

stroke of luck jourdan lane

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Chapter One

Sweat ran down my brow and headed for my eyes. I wiped my forehead for the umpteenth time and continued rasping the hoof on the horse I was trimming. February in Colorado was cold, but damned if I wasn't sweatin' like a whore in church.

The horse licked at the back of my shirt, nosed me hard enough to almost make me lose my balance, then started licking at my clothes again. This one had a habit of playbiting, so I tended to be a little more observant of his body language. He was getting antsy, and that was going to lead him getting a firm smack if he took it any further.

I didn't like having to discipline any of the horses, but sometimes it was a necessary evil. This gelding had come from another ranch and was only about two years old, so we needed to get a handle on this damned biting before he got any older. He was a good horse, but damn if he didn't think making someone whoop in pain was funny.

Last time I trimmed him up he bit me right on the ass. Left a bruise that lasted for two goddamned weeks. He nosed me again and I growled. "Quit it, Bo!"

He whinnied, and it sounded like a laugh. I rolled my eyes and checked the hoof to make sure everything was even. I pulled the Hoofjack over and put his foot down on it, checking it again to make sure there weren't any jagged edges.

All good.

Nice and smooth.

"That bastard bite you yet?" Brandt asked as he walked into the barn. "Looks like he wants to."

"Shut up." I glanced back at him and saw that he was leading yet another horse—which one, I didn't pay attention to—into the barn for me. "How many more've I got to do? I've lost count."

"Uh..." He glanced back outside. "Six more."

Jesus H. Christmas.

I was going to be hunched over permanently if I didn't get this shit over soon. I'd been trimming hooves for going on five hours straight. If I had six horses left, then I'd managed to trim up right at twenty horses, Bo included.

Another hour, hour and a half ... and I'd be done. I was starving to death as it was. The sandwiches Brandt and I'd had for an early lunch had long since worn off. I moved the Hoofjack and put Bo's foot down, shoved the rasp into the pocket of my chaps, and walked around to give Bo a nice, firm petting.

He nuzzled against me, blowing over and over again. The gesture was nice, but not nice enough for me to forget that last bite of his. "If you'd have bit me, I'd have bit you back this time."

Brandt laughed from where he leaned against the wall. "That sure cured Bitch from biting."

Bitch.

She'd been here when we got here and had some terrible habits and behaviors. Biting was the worst, and she bit with each and every opportunity. Until she bit me while I was

working with her. It'd hurt like fuck, pissed me off, and I bit her right on the ear. She never bit a damned soul after that.

I untied Bo and led him to the far door to release him to the pen. He wandered out and by the time I turned around Brandt had the mare he'd brought in tied up in Bo's place. I sat on a square bale of hay and stretched, and my back popped nine ways to Sunday.

"Remind me why we don't have someone else do this?"

"Because you said you'd rather do it because then you'd know it was done right." He came and sat beside me. "And because it saves us boo-coos of money."

"We account for that, though ... don't we?" When he nodded, I shook my head. "Where's the money going then, if we're accounting for it but not using it?"

"Set aside in case you ever decide to stop doing this on your own." He turned and started rubbing my back. I grunted when he hit a sore spot, growling through it when he worked out a knot between my shoulder blades. "You ought to save the last of these for tomorrow."

"Have to go into town tomorrow, remember?" The words came out harsh, but I hadn't intended them to. When Brandt pulled his hands away and sighed, I reached over and patted his thigh. "I'm sorry, babe. I'm tired and I'm hungry..."

"Well I'll go make up some supper here in a bit." He leaned over and gave me a quick kiss. "Sound good?"

Oh yeah.

Supper.

Something nice and hot; something full of meat and potatoes and maybe even smothered in some kind of gravy.

Something that would definitely put me right the fuck out once I got a full belly and a hot shower.

"Yeah, sounds damned good."

Brandt wandered off after that and I went over to get started on the next horse—which ended up being Sheila. A pretty little Appaloosa, she was one of the many rescue horses that we'd taken in. She'd been treated horribly by her previous owners and by the time the county had confiscated her, it was too late to correct a lot of her issues. Only thing now was to make sure she was healthy and happy.

"Hey there, Sheila." I gave her a good scratch up and down her neck. "How you doin', girl?"

She nickered and moved toward me. The only thing about trimming her, well ... was that you couldn't just go right up and get started. She needed personal time before she was comfortable with you working with her feet, and she needed to sniff each and every piece of equipment.

I pulled tools out of my pockets and let her inspect them, one by one. When I ran out of tools, I moved beside her to get to work, careful not to take my hand away from her. I worked my way down and picked up her right front leg to inspect her hoof.

Not too bad.

Twenty minutes later, I was ready for the next horse. By the time I finished the next five, I could hardly stand up straight. I turned all of the horses out in to the second pasture, cleaned my tools, and hung my chaps in the tool room, and then headed for the house.

As dirty as I was, I went in through the back door so I could strip off and not trail dirt and dried shit through the rest of the house. I shucked everything except my boxers in the mud-slash-laundry room and walked into the kitchen.

