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Twin Cowboys
for Tamara

THE DOUBLE R
BOOK 1

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MENAGE AMOUR



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The Double R, Book 1

GIGI MOORE

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Prologue

The Double R – McCoy, Colorado – Eighteen Years Ago

Tamara Carpenter would be the first to admit she wasn't thinking clearly when she dragged Noah Frost out into the barn. Her hot, throbbing core did all the thinking and talking for her, and boy, did it have some things to say about how much she wanted Noah on top of her, inside her, caressing her as he had the first time they'd been together.

Like a strung-out addict, she had been trying to recapture that first tingling blush of excitement and pleasure ever since they'd started seeing each other at the beginning of the summer. She'd finally given him her virginity a few weeks later.

Once Tamara and Noah got into the cozy, dim confines of the barn and closed the door behind them, her lust kicked into overdrive. She cleaved her lips to his, darting her tongue in and out of his mouth, and going at the buttons on his denim shirt with the ferocity of a raccoon rooting through last night's garbage. If it hadn't been for Noah's earlier voice of reason, they probably would have been rutting

like a bull and heifer in heat out behind the pond. It had taken all her enthusiasm and feminine wiles, such as they were, to convince him to come out to the barn with her instead.

Her teenage hormones had been flying off the charts ever since she and Noah had first made out in one of the ranch's vacant guest cabins. She'd asked him to come with her on the pretense of helping her get the place in tip-top condition for the arrival of some newlyweds due the next day. She figured they might as well make good use of the time and pretty much jumped his bones before he could turn from closing the door.

Much like she did now.

"Christ, I want you," he rasped. He kissed a path from the cleavage he'd bared by undoing two of the buttons on her flannel shirt to her neck and nestled his lightly whiskered cheek against her sensitive throat. She shuddered at the contact, the tangy scent of his after shave a pleasing counterpoint to the simple aromas of feed and grass.

"I want you too." She pushed back from him for the moment it took her to situate herself as sexily as possible on top of a nearby haystack.

Noah paused in the midst of lowering himself to his knees and tilted his head in the general direction of the hayloft. "Did you hear that?"

"Probably just mice." At least she hoped that's all the snickering noises above were, but she half suspected those darn twins up to their usual shenanigans. She had half a mind to teach them a lesson and give them an eyeful if so, but she didn't want to traumatize the young'uns beyond repair. Her lust had its limits.

So with budding trepidation, she let Noah's knee open her thighs as he settled himself between her legs. Hunger quickly replaced her nervousness when he unbuttoned her shirt down to her bellybutton and unsnapped the front of her bra.

Noah braced a hand against her stomach and caressed his palm over her ribs and farther up to cup one full breast. He paused, licking his lips before he bent his head to take one brown, turgid nipple into his mouth. He sucked voraciously before moving to the next, nibbling and licking as he moved his free hand down to cup the heated crotch of her jeans.

Her center ached for him like it never had before. She didn't know desire could be so painful, make her so needy. Did she feel this way because of her youth or her lack of experience? Or did the inherent risk factor of any minute being caught in the act excite her?

Tamara closed her eyes and arched her neck, losing herself in the feel of his weight on top of her, and by now, had convinced herself that the darkness would keep the boys from seeing anything except indistinct shapes *if* they indeed occupied the loft.

But the twins became the least of her worries several seconds later when her father burst into the barn in full fire-and-brimstone, overprotective father mode.

Chapter 1

The Double R – McCoy, Colorado – Current Day

Jess Reynolds left his father's office, all balled up after the news the old man had just delivered in his usual matter-of-fact way.

Her Highness was coming home.

His heart skipped a beat at the thought of Tamara's imminent return, that after eighteen years of living in the big city, she had finally deigned to grace the ranch with her presence.

Jess mentally kicked himself for his bitterness. He told himself he would have to put his best foot forward and portray his customer-is-always-right persona with the utmost skill. Treat Her Highness like any other ranch guest deserving the best service and care possible.

Except that she wasn't a guest. Up until almost two decades ago, she had been *family*, like a big sister to him and his twin brother, Jax, and like a daughter to their dad, Jeremiah.

Then she'd gotten too big for her britches, as his dad and Bailey would say, and caught the first thing smoking out of McCoy to go to law school in New York. Like they didn't have perfectly good law schools in Colorado, or at least closer than half-way across the country.

Jess shook his head, castigating himself for his resentment. He acted like a jilted lover, which was ridiculous since he had never had Tamara. She'd deserted him and his brother when they'd been nine and just barely over the death of their mother.

True, their mama had died when they'd been four, and they barely remembered her but for the stories their dad affectionately passed on

about her. But in the absence of a suitable stepmother, as Dad hadn't dated since Mama's death, or aunts, since Dad was an only child, Tamara had been the most constant and stable female influence he and Jax had had in their lives for as far back as either of them could remember.

Jess smiled now at the way Tamara teased them after they'd gotten older, about how she used to help change their diapers when they were little tykes. She didn't let them forget, too, how, she had to catch their naked, slippery tails to dry them off when they ran from her and through the house fresh from their evening bath.

"Catching you two critters wasn't the highlight of this gal's life, I'll tell ya."

He chuckled at the memory of her soft southwestern twang, wondered if she still had traces of it after all this time.

Jess decided to focus on the good memories rather than the gloomy ones of Tamara leaving. He and Jax had tearfully clung to her at the airport before her departure, and Tamara promised them to write and call as often as she could.

As often as she could had been a couple of times a week, which turned into once a week, which eventually became once a month, until they barely heard from her except on major holidays and their birthday.

Jess understood she had nine years on them. She had a grown-up life to live and important work to do with her studies, but as a kid with his first crush, he really didn't want to hear anything about logic and studies. Back then, Jess's jealousy of the things that had taken Tamara away ruled him. To this day, he saw New York as this big city of wickedness and sin that had deprived him of someone he loved, drawing Tamara away from him and the family fold.

He realized now that he had never gotten over his first crush, namely because he had been in denial that it even existed up until an hour ago when his world caved in with his Dad's news.

Jess wished he could be as happy about Tamara's arrival as his dad seemed to be. The ol' man had sat behind his big shiny mahogany desk with his hands folded across his slight paunch and a right, full-of-himself smile plastered on his face.

Suspicion, however, tempered Jess's own happiness.

Would she even be coming home if Bailey hadn't been hurt? Why should he get excited about her homecoming when she would probably be leaving as soon as Bailey got well and truly up and on his feet again?

He needed to find Jax. Not just to let him know what came down the pike, and that he would be on his way to pick up Her Highness in a couple of hours. He needed Jax because his brother had the uncanny ability of making Jess see the bright side of things when no one else could.

Really, Jax had this effect on everyone with whom he came into contact. He had a way about him, never took life too serious, whereas Jess took everything serious. At least Jax and the rest of their family and friends on the ranch always told him this.

Well, someone had to take things serious. They couldn't all be like his nonchalant, fun-loving brother who acted like he didn't have a care in the world half the time and flitted from passion to passion and project to project at the drop of a dime. His stint at the ranch this last year-and-a-half, in fact, had been the longest time that Jax had stayed with anything except his days playing college football at their alma mater Colorado State, or doing the rodeo circuit.

At least Tamara had some focus. She'd known what she wanted from an early age and resolved to get it, not letting anyone, not even the little boys who cared about and loved her, get in the way.

Yeah, he definitely needed to talk to Jax. Jax hadn't taken Tamara's departure nearly as hard as Jess had. Maybe Jax had the right idea not taking life too serious.

Jess went to the stable and saddled up his prize bay stallion Clipper. He took the scenic route past the trout pond, petting zoo,

roping and riding arena, Tee Pee Village and trading post. He finally reached the make-believe, all-inclusive western town-target range that Jax had masterminded a couple of years back. It had been built on the outer reaches of the main lodge and dining area under Jess's ever-evolving expansion program.

The town consisted of several convincing facades—a bank, saloon, church, hotel, general store, post office—,pop-up targets, horse-drawn wagons, and other props and special effects to give a Hollywood lot a run for its money.

The pop-up targets proved true to life but nothing beat the real thing. Jax and several of The Double R's working wranglers and cowboys provided that with their staged shoot-outs scheduled throughout the day from late morning to early evening every other hour.

Veering left, Jess made it into the town proper at the tail end of one of his brother's famous shoot-out episodes.

Heart in his throat, he paused to watch his brother take a header off the roof of the town's bank into a cushioned bale of hay like a top-notch Hollywood stuntman.

His brother's eye for detail and realism never failed to impress Jess. Jax had a real feel for the dramatic and knew exactly what the customer wanted, especially when the customer came in the form of a kid. Jax had an uncanny way with kids and critters.

Jess dismounted Clipper, quickly tying the horse to a nearby hitching post. Shaking his head and laughing, he trotted over to where Jax was busy hamming up his latest death scene.

Several of the ranch guests' kids surrounded Jax with their make-believe guns drawn. They took him down with blanks electronically synched with several small bags of fake blood that Jax wore beneath his shirt.

Jax lay coughing and gurgling, hands splayed over his blood-soaked shirt as he winced up at his pint-sized conquerors. "Ya got me, varmints. Ya got me...*cough, cough*...good."

One of the kids pointed his gun at Jax's torso and pulled the trigger. Fake blood exploded beneath Jax's denim western shirt where the kid had hit his target true. Jax jerked and grimaced as if in great pain. "I'm a goner for sure, you sidewinder."

The kids laughed, all drawing their guns now and firing to get in on the act.

The special effects and Jax's timing and over-the-top performance made the shoot-out so much more fun and authentic than a regular paintball game.

The western town-target range and its scheduled shoot-outs proved the most popular attraction for kids who visited The Double R. Even some of their parents got into the act and couldn't help but be swept up by Jax's infectious enthusiasm for the scenes.

After one last convulsion and coughing spasm, Jax finally lay still with his eyes closed.

Jess stepped in and showed the kids his marshal's badge, another of Jax's bright ideas deputizing several of the cowboys and appointing Jess the town marshal. "You've taken down one of the most dangerous fugitives in the west, pardners. I'll take it from here. These fellas will escort you over to the bank to claim your bounty for bringing down Jumping Jax Flash."

He watched as Carson and Sam Quarry led the boys away to the town bank where they would be issued official Double R currency that they could redeem at the ranch's video and game arcade. The two brothers had recently been added to the buckaroo crew as of several months ago and liked to take part in Jax's cowboy games as much as the guests.

As soon as they disappeared from view, Jess turned and squatted beside his brother's supine form.

Jax opened one eye and peeped up at Jess. "Coast clear?" he stage-whispered.

"Get up, porky." Jess chuckled and proffered a hand. He remembered the fake blood a second before Jax clasped his hand to

let Jess help him up. “Ugh.” Jess grimaced and wiped his bloody palm down the front of Jax’s jeans.

“Hey, a guy’s got to make sacrifices for his art.”

“You missed your calling.”

An expression of misery flickered across Jax’s face so briefly, Jess wondered if he had actually seen it, but before he could ask his brother about it, Jax clamped a hand on his shoulder and started to walk Jess back toward his horse.

“So what brings you out here? Surely not to see my three o’clock show.”

Jess looked at his brother and couldn’t stop thinking about the expression of loss he’d seen. He wondered about those days off his brother had taken lately. He shook his head as if to clear it and said, “Dad just gave me some interesting news.”

“Can’t read anything past that stern poker face of yours. Good or bad interesting?”

“Depends on how you look at it.”

Jax arched a brow and waited.

“Tamara’s coming back.”

“Well, shucks! That’s great news and definitely a cause for celebration if I’ve *ever* heard one!” Jax took off his chocolate Stetson and waved it in the air before putting it firmly back on his head and gawking at Jess. “Why do you look like you just found a rattler in your boot? Aren’t you glad?”

“Should I be?”

“Well, sure. You’ve missed her as much as I have.”

“Eighteen years, Jax.”

“Don’t tell me you’re still mad about her leaving.”

“She deserted us, deserted the family, the ranch.”

“She had her life to live.”

But we needed her.

Jess wanted to shout the words, but like everything else that bothered him, he bottled up his feelings and just bit his tongue. Not

that bottling up his feelings and biting his tongue had ever done a lick of good when he dealt with Jax. Jax lived in his head and his heart, always knew when something bothered him.

Jax put an arm around his shoulder now as they made their way to Clipper. “Besides, we turned out all right without her, didn’t we?”

“I don’t know,” Jess murmured. “Did we?”

“Jess—”

“I’ll be all right. It’s just that I can’t take her coming back as lightly as you.”

“You’ve got to let go of the baggage, Jess. It’s only weighing you down. And you with your stern, uptight ways are the last person in the world who needs extra weight on his shoulders.”

Jess gritted his teeth. “I’m not uptight.”

“Tell that to someone who doesn’t know you.” Jax laughed and slapped his brother on the back. “So when is she arriving?”

“I’m on my way to the airport now to pick her up.”

“Well, shucks, that doesn’t give us much time to prepare, does it?”

“Prepare for what?”

“Our Tamara’s homecoming.”

Jess shook his head then untied Clipper from the post. He put his left foot in the stirrup, and swung up onto and mounted his horse. He looked down at his brother standing beside Clipper with a hand on the animal’s rump. “Don’t do anything elaborate, Jax, if you do anything at all. You do have your duties.”

“And we wouldn’t want her to get the idea that she’s welcome.”

Jess scowled, knowing his disapproval would have little to no effect on his brother. Jax would listen to what he had to say, then go out and do what he wanted to. It had always been this way between them. Hell, Jax did the same thing with their dad. He’d listen to the old man’s sage advice, and what he didn’t agree with, he’d just ignore or toss out and use what was left over.

Jess supposed this way the best way to be in order to get along in life stress-free, not worrying about the consequences of your actions or what people thought of you, or what you did in life. He didn't have that luxury, and wouldn't allow himself the luxury. Too many people counted on him to make the right decisions for his family and the employees of the ranch as a profit-making business.

"Go get ready for your next show."

Jax snapped to attention and gave Jess a crisp salute. "Aye-aye, sir!"

Jess chuckled and kicked Clipper into gear. He took off toward the ranch proper.

He needed to retrieve his truck and get to the airport before Tamara's flight landed. He didn't want to keep her waiting, although the idea of picking her up on Clipper held a twisted and vicious sort of appeal for him. He could just imagine the look on her face, and could feel her sliding behind him on his mount, having to cling to him for purchase.

He wondered how long it had been since she'd been riding, how long since she'd had a big, powerful beast like Clipper between her legs.

Jess pulled up on the reins and brought Clipper to an abrupt halt. He tried to gather himself. Perspiration dotted his upper lip and forehead, and he was near panting at the thought of Tamara leaning against him. He imagined her arms wrapped around his waist, palms sliding up to his chest as Clipper bore their weight and galloped through the outermost forests and acres of The Double R.

He took several deep breaths and closed his eyes against the vision. The idea of sharing Tamara's backside with Clipper was enough to breathe life into his green-eyed monster and make Jess hard as a steel rod.

Where all this horniness and sense of possessiveness came from, Jess couldn't say. Tamara had been gone eighteen years, more than enough time for him to have gotten over any residual puppy love he'd

fostered for her as a kid, especially considering that they had never had a romantic relationship what with him being nine and Tamara being over eighteen when she'd left. Talk about jailbait. The authorities would have put her not in jail, but *under* it for even thinking about him in that way. But as the years past it didn't stop *him* from thinking of Tamara *in that way*. In fact, the more time went by, the more he wanted her.

Other boys had had *Playboy* and *Penthouse* growing up. Jess had had recollections and photos of Tamara. Maybe if he hadn't obsessed over his memories and pictures of her pretty much from the moment she'd left until now he wouldn't be working himself up into such a frigging lather.

He remembered the first and only time he had seen her naked breasts.

Even back then she'd been a walking wet dream, curvy and lush, her skin a flawless, smooth caramel-brown that glimmered beneath the dim lighting in the barn.

He'd never seen naked breasts before then, but couldn't imagine any other woman's breasts being as perfect as Tamara Carpenter's. Even at his tender years, Jess wondered what it would be like to touch them, taste them. In fact, he had gotten his first ever erection lying prone among the earthy scents of hay and horses dreaming about nestling his face against them.

Jess had gasped as he watched Noah Frost, the ranch's only black wrangler, tenderly kiss Tamara's breasts. He'd snickered with Jax, and thought the whole display just generally icky, but something deep down, below the childish fun and games stirred to life inside him.

Tamara belonged to him and Jax—always had, always would.

By the time Bailey burst into the barn with steam coming out of his ears and the dust had settled completely, Noah had been fired and Tamara had been grounded for the rest of that summer before her final embittered departure to New York.

Even through his own distress, Jess had seen that Tamara had been distraught too, and so distant from everyone she cared about that she didn't belong to anyone anymore, not even the boys on which she doted from when they'd just gotten out of diapers.

When Jess considered the conditions under which she had left, he wondered why she bothered to come back at all.

What had his father told her?

Jess opened his eyes and squared his shoulders as if preparing to face a firing squad. What he was about to do was far more damaging, however, and dangerous to his cool and libido than several well-aimed bullets would ever be to his body.

He geared up to face the embodiment of all his unfulfilled desires.

Chapter 2

“So you went ahead and done it, huh?”

“Well, afternoon to you too, boy.”

Jax chuckled and finished stomping the mud off his boots. He took them off and placed them on a nearby rack across the room from where his father took a freshly laundered pile of whites from the washing machine to put into the drier before their housekeeper, Maria could.

Marie came up short in the doorway several seconds later, looked at Jax, and sighed and rolled her eyes before throwing up her hands. “Ay, I give up. He does not listen to me.” She shook her head, leaving the mudroom an irate trail of Spanish sentences in her wake.

“Pop, I told you Maria gets upset when you do her work for her.”

“I’m not the one who hired her.”

“We did it to give you a break and more freedom to do other things you wanted to do.”

The man acted as if they had gone out and smuggled Maria over the border and onto the ranch without his knowledge, and that she hadn’t been living and working at the main house for the last several years. Lucky for Jax and Jess that most of the time she didn’t pay any attention to their father’s orneriness and came well equipped and willing to put up with a stubborn old rancher’s idiosyncrasies. If memory served Jax correctly, this might have been the exact wording he and Jess had included in the Help Wanted ad they’d placed. Maria Consuelos had been a godsend when she’d showed up on their doorstep, responding to the ad with references as long as their arms and a willingness and readiness to start as soon as possible.

Jax knew the real problem and he and Jess had assured their dad that they did *not* try to hook him up and replace their mom. Having Maria around made sense and freed up not just Pop's time, but had freed up his and Jess's time to attend university, work at the ranch between classes and commuting and still have a life in between. Pop entrenched himself in his ways so deep, he couldn't see things clearly, not that Jax would ever tell the ol' man that to his face.

"I ain't never too busy to do a lousy load of laundry," his father now grouched.

"Yeah, but if you could be out fishing at the pond or riding, wouldn't you rather be?" Jax closed the space between them and gave his father's shoulders a firm massage before passing him to go into the kitchen.

"Don't sass me, boy. I ain't old or infirmed and *you* ain't too old for me to take a switch to your hide either."

"Don't I know it," Jax murmured then opened the fridge to see what there was to eat. He felt his father standing nearby, ol' man probably expecting more lip. He found some of Maria's famous roast beef leftover from a couple of nights ago, removed the platter from the fridge and put it on the solid cherry island top. He retrieved the jar of mayo, half a head of lettuce, a tomato, loaf of whole wheat bread, a carving knife, and prepared to make a sandwich. Jax glanced up at his father as he took a seat at the island. "You want one?"

"Naw. I had a sandwich a littler earlier."

Jax nodded and carved into the rare, succulent meat. "That Maria makes a mean roast."

"It'll do."

Jax stopped carving to look up at his father. "Not as good as Mama's, huh?"

"Couldn't too many women compete with your mama in the kitchen."

Jax would hazard to guess that not too many women could compete with her in other areas of the house either.

He loved hearing all the romantic tales about his mama and daddy meeting and the happiness they'd shared in the several years that they'd been married. They hadn't had nearly enough time together. Heck, Mama had been dead now longer than she and Pop had been married, and after twenty-three years, not a day went by that his father didn't mention her.

Jax hated seeing the old man all torn up after all these years and had been tempted on several occasions to fix him up with a couple of nice older women he knew in the area. He knew for a fact the ranch's cook, Helena Quarry, had a particular hankering for his pop, and Jax thought it high time his dad threw his hat back in the ring. But the last time he or Jess had brought up the issue of him dating, the old man pitched a hissy-fit saying Paula Pines had been the only woman for him, and if he couldn't have the real thing, he didn't want nothing.

Jax half-suspected his brother felt the same way about Tamara and this was why he rarely went out or dated. He guessed Jess didn't think there was anyone else out there to compete with the memory of a woman who had been out of his life longer than she had been in it.

Jess and their dad had far more in common than either of them would admit, least of all the mile long and wide stubborn streak they both had. The two of them forever locked horns, usually about ranch operations, especially Jess's plans for expansion and modernization and his ambition to keep The Double R competitive into the 21st century and beyond.

Jax usually played the buffer and go-between during these entertaining and loud differences-of-opinions. But he suspected when it came to women and relationships, Jess and the ol' man agreed like two pickpockets at a country fair.

Now Jax, he admitted to hedonistic tendencies and claimed to be a connoisseur when it came to the female form. He also liked variety and frequency in his couplings and wasn't about to get tied down by any one woman. He didn't search for everlasting love as much as he searched for the ultimate physical satisfaction.

Jax now slathered mayo on both pieces of bread then placed the thinly-sliced pile of roast beef, lettuce and tomato wedges on one slice. He slapped the other piece down onto the robust mound of food before cutting the sandwich in half. "So you called Tamara."

Pop folded his arms across his chest. "An' I ain't apologizin' for it either."

Jax didn't say anything, just lifted one half of the sandwich to his mouth and took a hearty bite. Still chewing, he went back to the fridge to grab the gallon container of milk off the top shelf and brought it back to the island. His father passed him a glass from one of the overhead cupboards and silently stood by as Jax filled the glass and took a gulp.

"The gal needs to bury the hatchet with her daddy. It's way past time."

"And his being your oldest friend has nothing to do with it."

"Of course it does!" Pop threw up his hands and began to pace. "But that gal has been like a daughter to me since she barely got out of training pants. I ain't giving up on her just 'cause she done gone to some hotsy-ditty college and become a highfalutin' pettifogger."

"Why don't you tell me how you really feel, Pop?" Jax got the glower he expected at his sarcasm and knew he worked his dad's reserve nerve with his lip, but he couldn't help it. He'd always been a smart mouth and a daredevil. And more times than not had to turn to Jess to get him out of one tight spot or another. "Pop, how do you think she's going to feel when she finds out that Bailey only has a broken leg and isn't a paraplegic?"

Jeremiah stopped his pacing and arched a brow. "I never said he was a paraplegic."

"I bet you made his injury sound worse than it is though. I know you, ol' man."

"Don't *ol' man* me. Besides, the stubborn ol' coot needed someone to grab the bull by the horns and stop beatin' the devil around the stump. I just done him a favor contactin' the gal."

“Ain’t that the pot calling the kettle black?” Jax said, just addressing the *stubborn ol’ coot* part since he was pretty much at sea about most of the rest of what his father had fired off. The man had some colorful, favorite, old western lingo and sayings he liked to throw around, but every now and again he pulled a new one out of his bag of tricks that not even Bailey or any of the other old cowboys on the ranch knew.

Pop’s hand now swept out to playfully cuff Jax upside the head. “Generally, you ain’t learnin’ nothin’ when your mouth’s a-jawin’.”

“I’m a-listening.”

Pop forked a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair and sighed in obvious frustration. “Aw hell, I just miss the gal. We all do. Some of us are just too stubborn and pigheaded to admit it. What’s the harm in askin’ her to come back to the homestead where she belongs?”

“Pop, I know how you feel about her. We all feel the same way. But you can’t make her want to be here. If she’s just coming out of an obligation, she’s not going to stay long.”

“Hmm, we’ll see about that,” Jeremiah mumbled and took the seat across from Jax.

Jax looked at him over the island, wondering what the wily old man had up his sleeve.

Did he plan to hog-tie and keep Tamara a prisoner in the basement or something? What other kind of plans could he possibly have that would make her stay longer than the hot minute it would take her to find out she had been hornswoggled?

Not that he complained any. He couldn’t have been happier to have Tamara back at the ranch and couldn’t wait to see her live and in the flesh and not just in the annual snapshots she sent in her Christmas cards. Granted, in the absence of a partner—a rarity for him—her pictures unfailingly guided him to satisfactory release during his sessions of five-fingered *amore*. But nothing like the real thing could give a man wet dreams fine as cream gravy.

The more he thought about it the harder and more anxious he got at the idea of being reunited with Tamara after so long.

Truthfully, he hadn't ever expected this day to come, not after the bitter falling-out she had had with her daddy. Those two had gone at each other worse than a cobra and a mongoose, and despite Tamara's being eighteen, she had stood toe-to-toe with her daddy and argued with him word for word. But then she'd always been headstrong and smart and knew exactly what she wanted. She'd talked about becoming a lawyer from as far back as Jax could remember and darned if she hadn't gone out to the big city and realized her dream.

She hadn't been like him who'd busted up his knee on the football field senior year and never got to play a game of pro ball a day in his life the way he had planned.

Pop always said people made plans and God just laughed. Well, God had hooted it up right and proper the evening a two-hundred-fifty-pound bruiser clobbered him during a brutally stunning play in the last minutes of Colorado State University's final home game. He'd caught the ball two yards short of the end zone to bring the Rams that much closer to winning the game, but he paid a price.

Jax heard the pop even before he felt his knee give out and knew his time had run out and along with the season, all his hopes and dreams of a career in the NFL were over. He'd had to sit in the stands looking much like Bailey did now, leg in a cast to his thigh and crutches at his side as he watched his teammates bring home the state championship without him.

Jax closed his eyes and swallowed hard before he totally choked up and his father noticed anything off-kilter with him. He couldn't talk to his father about what he'd lost. To his pop, football wasn't an honorable, *real* job. To his pop, a man played football for fun, before he settled down into what he came on this earth bred to do for life. And according to his pop, Jax had been born and bred to be a cowboy and a rancher. Pop had a little more respect and tolerance for the rodeo circuit over football, but not much, mostly because the latter

had taken Jax away from the ranch when he'd taken it up after getting out of college.

"...hear what I said, boy?"

Jax shook his head, focused on his father standing in the middle of the kitchen as he brought the second half of his sandwich to his mouth and took a bite.

"I already had Maria fix up the guestroom for Tam—"

"You actually let her do something?"

"Pull in your horns, boy, and stop bein' a clever trousers."

Jax chuckled and drained the last of his milk before snatching a napkin from the holder on the island and wiping his mouth. Far be it from him to look for trouble. "Need *me* to do anything to welcome home our girl?"

"Now that's the right attitude. Not like your brother giving me lip when I gave him the news, the whole time telling me all the reasons she shouldn't and didn't need to come home."

Jax didn't want to point out that this wasn't Tamara's home anymore. New York was.

Pop had made it clear that this would always be her home whether Bailey talked to his daughter or not.

"Can't just turn off my feelings like a faucet, you ol' coot, and I ain't gonna."

This little piece had been delivered to shut Bailey up right and proper the last time he and Pop had words about Pop's calling Tamara and volunteering news of her well-being to Bailey when Bailey hadn't asked for it.

"So you're not setting her up in Bailey's ranch house then," Jax teased, already knowing the answer. Bailey probably didn't even know his daughter was on her way to The Double R.

Wow, Jax thought the fireworks that would go off during the father and daughter's little reunion would be something to see and hear.

Jax gave the pyrotechnics engineer of the upcoming event a look and just grinned.

“Don’t ask fool questions, boy.” Pop returned his grin. “Well, don’t just sit there like you ain’t got nothin’ to do.”

“You want me to go into town to get a cake?”

“I asked Maria to make a devil’s food. Tamara’s favorite.”

“I remember.” Tamara had liked chocolate anything as a kid. He didn’t think she had left behind the addiction. Maybe she’d upgraded the form of her supply but Jax figured Maria’s cake could compete with any highfalutin’ Yankee confection Tamara might have tried in the ensuing years since her departure.

He polished off his sandwich and got up to put his saucer and glass in the dishwasher.

“Got some other things for you to get though.”

Jax paused as his father pulled a sheet of paper out of his pocket and handed it over to him. He took it and glanced through the list of items. At least the old man wasn’t going overboard, just the basics—a *Welcome Home* banner, balloons and streamers. He looked up from the paper to ask, “Is this just going to be a private affair? You know, you, me, Jess...Bailey?”

“Don’t you worry none about who’s comin’. Just get the stuff we need and help me set up when you get back.”

“You sure like cutting things close, ol’ man.” It would be a miracle if he got into town and got back with everything before Jess made it back with Tamara. But he figured his pop held things close to his vest to keep Bailey out of the loop as long as possible.

“Don’t you worry none. Things’ll work out. Guarantee it.”

Jax smiled and left, each step out of the house to his truck making his heart fill and pump with anticipation and unaccustomed desire.

When Jess initially informed him of Tamara’s impending arrival, Jax had toyed with the idea of offering to go with his brother to pick her up, but decided against being the designated third wheel. Despite his brother’s grudging affection and ambivalence about her return, Jax

knew how possessive Jess could be over Tamara. Having her in a one mile radius with someone else other than him sniffing after her would only turn up his brother's aggression and overprotective instincts.

He wondered how Jess would take sharing her company with Jax, much less the rest of the ranch. Or did his brother really expect to keep her to himself during her stay?

To be sure, Jeremiah would have some say about that. The ol' man already chomped at the bit, ready to lavish all the attention on Tamara that a long lost daughter deserved.

Bailey proved another story, but Jax couldn't really see him totally ignoring his only child during her stay. And even if he did try some nonsense like that, Jeremiah would be on his hide, kicking up a row about his responsibility to the girl before anyone could blink an eye. Aside from having a special affinity for Tamara, Jeremiah valued family ties, and Jax knew the behavior of his best friend of over thirty years disappointed his pop.

The two men had a lot in common despite the seven years separating them, the least of which being their history as single fathers raising their young children alone. Their love of the land and hard work ran a close second, a love they tried to instill in their children from the cradle. Arguably, this love took a little more with Jess than it had with Jax and Tamara.

Speaking for himself, he did love the land, but didn't have the same passion for ranching as his brother and father though he proved a natural at certain aspects of the occupation, specifically the physical aspects. He didn't feel right unless engaged in some activity where he worked up a sweat.

His own disillusionment made him wonder exactly how Tamara could be happy as a lawyer in New York. Had she really found what she'd been craving after all those years she'd been passing time on the ranch with them? Or was she just as restless in her position as Jax was in his?

The idea that he could have anything in common with Tamara, aside from their shared history on the ranch together, made Jax wonder at his past failures. They had necessitated him returning to the family homestead as he'd promised his father he would if the rodeo gig didn't work out. He hated dwelling on it, but Tamara's return brought on a bout of nostalgia that Jax hadn't allowed himself in years, forcing him to put his feelings about his father and his past under a microscope for the first time in a long time.

Football had been the only thing that distinguished and distanced him from his brother and the work they both did on the ranch. Football had been the only thing that belonged to *him*. The more he excelled at it, the more he understood exactly why Tamara had been so passionate about the law and going to school away from home. When he'd been in school, even though he hadn't lived on campus, he'd had a sense of freedom and fulfillment that living on the ranch had never afforded him.

When he'd gotten injured and could no longer play, at least not competitively, he couldn't help feeling that his father rejoiced in his setback. He knew his pop wasn't being mean-spirited. The ol' man had just wanted him home, by any means necessary and even at the cost of Jax's aspirations. His pop came from the old school, and believed in a hard and honest day's work for an honest day's pay. He tried to rouse in Jax and Jess the same enthusiasm he had for The Double R. The ranch made up their heritage, he always told them, and would pass down to them and their sons and daughters after all. Thus, Jax and Jess needed to take an active interest in the ranch's success, and failure, as soon as and as much as possible.

Jax hated that he couldn't find the same sense of satisfaction at working the ranch as his brother and father. He often wondered what he missed inside him and what kind of a pariah he would be if they knew just how much he resented having to come back home after only four years on the rodeo circuit.

Would Pop wash his hands of him the same way Bailey had washed his of Tamara if he found out the circuit still kept his blood warm, that the call of competition still drove him?

Chapter 3

Tamara deplaned at Vail/Eagle County Airport not knowing what to expect or what kind of reception she would get from her father. She didn't even know who would be picking her up from the airport, only that someone would and *not to worry*.

Jeremiah had made the arrangements. She trusted him. She knew he had something up his sleeve though. She had been suspicious from the moment she got off the phone with him to call her travel agent right to the moment she'd boarded her plane at Kennedy Airport.

He'd been evasive about aspects of her father's accident enough to make her antennae go up. Jeremiah's caginess led her to believe that her father's injury proved worse than he had revealed or that her father wasn't even aware of her trip, and probably wouldn't approve of her traveling half-way across the country to see him laid up and incapacitated. Either possibility did not sit well with Tamara's conscience.

Much like Jeremiah, her father demonstrated pride and stubbornness. And herein lay the problem and why they hadn't spoken in almost two decades—her pride and stubbornness.

When she put it into that perspective, palpable regret coursed through her until she remembered why she wasn't speaking to her father.

Tamara headed to baggage retrieval with her one carry-on strapped slung over one shoulder. The memories of her last few months at The Double R came back to her in a rush of unaccustomed nostalgia that nearly keeled her over.

Damn, she had thought she'd gotten over the place by now.

She had been in New York so long , living, working and playing the way city people did, that her father probably wouldn't recognize the woman she'd become. She'd become *citified* the epitome of a city slicker, the antithesis of how she had been brought up on The Double R.

She had become her mother.

More than Jeremiah's call informing her of her father's accident and summoning her back to her childhood home, , she hated being anything like the woman who had abandoned her when Tamara barely got out of diapers. But she couldn't escape her heritage or the truth. From all the things she had heard about Jasmine Carpenter, Tamara thought herself more like the woman than not, more like her than she wanted to admit.

She already knew how much she looked like the woman—not because her dad kept any pictures of her mother around, but because everyone who'd ever known her mother told her so as Tamara grew up. And, from as far back as she could remember and according to her father, she had suffered from the same wanderlust that had her mother up and leaving the ranch without a backward glance.

In the last few days, however, she'd been wondering more and more about her mother and the circumstances that had led to her departure, especially after her own fiancé, James' defection no more than a couple of weeks ago.

She squeezed sketchy information out of her father at best. Jeremiah and his wife Paula, her surrogate mom, had filled Tamara in on the sordid details of her parents' relationship and breakup, and even then they shared their biases, couldn't get passed their friendship with her father. On the other hand, Jeremiah and Paula portrayed her mom as a materialistic, wild, and reckless opportunist who'd only married Tamara's father for the glamorous life she thought his participation on the rodeo circuit could provide.

When the injuries piled up and the tournament victories and money fell off, her father decided to call it quits and settle down. He

said he didn't want to live on the road away from his wife and baby so many weeks out of the year, the rodeo lifestyle not what he wanted for his family.

To hear Jeremiah tell the story, it had been a match made in heaven—her father's good fortune that The Double R had an opening for ranch foreman and The Double R's good fortune to land a man like her father to help run it.

What her father lacked in experience, according to Jeremiah, he more than made up for in raw talent and enthusiasm. And the rest, as they say, was history. The two men's working relationship spawned a thirty-plus-year friendship, and the inception of Tamara's upbringing on the ranch.

As a lawyer, and curious by nature, Tamara didn't think things this cut and dried. She liked to hear every side of a story. After all these years, she had only heard her father's side. She loved him and Jeremiah and cherished Paula's memory, but that wasn't enough anymore.

She wondered what kind of picture her mother painted of her ex-husband when she related the tale of their separation and divorce to *her* friends. Did her mother paint Dad as the bad guy in her scenario the way Tamara painted James?

Tamara gritted her teeth, angry at herself for breaking her promise. She wasn't supposed to think about her breakup with James. This trip should have been the perfect opportunity for her to get her mind *off* of him. She wasn't glad her father had been injured, but she welcomed the excuse it gave her to get out of New York and away from the flaming failure of her relationship with the man engaged to marry her until a few weeks ago.

How quickly things changed.

At least she wasn't a toddler or little kid anymore and could take abandonment a lot better. It still hurt, especially with James's asinine reasoning. Had he been more like her mother and just left without a word she might, have felt better about him leaving.

For the first time in a long time, she felt sympathy for her father and thought she might understand what he must have felt when her mother left him. This comprehension, however, did nothing to lessen her desire and need to know *why* her mother had left.

Tamara shook her head, realized she had been standing at the carousel for quite some time and among the last several passengers milling about waiting for their bags. The conveyor probably had gone around a few times, and she'd just missed her luggage, mired in her thoughts of the past.

She focused on the bags coming through the chute now and within a couple of minutes saw her Louis Vuitton suitcase appear and make its way toward her. She moved closer, jockeying for position at the carousel to grab the handle of her bag and lift it off of the conveyor.

The minute she touched the wheels of her suitcase to the floor, she started to feel anxious again, the reality of being back in Colorado setting in.

She'd always promised herself that once she left McCoy she would not come back, at least not to live. Not that she had had a bad childhood—her father had done everything he could to make up for the absence of her mother—but she didn't cotton to the idea of going backwards in her life. After working her way up the echelons of society and her career, returning to the slow, simple life of The Double R definitely seemed like a step in the wrong direction for her. She liked the fast-pace and convenience, too used to and preferring the city-that-never-sleeps vibe.

But her dad was the only family she had, and he needed her.

At least this is what she told herself. The thought had driven her every move since she'd hung up from Jeremiah to make arrangements for her trip.

My father needs me.

She hadn't seen or spoken to him since she'd left home. Her last image of him was that of the long, lean, and robust cowboy she had always admired. He had been a rough and ready man's man, working

his buckaroo crew hard. He had also been an overprotective and loving but stern disciplinarian trying to make sure his only child grew up with the right values.

Tamara had to remind herself that at sixty-five her father was, a senior citizen, even though she knew he would reject this notion.

She didn't think she'd ever forgive him for Noah, but she could do no less than carry through with her plans and see to his recovery.

It wasn't like she had anything else better to do. Her personal life was in the crapper. Though her career was flying high, she knew that her success and dedication to it was at least half the reason behind James' departure. She knew her independence and success fueled his self-esteem issues. She kept telling herself that his chauvinistic attitude and desire to be the only star in their universe weren't her crosses to bear. She couldn't spend her life kowtowing to a man's ego and being who and what she wasn't just to make things pleasant and easy for him. She had left home eighteen years ago so she wouldn't have to.

At least her workaholic tendencies had put her in good stead with her firm when it came time to ask for an indefinite leave of absence. She hadn't taken a vacation or day off in the seven years since she'd been with McEntee, Brecker, Holzman & Frakt. She'd even dragged herself out of her sick bed and worked through a bad case of the flu last winter. Of course the profits she brought the company in numerous high-profile, lucrative lawsuits, and her reputation as one of her company's most successful litigators, weighed heavily in her favor. Not to mention her mentor David Frakt, particularly sensitive to her situation after recently losing his own father to a long illness, had passionately made a case for Tamara to go home and tend to her personal affairs without fear of losing her job.

If she had to have any romantic notions about anyone at her firm, Tamara thought, it would be for the firm's youngest partner, but David's marriage and devotion to his wife, Michelle, nipped these inclinations in the bud. She didn't do married men. Nor did she do

white men. She didn't like to say never though and this motto had served her well in her life and her career so far.

Tamara took a deep breath as she made her way through the airport terminal looking for this person designated to pick her up.

She noticed a couple of uniformed limousine drivers holding up placards with names written across them, but didn't see her name among them.

Several passengers who had been on the plane with her rushed by to raucously greet loved ones and friends before they all made their way out of the terminal.

Tamara decided to leave too. Maybe her pick-up waited for her outside somewhere. Besides, the fresh air would do her some good, maybe clear her head.

She shouldered her Keepall, expanded the handle to her suitcase to more easily wheel it behind her, and headed for the exit.

Tamara made it through the crowds and still hadn't spotted anyone familiar, though a dozen or more men wearing cowboy hats, jeans and boots gave her more than a passing glance. She reminded herself that in Colorado the outfit proved a fashion statement as well as the state uniform so didn't necessarily mean the men in question worked on a ranch, though nine times out of ten, they did.

Just when she'd been about to give up her search, someone cupped her elbow.

Tamara yelped at the unexpected contact and turned to see a tall, broad-shouldered cowboy with black Stetson tipped low over his face. He had to be at least six-two, towering head and shoulders over her five-seven, so she craned her neck to peek under the brim of his hat and could just make out the strong square jaw and sculpted cheekbones.

God, he was gorgeous, at least what she could see of him. She couldn't imagine what his eyes looked like, and as if reading her mind, he swept off his hat and cradled it in the crook of one arm to give her a better, full view of his face.

Tamara swallowed and had to stop herself from gaping. Scratch that first impression. Breathtaking was a better description. He had a full, wavy head of chestnut hair and keen azure eyes that stared down at her with a curiosity and intensity that made Tamara moist. She switched her weight from one leg to the other, surreptitiously squeezing her thighs together to stem the flow.

“Tamara Carpenter?”

“Uh, yes. And you are?”

“My name is...J.”

Jay had a raspy, deep voice that reached down inside and tickled her G-spot.

God, it had been too long since a man had made her feel like swooning. *Had* a man ever made her feel like swooning? Or maybe it had been too long since she'd had some good loving.

Tamara wondered if the eleven-year gap between her and James proved part of their problem, if maybe he thought himself her daddy and the boss of her. He had been an adequate lover, but she'd missed the enthusiasm and spontaneity of the younger men she'd acquired a taste for since her first affair with ten-years-older-than-her Noah.

In the year that they'd dated before his proposal, Tamara had often wondered why she stayed with James. Sure, he looked attractive, demonstrated intelligence, and they had their profession in common, but when it came to pleasing her, not just inside of bed but outside it, James' cool, master-of-his-domain attitude left a lot to be desired. She often questioned her attraction to him, wondered if she subconsciously searched for the father-figure she'd lost when her father dressed her down for lying with a Double R wrangler *he* thought much too old for her.

Presently, Tamara cleared her throat. “Jay, you said?”

“Yep. I'm your ride to The Double R.” He jutted his chin toward the suitcase at her feet. “That it?”

“And this.” She nudged the matching Keepall on her shoulder, and before she could object, he took the bag from her shoulder. He

flipped his hat back onto his head and slung the strap of her bag over his shoulder in one fluid movement. “You don’t have—”

“It’s not a problem, really.” He looked at her, his expression so joyless and stern he reminded her of her father when he’d burst into the barn on her and Noah.

Tamara’s stomach flipped over.

A grown woman, self-sufficient and thriving, Tamara yet doubted whether she could go through with this without some sort of liquid fortification. In fact, she decided she could use a stiff drink before heading out to McCoy. That is, a stiff drink for now. She’d welcome a stiff something else later if Jay proved amenable. “I’d like to make a stop before we go to the ranch.” Thinking about it now, she didn’t know why she hadn’t had a drink on the plane.

“You have some place specific in mind?”

Hmm, she loved his lazy drawl and caught herself sneaking looks at his profile as they headed for the exit. She let her gaze drift down to his left hand to check his ring finger. She released a breath when she found it empty. “Is there a bar nearby?”

“We have a saloon at The Double R.”

She shook her head. “I’m not ready to go to The Double R yet. Is that going to be a problem?”

He paused to look at her, his gaze raking her from head to toe and leaving a trail of heat over her whole body as if he had touched her with his hands or tongue.

Tamara put her hands on her hips, more for something to do with them than to be defiant, although there was that too. When she noticed Jay quirk his brow in apparent amusement, she lifted her chin and gave him her best intimidate-the-witness-on-the-stand glare for good measure. “Well, is it?”

“Not a problem at all, ma’am.”

She couldn’t put her finger on it, but she found something familiar about him. Her body tingled with awareness as if they shared a past. But wouldn’t she remember someone like him on the ranch? Of

course, it had been nearly twenty years since she'd been back, and he couldn't have been more than twenty-five. He'd probably just been a toddler when she'd made her explosive departure, so it wasn't possible she could know him or him her.

Tamara decided she *wanted* to get to know him—at least in the biblical sense.

Intellectually, she realized herself on the rebound, but her body refused to have a nickel in that dime, hot for the young cowboy like she hadn't been for any man in a very long time.

She followed him to his vehicle, a spanking new, shiny black Chevy Silverado. If he had been a man of smaller stature, she would have automatically thought he tried to compensate for some shortcoming with his choice of truck, but Mr. Jay had no shortcomings as far as she could see. Not a one at all.

Tamara licked her lips as he walked around the truck to open the back door and bent at the waist to carefully stow her bags on the floor of the truck. She watched the way his back and shoulder muscles flexed beneath his white western shirt. He had the nicest ass too, round, firm and beckoning her to sink in her nails and teeth.

She shook her head at the thought. God Almighty, it *had* been too long since she'd had someone like him—young and rugged and just all male. Hmm, she guessed something could be said for ranch life because they certainly didn't grow them like him back in New York. Sure, some good-looking men abounded in the city, but everyone in her circle wore a suit and tie or the latest designer threads trying to keep up with the Joneses.

Jay's body looked like the most designer thing about him. Otherwise, he put on no pretension or airs. He seemed simply a desirable man. Tamara blinked when he stood up and turned to her with a frown.

Had he caught her staring at his butt? Not the best way to make an impression and start off her stay at The Double R. She didn't want the word to spread that a loose cougar prowled the town if this proved the

case, at least the on-the-prowl part. She didn't consider herself loose by any means, just a woman with needs and a healthy appetite. And as for the cougar part? Well, maybe a few, okay, *several* years separated them, but who counted anyway? They wouldn't be doing anything illegal. So who had a—

“...problem?”

She blinked. “I'm sorry?”

“I asked if you have a problem. You're looking at me funny.”

Tamara instantly shook her head. “No problem. I'd just like to get to a bar.” God, had she just said that? The man must surely be thinking she needed rehab!

He chuckled as he opened the passenger door for her. “One bar coming up.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled, and climbed up into the leather seat.

Jay closed the door behind her and sauntered around the front of the truck to get into the driver's seat. He looked at her from the corner of his eye and said, “I don't know how you Yankees do things back in New York, but around here, we buckle up for safety.”

Tamara shook herself out of her sensual stupor and pulled the belt across her torso to fasten herself in.

Jay did the same then keyed the ignition before he turned his head to look at her. “There's a little place down the road a piece that should suit your needs right nice.”

Tamara nodded, not sure what she needed yet, except *him*.

Chapter 4

She didn't recognize him.

Jess didn't know whether to be angry or hurt at this fact, disappointed or sad. He thought he was a little of all, especially disappointed. Out of all the people who'd lived on the ranch, aside from his and Jax's parents and Bailey, no one had ever been able to tell him and his brother apart *except* Tamara.

Where had her insight gone?

Logic told him she hadn't seen him in close to two decades, that he had been a kid when she'd left and had looked a lot different then than he did now. He stood a good two feet taller and tipped the scales more than a hundred pounds heavier for two things—pretty big differences. But his face? Sure, he had aged, but he still had his same basic features, the same eyes.

Couldn't Tamara see her boy beneath the man? Or did the overall adult package *Jay* represented blind her?

Even if *he* was blind to his attractiveness most of the time, Jess always had his identical twin and the bevy of female admirers panting after Jax to remind Jess that *he* wasn't too bad in the looks department. Tamara's reaction to him back at the airport just confirmed this.

He grinned at the memory of catching her staring at his backside. The look on her blushing face had been priceless and went a long way to assuage his irritation at her snub, no matter how unintentional it had been.

After the anger and hurt came the thoughts of acceptance and reconciliation. He didn't know where they came from, but he asked

himself, why not go along and play the charade? She thought he was someone else. Of course he had contributed to this misconception with the briefest version of his name he could think of off-the-cuff. He figured he would *be* someone else and they could start off fresh—just a man and a woman who found each other attractive.

He thought it better this way. She wouldn't have to suffer under the older nurturer memories that would inevitably slip into her mind when she realized his true identity.

He knew he justified his actions, already prepared for her anger when she figured things out because he knew she would. He couldn't stay in her company too much longer without letting something slip and give himself away. Granted, they'd known each other a long time ago, but they did share some history. Not to mention they would arrive at the ranch eventually, and once she saw Jax the jig would definitely be up.

"What are you smiling at?"

He glanced at her from the corner of his eyes. "I just thought of something funny."

"Don't keep it to yourself. I could use a good laugh."

"Why?"

She turned to him, and he felt her grimace before she asked, "*Why?*"

"Why could you use a good laugh?"

"Do I need a reason to want to laugh?"

He shrugged and didn't know why he wanted to antagonize her except that he enjoyed the glow to her caramel-brown skin when she flushed at his question.

Jess shifted in his seat as he paused at a stop sign and let a couple of elderly women cross the street in front of him. He followed them all the way to the sidewalk, hoped looking at them could get his mind off of the woman beside him who made the critter in his jeans harder than a rock. He closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath as if this could help him rein in his lust. It only made things worse,

especially with the vision of Tamara standing at the carousel in hip-hugging, painted-on blue jeans, sky-blue, midriff-exposing, baby doll T-shirt beneath a denim jacket rushing across his mind's eye. Not to mention the spicy-sweet aroma of her wafting throughout the cab of his truck.

Christ, he'd missed her! He missed her smell, the laughs they used to share, the sound of her voice, and her crazy sense of humor. He hadn't known just how much he missed her until this moment. But could he say any of this without giving himself away? He'd really backed himself into a corner when he hadn't told her the truth.

It's not too late.

Jess gritted his teeth against the angel whispering in his ear, preferring to listen to the devil that told him he hadn't really lied to Tamara, but had just omitted the truth. He had no intention of hurting her, after all. He just wanted to see where his gambit led them.

"Why don't you want to tell me why you were smiling?" Tamara asked.

Jess opened his eyes and stared through the windshield for a moment, shocked they had covered the twenty-five miles from the airport already. He steered his truck to the next block where he parked in front of Loaded Joe's or, as the locals called it, Joe's.

It proved the perfect social setting—watering hole, a gourmet coffeehouse by day morphing into an energetic cocktail and live entertainment lounge by night. A glance at the digital display on his dashboard clock told him that they arrived right on time to party hard as the morning crowd began shambling out to make room for the evening natives swinging in. A small crowd of twenty- and thirty-somethings already gathered outside on the deck.

Jess turned off the ignition, disengaged his seatbelt and turned to Tamara. "Truthfully?"

"Yes, truthfully."

"Okay, you asked for it. I tried to be nice and not embarrass you, but since you insist on knowing why I was smil—"

“Just tell me!”

“I remembered the expression on your face when I caught you looking at my butt.”

“I, uh...I wasn’t looking at your butt.”

He just raised a brow and stared at her.

Tamara threw up her hands in surrender. “Okay, I looked at your butt!”

They stared at each other for a long moment before finally bursting out laughing. They laughed so hard and long that by the time they finished, Jess’s stomach muscles ached.

Catching his breath, he watched as Tamara wiped tears from her eyes and grinned at him.

He grinned back, staring into her gently slanted onyx eyes, so dark and shiny that they looked like polished jewels. He reached out to cup her face, moving his thumb in a caressing, circular motion over her high, pronounced cheekbone, transfixed by the softness of her skin, as soft and silky as it looked.

Jess bent his head, tilting it to the left as Tamara leaned forward and tilted her head to the right, meeting his lips and sealing them with hers.

He closed his eyes and groaned deep in his throat at the honeyed taste of her, sliding his hand to the back of her neck to collar her nape and draw her closer. He slid his tongue along the smooth surface of her teeth before dipping into her mouth, first experimentally, then driving his tongue against hers to taste her more fully.

Jess pictured her sitting on one of the comfortable burnt orange and cream sofas inside. He could see her beneath the dim lights of the lounge and amidst the sounds of the live band and DJ Hal warming up. He realized he didn’t want to share her with anyone—not with strangers, not with family, not now, maybe never. He just got used to having her to himself, and he really didn’t even have this, especially not once she found out he’d lied to her.

He pulled back, panting as he watched her kiss-swollen, slightly parted lips and closed eyes. Jess cupped her face just as she opened her eyes to look at him.

“Why did you stop?”

“Because I would have had you laid out on the backseat in another minute.”

“Did you hear me complaining?”

