit. “Yeah, right between us.”

Epilogue

Dakota moaned as Joe urged the horse faster. With her sundress bunched around her waist and impaled on Joe's cock, she held on tightly as they galloped toward the ridge. The hands at her back that held the reins also held her securely on his lap with her arms and legs wrapped around him.

The movement of the horse set the rhythm for his thrusts. The friction on her clit as it pressed against him drove her over the edge far too soon.

Her cries of release got muffled against his throat. She breathed deeply, loving the smell of him as she shuddered all around him.

His own groan and the pulsing inside her told her that he'd followed. His arms tightened around her, rocking her against him as he slowed their pace, drawing out their orgasms as long as possible. Finally, he came to a halt and lifted her face from his shoulder to look down at her. "Isn't this better than riding your own horse?"

Dakota lifted her face for his kiss and smiled, her happiness complete. "I may never ride again."

Colt chuckled from beside them. "You may never wear jeans again, either. I like those sundresses. I think we should buy more of them the next time we go to town."

Joe's lips twitched as his hands moved over her bare bottom, lifting her dress to expose her to Colt. "But no panties. She doesn't need them."

Dakota wrinkled her nose at him, while inside she thrilled at his playfulness. She'd set out to teach them to play and got more than she bargained for. "I only have three pairs of panties left. You two ripped

all the other ones.”

Joe lifted a brow. “Are you complaining? I’m telling you right now, if you put one of those panties on, I’m ripping them, too.”

Dakota moaned again when he shifted her on his cock. They’d come a long way in the last several months. Both men still brooded occasionally, but she could usually snap them out of it. They’d taken over all the physical work on the ranch, telling her that they wanted her energy reserved for them. How could she complain? She’d never considered herself such a sexual being before, but with them she thought of little else. She happily submitted to their desires, especially since they mirrored her own.

Not that she’d had much choice. They’d taken over her body in ways that sometimes overwhelmed her, sometimes shook her, but always thrilled her. They’d given her more pleasure than she’d ever known, and not just physical.

Little by little they’d loosened up with her, although they never talked about their time in prison. The people in town had learned to give them a wide berth when they had those hard looks on their faces, and smiled indulgently when they saw how much both Joe and Colt adored her. Just as she adored them. She’d fallen head over heels in love with both of them and didn’t care who knew it.

Jill had been thrilled to learn of Dakota, Joe and Colt’s relationship. Joe and Colt both treated Jill as they would a sister and watched out for her, much to the amusement of both women.

Ben had left for another assignment and Dakota still missed him, but knew she could never be the woman for him.

She’d made her peace with the town, and no one said a word about Dakota living on the ranch with two men. Not that it would have mattered. She was happier than she’d ever dreamed she could be and wouldn’t let anything get in her way.

Her eyes closed, and she slumped against Joe as they rode to the top of the ridge, his arms like hot bands around her.

Ed had gone to prison, and Joe and Colt’s records had been wiped

clean. Colt's parents had both passed away while he'd been in prison, along with Joe's dad, but Joe had spoken to his mom and his sister, and the three of them would be driving to see them next month.

At the top of the ridge, they stopped. Dakota opened her eyes and lifted her head to look down at the acres of land spread out below them.

Joe ran a hand up her back. "Everything we see belongs to us."

Dakota turned to face him to find both men looking at her. She reached out her hand to Colt. "Yes, it does."

Colt chuckled. "You, too. But I think Joe was also talking about the land."

Dakota grinned up at him. "Not quite all. Our ranch only goes to that fence."

"Not anymore."

Dakota frowned and looked up at Joe. "What do you mean?"

Colt reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, unfolding it and handing it to her.

Dakota looked down at it, hardly believing what she saw. "What? I don't understand. How—"

Joe smiled and kissed her forehead, lifting her from his cock. "Between the settlement the lawyer got us for being locked up all those years and the proof that Frank used the money from the insurance from Colt's parent's house, we managed to get the property and stock that Frank had."

Dakota knew her eyes had to be huge as she stared from one to the other. "I didn't know you were doing this. How could I have not known you were doing this?"