“Maybe not yet.”

“Trust me. I’ll let you know if I don’t like what you’re doing to me.”

“I’ll bet you would, Ms. Confident and Sure City Girl.”

“You have something against confident and sure city girls?”

Jess looked at the fist she automatically planted on her hip as she jutted her chin at him and grinned. “Don’t get your feathers all ruffled. I just made an observation. And, for the record, I have nothing against confident and sure city girls.” *I don’t have a thing against them except when they leave and go back to the city.*

“And, just to add to the record, I’m a city woman.”

He nodded and doffed his hat with the appropriate amount of gravity and respect. “Won’t make that mistake again, ma’am.”

She chuckled and elbowed him in the ribs. “You are such a wiseass.”

He laughed, got out of his truck and engaged the automatic locks on the doors once Tamara exited on her side.

It amazed him how easily they had fallen into joking with and teasing each other. He couldn’t remember the last time he had laughed so much with anyone. He thought Jax would be proud of him.

Jax.

What would he do about his brother? He knew Jax would be all over Tamara once they got back to the ranch. His brother wouldn’t be able to help himself. She traveled right up his alley, but then again, anything with breasts and a vagina traveled up his brother’s alley. Jax wouldn’t let a little thing like a nine-year age gap overly concern him

or get in his way of flirting with Tamara. He wasn't Jess, didn't have the same sense of propriety or responsibility that prevented Jess from jumping in and out of bed with any available female.

He admitted to himself, however, that he did more than flirt with Tamara. He *wanted* to do much more than flirt with her too. Today's reunion was eighteen years in the making, something he'd been looking forward to since before she left, since before he knew what flirting entailed. And he wasn't opposed to jumping into bed with Tamara.

Jess jogged behind her now and caught up with her at the front door to Joe's. "Allow me." He reached around her to pull open the door.

Tamara glanced back at him with a smile then stepped through the door.

The interior looked cozy but spacious. Ambient, muted light reflected off of the red walls and rich wood and earth tone furnishings and set an intimate mood. The place suited his frame of mind, intensifying his need to be near Tamara.

Several people already out on the floor danced and several people reclined on the various, overstuffed sofas scattered throughout the floor.

"It feels like I'm in someone's living room," Tamara whispered as Jess stood beside her just on the threshold of the main floor.

"Funny you should say that since Joe's slogan is *Your home away from home*." He slid an arm around her waist and drew her farther into the lounge.

She turned to look at him. "Is Joe a real person?"

"Joe is actually Kent Biedel from Seattle."

"You know him personally?"

"Sure, we go way back," he teased. "Seriously though, that's what he envisioned when he created Joe's—a community meeting place and a hot spot where everybody knows everybody else's name, kind of like a *Cheers* of the West."

“You’re Joe’s public relations man?” She grinned and slid her arm around his waist as Jess steered them toward a cluster of couches sandwiched between one of the bars and the pool table.

“I’m just one of many locals who like hanging out here.” Jess guided her to a seat, took off his hat and parked it snug on Tamara’s head. “What do you want from the bar?”

“An apple martini would be great.”

“One apple martini coming up. Hold a seat for me.” Jess headed to the bar a few yards away with a jaunt to his step and the memory of Tamara’s hand on his waist shooting tingles down his spine and hardening his cock. If she could do this to him when they were both fully clothed and in mixed company, he feared what she could do to him when he got her alone and their clothes off.

Several people at the bar ordered drinks from the four bartenders.

Jess positioned himself just to the right side of a young blonde sitting at the middle of the bar. “Excuse me, ma’am.”

The woman turned and gave him a big smile. “Jackson Reynolds! As I live and breathe.”

Jess winced, hoping Tamara hadn’t heard the blonde’s reaction to seeing him. He glanced over his shoulder to see her lounging comfortably against the sofa, grinning as she took in the sights and sounds around her, sure she couldn’t have heard anything over the booming music. He turned back to the blonde. “Sorry, not Jackson.”

“He mentioned he had a twin, but I didn’t believe there could possibly be two of you.”

“Yep, there are.” Jess waved at the closest bartender to get his attention, and when the young man came over, he ordered Tamara’s apple martini and a beer for himself.

As soon as the bartender went to tend to his order, the blonde turned on her stool and spread her thighs wide to either side of Jess’s hips. She licked her lips then leaned forward to whisper in his ear. “Prove it to me.”

“Ma’am?”

“Prove to me you’re not Jackson.”

Christ, he would have to bump into one of his brother’s many groupies. It surprised him that she knew his brother had a twin, when she didn’t know Jax’s nickname. Jess surmised Jax had thrown her a bone in the process of letting her down easy to think herself more than a one-night-stand.

Leave it to Jax’s mating habits to come back and bite *him* in the backside.

“Well?” The blonde slid her hand down to his crotch and cupped his already hardening shaft. She raised her eyebrows and licked her lips again as she looked at him, obviously thinking him hard because of her. “Feels like Jackson Reynolds to me.”

“We’re identical.” Jess smoothly moved his hips to get away from her and caught her wrist before she could pursue him.

She raked him with her eyes. “You older or younger?”

“Twenty minutes older,” he automatically responded, though Jax often maintained Jess acted twenty *years* older.

“Hmm, I like older men.”

More like younger men. He’d eat his hat if she proved in her twenties. Jess put her closer to forty, surprised by his brother’s range despite knowing Jax just plain loved women of all walks of life—older, younger, black, white, and everything beyond and in between.

Blondie must have noticed him looking over his shoulder in Tamara’s direction and frowned when he turned back to her. “So it’s like that, is it?”

Jess frowned now. “Like what?”

“Jungle fever.”

The bartender arrived with his drinks before he could respond and Jess turned from Blondie to pay for them. He left a generous tip on the mahogany bar before turning to make his way back to the sofas where Tamara sat.

He glanced over his shoulder to see Blondie staring at him then settled down onto the seat Tamara had saved him near the arm of the sofa. He handed her the martini.

“Woman trouble?” Tamara asked before she took a sip.

“Uh, no. Why do you ask?”

“The blonde at the bar is giving you the evil eye. Jilted lover?”

“Not at all.” He should have been flattered that she’d consider the possibility, but he wasn’t. His ego didn’t need that sort of stroking.

“Or maybe she’s giving *me* the evil eye.”

Jess turned back to Blondie and noticed her sneer though he couldn’t figure out exactly why she seemed so riled. Maybe she didn’t like his rejection, however reasonably he had delivered it? Or maybe she just didn’t like him rejecting her for the company of a black woman.

The latter possibility bothered him on a level he had never been bothered before.

Jungle fever.

He grimaced at the memory of her words before taking a sip from his longneck and gazing at his surroundings. He realized for the first time since he’d started coming to Joe’s that there weren’t any people of color in the lounge. The absence had never struck him so forcefully before. Generally, there weren’t many people of color in Colorado statewide, and definitely weren’t many in McCoy, but he thought he had seen at least a few African Americans or other people of color in Joe’s at one time or another.

With Tamara growing up on The Double R and living in McCoy around him and Jax for most of their childhood, he just never saw her race as a problem though a rarity. Maybe it never seemed a problem because Tamara had always been so intrepid and self-assured, always at ease in her surroundings that she just seemed like she belonged, her skin color notwithstanding.

Before that moment, it had never occurred to him that she might be self-conscious or feel like an outsider, and at the thought, Jess slid

his free arm around Tamara's shoulders and snuggled close. "Do you want to leave?"

"You mean run?"

He followed her gaze to see Blondie still glaring at them, turned to watch Tamara's profile and saw the tick in her jaw as she gritted her teeth. "That's not what I meant."

"If she's making you uncomfortable, we can go. I, however, am not concerned with Ms. Attitude Problem."

Jess grinned at her tough act and thought she could give Blondie a run for her attitude problem any day. "I brought you here to have a good time."

"I am having a good time." She turned to him and smiled. "I've got a stiff, tasty drink in hand and good company at my side. Why wouldn't I be having a good time?"

That she considered him good company *did* stroke his ego. Something funny happened to his heart when he looked in her dark eyes beneath the strobe light of the room and saw the sincerity shining out of them. He squeezed her shoulder and leaned in to nuzzle her neck.

"Are you using me to make her jealous?"

He popped up his head to look at her. Her voice had been firm, her tone neutral and her look didn't waver when she returned his stare. She didn't *look* jealous or offended. "Is that what you think?"

"Are you?"

He bent his head again, circling the shell of her ear with the tip of his tongue and inhaling the sandalwood aroma of her skin as she shuddered. "I want *you*."

"Then let's get out of here."

Chapter 5

What did she do? What was on her mind? Obviously, she wasn't *in* her right mind. Obviously, she'd lost it. Either that or the one little martini that she'd barely consumed had gone straight to her head.

Yeah, like she could blame her raunchy frame of mind on a little libation. She'd been more under the influence in the past than now, and she hadn't gone to bed with the first pretty face that asked her.

Tamara had just met this guy, didn't even know his last name—had no interest in knowing it to be truthful—and already she found herself going to a motel with him.

She couldn't explain it, but she felt like she'd known Jay all her life. After her encounter at the bar with Ms. Better-Than-Thou, she wanted him more than she had upon meeting him.

Tamara knew she didn't have anything to prove, not to herself or to him, but something in her wanted to know that a hunky young cowboy like him found her irresistible, that she could pull him in and keep him when the blonde at the bar couldn't. Petty, she knew, but she wasn't feeling incredibly generous or gracious at the moment, just very needy.

She needed Jay. She *needed* to feel wanted.

Jay and Tamara made the one-minute walk to The Comfort Inn Beaver Creek companionably holding hands. The silent intimacy felt right in the beautiful spring evening.

Tamara smiled now at the memory of the spiteful look the blonde had given her when she and Jay left—Jay's arm possessively encircling her waist as he leaned in to tenderly kiss the side of her head. A sense of supreme satisfaction and victory filled her.

She had had similar run-ins with other women like the blonde before, and the perpetrators came in all shades and races in Tamara's experience. Black sorority sisters had looked down at her just as much or worse than some white girls had when she'd started at Columbia. She'd wondered if they could smell the country bumpkin on her, wondered if they inherently knew she didn't belong.

Though it probably shouldn't have, the animosity surprised her. She expected the reaction in a small town like McCoy. She didn't expect it in a great big melting pot like New York. In McCoy if she passed more than two other black people in town at the market that was saying something.

When Tamara thought about it, maybe this shortage had been the real reason behind her mother's departure, or at least part of it. Maybe the woman just couldn't handle being the cynosure and only black person on the ranch other than her baby daughter.

Tamara supposed she owed her own composure under fire to her father. He had instilled in her from the beginning that she was as good as anyone else, and that she shouldn't judge a man by anything other than the content of his character.

She guessed she should thank her father for raising her how and where he had. The Double R, and the people on it, had proved to be an ideal environment to build her inner and outer strength, the best place to build the personality that she would later need to daily deal with and succeed among New York's cosmopolitan elite.

Jay squeezed her hand, and when she brought her gaze up to meet his, searching beneath the brim of his hat, he grinned. "What're you thinking about?"

"Isn't that supposed to be my line?"

"I'm not much into clichés or stereotypes."

"That's good to know."

"So, what're you thinking about?"

"Persistent, aren't you?"

"If you don't want to tell me..."

She squeezed his hand back then twined her fingers with his long, thick ones. His hand gobbled hers, the palm rough yet soothing against hers, strong like him. “Who was that woman at Joe’s?”

He paused, released her hand to tip his hat back on his head and stared down at her. “That still bothering you?”

“I’m not bothered, just curious.”

He shrugged, grabbed her hand and started walking again. “She’s just a woman who thought I’m someone I’m not.”

“I bet you get that a lot, huh?”

“We’re here.” Jay pulled open the heavy glass door and ushered Tamara into the motel lobby in front of him. He took her hand and led her to the desk, adjusting her Keepall on his shoulder and reaching for the wallet in his back pocket.

She caught his wrist as he extracted it. “What are you doing?”

“Can’t get a room on my good looks.”

Tamara laughed as he wiggled his eyebrows Groucho style then suddenly turned serious and said, “That’s not what I mean. *I* wanted to come here.”

“It’s not like you dragged me here against my will.”

“But I—”

“Look, Tamara, call me old fashioned, but I pay my own way. I’m not some gigolo.”

“Oooo-kay.” Tamara rolled her eyes as the desk clerk warily approached. Evidently, she’d hit a nerve and the clerk understood this as well as she did.

“May I help you?” asked the small, nattily dressed man.

“We’d like a room for the night,” Jay said, sliding a credit card out of his wallet and slapping it down on the desk.

“Of course, sir. Smoking or non-smoking?”

Jay looked to Tamara and she said, “Non-smoking.”

“Non-smoking it is.” The clerk began tapping on his keyboard, gazing at the monitor in front of him. “We have a lovely room

available on the fourth floor, mountain view, king size bed, non-smoking.”

“That’ll do right fine.”

Tamara waited as the clerk took Jay’s credit card and started the transaction. She drummed her fingers on the marble desktop and took the time to admire her surroundings, the expected turquoise-and-burgundy, Aztec-patterned carpet and western-theme furnishings.

The clerk inputted the required information. “You’ll be in Room 404. That’s \$129.66 for one night. We have free deluxe continental breakfast until ten a.m. Checkout is at eleven a.m.” The clerk handed Jay his credit card and two electronic keycards then directed them to the elevators behind him and to the right.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sir. Will there be anything else?”

“No. We’re good.”

Jay took her hand and led her toward the elevator bank.

“Well, that was quick and easy. I hope *our* transaction isn’t,” Tamara murmured.

Jay leaned in to kiss her, slowly sliding his tongue along the seam of her mouth until she parted her lips on a moan. She stimulated her already hard sensitive nipples even more when she pressed herself against him. She flattened her breasts against his chest. He wrapped an arm around her to hold her close.

She realized a second before one of the elevators sounded and the doors slid opened that she stood on her tip-toes and ground her pelvis against the hard bulge in Jay’s jeans. She pulled away to glance around him into the empty car. “That’s us.”

Jay shouldered her bag, grabbed her hand and pulled her into the elevator with him. He punched four right before turning to and cornering her against the back wall of the elevator as the doors slid closed behind him. “So you like it slow and easy do you?”

She wanted to tell him that almost any combination would work with him—slow and easy, quick and hard. It just didn’t matter as long

as he moved inside her as soon as possible. “Slow and easy is good for now.”

“We’ve got the whole night to try out some other combinations more to your liking, ma’am.”

Her stomach tightened at his husky words.

The man read her mind, but why did the idea of the whole night, disappoint her? Did she want more than *one* night from him? She hadn’t even had him yet, but something told her that one taste would not be enough.

The elevator stopped and signaled that they had reached their destination.

Jay took her by the hand and pulled her from the car, his steps sure and purposeful as he marched down the plush-carpeted corridors in search of their room.

He finally found it at the end of the hall, slid his keycard into the slot, and when it clicked over to green, he pushed open the door and let Tamara enter in front of him.

She stood in the middle of the clean, well-appointed room, had a moment to admire the turquoise and burgundy carpeting and thick bedding, and the imposing, four-poster solid pine bed before Jay sidled behind her.

He dropped her bag at their feet and slid his arms around her waist, easily pulling her back against his chest and bending his head to nuzzle her neck. He lingered for a minute at her pulse-point, sucking and licking her skin before he turned her around in his arms and zeroed in on her waiting mouth. “I want to taste all of you, every inch,” he whispered before thrusting his tongue past her lips. His mouth devoured hers in a mind-blowing, nipple-tingling kiss that had buckled her knees and made her heart hammer hard in her chest.

There ought to have been a law against a man looking and smelling so good who could kiss like *this*!

Jay upped the ante even more when he slid a hand up to her head. He buried his fingers in her hair right before gently fisting a handful

and directing her head to an angle that better suited his need to ravish her mouth.

Tamara groaned deep in her throat, pressing her body so close to his she felt like she tried to climb inside his skin. Jay pressed right back like he wanted to climb into hers.

He stopped suddenly and cursed.

“What is it?”

“I don’t have a condom.”

“I thought all guys keep one in their wallet.”

“I wasn’t exactly expecting anything to happen, and it’s been a while...”

“Fear not. I’ve come prepared.” And if that made her seem like a cheap floozy, then so be it. Better safe than sorry.

She bent to reach for her bag, picked it up and carried it over to the bed. She sat down, unzipped her bag and dug into one of the compartments for what she wanted. When she looked up to see what Jay did, she caught the look on his face—not judgmental or disappointed—just a pleased grin.

Tamara grinned too, relieved that she had followed her instincts when she’d thrown the condoms into her luggage at the last minute. She patted the mattress beside her.

Jay strutted over and took a seat, pressing his thigh against hers. “I like a woman who knows what she wants and goes after it.”

She released the breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding. “I thought you might have a problem with my boldness, especially after that little scene in the lobby.”

“That wasn’t a scene. That was just me being an assertive, take-charge male. And this,” he leaned close and took the string of condoms out of her hands, “is you being an assertive and responsible female.”

“I suppose we all have our roles to play.”

“I don’t play. I’m totally serious about this, about us. Can’t you tell?”

She could tell. And it scared her to death when she looked into his earnest, sky-blue gaze. She had never seen anyone more serious, not even James when he'd proposed. James had been proud and satisfied as if he'd just attained a prized jewel for his collection. He hadn't been as intense and passionate as Jay. Jay made her feel like his feelings could consume her if given room to breed and grow.

Jay crawled up the bed to deposit the condoms atop the bedside table, and then on his knees, he crooked a finger and beckoned her to join him at the head of the bed.

Tamara toed off her boots and inched her way up the bed. She never once took her eyes off of Jay's. His focus compelled her and made her pussy shudder with hunger as he swept off his hat and tossed it onto one of the bed post knobs.

She stood on her knees when she reached him. He cupped the back of her neck and pulled her close for a slow lazy kiss that would have knocked her boots off if she hadn't taken them off already.

His tongue stroked hers, the taste of him heady like an insidious drug, stealing her ability to think, to do anything but accept and enjoy. Not that she wanted to think. She just wanted to feel, feel him. She'd felt so little in her physical relationships. With James and a few other men in whom she'd allowed herself to indulge, there'd been efficiency and pleasure, but more often than not, frustration and especially a feeling of emptiness, a feeling that she missed something at the end of the day.

Tamara jerked her arms out of the jacket she wore. She couldn't get it off fast enough. She tossed it somewhere behind her. She kept her lips sealed to Jay's, meeting his tongue stroke for stroke, loving the sinful, erotic taste of him, the hard-muscled feel of him beneath her fingertips.

He slid a hand between her legs and caressed her slit.

She gasped against his mouth and her vaginal muscles tightened in anticipation.

Jay moved his hands to her hips and guided her back against the bed, easily planting his leg between her thighs. He pinned her beneath his weight as he placed kisses from her chin to her throat and back to her mouth again.

Tamara writhed beneath him, taking pleasure in the sensation of safety and security provided by Jay's arms caging her in as he braced his weight on his palms at either side of her face. She felt anxious and ready to have him inside her. She'd never been so ready in her life and moaned, her voice rising in wordless supplication that she couldn't contain.

Jay responded with a groan of his own, reaching beneath the hem of her shirt to caress her belly, doing figure eights around and teasing her navel with his fingertip.

Tamara grasped his biceps tight, just short of digging in her nails, trying to convey her urgency without seeming desperate.

Jay countered by rubbing his knee against her pussy and teasing her clit with his kneecap until she whimpered and wrapped her arms around his wide shoulders to bring him closer.

She pulled back slightly to whisper, "I need you out of these clothes, cowboy."

Jay looked at her, gritted his teeth before he buried her mouth in another kiss, plundering with his tongue, grinding his hips against hers, devastating her senses with his rough heat.

Had she said something wrong? For a moment, she'd thought he'd been about to object to her teasing pet name. There'd been a flash of something—regret?—in his eyes, and just as quickly as it appeared, it disappeared.

Had she only imagined it?

She took a deep fortifying breath when Jay lifted his head and stared down at her.

"I need you out of these clothes too, ma'am."

Tamara chuckled and raised her arms as he pulled her T-shirt up and over her head. He tossed it in the vicinity of his hat then ran his hands down her sides until he reached her jeans.

Jay made short work of unbuttoning and unzipping her pants, pulling them and her panties down over her hips and off in one fell swoop.

He slid off the bed and stood before lowering himself to his knees on the carpeted floor.

Tamara watched as he reached for her hips and pulled her forward until her pussy stood poised at his mouth. Her clit throbbed and her inner muscles clenched when he licked his lips.

He hadn't taken off anything except his hat. Yet she lay beneath him exposed and half-naked, feeling more powerful than she ever had fully clothed in her designer courtroom gear giving a summation in front of twelve malleable jurors.

"I've wanted to have you like this, taste you since I first saw you." Before Tamara could say anything to this, he lifted and hooked her legs over his shoulders and buried his face between her legs, going at her pussy the same way he had gone at her mouth—voraciously.

She arched her neck at the first touch of his tongue to her clit, groaning, clutching the bed covers to keep from tearing into his hair, or she might have snatched him bald.

Tamara felt Jay spread her labia with his thumbs, running his tongue over her vulva in luxurious strokes before closing his mouth over her and sinking his tongue deep.

She shuddered from head to toe, couldn't hold back anymore and fisted his hair in both hands, needlessly holding him close. Jay showed no intention of leaving her. He burrowed deeper, upping the speed and power of his thrusts until she writhed uncontrollably and undulating her hips against his mouth. "God...Jay!"

He smoothly replaced his mouth with his fingers, plunging first one then another into her wetness as he sucked and nibbled her swollen clit and almost sent Tamara through the roof.

When he lifted his mouth, curved his fingers up inside her just so, touched *that* spot and said, “That’s right, darlin’. Come for me, long and hard. Come for me now.” Tamara did.

Chapter 6

Jess watched Tamara's flushed glowing face, and his cock throbbed hard in his jeans.

No doubt he wanted inside her in the worst way, that he wanted her in his life like he had never wanted another woman.

The situation demonstrated insanity! He hadn't even told her his real name. She didn't know his real identity.

But he knew her, knew every line and curve of her body because he had been imagining them, seeing them in his dreams for almost two decades. He knew her soul.

Jess regretted not telling her the truth, and hoped that when he did finally spill the beans, she'd understand why he'd prevaricated and hadn't told her the truth right away. He'd explain. She'd have to understand. Besides, he hadn't really lied to her. He'd just gone along with her assumption—that she didn't know him and they met for the first time at the airport. What harm had he done?

Christ, he sounded like his impulsive, skirt-chasing twin, and that he would start resembling his twin in character as well as looks didn't sit right with Jess at all.

Tamara sat up and reached out to cup his cheek. He turned his face into her palm to kiss the soft warm skin there, nuzzling her hand as if he could gain insight and strength for what he knew he needed to do.

He'd almost told her when she'd called him *cowboy* with that tantalizing, playful edge to her voice. But the idea that she wouldn't look at him as she looked at him now—like he made up the center of

her universe—stopped him. He didn't want to disappoint her but realized that he already had. She just didn't know it.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Not a thing, darlin'. I've just tasted my dream come true, and I'm about to have seconds." He lowered his face to lick her moist folds, the taste of her exotic and stimulating.

She purred beneath him, wiggling her hips before she grabbed him by the ears to lift his head away from her. "I want you inside me, cowboy. Really inside me, if you know what I mean."

Jess reached for her rose colored, lacey bra and undid the front latch, slowly sliding the straps down her arms before discarding the scrap of clothing behind him. He guided her back against the mattress as he stood and spread her thighs with his knee before bending over her for a kiss.

He teased her with his tongue, darting it in and out of her mouth and dancing with hers before pulling back to nibble her full, luscious lips. "I thought you wanted it slow and easy."

"Among other things." She ran her hands through his hair and lifted her head for another kiss, this one making his dick painfully twitch in his jeans before she ended the kiss and pushed him back. "Clothes off, pardner."

She didn't have to ask him twice.

He snatched off his boots and socks.

Tamara slid off her remaining clothing—a pair of blue and brown western theme socks—and lay back in the middle of the bed like an offering. She patted the space beside her.

Jess couldn't get out of his jeans and shirt fast enough, leaving a puddle of clothes, underwear and boots at his feet before climbing onto the bed between Tamara's legs.

She instantly wrapped them around his waist and smiled up at him. "I'm ready to ride'em now, cowboy."

He stared into her eyes, losing himself in their dark depths.

He wanted to ask her so many questions, like did living in New York as a high-powered attorney make her happy. Had leaving her daddy and him and Jax and the rest of the ranch behind all been worth it? Didn't she miss the wide open spaces and clean air of Colorado? Did she miss *him*? Did she have any regrets at all about leaving?

He didn't want to inject a pall into their dealings. He didn't want to rouse her suspicions, but he had a hard time containing his curiosity about her life, his curiosity about *her*. It served him right for not being honest with her from the get-go.

What would Jax do in a situation like this? Easy—his brother would just go with the flow, and wouldn't think twice about twisting the truth a little if it suited his purpose.

But that wasn't Jess's philosophy.

It is now.

When he got right down to it, he acted no different than his brother, at least not where it concerned Tamara. In fact, where it concerned Tamara his dick led him just like any other guy. He hated that. He didn't want to be just any other guy to her. He didn't want to be a faceless stranger. But he had sealed his fate when he hadn't told her his real name, hadn't he?

"Hey, you still with me?"

"Always." He concentrated on the expression in her eyes and saw the sadness. She talked a tough game, but she couldn't hide *that*, not from him. He wondered what had put the sadness in her eyes. He wondered *who* had.

Jess reached for the condoms on the bedside table, tore one off the string and ripped it open. He watched Tamara watching him and took great satisfaction in the hungry look on her face as she stared at his hard shaft jutting between them.

She reached out to wrap her fingers around him and Jess shuddered at the contact, immensely pleased that her fingers barely met around the girth of him.

His size evidently pleased Tamara too for she smacked her lips like she could eat him in one bite, looked up at him and said, “Oh my, cowboy,” with such a sense of awe that Jess’s ears instantly got hot.

He shrugged. “Are you going to release me so I can give you what you want?”

“Maybe *this* is what I want.” She unwrapped her legs from around his waist and pushed him to his back, instantly straddling his hips.

“You like the superior position.”

“It has its merits.” She licked her lips, and the fact that she showed no signs of releasing him and obviously had something in mind for him made Jess vibrate with anticipation.

Tamara bent her head, took the head of his penis into her mouth, hollowed out her cheeks and sucked him hard.

Jess released a half gurgle, half strangling noise. Her maneuver sent unexpected waves of pleasure shooting through his center and made his balls draw up tight against his groin.

She moved her head farther down his shaft, sucking and licking her way to the root where she paused and let her light breathing tickle his balls as she deep-throated him.

Jess arched his back, silently begging for more and then Tamara moved again, gaining a rhythm as she added her hand to the mix.

He squeezed his eyes, pumping his hips just once, so close to coming. He *would* have come if he didn’t cup her face to stop her flow. “Not yet.” He slapped the condom into her hand, watching as she came to her knees and slowly rolled the latex down the length of his hard, pulsing cock.

Tamara reached under him to lightly squeeze and fondle his balls, and Jess lost it, tumbling her to her back and roughly kneeling her thighs apart before he slid a finger into her wet heat to make sure she was good and ready for him.

The scent of her arousal wafted up, invigorating him with a memory of her tangy flavor and making him salivate like the hungry dog he felt like.

Time to get this show on the road.

Jess took his cock in hand and steered it to her dewy canal. He nudged her opening, teasing her soft folds with the head of his penis before he drove forward, sliding into her on one smooth stroke.

Tamara gasped, caught his biceps then slowly slid her hands up his arms until she curved her arms around his neck and bent her knees to better meet his thrusts.

Jess lay still inside her for a long moment, acclimating to the warm tight clutch of her, closed his eyes when she flexed her vaginal muscles around him and purred. "Being inside you like this, I feel like I've died and gone to heaven."

"Don't be so quick to find religion and check out on me."

"Never." He slowly rotated his hips, all he could do not to piston them and take Tamara and himself over the edge right then. Instead he ground his pelvis against hers for several long moments before he pulled back, leaving just the head of his penis inside her.

Tamara whimpered at the loss right before he plunged into her again, balls slapping against her anus as he gradually built up a head of steam, pulled back and drove into her again.

"Ah...God..."

Jess easily found his rhythm, alternately pumping and undulating his hips, the friction growing between them until Tamara released this primal cry that fell somewhere between extreme pleasure and pain.

She wrapped her legs around him tight, clutching him from the inside and the outside, her entire body quivering around him.

Jess rode the wave of her orgasm and absorbed it, his own lust culminating on the cusp of hers until his raw growl joined her husky pants.

He gathered her close, taking her with him as he turned onto his back. He buried his face in the crook of her neck and took a long whiff of her spicy scent as if to brace himself.

Then his cell phone started ringing.

Jess leaned over the side of the bed to reach for his jeans and extracted the device from the case clipped to his belt. He looked at the caller ID, his heartbeat skipping when he saw The Double R's main house phone number on display.

He'd managed to lock out and forget about the outside world—Bailey, his father and brother—but now it all rudely barged back in to cut short his idyll.

Only if you let it.

"Do you have to get that?"

Jess put the phone back into the case, shaking his head. "You're the only thing I plan on getting at the moment." He gathered her close and tumbled her onto her back, the musical lilt of her giggles echoing through his head with the promise of endless tomorrows.

* * * *

"Where the heck are you?" Jax demanded.

"I'm at the Comfort Inn."

"What are you doing th—oh, wait a minute..."

Jess listened to his brother's voice drift off and could clearly picture the sly grin spreading across his twin's face in realization.

"You old dog. Is Tamara there with you?"

"Not at the moment. I'm in the bathroom. She's in the other room sleeping."

Jax chuckled on his end. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"I'm not a monk, Jax."

"Can't tell sometimes."

"Look, I'm just calling back to let you know where we are so you and Dad won't worry or call out the dogs."

"Too late for both of those. The man's been climbing the walls for the last couple of hours. He wanted me to go to the police to put in a missing persons report until I convinced him that they don't do that before twenty-four hours unless there's extenuating circumstances.

Before that he checked the news for anything about hijacked planes and car accidents on the I-70.”

Jess cursed under his breath. Bad enough he had to hide in the bathroom to make a frigging call. But the ol’ man could be so melodramatic sometimes.

Didn’t there being grown entitle them to certain perks, like freedom to come and go as it pleased them?

“So, how is our girl?”

Why did Jax insist on referring to her that way? But almost as soon as the thought formed, Jess chastised himself for thinking it. They both had considered Tamara theirs coming up. He guessed he wasn’t the only one who hadn’t grown out of the practice. He just thought of Tamara as *his*, especially after tonight and all they’d shared.

Shared under false pretenses. “She’s okay. Tired from her flight.”

“And you thought she’d be more comfortable sleeping off her jet lag in a motel instead of back at the ranch?”

“To tell you the truth, I wasn’t thinking. Things just happened.” Jess winced at the admission of weakness, steeling himself for his brother’s razzing.

Instead, Jax asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just...” God, how could he tell his brother that he had lied to her? How could he tell Jax that Tamara didn’t even know him? He’d always been the responsible one who didn’t tolerate dishonesty in anyone, much less from those he loved and cared about. His brother would think him a total hypocrite and rightly so.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing important. I’ll tell you all about it when we get home.”

“And when will that be?”

“Tomorrow.”

“You mean today?”

“Yeah, later today. I’ll call you once we get on the road. That way you can put the finishing touches on whatever welcome home celebration you and Dad have cooked up for Tamara’s arrival.”

Jax laughed. “You know us too well.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Later, pardner.”

Jess flipped his phone closed and pressed the device to his forehead.

He had gotten himself in a seriously tangled web here, but he promised himself as soon as he got to the ranch, he would begin to unravel it and tell Tamara his identify. He had to do it before she saw Jax or she would figure it out all on her own. He didn’t know how one way would be worse than the other, but he figured if he’d rather be told than to find out on his own like that. That she had slept with someone who had been nine years old the last time she’d seen him would shock her enough.

But I’m not a nine-year-old anymore. I’m not a kid. I’m a man. Surely she’ll take that into consideration.

A knock sounded on the door, and Jess leaped from the closed lid of the toilet where he sat to stare at the wooden door.

“Private party, or can anyone join?”

Jess slipped his cell back into its case before he opened the door and gave Tamara a big smile. “I wondered when you would wake up.”

She arched a brow. “You have some sort of plans for me?”

He slid his arms around her waist and leaned in to peck her forehead. If he told her the truth, he for darn sure had to make this charade worth his while before the bottom fell out. “I thought we could take a shower together.”

She returned his hug, pressing her cheek against his chest and making him shudder when her warm breath wafted across his bare skin. “Get clean so we can get all hot and sweaty again and then repeat?”

“Well, when you put it like that, most definitely.”

“I’m in.” She popped up her head to stare at him, stepping back so that he could get a full frontal view of all her naked glory.

She had the most stunning breasts he had ever seen. Round, full and pert, they invited his touch, her erect nipples and areole slightly darker and screaming for attention.

Jess licked his lips and anticipated tasting them as he closed the space between Tamara and him, barely touching her. He just wanted to look at her for a moment, admire her and cherish the moment for its quiet beauty because later on in the day? All hell would break loose.

He re-sat himself on the closed lid of the toilet and caught Tamara around the hips. He pulled her close enough to nuzzle his face against her belly, reveling in the feel of her soft skin and saturating himself with the clean sandalwood aroma of her.

She burrowed her fingers through his hair, fisting a handful before pulling his head back to look at his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, darlin’. You’re here with me.” He wanted to tell her that everything couldn’t be better because she had come back into his life, that he had been *waiting* for her all his life.

She cupped his face, frowning, and when she opened her mouth to respond, Jess just pressed his face to her stomach again, holding her tight.

“Make love to me, Tamara. Make love to me all night.”

She grinned. “Sure, Jay. We’ll make love until the sun comes up.”

Chapter 7

They showered again after making love and taking a short nap before their wake-up call came at eight a.m.

Relaxed in her own skin, but unexpectedly at ease around Jay, Tamara found herself walking around the bedroom naked as she searched her carry-on for something comfortable to wear. Or maybe exhibitionism ran in her blood. She definitely enjoyed Jay's reaction as she swiveled her hips walking from one end of the room to the other once she'd dropped her towel and left the bathroom after their shower.

She caught him pausing in the middle of pulling his own jeans on, his mouth agape when he visually followed her to the bed where she sat to pull on a blue lace thong.

"You keep walking around like that, and we're going to wind up back in bed."

"Have to get downstairs for breakfast and checkout."

"Yeah, right. Check-out."

"We do have a home to go to right?"

"Of course."

She felt his tension as much as he tried to hide it with a grin. Something went on with him, and she got the feeling that he hid something from her.

For the first time since she met him, Tamara realized that she didn't really know anything about him despite the fact that she felt she had known him all her life. She realized she made excuses for not being more discriminating with a man she bedded. Sure she'd had one-night-stands before. She didn't have anything against going to

bed with a man on the first date either. When she appreciated something, she went for it, because she wasn't into playing coy games of hide and seek. But she'd never been as reckless about sex as she had been with Jay.

She'd just met him.

Now is a fine time to wonder if he'll respect you in the morning.

"Hey, you're not nervous about going to the ranch, are you?" He sat down beside her, taking one of her hands in both of his and holding it as he stared at her.

Tamara returned his look, shoulders back, unintentionally pushing one of her best assets in his face. He didn't move his gaze from her face. She had to respect the effort it took for him not to dip his eyes down to her breasts when she could tell how much he wanted to from the way the bulge in his jeans grew.

She ran her nails across his balls before cupping him and feeling his shaft twitch against her palm. Emboldened and determined to get his attention off of her nervousness, she asked, "Who were you speaking to on your cell earlier?"

For the first time since she'd met him, he averted his gaze and Tamara caught his chin to bring his gaze back up to hers. "Jay?"

"The boss man worried about why we hadn't shown up as scheduled."

"I can imagine explaining our delay embarrassed you a little."

"A little."

"So, what did you tell the boss man?" Tamara wasn't sure if he referred to Jeremiah or her dad. The title described both men, officially and unofficially.

Jay shrugged. "I'm entitled to a personal life."

"I agree." Should she be concerned that he obviously mixed business with pleasure? Was she just business to him? And if so, what kind could she possibly be to him when they'd just met?

Or had they?

She considered his blue eyes, falling into them like a deep pool and almost forgetting why she needed to look into them, the mirrors to his soul.

He eased out of her grip and stood up to pull his T-shirt over his head. "We'd better start packing it up. Like you said, breakfast and then check-out."

She stood before him in just her thong, placed both hands on his hips. She knew she turned him on and decided to use it in her favor. She hadn't won more cases than anyone else in her firm the last two years running for nothing. "You're not going to get into trouble for bringing me to the ranch so late, are you?"

"What? No. I'm a grown man. My time's my own. As long as you don't have a problem with it then there's no problem."

She didn't say anything, just stared up at him, and he finally asked, "You don't, do you?"

"Have a problem?"

"Yeah."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. "I told you if I didn't like what you did to me, I'd let you know."

"You did." He kissed her back, burying his fingers in her hair. He pulled her up against his body and ground his hips into her. The rough fabric of his jeans and the hard bulge behind them tantalized her like a mouthwatering meal she wanted to dig into.

Damn, the guy had her throwing caution to the wind and forgetting all her senses and sensibilities.

The ranch, at this point, would be a welcome distraction, something to help her get a little perspective and distance from this situation. She certainly wouldn't be so preoccupied with getting inside Jay's jeans once she came face-to-face with her father for the first time in eighteen years. She wouldn't have time to be preoccupied with much of anything else at all. Her father and the situation with him demanded all her attention. Even away from him all this time, he occupied most of her thoughts and feelings.

She hadn't wanted to admit that to anyone, not even to herself, before now. But being back in Colorado, a little under an hour away from her only real family and the most important man in her life, she couldn't deny she had missed her dad all this time. She'd missed his strength, his wisdom, his firm hand guiding her when she veered into treacherous territory. She missed his gentle support and admiration when she achieved her goals.

Tamara deepened the kiss, letting her tongue forage inside Jay's hot, demanding mouth. She wrapped her legs around his waist and gently pumped her hips to feel the solid crest of his arousal rubbing her slit, the friction delicious and irresistible and enough to eradicate her morose thoughts, at least for the moment.

He tasted so good, pure and raw and honest like the earth on which they stood. He wasn't like James with hidden agendas and motives, using her to further his career and climb up the social ladder. He was an uncomplicated, young cowboy who wanted her for her and for now, nothing else mattered. She wouldn't let it.

After several long moments, she unwrapped her legs and let herself slide down the front of Jay's body to the floor, enjoying every delectable, hard inch of him along the way as he loosened his hold.

She looked into his eyes, shaken at the penetrating look he gave her, not sure she wanted to know more about him than she did right then. She wasn't sure she could handle it. The look in his eyes made him seem so much older than the twenty-five she had him pegged, made him seem more serious, like so much more trouble than a one-night-stand.

"I'll wait for you to get dressed, and then we can go down for that breakfast," he whispered, squeezing her ass as if for good measure and to give her something to remember him.

"Okay." She turned from him and silently finished putting on her jeans from the day before and a fresh T-shirt, all under Jay's watchful gaze. By the time she got to her socks and boots, her flesh quivered, making her want to strip all over again, thrilled to the idea of him

watching her, wanting her. He didn't seem the least bit interested in taking her though, seemed perfectly content *to* just sit and watch her.

Tamara didn't know what unnerved her more, knowing he wanted her, but that he willfully refused to take her, or having him take her just for the sake of a conquest. The former spoke of the type of maturity and self-control she envied in a man, especially a man as young as Jay. In her experience, guys his age had one thing on their minds—sowing their wild oats with any available female they could find. She'd seen her share. But of course the playboy mindset wasn't just unique to the young or single.

Married guys trolling bars without their wedding bands no longer surprised her. Younger guys claiming advanced years didn't shock her either.

She wondered what tales Jay told, what roles he played when the mood or situation struck him.

I don't play.

The memory of his words replayed in her mind, but she told herself she didn't need to worry about it, because once they got back to the ranch, this would all be over. She had other things to think about than her next lay. Although depending on how things worked out with her father, in particular, and her stay, in general, a distraction like Jay could be welcome.

They ate their deluxe continental breakfast in silence, Jay periodically glancing at his watch as if he couldn't wait to get back to the ranch and ditch her, Tamara looking at her watch, dreading their forthcoming departure and separation.

At a little past ten-thirty a.m., they finished their leisurely breakfast then headed back upstairs for Tamara's bag.

Jay sent her ahead to the elevator while he stayed behind in the room to make a phone call on his cell.

Tamara wondered if he called that beautiful blonde he'd spoken to at Joe's the night before then realized she had no reason to be jealous.

He'd left with her, after all, and didn't seem to be interested in the blonde beyond the time it took him to dismiss her.

After only a couple of minutes, Jay came out of the room with her bag, pulling the door locked behind him and heading toward her and the elevators with a grim expression on his face.

Well, if he *had* spoken to the blonde, it couldn't have been anything remotely good or romantic, not with that look on his mug.

Tamara didn't know whether to be relieved or upset at the fact and didn't understand where her sudden lack of self-confidence came from. It wasn't like she and Jay fostered a long-term relationship.

They took an elevator down to the lobby where Jay turned their keycards into the desk clerk and got a print-out of his receipt to sign before they headed out to retrieve his truck from in front of Joe's.

Outside, a beautiful spring day greeted them, the air crisp and clear, the sky the color of Jay's eyes with cotton-candy clouds, and the surrounding foliage bursting colors of burnished gold and green.

The traversed the relatively empty streets to Jay's truck in no time, creeping closer and closer to the moment when they would part company.

The silence between them weighed heavy on her shoulders so ponderous Tamara felt as if she would soon face a firing squad.

Her feeling of impending doom only intensified when Jay turned onto The Double R's acreage, slowing down several yards from the main house.

She glanced out her window, admiring the rustic façade and thinking lots of improvements and expansions had been made to the main house and its grounds since she'd left.

"There's something I need to tell you."

I knew this too good to be true. "That sounds ominous."

"It's nothing bad. Just something I should have mentioned when we first met. You'll probably have a laugh once you know what it is."

"Hey, you know me. I'm always up for a laugh."

Jay turned in his seat, sliding his arm across the back of hers just as the front door opened. Three men burst out of the house. One she recognized as Jeremiah, the other hobbling on crutches with one leg in a cast she identified as her father. The last one looked suspiciously just like the man sitting in the truck with her.

Oh...my...God!

“We couldn’t wait anymore and figured we’d bring the celebration out to you two! Welcome home, gal!”

Tamara gaped, looking from the three men coming toward the truck to Jay, or rather to—“Jesse?”

“Tamara, I can explain.”

She shook her head, a bitter taste in her mouth as she backed away from him, reaching for the door handle behind her. She got the door open and stumbled from the truck to face the three men coming toward her, two with their arms outstretched.

Jesse followed her, running around the front of the truck to catch her by the arm.

Guilt and a pleading edge tempered the familiar intense look on his face.

“You have to listen to me. Give me a chance to—”

“Explain?” She jerked out of his grasp and backed away from him. “You had an entire night and morning to explain!”

“It’s not as bad as it seems.”

“Right, because I’m supposed to be having a laugh at this.” She poked him in the chest with a finger. “Let me tell you something, *Jesse*. I don’t think lying is a laughing matter at all. In fact, I find lying quite a serious and *unforgivable* offense, especially when it’s done to me. And you know what I hate worse than being lied to? It’s liars, Jesse. Liars like you.”

“Uh-oh,” Jax murmured.

Tamara spared him a look and watched the grin slide off his face with great pleasure but didn’t give herself a chance to really

appreciate the effect of her withering glare before she turned back on Jess.

“Tamara—”

“You sleazy son of a bitch!” Good manners and modesty went right out the window when her arm swung out, and she felt the palm of her right hand collide with Jess’s cheek. The impact sent a satisfying current of electricity straight up her arm all the way to her shoulder and adrenaline shooting through all her limbs. “How *could* you?” Tamara marched toward the house, pushing through the three dazed men blocking her way and not stopping until she made it inside and halfway to the circular stairs leading to the upstairs bedrooms. She stopped only to avoid the petite, brown-eyed brunette she almost collided with coming out of the kitchen. “Whoa! I’m so sorry!”

“Ay no, which one of the men is causing you heartache? Young or old?” The woman wiped her hands on the apron she wore and reached for her. “They are all a handful and headache to deal with, no?”

“Yes.” Tamara went into the strange and wise woman’s arms without further words and held on, the only positive about her arrival so far. Far from a substitute for Jeremiah’s dear departed wife, Paula, she did help alleviate some of the shock of Tamara’s recent discovery.

She’d slept with Jesse Reynolds!

If she wasn’t so angry, she thought she might be sick. Sure the sex had been good, better than good as a matter of fact, and she’d enjoyed his company all the way up until the exact moment she’d realized his identity. But nothing could erase the fact that she’d spent the night and morning screwing a younger man she used to babysit as a teen. Ewwww.

She didn’t know which was worse and didn’t know what made her angrier. The fact that she hadn’t recognized him and had allowed his good looks and her hormones to rule her actions, the fact that he had lied to her about who he was, or the fact that she was so turned on by him!

He just couldn't be one of the little boys she used to bathe and read bedtime stories to *because* he turned her on, and anything else just made her feel plain icky, like a pederast or something.

Oh, let's not forget the worse thing of all that she had fallen from grace once again right before her father's eyes, not to mention Jeremiah and Jax's eyes.

She guessed this would all teach her a lesson for not wanting to know *Jay's* last name.

God, when she thought of all the things she had done with him, *to* him. She never went down on a guy so early in a relationship, if at all, never felt the inclination. But with Jess, she'd wanted to taste him so bad, and taking him into her mouth—all big and hard pulsing heat—had just felt so right, felt so *good*.

Damn it, he had grown up to be just like all the other men she dealt with on a regular basis—a liar, and a player only interested in one thing.

To think she'd thought about checking his driver's license, curious to see how far off the mark she had been about his age, not that it mattered to her, obviously. Little had she known he harbored a secret far greater than the gap between their ages. He lied about his very identity.

Bastard!

Tamara remembered how close she had been to searching for his wallet before she talked herself out of it while he'd been in the bathroom earlier that morning. She'd learned her lessons but good about snooping that way when she had found a strange phone number written on a crumpled scrap of paper in her then college boyfriend's wallet. She'd called the number out of curiosity only to discover her said boyfriend cheated on a wife and kid with *her*.

She'd broken one of the first rules she'd learned in law school—never ask a question to which you either didn't know the answer or one in which you weren't *ready* to know the answer—and gotten stung badly.

“Come. I have a nice devil’s food cake and a half-gallon of chocolate-strawberry-and-vanilla ice cream with your name on them.” The pretty woman pulled away and took her by the hand to lead her to the kitchen. She turned to Tamara on the threshold and placed a hand on her own chest. “I am Maria Consuelos. I work as the housekeeper here. And you must be *Senorita* Tamara?”

Tamara understood why Maria knew her name when she glanced up and finally noticed the pink and blue streamers criss-crossing the room from the ceiling but especially the big matching banner proclaiming *Welcome Home, Tamara!* suspended from the middle of the large living room. “Yes, I’m Tamara, and that’s what you can call me. Just Tamara. But right about now I feel more like an idiot,” she confessed.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It is the one who hurt you who is the real idiot.”

“I like your thinking, Maria.” It suited her a thousand times better than feeling like a doormat for the second time in as many weeks.

Chapter 8

“Well, I guess I don’t need to ask what happened between you and the gal.” Jeremiah frowned.

“Dad, not now.” Jess tried to make his way past, but Bailey raised a crutch to Jess’s chest, blocking his forward motion.

“I don’t have to ask, but I’m going to.”

Jess winced at the reprimand he heard in Bailey’s voice. He guessed he should consider himself lucky the man hadn’t *hit* him with his crutch. He had every right to. Jess loved and respected the older man like a father, didn’t like causing him any undue stress or pain, and he knew that the idea of someone, especially a man, hurting his only daughter would do just that. He hated like hell that Bailey might throw him into the same category as he had thrown Noah all those years ago, didn’t like looking anything less than honorable in his eyes.

“We just had a little misunderstanding.”

“Seems like more than a *little* misunderstanding to me.”

“I just need to talk to her is all.”

“From the looks of it, she don’t want to talk to you, son.”

“Yeah, Jess. I’d give her some time to cool off if I were you,” Jax put in.

Jess looked at him, hated to admit Jax and Bailey were right, but the fact glared at him. He cursed under his breath and stomped off toward the barn and stable.

A hard ride on Clipper would do him some good.

But when he neared the stall that housed his horse, he spent several minutes trying to calm himself down and get into a frame of

mind where he wouldn't just take the horse out and ride him into the ground. Clipper deserved better than that.

When Jess turned the corner to the horse's stall, the animal whinnied in greeting, looking about as happy to see him as anyone ever had.

Jess rubbed Clipper's neck, reassuringly talking to him, calming himself down some more, as well as calming the horse. He could kick himself for not bringing the animal a treat, wondering more and more if a ride would help. He'd just be running away from his problems, and Jess didn't do that.

But then he'd done a lot of things in the last twenty-four hours that he didn't usually do, lying to someone he cared about number one on the list.

When he'd first seen Tamara in the airport terminal looking so vulnerable and lost, and as far away from the intimidating, city-slicker, attorney-at-law picture he had nurtured of her over the years, Jess's heart had immediately thawed. The thoughts of anger and half-assed vindication because the girl had gone off and made a life for herself without him and Jax, disappeared. In their place stood reconciliation and the idea that if he could just get her to see him the man and not the boy she remembered, he could get her to care about *him*.

He'd made a grave error in judgment to say the least and now Tamara hated him if he went by that slap. More than the slap, however, had been her words that hurt, especially that *sleazy* part. He spent his life trying to be as far away from sleazy as he could get. Wouldn't it just figure that the one time he decided to act out of character it would rear up to bite him in butt? And the one person honesty counted with the most he had made the mistake of lying to.

Jess rubbed his jaw now, remembering the blow and the fire that had lit Tamara's dark eyes when she'd given him a piece of her mind. He'd actually been a little turned on by her anger. What kind of foolishness did he entertain?

“Hey, pardner.”

Jess almost leaped out of his skin before he turned to see Jax leaning against the door of the stall, long legs crossed at the ankles and hands behind his back. He looked back at Clipper and said, “You could have warned me.”

“Don’t get mad at Clipper. He knows what side his bread is buttered. Don’t you, boy?” Jax pushed off the door and made his way over, bringing his hands from behind his back where he held a fresh shiny apple in one hand. “Besides, he did snort, you were just too wrapped up in your moping to notice.”

Clipper neighed and nodded his head as if to agree.

Jax rubbed the animal’s nose and fed him the apple. Clipper greedily bit into the piece of fruit, finishing it in a couple of bites.

“Thanks, Jax.”

“I figured he’d need a little sustenance before you ran him ragged.”

“Not for the apple, although I’m sure Clipper appreciates it, but...just thanks.”

“Still need to go out for a ride?”

“I changed my mind about riding before you got here. At least until I calm down a little more. I’ll have to find some other way to work out my frustrations than running a poor animal ragged.” Jess turned to his brother. “How’d you know I came out here?”

“As kids and whenever I got us into a pickle or you got upset about something, you always came out to the stalls to talk to the horses. Didn’t have to ride them, just liked being around them when trouble struck, like talking to them could make everything all right.”

In a pickle—that explained his situation with Tamara perfectly.

As always, Jax had a way of putting things—accurately.

As a kid Jess had often sought the company of animals over people, preferred it. Animals acted uncomplicated, had simple needs—food, shelter, exercise and TLC—not like people with low self-esteem issues, jealousies or other axes to grind. If an animal acted

out of sorts, nine times out of ten he suffered physically illness and not an emotional or mental one. An animal either liked person or he didn't, and once he did, he would more than likely be loyal to the person forever.

"So, you want to talk about it?"

Jess shrugged. "What's there to talk about? I screwed the pooch but good."

"I kind of got that much but what I want to know is how. Jesse Reynolds, Mr. Responsible, Mr. Conscientious, Mr. Frank and Upfront—you *lied*?"

Jess grinned despite his misery. Like on *Seinfeld*, he felt like he lived in bizarro world, an alternate universe where he and Jax had traded places and personalities. Here in bizarro world, he played the impulsive, irresponsible twin and Jax played the cautious and sensible one. Here in bizarro world, Jax got to tell him about himself and what he had done wrong and what he needed to do to make it right. Here in bizarro world, Jess was miserable and without the woman he needed and had been craving for most of his life.

Wait a minute. That was the way things were for him in the real world too.

"So, what exactly did you tell her? Or not tell her, I'm guessing?"

"When I picked her up at the airport, she didn't recognize me."

"Who'd she think you w—"

"I don't know what she thought, I just know she asked who I was, and right then and there, I made a split-second decision to play along and be someone else, be the someone she wanted me to be—a sexy stranger she wanted to get with."

"You didn't think she'd be pissed once she found out?"

"I *wasn't* thinking, all right. Haven't we established that that's the problem? I just acted on impulse. I just followed my—"

"Cock."

Jess frowned. "I was going to say gut, but I guess cock works just as well."

“You dug yourself into a right deep hole, pardner.”

“Tell me about it.”

“But that’s what your brother is here for.” Jax slapped him on the back and grinned.

Jess just looked at him, confused.

“I’m going to help dig you out.”

“And how do you propose to do that?”

“By making her fall in love with me.”

* * * *

Jax could imagine his look mirroring his brother’s current gape, felt his own jaws unhinge at what he’d said.

He had no idea why he’d said it, but the words just flew out of his mouth like most things did from him—impulsively and without thought to consequences. But, after a moment of consideration, he had to admit it wasn’t a bad idea. How could getting a beautiful fiery woman to fall in love with him be anything but a good idea? Jax had a problem getting Jess to see the sense in his half-assed plan.

“And how is getting her to fall in love with *you* supposed to make her forgive *me*?”

“Now you’ve got to hear me out.”

“I’m listening.”

“If I can get close to Tamara—”

“No great hardship for you, I’m sure.”

“True. But the point is, I get close to her, get in her confidence, and while she’s falling for me the way woman invariably do—”

“Because you’re such a lady killer.”

Jax picked up as if his brother hadn’t spoken. “I’ll use the time I spend with her to sing your praises.”

“You don’t think she’s going to see right through that?”

Jax's eyebrows shot up as he wrapped an arm around his brother's shoulders. "Trust me, Jess. I've got a little more experience at this than you do."

"At what?"

"Wooing women. Making them trust me."

"Yeah. Right before you dump them and leave a trail of broken hearts in your wake." Jess shook off Jax's arm and stepped back to glower at him. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Jess, come on. Do you really think I would do that here, that I would hurt Tamara?"

"Not intentionally, no. But trouble and broken hearts just seem to follow you around, Jax. I know you. You'll start off with the best of intentions, but somewhere along the line things will go a little awry."

"When's the last time you've seen me in hot water with a woman, really? I've been a good boy for months now."

"I'll remember and tell that to the blonde I saw at Joe's last night."

Jax frowned. "Did you get her name?"

"No. But she was gorgeous, rude, and she thought I was you."

"Rude?"

Jess shook his head. "I don't want to talk about it."

If the woman had caused his brother grief, Jax wanted to know about it. They stuck together, watched each other's back. Jax offered to smooth things over with Tamara because of the close relationship he shared with his brother. That and he wanted to get reacquainted with her, to be honest.

But back to this rude blonde, what could she have possibly said to Jess that fell in the *rude* category? Sure, his brother could take himself entirely too seriously sometimes, but Jess was nothing if not perceptive. And the look on Jess's face when he spoke of the blonde told Jax that she had insulted Jess in some way and maybe Tamara too. That would explain the Papa Bear vibe flowing off of Jess, like someone had threatened or hurt his cub.

“Jess, talk to me. What did she say to you?”

“Nothing much, just showed her true colors is all.”

“True colors?” Jax grimaced. He honestly didn’t know what his brother meant. “What did she *say* to you?”

“It wasn’t just what she said. She behaved pretty nastily toward Tamara.”

“Probably just jealous. Tamara’s an attractive, sexy and self-confident woman comfortable in her own skin. That’s enough to threaten any woman.”

Jess just stared at him.

“Well, she *is*.”

“I’m not arguing with you. I’m just wondering how you got the ‘comfortable in her own skin’ part from less than a minute in her company.”

Jax shrugged, wasn’t sure how he got all that either. He could just see it, feel it. Tamara had always been brimming with self-confidence as a teen, a young woman who knew what she wanted in life. She had to be made of tough stuff and self-assured to leave her family behind at barely eighteen, and without a backwards glance, to go half-way across the country, live on her own and become a successful attorney. She’d had to be comfortable in her own skin just being Bailey’s daughter and living among so many people who weren’t like her.

Jax shot up his eyebrows as a light bulb suddenly went on in his head.

Jess acted too uncomfortable discussing his encounter in the bar, going all around the belt to get to the buckle and that could mean only one thing—the exchange between him and the blonde threw him for a loop, something that made Jax’s normally assertive brother self-conscious. “Did she say something racial to you?”

“When she found out Tamara and I were together she said *jungle fever*.”

“Oh man.”

“Yeah, my reaction exactly. That and speechlessness.”

“Did Tamara hear her?”

“No. Tamara waited on one of the sofas while I went to get us drinks at the bar. That’s where I met your friend.”

Jax mentally disavowed the blonde as a friend of his. Women he slept with weren’t always his friends, though a couple laid claim to friends-with-benefits. Most turned out to be one-week-stands, which amounted to the length of most of his relationships. And it wasn’t like he went around vetting potential bed partners regarding their political views or religious beliefs. Jax let his physical desire lead him, plain and simple. He wasn’t looking for a wife or life mate, after all.

However, one look at his brother told him Jess wouldn’t go for Jax’s reasoning. The blonde was just one in a long line of women that demonstrated how cavalier and irresponsible Jax had been in his past choice of women, proof positive to Jess that his brother couldn’t be trusted to treat a woman like Tamara with the proper respect.

He could see the thoughts written all over Jess’s face. His brother had tried and convicted him on the basis of his past choices, and Jax really couldn’t blame Jess. He would probably feel the same way in his brother’s shoes.

“Jess, I’m not that blonde. You know I don’t feel that way about Tamara.”

Jess sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “I know that. It’s just that her attitude, her words caught me totally off-guard. They made me think. They made me doubt.”

“You? Doubt?” Jax teased.

“I tried to put myself in Tamara’s place, feel how she feels being surrounded all day by people who aren’t like her. And you know what? I couldn’t do it.”

“Not many people would be able to.”

“If I can’t empathize with who she is, with what she goes through every day, how can I ever hope to make her see that I care about her?”

"It doesn't matter that you can't empathize. What matters is that you're willing to, that you *want* to know how she feels. That's half the battle."

"Why does it have to be a battle?"

Jax shrugged. "Hey, love is a battlefield, to quote Pat Benatar."

Jess chuckled and punched him in the arm. "Asshole."

"But I got you to laugh."

"You always do."

They stood in comfortable silence for several moments, then Jax put an arm around his brother's shoulders. "So, you're in love with her then?"

"I never said I'm in love with her."

"You never said you weren't."

"I care about her, Jax. I always have, maybe more than I should."

"How much is that?"

"You know what I mean. I cared about her when it wasn't always right to care about her the way I do—like an adult."

"You know what I think. I think you're substituting *care* for *love*. Admitting how you feel is the other half of the battle."

"Since when did you become such a wise philosopher?"

"I told you. I've been a good boy. Part of that is maturing and not playing with childish things anymore."

"Okay, Mr. Mature Good Boy, let's hear in more detail this plan you have to get Tamara not to hate me anymore."

"Before we do this, you've got to know, you're not just going to be battling Tamara to get back in her good graces. You're going to be battling society too. The blonde probably won't be the last with an attitude and something to say."

"We're not getting married. I just want to be with Tamara and see where things go."

"Seems to me, you've already been with her. That's the problem."

"You know what I mean."

“Yeah, I do.” He didn’t envy his brother. The man clearly loved Tamara and had a difficult time admitting it, especially in the current environment. Not to mention, Jess didn’t like to just see where things went. He liked to plan, organize. He liked to map things out, strategize how to get from point A to point B in the most efficient way possible. He liked to know exactly where he headed and exactly what he would do once he got there.

He’d never been in love, but Jax knew enough to understand his brother couldn’t organize or plan it. He couldn’t compartmentalize love into neat little boxes marked *The Way I feel About Tamara Carpenter*, *The Way Tamara Carpenter Feels About Me*, and *The Way The World Feels About Tamara Carpenter and Jess Reynolds Being Together*. Love fell on the outside of efficient and tidy. It got dirty and messy in the worst of times and confusing and unmanageable in the best of times—all the things that got Jess’s back up big time.

Jax still didn’t understand how his brother had gotten on Tamara’s bad side to begin with. The actions his brother described were *so* unlike the meticulous Jess that Jax knew. Sounded like he’d been a reckless man too in love to care what anyone else thought as long as he got the woman he wanted.

Clearly, Jess was too far gone already and Tamara was too pissed to care.

Jax definitely had his work cut out for him.

Chapter 9

“I don’t appreciate being ambushed.”

“What ambush? I told you I had a surprise comin’ for you.”

“You didn’t tell me it was the daughter I haven’t spoken to in nearly twenty years.”

Jeremiah paused on the front doorstep, slammed his fists on his hips as he turned and faced Bailey. “Now is that my fault? Besides if’n I had told you Tamara was comin’, it wouldn’t have been a surprise, now would it?”

Bailey growled. “Does she know about—”

“—the cancer? No. I ain’t told her...yet.”

“Are you threatening me, you interfering old coot?”

Instead of responding to his long-time friend’s question and insults, Jeremiah said, “I just told her about your accident fallin’ off your horse. I didn’t tell her how or why.”

Bailey nodded. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I want you to be civil to the gal.”

“I’ll be civil.”

“Nice wouldn’t be bad neither.”

“Wouldn’t that get her suspicions up?”

Jeremiah stared at Bailey, a man who was practically like a brother to him—his only brother. He couldn’t believe they stood there as if it was just any other day of the week, discussing Bailey’s estranged daughter’s long overdue homecoming and Bailey having an inoperable brain tumor that would kill him soon. “Well, how long do you think you’re goin’ to hide your illness from her while she’s here? You have to go for chemo, and—”

“I’m not the one who asked her to come here!” Bailey threw up his hands as much as he could while cradling two crutches under his arms.

“If you don’t hold it down, everyone’s goin’ to know what’s goin’ on for sure and long before you want ’em to.” Jeremiah watched as Bailey closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, jaw muscles working as he gritted his teeth.

“You think you and the boys could keep her occupied while she’s here?” Bailey opened his eyes and looked at Jeremiah with a silent appeal shining out of his brown gaze.

“I’ll do my part. And I’m sure the boys will too. You know we all love her. But you’re goin’ to have to talk to her sometime. And sooner or later, plain old curiosity and concern is goin’ to bring her around in your neck of the woods to talk to you whether you want her to or not. She is your daughter.”

Bailey sighed, leaned on one of his crutches, bent his head and pushed a hand through his long silver hair. “I know I’m stubborn, all right? And I know I ain’t exactly been fair to the child, but—”

“There’s no buts about it. Either you’re goin’ to reconcile with her while she’s here, or she’s goin’ to know everything before she gets ready to go.” Jeremiah opened the door and held it for his friend, ignoring all the grumbling and cussing he heard in his wake. “It’s up to you how and from whom she finds out.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re a pushy cuss?”

“Not for a couple of hours.”

Bailey chuckled despite the gravity of the situation. “What am I going to do with you?”

“The question isn’t what you’re goin’ to do with me, but what you’re goin’ to do with your daughter and how soon.”

“Seems like someone beat me to the punch and done something with my daughter already, at least *to* her.” Bailey pointedly arched his brows and Jeremiah rubbed his fingers over the grizzled hair growing out of his chin and jaw.

“Yeah, about that...”

“Did you plan for them to sleep together along with everything else you planned?”

“I know what you’re doin’, and it ain’t goin’ to work.”

“What, pointing out facts?”

“You’re trying to turn the situation around to bein’ about me and my boy when it ain’t about us. It’s about you and Tamara.”

“Looked like Jess had a little something to say about that.”

“You just worry about your daughter. I’ll worry about that fool son of mine.”

“Which fool son would that be, Pop?”

* * * *

Jax watched each man as they slowly turned to him in the vestibule and wondered what he had walked in on the tail-end of. His pop and Bailey looked right uneasy to say the least. But the latter man took no time rebounding to his usual cantankerousness.

“The fool son who upset my daughter ‘fore she even set foot on the property. And seeing as I can tell you two troublemakers apart, I’m guessing that wouldn’t be you,” Bailey said and gave him a pointed look. “Where’s your brother?”

“Out at the barn and stable. He’ll be in directly.”

“Not so sure he’ll be welcomed.”

Jax shot up his eyebrows. “By you?” It wasn’t like Bailey could demand Jess be fired like he had with Noah. The Double R wasn’t only Jess’s home. Jess owned part of the venture,,more responsible for its popularity and increase in revenue the last few years than anyone else Jax knew. Noah, on the other hand, had been a wrangler with no real ties in the community besides the ranch and the misfortune to fall for the progeny of the owner’s trusted confidant and friend. The man hadn’t had a chance.

“By Tamara,” Bailey said.

Jax put his arm around Bailey and felt the man's hard brown gaze on him as Bailey cut him a look. "You don't have anything to worry about with those two. I happen to have it on good authority that everything is going to work out just fine."

"Let me guess who the authority is." Bailey rolled his eyes, but Jax could see that he got to him, saw the man's smirk turn into a slight smile.

"Trust me. Those two will be making beautiful music together in no time."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Bailey grumbled.

Jeremiah said, "Well, I'm not wastin' any more time with you two fools. There's a piece of cake and some ice cream callin' my name and a right pretty gal I ain't hugged in a coon's age. I'm intendin' to rectify that as soon as possible."

Jax and Bailey both laughed as Jeremiah clapped and rubbed his hands together as if preparing to get into some serious devilment.

As soon as his father left, Jax turned back to Bailey with a grin and squeezed his shoulder. "So, going to tell me what top secret meeting took place between you two?"

Bailey just politely shrugged off Jax's hug, chuckling and shaking his head as he grasped his crutches and haltingly followed behind Jeremiah to the kitchen.

Jax watched him go, knew the old man had something up his sleeves and figured he'd find out what sooner or later. Weren't too many people that could keep a secret from him once he turned on the charm, much like there weren't too many women who could resist him. If he needed to learn something, he promised himself he'd learn it. But not before he started working on getting Tamara and Jess back on speaking terms.

Jax followed the path Pop and Bailey had taken to the kitchen and thought luckily it was a big kitchen that could handle two people in it who really wanted to avoid each other without seeming too obvious.

He watched Bailey take a seat at and rest his crutches against the island in front of him while Maria and his dad bustled around the kitchen getting everyone a plate and bowl for their ice cream and cake.

Jess—always one to stand up and admit when he made a mistake and never one to avoid an uncomfortable situation just because it would be easier for him—sat at the end of the island farthest away from the doorway. Tamara sat on the opposite end a few feet away from Jax.

He sidled behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders and gently massaging before he leaned in to give her a friendly peck on the cheek. “Welcome back, Tamara,” Jax whispered and spied the intense look Jess gave him. He felt his brother’s barely reined in aggression and wondered how Jess managed to keep his seat and not leap across the island to slug him, especially when Tamara reached up to cover then squeeze one of Jax’s hands before turning to smile at him over her shoulder. “Hey, Jax.”

“Good to have you home.” He felt her stiffen beneath his fingertips, watched her glance dart around the room before landing and resting on Jess.

“It’s, um, good to be...back.”

He heard the slight tremor in her voice as she avoided saying *home*, a tremor like she fought back tears, then she cleared her throat and squeezed his hand again.

“So, you going to sit down and have some of this Welcome Home cake, make sure there’s as little left over for me as possible?”

“Leave it to him, he’ll eat the whole thing by himself,” Jeremiah said.

“I’d be grateful. Better for my hips and thighs.” Tamara chuckled.

“Ay, I keep telling her she is not fat. She is perfect.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” Jax said and watched as Maria placed a saucer with a hunk-disguised-as-a-slice of cake on the island in front of Tamara.

“It is a celebration. Eat!”

Tamara grinned, pulled the plate closer and picked up the fork beside it. “Is she always so bossy?” she asked no one in particular but all four men present quickly chorused, “Yes!” before bursting out into laughter.

Maria paused in the middle of the kitchen with her fists on her hips. “Ay, then how come no one listens to me?”

Jax went to her, gently massaging her shoulders as he had Tamara’s. “Aw, we listen to you, Maria. We just have to give you a hard time before we do what you say.”

“And make me say things twice.”

“Only because we love hearing the musical lilt of your voice and your beautiful Castilian accent.”

Maria poked him in the stomach with her index finger. “You are *such* a flirt!”

Jax leaned in and kissed her nose. “But you love me anyway.”

She put an arm around his waist and stood on her toes to peck his cheek before giving him a sound smack on the butt. “Now go sit down and have some cake and ice cream.”

Jax saluted. “Yes, ma’am!”

Maria and Bailey finished doling out servings of cake and ice cream until everyone had a saucer and bowl in front of them and had started to dig in.

For a long time just the sound of silverware scraping across ceramic could be heard and Jax about thought he’d explode from the tension hovering over the room. The tension between Tamara and Jess alone practically suffocated him, overwhelmed him until he wanted to get up, grab both of them by an ear, drag them to the middle of the room in front of everyone and make them kiss and make up. Jax could see they wanted to.

Jax sighed and could see he’d have to dig in on this assignment and that neither Tamara nor Jess would make it easy for him. He’d always liked a challenge though.

“So, Tam, how’s business in the Big Apple? Litigation keeping you busy?” Jax asked, just for something to say and maybe get everyone else curious and to talking. The unnatural silence got to him, like having nothing to do. Even if the snooze button had been created for people like him who only saw a sunrise under duress, once Jax got out of bed, he didn’t feel right unless he had a sport to play or had some other way to work up a sweat. Perpetual motion best described him.

“Litigation is what it is. It keeps me busy and it has its ups and downs.”

“More ups than downs I reckon if the looks of that fancy luggage I saw Jess pulling out of the truck is any indication,” Bailey mumbled, but everyone at the island heard, including Jess, all the way at the opposite end of the island.

“There’s nothing wrong with being paid well for what you do,” he said.

“I don’t need you to defend me.” Tamara gritted her teeth and turned on her father. “But now that Jess mentioned it, there *is* nothing wrong with being paid well for what I do. I worked hard to get where I am and big deal if I like nice luggage. I earned it.”

“No one’s saying you didn’t.”

“Then what’s your beef? You haven’t said word one to me since I got here, but the first words you do let out of your mouth are a criticism.”

“Ain’t nobody criticizin’ anybody. Bailey’s just missed you is all. Same as we all did,” Jeremiah put in.

“He’s got a strange way of showing it.”

“Don’t see why I’ve got to show you anything. You already know I care about you.”

“How would I? The last time we spoke you spent the entire time outlining all my faults and the big mistake I made in leaving here. And since I’ve been in New York, you haven’t bothered to call or speak to me. So if that means you care, then yeah, I guess I know.”

“Phone works both ways, missy.”

“I don’t see why I have to make a move toward reconciliation when you made it perfectly clear how you felt about me leaving home even before I got involved with Noah. You just used him and his age as an excuse to punish me for wanting to leave.”

“If that’s what you think.”

“I don’t even know why I bothered to come back. It’s plain to see you don’t need me here, and that I’m far from welcomed.” Tamara pushed away from the island with an abrupt shove, the resultant noise of her chair legs scraping against the laminated wood floor deafening in the suddenly silent kitchen. She threw down her napkin and got up from her chair. “I’ve suddenly lost my appetite. If someone could just tell me which room I’m in...”

Jax stood. “I can take you.”

“No, just tell me.”

“I will show you to your room,” Maria said, showing each man at the table her wrath with a withering glare. She stood and put an arm around Tamara’s slim waist to guide her toward the doorway.

Jax stayed standing, and Jeremiah, Jess and even Bailey joined him as Maria led Tamara out of the kitchen into the hallway.

As soon as the women got out of earshot, Jeremiah threw his napkin down on the island top. “Well, what was that all about? Her first day back and you go and treat her like a pariah? I told you to be nice to her.”

“I know what you told me, but I also know that Tamara would see through nice like glass. I’m just being myself, warts and all.”

“Yeah, that’s for sure. But I know what you’re doin’ too. And don’t think alienating that gal is going to get you off the hook.” Jeremiah stood and pointed a finger. “Remember what I said, you old coot. I want more than a lick and a promise.”

“I remember, ornery cuss.” Bailey warily looked at Jax and Jess before glaring at their father. “Just leave me be. I know what I’m doing.”

“You’d better because I’m countin’ on you to make the gal’s stay a pleasant one and for you two to kiss and make up.” Jeremiah suddenly turned on his oldest, ignoring Bailey’s grumbling. “And that goes for you too. Whatever went on between the two of you on the way out here, you’d better do your best to make things right, or there’s goin’ to be hell to pay from me. Ya hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” Jess muttered.

As if Jess didn’t have enough to deal with worrying about making things up to Tamara on his own, Jax thought, now the ol’ man put the pressure on.

Without further comment, both Jeremiah and Bailey turned to leave, each in opposite directions. Jeremiah went passed Jax toward the living room and Bailey went passed Jess out the back door, presumably to his small ranch style house down the road a piece.

As soon as they left, Jess stared at him and asked, “Do you know what’s going on between those two codgers besides GOMS?”

Jax chuckled at his and Jess’s secret code name for Grumpy Old Men Syndrome and shook his head. “I haven’t the faintest.” But more than ever he intended to find out, especially if it had anything to do with threatening his plans to get Tamara and Jess back together.

Chapter 10

Tamara finished unpacking and putting away her clothes as if she planned to stay for a while, but after the scene down in the kitchen, she doubted her ability to make it through dinner before hightailing it out of Dodge.

Despite her age, heated confrontations with her father still left her breathless and near tears. And like she had when she'd been a young girl, she'd wisely run off to her room away from him. If she'd stayed in his presence, she would have said something she would later regret, or she would have cried.

Tamara didn't let anyone see her cry, not since she'd learned that once you let anyone know they could hurt you that bad, drive you to tears, that person had power over you. And no one, but no one, had power over Tamara Carpenter except Tamara Carpenter.

But boy did it hurt, holding in the tears until Maria had settled her into her room and finally left her alone behind the closed door. It hurt a lot to know that the old man still had so much influence over her emotions. She shouldn't care a lick about what he thought of her. She'd proved she could make it on her own, that she didn't need him to make her dreams come true, that she didn't need his approval. Why couldn't this be enough?

Because since she'd been a little girl and could see the sun in her daddy's smile she'd been looking for not just his unconditional love but his approval.

Tamara knew this as well as she knew her own face in the mirror, but try getting her to tell her daddy that.

She had half a mind to march right down stairs and over to his house to give him a piece of her mind since unfinished business still stood between them.

Tamara thrust her hands out in front of her to see them still shaking. She wasn't sure what caused it—the idea of another confrontation with her father or the aftereffects of Jax's hands on her shoulders.

Whew boy, she had been hard-pressed to act like his nearness didn't turn her on, or that the thought of him and his lying brother making love to her at the same time about drove her to her knees in a puddle of lust.

What *drove* her to even consider a threesome with two cowboys nine years her junior? Cowboys she used to babysit! Had she lost her mind?

Her nipples grew hard and tight, tingling at the memory of Jax's body heat, the memory of his clean tangy scent. He smelled like evergreen and aspen trees in bloom. And her breasts told her they had no nickel in a dime of denial, and didn't care what her mind thought, *they* wanted some action, and they wanted it now!

God, had they been erect while she'd been downstairs in the kitchen? And, if they had, had anyone noticed?

She'd been back less than a few hours, and she'd already been more embarrassed than at the most embarrassing incident in her life when her father walked in on her and Noah in the barn. At least back then she'd had an excuse, the stupidity of youth on her side.

What excuse did she have now?

If she admitted the truth to herself, it would pretty much be the same excuse she'd had back then, besides the youth factor. She'd suffered from raging hormones. It seemed like the older she got, the more she wanted sex. But not just any sex. She wanted hot, make-her-body-sing-for-several-days-after sex, which Jess had given her. Good thing too, because the memories of what she'd shared with him in that

motel room would have to last her since she had no intentions of letting him get near her again.

At least this is what her brain said. Her body made plans to play Benedict Arnold at the closest sign of an opportunity, the turncoat.

It had to be the crisp, clean Colorado air, something in it that made her appreciate the sensual so much more than the city air ever had. She'd never reacted to men in this gotta-have-him-now way in New York as she had since she'd been back and gotten a look at Jess. The fresh, unpolluted country atmosphere seemed to bring her closer to her more basic self, made her needs clearer to her, and intensified her wants.

Tamara closed her eyes now, letting the memory of that infamous day seep in, her father's anger and disappointment tangible forces riding her spine and tightening her heart in her chest even so many years later.

She'd thought herself so grown back then, that she knew it all, but her father had quickly shown her the consequences of her actions, that her actions didn't just affect her but others too. The others in her case had been Noah, and the twins who Tamara later learned *had* been in the barn, spying on everything she and Noah had done.

The thought of those innocent nine-year-old boys watching her make out with Noah had been as, if not more, mortifying than her father catching her. Knowing that she had fallen in their worshipful eyes crushed her enough that she felt numb by the time Jeremiah handed down his decree and fired Noah and her father grounded her for the rest of her time on the ranch.

For all of August, she'd been an emotional zombie, going through the motions of doing her errands, preparing for her trip to New York, but her soul not really into anything, at least not until the time came to leave.

The closer her departure date came, however, the more animated Tamara became, until she thought she'd scream for joy at the top of her lungs in celebration of her approaching freedom.

Again, the drawback to leaving had been the twins. Even if she did want to leave the ranch, especially after the debacle with Noah and her father, and eagerly looked forward to going to New York, she didn't have anything against the twins. She didn't want to leave them. But she had no choice. She had to move on, her life moving on a different path, and she couldn't take them with her as much as she wanted to.

The farewells at the airport almost tore her apart. The boys relentlessly clung to her, and Jeremiah stood back, fidgeting with his hat in his hands, eyes moist with unshed tears.

Her father hadn't even shown up to see her off. His absence had hurt as much as the boys' tears.

She'd held in her own tears like Jeremiah, hardening her heart against the snub and preparing to meet the world outside on her own. She knew that her dad disapproved of her and what she had done and probably would never forgive her for leaving.

Had her mom felt as abandoned and cold when she'd left or had she felt liberated?

Tamara jerked her head toward the door when someone knocked on it and took a deep breath before saying, "Come in." She thought better of it as soon as the door opened and Jax stepped into the room, all broad-shouldered, rangy and gorgeous young man.

She knew Jax because of the outfit—he had on a navy western shirt and jeans while Jess wore a white western shirt and jeans—but wondered if they'd been dressed exactly alike would she have been able to tell them apart. She used to be one of the few people who could. At least she used to be able to. But now, she no longer trusted her judgment. How could she when she hadn't even recognized Jess when he'd picked her up?

Tamara watched Jax take a couple of steps across the threshold. He paused, put his hands in his back pockets and rocked back on his heels as he watched her.

God, the man took her breath away, the same way Jess had when she'd first laid eyes on him at the airport, the same way Jess had when she later saw him in the kitchen after she'd slapped him. It didn't matter how angry she remained with Jess, she still wanted to fuck him.

That she still wanted him after what he'd done to her pissed Tamara off. That she wanted him *and* his brother pretty much disgusted her.

If her father knew what she felt and thought, he would probably say she'd been corrupted by her long spell in the city, that New York had finished the job Noah had started eighteen years ago. Little did her father know, Tamara had a mind of her own and had been perfectly corrupted long before meeting Noah, if corrupted meant wanting and needing to be with a man who needed and wanted her as much as she did him.

Why shouldn't she go after what she wanted without fear of censure? Why did someone in her life that cared about and loved her for her equal corruption?

Noah had Loved her For the short length of time that they'd been together, he'd cared about her and hadn't been shy about showing her. He'd been a good man—gentle, generous, an excellent lover and ten years older than her. This more than anything had been his biggest fault and cinched his banishment from the ranch and her life.

For a long time after he'd left and she'd gone to New York, she'd wondered what had happened to him. Had he managed to get another job on another ranch? Had he left McCoy for greener pastures like her and her mother?

She'd like to think that he'd been able to make a go of it somewhere else, and that because of her, his life hadn't totally been ruined.

"If you're busy I can come back later," Jax said, peering at her across the floor of the large suite where she sat ensconced among the

goose-down pillows proliferating on the lavishly furnished, four-poster bed.

The room had been aired out and prepared for her with tender care, and Tamara appreciated Maria's obvious woman's touch.

Jax crossed the plush carpeted floor and sat down on the bed beside her, leaving just enough room for propriety's sake but not enough not to make her uncomfortable.

Tamara shuddered as soon as his butt hit the mattress. She felt the heat of his body sitting just a foot away from him. When he reached out to pat her thigh, she didn't move, tolerating his touch like a skittish mare he tried to calm down. When she thought about it, the description wasn't too far from the truth. Her nerves had gone on high alert as soon as he'd opened the door and went haywire since he'd taken a seat beside her.

"Quite a scene downstairs, huh?" Jax said.

"Are you talking about outside or in the kitchen?"

"All I can say is you sure know how to make an entrance and an exit."

Tamara laughed. She couldn't help herself. Jax had always been able to make her laugh—during a pillow fight when he resorted to merciless tickling to win, or when he told one of his many, so-corny-they-were-funny knock-knock jokes.

He'd often claimed he would be a rodeo clown when he grew up, kill two birds with one stone since he could rope and ride with the best of them and great at making people laugh. Not many people disputed him except Jeremiah, who, when he got wind of it, said no son of his would be a darn rodeo clown!

Tamara stared at him now and saw the devilish little boy behind the adult man's smile. She recognized the fun-loving, rabble-rousing boy behind any prank that had ever been played on any of the cowboys on the ranch, her dad, Jeremiah or Tamara herself.

She realized now that on some level she had recognized Jess. She realized that her soul had recognized the intense and serious boy he

used to be hiding inside the intense and serious man who had made love to her in that motel.

Maybe had she spent more time with him before they'd come to The Double R something would have given him away. Maybe she would have picked up on some quirk or statement he made that could have only come from Jess Reynolds and not some hot and sexy stranger named *Jay*.

"Your brother had a little something to do with that entrance."

"About that, you know he's not usually so, uh, reckless."

"Don't make excuses for his behavior."

Jax grinned. "Funny you should say that because he's usually the one making excuses for my behavior since I'm the wild and reckless one."

Tamara returned his grin. "No comment."

Jax scooted closer to her and draped an arm around her shoulders in a chummy way that totally belied the instant hardening of her nipples. The girls tingled and juttied out as if he had slid his hands between her legs and his tongue in her ear, not to mention the moisture trickling into her panties at his nearness.

Tamara trembled and closed her eyes at the vision of Jax kissing a path from her lobe to her cleavage. She could almost feel his hot breath on the sensitive skin of her throat and breasts.

She opened her eyes and turned to see him staring at her. The azure color of his eyes turned almost navy, their earnest expression about making her spontaneously orgasm.

Why did these twins drive her to wanton lust at a mere glance or touch?

As kids they'd always been dynamic and engaging, drawing comments about their singular beauty from little old ladies and young girls alike. Aside from their good looks, they were intelligent, well-mannered kids if also rambunctious at times, whose charms knocked down the guard of most adults, ingratiating themselves with many.

As adults, however, Jax and Jess seemed to have grown into their full potential to knock the socks off of any woman with whom they came into contact. In the short time she'd been back in town, Tarmara saw the effect Jess had had on the female contingent at Joe's, the drools he'd elicited and the envious stares of which she'd been the recipient because she kept his company. She saw the way Maria melted beneath the full wattage of Jax's teasing smile and could only imagine the influence he wielded over the rest of the female staff and guests at the ranch and beyond.

Realizing that she was so not immune to their charisma highlighted a vulnerability to which she didn't want to give credence. She already felt totally insignificant with no reason for being at the ranch except a father who didn't want to acknowledge her existence.

"He's not a bad guy, you know," Jax said.

The statement confused until she realized Jax referred alking about Jess. "No, just a liar."

"Don't you wonder why he did it?"

"Not particularly." She reprimanded herself even as she responded. She didn't consider anyone above reproach, certainly not herself. And it wasn't like she had never told a lie in her life or during the course of her profession. But she couldn't remember a time when she'd been so outright dishonest as to keep her identity a secret from someone about whom she allegedly cared.

Tamara pulled back to glare at Jax, annoyed that he made her second-guess herself. She did enough of this at her job, constantly questioning the ethics of one legal maneuver or another against the needs of her clients and the firm. It balanced her acts delicately, and not easily or without reservations. "Did you come here just to make me change my mind about him? Because I have to tell you, if that's the case, you've wasted your time."

Jax shook his head before she could even finish. "That's not it at all. I came to make sure you got settled in okay."

"Well, I did."

“Good.” He grinned. “How about going out for a ride with me?”

She wanted to claim jet lag, but in all honesty, she really felt tired. In fact, she felt energized and eager to get outside these four walls, away from the house. A ride would do her right nice, and she figured the company couldn’t be beat as long as she could separate Jax from his brother and what Jess had done to her. She thought herself adult enough to accomplish this, even if she wasn’t so sure about keeping her hands to herself or keeping her hormones in check.

Maybe she could if she reminded herself of the trouble her hormones had already gotten her into when she gave them free rein.

The idea of working up an honest sweat in some physical activity more than appealed to her. Working up a sweat with Jax in some physical activity made her mouth water.

Stop it! It’s just a ride on a horse, not a ride on him.

But the latter sounded infinitely more pleasurable.

Without another thought, Tamara said, “I’ll meet you out by the stable.” and felt her stomach heave at the last few words.

Her biggest ignominy and her greatest childhood joys and triumphs had all taken place in the stable. She’d had some good times playing and working with the horses there and had her earliest sexual experiences there.

Jax squeezed her shoulder before he stood to leave, and Tamara watched him walk out of the room and close the door. She wondered what sort of new memories he could help her make in the stable to wipe out the old ones.

Chapter 11

Jess felt his brother coming before he made an appearance at the entrance of Clipper's stall. He stopped brushing the animal's hide to watch Jax lean a shoulder against the stall door in his typical relaxed manner—arms folded across his chest and legs crossed at the ankles.

His stomach dipped because when his brother relaxed, it meant exponential trouble for everyone else. "What is it?"

"I wanted to warn you before she gets here that Tamara and I are going out for a ride."

Jess gritted his teeth but said nothing as he picked up where he had left off brushing Clipper. He did everything he could to keep from looking at his mirror image's face. He didn't want to figure out whether that was a smirk of triumph or a look of concern on Jax's face.

"You okay with that?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Just remember it's all a part of the plan."

"Yeah. The plan." Whatever that meant, Jess thought.

Jax always had plans, especially when they had been little and not a day went by that Jax didn't come up with a scheme to skip out on chores or play a prank on some of the cowboys while they did theirs. Not to mention the typical switcharoo games they played on everyone except the supreme bullshit detectors in their parents, Bailey and Tamara.

Their little jaunt and hide-and-seek game in the barn the day Bailey had caught Noah Frost and Tamara together had been just such a prank.

Jess didn't know how, but he found out later that Jax knew about Noah and Tamara's previous trysts and had gotten wind that they would be arriving in the barn for another. Jax had thought it would be a great idea to see exactly what the couple did when they got alone together and had convinced Jess of his great idea.

The boys had had just a few seconds to hide themselves in the rafters among the bales of hay before the door opened and the lovers came in.

Jess's allergies had almost totally given them away when he'd started to sneeze and his brother managed to cover his mouth and nose to smother most of the noise.

He remembered his heart pounding in his ears at the idea of getting caught, especially when Noah glanced up in their direction. He'd been even more nervous at the idea of witnessing what Noah and Tamara were about to do with each other.

To this day, Jess didn't know if he had been upset or relieved when Bailey arrived to stop whatever happened between Noah and Tamara. He'd had an idea what would have occurred had the couple not been interrupted and wasn't sure he wanted to see a man touch Tamara that way, even if he couldn't.

Up until that moment he'd helped his dad and the vet deliver a couple of calves and foals. He had even watched two horses mate before, but seeing the act he had only witnessed between animals, or just heard gossip about were three totally different things.

Had he and Jax not been shirking their duties that day and Bailey hadn't been looking for *them*, Tamara and Noah probably wouldn't have been caught, at least not right then. Not a day went by that Jess didn't blame himself for what happened next. Sure, he didn't like Noah for touching Tamara so familiarly, for doing things to her that he felt he alone had the right to do, but he hadn't wanted his dad to fire the man.

He still blamed himself for the fallout every day since. He had wanted to apologize to Tamara a hundred times over for his part in

getting her and Noah caught. He knew, however, that nothing he could have said would have changed what happened or would have put the light back in her eyes.

Jess had to settle for glimpses of Tamara around the ranch the rest of that summer as she worked and studied. She rarely ventured outside a routine that everyone on the ranch knew was part self-flagellation and part rebellion.

Jess wondered if Bailey had ached as much as him for Tamara. He wondered if anyone felt her withdrawal as acutely as he did and decided it wasn't possible because no one cared about her as much as he did.

Jax pushed off of the door and made his way over to Jess, clamping a hand on his shoulder. "I'll soften her up right and proper. By the time I'm done with her, she'll be falling over herself to forgive you."

Jess glanced at his brother from the corner of his eye, and blood or not, he wasn't too crazy about the idea of Jax *softening up* Tamara even if he did it for Jess.

This was exactly what he had not wanted. Only back on the ranch barely a day and Tamara already came between him and his brother and wreaked havoc with her presence.

She can only wreak havoc if you let her.

Easier said than done. He really didn't have a choice in the matter. She couldn't be ignored as much as Jess would like to try and forget she existed. It hadn't worked in the almost twenty years since she'd been away. It certainly wasn't going to work now. Not when he knew she lived and breathed walking distance away and accessible.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, remembered the look of someone betrayed etched across her caramel features and knew that he had put it there, that *he* had betrayed her.

If she would just give him a chance to explain, she might not hate him so much.

Who did he kid? He wanted it all. He didn't want her to just not hate him. He wanted her to care about him as much as he cared about her. He wanted to recapture those precious, quiet moments at the motel away from everyone and everything when she had been his.

"I appreciate your help, Jax but you really don't have to do this."

"Like it's going to be any great sacrifice."

That's what Jess feared. Getting close to Tamara wasn't going to be any great sacrifice for Jax. He knew Jax couldn't *wait* to toss his hat in the ring and see if she would go for him the same way she had gone for Jess. He knew his brother, knew how Jax liked to compete because he did too. At least in this respect, they had lots in common. Must have been a Reynolds family trait bred into them from a father who didn't know the meaning of the words give up, quit or surrender.

"Jess, I want to do this for you and Tam. Let me help you."

His reluctance must really be showing. And if so, Jess wondered, what else showed? Could Jax feel his jealousy? Could he see it?

He hated being all balled up inside, hated not knowing whether he was coming or going and, especially, all because of a woman.

Maybe he'd be better off just letting it go and stepping aside altogether to let Jax be with Tamara.

Even though his heart twisted in rebellion at the idea, he couldn't deny the chemistry he'd felt between them when Jax had massaged her shoulders. He couldn't deny that something simmered between them. It wouldn't take much to fan the flames of desire between the pair, not with Cool Hand Jax on the case.

Just thinking about all his brother's lusty antics in college and all the different ways Jax had of separating a girl from her panties made Jess's stomach flip.

"You're not giving up before we even start, are you?"

Jess opened his eyes to stare at Jax, hadn't even realized before then that he had closed them as if to ward off a vision of his brother and Tamara together. "Giving up?"

"Yeah. On Tam?"

“Not a chance,” he blurted, meaning it. He wasn’t giving up on Tamara that easily, even if his brother was the other man.

“Good man. That’s what I wanted to hear.” Jax clamped his shoulder again just as Tamara turned the corner and neared Clipper’s stall.

Jess caught the way she slowed down as she approached and the way her back straightened, emphasizing her already proud posture, which consequently pushed her breasts out at a mouth-watering angle.

He watched his brother turn to her and plainly saw the look of appreciation splashed across Jax’s face, but couldn’t find it in himself to be angry with Jax. The man only followed his instincts. Besides which, Tamara was an attractive sexy woman, as Jax had pointed out earlier. Jess knew she would garner second and third glances from any red-blooded male within a twenty-mile radius, himself included.

Jess remembered the way she’d looked earlier that day, shamelessly walking around the motel room naked, and caught himself licking his lips as she neared.

Tamara frowned as she paused a couple of feet away from them, and Jess noticed that she had freshened up, changing into a black pair of jeans and an orange shirt that perfectly set off her complexion. She eyed him warily before turning to Jax. “Am I interrupting anything? Let me know and I can come back later.”

“No you’re not interrupting anything. I just touched base with Jess about some work that needed to be done around the ranch.”

Jess smiled at his brother’s cool tone. The man proved such a smooth operator it should have been illegal. It still wasn’t enough to put Tamara at ease, he noticed, since he could feel her tension washing over him in waves as she stood between them.

Clipper whinnied and nodded his head, relieving the friction, and Tamara looked at the animal as if noticing him for the first time.

She stepped closer, easily patted his head, smoothing her hand down his shiny spotted coat and grinning. “What’s his name?”

“This here’s Clipper, one of our finest stallions,” Jax responded with pride. Tamara turned to look at him with a bright smile that belonged to Jess. At least it had belonged to him up until a couple of hours ago before he’d become *persona non grata* around here.

“Actually he’s Sunspot’s Eclipse. I just call him Clipper.”

She turned to him, her look guarded, and he wished he hadn’t been the one to put that expression of hostile distrust in her eyes. “Beautiful name for a beautiful horse.”

“Want to take him out? I’m sure Jess won’t mind, will you, Jess?”

Jess ground his teeth. He darn well did mind, but he’d walk over hot coals before he let Tamara know that her going out for a ride with his brother on *his* horse bothered him. “No, I don’t mind at all.” He handed the reins over to Tamara then crossed the stall to retrieve Clipper’s saddle. By the time he made it back, Jax had already draped a blanket over the horse’s back, and Jess settled the saddle on top of it.

He reached to cinch the saddle around the horse’s middle, but Tamara stepped between him and Clipper and reached for the straps.

“I can do that.”

“I thought it might have been a while since you’d ridden...”

“It has, but I haven’t forgotten.”

And he could see that she hadn’t. She acted as perfectly comfortable and at ease with Clipper as he acted with her, and in no time flat, she had attached the saddle snug but not too snug over the blanket and around the horse’s belly.

He watched her take Clipper’s reins again to lead him out of the stall, and traitor followed her like an obedient servant.

“Well, I’ll go get Cappuccino saddled up, and we’ll be on our way.” Jax left before either of them could object, and Jess watched as Tamara shifted her weight from one leg to the other as she averted her gaze and almost compulsively patted Clipper.

“Get much riding done in New York?”

Tamara looked around her then gave Jess a head-on stare as if to say “You talking to me?” before she finally acknowledged that he could *only* be talking to her. “Not unless you count the carousel at Coney Island.”

“I would have liked to have seen that.”

She shrugged. “No big deal. You seen one carousel, you’ve seen them all.”

His arms ached to hold her and the fact that they were standing there like two strangers tore him up inside. He could barely believe he had been buried deep in her body and they had been wrapped around each other not a few hours ago.

Jess didn’t know what he considered worse—her being back only to ignore him like yesterday’s garbage or her not being back at all. He thought he could deal with never having known how it felt to make love to her, than knowing her body only to have it snatched away from him. To heck with that better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all saying. The pain of having her within arms’ reach, but her hating and mistrusting him too much for him to want to do anything about it, ate him up inside. .

Jess decided to leave her alone a second before Jax turned the corner, leading a saddled and spirited Cappuccino down the aisle.

“Oh, he’s beautiful too!” Tamara rubbed the shiny copper coat of Jax’s stallion as they neared, and like Clipper before him, Cappuccino welcomed her attention, pushing his head against her hand and whinnying in pleasure.

Tamara giggled at the animal’s antics. “I missed this a lot more than I thought I did.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, the look on her face far away and dreamy as she continued caressing the animal’s head and shoulders. “The feel of a horse, the earthy smell of the country... There’s just nothing like it in the city.”

“Makes you wish you never went away, huh?” Jax asked.

Jess held his breath waiting for her answer then felt the top of his ears heat with embarrassment at the naked regret he saw in Tamara's eyes when she opened them.

Leave it to Jax to be blunt and get to the painful heart of a matter.

"I had to go away, Jax. You know that."

Jess read between the lines. She'd left not just because law school in New York had been calling her, but because she couldn't stand to be in the place of her greatest humiliation and failure a minute longer. Yet, she might have stayed on and even gone to school in Colorado had Bailey showed her the slightest indication that she was still his cherished daughter. She'd just wanted to know that he loved her no matter what, and that she hadn't irreparably disappointed him. That the man had been too stubborn to do so had been all of their loss.

"You know we never stopped loving you, no matter what Bailey said or did."

She glanced at Jess before turning to Jax. "I know. And you know the feeling's mutual. I never stopped loving you either."

Tamara had her back to him, but he could still hear the catch in her voice as she stepped close to stand on her toes, wrap her arms around Jax's neck and peck him on the cheek.

That they'd shared a brief, friendly kiss made it no less of an affront to Jess. She might as well have stuck her tongue down his throat and rubbed herself against him.

Jess clenched his hands into fists at his sides and squeezed his eyes tight.

He didn't know how he intended to survive Jax's grand plan to get Tamara to forgive *him*, especially if it involved Jax and Tamara getting any closer than they stood right now. In fact, he thought he'd die a thousand times over at the thought of her being out and about on the ranch with Jax.

The ranch featured several vantage points to particularly panoramic views that could be turned into an excuse for a romantic interlude. Sunsets and sunrises were especially dazzling. Jess knew

that after so many years surrounded by high rises, smog and starless nights, Tamara would be exceptionally susceptible. She would be more than willing to show her appreciation of nature's wonders to the nearest available person. He remembered how much she'd enjoyed the mountain view from their motel room when she wasn't enjoying his body and the thought made him smile.

"...out now."

Jess shook himself and opened his eyes to stare at Jax and Tamara who both frowned at him. "What?"

"I said we're going to head out now. I'll look over the fences during our ride."

"Have a good time."

Jax curved his free arm around Tamara's shoulders as they headed toward the exit. "Oh, don't worry. We will."

Just what Jess worry about.

Chapter 12

The farther away they got from the ranch and Jess, the more Tamara's stomach churned and the more uncomfortable she felt, as if she left behind her best friend.

Why did she feel so guilty about leaving Jess and riding off with Jax?

He'd *lied* to her. *He* had betrayed *her*. He didn't deserve her soft heart or sympathy, far from it. But she couldn't seem to keep the cool and detached stance, not in her heart, and especially not with the memory of their time spent together in the motel haunting her.

Tamara refused to believe that she had fallen for someone who behaved so despicably toward her, someone with no redeemable qualities. She usually proved such a good judge of character, usually knew when someone pulled the wool over her eyes. But she'd had no reason to doubt Jess's sincerity, no reason to believe that the young man *Jay* had any reason to lie about his identity.

Why had he lied?

Jax had earlier indicated that his brother had a good reason for doing what he did, and she had to admit that curiosity almost tempted her to ask him—almost.

Had it just been to get her into bed? Would she have slept with him had she known his real identity? Tamara couldn't really say one way or the other but she doubted she would have entertained the thought of being intimate with Jess. Too much baggage existed between them, too much history. She still saw him as a kid and the fact that he'd pulled that little identity game on her at the airport didn't help matters.

Why?

She knew she appeared relatively attractive to the opposite sex, but she functioned under no illusions to believe that her allure was irresistible. Not enough to make Jess act so out of character, to make him lose all sense of decency and reason and lie to someone he knew and cared about.

“You’re mighty quiet over there. Anything you want to talk about?”

Tamara turned her head to look at Jax, momentarily thrown by the familiar tone of his voice, thrown by the sexy drawl. Thrown by how much he sounded like Jess.

She mentally kicked herself. Damn it, she needed to stop thinking about Jess, which proved a pretty tall order when his mirror image rode not more than ten feet away from her.

“Nothing you can help me with,” she said and turned her head to admire the scenery they were riding by. She unintentionally got lost in the lush green and brown countryside below them and the view of the sun beginning to dip low behind the mountains on the western horizon.

She’d forgotten how breathtaking this country could be, how homesick it could make a body.

“I’m a good listener.”

Tamara smiled as she turned back to Jax to find him and his horse riding much closer to her. She’d been so absorbed by the landscape she hadn’t even heard their approach.

She looked at the earnest expression on Jax’s face and wanted to spill her guts—not just about what had happened between her and Jess, but what had happened with James. But from there it would have been just a hop, skip and a jump to spilling the beans about a whole lot of other things that he just didn’t need to know or probably didn’t want to hear.

Tamara wasn’t good at sharing confidences. She never had been. She’d always been a bit of a loner on the ranch except when it came

to immediate family, and she had stayed that way when she went away to college because saw no reason to change. She didn't fit in with any of the various factions except those bent on excelling in their studies and that group, like her, wasn't interested in socializing except under duress and unless it would further their academic goals.

She talked a good game at work, proved proficient at mixing when she needed to, at rubbing elbows with the bigwigs and the clients of her firm, but when it came to intimates she kept close to her, the circle almost didn't exist.

James had been the closest thing to a confidant she had had, and he had been a poor excuse for one when she got right down to it. She knew about and had shared more with Jess since she'd been back than she had with James their entire time together.

Tamara had never felt comfortable enough with her fiancé to tell him her innermost secrets or to reveal her vulnerabilities. When she got right down to it, he had done her a favor by dumping her. What kind of marriage would they have had, really? She would have been making the same mistake of incompatibility that her own parents had made.

She didn't want the relationship her parents had had. She wanted the sort of relationship that Jeremiah and Paula had had.

Tamara knew that her father's friends hadn't had the ideal relationship and that everything wasn't always sunshine and kisses for them. They'd gone through some rough patches, had their disagreements like any other married couple, but for every disagreement or moment of unhappiness between them, they worked that much harder to make sure the good times outnumbered the bad.

Vaguely, she wondered if Jeremiah had ever kept a secret or lied to Paula.

But you're not married to Jess. You don't have anything beyond a crushed ego invested. Better to cut your losses now than to devote any more time or energy to something doomed to failure and that shouldn't have started in the first place.

“Right here’s a good spot to rest for a spell.”

Tamara dismounted, took Clipper’s reins, and led him toward the stream several yards away, following Jax and Cappuccino.

In synch, the horses lowered their heads and drank.

The stream, leading to a pristine waterfall in the mountains yonder, appeared cool and refreshing and tempted Tamara on a visceral level.

She closed her eyes and could see herself naked and frolicking with Jess and Jax beneath the force of the falls, the cold water making her nipples stand at attention for both men’s sucking and viewing pleasure.

Tamara licked her lips and opened her eyes with a start when she felt Jax’s hands on her shoulders and his lips near her ear.

“Thinking about going for a dip?”

“You read my mind.” She turned to face him and smiled. “The water just looks so good.”

“Feels even better.” Jax winked, took a couple of steps back and tossed his hat aside right before he began pulling off his boots.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting ready to go for a dip. Care to join me?”

Everything in her said she shouldn’t, that it would be a mistake, bigger than going to bed with Jess had been. But her heart fluttered at the idea of making at least half her fantasy come true, even though she knew the water must be a bracing forty degrees, if not colder. Sure spring abounded but she wouldn’t dare underestimate the cold of the Colorado Rockies.

“You’re insane.”

“Suit yourself. You can watch me enjoy myself then.”

And watch she did, feeling part voyeur and part honored guest at a Chippendale’s stage show when Jax finished pulling off his boots and proceeded to peel off his jeans.

Something unfurled and fluttered low in her belly at the sight of his long lightly-tanned legs, at the material of his black boxer briefs clinging to the lean tight muscles of his thighs.

Tamara just barely held in a gasp as Jax teased the waistband of his underwear before sliding his hands up to the buttons of his shirt. She glanced up at his face to find a wicked smile teasing the corners of his full, sensual mouth as if he knew she wondered whether he'd meant *skinny* dip when he'd invited her into the water with him.