Colt ran a hand up her thigh as he brought his horse even closer. "We wanted to surprise you. Your name's on the deed, too. All of this belongs to all of us."

"Holy hell," Dakota breathed.

Colt chuckled. "We've already started hiring hands."

Stunned and elated, Dakota laughed. "I can't believe it. It's really

true?"

Both men grinned, making her heart skip a beat. Colt leaned over to slide his lips over her, running his tongue over her bottom lip. "It's true, baby. We have more than we could have ever dreamed of. Once we get you pregnant, we'll have it all."

Dakota's heart leapt to her throat and she couldn't resist teasing. "Cocky, aren't you?"

Colt laughed. "You should know. In fact..."

Joe's hand tangled in her hair, tugging until she turned her face up to him. His mouth covered hers, his tongue sweeping erotically as he pulled her tightly against him.

Her senses spun out of control at the possessiveness in his kiss, in his hold. She thrilled at the way both men openly showed their love and need for her. She felt his cock harden against her stomach and squirmed against it. When he lifted his head, he kept a tight hold on her hair to keep her from following. "Fuck. I've got to get my dick back in my jeans and that's not going to help."

"Put her across your lap," Colt told him.

Dakota's head whipped around at that to see Colt squirt lube onto his finger. Her bottom clenched in anticipation as she stared at him incredulously. "You brought lube on a horseback ride?"

His cock had already been freed and he stroked it, working a generous amount of lube onto it. His eyes glittered as they met hers before he squirted more lube onto his fingers. "Around you, it pays to be prepared. You're riding back down the ridge with me. Care to guess where my cock's gonna be?"

Before she had time to react, she'd been lifted and placed over Joe's lap, his hard hand at her back keeping her in place and holding her dress up so her bottom remained exposed. She groaned when the cheeks of her bottom were spread and the cool lube worked into her.

Looking down at the ground, she couldn't see either of them and couldn't believe how vulnerable and exposed she felt. On a horse, for God's sake!

They never failed to surprise her. Not knowing what they would do to her from one minute to the next kept her constantly filled with anticipation. Their mischievous behavior got more erotic every day.

And they never disappointed her.

“I can’t believe the things you do to me,” she moaned.

Colt shoved a finger deep. “You love what we do to you, darlin’. You’re soaking wet again. Now come to me so I can get inside that tight ass.”

“Oh God.”

Knowing they could hold her, she allowed Joe to pass her to Colt, trembling as Colt bent her over his arm facing away from him. Looking over, she watched Joe stroke his cock as he watched Colt begin to enter her bottom.

The forbidden feeling always surprised her as Colt began to work his cock into her. Once he pressed the head of his thick shaft past the ring of muscle, she groaned, shivers racing through her as he began to fill her.

“Damn if that’s not fucking beautiful,” Joe murmured as the strokes on his cock increased in speed. Dakota couldn’t look away.

Colt’s arms wrapped around her and slowly pulled her back against him and fully onto his cock. “Fucking incredible. We’re going to go slow and take the long way back.”

Dakota groaned loudly as he filled her completely, the burn of her anus being stretched already causing warning tingles throughout her body.

One hand held the reins while he held her in place with the other. His hand covered her abdomen, his fingers skimming over her throbbing clit.

Lost in sensation, Dakota leaned back against him, watching as Joe came, his seed spurting as he threw back his head and groaned. The sight of her lover pleasuring himself made Dakota even hotter and she gripped Colt’s thighs as her body began to tighten.

They waited as Joe finally managed to zip his jeans and turn to

smile at them. “Ready to go home, baby?”

Dakota moaned as the cock in her ass jumped. “I’ll never survive it.”

Colt’s chuckle ended in a groan when she clenched on him. “Let’s ride, cowgirl.”

Dakota squeezed her eyes closed at the naughty and unbelievably erotic feel of riding back to the ranch in her lover’s arms with a thick cock filling her ass. The horse started to move, slowly at first then slightly faster. Before they’d gotten off the ridge Dakota’s scream of release filled the air.

Before they got back to the stable, another orgasm hit her and she screamed again.

But this time she took her cowboy with her.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When she isn't writing, Leah Brooke spends her time with family or plotting out new stories to tell.



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