Jax finished taking off his shirt to finally stand before her in just his underwear and a smile, and Tamara took a deep breath to steady herself.

He looked just as gorgeous as Jess, but then she hadn't expected anything less. He had a few distinguishing marks, however, the most prominent being a jagged scar that ran six inches in length down his right knee.

The football injury she'd heard about years ago came to mind.

Jeremiah had called her in New York with news of Jax's injury on the field. She had been buried deep in one of the biggest cases of her career at the firm. She hadn't been able to come up for air to do things like eat and sleep, much less travel halfway across the country for a hospital visit. She'd had to settle for giving Jax a call after his surgery but regretted not coming to see him in person. She regretted missing so *many* significant moments in his and Jess's lives—the boys' baseball team taking the championship in little league three years straight, Jax's first game as starting running back in high school, pageants, plays, graduations.

Damn, when she thought about it, she realized she'd been remiss with keeping in touch, and she regretted a lot of things that concerned her boys.

Her boys—she'd probably always think of them this way no matter how old they got. And she had allowed the differences between herself and her father to spill into her relationship with Jax and Jess when she should have been doing everything she could to

preserve the relationship. They and her father and Jeremiah were all the family she had, after all.

Jax followed her gaze and smiled. "I know, it looks wicked, but it wasn't that bad."

"It looks like it hurt."

"It did." His expression turned solemn, but he instantly perked up, bending slightly to knock his knuckles against his shin. "Between football and the rodeo, I've got enough plates, pins and screws in this old body to make going through airport security a fun adventure."

"Regular bionic man, huh?"

"To say the least." He chuckled.

That he could laugh about it made her smile, though she knew how agonizing his injuries and the resultant rehabilitation must have been. She remembered how hard it had been for her when she'd suffered a knee injury that prevented her getting in her daily morning jog. And she would never be a professional athlete who ate, slept and dreamed a sport the way she knew Jax had with football. "Rodeo too?"

He shrugged. "Guy has to get his adrenaline rush some kind of way."

Hers just happened to be the unexciting practice of law. Still, Tamara ran into some clients and opponents in the legal arena as ornery as an untamed horse or irritated bull though.

She'd never had any great weakness for the rodeo or its participants like so many other women she knew who fantasized about cowboys and the cowboy way. She'd grown up around cowboys and ranchers and knew each a job as well as a way of life. Tamara wasn't impressed by cowboys and their way of life didn't hold any romantic mystique for her. But just the idea of seeing Jax atop a bucking bronco or bull trying not to be thrown made her panties damp and her nipples tingle.

"Guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do," she said.

"Change your mind yet?"

She looked out over the peaceful stream then back to him. “I don’t think so.”

“Suit yourself.” He turned and headed toward an outcropping of rocks past a cluster of aspen and other trees she had long since forgotten the names of. Tamara got a sweet view of the most perfectly round, tight ass she had ever seen this side of a brother.

Damn, but he looked fine!

It would probably be wise to stay on dry land and keep her distance. She was already wet enough and knew it could only get worse the way her pussy clenched and throbbed at the mere sight of Jax half-naked. If she got in the water with him, she didn’t think she could keep her hands off of him.

Hadn’t she had sex with what had to be the sexiest man in Colorado not several hours ago? How could she be so hot and ready for a go-round with his brother now? She’d never been this randy and hungry for sex before.

What gave?

Despite all her arguments against it, she found her feet following the path Jax had taken through the forest to where the stream ran deeper. She couldn’t help herself.

She watched as he dove into the water, cutting the water cleanly like a knife and looking so good and athletic doing it that he took her breath away.

Jax’s head popped up several yards away from shore after a few moments and Tamara laughed as he shook his head like a drenched pup.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. “The water’s great! You should come in.”

Somehow, she thought she’d be in for a rude awakening if she accepted his invite.

Jax struck her as an adventurer, someone who did things just for the hell of it and to get a rise out of people. Tamara considered herself a bit of an adventurer too, but she practicality made her draw the line

at hypothermia. “I’ll pass,” she said, but continued to watch as Jax turned onto his back, closed his eyes and floated with the current as the late afternoon sun bathed his body. She could see why he had a tan, imagined he came out here as often as time allowed to catch some rays when he wasn’t working around the ranch shirtless any chance he got.

After a moment, she took a seat on the grass, pulled her knees toward her chest, wrapped her arms around them and leaned her back against one of the lush-leaved trees. She lifted her face toward the sky, enjoying the tangy spring breeze blowing in off the stream, the scent of moist grass and aspen trees heavy in the air.

Looking at Jax so comfortable with his body and relaxed in the water, she wondered how sex would be with him. Would he be as good as his brother? Better? Certainly, he’d be different, but in what way and would she be able to tell their styles apart?

From what she knew of the twins, she thought Jax would be more inventive and playful, might even be open to some kink. He, more than Jess, would probably be more receptive to the idea of a ménage, not that she’d ever bring it up, of course.

It wasn’t like *she* had ever engaged in kink herself, unless she counted a lover licking and sucking her toes or her licking melted chocolate and whipped cream off of a lover’s cock. And she certainly had never engaged in a threesome, had never even thought about one—until now.

James had been so straight-laced in bed the idea of anything except the missionary position put him into a lather and not a good one. Public displays of affection proved another taboo for James so Tamara hadn’t even entertained dabbling in a little public or semi-public foreplay and sex. The idea of him going down on her totally repulsed him, though he welcomed the favor from her. What man, straight-laced or not, would turn down good head?

God, the more she thought about James and all his little idiosyncrasies, the more she wondered why she even bothered to stay

in the relationship as long as she had, and the more she wondered why she accepted his marriage proposal in the first place.

Of course, her fiancé's shortcomings and her realizations of same didn't mean she needed to go out and have a mad torrid affair with a pair of too-gorgeous-and-young-for-their-own-good cowboys. She couldn't make up for years of emotional and erotic starvation with recklessness, or at least she shouldn't. She had already made one of the biggest mistakes of her life jumping into bed with Jess without knowing more about him than his first name, and that had been false. She needed to take things slow, very slow, as in don't go there at all.

But her body had other ideas, burgeoning and swelling in some places, moistening and warming up in others at the thought of the twins' hands on her, at the thought of Jax entering her from behind while his brother molded his hands to her breasts and thrust his tongue in her mouth to muffle and swallow her inevitable cries of pleasure.

Tamara got so lost in her raunchy flight of imagination that she didn't notice Jax when he swam over to the falls and pulled himself up onto the rocks to stand just under the cascade of crystal clear water.

Her heart fluttered at the sight of him in bas-relief, his virility reaching out to her, clutching her internal organs like a fist.

Jax tilted back his head, face aimed at the spray, chestnut hair plastered to his skull. Droplets of water glistened against his bronze skin and more sluiced down and over the hard ridges and muscles of his pecs and abs.

He looked like a Greek god, unaware of his surroundings, uninhibited, just enjoying the moment—one with nature.

And, God help her, she wanted to be one with him.

Tamara licked her lips at the thought. Her pussy convulsed when Jax lowered his head and turned to direct his gaze at her the same instant a wolf's bay rose and echoed in the distance.

She felt like a butterfly pinned to the back of a display case, unable to move beneath the intensity of his sky-blue eyes except when the wolf's howl made shudders ride down her spine.

Tamara had never felt so uninhibited and wild in her life, so in danger and dangerous. She didn't know if the idea of being caught by human eyes excited her. She didn't know if the idea of having sex with Jax surrounded by nothing but trees and any untamed animals that might be in the area excited her. She didn't know if the idea of having him take her, right there out in the open, just raw and primitive like the nature surrounding them excited her. She just knew she was excited.

Jax didn't smile or wave or wink as she expected him to, didn't make any motion of invitation, just stared at her as if waiting for her to come to the decision on her own.

She'd never been shy about her sexuality and saw no reason to be shy now.

Tamara grasped the hem of her shirt, only losing sight of him for the moment it took her to pull the garment up and over her head. She neatly folded and placed it on the ground beside her then reached for the fasteners on her jeans—first button, then zipper—before she started to peel off her pants.

Chapter 13

Jax's heart thudded so hard that if he hadn't been under the waterfall already, his hearing still would have been dulled by the sound of thunder crashing in his head. The mental roar of his lust and the blood rushing straight from his head to his cock—hardening his shaft until he could have pounded the stones around him into dust—made him lightheaded.

There'd be no way to hide his erection from Tamara, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to anymore. He'd been making a valiant effort all afternoon and evening, trying to keep his distance, trying to make sure that she didn't know exactly how turned on he felt. But the longer he stayed in her company the more impossible this situation became.

Part of the reason he'd jumped into the stream had been to get away from Tamara and cool off the critter in his britches itching to start trouble. He'd been both relieved and upset that she hadn't accepted his multiple invitations then just as quickly wanted to kick himself for trying to sabotage his own plans to keep his hands off of her.

This half-assed plan he had to get Tamara to forgive Jess might be harder to execute than he had first thought, especially with *him* panting after the woman with every intention of cock-blocking.

He saw the error of his arrogance. He thought he could be in her company extolling the virtues of his brother without falling prey to the very same impulses that led to his brother's downfall in the first place.

Jax watched her approach on long shapely legs that slowly disappeared beneath the water as she came farther out into the stream before diving beneath the water.

He held his breath until she emerged several moments later a few yards from him.

She scissor-kicked the last several feet, closing the distance between them before climbing up onto the rocks to stand before him.

Her mink brown hair dripped water onto her shoulders and down her back, the copper highlights shimmering beneath the fading sunlight.

Jax reached up a hand to take a wavy tendril between his forefinger and thumb, enjoying the weight and soft texture. “Beautiful.”

“Cold,” she said through chattering teeth.

He laughed at her histrionics, wrapped an arm around and pulled her close. “Anybody ever tell you you’re a drama queen?”

“All the time. It’s an occupational hazard.”

“I can imagine.” He turned serious as he looked at her. “I brought a towel and you can wrap yourself in Cappuccino’s blanket if you’re still cold after you dry off.”

“Came prepared, huh?”

He shrugged. “Never hurts.”

She remained silent and he wondered what went through that sharp mind of hers, wondered if she knew exactly how prepared he’d come. She was a smart girl after all, and he could just see her wheels spinning.

“Maybe we’d better start heading back now. The sun’ll be down soon. Don’t want to get caught out here in the dark.”

“There’s a couple of things I’d like to do first.” He just wanted one taste. He would take one taste, and he wouldn’t touch her again.

Jax knew he lied to himself as he lowered his head to kiss her. He watched her close her eyes and tilt her head to one side right before he closed his own eyes and tilted his head to the opposite side.

He teased her lips with his tongue first, running the tip of it along the seam of her generous, soft mouth before she parted her lips on a sigh and let him in.

Her acquiescence undid him.

Jax let instincts take over, plunging in his tongue to stroke hers, drawing a long mewl of pleasure from her that vibrated down through his toes.

He reached up to wrap his fingers in her hair, fisting the wet strands at the base of her skull and guiding her closer. His cock throbbed as he held her head just so, lavishing her mouth with nips and kisses and long slow licks that left them both breathless.

Jax circled her body with his free arm, bringing her closer and caging her in as he ground his hips against her center. She swiveled her hips and ground back, and he swore he could feel the heat of her slit through her lacey coral boy shorts and despite the cool water pounding down just to the side of them.

She pressed closer to him, flattening and rubbing her breasts against his chest. The lacey cups of her matching bra sent a little jolt of electricity through his nipples, and Jax groaned. He felt pre-cum forming on the tip of his dick. His balls turned heavy and tight, prepared ready for release. He grew close, so close—too close but couldn't seem to stop himself from touching her.

Jax enfolded her in his arms, gathered her close and lifted her just as Tamara wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck, clinging like a vine.

It appeared his little filly didn't want to stop touching either.

Until she pulled her head away from him, panting as she stared down into his face. "We shouldn't be doing this."

"Why not?" He steeled himself for her response. He didn't know how he would feel if she said they shouldn't be doing this because she still had feelings for Jess, even if hearing that should have been his number one priority.

"It's too soon."

“After Jess?”

She slid her legs from around his waist, and Jax let her slide down the front of his body until she stood on her own two feet to look up at him.

He didn’t release her though, unwilling to give her the distance she needed to totally shut things down between them, unwilling to deprive himself of her female heat.

“I never should have gone to bed with him the way I did,” she murmured.

At least she hadn’t said she shouldn’t have gone to bed with him at all. He had something to work with, something in his and Jess’s favor.

Looking into Tamara’s onyx eyes, he no longer remembered exactly what he planned when he’d first invited her out riding. He no longer thought about her as belonging just to Jess, and he knew what he did, what he thought and felt, wrong, at the very least unprecedented.

He and Jess had never shared a woman, never come close. He had his own likes and dislikes, his own courting style and so did Jess and never the twains should meet. But he could see falling for Tamara, half-way there already and could understand what had made his brother act so out of character and take Tamara to a motel to make love.

He had no illusions that’s what happened between them, whether either of them admitted it or not. He knew the truth, that it wasn’t just sex. He knew too that he felt the same way about Tamara as his brother did, and he wasn’t willing to let her go either.

Are you willing to share her?

Whoa, where had *that* come from?

Admittedly, he’d done some freaky things in the bedroom in the past—spanking his partner, engaging in some light bondage where he had cuffed his partner and other occasions when he had allowed his partner to cuff and even blindfold him.

He'd even briefly dated a polyamorist back in college, a bi-racial filly who proved more adventurous and daring than him when it came to sex. But he didn't fully understand the philosophy of the movement or the depth of her boldness until long after he and Muse Meyers had parted ways and he'd bumped into her in Reno during his rodeo days years later.

He'd questioned and teased her about her move to the wicked city, and she'd confided that she belonged in the city, where people readily accepted her lifestyle if they noticed it at all. He thought at first she'd been talking about her penchant for white guys and interracial dating but learned her reasons went much deeper than skin color.

Jax had always admired her cheek and quirkiness. They had been among her biggest attractions next to her beautiful body and intelligence. But more he loved that Muse had the ability to surprise him.

Jax thought predictability the worst kiss of death in a relationship. He liked surprises and variety in his life. He had never, however, been unpredictable or daring enough to take part in a threesome or a ménage the way Muse did. He had never even considered it before now.

The idea of sharing a woman with a man didn't hold any great appeal or fascination for him, but the idea of sharing Tamara with his brother, intrigued him on a level he never thought possible.

He couldn't explain why, but the thought of watching his twin please this woman, the thought of watching his mirror image bring Tamara to climax with his mouth and his cock, excited Jax as much as the idea of having Tamara himself. The imagery plain made his shaft twitch in his boxer briefs with renewed energy and desire. The hunger for a new kind of conquest, a new mode of satisfaction caused an exquisite ache to gnaw at his groin.

Jax stepped back and tried to give himself some breathing room. But he grasped her by the shoulders and didn't know whether he

braced her or himself when he asked, “You still have feelings for him, right?”

She didn’t hesitate to say, “I’m still angry with him, if that’s what you mean.”

“You can’t stay angry with him forever.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“Aw, c’mon. You’re not the type to hold a grudge.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him as if to say he should know better than that, and Jax gave her a grim smile remembering her fallout with Bailey.

He wondered if she considered Jess’s transgression as unforgivable as Bailey’s then recalled the scene in the kitchen and realized she still felt raw inside. Her father still treated her like an outsider, and the man she’d trusted enough to sleep with had turned out to be not so trustworthy—at least not in her eyes.

Jax wanted to tell her just how trustworthy Jess was. He wanted to tell her how much Jess cared about her. He knew he had to take it slow, a serious stretch for someone as impulsive as him. But Tamara would see even a soft sell a mile away, so he had to play things safe.

He had to make some effort though otherwise the whole trip out here would be a total waste of time. “He acted like a lost puppy when you left.”

“My dad?”

“Him too, but I’m talking about Jess.”

She gaped, then quickly snapped her mouth shut as if she didn’t want Jax to know how much his revelation shocked her. “You were both nine—kids!”

“It doesn’t mean we loved you any less.”

“Jax—”

“Just hear me out.” He tightened his grip on her shoulders, not painfully so, but enough to get her attention. “When you left, he took it pretty personally. He blamed himself for Noah and you getting caught, and I think he thinks you blamed him too.”

“That’s ridiculous! You didn’t blame yourself, did you?”

“I’m not Jess. Jess has always been the responsible one, likes to carry everyone’s woes on his shoulders whether they want him to or not. And he just felt if we hadn’t been there horsing around shirking our duty that day, then Bailey wouldn’t have had any reason to come in the barn looking for us.”

Her eyes softened with an expression of sympathy, and Jax decided to push home his advantage. “When he found out you would be coming back, his past came rushing back to slap him in the face. He didn’t know how to feel about it, how to react. I’m sure when he went to the airport to pick you up he wasn’t—”

“What? He wasn’t himself? He wasn’t in his right mind?”

“That’s not what I’m going to say.”

“Good. Because if you think you’re going to turn this around and make it my fault that your brother’s an arrogant deceitful asshole, you’ve got another thing coming.”

He smiled at her prickliness. Clearly, she wasn’t used to and didn’t like being wrong about anything and would defend her stance against Jess tooth and nail. Changing her mind would prove tough, but Jax counted on her affection for and memories of Jess the boy, her *little man*, to help him over the hump. “Tam, when you left you took a piece of him with you. He had to figure out a way to get that piece back, figure out a way to get himself back. And Jess chose to bury himself in work. He threw himself into the ranch, into making it the best one around. Pop acted like a pig in slop when he saw at least one of his sons taking the initiative and taking to the family business.”

“I’ll bet.” Tamara smirked and Jax rushed on, trying to cover what he had revealed about himself without meaning to. “When Pop told Jess you would be coming back, he didn’t take it so well. He resented your coming back.”

“I see.” She nodded, her expression contemplative as she bit her full bottom lip, her eyes just a little sad. “Did he tell you all this?”

“Some of it. But most of it I got from just knowing him, and knowing how he thinks. And ever since he found out you were on your way home...I mean to the ranch he’s been all balled up inside.”

“And in order to work things out and *unball* his insides he fucked me?”

Jax dropped his hands from her shoulders and shrugged at her harsh tone. He tried not to wince and let her know she’d gotten to him with her blunt accuracy.

Tamara shook her head and chuckled. “The twisted thing is I understand why he did it.”

Jax’s eyebrows shot up with hope that Tamara instantly dashed when she held up her hand in a stop sign to head him off at the pass. “I said I understand why he did it. It doesn’t mean I forgive him for lying to me.”

He grinned. “You understand though. That means you’re half-way there.”

“Have you always been such an optimist?”

He draped an arm around her shoulders and grinned. “You know me. The glass is always half full.”

“Seems to me that you’re the one who’s full...of shit!” She emphasized the last two words bumping her hip into his hard enough to knock him off balance and into the water.

Jax came up sputtering and shaking water from his hair. “You little witch!”

“I’ve been called worse.”

Jax swam to the rocks and leaned his forearms on the rock shelf at Tamara’s feet. He didn’t want to address her statement, couldn’t imagine what she might have done to elicit *worse* or why the idea that she had been at the wrong end of someone’s wrath or hatred bothered him so much. She was a big girl. She could definitely take care of herself. And so could his brother. So why did he find himself in the middle of their little fracas? Didn’t he have enough of his own troubles to worry about, his own disappointments and setbacks?

He admired her toes for a moment, the coral color flattering her dainty, flawless feet, feet he wouldn't have minded kissing and coming back for more.

Jax had never had such an inclination but still licked his lips at the prospect of placing his lips right against the instep of her foot. Being around this woman and her and his brother's relationship woes made him hornier than he'd ever been before. It wasn't an exactly ideal condition for a so-called matchmaker to be in.

He reached up a hand and grinned. "Help me up?"

"Not on your life." She winked and dove over his head into the water behind him. When she came up blinking water from her eyes, she completely caught Jax off-guard. "Race you back!"

Like a shot, she swam toward shore.

Jax took a moment to admire her graceful, efficient form, then took off after her.

Closing the distance as they neared shore, he dove under the water, caught her around the legs and pulled her under with him, before pushing up to break the surface and continue swimming to shore.

Jax pulled himself up onto dry land, listening to Tamara's determined strokes as she made it to shore a moment after him.

He headed back for the horses several yards away where they had left them. He turned just in time to watch her pull herself out of the water. She made a vision in her sexy underwear that perfectly complemented her smooth fair complexion and made him want to sink his teeth into and lick her from head to toe.

"Cheater," she said as she caught up to him.

Jax braced himself for the light punch that she delivered to his arm and laughed. "I could have taken you without cheating."

"Then why didn't you?"

"It wouldn't have been as much fun." And he wouldn't have had the opportunity to hold her for those brief moments it took him to pull her under.

She shook her head, and the smile she gave him had a tinge of sadness and wonder.

“What?”

“It’s just amazing how two people who look exactly alike can be so different.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Not at all. In fact, a woman could get used to the...”

Jax leaned closer as she let her words trail off, waited for her to finish, but she murmured her next word so low, he almost didn’t hear it—almost didn’t. “So you like variety?”

“You weren’t supposed to hear that.”

“But I did.”

She shrugged and after a long silent moment said, “You know what they say. Variety is the spice of life.”

“And how much spice and variety are you looking for Tamara Carpenter?”

Chapter 14

The question took her totally by surprise, and it probably shouldn't have, not with the direction her thoughts had been going in for the last couple of hours.

How much spice and variety did she want, indeed? And could she let the twins provide that spice and variety? Were *they* ready to provide that spice and variety?

Good question as Jess had already pissed her off, and she barely spoke to him since finding out the truth. In fact, and she suspected Jax just humored her.

God, she didn't even know what she needed anymore!

Before her arrival, she had been pretty sure of what she wanted *and* needed in her life—a fulfilling career, someone who loved and cared about her, someone to share her successes and be there for her with tea, sympathy and a strong shoulder to help her get over the failures.

For a time, James had provided those, or so she'd thought. But James suddenly breaking off their engagement had admittedly left her confused and floundering, had left her reevaluating her wants and needs especially when it came to a man.

She had thought her *future* would be with James, a future of security and stability.

Yeah, stability. No excitement or spontaneity, no fire, all the things you've been searching for since you left home, all the things you thought you'd find in New York.

She stared at Jax, and his serious look made something come alive and flutter in her stomach. He looked like her answer really interested

him, not to mention his eager expression said that he could and would fulfill her every wish and need.

If only life could be as simple and straightforward as telling him what she wanted and getting it. What would she do once she got what she wanted and would she be able to deal with the consequences of getting her wish?

She already regretted her decision to sleep with Jess. But then she hadn't made a completely *informed* decision there, had she?

Would the decision to get physically involved with Jax be more informed? It wasn't as if she knew Jax any better than she knew *Jay*.

"That hard a question, huh?"

"I'm just trying to come up with the right answer."

"There is no right or wrong answer, Tamara. This isn't a court of law. I'm just asking you—man to woman—what you want."

If he only knew even in a court of law right wasn't always right and wrong wasn't always wrong. Shades of gray abounded, especially when her job often involved twisting a situation to her advantage—especially when the situation involved emotions.

Like with her mother, Tamara thought. She had so many questions still, didn't believe half of what Paula and Jeremiah had told her about her mother. She supposed she still held out hope that she would meet the woman one day and that she would look on Tamara with love and pride and not the negative emotions and situation that must have driven her away.

God, she hated admitting that the woman's desertion still stung, even after all these years, hated that she needed that maternal validation.

She closed her eyes when she thought about all the compromises she had made in her life—staying with James when all logic told her that he wasn't right for her, taking on certain cases when her conscience niggled at her, wanting to believe in and forgive her mother when all signs said that she didn't deserve any of Tamara's tender mercies.

“What if I said that I...” She took a deep breath and opened her eyes to stare at Jax as if to make him pluck the thoughts and feelings from her heart and mind so that she wouldn’t have to say the words out loud. “What if I want both of you?”

Jax didn’t even blink or miss a beat. “Do you?”

God help her she did, and she knew her father wouldn’t approve, not one bit.

Noah had only been *one* man, and her dad hadn’t approved of him. Of course Noah had been a decade older than her and, according to her father and to a lesser degree, Jeremiah, he didn’t have a future, whereas she did. She was going places that Noah would never reach. They’d claimed he would have held her back, but at eighteen, she hadn’t wanted to hear any logic. No one could have gotten past her fog of teenage certainty and lust to convince her that she was in love, or that she wasn’t going to spend the rest of her life with Noah.

She could claim age and wisdom now, though.

And the wise decision would be to cut her loses and spare herself the heartache rather than wade into uncharted territory with two men almost a decade younger than her. Not to mention the fact that they were cowboys attached to the land and who lived in Colorado while she toiled in a purely white-collar job as a lawyer and lived almost half-way across the country in New York.

Jax stepped closer and caught her by the arms. “Do you want both of us, Tamara?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“You do. You’re just afraid to say it.”

“Of course I’m afraid! I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“You think I have?”

“I don’t know, Jax. Why don’t you tell me since I really don’t know all that much about you beyond your having a wicked sense of humor and a smile to match.”

“You know me better than you think.”

She wanted to believe that, but more, she wanted to believe she could trust him not to hurt her the way James had, not to hurt her the way his brother had.

“You don’t need to be afraid of me or Jess. And contrary to what you think, Jess didn’t set out to hurt you. Neither of us would ever hurt you intentionally. You know that.”

“I know.” But it didn’t mean that this situation suited any of them, and it didn’t mean that they wouldn’t hurt her at all, just not intentionally—small comfort.

Her father already thought her a jezebel and a fallen woman. What would he think of her if she went through with this madness, if she, Jess and Jax got involved? What would Jeremiah think?

She should have been over this by now. She had been living on her own for more almost two decades, without the approval of either parent or Jeremiah. She didn’t *need* their approval.

But she wanted it.

Jax slid his arms around her waist and pulled her close to nuzzle her throat. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m afraid too.”

She pulled back to look at him, eyebrows arched.

“Don’t look so shocked. I’ve never done anything like this before either.”

“What do you think Jeremiah will think about it?”

Jax shrugged. “I’ve never based any of my relationships with women on what Pop thinks. If I did, I’d never be with anyone.”

“Speaking of which, exactly what is your status woman-wise?”

“I’m not with anyone right now, if that’s what you’re asking me.”

“I guess that’s comforting.”

“I wouldn’t have made a play for you if I had an attachment to another woman.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Making a play?”

“I suppose you could say that.”

She grinned and returned his hug, loving the way his skin felt so warm and firm beneath her touch, loving the way his hard muscles felt pressed against her.

“I might have known this is what you’d be up to.”

Jax dropped his arms from around her and jumped back as if he’d been burned.

Tamara turned and followed his gaze to see Jess sitting up on a black stallion. He looked majestic and so damn gorgeous she had to fight not to release the estrous sigh that teased the edges of her vocal cords. She had to fight not to allow her panties to completely flood with her juices.

He also looked pissed, which made her pissed. Who the hell did he think himself, judging anyone, much less his brother who *hadn’t* lied to her the way *he* had?

But there he sat, self-righteous and indignant and just so damn fine she wanted to slap the smirk off his face.

Had he always looked so cocky or did she just notice it now because he’d angered her?

You can’t stay angry with him forever.

Jax’s words haunted her, poking her conscience. She couldn’t stay angry forever, except in Jess’s case, she wasn’t willing to forgive him so fast and easy either.

Why did she assess him so harshly? She’d forgiven James for repeated affronts just as bad or worse than Jess’s. Why didn’t he deserve her forgiveness when James had?

She’d expected so much more from Jess that’s why. He had disappointed her, skewed her perception of the sweet if also somber little scamp she used to remember. And these, more than any lie he could have told her, hurt the most.

Jess smoothly dismounted his horse and made his way over to Tamara and Jax.

He didn’t hesitate to haul back his fist and strike his brother in the jaw.

Jax went down like a marionette that'd had its strings cut.

Tamara jumped between him and his brother as Jax rebounded to his feet and took two steps forward. She planted a palm in each man's chest. The frantic beat of their hearts vibrated through her arms right down to her toes—so much wasted energy that could have been better directed elsewhere. “Stop it right now.”

Shaking the hand he had used to punch Jax, Jess pushed against her hold.

Tamara looked at the hand he flexed and grinned. “Hurts, huh? It serves you right.” She fisted a bunch of his shirt in her hand and pulled him forward so that his face poised less than an inch from hers. “What the hell is the matter with you?” But she knew what was the matter and could see what she had imagined had earlier been her own look of betrayal on Jess's face now.

Why did *he* look betrayed?

“Nothing's the matter,” he grumbled. Then he thrust out his injured hand to point at Jax simmering behind her. “I *trusted* you.”

“Trusted him to what?”

“That's between him and me.”

“Not if it involves me, it isn't.” She turned to Jax who busied himself rubbing his jaw and chin, his gaze pinned to Jess's face. “Well? What's going on?”

“Like he said. It's between him and me.”

He still didn't look at her. So it was like that, huh?

Did he feel guilty? Had these two already been tossing around the possibility of sharing her? Had Jax betrayed him by going behind his back to make a play for Tamara on his own?

No, Tamara didn't think so. She sensed something more than just the twins plotting to have her at the same time.

And how could she be so *calm* about the prospect of a premeditated threesome?

Tamara shook her head, didn't even want to go deeper to analyze the reasons for her serenity and acceptance. She had a feeling she'd be

shocked at what she'd find—that she wasn't daddy's innocent little girl anymore and hadn't been for a very long time.

Suddenly, she remembered how Jax had gone out of his way to defend Jess to her earlier, and she realized he hadn't only been making a play for himself. He'd been trying to smooth things over with her for Jess too.

Tricky, tricky.

She released them and smiled grimly. "I see."

Both of them turned concerned looks on her and Tamara couldn't figure out who rushed to whose defense the fastest when the brothers chorused, "It's not what you think!"

Jax caught her by the arm. "Tam, don't be upset. I only did what I had to do to make you see—"

"What?" She jerked her arm from his grasp. "That you're a bigger asshole and jerk than your brother?"

"Hey!"

Tamara turned on Jess then. "And you, coming here all vengeful and holier-than-thou. How *dare* you attack Jax when for the last half-hour he's done nothing but sing your praises! And frankly I don't know why. You're not worth the trouble." She moved to push by Jess, and he caught her by an arm to stop her mid-stalk—so much for her melodramatic departure.

"Tam, please."

The mere fact that his deep voice didn't break or soften—not one iota—at her attack had *her* ready to break at his strength and arrogance. The *please* notwithstanding, he didn't sound very conciliatory or balled up at all—authoritative maybe and ready to make her see things his way, but not conciliatory in the least.

Tamara closed her eyes and swallowed, afraid to turn and look at him, knowing that one look at those earnest azure eyes and her willpower would just up and die a not-so natural death.

"Tamara..."

She felt herself being pulled back into Jess's arms and didn't struggle. She wanted this, had missed the feel and smell of him, despite the fact that she stood half-naked and had been all up in Jax's half-naked personal space not several minutes ago.

This wasn't the same. *They* weren't the same. They were two separate entities—*two* being the operative word—two men that she *wanted*.

The latter should have made her pull away, but it didn't, and when Jess's arms came around her in a tender hug that had her choking back tears, Tamara still didn't struggle.

He bent his head to circle the shell of her ear, licking and nibbling her lobe before he moved farther down to nuzzle her neck. "I've missed you," he murmured against her skin.

Tamara didn't trust herself to speak so just settled for a soft moan as she pushed back against him and felt the expected hard-on pressing just above her ass.

Jess hissed then cursed before lightly nipping her throat. He slid a hand down her body until he reached the waistband of her lacey boy shorts. He eased his hand into her underwear, cupping her heated mound before thrusting his middle finger passed her moist folds.

Tamara vaguely wondered where Jax had gone to before Jess added another finger and made the outside world go away completely. She didn't want to pause to consider that they fucked out in the open and not-so-broad-daylight, or that anyone could come up on them the same way Jess had come up on her and Jax.

When she got with Jess, with either twin, she didn't want to think—just feel.

What kind of sickness did she suffer?

"I want you," he murmured.

"I know."

He chuckled against her throat. "Do you want me too?"

She wanted to tell him not to ask ridiculous questions, but settled for nodding.

“I want to hear you say it, Tamara. Say *I want you*.”

Talk about arrogant. The man just barely got out of the doghouse a couple of minutes ago, yet insisted on dictating—

Tamara gasped as he twisted then wiggled his fingers inside her, engaging nerve endings that made her see stars and squeeze her thighs together against the flow of cream from her pussy.

“Say it, Tam.”

Just say it. What’s the big deal anyway? It’s not as if he wants you to say you love him. Just that you want him. You. Want. Him.

“I want you, Jess.”

He growled. “Between you and Bailey with the stubbornness...” He slid his free hand into her bra, molding it over her breast as if to prove what made them a perfect fit.

Tamara gritted her teeth against his indictment and the pleasure zinging from her breast, where he pinched and rolled the nipple, straight to her molten center. She squirmed against him, her cunt throbbing and ready for his invasion.

“Private party or can anyone join?”

Tamara’s eyes flew open at the familiar voice drawling the same line she’d said to Jess in the motel room. Had it just been that morning?

She took in Jax standing before her, brandishing two foil packs and a wicked grin. She lowered her gaze to see the blanket he’d spread before their feet to make things more comfortable for them, she guessed. “You’ve been busy.”

“I thought I’d make myself useful.”

She felt Jess tense behind her, thought for sure he’d stop what he did to go after his brother again. But he didn’t. Instead, he delved deep inside her with his fingers as if on a mission and thumbed her clit in rhythm to his strokes until she cried out.

Tamara thrust her hips against his hand, riding it until a powerful orgasm crashed down on her, and she sagged back against Jess.

“My turn.”

Jax's words challenged rather than asked permission, but Jess didn't seem to mind and slowly pulled his hands from her shorts and bra before grasping her shoulders to turn her around to face him.

"Do you want to do this?" he asked.

"I told you I want you."

"Do you want both of us, Tamara?"

She realized she'd never really answered Jax's earlier question when he'd asked the same thing. She'd skirted the issue like the well-schooled, successful lawyer she'd trained to be, but she'd never answered him.

Jax approached on bare, silent feet, but Tamara felt him at her back, his body heat and energy reaching out to her like a siren song—alluring and dangerous.

"Yes," she said. "I want you both."

At her words, Jess took his hat off and plunked it on her head before sliding down to his knees before her.

She glanced down at him peering up at her from a position that should have been submissive but proved far from it. Submissive didn't nearly describe the forceful expression in his eyes, nothing meek or mild about the way he licked his lips before easing her shorts down over her hips until he reached her ankles, and she stepped out of them as if enthralled.

Jax unlatched her bra and slid the straps down Tamara's arms until she stood completely naked between the twins but for the black Stetson perched on her head.

Then her boys really got down to business.

Chapter 15

The thatch of hair covering her cunt glistened with the juices she'd released during her climax and the smell of Tamara's need almost drove him wild. Her arousal wafted out, affecting him like a drug, and had Jess *not* slid down to his knees in front of her, his legs probably would have given way beneath the force of his desire.

Jess grasped her hips, tried not to be too rough or dig his fingers in too hard, reveling in the softness of her skin as he drew her closer.

Tamara closed her eyes, arched her neck, and he watched as she cradled her head back against his brother's shoulder.

Jax slid his hands around her front to cup her bare, voluptuous breasts and Jess swallowed at the sight. His dick throbbed at the downright eroticism of the act, the naturalness and synchronicity of Tamara and Jax's movements. They looked like erstwhile lovers familiar with each other's bodies, and now rekindled the old flame.

Jess lost himself in watching them, enjoyed the contrast of Jax's sun-bronzed skin against Tamara's slightly darker, caramel complexion. He enjoyed what Jax did to Tamara so much he almost forgot what *he* wanted to do to her—with her.

The tiny gold ring she had in her navel glinted in the fading light and made him pause.

He couldn't remember whether he'd noticed it the other times they'd made love, but then he'd been occupied trying to get inside her and not admiring every facet on the outside of her luscious body the way he could have. But he stared at it now, the symbolism of her growth away from the ranch, her wild rebellion and nonconformity not lost on him.

Jess dipped his head, stuck the tip of his tongue into the tiny ring and Tamara shuddered. Whether she reacted from his manipulations, his brother's or a combination of both, Jess didn't know. He just went to work tasting her, swirling his tongue around her sexy innie and teasing her navel before trailing his tongue down, down to her sweet moist core.

He glanced up at her face, mesmerized by the expression of rapture on it, her long dark lashes just brushing her pronounced cheekbones. When she bit her bottom lip and moaned, Jess caught himself mimicking her action right before he spread her labial lips with his thumbs and covered her pussy with his mouth.

"Oh yes, Jesse. Please, more..."

His name had never sounded so good to him before. When they'd made love in the motel, she'd thought him Jay. But now she knew his exact identity, knew exactly who made love to her, and it made her happy. Jess licked her soft folds, lovingly stroking her vulva before thrusting his tongue deep inside her and savoring the tangy sweet taste as she slowly pumped her hips against his mouth.

Jess felt her hands burrow in his hair, closed his eyes against the slight tug as she fisted a handful and mewled. Encouraged, he picked up the pace and intensity, replacing his mouth with two fingers as he concentrated on her swollen clit. He taunted the hard numb with his tongue before licking then sucking it into his mouth. Simultaneously, he delved deep with his fingers, scissoring and twisting them until Tamara bucked against his mouth with a gasp.

He felt her thigh muscles tensing beneath him just before she came on a long groan, her cream coating his fingers and dripping down the insides of her legs.

She held his head in place as if he might try to leave before she came down from her high, but Jess had no intentions of going anywhere—not until he sunk his cock into her and felt her silky wet heat surrounding him again.

Jess stayed where he knelt, inhaling the honeyed musk of her juices as her tremors gradually subsided, and she leaned back against Jax for support.

His brother easily accepted her weight, lifting her up into his arms and kneeling down to lay her on the blanket.

Jess stared at his brother over her supine body. He unbuttoned and got off his shirt in record time as Jax peeled off his boxer briefs to set free a mammoth erection.

Jess didn't let his gaze linger. He had his own erection to worry about and set free.

Tamara rose up and sat on her heels to help Jess get out of his jeans and catch up with Jax. The minute her hands touched him, her warm insistent fingers brushing his waist, Jess thought he would take off and had to grit his teeth to keep from shooting his load prematurely.

She unbuckled his belt then went to work on his button and zipper, peering at him and giving him a gentle pleased smile that he'd thought he'd never see again.

Had she forgiven him?

Before he could dwell on the ramifications of Tamara's behavior and mood, she reached for his jeans to jerk them and his boxers down over his hips. He sprang free to the mild evening breeze, pre-cum already glistening in his slit.

Tamara bent her head to take him into her mouth and at the first touch of her lips to his dick, Jess tensed and arched his neck.

When Jess caught Jax's glance, his brother reached out to hand him a condom.

Jess took it, grateful for something to do with his hands and keep his mind off of what Tamara did to him—at least for a few seconds so that he could get his responses under control and not come too soon.

When Jax grasped Tamara's hips, Jess saw that his brother had already sheathed his cock. He watched as Jax reached between Tamara's legs to delve into her pussy with his fingers.

Tamara moaned and Jess felt the pulsation of it through his entire body.

Jess couldn't take his eyes off of Jax as his brother smeared a coating of Tamara's copious juices over his cock, then guided his erection to Tamara's back hole.

Jax teased her anus with the head of his dick, slowly pushing against the tight ring of muscles before Tamara's whimper stopped him. He circled his hips and pushed further, as slowly as he could until a couple more inches of his cock disappeared inside her.

She gasped and pulled her mouth off of Jess as she reached back to catch Jax's wrist.

"You're tight back here. Am I hurting you?"

"I'll be okay. Just give me a moment."

Jess watched his brother pull almost all the way out of her, and add more of Tamara's juices to his dick before he began pushing inside of her again. He murmured in her ear, caressing her shoulders as he thrust.

The interplay fascinated Jess, so much so that he didn't know whether his balls grew heavy and tight because of what he saw and heard or because of the excruciating torture Tamara still inflicted on his cock with her free hand.

Jax took one final plunge that seated him balls deep in Tamara's ass and Tamara cried out before pushing back against Jax's groin.

Jess couldn't take anymore and closed his eyes against the stirring eroticism because if he looked any longer he wouldn't have been able to draw out the moment. He wouldn't have been able to stay in the game for just a little longer—just one more moment before he came.

He knocked the hat off her head and buried his hands in Tamara's hair, gently fisting the silky shoulder-length waves as she took him in her mouth again. He pumped his hips and she added more torture fondling his balls.

“Tamara...” He couldn’t finish, couldn’t *remember* what he wanted to say when she swallowed him whole to the base and sucked hard.

“Oh...Christ! I’m coming...”

He heard the exclamation as if it had come from far away then realized it hadn’t been him who’d cried out. It had been Jax.

Jess opened his eyes to see his brother tightly gripping Tamara’s hips as he stiffened and shot his seed deep inside her. For the longest moment, his brother stood poised as if in suspended animation—face contorted in the grip of his climax, body shuddering—and watching Jax hurtled Jess into his own release.

He came in Tamara’s mouth on a hoarse shout, fisting his hands against her scalp as he threw back his head and arched his back. Jax collapsed over her ass and back.

They knelt like this, huddled together and panting as Tamara finished milking him until he thought his cock as dry as the Mojave.

For a long time, no one moved—probably unable to if the weakness in Jess’s legs was any indication. Finally, Tamara lifted her head from his lap with a muffled pop. She lazily licked his shaft and kissed his cock head before she separated from him to sit back on her haunches.

Almost simultaneously, Jax slid his cock from inside of her, gently caressing and kissing her back before he peeled off the full condom and stood to take care of it.

Jess remained on his knees in front of Tamara and grasped her arms. He pulled her close for a kiss, dipping his tongue into her mouth and tasting himself on her. He probed deeper, stroking his tongue against hers before pulling back to gently nibble and suck her full lower lip.

“I want you inside me,” she murmured and it was all she had to say to get him hard again.

Not that he thought he could ever really be soft around her. Just the sight of her kept him armed and ready, hornier than a hound dog in spring—that's what his Tamara did to him.

She's your and Jax's Tamara.

Strangely, the thought didn't leave him as cold as he thought it would, didn't get him as all-fired riled as he had been when he'd first ridden up and saw them together in that clinch.

He had to admit he'd wanted to pound his brother's face to mush, had never been so jealous, so angry in his life. But something about watching Jax and Tamara making love, the look of pleasure on her face at what Jax did to her, the provocative, sensuous look of them together, diffused his resentment and replaced it with a sense of sublime satisfaction.

He glanced passed Tamara's shoulder to watch Jax getting dressed, appreciated his brother giving him and Tamara a little privacy and space. He brought his gaze back to Tamara. "You know I want nothing better than to be inside that hot pussy, darlin'."

She licked her lips and took the condom that he'd forgotten all about out of his hand.

He watched in awe as she ripped open the packet then skillfully, slowly rolled its content down over his erect and still hardening shaft. When she got done, Jess brought his legs around to sit on the blanket and let Tamara straddle him.

She took his hard shaft in one hand and positioned her opening just over the head of it, teasing her creamy folds with just the tip until Jess thought he would pass out from the pleasure of watching her. She slowly eased down onto his shaft, gradually taking his eager length into her body and impaling herself beneath Jess's captivated stare.

He brought his arms up around her back to hold her close as she ground her hips against him first then rocked and undulated. He felt her squeeze her pussy muscles around him, her hot and moist walls holding his cock a willing hostage.

Jess closed his eyes, pulsing deep inside her and finally found the strength to move. He pitched his hips up to meet her downward thrusts until they had a nice rhythm going, building an enticing and overpowering friction that had them both panting and perspiring within moments.

He lowered his head to lave and kiss a breast before taking the hard nipple into his mouth to tease with his teeth and tongue.

With a groan, Tamara sped her plunges, riding him hard and driving them both over the brink straight into the rapturous abyss of ecstasy.

Jess squeezed her to him, her soft breasts flattening against the rough material of his flannel shirt. But Tamara didn't seem to care, convulsing around him as she returned his fierce hug and lowered her head. She nuzzled her nose against his throat and inhaled deeply before nipping the patch of skin between his neck and shoulder.

Jess shuddered and just held her for a long while, unwilling to end the moment or let her go—ever. But giving in to inevitability, he finally released Tamara and allowed her to stand.

He quickly followed, pulling his jeans back over his hips, buttoning and zipping them before he buckled his belt and while Tamara gathered her still damp underwear.

He watched as she slid on first her boy shorts then the matching bra. His critter already stirred back to life in his jeans, impatient for the next time when he could get her out of her underwear again, and he had just *had* her.

Jess retrieved his hat and put it on before he found the rest of Tamara's clothes. He handed her jeans over and watched as she pulled the denim up and over her hips before pulling her orange shirt on over her head. "We need to get you home and into some dry clothes before you catch your death."

Tamara silently nodded as she went to Clipper and held his reins.

Jess didn't want to mention it, but he worried whether someone other than he and Jax had seen Tamara in her birthday suit, not to mention the wild animals that might be roaming around in the area.

The location wasn't well-trod and normally remained isolated, but a couple of neighboring ranchers had reported a pair wolves in the area. And like him, and Jax and Tamara before him, the setting attracted nature lovers, or just those who wanted to get away from it all. At least a couple of wranglers, specifically the Quarry brothers, might be attracted to a secluded spot like this one for a break from the ranch.

Carson and Sam worked hard, knew their jobs and did them well, the main reasons that Jess and Jax's dad and Bailey had taken a chance and hired them several months ago. Except for their reticence that bordered just on unfriendly at times, they demonstrated ideal work habits but just liked to keep to themselves and preferred their own company or that of their mother, Helena. He couldn't fault them for that. They'd come onto the ranch as a family unit and functioned that way. But Jess still wondered about the circumstances that had brought them to The Double R.

He turned his attention to Tamara now, sensed her emotionally withdrawing, probably already sorry she had allowed both his brother and him to take her. Jess stepped to her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Don't Tam."

She turned to him with a bright fake smile. "Don't what?"

"Don't pull away."

"I'm not. We should be getting back." She fidgeted with Clipper's reins for a moment before raising her eyes to peer at him. "There's no way this can work."

When she said *this* did she mean him and her or him and her and Jax?

Jess uncharacteristically feared asking her. He had been doing a lot of things out of character since she'd returned to the ranch—lying,

running scared, giving his brother control of a situation he clearly should have taken control of himself.

He lightly squeezed her shoulder to make sure she didn't leave. He almost told her not to give up on them when he turned to catch sight of Jax mounting Cappuccino several yards behind them and holding Stormchaser's reins. Jess eyed the stallion that he had borrowed to come find his brother and Tamara and noted how he obediently followed Jax as if he was a rat instead of a horse and Jax was the Pied Piper.

"I'll meet you guys at the ranch. I'm heading back now," his brother said.

Did Jax want to run away from this too? Was *he* the only one that wanted this relationship and would fight for it? "We'll see you there." He frowned, contemplative. The idea that his brother had gotten what he wanted from Tamara from just one joining together chafed his hide, especially when he didn't think *he* would ever get enough of her if he gave it the rest of his life. "Hey, wait a minute! Jax! My horse!" Jess took off his hat, waving it in the air as he ran after Jax briefly before finally giving up.

He stood and watched Jax, Cappuccino and Stormchaser disappear over the horizon, shaking his head at his brother's craftiness as he turned and headed back to Tamara.

She stood smiling and rubbing Clipper's rump. "Looks like it's just me and you."

"He did that on purpose," Jess grouched.

She arched a brow. "Do you mind riding with me?"

"Do you mind if I ride with you?"

Tamara shrugged. "Considering what we just did, I guess I've forgiven you."

Jess thought about that for a moment as he stood in front of her and reached for her hair. He wrapped a length of it around his fingers and enjoyed the way the silken strands felt against his skin, the strawberry scent of it wafting to him.

He stood awed by her casual attitude, didn't think what they had just done had been so easy or ordinary for her. It certainly hadn't been for him. "Do you think Jax forgives me?"

"For the punch?"

Jess nodded, even if he hadn't really asked the question he wanted to and even though he knew he had some more apologizing to do no matter what Tamara's response.

"You'll have to ask him about that. But I'm thinking after what's happened here, he doesn't hold any grudges."

"People can have sex with each other and still hate each other." He stared to gauge her reaction, and she didn't even flinch. Did all that cool, calm collectedness come from living in New York or had she always been this way?

"I never hated you, Jess. It just upset me that you didn't trust me enough to be truthful with me. That's all."

"I know, and I'm sorry I lied to you. I never meant to hurt you."

Tamara waved his apology away. "Jax already explained all that."

"Really?"

"I told you before you got here playing Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots with your brother that Jax had been singing your praises."

"Yeah, you did."

"Did you ask him to?"

Jess shook his head. "But I did go along with his harebrained scheme to get us back together."

"Not so harebrained. It seemed to have worked."

"Did it?"

"I'm glad you let me in on your little scheme."

"I didn't mean it like that. But you know Jax—"

"Is always up to some mischief. Things haven't changed much since I left, huh?"

Jess moved his hand from her hair to gently rub his thumb across her cheekbone then bent his head to kiss her. He took his time,

slipping his tongue passed her parted lips and hardening at the soft sigh she released when she let him in.

He moved closer, easing his leg between hers and rubbing her slit with his knee. After a moment, he pressed his kneecap where he guessed her clit swelled beneath the crotch of her jeans and Tamara rewarded him with a soft mewl as she writhed beneath him.

Jess pulled away a minute later and stared down at her. “Things *have* changed.”

“Really?”

“We’re not little boys anymore.”

Chapter 16

A week later, Tamara barely felt the effects of her encounter with Jess and Jax, though she still felt tingly in places she'd forgotten she could feel tingly. The low, evocative throb in her pussy and ass during random times of a day served as her biggest reminders of the pleasure she'd enjoyed several days ago and that neither Jess nor Jax were little boys anymore. Not that she'd needed much more of a reminder than the way they'd taken her on the blanket out in the wide open space outdoors for all the world to see if it had chosen to.

Correction—they hadn't taken her. She had given herself to them, freely and with no reservations. At least she hadn't had any reservations last week.

Now with the light of day streaming through the light-weight, peach and floral print curtains of her bedroom, heralding a new week full of promise and busy work, she had plenty.

She didn't want to but had managed to avoid Jess and Jax during most of her time on the ranch so far. With throwing herself into the thick of the things with cattle drives, pack trips and other ranch activities with the guests, she found more than enough ways to avoid her boys. How else would she deal with what had happened more than a week ago? How else would she function, keep her sanity and try to reconcile with her disapproving father while fostering a relationship with two younger men?

She'd known that getting involved with either twin would not be a wise idea, but she hadn't been thinking about the future or their romantic prospects when they'd been getting it on by the stream. Her hormones had been calling to her since she'd touched down in

Colorado and seen Jess at the airport, and last week she had just politely answered them.

A knock sounded on the door just as Tamara flung the bedcovers off of herself and placed her feet on the carpeted floor.

Before she could even gather herself to answer, someone pushed the door opened just a crack and waved a hand inside the door. “You decent?”

“What if I’m not?”

“All the more reason for me to come in.” Jax opened the door, his smart crack and the devilish grin a dead giveaway to his identity. This and the slightly lighter inflection to his voice clued Tamara in to which twin stood before her.

Tamara made no move to cover herself, refusing to be cowed by her feelings about what had happened more than a week ago and eager to see Jax’s take on things. She did, however, feel her face heat with what must have been a fierce blush.

She hadn’t spoken to either brother at length since that day by the stream, and meal times had been tense and quiet affairs that no one seemed willing to fill with superficial questions or conversation.

Outside of meals and other routine activity at the house, Tamara had refused to seek out either brother. Both of the twins had returned the favor and didn’t seek her out either.

Even as she had bedded down last night, Tamara had realized they couldn’t go on avoiding each other forever. Sooner or later, she’d have to face them the same as she would have to face her father.

“I like the outfit.”

Tamara glanced down at the green satin shorts and matching tank top before bringing her gaze back to his and licking her lips. “Glad it meets with your approval.” Tamara smirked as Jax crossed the threshold, closed the door behind him and leaned against it.

“Everything about you meets with my approval.” He made his way over to the bed, backing her against the mattress until she flopped on her back and he straddled her. “I had to come and see if you had

the same mesmerizing effect on me in the light of day as you did in the dusk of the other evening.”

She sensed the truth in his words, even though the joke and the smile. “And do I?”

“Mmm.” He leaned in to kiss her mouth, gently, slowly licking before he dipped his tongue passed her slightly parted lips to stroke hers. After several silent moments playing tonsil hockey until she panted beneath him, he raised his head to stare down at her. An expression of awe and just a tinge of fear lurked behind the blue depths of his gaze.

She completely sympathized with the fear part and nursed a healthy dose of it herself.

“I’ve been fantasizing for days about doing that.”

“And did it live up to your fantasies?”

“Every one of them. Except in my fantasies you’re completely naked, and I’m buried balls-deep inside you.”

Tamara shuddered and closed her eyes at his graphic description, could feel his hard cock pressing against her slit through the denim of his jeans. She was already wet, and the thought of how close he was to making his fantasies come true made her even more soaked. Made her wonder how she had been able to stay away and resist him or his brother for so long—nine whole, sexless, celibate days of dreaming and wondering and wanting.

As if reading her mind, Jax pressed closer, rubbing his hard bulge against her so that she could feel just how much she turned him on.

Tamara wanted nothing more than to start her day off right, making love with a hot, sexy, young cowboy, but she had some other things she needed to do today that didn’t include breaking unwritten taboos in carnal satisfaction.

Briefly, she wondered if Jax tried to beat his brother to the punch coming to her room first thing in the morning. Not that she cared, of course, but the thought of her two boys fighting over her like dogs over a bone did make her smile.

When Jax bent his head again to take her mouth, Tamara helplessly buried both hands in his hair, reveling in the silken feel of the thick, wavy strands against her skin. She fisted her hands and closed her eyes as he circled his hips against her. He pressed just so on her swollen clit and made her moan deep in her throat.

“Ay! *Lo siento. Perdonarme.*”

Jax leapt from the bed at Maria’s flustered voice raised in what Tamara could vaguely make out as profuse apologies. He took two long steps toward the door to stop her before the woman could leave, but came up short. .

Tamara just caught a glimpse of the back of Maria’s apron strings as she fled out the room and down the hallway.

Well, there went her good-girl image with the sweet and understanding housekeeper. It was bound to happen, she guessed, but she just hadn’t expected her fall from grace to happen so soon after her arrival. The scene out in front of the house with Jess that seemed ages ago had been enough to tarnish her reputation.

Jax closed and locked the door before he came back and sat beside her on the bed. “I should have done that as soon as I came in.”

She nodded. “Horse is out of the barn now.”

“I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I didn’t stop you. I wanted you as much as you wanted me.”

“Still want.”

“So, you weren’t thinking?”

“Not straight.”

Tamara reached between his legs to caress his erection and felt him pulsing even through the denim. She could imagine holding his hot shaft in her hands and wanted to feel the thick, heated vibration of him inside her. “Oh, I’d say you’re thinking pretty straight now.”

“One track mind doesn’t count.”

“What is it about you, about both of you, that makes me want to rip off your clothes when I look at you?” She watched his eyes darken

with desire, almost sorry she had opened her big mouth. But she had only said the truth. Just the sight of Jax and his brother made her feel unnaturally carnal. She'd never wanted two men so much before.

"So, we're just sex objects to you?"

She almost laughed at his joke until she noticed the shade of sadness beneath his grin.

She didn't see them as sexual objects, not totally. Sure, the sex between them had been mind-blowing, probably the best sexual encounter she had ever had in her life. But, and she really thought herself sick for this part, she still saw them as her boys, the kids she had been surrogate mother to. She still saw the kids she used to take care of and protect.

She knew if she told Jax any of this it would be a bigger blow to his ego than her thinking of him as a sex object. She'd been approached by several younger guys who'd gotten offended when she'd referred to them as *babies* once she'd discovered their ages. The gaps gave her pause—gaps about as big between their ages and her age as there existed between her and Jax and Jess.

Tamara curved an arm around his waist and drew him close. "You know how I feel about you two."

He turned to look at her, his expression doubtful. "Not really."

"Oh stop. You know you're both my b—" She cut herself off at his grimace.

"Boys? Is that what you wanted to say?"

She shrugged.

"C'mon, Tam. Didn't last week prove anything?"

"Sure. It proved a lot. That you two are bad influences."

"You're not even going to take a little responsibility for what happened?"

Tamara leaped up from the bed and began to pace as she raked a hand through her already tousled hair. "Of course I take responsibility!" Actually, she took full responsibility. The woman controlled the situation, her job to say no, if necessary. At least this is

what her father had taught her. She had to have a level head in situations like last week because left to the man things would always degenerate to the lowest common denominators—sex and violence. Men could not be trusted to think straight, or with anything but their penises, when the situation involved their testosterone. Jax had said it himself earlier when they'd been interrupted by Maria. He wasn't thinking straight.

How could she expect him to see the folly of what they did? She had to be the strong one, the logical one.

"I'm thinking Maria came up to let us know breakfast is ready or would be soon." The scents wafting up to her from the kitchen confirmed this.

"You're not getting off the hook that easily."

"What? I'm hungry." As if to confirm the point, her stomach growled.

"We still need to talk."

"About?"

"About us—you, me and Jess."

Just what she needed, another confrontation and discussion to look forward to in addition to the one she needed to have with her father—a complicated confrontation and discussion. "Can we just eat first? I'm not ready to handle this on an empty stomach."

"Just as long as you know we need to talk."

"Fine. We need to talk." Like that would be all they would be doing. She knew as well as Jax did that, as soon as they got alone together again, talking would be the furthest thing from their minds. She had been avoiding them for as long as she had for exactly this reason.

Jax stood and draped his arms over her shoulders in an affable manner that totally belied the intensity of his stare.

Damn, she'd barely been back two weeks, and she already found herself neck deep in a threesome and hadn't even begun to smooth things over with her father.

I'm involved in a threesome.

When she thought about it, the situation didn't even seem real, certainly didn't seem like something in which she, a respectable New York attorney, would be involved.

Jax bent his head to give her a brief, hard kiss on the lips, sliding his hands down her body to grasp her ass before releasing her.

When he pulled away, his eyes seemed such a crystal clear blue, they froze her. "I'll see you downstairs at breakfast then," he whispered.

Breathless, Tamara watched him leave, taking yet another piece of her with him that had nothing at all to do with sex and physical satisfaction and everything to do with passion and love.

Damn.

* * * *

Jax tried to convince himself the incident at the stream had been an aberration, that he hadn't had sex with the same woman, at the same time, as his brother. But he couldn't accomplish it. First, it would be a lie. Last week hadn't been an aberration or a one-shot-deal, especially not when he wanted to repeat the act so bad he could taste it. Second, it hadn't been just sex, and that more than anything else he had done with Tamara and his brother, scared the holy crap out of him. They had made love more than a week ago—love not just had sex. He felt it in every fiber of his being, had never felt this way before after sex with a woman—so attached, needy and possessive.

Strangely, he didn't think the sex would have been as good, as emotionally involving, as it had been had his brother not played a part. Watching Tamara please Jess, watching them together had been half the enjoyment for Jax, and had made him come as forcefully as he had.

It made him wonder why the thought of sharing a woman with his brother had never occurred to him before. But then nothing that had

happened at the stream had been premeditated. He hadn't known his brother would show up, and he certainly hadn't expected that Tamara would be up for a sexual encounter, though he'd hoped and been prepared, just in case, thanks to his Boy Scout training.

Jax forked a hand through his hair and practically jumped out of his skin when Jess walked up on him a second later.

"Your hair looks like you stuck your finger in an electrical socket. What's got you all ruffled?" Jess slapped him on the back, tone bright and jovial.

Up until several minutes ago, Jax had been just as jovial, ready and willing to conquer the world. He'd been prepared to see Tamara and prove to himself that what he had felt at the stream was a passing fancy, but he knew now that this was the furthest thing from the truth.

Jax turned to his brother and grabbed him by an arm.

"What the—?" Jess let Jax lead him back to his bedroom down the hall, push him inside and close the door.

"Before we go down to breakfast, I need to talk to you."

Jess arched a brow. "I suppose that's fair, seeing as how we haven't really had an opportunity to talk since..."

"We've had plenty of opportunities. We just haven't used them. We've been avoiding the issue and each other, just like Tamara."

"I suppose."

"You suppose?" Jax frowned. "Why are you acting so calm?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"More than a week ago you almost cleaned my plow when you saw Tamara and me together, and today you're all Buddha serene. What gives?"

"I've had some time to come to my senses." Jess paused, looking thoughtful before he added, "I should be asking *you* what's chafing *your* hide."

Jax released a long sigh and stared at his brother without saying a word. After a long moment, Jess finally threw up his hands and paced across the room.

“Okay, fine. I admit it upset me when I first saw you two together.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Jax rubbed his jaw where Jess had slugged him. It still felt a little tender to the touch, and up until a few days ago, there had been a slight bruise just visible between his jaw and chin. Either it hadn’t been noticeable enough to cause alarm or it had been noticeable and Maria and Pop had been discreet in not mentioning it so far. But after this morning with Maria catching him and Tamara together, he didn’t think either of them would keep silent for much longer.

“Look, Jax, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hit you at the stream, and I’ve been meaning to apologize to you for a while now. Just never found the right time.”

“I wasn’t fishing for an apology.”

“You still deserve one. I shouldn’t have taken my frustrations out on you.”

“I had it coming.”

Jess chuckled and closed the space between them to fling an arm around Jax’s shoulder. “Maybe you did, maybe you didn’t. It just wasn’t my right to dole out your punishment.”

He didn’t like having Jess angry or upset with him, never had. And it seemed everything he did, especially the way he led his life, upset either his brother or Pop.

How upset would they be when they found out what he did with his free time away from the ranch? How upset would they be that he got ranch hands to cover for his mysterious days off and absences? Jax didn’t even want to think about it.

“So, did you see Tamara this morning?” Jess asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“Guess that’s my answer.”

Jax felt the coolness enter his brother’s tone, but he still didn’t seem particularly angry. He guessed that boded well for their

relationship. “You might as well know we kind of got into it right before Maria walked in on us a little while ago.”

Jess just shook his head and laughed.

“I don’t see what’s so funny.”

“Well, it’s not like we could keep something like what happened at the stream a secret forever, not around here.”

“I wanted to. At least until the three of us decide what that day meant to us and what we’re going to do about it.”

“Interesting point.”

Jax raised his eyebrows. “Well?”

“You’re asking for *my* opinion?”

“I’d like it.”

“What did Tamara say?”

“She seemed a little evasive.” More like a lot evasive. She’d looked trapped when he’d said they needed to talk—trapped and terrified.

“I can see that.”

“We can’t just run away from what happened.”

“And I didn’t say we would.” Jess rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “The thing is I think Tamara’s a little skittish about more than just our threesome.”

“Our age?”

Jess nodded. “And maybe our race and who knows what other kind of excuses she can come up with or demons she’s running away from back in New York. I got the feeling she’s had some recent bad breaks in the relationship department.”

He did not want to hook up with a woman on the rebound. He probably could vouch for Jess on this too. “We need to find out for sure.”

“Are you going to ask her?”

Yeah, like that would happen. It wasn’t like Jax excelled at communicating and his interpersonal skills when it came to women, he’d been told, started and stopped at the bedroom door. But

somebody needed to bring up the issue. Not to mention the fact that Tamara wasn't here to stay. That part of their little conundrum just got swept under the rug what with all the other excitement going on. And at that moment, Jax couldn't even imagine her leaving him and Jess again—probably a big mistake on his part.

Damn, they weren't two whole weeks into this relationship, and he already fell under romantic and unrealistic delusions of longevity.

This thing between them all was moving forward full speed ahead whether any of them liked it or not, and Jax wanted to try and keep them from crashing headlong into heartache and disappointment if he could help it. He had enough of each in his life already.

"We're going to have to talk to her eventually. We can't avoid this," Jax said. For the first time in his life, he experienced a little bit of what it must feel like to be Jess. Jess always seemed so serious, so reliable, so *responsible*, driven by the need to take the weight of the world on his shoulders, or at least the weight of their immediate world on his shoulders.

"We won't avoid this, not anymore." Jess gave him a reassuring smile that strangely did the job all his own talking-to hadn't been able to do. "We'll sit down with her together and get this all out in the open."

Jax felt better knowing they'd have each other's back because he had a feeling going up against Tamara the legal eagle he and Jess would need all the support they could get.

Chapter 17

Jess looked at Maria at the stove scrambling eggs. She had her profile to him, but he could just make out a flush of color creeping up her neck to her cheeks and wondered just how far Jax and Tamara had gone by the time the housekeeper had walked in on them.

Jealousy flared in his chest, but more at the thought that Jax had been with Tamara alone, and *he* hadn't been there to share her with his brother rather than the fact that Jax had been with her at all.

Getting a hold of his emotions as they involved Tamara proved difficult enough. Adding how he felt about his brother and Tamara together just royally balled him up to a point where Jess wondered if he shouldn't just take a cue from Carson and Sam and stay to himself.

He watched the brothers around the ranch, how they interacted with the other staff and visitors, or rather how they avoided interacting. They did what they had to do to get the job done, did what their employers asked them to, for sure, but they didn't socialize more than they had to. And unlike the other cowboys who basked in the romantic vigorous attentions that female staff and visitors of the ranch frequently showed them, neither sibling showed any interest in hooking up with any one woman, much less several. He wondered if they might be gay, but didn't see any evidence of this either. Clearly, Carson and Sam seemed to prefer each other's company as opposed to outsiders.

Jess might have thought them at least fraternal twins if he didn't know that Carson had Sam by a couple of years.

Presently, he took a seat at the island behind Maria. “Morning, Maria.”

She barely mumbled a greeting, averting her gaze as she doled the eggs onto a serving platter that she brought to and set on the island before Jess—definitely not her usual bright and bubbly self.

Jax came into the kitchen, walked right up to her, wrapped an arm around her shoulders and bent his head to kiss her on the cheek. “*Buenos dias*, Maria!”

“Ay, you.” She giggled and slapped at his chest with a dish towel as she pushed him away so that she could finish preparing breakfast.

Leave it to Jax to work his charm and not give the woman a chance to be embarrassed, at least not for too long.

Jess hoped he’d managed to work some of that charm on Tamara and wondered what *he* would say to her once he saw her.

They hadn’t spoken since they’d gotten back from the stream, not about anything significant, and he’d gone to bed every night since confused and with his empty arms aching to hold her. That Tamara remained at the root of his confusion didn’t deter him from wanting to see her. Illogically, he felt like seeing her would clear up the confusion rather than contribute to it more.

Jax took a seat beside Jess and helped himself to a steaming portion of the eggs, several strips of bacon and a stack of Maria’s famous light and fluffy flapjacks that gave the range cook flap jacks a run for his money. As far as coosies went, Garfield did pretty darn well satisfying the guests’ palates .

“Where’s Pop?” Jax asked as he poured a generous amount of syrup over his stack.

Jess shook his head and smiled. He didn’t think little kids could beat Jax for his sweet tooth.

“He had breakfast earlier. Said he would go fishing at the pond and maybe go visiting after that,” Maria said as she took a seat opposite Jess and Jax and sipped from her cup of coffee.

Go visiting could have meant anything, but Jess had a pretty good idea that their dad went over to Bailey's to stir up some trouble more than likely. Although he probably wouldn't see it that way at all even if he'd caused the recent upheaval at the ranch.

He didn't like thinking of Tamara as an upheaval, but couldn't think of another way to describe the state of affairs at the ranch since she had arrived. Everyone walked around the house on pins and needles, and Jeremiah and Bailey acted more cantankerous than usual. Not to mention the two's secretiveness of late had only gotten worse since Tamara's arrival almost two weeks ago, and Jess wondered what that was all about.

Did Maria know what went on? Being the housekeeper and naturally low-key, she tended to blend into the background, the eyes and ears to the household grapevine, though she refrained from gossiping. Maybe she had overheard a few discussions between the men that would give Jess or Jax an idea of what went on.

He knew his father wasn't completely happy with all the changes and expansions that Jess had masterminded at the ranch, but he didn't think the old man would take any kind of drastic steps like selling the place without consulting him and Jax.

But Jess knew *something* went on between the two codgers.

"Will *Senorita* Tamara be coming down for breakfast this morning?" Maria asked, her voice quiet. She avoided their glances and released a little gasp of surprise when Tamara swept into the room dressed in a pair of blue jeans and an off-white western shirt.

She immediately went to Maria and bent at the waist to peck the older woman's cheek. "I told you when I arrived you could call me Tamara, Maria. Nothing's changed, has it?"

"N-no *Sen...* Tamara."

Jess watched Maria's lips curve into a little smile and thought about the bewitching effect Tamara had on everyone—except for her stubborn father, Bailey.

“Good.” Tamara gave Maria’s shoulder a gentle squeeze then went to stand between him and Jax, draping an arm over each of their shoulders before giving each of them a sound peck on the cheek. “How’s everybody this morning?”

Jess looked at her and noticed his brother mirroring his action just as Bailey struggled through the back door.

All gazes automatically darted to the door to see him haltingly make his way across the floor to the island on his crutches. He settled himself onto the high chair beside Maria, resting his crutches on the island on his other side.

“Where’s Jeremiah?”

“Good morning to you too,” Tamara said.

Bailey spared her half-hearted greeting that came out more like a growl.

“We thought you were together,” Jess said.

Bailey frowned. “Why would we be together?”

Jess just shrugged, now more than ever convinced that the two men harbored some secret that he, Jax and Tamara probably should have been privy to.

More and more, Jess wondered about the accident that had broken Bailey’s leg. Neither man had ever explained to his satisfaction how it had happened. He wondered how Jax felt about it and whether or not Bailey had shared anymore with Tamara than he had with them.

Had she come out so quickly because she knew something he and Jax didn’t? After all, she hadn’t visited the ranch since her departure almost twenty years ago—not when Jax had fractured his knee playing football and not for anything else of importance involving him or Jess. But then Bailey was her father, and he was getting up there in years. Maybe she thought now would be her best excuse, her last chance to reconcile with him. God knows the silence between them had gone on long enough.

Jess didn’t think he could pull it off. No matter how angry he got with his dad and Jax, and they had had some pretty heated arguments

over the years, he still couldn't see not speaking to the old man or his brother for so long, and he considered himself just as proud as the next guy.

Jax said diplomacy prevented Jess from holding a grudge. Maybe if this wasn't true, and the ranch hadn't always been his passion he would have left long ago, just like Tamara, and never looked back—maybe. Jess just couldn't see it though, not the way he felt about family ties, not the way he still missed his and Jax's mom.

He glanced at Tamara, who stood between him and his brother, and wondered if she missed her mother as much as he missed his. She talked a good game after all, playing it tough and untouchable, but Jasmine's abandonment had to hurt her on some level. At least he had had Tamara in his life to mitigate the absence of a female influence. But who had Tamara had to ease the effects of Jasmine's departure?

Bailey loved her in his own way, but his stubborn, disciplinarian manner prevented him seeing past his own viewpoint to notice Tamara's real needs. She was a girl, not the rough-and-tumble boys that Jeremiah had raised, and she needed tender loving care

When silence reigned for several moments and no one answered Bailey's question, he cursed under his breath and said, "Has that ol' coot been shooting off his mouth?"

Tamara arched a brow. "Shooting off his mouth about what?"

Bailey grumbled some more then asked Jax to pass the flapjacks. Jax dutifully complied, and when Tamara realized that Bailey wasn't going to answer, she sighed and went to the end of the island to take a seat adjacent to Jax and her father.

Jess watched the flush of color in her cheeks as she fixed her own plate, his heart breaking at Bailey's obvious snub. He felt bad for Tamara, and if Bailey wasn't the oldest and respected friend of his father, Jess would have made a point of calling the ol' man out for his uncouthness. Well-regarded elder or not, Jess's protective instincts wouldn't allow him to be completely silent on the issue and kicked

into gear. “I’m curious too, Bailey. What would Dad be shooting his mouth off about?”

“Who knows? He’s always poking his nose where it don’t belong. Could be anything.”

Jess exchanged a look with Jax, Maria and Tamara that plainly said, *Are you buying any of this bull crap, because I’m sure not.*

Tamara reached over to grasp Jess’s closest hand in hers and squeezed, giving her silent thanks.

Jess squeezed her hand back before he felt the heat of Bailey’s dark gaze and looked up to meet the disapproval in the older man’s eyes. He refused to break eye contact first, standing his ground for himself and Tamara and Jax too.

If he backed down, there’d be no peace for any of them. No matter how things turned out between the three of them, Jess wanted Tamara to be able to walk with her head held high. He didn’t want her feeling shame for what they had shared together, or what they felt for each other, whatever that was. As confused as he felt, shame didn’t factor into his emotions, and he didn’t think it ever would. He couldn’t be ashamed for feeling the way he did about Tamara or for making love to her with his brother. She deserved to be worshipped and taken care of by at least two men, better that the two men be the ones who knew and loved her.

Bailey finally broke the stalemate and turned his stare on Jax. But if he thought he would find Jax anymore diffident than his brother, he had another thing coming. Jax met his gaze head-on like Jess had.

After a long moment, Bailey pointed his fork at Jax and then Jess before making a jabbing motion in the air. “I know what you two boys are up to, and I don’t cotton to it. I just want you to know that.”

Jess exchanged a look with Jax who shrugged as if to say *the jig is up*.

“Nothing to say for yourselves?”

Jess wondered exactly which part of the equation Bailey had an issue with—the age gap between Tamara and him and Jax or the

threesome. It couldn't be his and Jax's race, not when he had fathered Tamara with a black woman.

He cleared his throat but before he could say anything, Tamara jumped in with, "Why don't you direct your condemnation at me? I'm just as much at fault as either of them if you're talking about what I think you are."

For the briefest of seconds, Jess wondered if Maria had said anything to Jeremiah or Bailey about what she had seen, or whether Bailey and probably their dad had put two and two together on their own. Admittedly, she looked uncomfortable fidgeting in her seat next to Bailey. But the expression on her face wasn't guilt as much as empathy when she exchanged a helpless look with Tamara.

"The three of you hanging out to all hours, God knows where, doing God knows what. Don't you have any shame?"

"We didn't do anything wrong," Tamara murmured, but she didn't sound half as convincing as Jess would have liked.

He hated that Bailey succeeded in cowering her and making her feel like less than a woman of worth. She didn't deserve that. If Bailey had been anyone else, Jess might have been tempted to knock him right on his butt, broken leg and crutches or not.

"Bailey, you need to pull in your horns a tad before you say something you're going to regret," Jess said, as deferentially as he could, which wasn't a lot considering the way he felt. Now that he didn't have Jax to direct his anger at, Bailey would do just fine.

"And who's going to make me if I don't?"

"You know, you're being one right ornery cuss, and there's really no need for it," Jax said. "We're all adults here. Let's just live and let live."

"I *thought* we were all adults." Bailey looked at his daughter and scoffed. "But it seems despite the years that have passed, some of us haven't grown up one iota."

Tamara tossed down her napkin and stood from her chair, fists automatically landing on her hips and Jess had an eerie sense of déjà

vu. Hadn't they just lived this scene several evenings ago when he had still been deep in the dog house?

"You know what? I'm about sick and tired of you judging me. I didn't come back here for this, and I don't have to take your abu—"

"Why *did* you come back?"

"Because..." Tamara gaped, exasperated as she threw up her hands. "You have to ask?"

"I just did, didn't I?"

"I didn't think you could be any more clueless or obnoxious than when I was a teenager. But clearly I'm wrong."

Bailey jabbed the air with his fork again. "You watch your mouth, missy."

"Or what? You'll ground me?" Tamara did a little air-jabbing of her own with her forefinger. "I've got news for you, *Dad*. I'm not a kid anymore, and I'm certainly not your little girl to boss around and tell what to do."

"Is that how you saw things?"

"I saw things as you made them."

"If you think that then you're more immature, short-sighted and selfish than your mother."

"Don't you *dare* compare me to that woman! I didn't walk out of here and desert a three-year-old despite the temper tantrum you threw that made you resemble one."

"*Ay caramba! Basta!* That's enough!" Maria slammed her palm down on the island top, and all gazes flew to her. While she had everyone's undivided attention, she pushed back from the island and stood up, panting and clearly fuming.

Jess didn't think he had ever seen her more angry.

"Why do you do this?"

"It's a long story, Maria," Tamara mumbled and Bailey said, "You don't understand the history."

"Whether I do or not, I do not see the reason why a father and daughter would tear into each other so. It is not right. And to not

speak to each other for so long..." Maria paused to shake her head, tsking. "It is not right," she repeated.

Jess knew Maria didn't like to see people she cared about at odds. She got upset when he and his dad got into it. But they always made up, and at least they hadn't been estranged for eighteen years. He thought how small the consolation when he considered all the time Tamara and Bailey had wasted being angry with each other. He could easily see how unreasonable their feud looked to someone who wasn't as intimately involved as he, Jax and their dad.

Marie put her own fists on her hips, looking as fierce as Tamara despite her petite proportions. "So now you have nothing to say for yourselves?"

"Thanks for trying to run interference, Maria," Tamara said. "You're a sweet woman, and you didn't deserve to be subjected to our family feud."

"Ay, please." Maria waved a hand. "It is nothing that does not happen in all families. The thing is to get past it. Life is too short to hold grudges, *si?*"

Tamara leaned in to give Maria a peck on the cheek. "I'm going for a walk."

Jess watched as she headed for the back door through which Bailey had burst not ten minutes ago. His heart told him to follow her and his head told him she needed time alone.

Well, so much for him and Jax sitting down with her to talk.

Maria turned on Bailey now. "See what you did?"

Bailey stood up from his chair with some difficulty, quickly situating his crutches under his armpits and glaring at Maria before turning his gaze on Jess and Jax. "I love you boys like my own blood, but you best believe I'm going to be watching you two like a hawk for as long as Tamara's here."

Chapter 18

Tamara blindly ran from the house. Tears of frustration and anger that blurred her vision so much she didn't realize she had gone so far away from the main house. Then the lively whoops and shouts of several cowboys roughhousing in the roping and riding area drifted through the mental fog to finally reach her.

The man just never failed to put her on the defensive and make her feel lower than a bug on the bottom of a shoe.

What had she ever done, really, to earn his mistrust, besides what any other red-blooded teen girl had done?

Before Noah, she'd really never given her father a moment of grief to speak of. She'd gotten straight A's all through school, she hadn't used drugs, drank or smoked, and before Noah—a man she had at the time considered would be her first and only lover—she'd been a dutiful virgin. Yet with all this, her father treated her like Hester Prynne. Why didn't she just sew a scarlet letter on all her clothes now before she went back to New York? Come to that, why didn't she just go home now before she royally cussed the man out?

Life is too short to hold grudges.

Maria's words came back to haunt her and made it difficult to swallow over the boulder in her throat. She knew the truth of the words, but she couldn't bring herself to go back into that house and apologize when *she* had been insulted and wronged. Granted she wasn't perfect, but she didn't deserve this kind of condescending treatment—no one did.

“What the—?” A lasso looped over Tamara's head and shoulders then tightened around her waist before she could blink. Arms

imprisoned against her sides, she turned as much as the binding would allow and saw Jax with the other end of the lasso in his hands, easily reeling in the slack and pulling Tamara toward him.

Grinning against her will, she toddled to him, stumbling the last couple of feet before falling against him—apparently right where he wanted her if she could go by the hard bulge in his jeans. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“This is the roping and riding area, sweetheart. And I think I done caught myself a right wild little filly I want to ride.”

If her arms had been free, she would have punched his arm. Instead she settled for a good-natured, “You fresh ass.”

Jax just chuckled, the dimples-revealing grin he aimed her way melting her insides and making her wet.

She did not need him to turn her on right now. She did not need her judgment clouded.

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, trying not to think of how good his cock had felt inside her last week, trying not to think how right his lips had felt against her back.

Damn her father for being such a judgmental tyrant, and he’d only gotten worse with age, still able to make her feel like a brainless nympho. It wasn’t as if she had had all that many lovers since she’d left the ranch, just enough to make an informed decision about the kind of man she did and didn’t want in her life.

Make that the kind of men I want.

She looked at Jax and licked her lips. She couldn’t help herself, something about his devil-may-care demeanor just doing it for her, making her heart flutter and her mouth water. And then she had the opposite side of the coin, the level-headed but just-as-sexy Jess to look forward to making love with.

How could a woman choose between them? But a better question would be why should she have to choose just because society, specifically her father, subscribed to an antiquated set of ideals about what a relationship between a male and a female should be?

She had to admit she broke more than a few taboos being with Jess and Jax, and wondered which one bothered her father the most. Knowing him as she did, it didn't take much for her to displease him, at least not as it concerned her sexuality.

Is that the way you saw things?

Tamara frowned as that bit of their argument came back to her. Her father had sounded genuinely surprised that she'd seen him as a bossy dictator.

Did he sincerely believe the brow-beatings he'd given her as a child had been for her own good, or more that she'd needed them to shape her into the intelligent, responsible woman she had become? Would she have had the drive to be successful and herself had it *not* been for her father's strict and watchful parenting?

No way in hell did Tamara want to admit that her father could be right about her, especially about what he considered, her out-of-control libido. Did her reaction to Jax and Jess indicate she'd lost control of her libido? She'd never been so wanton with a man before, much less two. She'd never hungered like this for anyone else. In fact, she'd been called frigid and *undersexed* by at least a couple of lovers.

Tamara shuddered as Jax leaned in to circle the shell of her ear with the tip of his tongue.

Yep, she still hungered, and she felt far from frigid, especially where it involved either Jax or Jess. Just being in the same vicinity as either of them sent her temperature soaring.

Jax chuckled, sending even more tremors through her body when he bent his head to nuzzle her neck, Tamara turned her head to see if any of the other cowboys watched her and Jax but they remained at least several yards away, sitting and balancing on the fence surrounding the roping and riding area and paying her and Jax little heed. They watched and cheered on the action inside the corral where a cowboy attempted to stay on the back of a bucking bronco.

Tamara arched her neck and closed her eyes, moaning as Jax nibbled and sucked her throat. She didn't let her hormones take her

too far before she pulled away from him, panting and not wanting to give her father anymore ammunition than she had already.

"I know we can't, not here," Jax murmured and leaned his forehead against hers as he collared her nape with one hand. He took a deep breath. "You're a dangerous woman."

"You're a bit of a curly wolf yourself," she said and smiled at Jax's look of surprise. She shrugged in response. "You can take the girl out of the country..."

"Well, you proved you can still ride a horse."

"Among other things." She licked her lips and smiled as Jax groaned, curved an arm around her and gently squeezed.

"Better stop before I ravage you right here, ranch hands and wranglers be damned."

"Don't forget my dad."

Jax shook his head. "He's always been a might cantankerous, giving Pop a run for his money. But since you got back, he's gotten worse. And I don't know what that's about."

"Old age?"

"Yeah, he's getting up there. But there's something else up with him I just can't put my finger on."

Tamara hated to admit it, but Jax would know whether or not something went on with her father better than she would. She conceded the point that he and Jess had been around her father more and longer than she had. Her dad had helped Jeremiah raise Jax and Jess. And Jeremiah had helped raise her. "Maybe it's regret," she said, wondering as she did whether her father had ever felt regret in his life. She hated to be so hard on him, but she swore his stubbornness could try the patience of a saint sometimes.

"I'm sure there's that. What father wouldn't regret depriving himself of his beautiful daughter for the last eighteen years?"

"Do you really think he still cares?"

"I think he never stopped caring. He just has a hard time showing it."

Jax sounded so sure, and Tamara wanted to believe him.

She knew her father wasn't a total heartless bastard, and had to admit the good times at the ranch for her had far outweighed the bad. That last day, those last moments just stuck in her craw and overshadowed everything else. It still hurt her to this day that her father hadn't even come to the airport to see her off. "You remember the day I left?" she blurted.

He tightened his hold on her as if to brace himself for what she would say next, and finally responded, "How could I forget?"

"He never showed up, Jax. He never even said good bye."

"I think it would have hurt him too much to watch you go, to lose you."

"But he *didn't* lose me. Or at least he wouldn't have if he had bothered to show a little sensitivity."

"You know that goes both ways."

She glared at him, her first reaction to lash out before she realized he hit the nail on the head and stood there wincing as if he waited for her to tear into him for expressing his opinion.

"You're right," she said, heart filling with not a little respect for his taking a stand. How could she not respect him for speaking his mind, for speaking the truth, especially in the face of her womanly, righteous indignation?

Tamara remembered those last days of silence, how she barely spoke to her father except to deliver the most essential information about her trip to New York or talk about her studies—nothing personal, nothing that could have led to a conversation about Noah. Her father had banished the man she'd loved, and she'd wanted to punish him for taking Noah away from her, wanted to punish her dad for shattering her illusions of his unconditional acceptance, love and support. Before the Noah incident, she'd been the recipient of all three, but after they became strangers. And the less she spoke to him, the easier it became for her to act as if he didn't exist so that by the

time she went to New York sans his farewell, her dad *didn't* exist to her.

She guessed he'd written her off the same way she had written him off.

"I left believing he didn't care, leaving so many things unsaid."

"I know we sent you off on a guilt trip what with all the bratty bawling and clinging. That couldn't have helped either."

Tamara laughed. When he put it into perspective, she couldn't reconcile the Jax and Jess of today with the two little boys who had cried at her departure. She guessed that meant she had gotten over the whole age gap, not that it had ever stopped her from screwing them to begin with. More than a deterrent their youth seemed to spur her on.

"It wasn't so bad. If you guys hadn't come to the airport, then it really would have been a crappy sendoff."

"You're too kind."

Evidently, she wasn't kind enough, at least not where it concerned her father.

She really needed to find a way to come to terms with their past and repair their tattered relationship.

Lured by his hard strong muscles and clean fresh scent, she buried her face against Jax's chest for a long moment, then lifted her face to stare him in the eyes and asked, "Where's Jess?"

"Shucks, sweetheart, you really know how to boost a cowboy's ego. What's the matter? I'm not enough for you?"

Tamara instantly felt like crud and started to apologize until she saw the teasing gleam in his azure eyes. "I'm a whole lot of woman, and it takes two good men to tame me." She saw his eyes light at the *tame me*, and her heart sped with the implications of her freaky Freudian slip. She wondered how much more or if his eyes would have lit up had she said what she really felt in her heart—that she needed them both and had never felt more cared about, safe and secure than when she lay in their arms.

As if sensing her sudden solemn mood, Jax silently moved his hands to loosen the lasso and slide it up her body and over her head.

Entranced, Tamara watched him wind the extra rope into a spool.

She had been so comfortable as his captive, that she had forgotten all about the binding, hadn't felt restricted at all. Had, in fact, felt more free and open with him than she had felt in a long time, except when she and he and Jess had been out by the stream. She couldn't help thinking that she must trust both of them on some intrinsic level, trusted them a lot.

"To answer your question, set your sights on the rider in the corral."

Tamara's heart fluttered as she realized the identity of the bronco buster—none other than Jax's twin. With his hat low over his brow as it had been that first day she'd met him at the airport, she hadn't been able to tell, really hadn't been paying much attention to be truthful, since she'd had her hands full with Jess's brother. But almost as soon as Jax drew her attention to the rider, his black Stetson flew off, and she recognized Jess's unmistakable, chiseled features, chestnut hair gleaming beneath the rays of the mid-morning sun and blowing in the gentle spring breeze.

Her pussy clenched watching him, and she had to amend her earlier thoughts about the rodeo. She never *had* been inordinately drawn to the cowboy mystique before, but watching Jess atop the wild horse—muscles tensed and bulging beneath his western shirt as he tightly gripped the cinch around the horse's belly—she thought she could definitely become a fan.

She didn't know if the obvious danger in the act of trying to break such a wild horse convinced her. However, when she watched Jess's skillful handling of the animal—one hand held high and thighs clamped against the horse's middle—her panties became moist. "He's a real arm jerker," Tamara said.

"Yep, but Jess is doing a lot of floating up there. Showoff."

Tamara chuckled, recognized Jax's reference to a technique some saddle bronco riders used to make it appear the horse bucked them off at every jump.

"Uh- . I see daylight."

Tamara did too, Jess coming so far off the horse when the animal sunfished, twisting his body into the shape of a crescent, that she worried he really would be bucked off. She turned to Jax for a brief moment, enough to notice the anxiety on his face.

"He's going to get thrown."

The certainty in Jax's voice chilled Tamara as he rushed past her, scaling the corral fence at the same instant Jess went flying from the back of the bronco.

Tamara instantly followed as did several of the other cowboys who leaped down from the fence, some with lassos at the ready as they ran down the still bucking horse and the rest going to see how Jess fared.

By the time she reached the circle of men hovering over his unmoving form, all the saliva had vacated her mouth, leaving it dry and almost unworkable.

Jax knelt by his brother's side, slapping his face a couple of times and calling his name before Jess finally blinked opened his eyes. "You okay, showoff?"

Jess winced as he sat up, rubbing the back of his head. "Fell the wrong way. But I'm okay."

"You sure?"

"Gimme a break." He glanced at the circle of men and Tamara gathered around him. "Just help me get up."

Jax instantly reached out a hand to grab his brother's, pulled and helped Jess to his feet.

Jess dusted off the seat and thighs of his jeans as one of the other cowboys handed him his hat. "Thanks," he murmured, but when he reached for it, he missed and would have gone face-first into the dirt had Jax not caught him.

“Whoa, whoa pardner.” Jax held his brother firm until he seemed steady enough to stand on his own feet, then peered into Jess’s eyes. “Think maybe we need to mosey on over to the emergency room for a quick look-see.”

“I’m just a little lightheaded. I’m *okay*.”

“Don’t be such a tough stubborn cuss just because our girlfriend’s here,” Jax teased and Tamara’s face immediately heated as all eyes turned her way. At least the gazes seemed more curious than judgmental. She didn’t think she could deal with anyone else in addition to her father jumping to conclusions, not in one day.

“Jax is right, Jess. You should see a doctor, just to make *sure* everything is okay.”

He gritted his teeth so hard, Tamara knew he must have broken a couple of molars. “Oh, all right. I’ll go and let a doctor take a look at me.” He reached for his hat and this time succeeded in snatching it from the cowboy who held it out to him before he slammed it on his head.

“Good. We’ll take your truck to town. I’m driving,” Jax stated and headed toward the open corral gate.

Tamara fell into step behind him and Jess. “I’ll go with you.”

Jess stopped in his tracks and turned to frown at her. “No sense in both of you being bored silly looking at four walls while the doctor tells me what I already know.”

Tamara prepared to argue before she saw Jess’s back go up as he prepared to argue too. Any other place and time, she might have pushed the point, the debater and lawyer in her scratching at her vocal chords, begging for a voice.

She’d spent years debating on her high school and college teams. In college, she had even been co-captain of the team, and she didn’t back down from a challenge easily. Except the look on Jess’s face, the macho-man-doesn’t-want-to-show-weakness-in-front-of-the-woman-he-cares-about look gave her pause.

“Jess is right. Why don’t you stay and play the tourist? Let one of the wranglers show you around the place to see all the improvements we’ve made and some of the stuff you’ve missed. I suggest checking out the western town and shooting range in particular. Although the star attraction,” Jax paused here and wiggled his eyebrows, “won’t be available, my fill-in and his partner put on a good show too.”

One of the cowboys broke rank from the circle of men, stepped forward and doffed his hat to reveal a head of longish, raven-black hair. “Carson Quarry at your service ma’am.” He motioned to the cowboy beside him, about the same height as Carson’s probable six foot three and just as stoic. “This here’s my younger brother, Sam. We can take you to the range now if you like.”

Younger? From the looks of it, and despite Carson’s serious expression, he didn’t appear much older than twenty-five himself. Not only did he appear as young as Sam, but he and his brother looked just as gorgeous as Jess and Jax.

They seemed nice enough, not exactly friendly, but not unfriendly either. And for all their sexiness, neither of them did a thing for her physically—*nada*, zip, zilch.

Tamara breathed a sigh of relief at this. Aside from the fact that she already had a full plate with her own two cowboys, she did not want to be the woman who fell for or tried to tame either Quarry brother. They seemed more rugged and feral than the rest of the cowboys she’d met at the Double R—feral and dangerous.

Still, she felt the need to tease Jess and Jax, if only to get back at them for wanting to make her stay behind like a good little obedient woman.

Jax beat her to the punch, however, when he pointedly gave the two men a teasing if also warning glare and said, “Take good care of her.”

Both cowboys barely cracked smiles as they nodded.

Carson, the apparent spokesman for the pair said, “No harm will ever come to any woman under our watch.”

Tamara didn't know whether to be reassured or worried about the truth of Carson's statement.

Chapter 19

“So how long are you goin’ to keep up the silent treatment?” Jeremiah asked. He couldn’t take the quiet anymore, not now.

Bailey hadn’t said a word to him all the way to the hospital except for a grunted greeting when he first got into Jeremiah’s truck after breakfast. Bailey had spent the half-an-hour of his chemo treatment alternately flipping through an outdated magazine from one of the round coffee tables in the treatment room and silently glancing out a nearby window.

Presently, he turned to glare at Jeremiah. “You had to go and open up your pie hole.”

“What are you jawin’ about? Open up my pie hole about *what*?”

“Are you going to sit there and tell me you didn’t say anything to the boys or Tamara about my...condition?”

Jeremiah could understand his friend’s almost choking on the last word. He hesitated over the term every time he thought about his friend’s condition—inoperable cancer.

He still hadn’t reconciled himself to the fact that his friend of more than three decades would die soon, at least much sooner than either of them had prepared for. Jeremiah had been looking forward to at least another twenty years of hearing Bailey’s ranting and seeing his grouchy face across the breakfast table. Those twenty years had been knocked down to a mere month. “You think if I had said anything I’d be sitting here alone looking at your sour puss?”

Bailey grunted and turned to look out the window again.

Jeremiah put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "Don't you think it's about time you let them know? At least let Maria, the boys and Tamara know. They're family."

"No."

"Bail—"

"I said no. Not yet."

Jeremiah took a deep breath, knew he would have to make his friend see the error of his ways and that his next words would do the trick. "I've been speaking to Jasmine."

Bailey's head whipped around so fast, Jeremiah thought it would fly right off his shoulders. "What have you been speaking to her about? Or should I say what hole did you dig her out of?"

"The same hole she called from when she last spoke to you."

"She called almost thirty years ago. And how the hell did you know about it?"

"Paula."

The name elicited a grim smile. "Never could get anything by that woman."

"She always thought you made a mistake not lettin' Jasmine come to see the gal."

"I did what was best for Tamara by keeping her away."

"What was best for Tamara or what was best for you?"

"You know I'm not too old or sick to give you the ass-whipping that you deserve."

"You can get as angry as you want, curly wolf. You know I'm right."

Bailey gritted his teeth, hard from the way his jaw worked, but Jeremiah refused to back down this time.

"I told her about Tamara bein' here and she wants to come for a visit, kill a couple of birds with one stone. I'm thinkin' about lettin' her."

“I don’t care a continental what she wants, or what you think. But then since it’s not just my ranch, I suppose I don’t have a say now, do I?”

“You have a say, Bailey. But what about Tamara?”

“Does she know you’ve been speaking to her mother?”

“Not yet.”

“And how do you think she’ll handle that?”

“How do you think she’ll handle your denyin’ her mother access to her when Jasmine wanted it?”

“I’m curious about the answer to that myself.”

Jeremiah’s heart fell at the sound of his youngest son’s voice, and he knew Bailey’s did just the same, especially when he saw the stricken look on his friend’s face.

They both slowly turned their gazes to the treatment room threshold where Jax stood with the same distraught look on his face that Bailey had on his.

“What’s going on?”

* * * *

Jax stood waiting for an answer, not sure if he wanted to hear what either man had to say and not sure if he could even handle it, especially now.

It wasn’t enough that his brother had taken a fall that scared the spit right out of Jax. Now he had walked into something that he suspected was going to rock his world worse than anything else ever had so far.

Jax kept his own extracurricular activities with the rodeo a secret because he didn’t want to scare his family every time he got banged up on the circuit. Didn’t want to make anyone as anxious as he felt now.

“What are you doin’ here?” Jeremiah asked.

“How much did you hear?” Bailey asked.

Jax looked from one man to the other, didn't know whose question to answer first and suddenly felt put on the spot when *he* should have been asking the questions.

He stared at Bailey sitting in a large teal-blue recliner, really looked at him for the first time in a long time and noticed how tired and washed out the older man appeared. His gaze then traveled up the IV pole standing beside Bailey's chair like a lifeless metal sentinel. A bag of fluid hung from the top of it and a tube led from the bag down to the inside of Bailey's arm.

Jax darted his gaze from the IV in Bailey's arm to Bailey's eyes. He held the man's look as long as he could without breaking, then looked to his father as if for confirmation of what he already knew. He'd known it the moment he'd heard the familiar voices coming from the chemotherapy therapy room before he drifted in to see what went on with the two men.

"How long have you been sick?" he whispered and watched as Bailey closed his eyes and shook his head.

Pop got up and came over to Jax. "What are you doin' here, boy?"

"Jess got thrown off a bronc—"

"Is he all right?"

"He got knocked out for several seconds and had a little dizzy spell when he came to. He didn't want to come to the hospital until I made him though. There's a doc looking at him now."

"I'm glad he's okay. But you still haven't answered the question. What are *you* doin' *here*?"

Jax shrugged, feeling like a little kid who'd just been caught after breaking a living room lamp with a basketball he wasn't supposed to be playing within the house. "I just wandered around, killed some time while the doctor took care of Jess."

As soon as his brother had gotten settled in a treatment room with a doctor checking him out, Jax had used the time to take a stroll around the hospital to find something to eat and to just stretch his legs. Had he known what he'd be stumbling on he would have kept

his patooty firmly planted in a seat in the waiting room where he and Jess had spent the better part of an hour for a doctor to see to Jess's injury.

"I don't need to tell you not to say anything to anyone else, do I?"

Jax gaped at his father. "Why not?"

"Because Bailey doesn't want anyone to know yet."

"And I'm asking again—why not?"

"Please, Jackson. I need you to do this for me," Bailey rasped.

Jax looked over at him, saw he had his eyes open and gave Jax an intense, pleading stare that made Jax's heart trip in his chest.

"Tam needs to know you're si—"

"She doesn't need to know anything."

"But, Bail—"

"I said no!"

Jax snapped his mouth shut and his father turned his head around to look at his friend.

Bailey swallowed, and Jax watched his Adam's apple bounce up and down like a ping-pong ball in a lottery drum. "Well, uh," Jax cleared his throat, "what about Jesse? I can't hide this from him. He's going to know something's up. You know how he is."

"Only if you think he won't say anything to anyone else."

Jax didn't know if he could get Jess to make a promise like that, especially after all the trouble he had gotten into for lying to Tamara already, and this lie seemed a hundred times worse.

But he couldn't keep this to himself. He had to tell someone, and if he couldn't tell anyone else, he could tell Jess. Jess had always kept Jax's confidences—they had kept each other's confidences since they had been kids and always would.

When Jax had gotten picked up for DUI on they way home from a party several years ago, Jess had been the one he'd called, not Pop. Jess had come to bail him out and pay the fee to get Jax's truck out of impound. Jax'd had to hear about his irresponsible, reckless behavior

for days and weeks after, but he hadn't drunk and drove again since and their father had never been the wiser to this day.

If anyone could keep a secret, Jess could.

He *could* keep one, but would he keep *this* one?

"Promise me, boy. You and Jess won't tell Tamara. Promise me."

Jax choked back a sob, tears that he failed not to shed running down his cheeks at Bailey's plea.

"Don't you start that bawling, boy. I ain't dead yet, and I'll get up from this chair and knock you on your ass just to prove it."

Jax burst into laughter, hastily swiping at his tears and nodding. "I...I promise."

Now he just needed to make Jess promise too.

* * * *

"No way. No frigging way."

"Jesse, please, if you had only seen his face."

"What about Tamara's face? How am I supposed to look *her* in the face and not tell her the truth? How are you supposed to?"

"We wouldn't really be lying."

Jess cut a glare at him so fierce Jax wondered why he didn't go up in a ball of spontaneous combustion.

"All right, fine. It's a lie of omission. But, Jesse, he begged me. I can't tell her. And you can't either."

"You should have never made a promise like that, especially not for me."

Jess drove in silence for several long moments, hands gripping the steering wheel so hard Jax thought he would pull it right out of the steering column any minute. Just when he'd decided not to say anything else until Jess did, his brother cursed under his breath, pulled to the side of the road and turned off the ignition. He slammed his fist against the steering wheel once then leaned forward and pressed his forehead against his knuckles.

Jax just watched him, waiting and wondering what to do before Jess raised his head to look at him with moist, red-rimmed eyes. He could see exactly what his brother thought, could feel it, awash in the same guilty relief that a terminal illness had not befallen their dad, still overcome by grief for their impending loss.

They barely remembered their mother, taken from them with the same general disease. But this death, they would both remember. They couldn't escape it.

"What are we going to do, Jax? This just isn't right."

Jax couldn't agree more. He'd thought the same thing when Bailey first made him promise not to say anything to Tamara.

Bailey wanted to break the news to his daughter in his own way, in his own time, and he had that right. But where did that leave the rest of them, practically forced to walk around the house on eggshells, anxious and afraid of saying or doing anything that would tip off Tamara?

"He had no right to ask us to do this," Jess murmured.

Jax nodded, felt as pressed between a rock and a hard place as his brother.

They could either respect the wishes of a dying man and lie to the woman they both loved, or they could tell her the truth and violate Bailey's confidence.

"This is going to hurt her no matter how this plays out, and I don't know if I can be a party to this. I love her."

"I know you do. I do too." Jax's heart sped at the admission, but he couldn't deny it as attractive as it might have seemed to do so. It wouldn't have been the truth though, and there wasn't enough of that going around right now—not enough truth and too many secrets. "I probably should tell you that her mother might be making a visit."

"Jasmine? When? How?"

Jax could imagine all the other questions going through his brother's mind. Why, after all this time, would she come back to the ranch? "I didn't get all the details, just stuff I caught before I

interrupted Pop and Bailey. They argued about letting her visit while Tamara's at the ranch. Pop wants to kill two birds with one stone. Bailey's dead set against her coming."

"And I suppose we're not supposed to warn Tamara about her mother's impending visit either right?"

"I think that's a given."

"I don't have to tell you how much this stinks."

Jax nodded, in total agreement. And he knew how much this stressed Jess out and would stress out his brother in the days to come. Already he could see the sense of responsibility, the need to keep everything organized and everyone happy already weighing down his twin's shoulders. He almost regretted telling Jess anything, but he couldn't have helped it anymore than he could have helped loving the same woman his brother did.

He reached out an arm to wrap around Jess's shoulder. "Hey, you don't have to do this alone. I'm here for you." Jax saw the question in his brother's eyes and quickly put in, "And we'll both be here for Tamara when this crap finally hits the fan."

"As it will inevitably do."

Jax did not look forward to the coming days and weeks. He wasn't good with confrontations and tears, and he anticipated a lot of both with Tamara's mother visiting and the progression of Bailey's illness. "We'll help her get through this."

"She may not want us to help her, may not want us near her. Not after she finds out we knew things ahead of time and kept it from her."

"You're probably right. But that doesn't have to stop us from taking care of her in spite of herself and her anger."

"And there will be that."

"And probably blood too," Jax said and Jess laughed. "It's going to be okay, bro. We'll get through this."

"I want to believe you."

"I know it's not in your nature to, but trust me."

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Jax. When the chips are down, I’ve always been able to count on you to come through for me.”

“You just don’t trust *anyone* to get this right except you.”

Jess nodded and Jax thought when they got right down to things, they left the control of a potentially volatile situation in Bailey’s hands, and Jax knew that just didn’t sit well with Jess, especially not where it concerned Tamara. Bailey had a history of not thinking clearly or objectively when it involved his little girl.

“Let’s just play it by ear. If it gets to be too much to handle, we’ll go back to Bailey and insist he tell Tamara himself before we do.” He hated to give a sick old man an ultimatum, but what else could they do? Bailey for sure wouldn’t be comfortable or happy with any decision they made regarding his illness. Better to at least give him a head’s up before they dropped the bomb on Tamara.

Jess turned the key in the ignition and started the truck as he grinned at Jax.

“What?”

“You really are maturing aren’t you?”

“It’s about time, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

Jax credited Tamara’s arrival in no small part to his maturation. She made him want to be a better man, and this made him know he really loved her.

Love changed people, made them do strange things, things they’d never done before. “I guess love is making me grow up,” Jax whispered, realization dawning.

Jess glanced at him and smiled. “It looks good on you.”

Chapter 20

Jess drove the rest of the half-mile up to the ranch in complete silence, planning his escape as he made the turn onto the dirt path leading up to the main house. He needed some time alone to think and decide whether or not he would go along with this secret.

But as soon as he entered the house through the back door in front of Jax and spotted Tamara standing at the kitchen sink, he really didn't want to be alone or make any major decisions.

Tamara didn't make it easy to avoid her either when she unabashedly flew across the room and flung her arms around his neck in greeting. "Are you okay? I've been worried about you."

Jess took his hat off and plopped it on the back of Tamara's head before leaning in to give her a slow kiss on the lips. Drawn by her warmth and taste, he slipped his tongue into her mouth and stroked her welcoming tongue with his, hunger quickly growing along with his cock.

When Tamara responded, pressing against him so that her soft curves molded to him in a sensual perfect fit, Jess's guilt came crashing down on him.

How could he sustain Bailey's ruse for more than the time it took him to say hello when just touching the woman made him want to come clean right here and now?

He didn't like the idea of lying, much less to Tamara—again. Not to mention he knew perfectly well what Tamara thought on the subject.

Jax cleared his throat behind them. "So, I'm chopped liver?"

Tamara giggled and pulled away from Jess to reach over and pat Jax's cheek. "Nothing of the sort, honey. But you weren't the one who got thrown off of a horse."

"Is that what a guy's gotta do to get some tender loving care around here?"

"I wouldn't recommend it, but it is a good way to get a boo-boo kissed." And with this, Tamara cupped Jess's face with both hands and stood on her toes to kiss his forehead.

When she pulled away, he stared at her, tongue-tied as he sank into her dazzling onyx gaze. After an endless moment, he licked his suddenly dry lips and blurted, "The doctor gave me a clean bill of health, but I wouldn't refuse some more tender loving care."

Now Maria cleared her throat. "I think some of my famous homemade chili should go a long way in helping to heal any other injuries."

Jess almost forgot that Maria stood in the room. He supposed she'd been quiet long enough, busy at the stove, stirring her pot and making herself as unobtrusive as possible.

Did she suspect he and Jax had gone way passed flirting and kisses with Tamara? What would she do if she knew? Would she be as disapproving as Jess suspected Bailey and his father would be?

As if to put his mind at ease, Maria winked at him then turned back to tend to her pot.

"I washed the vegetables for the salad before you guys arrived," Tamara said and hooked an arm through his to pull him closer.

"Chili and salad. Sounds like a plan to me. I'm starving." Jess gave Tamara another kiss on the lips before pulling away to head toward the foyer and stairs.

Maria caught his arm to stop him on the threshold. "We're glad you're okay, *niño*."

He wouldn't be if he stayed in this kitchen a minute more acting like there wasn't anything wrong.

Jess patted Maria's hand and eased out of her grasp just as Jax hooked an arm around his neck in a playful headlock and led him to the stairs.

"Gotta go wash off some of this dirt so we can have your delicious lunch, Maria. We'll be back down directly," Jax said over a shoulder.

"There's homemade buttermilk biscuits too," Maria said.

"Can't wait!"

As soon as they got upstairs behind the closed door of Jess's room, he started pacing and Jax took a seat on the king sized four-poster bed that dominated the room.

Jess felt his brother's worried look following him the entire time he marched from one end of the large bedroom to the other, but didn't know what to say to stop Jax from worrying.

"You okay?" Jax finally asked.

Jess paused in his pacing to glare at his brother who peered back at him like a dormant volcano Jax expected to erupt any second. "What do you think?"

"I know you're upset about this, but you've got to keep it together—for Bailey."

Jess wanted to tell his brother that if Bailey cared a lick about any of them he wouldn't ask them to do this. But that wasn't fair. The man was sick and dealing with things the best way he could. Jess just didn't like being caught in the middle of his and Tamara's power struggles and emotional minefields, or whatever the heck they wanted to call things.

"Just think of it as a test. You've always been good at passing those."

"This is different, Jax."

"Not really. Just put it into perspective. Do you really want to be the one to tell Tamara her father is dying?"

Christ, did he? When Jax put it like that, heck no he didn't want to be the one to deliver news like that to someone he cared about.

Jess let out a long tired breath as he flopped down on the bed beside his brother, Jax's question totally knocking him for a loop.

"I didn't think so."

"Someone needs to tell her."

"It's Bailey's responsibility. He'll tell her when he's ready."

Knowing Bailey he might never be ready. He might take this feud and his silence to his grave and leave the rest of them to clean up the emotional fallout after.

"Do you remember when Mom died?" Jax asked.

Jess turned to look at him. "Do you really want to talk about that now?"

"What better time?"

Jess shrugged, didn't know where his brother intended to go with the question, but waited for the rest with his heart drumming.

"I remember when Pop sat us down in his study after he got back from the hospital without Mom. I knew something bad happened because that's the only time Pop took us into his study—to give us a serious talking to."

"I remember," Jess said past the lump in his throat. He really didn't want to do this now, felt like he went through a dress rehearsal for when Bailey finally died, felt like they rushed things.

"When Pop finally explained to us that God had taken Mama to heaven to be with Him I just started crying. I didn't want Mama to be in heaven with God. I wanted her to be here with us and didn't care what Pop had to say about Him needing her more than we did."

"Dad said you shouldn't be selfish, that we needed to share her with God."

"And I told Pop that God was selfish."

Jess nodded, remembered Dad's stricken look, how the man had come that close to striking Jax. It was the first time he had ever seen his father so close to losing it with them.

“Even back then you played the responsible diplomat.” Jax chuckled and shook his head, turned to look at him. “Do you remember what you did?”

“Barely.”

“You stood up and rubbed and patted Pop’s back as if exchanging roles and you told him everything would be okay, that you’d talk to me and make me understand. Then you turned to me, and by this time I had been crying pretty hysterically. But you wrapped your arms around me and hugged me tight and told me everything would be all right. You said I still had you and that I’d always have you.”

“Dad left us alone in the room after that.”

“But I saw the tears in his eyes before he left, and I felt like crap for making him feel bad like that. I wanted to say sorry.”

“He knew.”

“Yeah.” Jax nodded. “I just think about how difficult it must have been for him to sit two four-year-olds down and tell them their mother had died. And I wonder how much more difficult it’s going to be for Bailey to tell his daughter he’s barely civil to that he’s going to die. I just wonder what’s going through his head, his heart, and I know I don’t want to be in his shoes for more than just the obvious reason.”

“Is there some message you’re trying to relay in your convoluted way?” Jess asked only half jokingly, and Jax shrugged.

“Just wondering who death is harder on—the one who dies or the ones left behind.”

Jess wished he had an answer for that. He wanted and needed a clue how to make it easier on Tamara when Bailey died. It wasn’t like he had that much experience consoling the grief-stricken. Aside from his Mom, he hadn’t lost anyone else nearly as close or important in his life, glad that he’d never had to go through that sort of loss too often. He knew it wasn’t realistic to believe that he would never have to go through that loss again, but once was enough.

When a sudden knock sounded on the door, they both froze and stared across the room before looking at each other.

“You decent in there?”

Before either of them could answer, Tamara opened the door and paused on the threshold when she saw them. “Hey, good, you’re both in here.” She closed the door behind her, frowned and asked, “Should I ask what’s up with you two? Busy plotting your next move?”

Jess tried not to look at her too warily. “In regards to what?”

“Me and how you’re going to get me out of my clothes and into bed again.”

Jess grinned and shook his head. “No, no plotting,”

“Just reminiscing,” Jax offered.

“Really? About what?”

“Mom,” Jess said.

“Oh.” Tamara arched a brow. “What brought that on?”

He shrugged, couldn’t think of something that wouldn’t point the finger at Bailey’s illness but Jax saved him.

“Having you around reminds us of Mom.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Jax chuckled. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How do you know how I think you meant it?”

“We can tell by the look on your face,” Jess said and stood to cross the room. He stopped less than a foot in front of Tamara, admiring the flush that added an ethereal glow to her smooth, caramel complexion. “I think what my dear awkward brother meant to say...” He paused, enthralled by the way she looked up at him, all curious innocence and carnal hunger—a deadly combination. No wonder he and Jax got tongue-tied around her. No wonder Jax had made that ridiculous promise to Bailey. It was hard to deny either of the Carpenters anything when they turned on the persuasion and looked at a body in a way that could make it melt inside and out.

“What did Jax mean?”

Jess peered at her face and the words just fell into place. “We’re just glad you came back home to us.”

“Yeah.” Jax stood now and came to position himself just behind Tamara, effectively pinning her between him and Jess.

Jess saw the doubt in Tamara’s eyes, the dispute when he’d said *home*, and his heart fluttered at the idea of her leaving the ranch. He didn’t know what he had been thinking, what dreamland he had been living in the last few days to forget the reality glaring him straight in the face. When everything was said and done, when Bailey died and they buried him, Tamara would go back to her world and leave him and Jax behind—again.

He could see the resolve in her eyes right now, but became determined to do everything in *his* power to convince her to stay, that she could practice law anywhere. He knew his thoughts selfish but couldn’t see past his desire to keep Tamara put. He’d deal with the logistics and mutual sacrifices later.

Jess glanced at Jax when he heard his brother push the lock in the doorknob.

“Learned your lesson after the last time, did you?” Tamara teased without turning and Jess smiled as he nuzzled her neck. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her farther into the room, Jax hot on their heels as Jess got them to the bed.

“I’ve always been a quick study,” Jax said.

“So you’ll remember how I like to be ridden then.”

“Slow and easy” Jess rasped.

“Hard and fast,” Jax murmured.

“Correct on both counts.”

* * * *

Feel, just feel, she told herself.

She didn’t want to deal with the desperate look of longing she’d seen in Jess’s face, didn’t want to deal with the knowledge that he thought she would stay, that he wanted her to stay. She couldn’t deal with the future, just wanted to deal with the now—the feelings.

Tamara moaned as Jess added teeth to his ministrations, nipping her throat before swirling his tongue over the love bite and holding her tight when she shuddered.

She raised her hands to tunnel her fingers through his silken waves, fisting her hands against his scalp as if it were a life raft, and she feared being lost at sea. She arched her throat to give him better access to her neck and the top of her breasts, pushing them up toward his face like an offering.

Jess unbuttoned her shirt all the way, unlatched her bra and Tamara could barely hold in the whimper when his tongue darted out to lick her nipple, finally.

“More, Jess. More...”

He laved the tight nub, winding his tongue around the hypersensitive aureole before pulling the nipple into his mouth and firmly sucking until she closed her eyes tight and saw stars. He licked his way over to give the other nipple equal attention. He licked and sucked it until she was ready to cry uncle when the sensations zinged straight to her pussy and engulfed her lower body in searing white heat.

Tamara took his hand, guided it to her warm core, and when Jess took her lead and caressed his fingers up and down her slit, she felt herself gush into her panties at the raunchy contact. And despite her preoccupation with Jess, she became acutely aware of Jax behind her now, grinding his pelvis against her lower back. He slid her shirt and bra straps over her shoulders and down her arms before finally tossing them and twining his fingers with hers.

Without turning to look at him, she knew he had gotten out of most of his clothes, the heat of his body intense and raw—encompassing.

Tamara untangled her hands from Jax's, reached back to stroke his thighs as if to test her theory, not disappointed when her palm met bare skin, hot and muscled behind her.

Jax pushed against her, his erection nudging just above her jeans-clad ass as he rocked his hips. He curved his arms around her, cupping her breasts, replacing the wet warmth of Jess's mouth before he rolled and plucked her nipples.

By now, Jess had moved farther south, making quick work of opening and getting off her jeans with not a little help from Tamara, who stepped out of them forthwith and pushed Jess back onto the bed.

She watched as he lay there, peering up at her while she licked her lips with anticipation. "You need to catch up with the rest of us." Tamara started on his belt, taking pleasure in the breath he hissed out when she unbuckled, unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans then pulled them down over his hips with his eager assistance.

Jess reached up to cup her face, kissing her deep before he pulled away to ask, "Do you think now's a good time?"

"As good a time as any."

"I mean with Maria holding lunch for us downstairs."

"She won't come looking for us, if that's what you're worried about," Jax assured.

"We'll make it quick," Tamara said.

"Not too quick." Jess drew her close for another kiss, this one more soul-searing than the last and just as provocative.

Tamara delved in his mouth, searching and finding his waiting tongue, drawing a moan from him with her desperation and hunger. She wanted him inside her, writhing beneath her with the same desperate hunger. Just the thought of gloving his cock made her pussy muscles contract, made her wetter, her juices already dripping down the insides of her thighs in desire.

"Top drawer," Jess panted when Tamara finally let him up for air.

Jax beat her to the night stand, retrieving two condoms and a tube of lubrication. He handed one of the condoms and the lube to his brother and kept the other condom for himself.

Tamara squeaked when he slid a finger past the tight ring of muscle and into her anus before he withdrew to slap her ass.

She yelped and turned slightly to catch his jutting shaft as he tried to get back behind her, gently pumping him with one hand and scooping the pearl of liquid from the head of his cock with her thumb. She brought it to her mouth, observing his mesmerized expression as she sucked the digit into her mouth with much relish, especially when she heard him groan.

She reached for Jess with her free hand, and treated him to the same handling, discerning the subtle differences in the brothers' tastes—Jax's sweet and tangy and Jess's more down-to-earth and spicy—and liking them.

"If I don't get inside you soon, I'm going to explode," Jess growled. He ripped open his condom and rolled the latex down onto his shaft with lightning speed. He then coated his sheathed cock and Tamara's anus with a liberal amount of lube.

Tamara panted and turned her back to sit down on his lap and straddle his legs. The ridged underside of his stiff penis rubbed against her lower back before he grasped her around the waist and lifted her several inches to hover over the head of his cock.

He teased both of them with his strength, nudging her creaming folds for a moment before he slowly lowered her onto his rod and Tamara's rosette gradually stretched to accommodate his length and width. She cried out at the burning sensation when he pulled her down onto him and impaled her with one hard thrust. Breathless, she braced her hands against his strong thighs for balance and just in time to see Jax standing before her, weeping and engorged penis begging for its share of attention too.

She licked her lips, eager to taste him again, fully taste him.

Jess pumped his hips against her just as she sucked the head of Jax's cock into her mouth. Tamara squeezed her muscles around Jess, pushing down against him as his cock throbbed inside her. His cock stretched her and made her nerve endings sing.

He picked up his rhythm, thrusting his pelvis as Tamara ground her ass against him while pulling more of Jax's shaft into her mouth.

Jax buried his hands in her hair, drawing her inexorably closer, and she gladly obliged his silent demand. She closed her eyes and inhaled the heady musky scent of him, getting high on his taste and enjoying him as she sucked and licked her way down to the root.

Jax rolled his hips, fucking her mouth and matching his brother's rhythm for several long moments before he grunted and pulled back.

Dazed, Tamara looked up at him when he grasped her shoulders as if he tried to get a hold of himself. "What is it?"

"I want to be inside you when I come and I got too close."

"Oh." Tamara licked her lips and watched his dick twitch in response. She leaned forward to give him one more affectionate lick and kiss before Jess wrapped his arms around her waist to tumble them onto their sides and better accommodate Jax's desire.

Jax quickly donned his condom and crawled onto the bed, facing Tamara and raking his hands through her hair to cup the base of her skull. He kissed her hard and long before he addressed his brother. "How're you doing back there, pardner?"

"I'm holding on."

"Hold on a little longer." Jax positioned himself at her entrance, teasing Tamara's moist, velvety lips before he plunged inside.

Tamara gasped at the double penetration, the exquisite glide of two cocks pulsing inside her. She felt so stuffed she could barely breathe when each man wrapped his arms around her and secured her in a comfortable cage. She hooked one leg around Jax's hip, tugging him close as Jess began to move inside her.

Jax joined him, pistoning and gyrating his hips as Jess did, their tempo in perfect, sensual synch, their movements a coordinated attack designed for one thing—to make her lose control.

Caught between the passion of their exploits and her own, Tamara drove her hips back and forth, relentlessly pushed to the edge of an orgasm that she toppled into with a scream of delight and near exhaustion.

Jess and Jax's climaxes instantly followed, each man stiffening in her embrace before releasing inside her on a chorus of husky shouts.

Tamara lay between them panting and getting her bearings. She took full advantage of the lull and fondled and squeezed all the hard muscles at her disposal—Jax's smooth, bare back and tight ass, Jess's downy, lean-muscled thighs, Both twins' milked cocks remained inside her.

Tamara rested a cheek against Jax's moist chest and listened to his pounding heart as it slowed to a regular beat, the pace of Jess's heartbeat against her back slowing to match.

She opened her eyes to see Jax staring at her while he brushed a tendril of hair away from her face as if for a better look. He leaned in to kiss first her forehead, then her eyes and nose, brushing his full lips across her cheeks before he gently kissed her mouth. Behind her, Jess kissed and nipped her nape and shoulders, finally sucking her earlobe into his mouth and making her shudder in their embrace.

If she could stay here like this forever, she would be a happy woman, she thought, but duty called and Tamara had been ignoring it for much too long.

Just give me a few more days. I'll go face the music then. I promise.

Chapter 21

A few more days turned into another week before Tamara found herself standing outside her father's bungalow like a kid who'd been called to the principal's office.

Again, she had refrained from being anywhere near the twins outside of lending a hand with the guests and ranch activities.

She found a particular niche working with the less experienced guests on the ranch, especially the kids, teaching them the finer points of horseback riding and playing in the western town. In fact, she had been back several times since that first trip with Carson and Sam, had even taken part in one of Jax's famous staged shootouts with them and Jax for the ranch guests' kids.

She'd been back almost a month and aside from the not having much contact with her father and steering clear of the twins whenever she could, she felt as if she'd never left. She'd fallen right back into the routine of ranch life, had forgotten how much she enjoyed living, working but especially playing out in the clean fresh mountain air beneath the Colorado sun.

Her life would be perfect except for one thing.

Tamara closed her eyes now and took a deep breath, remembering how good it felt to have both Jess and Jax inside her, how safe and protected she'd felt. She tried to garner strength from that memory, those feelings, and how right it had felt being held by both men, being *with* both men at the same time, before she finally knocked on the door to her father's house.

"It's open!"

Of course. She forgot for a moment that she wasn't in New York where two locks and bars on the windows proved the minimum and norm.

Tamara turned the knob and opened the door, pausing on the threshold to take another deep breath and looked in the mirror her father had hanging on the wall opposite the door. She stared at her reflection as if checking for any telltale signs, a flush or a love-bite for instance, like the evidence of her and Jess and Jax's love-play from days and days ago would still be visible.

Still she looked, figured even if she couldn't detect anything, her hawk-eyed father might. She hadn't been able to hide much from him as a kid. He'd always known when something was up with her, except for Noah. That affair she had managed to hide from him for almost a month.

Finding nothing to give her away, at least nothing discernable to her eyes, she gave a sigh of relief then stepped a little farther into the house to better admire the mirror.

She remembered the piece from her childhood, a gilt-framed number that her father probably got as a concession to her mother's extravagant, feminine sensibilities. The piece definitely did not suit her dad—just like the rest of the house.

Like Jeremiah's place, Dad's bungalow had several distinctive touches that screamed a woman's touch, most likely Maria's. In the living room stood the cream, overstuffed sofa and chairs with accent pillows. At the window hung the complementary, floral-print, summer-weight curtains, and an Aztec-patterned throw rug adorned the hardwood floor beneath the mahogany coffee table.

"Well, are you just going to stand there and let in all the cold air or are you going to close the door and make yourself at home?"

The voice came from a distance, somewhere in the back of the house, probably the kitchen, but it might as well have come from right beside her for all its accuracy and force.

Tamara closed the door behind herself, thinking it wasn't too late to turn around and run. Her father hadn't seen her yet, and she hadn't made a commitment.

Coward.

She hadn't allowed anyone to intimidate her in a long time, had left this anxiety and low self-esteem behind her years ago. She'd had to leave her family and home to do it, but she had.

Tamara came farther into the house and felt like she had gotten caught in a time warp.

Not much had changed since she'd left, but she still found it hard to believe that she had once lived here under the same roof with her bear of a father. Maybe because she spent as much time over at the Reynolds' as she had ever spent at her house. Maybe because she'd grown up as well as away from her dad.

Despite the feeling of familiarity, Tamara still felt like an interloper, a trespasser and the fact that, unlike at the Reynolds' where pictures of Paula abounded, not one picture of her mother inhabited a shelf or wall didn't help. However, the fact that she spotted a picture of herself as a teen on the mantel above the fireplace in the living room left her strangely thrilled and shy.

Tamara walked toward the lemon-yellow kitchen where her dad stood on a stepstool trying to retrieve something from one of his many overhead cabinets.

Shaking her head she advanced into the room, rushing ahead when she noticed him about to lose his balance as he began to tip backwards.

Tamara rushed across the floor to steady him, planting her hands on his lower back and letting him brace his weight against her.

Once he had gotten stabilized on the stepstool again, Tamara stepped back so that he could get down.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just lost my footing is all." He placed the box of spaghetti that he had been holding onto the counter and slowly turned to her.

She noticed his pallor, the way his clothes hung on his lean frame, much leaner than she could ever remember it being, and instantly wondered about the fall that had broken his leg.

Jeremiah had said he'd been thrown off of his horse when the animal got spooked by a snake. It sounded feasible, but for an expert rider like her father who had been riding since he'd been yay high to a caterpillar it just seemed unlikely.

"Stop looking at me like you done seen a ghost. It's still the same me, just a little older and a little slower. But I ain't helpless."

"I never said you were," Tamara mumbled, thinking maybe this hadn't been such a great idea. If anything, he acted more ornery here than he had at Jeremiah's, as if he took advantage of being on his home turf.

"Thanks for your help," Dad mumbled.

Instead of saying *you're welcome* and leaving it at that, Tamara asked, "So when are you supposed to get rid of that cast, and why don't you have some help around here, like a home attendant or someone until you're back on your feet?"

"Soon enough and I ain't crippled. I can take care of myself."

"I'm just saying you could use a little help around here."

"You been talking to Jeremiah behind my back?"

"Hardly." She'd seen Jeremiah since she'd been back about as often as she'd seen her father, which wasn't much.

"Is that why you came back? To help me until I'm 'back on my feet'?"

"You don't have to sound so thrilled about it, but yes, I did come back to lend a ha—"

"Don't need no pity or charity."

"And maybe I just came back to see you."

Her dad arched a brow as he took a seat at his oak table. “After all this time?”

“Somebody had to make a move.”

“I suppose I should be grateful.”

“God, I don’t know why I bother,” Tamara mumbled, but loud enough for him to hear. “You don’t have to be grateful or say thanks. I just thought that we could talk things out, get our differences out on the table and move forward. But since you want to stay stuck in the past, I suppose I’ll stop wasting my time and just go.”

Tamara made it halfway out the kitchen when she heard his voice call out behind her.

“Don’t go.”

She froze on the threshold, swallowing down her tears before she turned to see him standing beside the table, leaning his weight on one crutch.

Tamara held her place on the threshold, refusing to come back into the kitchen any farther before he asked her. She watched his Adam’s apple jump up and down as if he had a hard time getting the words out, but she refused to help him. She had come more than halfway across the country to reconcile. At least he could meet her halfway.

“Everything I’ve ever done, Tam, I’ve done to keep you from getting hurt.”

“Are you talking about Noah or Jess and Jax?”

He closed his eyes and sighed before collapsing back into one of the chairs at the table. When he opened his eyes to look at her, they appeared full of pain—pain and hopelessness. “I hoped it wasn’t so.”

“Jess and Jax?”

“Tamara, don’t you have any respect for yourself?”

“I’m not going to stand here while you insult me.” She turned to go before his voice stopped her again.

“Tamara, I’m sorry. Please stay.”

Her father wasn't big on apologizing, mainly because he always thought himself right. Maybe ninety-five percent of the time he was, but *not* when it came to her love life. His opinion didn't equate to law. She needed to be allowed to make her own mistakes, *if* being with Jess and Jax indeed equated to a mistake.

"Why?"

"Why stay or why do I keep insulting you?"

"Both."

"I don't want to see you hurt, honey. I'm sorry if I come off as a mean-tempered old coot. Old habits die hard, and after your mother I just..." He shrugged, unable or unwilling to finish.

Tamara crossed the floor to take a seat across from him. "Do you have any specific problems with Jess and Jax?"

"Do you really have to ask?"

"I can think of a few right off the back, but since I'm all right with them, then I don't see why everyone else shouldn't be."

"You're either being incredibly dense or wearing some rose-colored glasses."

"Maybe I'm being a little bit of both."

Her dad shook his head, a sad look on his face.

Tamara reached across the table to take his hand and squeeze. "Don't look so miserable. It's not that bad."

"Ain't it?"

"Why don't you come right out and tell me what exactly it is that's bothering you about them so we're under no illusions."

"Don't you realize how all-fired hard it's going to be for you being with a white man, much less two?"

"Not to mention they're almost ten years younger than me."

"Compared to the rest, that's small potatoes."

"I'm glad you think so." She stared at him for a long moment then said, "Tell me you don't really have a problem with them being white."

“Of course I don’t have a problem with them boys being white. If I tried to pick a man for you, I probably couldn’t do much better than Jess or Jax—just not *both* of ‘em.”

Tamara fought a smile and couldn’t believe she sat here talking to her father about her threesome. When she didn’t say anything else, Dad threw up his hands as if in frustration.

“*Why* does it have to be both of ‘em?”

“The heart wants what it wants.”

“That’s simplistic bull crap and you know it.”

“But isn’t that the way you felt about Mom? Your heart wanted her, wanted to be with her and couldn’t anyone tell you different?”

“Your mother doesn’t have anything to do with this here discussion.”

“She has everything to do with it!” Now Tamara threw her hands up and stood from the table to glare down at him. “Was it difficult for you being with my mother? Did the pressure of being married to a white man turn out to be too much for her and that’s why she went away?”

“That was a piece of it.”

He’d said it so quietly, as if saying the words hurt.

Tamara barely heard him and came closer but didn’t sit back down, didn’t want to get comfortable again in case she had to make a quick escape from his honesty.

“What else made her leave? Did she leave because of me?”

“Oh, baby, no. It weren’t you. It weren’t never you.”

She sat down, couldn’t hold out any longer, unconsciously leaning close, toward him, as if searching for reassurance. “Why? Why did she leave?”

“Tamara, don’t do this to yourself.”

“Don’t do it to myself, or don’t do it to you?” He held out on her. He didn’t want to just not hurt her. He tried to protect himself. Well, Tamara was tired of the half-truths and lies, and as much as she feared knowing exactly what had driven her mother away, she feared not

knowing more. “I *need* to know, Dad. What happened between you and Mom?”

Dad closed his eyes and wiped a hand down his face as if trying to wipe away the memories or his past, or at the very least, wipe away the ones involving Tamara’s mother.

“Was it that bad?” she croaked. She couldn’t imagine it easy to talk about the woman that left him more than three decades ago without a backwards glance. But did he think it any easier for her to ask and hear? “Please don’t try to censure what you want to say to make it easy on me. Just tell me the truth. I can take it.”

“Yeah, but can I?” he mumbled.

Tamara reached across to take his hand on the table and squeezed. “Dad?”

“This is hard for me, Tamara. I ain’t thought about the hows and whys of what happened between you and me and me and your mother in a long time. I ain’t needed to ’cause I knew I was in the right on both counts. But in the last few weeks I been thinking that I made some mistakes in my past I need to rectify.”

Tamara’s heart sped, pounding against her chest so hard until it shook her entire body. “Did you send her away?”

“No. I wouldn’t do that. But I guess I didn’t exactly make it easy for her to stay.”

“How hard did you make it?”

“I didn’t fight her when she said she wanted to leave, that she wasn’t ready for married life and a family.”

“Then she did leave because of me.”

“She left ’cause she was a spoiled brat who didn’t want to deal with responsibility.”

“You hate her.”

“No. I hate myself for believing her the right woman for me, for believing her the right woman to bear and take care of my children.” He shrugged and stared at her, squeezing her hand back. “When we get right down to it, I’m just as much to blame for everything that

happened as your mother, probably more so. At eighteen when we met Jasmine had little life experience. I had a sight more at twenty-six. I think that and the glamour of my cowboy life and the rodeo just swept her off her feet.”

Tamara could see a young woman being swept up by her father in his hey day. He could be charismatic as a snake charmer when he wanted to be, and he wasn’t a bad looking man. But that still didn’t excuse her mother for leaving. He hadn’t forced her into marriage, after all. Had he? “Was Mom pregnant when you got married?”

“Not by a long shot. She didn’t get pregnant until after I decided to leave the circuit and settled down to have a family. I didn’t want to be on the road away from her and any kids of ours. She seemed okay with my decision. We even celebrated my *retirement*. We probably made you then.”

Tamara watched as her father’s face softened with love and whimsy, wondered what went wrong between her parents’ irreconcilable differences. What went wrong between her and her father?

“I think what happened between Jasmine and me made me so hard on you and Noah. I saw your mother and me in you and Noah.”

She looked at her father and saw the honesty in his eyes. She also saw realization dawning, as if the root of all their problems had just been revealed to him that minute.

“I’m not my mother.”

“No, but you were young like her when her and me got together. You needed time to live, get out and see the world, not be tied down to a cowboy with no prospects except the skills in his hands.”

“It was good enough for Mom. And what if that’s what I wanted?”

“That’s just it. It weren’t good enough for Jasmine. At least she didn’t think so. Besides, you *wanted* to be a lawyer. Noah would have been a distraction you didn’t need. You would have never gone away to New York had you gotten tied down to Noah.”

“How do you know that?”

He just looked at her, unwilling or unable to answer.

Looking at him, Tamara had some realizations of her own. “Is that why the cold shoulder before I left? You didn’t want to be a distraction?”

“That cold shoulder went both ways. I just went with the flow and let you shut me out. It was easier than trying to fight you and convince you that I hadn’t made a mistake.”

“So you just gave up and let me go thinking you hated me.”

“You know I didn’t hate you.”

“I didn’t know anything of the sort. All I did know was that my love for Noah put me on your shit list when I used to be the apple of your eye.”

“You weren’t never on my shit list.”

“It certainly didn’t feel like it.” She stared at him, waiting for him to respond. When he said nothing she asked, “What was so wrong with Noah? And why did you have to *fire* him? He didn’t deserve that.”

“There weren’t nothing wrong with him. He was a good enough fella. He just wasn’t the right man for you. And we didn’t fire him.”

“You didn’t?”

Her father shook his head, averting his eyes with a sheepish look on his face before he raised his eyes to look at her again. “We gave him a healthy severance package and references for him to work at another ranch.”

“You bought him off?” And Noah had *let* them? So she guessed her father was right after all. He didn’t love her.

“That’s not exactly how I would put it. We just made him see things our way, and he agreed that the best course of action would be to leave and let you get on with your life.”

He’d still let her father and Jeremiah buy him off. But she guessed she couldn’t blame him. Stay with her and suffer the self-righteous wrath of her father and his best friend. Or take the money, run and live in relative peace to fight another day and be with another woman

who didn't have as many headaches attached as she did. She couldn't blame him, wasn't exactly sure that she wouldn't have done the same thing. But Noah's defection still hurt.

Maybe her father had done her a favor, but it still didn't make him right to interfere with her life the way he did.

Dad took her other hand in his and held them both. "Don't you see, Tamara? He wasn't good enough for you, not nearly good enough."

"That was my decision to make."

"I couldn't let you make a mistake that could ruin your whole life. I...I did it with your mother, and I didn't want to do it again if I could avoid it."

"Are you saying you ruined my mother's life when you married her?"

"I'm saying she and her kin felt that way."

Tamara shook her head, couldn't help thinking that this conversation should have taken place a long time ago.

She knew next to nothing about her mother or her mother's family. And she had been okay with that through most of her life. She figured if the woman didn't want anything to do with her then fine, she didn't want anything to do with her mother. Talking to her father now, however, made her curiosity grow, made her hungry to know the woman who bore her.

"Do you know where she is?"

He hesitated, and for a moment she thought he wasn't going to answer her at all before he finally said, "Once she left, I ain't never kept in touch with her."

He'd worded that very deliberately, and Tamara had a bad feeling about why. Maybe he hadn't kept in touch with her, but that didn't mean she hadn't tried to keep in touch with him.

She decided on another tactic to drop the subject for the moment and come at him again from another angle. Her father gave her the

perfect opening when he asked, “We need to move on and leave the past in the past and deal with your current hitch.”

“If you mean Jess and Jax, I don’t exactly see them as a problem or a *hitch*.”

“You don’t see being with two men a hitch?”

“No more than I see being with a younger, older or white man a hitch.”

“Do you love ’em?”

“Of course I do.”

“I don’t mean it like that, like because you grew up with them like family love. Do you *love* ’em?”

“What difference does it make?” She didn’t like being on the defensive and decided now would be a good time to turn the tables back. “Did you love my mother?”

“We’ve already covered this ground. Jasmine has nothing to do with this heart-to-heart.”

“She has everything to do with it.”

“You said it yourself. You’re not your mother.”

“Right, I’m not.”

“So why would you want to set yourself up for failure and make a spectacle of yourself like this?”

“Are you saying Mom set herself up for failure by choosing to be with you?”

Dad released her hands and suddenly stood up. He limped over to the kitchen counter and slammed a fist down. “Why would you keep bringin’ Jasmine up and comparin’ her and me to you and Jess and Jax?”

“You started with the comparisons by saying that Noah and I reminded you of Mom and you. I didn’t.”

He turned to face her, pointing an accusing finger at her. “Don’t use my words against me, missy.”

“I’m only saying—”

“Stop it, Tamara! You’re not a young’un anymore. And right now you’re acting more like your mother than you realize, trying to have your cake and eat it too. You have to make a choice and stop playing with those boys.”

“I’m not playing with anyone.” She didn’t know what she found more insulting—her dad comparing her to her mother or insinuating that she wasn’t serious about Jess and Jax. She didn’t really know *how* she felt about them, and her dad’s making her put a magnifying glass on the relationship had her questioning her morals, made her feel like a bad person.

“What do you call it?”

“I’m not calling it anything. I care about them, I enjoy being with them, and they enjoy being with me. Why can’t that be enough?”

“Don’t be coy. Are you even thinking ahead or about what you’re doin’ to those boys?”

“They’re not boys, and they’re not complaining.”

“Not now ’cause the sex his good, I’m betting. But that ain’t going to be enough if you really care about ‘em and they really care about you. What happens when you leave?”

She opened her mouth, floundering like a beached fish for a moment when her dad brought up the question that had been niggling at her for the past few weeks. She had to go home eventually, had a job, a *career* waiting for her.

“Don’t have an answer for that, huh, missy? I suggest you figure out what you want to do before you continue to string them boys along.”

“I’m not stringing anyone anywhere.” God, he made her sound like some dangerous older seductress only out for one thing. He made her sound like the cougar she acted.

Her dad raked a hand through his hair and sighed. “You need to grow up, Tamara. You need to—” He froze, body suddenly going ramrod straight before he toppled over face-first and began convulsing on the floor.

Chapter 22

Jess paused at the threshold of the waiting room, felt like this was the moment of truth. If he could get through the next few minutes without falling apart and admitting everything he knew about Bailey's illness, then he could get through anything.

Jax didn't seem to have any problems rushing across the room to take Tamara into his arms. He assured her that everything was going to be all right and that stress or some other non-life threatening malady had led to Bailey's seizure.

He almost had Jess convinced, but then Jax had had a lot of experience charming women and telling them what they wanted to hear, telling tales to get his way. This situation was different though, and Jess didn't know with whom to be more upset—Bailey for making them keep Tamara in the dark, or Jax for so easily accepting the situation.

Jess gritted his teeth and forced himself to cross the floor where he sat down on the other side of Tamara, settling his hands on her slim shoulders and gently massaging. She mumbled her appreciation against the front of Jax's shirt before lifting her head to glance at Jess over her shoulder and give him a sad smile.

"You two are the sweetest."

Jess bit his tongue before finally saying, "Not really."

"We're here for you, Tamara. Just remember that." Jax squeezed and rubbed her arms. "And Bailey's going to be just fine. He's a tough old coot."

“Yeah,” Tamara murmured and wiped residual tears from her eyes. “I just can’t help thinking that it’s my fault. If I had just backed off and not given him such a hard time...”

Jess stared at his twin over Tamara’s shoulder, gritted his teeth and said nothing while Jax took her hand in both of his and pet and caressed it. The gaze he gave Jess plainly reminded him to *keep his mouth shut about Bailey*.

“Why would you think yourself at fault, sweetheart?” Jax asked.

“We really went at it. And I have to admit I acted kind of difficult, disagreeing with and questioning everything he said.”

“What did you two talk about anyway?” Jess asked, had a feeling he already knew before Tamara said, “You two.” She looked from him to Jax before averting her gaze.

Jess put his forefinger under her chin, urging her head up and forcing her to look at him. “What *exactly* did you and Bailey discuss?”

Tamara shrugged, looking for all the world like a little girl trying to hide a secret from her parents, looking vulnerable.

“Tam...?”

“Family stuff. I’m sure you can guess the specifics. He doesn’t approve of...us.”

“The three of us together?” Jess exchanged another look with his brother.

Tamara nodded. “One of you might be okay with him, though I’m sure he’d still take issue with the relationship. But, according to him, my wanting to be with both of you makes a mockery of us all.”

This was bad. Bailey could very well force her to choose between them when not even he or Jax had brought up that possibility.

Jess didn’t want to think of the possibility now, just like he didn’t want to face the day when Tamara would finally leave and go back to New York. He was in serious denial, and he knew it, but would an independent, strong woman like Tamara be influenced by what her father thought of her, let his opinions make decisions about her love

life? She might if she wanted to get back in her father's good graces, make him happy.

He had to face facts. She'd been here almost a month and no one had brought the issue of her leaving up, not him, not Jax and not Tamara. They all three just went about their business like nothing amiss had happened, dancing around the big elephant sitting in the middle of the living room.

Actually, a couple of elephants sat in the room, but only a few of them knew about the biggest one.

"How do you feel?" Jess rasped. "About the three of us?"

She shrugged again and Jess didn't think it boded well for their future at all. His fingers itched to catch her around the shoulders and shake her, make her admit that she loved them and wanted to stay in Colorado to be with them. But how could he make demands when he and his brother hid such a big nasty secret from her, when he and his brother couldn't bring themselves to say *I love you* to her?

"My dad accused me of playing with you two, insinuated that I'm not serious."

"Are you playing with us?"

Jess heard his brother's voice crack on the question that he wanted to know the answer to himself before Tamara said, "No more than you two are playing with me."

"I can't speak for Jax, but I'm not playing."

"Neither am I," Jax piped up.

"The question is what are you going to do about New York?" Jess asked.

"How can you ask me that right now?"

"How can I not?"

Tamara slipped her hands from Jax's grasp and extricated herself from the cage he and Jess represented surrounding her from front and back. She stood up and took a few steps away from them, looking from one to the other and back again. "This isn't the time to discuss this."

“It’s as good a time as any, especially since we haven’t had any other opportunity to talk about what’s going on between all of us.”

Jax silently nodded his agreement.

“My father’s sick, and I don’t know how or why. I don’t have the energy or time to get into this with either of you right now.” Tamara planted her feet on the floor and her fists on her hips.

Jess could tell just from her adversarial, challenging posture that she meant her little speech to put a stop to his and Jax’s questions.

Jesus, she must be something else to see in action in the courtroom!

Jess braced himself for her further ire and stood to approach her just as Jeremiah came into the waiting room trailing the doctor who had been on duty when Bailey had been brought into the emergency room.

Jax stood and joined Jess and Tamara as they converged on the two new arrivals.

“How is he, doctor?” Tamara asked.

It didn’t escape Jess how the doctor looked to Jeremiah before answering, and he held his breath wondering if Bailey had come to his senses and decided to let his daughter know about his illness.

“He’s conscious and doing quite well. Actually he’s ready to go.”

“You’re releasing him?”

“Medically, there’s no reason to keep him.”

How could that be? Jess wondered and noticed how the doctor avoided saying anything specific about Bailey’s condition or why he’d had a seizure.

Tamara noticed it too and, evidently not willing to let things go, asked, “What’s wrong with him? What caused the seizure?”

Jess could imagine the territory tricky for the doctor what with doctor-patient confidentiality and all. Did that apply to lying to the patient’s family to keep his patient’s trust?

The doctor put a hand on Tamara’s shoulder. “Why don’t you go in and talk to him? He’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

Jess held in a gasp of surprise as best he could and wondered if Bailey would let them all off the hook. A man could hope anyway.

Tamara opened her mouth to ask another question, but the doctor squeezed her arm and said, “Talk to him.”

She nodded, and they all watched as the doctor left.

“Well, I guess that’s that.” Tamara said and turned to him and Jax. “Care to come in with me to see what’s up?”

“Sure,” Jax said without hesitation.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Jess murmured.

Tamara turned to Jeremiah who looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders, and Jess imagined it couldn’t have been easy to keep Bailey’s secret all this time. *He’d* held the burden for only a week himself and already buckled under the strain. Would things have been less stressful if Tamara wasn’t back at the ranch, in the flesh and they didn’t all have to look her in the face every day?

“You kids go in for a spell. I’m going to hold down the fort out here. I’ve had about all I can take of the ornery cuss for one night.”

Tamara chuckled and leaned in to kiss Jeremiah on the cheek. “Thanks for being here.”

“Ah, don’t thank me. Where else would I be?”

She ensconced herself between Jess and Jax, hooking an arm in each of theirs and said. “Let’s go face the firing squad then.”

Jess thought a firing squad would be a thousand times more pleasant.

They walked down the hall to the treatment room where Bailey had originally been brought, and saw him sitting up in bed, pulling on his shirt—blood still on the collar from where he had hit his head on the floor—while he gave the nurse a hard time, as expected.

“I ain’t stayin’ another minute, missy, so you can get this bed ready for someone who needs it.”

Tamara crossed the room and stood at his side while Jess and Jax stood sentry on the threshold like good little lovers and co-conspirators.

Jess saw her wince at the white gauze bandage on her father's forehead and the burgeoning shiner under his right eye. "Shouldn't you stay as a precaution? Just for one night?"

"You sound like that young'un doctor. And no, I shouldn't. I'm fine and dandy. I had low blood sugar and a touch of dehydration is all. Doc gave me a few stitches and cleared me to go home. End of story."

So that's the story he'd decided to go with, hypoglycemia and dehydration? Pretty clear, Jess thought, but could see Tamara slipped on her lawyerly, interrogator's cap.

"What caused the low blood sugar? Are you diabetic, Dad?"

"Yeah, that's it. I just missed one too many meals is all, and my sugar dropped."

Tamara eyed him suspiciously, and Jess wondered how much of Bailey's story she bought, how much of it he had rehearsed in his head before they'd come to get him. He had to admit the man lied well. But then he'd had a lot of practice, at least as far as it involved his illness. Who knew when or if he and Jax would have found out about the cancer had Jax not stumbled on Bailey and their father in the hospital? They would probably be in the dark right now, just like Tamara.

Ignorance certainly was bliss, Jess decided.

He wondered if that's what had actually happened when Bailey fell off of his horse. Had he had a dizzy spell or a seizure and not been thrown when the horse came across a snake? Jess had always been suspicious of the latter scenario, and as if reading his mind, Tamara folded her arms across her breasts and asked, "Is that how you broke your leg? Did you have a seizure and fall off your horse?"

"What is this? The Spanish Inquisition? I'm sure Jeremiah told you all about it."

"Yes, he told me. Now I'm asking you. How did you break your leg?"

Bailey actually had the decency to avert his gaze right before he glared at Tamara and growled, “I got thrown off my horse when a snake spooked him. Now that’s the end of it, missy!”

At least they remained consistent with their stories, Jess thought and wondered when Bailey had let their dad in on his little secret. Had he been forced to tell Dad the same way he had been forced to tell Jax, when Dad happened upon something suspicious?

“Well, don’t just stand there. Either give me a hand or step out of my way.”

Tamara immediately hooked an arm through her father’s while he leaned the rest of his weight on the one crutch cradled beneath his free arm.

As they passed Jess and Jax on the way out of the treatment room, Bailey turned to Jess and grumbled, “Where’s that father of yours?”

“In the waiting room. I’ll go fetch him, so we can all go.”

“You do that.”

The minute he left Tamara with her father and Jax, the weight that pressed against his chest, stole all the oxygen from his lungs, lifted and let him breathe.

By the time he reached his dad, he felt almost like himself before Tamara came home and he learned about Bailey’s illness. He felt light and alive, almost normal.

But his dad looked anything but.

Jess stood on the threshold of the waiting room just looking at the ol’ man sitting in one of the plastic orange chairs, chin resting on his chest as he released a soft snore in his sleep. He looked like he had been rode hard and put up wet, and it clearly Bailey’s illness took a toll on him.

He walked over to his father on silent-as-possible feet and gingerly took the seat beside him. He sat there, staring at the monochrome wall in front of him for a long moment before he slipped an arm around the older man’s broad shoulders and squeezed his arm. “Pop, wake up. It’s time to go.”

Dad's head jerked up mid-snore. He blinked several times before slowly turning in Jess's arms to look at him. "Bailey all checked out?"

"He's raring to go. Jax and Tamara are walking him out to the parking lot now."

Dad rubbed his hands against the thighs of his jeans before slapping his legs and standing up. "Well, I guess that's that then, huh?"

"Yeah. I guess it is." Jess stood, averting his gaze.

Dad stood up beside him, now wrapping his arm around Jess's shoulders and pulling him close. "Don't think too hard on it, boy. You'll only wear yourself down."

Jess turned to stare at him. "Like you?"

"Don't worry about me. I'm a tough old bird."

"It doesn't mean this is easy on you."

"I'm makin' do."

Jess nodded, said nothing for a long time then asked, "How long have you been making do? When did you find out about Bailey's condition?"

"He got his diagnosis almost a year before the accident that broke his leg."

Jess gaped. "A year?"

His dad nodded a-matter-of-factly, as if he hadn't said anything that outrageous.

"A year and we never knew," Jess said, almost too himself.

How wrapped up in ranch business had he been to not notice what went on with his dad's best friend? How could he not know?

"Don't blame yourself. We were pretty careful about keepin' things a secret. And you and your brother bein' tied up with other things made it a little easier to keep it from you."

Jess wondered if their dad knew about Jax and his extracurricular activities away from the ranch. He knew Jax thought he was pulling the wool over everyone's eyes. Jess also knew how much the rodeo meant to his brother, and that it wasn't something Jax would give up

without a fight. It didn't matter that he assured their dad he was here on the ranch to stay.

Jax's body worked at The Double R, but his heart and mind dwelled with the rodeo.

"You know about Jax?"

His father didn't even pretend to misunderstand what Jess meant and said, "I know the ranch isn't fulfillin' all his needs, if that's what you mean. He's not that great a liar, not with me anyway. I've always known what you boys are up to."

Jess shuffled his feet and lowered his head. The tip of his ears felt on fire, and he knew his face probably looked beet red. The idea that their dad knew Jax sneaked off to compete was one thing, but he didn't want to believe that his dad knew what went on with Jess and his brother and Tamara. The thought just didn't sit well with a body at all.

"She's a beautiful, intelligent girl, and I know how you both feel about her."

"She's a woman. And we're men," Jess stated, wanted to make sure his dad got the point.

Dad nodded, slapping Jess on the back. "That you all are."

"So, what do you think about all of us being together?" Jess asked. He held his breath as his father rubbed his chin with a thumb and forefinger, contemplative.

"If there's anything or anyone who can take your brother's mind off the rodeo, I think it'll be Tamara."

"That's not what I meant," Jess said, though he thought the same thing. It had worked with Bailey, at least for a while anyway. Too bad Jasmine had had other ideas.

"Lemme ask you this," Dad began, "how does *she* feel about the two of *you*?"

"She cares about us."

"Does she love you?"

"I think she does."

“You both should be sure before you go any further, don’t ya think? I mean, it’s a big commitment, not to mention it’s, uh, unconventional in more ways than one.”

At least his dad wasn’t totally against them, not like Bailey seemed to be. “I want to be sure, yeah,” Jess finally murmured. He wanted a lot of things. He wanted Tamara to profess her undying love and tell them that she would stay on the ranch with them, wanted her to spend the rest of her life with them, but he wasn’t holding out much hope for this scenario coming to fruition.

“Tamara not talkin’?” Dad asked.

Jess thought about the earlier scene in the waiting room. “Not much, no.”

Dad didn’t say anything for a long moment, still rubbing his chin, so Jess decided to fill in the gap of quiet with his own question. “How long did the doctors give Bailey a year ago?”

Dad chuckled, sudden tears filling his eyes, belying his mirth. “Six, eight months tops.”

“He’s always been a contrary, stubborn coot, huh?”

“Always will be.”

Jess nodded, heart clenching in his chest at the idea that Bailey’s daughter was just as contrary and stubborn, and he wondered how he and Jax would get her to stay when all was said and done.

Chapter 23

Several days after Bailey's seizure, Jax got up before dawn and strolled down the hall from his room toward Tamara's, his cock and heart acting as homing devices.

He'd had enough of sleeping alone, and since he considered her his and Jess's woman, he didn't think he should have to suffer, especially not when he knew Tamara wanted them as much as they wanted her.

Jax paused outside his brother's room, fist poised to knock before someone drawled behind him, "I see someone else couldn't sleep either."

Jax almost leaped out of his skin at the sound of his brother's voice, lowering his hand to turn and see Jess leaning against the door outside of Jax's bedroom.

"Didn't mean to scare you."

"I'll bet." Jax smirked. "Been tossing and turning most of the night." He'd even been up to see the circumspect Quarry brothers make it back to the bunkhouse a couple of hours ago. They arrived back just in time to relieve the night riders and start their day herd shift. Jax wouldn't have seen them at all if he hadn't been suffering from celibacy-induced insomnia. He wondered when they ever found the time to sleep.

"Me too," Jess said now. "I went down to grab a glass of milk before I came back up here and found you skulking around."

"I wasn't skulking. I just wanted to check on Tamara."

Jess's eyebrows lifted but he didn't say anything.

“We need to talk to her, find out what she’s thinking, what she’s going to do.”

“You ready to have her put the shoe on the other foot?”

Jax knew exactly what his brother meant, but didn’t want to let fear keep him away from the woman. He told himself he could handle the worse, even though his stomach somersaulted at the idea of her asking point blank about Bailey. He had a hard time deciding what would be worse to hear—Tamara telling them she had no intentions on staying and wasn’t serious about them or Tamara asking what illness her father actually suffered. .

Jess reached out to cup his shoulder, tightening his grasp slightly, either bracing himself or bracing Jax for what he wanted to say. “You know I’m behind you.”

If anything his brother would take the lead as soon as the opportunity presented itself, Jax thought. It’s what Jess did. It surprised Jax that Jess hadn’t taken the initiative already. Maybe his brother was just as afraid as Jax of what Tamara had to say, especially after that last scene in the hospital.

Jax understood her non-communicative attitude but couldn’t countenance it forever.

He *needed* to know.

“Thanks.” Jax nodded then turned and closed the space between himself and Tamara’s room, Jess on his heels.

Jax paused between knocking and just turning the knob and walking in. His sense of entitlement and possessiveness won out and had him just opening the door without giving her a chance to send them away.

“You’re feeling really bold, aren’t you?”

“Just thinking positive.”

They found Tamara sitting up in bed, covers clutched to her breasts as she turned on the bedside light. She frowned at them while they stood on the threshold of the room, unmoving.

She didn't look sleepy either, Jax noted right before Tamara asked, "What the hell do you think you're doing just bursting into my room in the middle of the night?"

"It's morning and we dropped in to chat," Jax stated.

"This is my room while I'm here, and I didn't invite you in—to chat or otherwise."

"Since when do we need an invitation?" Jess asked, stepping from behind Jax to stalk across the room, making his move.

Tamara didn't back down an iota. On the contrary, she flung back the covers, leapt from the bed and closed the space between herself and Jess in a blink. Even with her head tilted back, her nose didn't reach much past his sternum, but it didn't stop her from staring him down and poking her index finger in his chest. "You're not my keeper. Neither of you are."

"Speaking for myself, I don't want to be your keeper," Jess murmured, and it sounded like he tried to keep a rein on his anger.

It took a lot to make his brother angry and evidently a contrary, disagreeable woman topped the list of things that could bring Jess to a slow boil.

"Actually, we thought ourselves a little more to you than keepers," Jax said

His quiet words seemed to take a little of the wind out of Tamara's self-righteous sails.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and stepped back a couple of feet. She took another deep breath then opened her eyes to look at them in turn before finally resting her gaze on Jess. "What do you two want?"

"That should be fairly obvious. We need to talk, and I think we've waited long enough for you to come around," Jess said.

"I'm really not interested in what you think."

"You should be, especially as it concerns you." Jess caught her around the biceps and pulled her closed. "Why have you been avoiding us?"

"I'm not avoiding you." She averted her gaze, the act belying her words.

Jax couldn't speak for his brother, but it hurt to see her running from them.

This same woman had taken them inside her body and cuddled between them not much more than a week ago, acted as if it was the most natural thing in the world to her. But obviously it wasn't natural, at least not enough for Tamara to accept it as their due.

How could they convince her father and theirs that they all belonged together when they couldn't even convince Tamara that they all belonged together?

"Look at me, Tamara," Jess growled.

The hairs on the back of Jax's neck stood up so he could imagine what his brother's voice did to Tamara.

She tilted back her head to look Jess in the eye and then looked at Jax behind him before glaring at Jess. "I want you to know this double teaming wasn't fair when you were kids, and it certainly isn't fair now."

"All's fair..." Jess closed his eyes and lowered his head to cover Tamara's mouth.

Jax wanted to argue that they would get nothing accomplished falling into bed, yet again, but he couldn't stop his breath from hitching in his chest as he watched Tamara close her eyes and part her lips for Jess. He couldn't stop his heart from skipping and speeding when Jess slipped his tongue into her mouth and groaned deep in his throat.

He'd been hard from the moment he stepped into the room and caught a whiff of Tamara's sandalwood scent, but watching them together instantly made him harder. And when Tamara's arms came up to curve around Jess's broad back, Jax's entire body heated and tingled as if her arms had come around *him*, as if her breasts pressed against *his* chest, and he could feel her hard swollen nipples poking his bare chest through her skimpy spaghetti-strap top.

Unconsciously, Jax circled around the pair until he stood behind Tamara, all but salivating as her sweet musky aroma tickled his senses. He reached out his hands to grasp her hips, drawing her back against him. His cock strained against the front of his pajama bottoms. He wanted inside her in the worse way, to feel skin on skin, sweat on sweat and heat on heat.

She reached back a hand as if reading his mind, rubbed his erection through the material of his pajamas before she slipped her hand into the open fly and thumbed the pearl of liquid gathering at the head of his penis.

His moan echoed hers and he pressed closer, sliding his hands from her hips to squeeze the round globes of her ass and make her whimper into Jess's mouth.

Jax moved his hand down between her legs, sliding under the leg of her shorts and cupping her warm crotch. He pushed a finger inside her, thrusting deep as she gyrated and pumped her hips against his hand. He explored her wetness and warmth as if uncharted territory he wanted to experience for the first time. He enjoyed the clutch of her inner muscles as she sucked him in and released, sucked him in and released.

Tamara caught his wrist as if to guide his movements and Jax twisted his finger inside her, joining it with a second and stroking her slow and intense.

She tore her mouth away from Jess's, breathless as she clamped down on Jax's fingers, shuddering hard as an orgasm seized her.

Jax gladly accepted her weight as she leaned back against him, cradling her head against the crook of his shoulder, still writhing in his grasp.

Jess kissed his way down her face to her breasts, moving the straps of her top down her arms to give him better access.

Jax watched his brother lazily circle his tongue around each hardened nub, a tremor of lust riding him as Jess pulled a nipple into his mouth and sucked like a baby nursing.

“Oh God, I want you! Why do I want you both so much?”

Jax would have been full of himself if there wasn't such pain and conflict in her words.

“You can see we want you too,” Jess murmured against her chest, pulling back to step out of his pajama bottoms and stand before her naked and fully erect.

Not to be outdone, Jax got out of his own pajama bottoms before coming back to Tamara to remove her satin shorts. The sight and feel of the soft green material sliding down her even softer skin to pool around her delicate ankles before she stepped out of them made Jax's cock throb painfully.

Tamara slid her top over her head then stood between them, caramel skin shimmering beneath the soft light of the room, beckoning.

Jax licked his lips as she stood on her toes and curved an arm around each of their necks, French-kissing them each in turn. He didn't know how, but he managed to pull away and glare at her. “We didn't come here only for this.”

“At least you're truthful enough to admit that you want *this*.”

“Tamara...”

“I know you didn't come here just for this. But can't we have this now and talk later?”

“If you promise we'll talk.”

“We will.” She looked at Jess then back at Jax. “I promise.”

Not that either of them could guarantee what she would say.

* * * *

Tamara slid the condom down over Jax's rigid, pulsing cock with shaky hands and nervously bit her bottom lip as she turned to see Jess's just as impressive erection already sheathed and ready for her.

Her nipples stood at attention, swollen and hypersensitive, had been on the alert ever since Jax and Jess stepped through the door

earlier. She was thoroughly wet too, juices trickling down the insides of her thighs with need, her body all but humming with anticipation.

She felt like she prepared to have them both for the first time again, each instance with them an exciting and fresh experience—each instance an enlightening and disturbing experience.

That she could be so turned on by two men was one thing. She didn't want to consider love and giving up everything she'd worked for. The thoughts alarmed her too much so she wouldn't. But it's what she had been thinking about for the last several days, going over the logistics in her mind of what she wanted and what she needed, plotting and planning a way to make things right for all of them. That she loved them couldn't be the point. She did not want to make a decision based on love or, worse, her hormones. She had to be rational and weigh all the pros and cons.

She needed a reality check and toward this end had already planned to call the partners this morning to inform them that she'd be returning to work no later than the beginning of next week. She couldn't let her boys talk her out of it, no matter what happened here this morning. She had to at least maintain her own sanity, much less her pride which had suffered more than a few major blows since she'd been home.

This couldn't end well, definitely not happily.

As for her father, leaving would be the best thing she could do for both of them, the best way she could think of to salvage what affection still existed between them. She wasn't doing anyone a bit of good staying, least of all her dad. He looked better and more robust every day and walked without his crutches.

Why Jeremiah had felt the need to have her rush out to help a man, who clearly didn't want it, least of all from her, escaped Tamara.

But in the back of her mind she kept hearing the words *coward* and *running away* playing on a continuous loop. She refused to listen. She wasn't being a coward, she told herself, just being practical for all concerned.

“Come here, darlin’.”

Her knees weakened at Jess’s lazy drawl, and Tamara didn’t hesitate to walk into his open arms. She sensed the power shift as he took control of the moment, and Jax fell in step behind him. Or should she say behind her since she felt him there, at her back, hands on her waist and grinding his pelvis against her rump as Jess pulled her into his arms.

This was only one of the myriad things she loved about them, the way they worked together and were willing to share. That she loved their intelligence and kindness, and a dozen other quirks and foibles she couldn’t even begin to name went without saying.

Did they attract her so much because of their sameness or did she just love the men they had become? And how would they react when she told them she had to go? Would they be as accepting? Or would they mount one of their infamous, sensual assaults to induce her to stay?

Tamara pressed her cheek against Jess’s chest, closing her eyes as she listened to his strong heartbeat speed up, reveling in his spicy masculine scent and the feel of Jax, enticing and solid, sandwiching her between him and his brother.

Other women would probably kill to be in her place, satisfied to be cared for, to be the object of two younger men’s affection and lust, but not her. She wanted to run.

Tamara held tight to Jess as if in an attempt to ward off the thought.

His cock pushed against her belly as he hugged her back, burying his face against her neck and taking a deep whiff like he wanted to fortify himself with her fragrance. “I love you, Tamara. Do you know how much?”

She shook her head in denial and response.

“We both love you and want you to stay,” Jax said.

They did just what she’d been afraid of—double teamed her. It wasn’t going to work. She couldn’t let it.

She didn't know she cried until Jess licked the tears from her cheek.

"Is it so painful to hear?" he asked.

"We thought you'd be thrilled."

"It's not that simple," she said.

Neither of them said anything for a long moment. Either they knew no matter what they said, it wouldn't be right or enough or they tried to formulate the perfect comeback.

"I can't settle for pieces of you," Jess finally said, his intent clear. "I won't."

"Neither will I."

"Why does it have to be all or nothing?" She looked from one stern face to the other, her stomach heaving with emotion. They really weren't going to make this easy for her, but did she really expect them to? She wanted all of James too, but he hadn't been able or willing to give her that. And instead of her walking, he had.

When had she become so willing to settle for half the package, especially when the full package existed right here in front of her?

"I don't have any more to give," she whispered.

"You have so much more to give than sex. It's just easier for you to throw the dogs a bone, isn't it?" Jess said.

"Now wait a minute—"

"The truth hurts, doesn't it?"

"If that's what you want to think."

"Do you love us?" Jax asked.

Tamara's head spun constantly bouncing her attention back and forth between brothers.

What would it be like, day in and day out, with them? Working and living and playing together? Having kids together?

God, where had that just come from? Why did she entertain these thoughts? She wasn't that old, of course, but kids? And raising them with two men? Her dad would have a heart attack!

“Yes,” she said and closed her eyes, feeling the tears seep down her cheeks.

In the last few weeks she’d had more of these emotional outbursts than she wanted to count. She hadn’t been this weepy since she’d been a girl.

“Then stay with us. *Be* with us—as a family,” Jess said.

“Do you hear what you’re saying?” She couldn’t believe she stood here, naked no less and so turned on her body ached, calmly discussing an impossible future!

“You said you love us,” Jax said.

“I do, but I can’t just give up my life to come live here with you two on a whim.”

“You wouldn’t be giving up your life, just changing it, hopefully for the better.”

She couldn’t help the warmth that flooded her body at his grin—so earnest and sweet.

How could she refuse him, either of them, anything?

Tamara dragged herself back down to earth with a violent shake of reality, her father’s voice in her head urging her to think how hard life would be living it as the black woman of two white men. It didn’t matter that the ranch made up an insulated community onto itself and everyone treated everyone else like family and tolerant. She lived in the real world and in the real world a relationship like theirs wasn’t desirable on too many levels.

They love you.

That’s not relevant, not part of the equation. You have a life in New York.

“Why am I the only one giving anything up, the only one making a sacrifice in this scenario?” she blurted.

“It’s not like that, Tamara, and you know it,” Jess said, and his self-righteous tone set her teeth on edge.

She decided to go with the anger. It was much safer to revisit what she’d felt when she found out he’d lied to her about his identity. She

could burrow in the feeling like a well-worn blanket and let it fuel her rather than think how they loved her. “How is it not?”

“We’re ranchers, cowboys. Where in New York City can we ply that trade?”

“Oh, and I should just up and move because I can practice law anywhere?”

“Well, it’s true.”

“If that isn’t the most arrogant, wrong-headed, chauvinistic bullshit I’ve ever heard in my entire life, I don’t know what is! How dare—”

An abrupt knock on the door interrupted her tirade, and all three of them turned to stare at the door as one.

Had they been talking that loudly?

Tamara grabbed her robe off the foot post and quickly donned it as Jess and Jax scrambled into their pajama bottoms.

She went to the door and warily opened it to see Maria standing on the other side wringing her hands and already dressed in her apron.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Tamara, but it is your father. He is...he is on his way to the hospital with Jeremiah.”

Chapter 24

“Glio-what?”

“Glioblastoma multiforme or grade IV astrocytoma.”

“English please.”

“It’s a malignant brain tumor.”

Tamara slumped toward the floor, and Jess caught her under the arms, wrapping his own around her and guiding her to the sofa in the waiting room where she, he, Dad and Jax all listened to the doctor’s official diagnosis.

Tamara took a seat willingly, almost too willingly. Jess didn’t think he had ever seen her so meek and vulnerable, not even as a kid.

“But I thought he suffered from diabetes,” she croaked, looking up at the doctor like a lost child.

The doctor shook his head. “Your father is terminal, Ms. Carpenter. He didn’t want his family to know before now just how ill he was, I mean is...”

Before now, Jess thought, focusing on the doctor’s words, his first time hearing the hard ugly truth about Bailey’s condition up close and personal. So the man had finally decided to come clean. Probably because he just didn’t have a choice anymore.

The doctor continued addressing Tamara. “But I assure you it’s not diabetes.”

“The seizure—”

“The previous and most recent seizures were side effects from brain edema or swelling. We’ve been treating Mr. Carpenter with a various course of therapies including steroids, anticonvulsants,

radiation and chemotherapy, but despite our best efforts and your father's fortitude, this type of tumor grows and spreads aggressively."

"Surgery?"

"Isn't an option in his case. I'm sorry."

"How long?"

"Matter of days, a week at the most."

Tamara gasped, and Jess saw the tears in her eyes, felt her struggle not to shed them before she finally asked, "How long has he had cancer? When did you diagnose him?"

"As I said, your father is a fighter. Initially, about a year ago, we gave him six, maybe eight months tops and—"

"That can't be. Why wouldn't he tell me this? Why?" Tamara asked, almost to herself then aimed her gaze at each man in turn.

Jess's heart flipped over and stopped for the moment her eyes found his. He swallowed hard over the lump in his throat, praying she didn't put things together, praying she didn't ask why Bailey hadn't told him, Jax and Jeremiah about his condition, praying that she wouldn't soon see him as an enemy to despise and mistrust.

"So what you're telling me is he's dying."

Jess heard the defiance in her voice, as if she marshalled her strength for a fight. Definitely Bailey's daughter. She didn't let anything get her down for too long.

"I'm afraid so."

Tamara shook her head, stood and began to pace. "But you made a mistake once. He's lasted much longer than you gave him." She looked at all of them in turn before peering at the doctor as if for confirmation. "He's been up and around roping and riding like usual. He wouldn't be able to do that and look so healthy if he were this sick, would he?"

"Some people often undergo a surge of vitality before the end. It's like the calm before the storm, but it doesn't change the final outcome or prognosis."

“There must be something else you can do, something you haven’t already tried.”

“We’re making him comfortable. That’s the best we can do.” The doctor put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “Go to him.” And just like that, he left, his job done.

But theirs had just begun, Jess thought, glancing at his co-conspirators and wondering who would break first.

Tamara shook her head, flopped down onto the sofa and buried her face in her hands. She sat like this for several moments, quiet and still. Her shoulders didn’t shudder, and Jess couldn’t detect a sob or a cry. She remained so quiet and still, in fact, he wondered if she had fainted or otherwise lost consciousness.

Then she took her face out of her hands to look at each of them, exercising the gentle force of her dark gaze, making Jess squirm just a little.

She knows, he thought. *She knows and now she’s either trying to figure out how much we know or how to confront us about that knowledge.*

Dad sat down and wrapped an arm around her shoulders as she looked at him with surprisingly dry eyes.

Jess waited anxiously, didn’t know what to do except take his father’s lead.

He looked over at Jax, and knew that his brother had decided to do the same. The silent reinforcements at his back felt good, but didn’t go too far in eradicating his guilt.

“How could he keep this a secret from us?”

Us—she’d included them all, giving them the same status of unknowing family members as herself. Christ, but he felt simultaneously relieved and sick at her acceptance of the circumstances.

“I don’t know, honey,” Dad said noncommittally.

Jess still held his breath, waiting for Tamara’s quick lawyer’s brain to kick in—unless shock and grief had dulled her senses.

He could only hope, at least for the time being, that she wasn't thinking straight enough to figure things out.

But what about later? Do you really want to wait for her to figure it out and confront you, or do you want to just get it out in the open and take your medicine?

He knew what he should do, but couldn't gather the courage to do it, not now when Tamara already looked so defeated and small. Besides, Dad handled the situation in his inimitable way.

"You know how your father is. Independent, proud, stubborn..."

"To the core." Tamara nodded. "But something like this...I mean he's *dying*. And I could have missed the last several weeks if you hadn't called me." She put her arms around him and held tight. "Thank you, Jeremiah. Thanks so much for being here for him and being such a good friend. You're like a brother to him."

"It's nothing he wouldn't have done for me."

Jess closed his eyes at the truth of his father's words. As ornery and proud as Bailey laid claim, he could also claim fierce loyalty and would kill or die for those he loved, but woe to the soul that got on his wrong side.

And Tamara's just like her father in that respect. What sort of retribution would she seek once she found out?

Tamara pulled back to pat his dad on the leg. "Well, I'd better get in there and see what he has to say for himself."

"Don't be too hard on him."

Jess couldn't help thinking that his dad prematurely begged her forgiveness for the three of them.

Tamara smiled. "I'll try not to, but I can't make any promises."

* * * *

He doesn't look like a man who's dying.

Tamara paused outside her father's private room, reluctant to go across the threshold, reluctant to stand by his bed and admit the truth

despite his appearance. Sure, he looked slimmer than she was used to seeing him, his usual bronze complexion a little paler than normal, but he didn't look like death. Maybe because she didn't *want* him to look like death. Instinctively, she rejected the truth of what the doctor had told her. He was human after all, and he and his colleagues could have made a mistake.

"Well then, come on in. I ain't gone bite ya."

Tamara shook herself and stared at her father before slowly crossing the floor. She didn't realize her legs capable of moving until she made it to his bed. She put her hands on the bedside railing just for something to hold on to and do with them, and her father proffered his hand. Tamara gladly took it and immediately noticed the coldness and frailty of it.

How had she missed this? How had she not noticed his condition?

True, she hadn't been back that long, hadn't seen him in even longer before her arrival, and had been avoiding being with him as much as possible since her return, yet she should have known. She should have recognized that he wasn't well. But she hadn't been able to get beyond his insensitive attitude to see that he covered a secret, and he really wasn't himself.

"I know what you're thinking, so don't go blaming yourself. This ain't *your* fault."

"Maybe not, but I could have done something to make things easier, to make you more comfortable and—"

"To pity me?" Her dad shook his head and glared at her. "Thanks but no thanks."

"No one said anything about pity but what's wrong with giving a guy a break, huh? Even a grumpy old guy like you?"

"You forgot ornery and unreasonable."

"Did I call you those?"

"Among other things."

She grinned, surprised that she could and squeezed his hand.

“Listen, baby, there’s some things we need to talk about before I go...”

“Dad—”

“Let me finish because this needs saying.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

He squeezed her hand and closed his eyes tight as if trying to garner his strength before he opened them to pin her with the intensity of his gaze. “I never meant to alienate you or to hurt you. And I certainly never meant for you to leave here and stay away so long without us speaking. Things just got out of hand.”

“I know.”

“Do you? Do you really?”

“I let it happen too.”

Her dad shook his head. “As the adult I knew better. It was up to me to bring an end to the stalemate. I let stubborn pride get in my way.”

“Ditto.”

He chuckled. “You know Jeremiah never stopped trying to get us to talking, to get us back together.”

“He’s a good friend.”

“I want you to remember that always.”

Tamara frowned. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“And as for Jess and Jax,” he began, ignoring her question, “it’s your life. Don’t let what anyone thinks define how you live it or who you want to live it with.”

She lifted her eyebrows, truly shocked and Dad laughed a hearty laugh that surprised her. “What could possibly be so funny?”

“Before you came in here, I sat here thinking just how his approaching death can make a man see things a lot clearer, make him a sight more high-minded and magnanimous than he might have been without death looming.”

“I’m sure you would have come around eventually.”

“Well, now I ain’t got much choice. I can’t be bitter and interfering, not if I want to set things right with you and your mother and those boys.”

“My mother?”

“Let’s focus on one thing at a time.”

“You brought her up.”

“I know I did. I’ve got a lot on my mind, and I’m trying to clean house. Forget about her for now.”

Like she could ever do that. Even though her mother hadn’t been around or in her life for years, she still existed, always on the periphery of Tamara’s life and every decision she had ever made concerning her relationships with men. Tamara hated to admit the truth of that, but there it was.

Her dad peered at her. “So, you decide what you’re going to do about ’em?”

It took a moment for her to realize her father still talked about Jess and Jax, and once she did, she averted her eyes and murmured, “I’d rather not talk about them right now.”

“Why not? You think it’s going to send me into a tailspin?”

No, but it might send her into one though.

Tamara had yet to recover from his mention of her mother and the confrontation she had been in the middle of with Jess and Jax before Maria interrupted them. And practically on the heels of the boys’ proposal—and she still didn’t know whether it had been a decent or indecent one—came the news about her father’s catastrophic diagnosis. She figured she would be in denial until she saw his coffin go into the ground and the dirt shoveled onto it.

Tamara choked back a sob at the thought, but couldn’t stop the tears that instantly flooded her eyes, and her father reached up his free hand to thumb them off her cheeks when they spilled out of her eyes.

“Could you at least wait until I’m dead and buried before you start with the waterworks? I don’t need no reminders I won’t be around for much longer.”

“I’m sorry, Dad. It’s just...I...”

“Is it the boys? Did they do or say something to hurt you? If’n they did—”

Tamara petted his hand reassuringly. “It’s nothing like that.”

“Then things are fine between y’all?”

“Define fine.” If fine meant she remained undecided about what to do—stay or go, be with both of them, one of them or neither—then she remained hunky dory.

“Do you love ’em?” he asked.

His questions instantly swept Tamara back to his bungalow when he had asked her the same thing right before his seizure.

She loved Jess and Jax with all her heart, but she’d be damned if she’d admit it to anyone yet. She refused to let a little thing like love and other emotions influence her decision-making processes where her life and career were concerned. She’d done this once with James and had been supremely disillusioned. She didn’t want to make the same mistake—feeling she needed a man to complete her—again. “Would it ease your mind if I told you yes I love them and they love me too?”

“Hell no, not really.”

“Then why are you asking, Dad?”

“Because I want to know that you’ll be taken care of when I’m gone. And I’d rather leave you in the hands of those boys than any others. I know them. They’re good men. A little young for my taste, and you already know how I feel about that whole ménage threesome thing.”

“Dad...”

“I want you to be happy, Tamara. That’s all I’ve ever wanted for you.”

“I know,” she murmured.

But did she need him to step in and protect her now? Did her love for Jess and Jax blind her to logic?

She had age and wisdom on her side now. She knew what real love meant to her, knew what she wanted.

What was she willing to do and give up to get it? Did she want to remain successful at the expense of her love life?

“Oh Christ, you do love ’em.”

Tamara blinked and stared at her father, saw the look of dawning revelation on his face as if he hadn’t really believed the truth of her feelings until that moment.

She hadn’t really believed the truth herself and looking at her dad told her just how difficult her ultimate decision would be on all three of them. Love would not mitigate that.

“I need you to promise me something before I go.”

Tamara peered at him. “Anything.”

He released her hand and lay back, breath suddenly hitching in his chest before he coughed spasmodically and closed his eyes.

She bent toward him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Dad, are you okay? You want me to get the doctor?”

He shook his head, opened his eyes briefly to stare at her before he closed them again and coughed some more. When he caught his breath after a few moments he rasped, “There’s nothing they can do for me now.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s the truth.” He caught her hand and squeezed it almost painfully hard, so hard that Tamara winced, surprised at his strength. “But *you* can do somethin’ for me.”

“Yes?”

“I need you to forgive yourself and...forgive your mother.”

“My mother?”

He nodded. “She’s not the villain I’ve made her out to be, just human. And she’ll be...be nice to her. She’s on...She’s...”

Be nice to her? Did he want her to go out, find her mom and reconcile? She didn’t know the first place to look, much less if she wanted to waste the effort. “She’ll be what, Dad? She’s *on* what?”

She's on her best behavior? She'll be nice to you too? What does he mean?

"Please forgive her. And forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive. You did your best."

"That's what a man wants to hear before he goes." He smiled, opened his eyes, gaze full of clarity and passion. "I love you, honey."

Tamara watched as her father closed his eyes one last time and listened to the cardiac monitor's piercing wail when he flatlined.

Chapter 25

Her father had a Do Not Resuscitate order.

Tamara found out about it when several doctors and nurses rushed into his room as he coded but no one did anything despite her shouting for someone to help him.

She thought she'd have at least a few more days with him. Of course no amount of time could make up for the eighteen years they'd lost. An hour definitely didn't give them enough time to say all they needed to say to each other.

Despite her promises to him, she couldn't help blaming herself now. She remembered what she'd been in the middle of when Maria finally tracked her down to let her know her father had been taken to the hospital, and her face heated with shame.

She'd been naked, hot and horny, arguing about a life and future infinitely stretched before her when her father's life had been inescapably, irrevocably dwindling.

Tamara had been nothing but selfish since she'd come back home, thinking about getting laid and holding grudges rather than being the bigger person and helping out her father in spite of his attitude. She should never have let him hinder her reasons for coming home, should never have let his anger get in the way of her spending quality time with him.

Had living in New York so long made her so self-absorbed or had she always been this way? Her dad certainly hadn't raised her that way. Despite all his faults, he'd always taught her to give back and help the weak and needy—everyone at the ranch lived by this creed.

She and the boys had grown up with a strong sense of volunteerism, donating their time at the local church and schools with the literacy program or lending a hand with the displaced and rebuilding after natural and unnatural catastrophes.

Tamara had somehow lost sight of this side of herself in New York. Sure, she still donated considerable money to her pet projects, but she didn't give much of herself to anyone.

Had James left because of her selfishness? Would Jess and Jax tire of her the same way when they realized she really didn't have anything else to give than what she had so far?

Maybe she played herself short. It wasn't a matter of having nothing more to give, but a matter of her willingness to give it. And she didn't think she had it in her to give anymore of her heart than she already had.

God, she *was* selfish. Both Jess and Jax had professed their love to her, and she had yet to reciprocate. She played it safe and kept her distance, as if something better would come along. She hung back as if she functioned in a court of law and needed to keep her defenses up against opposing counsel instead of dealing with two lovers who had her happiness and welfare at heart.

Her father had it all wrong worrying about whether Jess and Jax would hurt her. She kept her emotional distance too well to allow them to hurt her, but also to allow them to love her the way she wanted and needed.

Someone needed to look out for the boys' hearts instead of hers. She had hers covered, admittedly, all too well.

"How are we doing over here?"

Tamara closed her eyes and leaned back into Jax's body as he massaged her shoulders. She knew which brother by the timbre of his voice—just a shade lighter, drawl a tad stronger than his twin's. "I'm not sure. I think I'm still in shock."

"We all are, sweetheart."

"I can't believe he's gone."

Jax slid his hands from her shoulders and wrapped his arms around her.

She put her hands over his and burrowed deeper into his hug, searching for comfort that she knew didn't exist for her, for any of them. But she needed his closeness, reassured by the strong beat of his heart and the idea that life went on.

You have to make a decision, girl. You can't leave them hanging like this. It isn't fair to them or to you.

Tamara could just hear her father now, could have sworn that he whispered in her ear, lectured her.

When Jess came into the waiting room carrying what she assumed were two cups of coffee, her father's voice got louder in her head, telling her to be an adult and choose.

Guiltily, she eased out of Jax's grasp and took a step away from him. She stood between him and his twin, crossing her arms across her breasts as if to protect herself. She couldn't let them get by her defenses. Every time she thought about herself and them together, in an intimate clinch, she thought about her father being rushed to the hospital without her knowledge.

Would she ever stop linking her father's illness to her desire and feelings for the twins?

Jess proffered one of the cups to her and the other to his brother.

"Thanks." Tamara took her cup, cradling it between both hands, welcoming the warmth and taking a deep whiff of the aromatic blend. She raised a brow at Jess. "None for you?"

He shook his head and reached in the back pocket of his jeans to extract a small bottle of orange juice.

Tamara smiled as she raised her cup to her lips and took a sip, closing her eyes to savor the warm coffee and trying to get her mind straight.

She didn't want to think about the arrangements she and Jeremiah would have to make in the next few days. She didn't want to think about the people who would be dropping by the ranch to leave their

condolences. Most of them she probably hadn't seen or heard from in years, people who would be looking at her with judgmental and questioning gazes.

The expected curiosity and inquisition would be the least of her worries, she knew. She still had to sit through the reading of the will a ghoulish act she really wasn't looking forward to. Besides, she knew her father hadn't left her anything—not after all the years she had been out of touch—and what she needed and wanted from him she could no longer get. Her being present would just be a formality. She'd do it though, if only to prolong her contact with the boys and Jeremiah, needing that connection to her father and the ranch, needing the connection to home.

When had she started thinking of the ranch as her home and not New York? When had she stopped missing the city?

"You say your good-byes?" Jess asked.

Tamara nodded, unwilling to think about the good-byes she would be saying in the next several days. She didn't want to let go, but knew she'd have to. She had no choice now.

Would letting go and saying good-bye to Jess and Jax be as difficult? Why say good-bye at all? She could just stay at the ranch. Give up her career in New York, start all over here and be with them the way they'd asked her to. Should be easy enough, right? To hear the boys tell it, it certainly sounded easy.

"Dad's signing off on some paperwork before y'all go to the funeral home to start making the arrangements. Jax and I have to get back to the ranch." He reached out to grasp her shoulders, caressing them for a long moment as he peered at her. "We'll see you once you're all done, right?"

Tamara nodded, thought him a man who had his priorities straight and knew exactly what he wanted out of life.

Jeremiah came into the room that moment, and before Tamara had a chance to object, Jess leaned in to kiss her deeply on the lips, stopping just short of sliding his tongue in her mouth.

When Jess finished, Jax moved in to take his turn, kissing her just as deeply before pulling back slightly to caress her lower lip with his thumb. “Love you,” he murmured then headed for the exit.

Jess grinned and winked, squeezing his father’s arm as he followed his brother out.

Jeremiah wordlessly walked over and pulled her into his arms and the tears came to her eyes unbidden though she managed to stave off the worse of the sobs.

“You’ve got a lot on your plate now, a lot to think about,” he said, offering her a hankie once he pulled away.

Tamara accepted it, patting at her eyes then returning it, biding her time before she opened her mouth and said something she’d regret. Jess and Jax’s parting still had her reeling.

She knew what Jeremiah referred to when he said she had a lot to think about, knew that she couldn’t run away from Jess and Jax and their proposal forever.

“It’s all right feelin’ the way you do about ’em.”

“You really believe that?”

“I can’t believe anything else since I believe in love.”

“But Dad—”

“Pardon my expression, was a stubborn, stuck-in-his-ways old coot.” Jeremiah pulled her close in a one-armed hug. “I loved him, but you and I both know he wasn’t always right in his thinkin’. And you have to keep in mind, that’s all they were—*his* thinkin’, his opinions. You can’t let other people’s opinions decide the rest of your life for you, even if they’re those of a level-headed old man like m’self who loves you like a daughter.”

She looked at him, searching. “Will you still? I mean...if we all wind up together?”

“I’ll have even more reason to since you’re the woman who makes my boys happy.”

Would he feel the same way when she left and made his boys miserable?

* * * *

Jax considered all the time he'd spent playing around—on the rodeo circuit, on the football field, just plain playing the field with women and not settling down.

He'd had a lot of time in the last couple of weeks to think about what he wanted to do with the rest of his life and who he wanted to spend it with. The rodeo didn't factor into that scenario, at least not seriously or as a career path.

Bailey's death had brought things home to him, made him see what was important in his life—family and home. He understood now why his father's friend had given up the rodeo, understood that he couldn't have his cake and eat it too, and in this case, Tamara, and having her on the ranch, served as his cake.

He loved Tamara, did not doubt it, and he loved working on the ranch, especially teaching the young'uns the finer points of ranching and horsemanship. He liked making people happy and when those people were of the small and young variety, or those he loved, he got a special thrill.

The rodeo served as entertainment and excitement, but ultimately he considered it just a diversion. It wasn't real life and not what he wanted *out* of life. It would always be there for fun and games, but he wasn't kidding anyone. He would never be a world class rodeo champion, and with his past injuries and battered up body, he'd pretty much reached his prime if not outright past it already. Time for him to grow up and face facts. Time for him to settle down.

With the possibility of Tamara choosing New York over him and Jess and the ranch, he knew he would give it all up—the rodeo and football. He would change his wastrel past just to convince her to stay, just to convince her that he and Jess were worth the risk and loved her enough to make things work.

Dusk had fallen when Jax brought Cappuccino to a stop outside the stables and dismounted. He did have any clearer idea about his future with Tamara than he had when he'd finished work earlier and gone out riding to get some perspective. He wondered if his head and heart would ever be straight again.

He took the reins and led the horse back to his enclosure where he found Jess in the next stall grooming his animal. "What a shock." Jax grinned.

Jess returned his grin and continued brushing Clipper's coat to a high sheen.

Jax silently led Cappuccino into his stall and uncinched the animal's saddle and other equipment before he took care of the animal's feeding, watering and grooming needs.

After a while, he heard his brother finishing up with Clipper and wasn't surprised when Jess stopped by and leaned against Cappuccino's stall door.

Jax paused in his brushing and looked at him for a long time before he voiced what they both thought. "You speak to Tamara since this morning?"

Jess shook his head. "She and Dad only got back from the funeral home a little while before I got back. I checked with Maria."

"So what are we going to do?"

Jess shrugged.

Jax couldn't remember seeing his brother at a loss for words or what to do.

Jess was the consummate problem solver and planner, prided himself on his organizational skills and ability to get what he wanted.

Jax used charm and shot from the hip, never taking anything too seriously. Jess took most everything seriously, always cautious and straight-forward. Sure, they went about things differently but they both inevitably knew how to get what they wanted.

"We can't let her leave," Jax said.

"How are we supposed to stop her, short of kidnapping?"

“Don’t give me any ideas.” Jax grinned, remembering his conversation with Pop weeks ago when Tamara first came back to the ranch. He’d wondered then what had been up the ol’ man’s sleeve, whether or not he had intended to keep Tamara hostage in order to make her stay. Now he knew just what kind of desperate frame of mind his father had been in back then trying to juggle what he considered best for his best friend and what he considered best for someone he saw as a daughter.

“Seriously, Jax. How do we keep her here?”

“I am being serious. And I really don’t know.”

“I used to believe honesty was the best policy,” Jess murmured.

Jax arched a brow. “You don’t anymore?”

“After all that’s happened, I’m not so sure. We’ve been honest with her on how we feel, what we want from her. But we didn’t tell her about Bailey.”

“You really think that’s an issue?”

“Damn it, Jax! Of course it’s an issue. At least it is for me. It’s eating away at me, has been ever since you told me about him.”

“Think about it, Jess. What good will it do her to know we knew about Bailey’s condition and didn’t tell her?”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to stay here because deep down she knows we’re not being honest with her. She doesn’t trust us. And telling her we love her and showing her we love her are two different things.”

Why did his brother have to go all deep on him? It wasn’t like he hadn’t thought of all this himself. He just wasn’t against telling a little white lie to protect someone if he had to. He guessed in this case, he protected himself and Jess now. Bailey certainly wouldn’t suffer for the lies they’d told. He’d gone to a better place now.

Lucky S.O.B.

“Even if we don’t tell her ourselves, she’s going to figure it out. Tamara’s a sharp girl and her mind won’t be clouded with grief forever. What do we do then?”

Jax wished he had an answer, but he didn't.

"I'm going up to the house. You coming?"

Jax nodded, silent as he followed his brother out of the stables and they both headed toward the main house.

The aroma of Maria's famous Tex-Mex wafted to them before Jess even opened the back door and Jax took a deep whiff. He never got tired of Maria's chili *con carne*.

He and Jess stood wiping the bottom of their boots off in the mud room when Tamara tramped in from the kitchen as if she had been waiting for them.

"I need you."

Chapter 26

Jess didn't know who moved first or the fastest, just knew that he had Tamara in his arms, face cradled against his chest and burrowing deep before he could blink an eye.

She took a deep breath as if to steady herself before pulling away to turn to Jax with an arm outstretched, beckoning.

Jax stepped closer, and Tamara pulled him against her in a one-armed hug.

"I need you both now," she whispered, looking up at each of them in turn, her dark eyes so bright they made his heart melt and his cock instantly hard. "Make love to me?"

She sounded so uncertain, so unlike herself, as if she thought they would dare deny her.

Fat chance. "Try and stop us," Jess said.

Tamara took her cue and grabbed them both by a hand to lead them out of the mud room and through the house to the back stairs.

Hunger no longer a factor despite the tantalizing smells of Maria's cooking carrying through the house, Jess did wonder about her and his father briefly. But if Tamara and Jax weren't worried, he guessed he shouldn't either.

They all made it upstairs to Jess's bedroom, Jess making sure to close the door tight and lock it behind them.

When Tamara turned to him and captured his gaze with hers, he nearly swallowed his tongue at the emotion he saw there.

He wanted to ask her so many questions, number one being what this moment meant.

Jess knew what the moment meant to him and Jax, but didn't know if it meant the same for Tamara. Were he and his brother just convenient tools of assuagement and satiation to get her mind off her grief? She'd said she needed them, not that she loved or even wanted them, though he could tell the latter from the imprint of her hardening nipples poking against the material of her shirt.

Jess lifted a hand to cup one breast, circling the erect nub with his thumb before lightly pinching it between forefinger and thumb.

She leaned into his hand, closing her eyes and whimpering as he cupped one full breast and bent his head to kiss her lips. He slipped his tongue inside her mouth to lazily stroke hers, tasting her sweetness, swallowing her moan.

Tamara put her hands on his hips, drawing him close enough to rub her slit against his cock, and he shuddered in her grasp as a growl erupted from his throat.

He deepened the kiss, drinking and eating from her mouth like a starving man—a man starved for her taste and touch.

Jess pulled the hem of her shirt from her jeans and slipped his hand beneath, resting his palm against the warm skin of her belly as she panted beneath him. He moved his hand up farther, undoing the front latch of her bra and caressing a breast. He pinched and rolled the nipple, his mouth never leaving hers. He thrust and rolled his tongue, mimicking the sex act as he ground his pelvis against her.

Tamara ground back, sliding her hips back and forth and creating delicious friction that nearly sent Jess through the roof. When the pressure suddenly stopped, his eyes flew opened to see Tamara pushing her ass back against Jax's pelvis, his crotch cradling her generous curves.

Jess went to work on her shirt, quickly unbuttoning then stripping her of it and her bra. He lowered his head to take one full breast into his mouth, sucking and licking around the sensitive goose-bumped aureole before pulling the hardened nub into his mouth and nibbling.

Jax slid his hands down Tamara's body, unbuttoning her jeans and pushing them and her panties over her hips and down her long sexy legs before Tamara stepped out of them.

She stood naked between them, Jess worshiping each breasts with his mouth and hands as she burrowed her hands through his hair and held on tight. Her hot sweet musk drifted up to his nostrils, intoxicating him so much he didn't know whether he was coming or going.

Eager to sink inside her, feel her heat surround him, Jess picked her up in his arms like a baby and carried her over to the bed. He put her down carefully, like the last card on a house of cards, and glanced across the bed to see Jax, bare-chested, already toeing off his boots and sliding his jeans down over his hips.

Jess toed off his own boots and removed his shirt, but paused at taking off his jeans. As much as he wanted inside Tamara, he wanted to savor her body, remember every inch, every moan and expression, more, just in case this would be his last time with her.

He didn't want to be so defeatist, but when Jess looked at his brother again, saw the desolation beneath the love and desire he knew that Jax's expression exactly duplicated the one in his own eyes.

Tamara reached for them, her upright nipples and female scent beckoning as much as the demand in her dark eyes.

Jax put one knee on the large bed, moving over Tamara's torso, and lowering his head to nibble one breast.

Jess watched her writhe beneath his brother, the sensations riding her body plainly etched across her exotic features, even when she closed her eyes. The moan that she released tightened his groin and made his cock press against the crotch of his jeans painfully.

He had to let the critter out now, or he'd explode.

Jess got out of his pants and boxers, crawled up the bed to take Tamara's free breast in his mouth, licking and sucking it as if he'd never tasted it before, each touch of her body a surprise and revelation.

He kissed and licked his way down her smooth curves, reveling in her soft, fragrant skin, dipping and swirling his tongue around her navel and through the ring piercing it until he reached her heated moist center. Her spicy-sweet scent lured him. Jess spread her labial lips, for a moment just admiring the way her juices glistened, licking his lips in anticipation of sampling her. “Christ, you’re so wet.”

“It’s all for you, Jess...you and Jax.”

Jax hadn’t lifted his head from her breasts, and the way Tamara had her fingers threaded through his hair, Jess didn’t think he could leave them if he wanted to.

She lifted her hips, appealing, inviting. “Please...touch me.”

Jess reached for the top drawer, opened it and removed two condoms. He passed one to Jax who took it without breaking from what he did and palmed the other one as he returned his attention to Tamara’s waiting pussy. He speared her with his tongue, thrusting as deep as he could to tickle the bundle of nerves at her entrance before drawing back and licking her vulva in long lazy strokes.

Tamara thrashed beneath them, one hand going to his head, the other remaining on Jax’s.

Jess moved between her thighs, hooking her legs over his shoulders as he prepared to feast. He brushed her folds with his fingers, blowing against her opening before sliding first one then two fingers inside her, thrusting in and out as he bent his head to suck her clitoris.

“Oh please, more. That feels so good...so good...” She pumped her hips against his mouth and hand, and Jess dipped his tongue into the hard kernel of flesh right before an orgasm ripped through her.

He replaced his fingers with his mouth, lapping up her juices as they flowed.

“I need you inside me now...both of you. Please, fill me...”

Jess’s chest constricted around his heart, making it pound harder just to pump blood through his system and to his already full cock. He

sat back on his heels to roll the latex down his hard length while Jax donned his own condom.

Jess covered Tamara's body, wrapping his arms around her and drawing her flush against him as he turned her onto her side with him. He nudged her opening with the head of his dick, his pre-cum mingling with her cream before he pushed through her moist folds.

"Mmm, yes. Oh yes..."

Jess circled his hips and plunged through her wetness until he got balls-deep. He closed his eyes and buried his face in the crook of her shoulder, breathing deep, fortifying himself with her essence.

Before he could think about moving again, he felt the bed shift with his brother's weight, and when Tamara's inner muscles tightened around him, and she released a guttural moan, he knew that Jax had entered her from behind.

Jess buried his hands in her hair and lifted his head to peer at her closed eyes. "Look at me, Tamara."

Her eyes drifted open, and she gazed at him with a lust-hazy expression.

Now that he had her attention, he didn't know what to say, but he knew he didn't want this to be their last time together, and he intended to do everything he could to convince her to stay. If that meant with his body or his words he would do it. "Don't leave."

* * * *

The smell of horses and two gorgeous, aroused men overwhelmed her senses, turning her on as she took a deep breath to fully appreciate the unique aroma that surrounded masculine, hard-working cowboys.

God how she would miss these two young men!

She wanted to assure Jess that she would never leave the ranch or them, tell them both that she wanted nothing better than to be sandwiched between them every morning when she woke up and

every night when she went to bed. But she couldn't do it. She couldn't lie.

She didn't know what she would do.

Instead of torturing herself with reason, she concentrated on the sensations of being filled to bursting with two cocks—Jess and Jax's cocks.

She remained still between them, panting as their members throbbed inside her, burning her inner flesh with need, intensifying her hunger and need.

Tamara couldn't help wondering if she tried to bury the grief, soothe her pain and fill the void her father's death had left behind, by being with the two willing young men who loved her.

Was she being selfish, knowing neither man would say no to her, knowing they loved her and she wasn't ready to give them the same in return?

Tamara searched Jess's face as if she could find her answers there, but all she found in his determined expression were questions.

"I can't make any promises beyond this." She closed her eyes and flexed her inner muscles, feeling their cocks twitch and throb inside her, both men groaning.

They pulled her so close between them that she thought they would smother her.

Panting, she hugged them back, one arm drawn around Jess's waist, the other flung behind her, nails digging deep into Jax's thigh as both men thrust and drove into her.

Tamara matched their rhythm, moving her hips back and forth until the maddening friction drove her over the edge, and she tumbled headlong into an orgasm that nearly sizzled all her brain cells as it rocked her world.

Both men continued thrusting inside her, reaching their climax together and seconds after she had reached hers.

Jess kissed her face and neck, pausing to inhale and suck her skin into his mouth before lightly nibbling and still holding on to her tight.

Jax pushed her hair aside so that he could kiss and lick the back of her neck before he pulled out of her with a low grunt.

She felt so empty without him, only half-alive.

Jess didn't allow her to dwell on it, pulling her into his arms as he turned onto his back and took her with him.

Tamara giggled and sat up to straddle him. She looked down into his face, so serious and stern, and swallowed hard. "What is it?"

He shook his head and averted his blue eyes, which struck her as odd because Jess wasn't a shy boy, never had been. Sometimes he could be aloof and quiet, especially with outsiders and strangers, but he had never been shy.

"Tell me what's on your mind, Jess."

She felt Jax slide back into the bed behind her, his calloused hand sending a vibration through her body when he caressed her back.

"He doesn't want you to leave. Neither of us does."

Tamara sighed. She'd known it would come to this, that neither man would let her get away with evading them forever.

Should she make this her moment of truth, or continue to string them along which, as ugly as it sounded, was what she did?

"Let's just get through the funeral, guys. I can't handle many more life-changing experiences than that right now."

She looked down at Jess, who stared up at her now, gaze so old and knowing she suspected that he knew she stalled, even though there had been a lot of truth in her words.

He gently rubbed her arms as if trying to soothe her or convey his acceptance of what she had said, which only made her feel ten times worse than the excuse she'd had to make.

Tamara dismounted Jess, left the bed and began looking for and gathering her clothes to put on before she tip-toed back out to her room. She needed to take a shower before she went back down to the kitchen for supper. It was one thing for Maria and Jeremiah to assume what went on between her and the boys, but another to rub it in their

faces, especially when she hadn't made a decision about whether to stay or go.

Jess and Jax followed her from the bed and started looking for their clothes too.

Quickly dressed, she stood by the door to watch her boys. She'd give anything to get back into bed with them. She wanted to languish in a shower with the two of them before she went down to face Maria and Jeremiah. But someone had to be the strong one, and it looked like that someone had to be her.

Funny thing, she didn't feel very strong at all when she turned her back on Jess and Jax and left the room.

Chapter 27

Tamara had pressed so much flesh and been the recipient of so many hugs and kisses and solemn condolences since the funeral, she didn't know how she kept it together.

Each face held more sincerity and sadness than the last. Each expression of sympathy brought more heart-felt sentiment. And people brought so many dishes of food that she suspected Maria wouldn't have to set foot in the kitchen to cook for a good month.

Her father probably turned over in his freshly dug grave with all the outpouring of emotion and commiseration. Her dad had never been demonstrative with his affection, except toward the end when he had told her he loved her.

Tamara wondered if maybe her mother had robbed him of that, his softness and ability to emote, but in the end even he hadn't been able to hold his anger against his ex-wife, so she wondered if she should.

Tamara stayed in the kitchen trying to keep a low profile, but keeping an eye on things in the living room.

Like radar, Jax seemed to lock onto her sadness and sidled next to her. He slid one arm around her before she could take a deep breath to gather herself.

He rubbed her arm as if to keep her warm and squeezed her close to his side. "How are we holding up?"

"As well as could be expected."

"I know." He pulled away to look down at her, and she returned his gaze. "You're a lot stronger than you think you are."

"You think so?"

He nodded. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you, or Jess or Pop. I don’t think I’d be cordially greeting people and directing them to the food without falling apart.”

She wanted to tell him not to remind her of what she wanted to do, that his, Jess, Jeremiah and Maria’s strength, held her together.

Tamara had been so close to breaking down in the last week she had lost count. If it hadn’t been for the boys and Jeremiah and Maria, she didn’t know what she would have done.

She glanced toward the staircase and just caught a flash of Jess and Jeremiah talking, rather animatedly from what Tamara could make out.

Did they argue, about her?

Far from making her feel special, the idea that father and son were at odds because of her made her heart sink. But she’d noticed a lot of the secret conversations between Jeremiah and the boys—either all three together or the boys with each other or either boy with Jeremiah—the last week.

The doorbell rang, and Jess seemed to use it as his excuse for an escape, leaving in a huff and disappearing behind the staircase.

A moment later, Tamara heard a door slam shut and assumed that Jess had gone into the study to get away from everything.

Jeremiah came from behind the stairs to answer the door and Tamara didn’t miss that he took several deep breaths before he opened it.

A small party of well-dressed and perfectly coifed females stood on the doorstep. Jeremiah greeted them, hugging the oldest woman like she was a long-lost friend. He then warmly welcomed the two younger women who looked so much like each other and the older woman, Tamara knew they must be her daughters.

They seemed familiar if only because Tamara had a vague memory of seeing them out at the burial site earlier that afternoon. She probably wouldn’t have paid them more than a passing glance if

they weren't among the few black people outside of her who had been present at either the funeral or the burial site.

"I'll be right back. Got something to tend to." Jax squeezed her arm before he released her to leave. He must have had a second thought and paused to ask, "You'll be okay?"

She smiled and nodded. "Tend to your business. I'll be here when you're done. Got nowhere else to be."

Tamara watched him go and visually followed him to the staircase, not surprised when he turned behind it, and she heard the study door open and close again.

The cloak-and-dagger air tempted her to go see what went on between the twins. Obviously something significant, and with the arrival of the mysterious woman and her daughters, she had a couple of scenarios to fuel her curiosity and suspicions. Actually she didn't know where to begin to feed her reservations.

The lawyer in her told her to go forward and introduce herself to the new arrivals, but the scared, abandoned little girl froze her feet where she stood. Uncertainty kept her from following the boys into the study to find out what the big to-do had been between Jess and his father.

No one could tell her that something wasn't up and that her grief hadn't made her blind to the signs that something went on and that someone kept her out of the loop.

Tamara stood for several long moments just crowd-watching as the new arrivals mingled with the rest of the mourners, the older woman introducing herself in some instances and in others, people evidently already knew her.

She got a bad feeling about the identity of the woman and her daughters, especially when she remembered her father's vague words about her mother before his death.

He'd been trying to tell her something, something he hadn't gotten out to either of their satisfaction.

"You look like you are thinking very hard on something, *chica*."

Tamara grabbed her chest and almost leaped out of her skin at Maria's silent voice behind her. She turned, smiling at the older woman and wondered why she hadn't thought of tapping this particular resource earlier.

The housekeeper and butler in a household almost always knew what went on between the people they worked for. But then Maria was also like family, which made her even more of an intimate in the know. "Maria, you liked to scare the bejeesus out of me."

"Not y intention, *nina*." She frowned as she stared at Tamara. "You were deep in thought. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Great, I've got my opening. "Actually, I wondered anything's going on around here that I need to know about? Something between the boys and Jeremiah maybe?"

Maria frowned and slowly shook her head. "Your guess is as good as mine. I know they have all been a little on edge the last several days with the preparations for the funeral. But I think that is to be expected, no?"

"I suppose." Tamara wasn't buying it. She didn't think that Maria knew anything, but that didn't mean that something wasn't going on.

She put the glass of soda she had been nursing down on the island top. "Please excuse me, Maria. I have something I need to tend to." She caught herself using almost the same words Jax had right before he left her and easily she wove through the crowd of mourners and well-wishers and followed his path to the study.

The epiphany dawned on her as her hand touched the doorknob of the study door. She remembered all the remorseful expressions directed at her when they thought she wasn't looking, all the guilty glances averted—and she wondered why she hadn't thought of it before.

And if she needed any further proof of her suspicions, the awkward looks that the twins gave her when she flung open the door sealed the deal. "You knew, didn't you?"

When the boys' faces flushed, Tamara had her answer.

“How could you? You knew he would die soon, that he had a limited amount of time, and you didn’t tell me?”

“We couldn’t, Tam,” Jax murmured so low she barely heard him.

“*Couldn’t?*” She gawked. “You robbed me. You robbed both of us.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t our choice.”

“When I think of all the time I wasted...” She turned her glare on each of them, moving farther into the room and watching their eyes widen as she neared—like they thought she would carry out some physical violence on their persons.

She had to admit that she did consider hitting them, the first piece of retribution that came to her mind. What good would it do, though? Then she remembered how good it had felt to hit Jess after she found out he had lied to her. She wasn’t normally a violent person and it hadn’t solved anything, but she’d felt better for just that one moment in time—vindicated.

The hangdog looks on each twins’ faces, however, gave her pause. She could see that she couldn’t beat up on them any more than they already beat up on themselves and probably had been beating up on themselves for some time now.

Still she couldn’t let them completely off the hook. “Why couldn’t you tell me that he was dying? Why *didn’t* you tell me?”

“If you’re going to blame anyone, Tamara, blame me,” Jeremiah said from behind her.

Tamara turned as he shut the door and took several steps across the carpeted floor until he stood within a few feet of her. She looked from him to his sons and thought how earnest well-meaning men surrounded her. She knew this, but their lies still hurt, and she needed to know why they had done it. “Why, Jeremiah? Why would you all do this? If I’d known what was going on, that he was dying I would have—”

“Acted differently around him? Made him self-conscious with your pity?” Jeremiah shook his head as if he already knew her answer. “Bailey didn’t want that.”

“Why was it okay for all of you to know, be trusted with the information, and not me?” When no one answered after a moment, Tamara just shook her head, disgusted. “Typical, male chauvinist behavior to the end.”

“Tam, it wasn’t like that,” Jess said, speaking up for the first time since she entered the room.

She turned on him, heated. “Oh no? Then what was it like? Why don’t you tell me?”

Jeremiah caught her by the arms and turned her to him. “Don’t be angry at the boys. They only did what I asked them to—what Bailey wanted. And they only just found out about Bailey’s condition recently.”

“How recently?”

Before Jeremiah could answer, Jess stepped forward and put a hand on his father’s shoulder. “It’s okay, Dad. You don’t have to protect us. We went into this with our eyes open.” He turned to Tamara as Jeremiah released her. “We didn’t find out until after you’d arrived. Jax stumbled onto the information when he took me to the hospital after my fall. Bailey asked him not to say anything to anyone, but Jax told me. It was our decision to continue to keep things hush-hush. We thought we did the best thing.”

“For who?” Tamara paced back and forth, mind reeling.

Jess had been thrown by that horse a good couple of weeks before her dad’s death. Two weeks she could have spent with her father not arguing, making his life easier and less painful...

Pitying him.

Jeremiah’s words rang in her ears, and she knew he erred on the side of good sense and loyalty. She knew her father—too stubborn and proud to the end.

“Tamara...”

She glanced up to see the tears in Jeremiah's blue eyes—so beautiful and evocative like his sons—and her heart clenched in her chest.

“Bailey was my friend. I loved the old coot like a brother, and I would have done anythin' for him.”

Tamara shook her head, tears filling her own eyes. “But what about me, Jeremiah? How could you keep that from *me*?” Erroneously, she made the situation about her. Her father had been the one dying. He had been the sick one, and he'd made a choice to tell who he wanted to tell—his loved ones, the ones who had been there for him the last eighteen years.

She realized she wasn't angry with Jeremiah, Jess or Jax for keeping her father's secret. She was hurt and disappointed, most assuredly, but mostly angry with herself. “I wasted so much time arguing with him. Fighting...”

Jeremiah wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest, crying in earnest now. He hadn't cried at the funeral, had been strong through all the arrangements, the wake and everything leading up to this moment—the strong man, the solid friend, the rock.

“I'm so sorry, Jeremiah. I had no reason to blame you or the boys. It was me. All me...” Tamara sobbed and felt Jeremiah's hand rubbing and patting her back in a comforting, hypnotic way that actually made her feel like less of a selfish heel. “I know you loved him, and you were there for him—more than I had been.”

“It wasn't a contest, gal. He loved you too. He just lost his way, forgot how to show how he felt about you, even once you arrived. He knew he erred in shuttin' you out, and I reckon that made it even harder for him to show you how much you meant to him.”

Tamara didn't think Jeremiah had said so much in one sitting since she'd known him. She smiled at the thought, at how much things had changed since she'd left—at how much things had remained the same.

“Never meant to hurt you, gal.” Jeremiah pulled away to look at her, thumbing stray tears away from her eyes. “That was the last thing I wanted to do. But there’s somethin’ else I have to tell you that might not sit right with you...”

Someone knocked on the door, and before anyone could answer, it opened.

The black woman who Jeremiah had greeted earlier came into the study trailing the two younger women. Tamara had a bad feeling about why they all seemed familiar outside of having seen them earlier. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Jeremiah. I’m just so anxious to meet—” She cut herself off when her gaze landed on Tamara then covered her mouth, eyes widening.

In that moment, Tamara knew.

How could she not? The woman looked like an older, mirror image of herself. And the younger women with her must be Tamara’s...sisters?

She stumbled back at the realizations, shaking her head. She didn’t think she could take any more shocking revelations today.

“Tam?”

If the woman expected a warm family reunion, she had another thing coming.

Tamara shook her head again, unable to verbalize what she wanted to say for several moments before “I can’t. I can’t!” finally flew out of her mouth, and she pushed passed the three startled women to sprint out of the room.

Chapter 28

Jax already made it to the door by the time Pop's forceful voice rang out behind him.

"Don't boy."

Everything in him rebelling against the command, Jax turned to his dad. "She needs someone right now."

"She needs to be alone right now."

"Maybe if I talk to her," Jasmine suggested, more timid than Jax would have ever expected. From all the stories he'd ever heard about her, he'd thought she'd be more of a fire-breathing dragon. But the woman before him appeared to be just an older version of Tamara—darker with a chocolate-brown complexion, beautiful, poised, and everything about her screaming class.

Of course, Tam had gotten back her cowgirl edges since she'd been back the last few weeks, but Jax didn't miss the poise and class under the hoyden, rough-and-ready gear.

"Pardon my sayin', Jasmine, but I think you're the last person she wants to talk to right now," Pop said.

She frowned, but nodded. "Perhaps you're right. She does have a lot to deal with."

The six of them stood around shuffling their feet for a moment before Jeremiah said, "I reckon introductions are in order." He indicated Jess and Jax with a nod of his head. "These are my boys, Jesse and Jackson."

One of the young women burst out laughing and the other one elbowed her in the ribs.

"What?" the chuckler asked. "I'm sorry, but it's funny."

Jeremiah smiled. "It was either that, or Martin and Luther, but their mother and me liked the sounds of the J names a lot better."

"You're serious?"

"Dead serious."

Jax interjected, proffering his hand to the young woman. "Just call me Jax. That's with an x at the end."

She shook his hand and smiled. "Maia Jensen. Tamara's half-sister. Call me Maia."

"Ma'am." Jax tipped an imaginary hat and Maia giggled. He pegged her as the youngest sister, maybe about his and Jess's age, definitely not older, and sensed a kindred spirit, at least as it concerned her outlook on life. She seemed like the fun-loving type.

Her sister elbowed her again. "Don't mind her. She's enamored by this entire experience. She's never met a real live cowboy before, unless you count the Naked Cowboy on 42nd Street."

Jax chuckled and offered his hand to the second woman. "And you, ma'am? Is this your first time?"

"I'm sorry?" she spluttered.

"Meeting a cowboy."

"Oh, um, uh, why yes, it is."

"She's just too cool to admit that her hormones have been on overload from the moment we set foot on the ranch and caught sight of all the hunky male pulchritude," Maia teased.

"Anyway, I'm Desiree Jensen. Tamara's other half-sister."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am." Jax shook her hand.

Jess stepped forward and shook each woman's hand, then waited as their dad introduced the young women's mother who needed no introduction.

"This is Tamara's mama, Jasmine..."

"Jensen." She stepped forward and shook Jax and Jess' hand in turn. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

With the introductions out of the way, Jax didn't know what to do next. He still was of a mind to chase after Tamara, and he could see that Jess wanted to do the same.

Maia, the more frank and outgoing of the sisters, hooked an arm through Jax's. "Why don't you take me on a tour of the ranch while you're waiting for Tamara to come around?"

"*Maia*," Desiree ground through her teeth. "They just put their loved-one to rest. They're in *mourning*."

"Ain't a problem, ma'am. I don't think the deceased would object." Jax patted Maia's hand on his biceps, looking forward to getting to know Tamara's baby sister. Even though they hadn't been raised together, and didn't even know each other to his knowledge, he thought maybe he could get a little insight. At least it would take him away from the house for a spell. And he needed the space, same as Tamara. Maybe by the time he came back, she'd be ready to talk...or forgive him for his part in keeping Bailey's condition a secret.

Jax excused himself and led Maia from the study, toward the kitchen, surveying the crowd the entire way for any sign of Tamara. He finally gave up and figured she had gone upstairs and locked herself in her room.

He took Maia through the kitchen and out the back door of the main house, greeted by a burst of afternoon sunshine and the smell of blooming aspens in the air.

"It's really beautiful country out here," Maia commented.

"I agree." He almost added that he wouldn't live anywhere else but wondered if he could be as happy here in this country now without Tamara in it.

Jax paused and looked down at her, adjusting to the difference in height. She stood more than a few inches shorter than Tamara, maybe five-three, but not much more. "What part of the country you from?"

"East Coast. New York to be exact."

Jax nodded, thinking that geographically it wasn't really a big state, not nearly as big as Colorado and several other states in the

West and Southwest. He wondered, what the odds that Maia or Desiree had ever come across their sister and never even known it?

“Seems pretty quiet for a working ranch. I guess everything’s shut down for the funeral?” Maia asked.

“Not quite.” Comparatively it proved quiet for a normal work day but only because most of the ranch’s guests remained out on a cattle drive with several cowboys. Bailey had made Jeremiah swear he wouldn’t shut things down, that he would keep things business as usual for the most part, and Pop had done his best not to disrupt ranch operations.

They walked away in silence before coming up on an outcropping of rocks near the pond where Maia didn’t waste a minute hitching up her skirt to take a seat.

Jax took a seat beside her, liking her earthiness and hoping she and her sister would be staying a while, hoping that Tamara could come to terms and reconcile with her Mom.

“You’re not a talkative type, are you?” Maia asked after a while.

Jax grinned. “You don’t know me very well.”

She chuckled. “I take it you’re the rabble-rouser between you and your brother?”

“I’ve been called that a time or two.”

“Same here.”

“Your sister does seem a little on the—”

“Stick-up-her-ass, stuck-up side?”

Jax winced but grinned when he saw Maia’s smile. She was definitely a firebrand and woe to the man who couldn’t deal with her sense of humor. “I wasn’t going to say anything nearly as—”

“Insensitive? Trust me, it’s said in love. I’ve tried to get her to loosen up, but haven’t been successful yet. I’m hoping all the fresh air and fresh cowboys will help with that.”

Jax chuckled, liking this sister a lot. They were two of a kind.

“So, what’s the scoop with you boys and my sister?”

Were they that obvious or was Maia just that perceptive? Or maybe she had spoken to someone at the house before she'd even been introduced to him and Jess?

Jax didn't put much credence into the former. The Double R had its share of gossips and did its share of gossiping, but except for that day at the waterfall, he thought he and Jess and Tamara had been pretty discreet. Besides, no one on the ranch would be inclined to talk about the personal business of ranch denizens to a couple of strangers who had just arrived.

Maia nudged his arm with hers. "I'm a big girl. You can trust me. Besides, I may only have known her two minutes, but it doesn't mean I don't care about what happens to her."

Jax looked at her, for the first time seeing the situation from her point of view and not just Tamara's and his and Jess's.

What thoughts must have gone through her and Desiree's heads when they'd found out they had an older sister? What had their mother said to them when she broke the news?

He cleared his suddenly dry throat. "When did you two find out about Tamara?"

"Mom broke the news to us a couple of weeks ago when she mentioned she'd had a first husband, he was critically ill, and we might be making a trip out here for some reconciliation. So we've had a little more time than Tamara to adjust to the idea. But it still feels kind of weird to know I have two older sisters and not just one."

Jax couldn't imagine what his life would have been like without Jess, or how he would have reacted if he'd been introduced to him in his adulthood after not knowing about him at all.

What kind of head trip must that be?

"So, you two guys doing the nasty with my big sis?"

"You've really got a one-track mind don't you?"

"Like a pit bull with a Chihuahua."

Jax chuckled, realized he did this a lot with her and gave her an affectionate, one-armed hug. “I’m going to like having you as an in-law.”

“That serious?”

“She means the world to both of us,” he murmured. “We’ve been trying to convince her to stay here on the ranch with us instead of going back to New York.”

“Hmm, I can see where that might be a problem.” She rubbed her chin with a forefinger. “Especially with the whole white boys, threesome thing.”

“It’s more than just a threesome. We love her. We want to spend the rest of our lives with her.” Jax turned to face her and gauge her reaction. She didn’t seem shocked or disgusted by what he said as much as she seemed concerned. Just to be sure, he asked, “How about you? Do you have a problem with the *white boys, threesome* thing?”

“Not as long as Tamara doesn’t. If she loves you guys, I don’t see what the problem is. Love conquers all, and all that.”

“Not in this case.” He gave her the details of what Tamara had found out before she and her sister and mother had arrived in the study and mentioned Tamara’s career back in New York.

“Hmm, you guys are really up against some tough competition—career and guilt.”

In less than a half-and-hour she’d summed up their situation in a nutshell, on both sides.

Now what did he and Jess plan to do about it?

* * * *

His dad showed Jasmine and Desiree to a suite of guest rooms on the opposite wing of the house from where the master bedroom and his and Jax’s and Tamara’s rooms were while Maia stayed out with Jax. Jasmine had said they had made arrangements to stay at a hotel in

town, but Dad insisted, and when he turned on his rare charm, not too many women could say no to him.

Once Jess had settled Jasmine and Desiree into their rooms, he went out to find Jax and Maia in the stables, smiling as he listened to his brother explain the fine art of caring for a horse, especially after a hard ride.

“So that’s where that saying ‘rode hard and put up wet’ comes from?” Maia beamed, looked like a student who had just learned something exciting and new at school.

“That’s about the size of it,” Jax said, brushing Cappuccino’s hide. “You guys stay here for any length of time, I’ll take you out for a ride so you can really see the countryside the way it’s meant to be seen.”

“I’d like that.”

“Am I invited?” Jess asked and watched as the pair turned to him—not embarrassed or jolting, just comfortable in each other’s company and welcoming him into their circle.

He took a place on the opposite side of Jax’s stallion, letting the animal push his head against his hand.

“I wouldn’t say no to being escorted around the countryside with two strapping cowboy hunks like you guys,” Maia said. Jess could tell that she teased although she probably wouldn’t turn down a tour in their company.

Jess liked her despite her irreverence, guessed that he knew how to deal with it after growing up with his irreverent brother all these years.

He thought Tamara the perfect balance between and combination of her sisters—not too serious or timid and not too audacious or foolish. She proved just right for him and Jax. Now if they could only get Tamara to see this.

“We’d be flattered to have a woman like you by our sides to show off,” Jax said.

Maia bumped her hip against his. “Don’t get used to it. You two have got another woman to do some tending to.” She stared at Jess over Cappuccino. “Have you talked to her yet?”

“I thought my brother and I would do that together since it involved us all.”

“Good. And when you guys aren’t working on her, Desiree and me and Mom will.”

“You barely know us,” Jess said with a tinge of wonder he didn’t mean to show slipping into his tone. “How do you know we’re even worth the trouble?”

Maia shrugged. “I’ve got a good feeling about you two. Call it a...sixth sense if you will.” She gave them an enigmatic smile before continuing. “This and I follow my gut whenever I can. Desi doesn’t believe in intuition and gut feelings. She’s a traditionalist, says my kind of *feelings* are what’s going to get me into trouble one day, but they haven’t so far.”

A traditionalist, huh? He wondered what Desiree’s take would be on him, Jax and Tamara together. For that matter, he wondered what Maia’s was and how much of the situation Jax had shared with her.

As if reading his mind, Maia gripped his biceps as she passed him on her way out of the stable. “You guys hang in there, Jess. We’ll make this work.”

He liked that she included herself in the equation, like she had something to lose or gain, like they were all family and she cared about them. He swallowed hard and said, “We will.”

Jess watched Maia as she left then turned to his brother, waiting for him to say something totally inappropriate and flirtatious, but he just said, “She’s going to be a great sister-in-law.”

Jess realized that Jax had finally grown up, and they had Tamara to thank for that. “We can’t lose her,” he said.

“We won’t.”

Chapter 29

A couple of days later and after official introductions to her sisters and her mother, the house had settled into a reasonable routine of civility with an invisible line drawn down the middle of it except during meal times.

Short of moving out to her dad's house to await the scheduled reading of the will, Tamara decided to stay and avoid the rest of the house as much as possible—no small feat.

She Remembered how she'd felt at the sight of Jax and Maia walking away from the house arm-in-arm the day of her dad's funeral. It helped her maintain a wall and avoid the boys and her sisters as much as possible without seeming outright rude.

The big flirt didn't waste any time getting over me.

Tamara couldn't remember being so jealous in her life. Later she'd noticed Jess go out to the stables where Jax and Maia had gone. She'd wondered if her sister would be able to resist them the way she hadn't and whether or not her boys would even try anything with Maia.

She knew she judged unfairly. Despite their dishonesty with her on a couple of key issues, they'd never disrespected her or shown any interest in another woman since she'd been on the ranch. They'd been the perfect, attentive boyfriends any woman would be proud to call her own—any woman except her.

Why did she torture herself with these thoughts when she wasn't much more for this place after she heard what the executor of her father's will had to say?

But deciding to leave proved a double-edged sword for her. Staying on the ranch kept her close to her father and the people who had loved him the most, kept her close to his memory and his life. Staying kept her close to the people *she* loved the most, but at what price? Her career and...What else did she have really? It wasn't like she had lots of friends or anyone who cared about her in New York like her family at The Double R did. And the family she did have in New York remained on The Double R now, though she didn't know for how long.

Her mother and sisters seemed to have dug in their heels the last couple of days, blending into ranch life as if they had been born to it, and not pushing her for anymore than she wanted to give—at least not yet.

Unlike her usual pro-active self, Tamara lived on pins and needles waiting for the ultimate showdown. She knew it would come. Her mother and sisters hadn't come all this way and set up shop to just turn tail and run because she put up a little resistance avoiding them. None of them seemed like the type. Except that her mother had turned tail and run from her and dad more than thirty years ago. Tamara's curiosity alone made her want to confront her mother, finally, and find out *why*, but she wasn't sure she'd like what she heard.

She guessed she came by her running-away genes honestly.

Suddenly, she shook her head and leaned forward in her seat, couldn't believe what she had just heard come from the executor's mouth. "I'm sorry. Did you say something about thirty percent share of The Double R?"

Mr. Clemson, an older man nattily dressed in a charcoal suit, white shirt, and red tie that all went with his distinguished gray hair, reminded her of many a judge she'd presented cases in front of, and she trusted him. But he couldn't have said what she thought he'd said.

But the man nodded. "Your father expressed the wish that you receive all his worldly possessions, including his share of The Double R on the stipulation that you maintain residence at the ranch at his

house. Otherwise, his house and shares of the ranch will be equally split between Jesse and Jackson Reynolds.”

Stay at the ranch?

All sorts of questions flew through her mind, the paramount ones being when had the will been drawn up and signed and whether or not the twins and her favorite meddling, surrogate father had had anything to do with the distribution of her dad’s possessions.

But her dad had his own mind until the end. She couldn’t very well see anyone influencing him to do something he didn’t want to do, especially if it involved his estranged, wayward daughter he hadn’t seen in almost two decades.

Why would he do such a thing? He’d obviously had a problem with her involvement with Jess and Jax. Why would he force them together if only to hammer out the details of the will once she decided what she wanted to do?

She looked at the boys who seemed just as surprised as her when they met her gaze and simultaneously shrugged.

Tamara next directed her gaze at Jeremiah who returned her look with an unreadable expression that spoke volumes. Obviously, he’d been up to his old tricks, and she thought he might have had a hand in nudging her father if not downright influencing him in the end. The only way to know for sure would be to ask Mr. Clemson directly. She’d been tuning out during most of his recitation—so certain that her father wouldn’t dare leave her anything—she must have missed that part. “When did you draw this up?”

“If you’re worried about anyone contesting your father’s will, I assure you, it’s ironclad...”

As a lawyer she knew no contract ironclad. They all had loopholes. A person just needed to know how to find them.

Tamara glanced at her mother to gauge her reaction. She didn’t seem unduly concerned one way or the other, which didn’t mean she hadn’t been expecting her share of her ex-husband’s worldly

possessions just because she'd been married to and had a child with him once upon a time ago.

Her mom met her gaze and arched a delicate brow as if in challenge.

What are you going to do?

Tamara heard the words loud and clear, and they weren't just in her mother's voice but Jess and Jax's.

She cleared her throat and asked again.

When Mr. Clemson gave her the date of the will's final version, Tamara gaped.

Her father had made his will out just after she'd gone off to college and never amended it.

Had he always planned that she'd come back eventually? And when she hadn't he'd just given up on seeing her in his lifetime and hoped that she'd come home after his death to see him off if she had nothing else to do with him?

At least she knew he hadn't been trying to push her together with Jess and Jax. How could he? He'd signed off on the will when she'd just been a teen and the boys had barely reached puberty. He couldn't have known she'd come back one day and be taken with the boys she'd practically raised.

Mr. Clemson leaned forward and put a hand over hers. "I've been your father and Jeremiah's lawyer for a long time, Tamara, and I know Bailey wanted you to be happy."

She looked at him. "I know," she rasped.

"He also wanted you to be well taken care of in his absence. And The Double R is a very successful and self-sufficient business venture, I assure you. You wouldn't have to work another day in your life if you didn't want to."

But what if she wanted to work? What if her chosen profession made her perfectly happy?

Tamara glanced at everyone present and saw the approving smiles of Jeremiah and his sons, the approving grin of her mother and sisters.

Why did this new development make everyone here happy except her? Why didn't she see this whole thing as a positive, a chance for her to stay with the boys and not worry about her livelihood?

Even if she didn't have to work another day in her life, it wasn't like the boys wouldn't be working. They made their living as cowboys after all. The ranch wasn't just a job either, but their home and their life. And it didn't sit well with her mooching off of them. Sure, she could set up a practice anywhere. But did she want to?

Mr. Clemson squeezed her hand and smiled. "It's not like you have to make your decision right away. You have some time to mull it over."

"Thank you, Mr. Clemson."

The rest of the reading went over her head in a haze and a half-an-hour later when Mr. Clemson finished the reading, Tamara left the law offices, oblivious to everyone who tried to get her attention or get her to ride back to the ranch with them, and she just drifted.

She had no destination in mind. She just wanted to get away from the places and people that reminded her of her father the most.

How could she stay at The Double R after what they had all done to her, after all the secrets they had kept, lies they had told and time they had all wasted *for her own good*?

God, she felt seventeen years old again, and the only way she could get away from all of it, rise above it, she felt like she needed to leave and start her life fresh and anew—somewhere else.

But it wasn't like New York didn't have its bitter memories and skeletons in the closet. It wasn't like she wouldn't be bringing herself and all her regrets with her when she went back because in the end it was like her father and Jeremiah used to say: "You can't run from yourself. Wherever you go, there you are."

She had issues, and she knew it. She had never gotten over first her mother's abandonment and then her father's condemnation. She had taken all that grief and sadness right back to New York with her

and tried to bury them under her studies and workaholism. It had worked for a while.

But now the same situation faced her again—going back, eighteen years later, leaving a bunch of issues unresolved.

She couldn't do it, not this time. She needed to face her mother, Jeremiah, the boys and clear the air once and for all.

* * * *

No one could have been more shocked by Bailey's will than Jax, except for maybe Jess, who had the same thought in mind at the terms as Jax. They'd discussed it on the way home, firm in their wish. They'd rather keep their forty percent share of The Double R without the additional thirty percent if it meant that Tamara would stay. She meant much more to them than owning a majority share of the ranch.

Jax wished that telling her would make a difference, but he somehow got the feeling that nothing he or his brother could say to her would make her change her mind about leaving. They had told her how they felt, that they loved her and wanted to be with her and that hadn't worked. Counting on her to stay for nostalgic reasons would be a long shot.

What did she have left to do?

"Did you see her face when Clemson stated the stipulations of the will?" Jess asked now as he sat on the barstool at the island in the kitchen.

Maria had begun breaking out fixings for sandwiches as soon as they had all arrived home together minus Tamara, but no one seemed to have an appetite, and their dad, Jasmine and her daughters had all retired either to their rooms or other pursuits around the ranch.

This left Jax and Jess sitting in the kitchen in front of a meal neither of them really had a taste for.

Jax nodded now in response to his brother. "Who could miss it?"

"She thinks her mother came back for the money."

“You really believe that?” Jax asked.

“I don’t, but I think Tamara does.”

“I reckon she’s got every reason to think that way.”

“I reckon.”

“Tamara and Jasmine need to talk,” Jax said.

“Good idea, but easier said than done. They don’t stay in the same room together longer than it takes to say *hi* and *bye*.” And the fact that Tamara allowed this much civility said a lot when Jax knew how abandoned she felt by her mother, how betrayed.

He raked a hand through his hair and sighed. He had never felt more helpless and vulnerable in his life except for those few times when his hopes had been dashed, and he’d lost the most important people in his life. Comparatively, he had not had it as bad as some people, though worse than others. So he didn’t have a career in football. He still managed to live in a place he enjoyed waking up in every day, and did a job that by and large he loved. Losing his and Jess’s mom hadn’t affected him as bad as it could have since they’d been pretty young when she died. But finding out about Bailey’s illness and being told there wasn’t anything they could do about it made him feel more vulnerable than he ever wanted to admit to.

He could just imagine what it felt like for Tamara, having to see her Mom every day and not speak to her, feeling trapped—damned if she left and damned if she stayed.

“I didn’t think Tamara a coward, but now I’m beginning to wonder,” Jess said. Jax stared at him across the island for a moment before his brother elaborated. “I mean, we told her how we feel, we spilled our guts, and she’s still planning to leave?”

“I think it’s more to it than that, Jess.”

“What more? Either she loves us or she doesn’t. Either she’s willing to forgive us or she’s not. She’s using the excuse of how we handled Bailey’s illness as a wedge to keep us apart.”

Jax could see his brother’s temper building and hoped that Tamara didn’t walk through the door that minute. In Jess’s frame of mind, he

might just be tempted to tell the woman how he felt. He couldn't say that he blamed his brother. He felt a little frustrated with the whole situation himself.

Did Tamara love them? He had difficulty telling from the way she acted sometimes. He knew she had feelings for them, had to believe this, because he found the alternative, that she could lay with them and accept their affection without having any for them, unbearable.

Jess often told him that he would get back how he treated all those girls in spades. Did all the girls he had slept with feel this way? He always tried to be up front and never lead a woman on that what they did together would lead to anything more than fun and games sex, a good time between the sheets. But now that his own heart was on the line, he wondered how far the divide was between his kind of up front honesty and their romantic expectations.

And what did Tamara's rejection say for Jess, he who had been living as chaste a life as any reverend or other holy man that Jax had ever known? Didn't he deserve a woman who loved him to settle down with? "Do you think it still might be the threesome thing?" he blurted.

"Why? Are you willing to step out of the picture to see?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

Jax frowned at his brother's confrontational tone. "Whoa, pardner. I'm not the enemy. I want the same thing you do."

Jess closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I guess I am a little cantankerous."

"Putting Pop to shame."

Jess grinned and put his hand over his brother's on the island top. "You don't deserve my bad attitude. No one does. I need to come to terms with this sooner or later."

"Come to terms with what?"

"That we're going to lose her."

"No one's losing anyone."

Jax and Jess jerked their heads toward the threshold of the kitchen where Jasmine stood in a pair of cowboy boots, jeans and an orange western shirt tucked into her jeans.

She managed to bring cosmopolitan elegance and polish to her cowpoke outfit without any effort at all, and Jax smiled at how much she looked like a darker skinned version of her oldest daughter.

“How long have you been standing there eavesdropping?” he asked. Jasmine smiled like he intended and obviously knew he teased her.

“Long enough to know I’ve been sitting on my patooty too long waiting for my daughter to come around.”

“You got any ideas about what we need to do to keep her here, we’re open,” Jess said.

“I’m going to talk to her. I can’t guarantee that she’ll stay after she hears what I have to say, but I’ll give her something to think twice about.”

“All we’re asking for is a chance,” Jax said.

“Then that’s what I’ll give you.”

Chapter 30

Tamara froze on the threshold of the door when she saw her mother standing at the island alone. She slowly closed the door as Jasmine turned to her with a grave look on her face.

“We need to talk, Tamara.”

“What is this, an intervention?”

“Intervention. Therapy. It’s whatever you want to call it to make you feel better about talking to me.”

“Too late for therapy.” Tamara tried to walk past her mother but came up short when the woman put a palm in her chest to stop her.

She automatically tried to go around her mother but then the woman took that decision out of her hands when she caught Tamara around the biceps and held on.

“It’s never too late to unburden yourself.”

“Are you talking about you or me because I don’t have anything to unburden.”

“Are you sure about that, Tamara?”

Hell, she wasn’t sure about much of anything when her mother looked at her with her dark glossy eyes taking Tamara in with such regret.

Tamara squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. “You want my pity, I’m sorry I’m fresh out.”

“Please, baby. I don’t care if you just say that you hate my guts and don’t want to see me ever again. I just want you to talk to me.”

“You don’t really want that.”

Jasmine lowered her hand. “Have at it.”

Tamara had to give the woman points for her gumption and could see what her father must have seen in her all those years ago besides her beauty—her spirit. But *something* had obviously taken some of that spirit away and run her off, *someone* maybe? “Would you have come back if he hadn’t died?”

Her mom released her and dropped her arm to her side. “You think I came back for his money?”

She couldn’t say the thought hadn’t crossed her mind, but that wasn’t what Tamara got at with her question. She could see that her mom had made out very well in the ensuing years since she had left her dad. She didn’t seem to want for any material possessions. “I just want to know if you would have come back to see me while he still lived.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, that’s an honest answer.”

“Tam, you have to understand how things were between us. Up until a few weeks ago, you father opposed my having anything to do with you. It’s why I stayed away as long as I did. If it wasn’t for Jeremiah, I don’t think I would have considered coming back at all.”

“Jeremiah?” She should have known the buttinski had a hand in this. Good ol’ Jeremiah Reynolds, The Fixer.

Tam smiled at the thought.

“I just knew you hated me like your father did. But Jeremiah stayed in touch, convinced me I needed to come.”

“How do you know I don’t hate you?”

“Do you?”

“I’m not sure *how* I feel about you!” Tam threw up her hands in aggravation. “More than thirty years, Mom! Three decades. When I was a kid, I used to dream about meeting you, imagined how you’d say you missed me, and how leaving Dad and me was all a big mistake. Then I grew up. I was ten when I gave up those dreams.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

“Too little too late.”

“I called you when you were little.”

Tamara arched a brow and stared at her, waiting for more.

“You were probably about six or seven. I was pregnant with Desi.”

Tamara swallowed and watched as her mother took a deep breath as if to prepare herself for that unburdening she had alluded to earlier. She tried to tell herself that whatever her mother said shouldn’t matter to her. She was a lawyer, a creature of logic. But she also missed her mother. She had a problem admitting this, even to herself. “You called?”

“I know it was too little too late, even then, but I wanted to talk to you, tell you about your sister, maybe try and be in your life in some capacity...I don’t know what I thought at the time, but your father nixed the idea, nonetheless.”

“Speaking ill of the dead?”

“No! I would never—”

“I mean it’s not like he’s here to defend himself.”

“And I’m not attacking him, just stating facts. Jeremiah can vouch for me if you need him to. I spoke to him first.”

Of course Jeremiah knew. Jeremiah knew all.

“Your father talked me out of coming back into your life—either of your lives, and he acted pretty adamant, expressing that he didn’t want me to try and speak to or see you. He said it would be too disruptive, that you were happy and fine and had grown to accept my absence. Is that true?”

Tamara folded her arms across her chest, feeling more defensive since she had arrived home than she ever had in her life. Now she could see where she had gotten her interrogational skills. “If you’re asking me whether or not I would have welcomed your call back then, I can’t honestly say. I don’t remember what my frame of mind was back then.”

“That’s fair enough.” Jasmine raised a hand to touch her arm. “I can’t really blame your father for his reaction, but I just wanted you to know that I...I did try.”

“Not very hard,” Tamara muttered. She knew she judged her mother harshly, maybe too harshly. The woman was human, just like her father, and humans made mistakes—some more irreparable than others, some more painful. How long would she allow her mother’s mistakes to affect her most important life decisions?

“I deserve that.” Jasmine nodded and it seemed more like in defeat rather than agreement. “Can I tell you something?”

“Have at it, as you said.”

“I know you’ll probably find this impossible to believe, but I’ve regretted the decision I made to leave you and your father every single day of my life.”

“Please, don’t...” Why did she get choked up when she should have been righteously indignant? When she should have been doing like the woman had suggested earlier and telling her she never wanted to see her again?

Truthfully, she *wanted* to hear what her mom had to say, wanted to know that she hadn’t been forgotten just because she had been out of sight. Wanted to know that the woman who’d birthed her loved her. “Why did you leave?”

“Cowardice, Tamara. Plain and simple. I let other people decide what life’s journey for me or more accurately, *who* I took with me on that journey.”

“What people?”

“My family. They weren’t happy with my decision to marry your father. I think they thought him a passing fad, and that I’d eventually get over him and come down to earth.”

Much like her father had thought about her and Noah. “But you didn’t.”

“And my parents disowned me for it. Didn’t want to have anything to do with me...”

Tamara's vision swam with tears she fought mightily not to shed, heart pounding at her mother's words that had hit way too close to home. "You followed your heart. I...I think that's brave." Her mother had acted braver than her with Jess and Jax, at least. She couldn't even bring herself to say the three little words to them much less commit her life to them the way they wanted to commit to her. This made her wonder how much of a passing fad her father had thought Jess and Jax. Or maybe he'd been so against the idea of her and them together because he knew they *weren't* a passing fad.

"I wasn't brave as much as young and rebellious. But when real life set in, and I realized the life of relative luxury I had given up to be with your father, and that the only way to get it back I had to renounce him and my...my child..."

Maybe she was emotionally overwrought and needed someone to hold as much as her mother needed to unburden. Or maybe she just missed her father so much more than she knew. Whatever the reason, she found herself falling into her mother's outstretched arms and hugging her tight as the tears flowed—from her and her mother's eyes.

She couldn't imagine what she would have done had she been forced to choose between Noah and her father. And she'd never had to find out because her father had taken the decision out of her hands and sent Noah away. She could just envision how her mother must have felt when her family turned their backs on her because she loved the wrong person.

She felt the same way when her father looked at her with distaste at the idea of her and Jess and Jax together.

How would her mother feel about it? Would she be as disgusted and judgmental despite what her own parents had done to her, despite what her family had forced her to give up?

Her mom pulled away from her, holding her at arm's length as she looked at her for a long moment before thumbing Tamara's tears away. "I know it's a lot to ask, especially as despicably as I've treated

you and your father, but do you think you could find it in your heart to forgive me for leaving you?"

Tamara had a sudden flash of her father in the hospital and his last words to her before he coded. He'd asked her to forgive her mother and to forgive him. "I already have."

* * * *

Jess watched the two women crying and hugging each other, his own throat clogging up with emotion. He turned his back and quietly left, unwilling to invade Jasmine and Tamara's privacy anymore than he already had.

He wished he could be more hopeful about the outcome of Jasmine's conversation with her daughter, but he wasn't. It heartened him to know they had finally gotten together and that Tamara had forgiven her mother. But he functioned under no illusions that Tamara had or would forgive him and Jax or that she would reconsider staying on the ranch.

Jess didn't know why he believed this the end of the road as the situation concerned Tamara and her relationship with him and Jax, but he did.

"Jasmine and Tamara still going at it?" Jax asked.

Jess stopped in his tracks, jerked up his eyes to see his brother standing in front of him. Had Jax not spoken Jess thought he probably would have walked right into his brother.

Jax frowned and stared at him. "You okay?"

"About as okay as I'm going to get."

"It didn't go well?"

"It went well for Tamara. I don't know what it means for us, but I'm happy for her. She deserves to have her mother back."

Jax nodded, looked about as bad as Jess felt.

Jess didn't want to give up like this, realized he had been dragging around the last couple of weeks like a dog with his tail between his

legs, beaten and defeated. This wasn't him. Maybe it had been, when he'd been young and could do nothing about Tamara leaving. But he wasn't a kid anymore. He claimed manhood and had something at stake and the means to get what he wanted if he really put his mind and heart to it. His mind and heart wanted Tamara to stay.

"I'm not letting her go, Jax. I'm not letting this end here. You with me?"

Jax looked at him and grinned. "What do you have in mind?"

Jess told him.

Chapter 31

Two Months Later...

Tamara didn't waste time trying to put her whole home-going experience behind her.

She went back to the office and to work the day after she arrived home to New York against numerous arguments from the firm's senior partners. Of course their arguments hadn't been too strident. They'd been only too glad to see their number one litigator back at work and watched her throw herself back into the grind, trying cases and bringing money into the firm's coffers. Money, of course, remained the name of the game.

Tamara had accepted this as an evil of her job, had accepted it a long time ago and gladly jumped back into the grind. The situation called for busyness—either go to work and keep herself busy or stay home, mourn and remind herself every day she stayed away from work of exactly what she had left behind in Colorado.

She hadn't just given up her inheritance or left behind her dead father, or her mother and two younger sisters she hadn't known existed before recently. She had left behind her heart and her future. As much as she wanted to deny this, she couldn't, and despite her burying herself in her work, she knew she couldn't bury her feelings for the two young men she'd left behind.

She'd assumed that she could settle back into her career and her life in New York and things would go back to normal just because she wanted them to. She compartmentalized well, after all, had been doing it most of her life, but especially once she left home to go to

school in New York. She compartmentalized so well sometimes she'd been accused of having a split personality.

Tamara didn't even think a split personality would save her from her grief. The pain and the regret embedded themselves in her psyche too deep to just forget.

She couldn't even console herself that she had done the right thing for all the right reasons. No matter how many times she counted the pros and cons of her relationship with Jess and Jax, no matter how many times the pros came up short, she knew in her heart what she needed to do to make things right between them all.

She loved them, belonged to them body, heart and soul as surely as she belonged to her mother and her father through blood. She knew for certain that they belonged to her, that they wanted nothing more than for her to stay at the ranch. But she had turned her back on them, had taken the easy way out and come back *home*.

Not that leaving had been all that easy. Saying goodbye to Jess and Jax had been the hardest thing she'd had to do next to saying goodbye to them eighteen years before.

Of course, this time, they were eighteen years older and seemed to take her departure with more equanimity than they had as nine-year-olds. In fact, they didn't seem as torn up about her departure as she had been—continued to be.

Tamara looked at the phone on her polished cherry wood desk, fingers itching to pick up the receiver and dial the ranch.

How many times had she had a receiver or her cell phone in hand ready to speed dial her childhood home just to hear some familiar voices? And how many times had she discounted doing what should have come second nature because she couldn't come up with a ready excuse for her to call The Double R? It wasn't as if she'd left on bad terms, if you didn't consider jilted lovers bad terms. Her family *lived* there after all.

Come to think of it, what kind of turncoats did her mother and sisters turn out to be to stay at the ranch even after she'd left?

Tamara understood Maia had a particular fascination with the cowboys she had up until that point met at the ranch, and that she'd wanted to prolong her stay to explore it. Coupled with their Mom and sister's wish to live where Tamara had spent the bulk of her life had been enough reason for the three of them to stay behind.

Tamara wondered what they all did now.

Had Jess and Jax done, as promised, finally shown Maia the finer points of riding a horse? Had Desiree finally managed to loosen up enough to get acquainted with the cowboys and the concept of roughing it? Tamara doubted it, smiling at the idea of her stuffy younger sister donning cowgirl gear and mounting a horse.

Desiree hadn't mastered either activity by the time Tamara had left for New York. She doubted her sister had changed much in the interim.

Tamara closed her eyes at the pain that suddenly invaded her chest at the idea of her sisters enjoying the company of Jess and Jax when she couldn't.

Scratch that. Not couldn't—she *wouldn't* allow herself to enjoy their company. She had denied herself when she left. It wasn't her sisters' fault that she acted stubborn and continued to be short-sighted.

Maybe James had been right to get out while he could. She obviously didn't know her own mind, didn't know a good thing—or in her case, two good things—when she had it.

She wondered how she could be so logical and clear-headed when it came to her job, but the exact opposite when it came to her love life. She'd *thought* herself logical, seeing all sides of the situation when she left rather than just the side that said she loved Jess and Jax and should stay with them on that basis alone.

Her father had given her the perfect excuse to stay, outside of love, by leaving her shares of his stake in the ranch and his house. But with her father and his executor being so efficient and organized, the case had avoided probate altogether, allowing Tamara to refuse her

bequest and leave everything behind without any legal strings to keep her in Colorado—a blessing and a curse.

The intercom on Tamara's phone sounded, and she caught herself jumping as if from a shock, hand hovering over the receiver. She pressed down the intercom button and the crisp voice of David Frakt's secretary sounded over the speaker.

"Tamara, David would like to see you in his office."

"I'll be right there," she said without a second thought. She remained eager to get away from her desk and have something to constructive do.

She'd managed to catch up with her work and take on a new lucrative client since she had arrived back without ever once meeting her reclusive patron—thanks to the convenience of e-mail and cell phones. Oh the joys of technology.

However, Tamara knew that sooner or later she'd have to meet with her client, if only to have the woman—at least the client sounded like a female on the phone—sign off on official documents in her presence. The validity of e-mails could only go so far. But for now she just contented herself in the knowledge that J. Pines' substantial checks cleared without any difficulties and the firm and Tamara always got paid on time.

Tamara walked down the plush-carpeted, cream hallways on her way to David's, stopping to chat with a couple of clerical staff here or nodding her head at other lawyers there before she finally arrived at the area just outside the senior partner's office.

"You can go right in, Tamara. He's waiting for you."

"Thanks, Dorothy." Hand on the knob, she took a deep breath before she opened the door. She went into the posh burgundy and cream corner office of the firm's youngest partner. Next to her own stellar track record, David proved one of the major reasons Tamara had been allowed to go home to Colorado for so long without worrying about job security.

She knew David had spoken for her at the partners' weekly meetings, though at the time she hadn't been as concerned about her career as she had been about her father. Now she didn't have that concern hanging over her head. No, she only worried about the shambles she had made out of her love life now.

Was it too late to go back, tell Jess and Jax that she loved them and she wanted to make a go of it? Two months didn't seem like particularly long to ask a man to wait, but then she'd never come out and given them hope that she considered being with them. She'd pretty much severed all ties, and Jess and Jax had followed her lead. They had every right to move on with their lives and take love where they could find it. It just pained her to think that they had.

Jax didn't strike her as particularly patient in most things, but she wasn't sure how much he had changed where affairs of the heart existed, wasn't sure how much being with her had changed him.

She'd like to think she'd left an impression on the brothers that wasn't easily forgotten, like to believe she hadn't left a bad taste in their mouths and completely turned them off of love.

David stood in front of the window with his back to her, Bluetooth headset securely in his ear as he spoke to someone on the other end.

She admired his broad back, the freshness of his white, designer shirt, sleeves rolled up just below the elbows.

Tamara had always found him attractive, in a purely blond, blue-eyed, aesthetic and different kind of way, nothing on the level of how attractive she found Jess and Jax. Those two boys gave hot, sexy and lust whole new meanings. It would have been easy to discount her feelings for them *as* just lust if there wasn't anything else to them, but there was so much to them besides the physical.

She respected their work ethic, respected that they loved what they did, and that they brought so many people joy during the course of a day. She enjoyed their smiles and diverse personalities and senses of humor. She admired their intellect and sharp tongues when they engaged in word play in or out of the bed with her. But must of all,

she liked the way they felt, smelled and tasted after sex, enjoyed the protected way she felt cuddling next to them and knowing that she remained the most important thing in the world to them at the end of the day.

Did she need any more proof than this that she loved them?

Tamara swallowed hard then cleared her throat to let David know she stood in the room. “David, you wanted to see me?”

“Tamara! Great! Have a seat. I’ll be right with you.”

She sat down in one of the Eames chairs before his large maple desk, listening as he began wrapping up his call while he made his way behind the desk and took a seat.

He smiled at her, and her heart leapt for no other reason than she hungered for affection from the opposite sex.

This wasn’t good. She couldn’t go around mooning over one of her bosses just because he showed her a little warmth no matter how sweet and idealistic she thought him.

But before she could further castigate herself for her emotional indiscretion, David’s look turned serious and probing as he leaned forward in his seat and folded his hands on his desk. “How are you doing? And before you give me the old party line about everything being fine and work being the best therapy, I’m interested in knowing how you’re really doing.”

Tamara just smiled, thinking she could make him regret his question if she gave him what he wanted. Finally, she just shrugged. “I’m about as well as can be expected, I suppose.”

“That good, huh?”

“You asked.”

He chuckled and leaned back in his chair. “I have some news that I think might cheer you up a little.”

Tamara frowned. “What kind of news?”

“Ms. Pines’...sons convinced her to end her seclusion to come in for a visit and discuss in detail her latest venture.”

Tamara's heart started to race. Nothing like meeting a "new" client and love to make it go pitter-patter. She supposed she'd have to settle for just the former for now. "What venture?"

"Ms. Pines is interested in investing in a ranch in Colorado."

Her heart beat even faster at mention of the location. "I'm a New York attorney."

"She's perfectly aware of that, but wants you on this particular undertaking. I've even suggested some of our contracted lawyers and referred her to counterparts in that state, as much as it pained me to do so. But she wants you to handle this deal."

At Tamara's long, confused silence, David added, "Of course there's a considerable commission involved should this transaction go through successfully."

"Why does she need a lawyer on the deal? I mean, is there some issue with the property?"

"Why don't I let her explain things to you? She's waiting in the conference room with two young men I'm sure you'll want to meet."

"Her sons?"

"None other."

Something smelled fishy to Tamara, but she couldn't quite put her finger on why she felt this way and didn't dare voice her suspicions to David. What if her doubts proved unfounded? She'd come off irrational and paranoid—not good looks for a lawyer who handled multi-million-dollar deals on a regular basis.

Tamara got up and stared at the door behind David's desk that led to the conference room. Her heart pounded erratically in her chest.

Why did she feel like there was more to this than just what involved her job?

Was it because David looked at her with a genuine smile on his face and not one of those suck-up-to-you-despite-how-I-feel-because-you're-an-excellent-lawyer-and-I-need-you-on-this-deal looks that the other partners gave her sometimes when they thought she wasn't looking?

Tamara approached the door, put her hand on the knob and glanced back at David, whose smile hadn't left his lips. In fact, it reached his eyes and made them twinkle. He looked like a father walking his daughter down the aisle—proud and pleased.

"You're not coming?"

"I'll be right out here just in case, but I think you can handle this group on your own."

She nodded and opened the door, stepped inside and had a moment to close it behind her before the two men standing on the other side of the room at the head of the conference table turned to face her, and she realized who stared back at her.

Before she could register her surprise, the woman sitting between them in the chair swiveled around to face Tamara too, a wide grin splitting her beautiful features.

Tamara grinned, not feeling duped, just intense joy and relief. "Ms. Pine, I presume?"

"That's Mom to you."

"And these are your *sons*?" Tamara waved her hand at Jess and Jax as they circled the table and purposefully advanced on her from opposite sides.

"More like future sons-in-law, but I won't quibble if you won't."

Tamara had so many questions, the least of which, how they had managed to drag David in on their scheme. "Are you really interested in investing in The Double R?"

"I consider it an investment in the future. And these two gracious gentlemen have agreed to sell me the shares that would have gone to you."

Tamara arched a brow. "You're going to live on the ranch?"

Her mother shrugged, a cagey look in her eyes. "At least some of the time. I have to admit it makes a nice summer getaway."

Compared to The Hamptons or Bermuda, she wasn't so sure, especially not for someone as urbane as her mother, but whatever floated her mother's boat.

She turned to Jess as he paused in front of her, felt the heat of Jax's presence behind her, butterflies fluttering in her stomach as if this were their first time together.

She couldn't believe her mother approved of this, couldn't believe they had all cooked up this scheme to get her to....to what?

Tamara pulled back just as Jess bent his head for a kiss and stared at him. "What if I don't want to give up my job and New York?" She couldn't believe she asked it, that she sabotaged her future yet again. But she had to know where their heads proved to be as well as their hearts.

"We don't want you to think of being with us as having to give anything up. But just in case you wondered, we're prepared to sign over not just the shares willed to you, but our own shares too," Jess said.

"Give up the ranch?"

"You're more important to us," Jax said.

"But what will you do for a living?"

Jess chuckled. "We're not total farm boys, Tam. We did go to college. We'll figure something out."

"And if worse comes to worse, we could always live on yours or your mother's charity for a while," Jax teased.

Tamara laughed because she knew good and damn well neither of them would do anything of the sort. But she considered their willingness to please, appreciated that they would make the effort for her. Just knowing that made all the difference in the world.

"I love you both, you know that?"

"We wondered," Jess said.

"I never had any doubt," Jax said.

"That's why I can't do this." She looked from one twin to the other, saw the crestfallen looks on their faces and rushed to clarify. "I mean I can't let you give up what you love doing, not even for me."

"Are you sure?" Jess asked.

“Because we took the liberty of having your boss draw up the papers just in case. All it will take is your Mom’s and our signatures and—”

Tamara quieted him with a sound kiss on the lips, then turned to Jess and gave him the same treatment before her mother stood and cleared her throat.

Tamara shook her head to clear the sensual fog that seeing the twins had invariably put her in. “Sorry, Mom.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just be sure this is what you all want.”

Tamara heard the doubt in her mother’s voice and saw the hopeful look in her eyes, as if the promise of Tamara’s successful relationship could heal her own past mistakes.

She exchanged looks with the twins as they exchanged looks with each other before they all turned to her mother as one and chorused, “We’re sure.”

Before Jeremiah called her all those months ago to come back to the ranch, Tamara had doubted anything good could come of her going home after so many years. She now knew that not only could she go home again, something good could come of it—something like love and reconciliation.

Her twin cowboys had taught her that.

Epilogue

The Double R – Ten Months Later

Carson Quarry watched the ceremony between the clearly happy couple from a distance, sitting on his stallion on the outer reaches of the gathering—a part of the service, yet strangely separate.

Watching Jess and Tamara take their vows, surrounded by family and so many loved ones should have been a joyous experience, but it proved bittersweet for Carson knowing that Jess and Jax Reynolds had something that he and his brother Sam would never have—a mate to call their own.

One woman to love, to protect and to make love with—that's all it would take, all they needed and wanted to complete them. It seemed to be too much to ask for.

Carson turned to his younger brother sitting on his stallion beside Carson, followed his brother's glance toward Tamara's sister Desiree and shook his head.

He'd been watching her too, lured by her elegant, copper-brown beauty ever since she, her younger sister and their mother had arrived on the ranch ten months ago late last spring. He'd immediately placed her to a section of his mind marked *off limits*, that. She could not be for him and Sam for too many reasons to name, the least of which being her humanness.

But Sam's youth made him believe love conquered everything. Even after all that he and his brother and Mom had been through in the last ten years he believed this.

Poor deluded kid.

Carson sadly smiled and applauded as the preacher brought an end to the ceremony, and Jess and Tamara passionately kissed.

Jax stood in the wings, ostensibly the groom's best man, but everyone at the service knew that Tamara would be keeping house and making a family with both brothers. It proved a sweet set-up, one that Carson could only imagine and one that made his groin and heart tight with longing.

He beat back the unrealistic emotions with memories of the past and everything that he and his brother had gone through to stay low and live under the radar, everything they had done to protect themselves and their mother.

They couldn't jeopardize that security with a slip of the dick just because they felt safe and at home for the first time in more years than either brother could count.

Carson knew that had anyone on the ranch other than his mother and brother heard his thoughts, they wouldn't believe his sentiments. He knew he didn't come off as the friendliest or most approachable person on the ranch, knew that most on The Double R eyed him and his brother with wariness. But that didn't bother him. He and Sam needed to maintain the distance, not that they wanted to—never wanted to.

"Are you going to the reception back at the main house?" Sam asked, his quiet but eager voice pulling Carson from his unpleasant memories.

Carson heard the eagerness and the hunger that his brother harbored for wanting to belong, and it made his chest hurt.

He'd done the best he could helping their mother raise the kid since their father's death, but he'd done a piss-poor job seeing to Sam's other essential needs—like the need to settle down and be a part of a clan made up of more than just him and their mother. But what else could he do? The minute they let down their guard, let someone in and got too comfortable... Carson didn't even want to think what could happen if this happened.

“I’ll stop by for a spell,” he murmured.

Sam bleakly grinned as he kicked his horse into gear and steered his mount toward the main house. “I’ll meet you there!”

Carson chuckled and turned his mount toward the house to follow Sam.

Yeah, he’d go mingle for a spell and torment himself with a view of a safe and secure future that he, his brother and their mom could never experience except from a distance—never.

THE END



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