Brandt was standing at the island counter in nothing but a pair of shorts. I took a moment to admire him. He was even sexier now than he'd ever been in all the years I'd known him. Like a fine wine, he'd only gotten better with age. His short black hair had a few bits of gray in it now, even if he really was too young for it. He swore up and down that I was single-handedly responsible for each and every one.

I let my gaze take in the rest of him. Broad shoulders, strong back, lean hips, and a tight-as-hell ass that I couldn't seem to keep my hands off of, even after all this time. His shorts were tight in all the right places and that dark dusting of hair over well-muscled legs had me biting at my lip, wanting to touch.

But I was too hungry to stand here and admire him all night, especially considering the fact that I didn't smell food yet ... and he was making a sandwich.

Oh, hell, no.

He looked up as I walked into the room. "You finished already?"

I nodded and walked around the bar. "Thought you were making supper."

He gestured to the sandwich he was making, giving me a no-shit-Sherlock expression. "Uh, yeah."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me, Brandt. I was hoping for something a little warmer than an old turkey sandwich."

"Well excuse the fuck out of me," he snapped. "You wanted something different, you should have said so." "Right."

I went to the fridge and grabbed two beers. One of them I chugged as I stood near the trash can; the other, I carried with me to the bathroom. I cursed Brandt the entire time I showered, frustrated as fuck that he'd taken the easy way out.

Hell, we had hamburger meat in the fridge. The least he could have done was fry up some potatoes and a hamburger patty or two. But no ... a cold turkey sandwich was what he'd come up with. After my shower, I wandered into the kitchen.

Everything was put away and there was no sign of a sandwich anywhere. I snarled and cursed him some more, then threw together a sandwich and choked it down as I stood over the sink. I grabbed another beer, but put it back.

If I drank another, I'd be up all night pissing.

I glanced into the living room as I headed for the bedroom and found Brandt in front of the TV, a pissed-off expression on his face. He glanced up at me, practically glaring, and then turned his attention back to whatever he'd been watching.

I wasn't about to fight with him tonight. Tired and disgusted with the whole thing, I headed off to bed. I lay there for a long while, trying to get comfortable. Truth was, Brandt wasn't in bed so it was nearly impossible for me to get to sleep.

About an hour later, Brandt slid into bed beside me, and even though we'd been pissed with each other, just his

presence seemed to make everything better. He rolled toward me and slung an arm over my hip, snuggling up close.

"Sorry," he whispered after a short while.

It was probably stupid to get pissed off over a sandwich for supper. I sighed and closed my eyes. "Me, too."

* * * *

Bacon.

The smell of it could rouse me out of a dead sleep quicker than just about anything. I slid my hand across the bed, surprised to find it empty. Of course it'd be empty. We didn't have a cook that magically appeared every morning to fix breakfast. I pulled Brandt's pillow over and hugged it close, inhaling his lingering scent as I contemplated dragging my ass out of bed.

He came into the room and crawled onto the bed, wrapping himself around me. I snuggled back against him and sighed. "What time is it?"

"Little after seven," he said, kissing his way down my neck.

"Great."

I shifted onto my back and he smiled down at me, those laugh lines framing his chocolate and honey-swirled eyes making me weak as always. "I can go into town if you don't want to."

"No, no," I said with a sigh. "I'll go, babe."

"Sure?"

I nodded and turned toward him, stealing a kiss. He melted and rolled back, pulling me on top of him, hands

sliding into my hair and holding me as he returned the kiss. He tasted of coffee and bacon and I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Asshole," I whispered. "You're supposed to wait for me before you start eating the bacon."

"Was just a tiny piece." The guilty look in his eyes said it was probably a few pieces. "And a sip or two of coffee."

"Um-hmm." I laughed and buried my face in his chest, loving the way he smelled of both him and breakfast. Two of my most favorite scents in the world. "And I don't like blowjobs."

Brandt laughed and the sound rumbled deep in his chest. "Baby, that's a much bigger lie than mine."

"But still a lie." His stomach growled and I pressed a kiss to his belly before grinning up at him. "At least you didn't eat without me."

"You know me better than that," he said, softness edging back into his voice.

I did.

It had become a thing between us to never eat apart. There's something intimate about creating and sharing a meal together. It gives us time to talk, to communicate, and to just be together. We treasured our meals together, whether they were at the bar in the kitchen, out back on the deck, or with the two of us snuggled in bed.

I'd fucked that up royally last night, but I was determined not to let it happen again.

"What's on your agenda today?"

"The books," he said with a sigh.

Damned glad I was going into town today, then. Brandt was damned hard to be around when he had to gather receipts, do accounting, and pay bills. I'd tried to get him to let the accountant do all of the book work, but he was intent on doing everything he could on his own.

Stubborn man.

Why I ever thought he'd listen and do things the easy way was beyond me.

"Well..." I laughed and shook my head. "I guess I'll fix supper, then. Anything you're hungry for?"

"Something good."

I rolled my eyes and rolled off him and out of bed. "I hate it when you say that."

"I know."

I didn't have to look at him to see the shit-eatin' grin on his face and the glint in his eyes. After a quick piss, I came back into the bedroom. I grabbed my sweats off the floor and pulled them on. "So ... breakfast?"

"Right behind you, baby."

Brandt and I headed for the kitchen. When I walked in, I wasn't expecting to see the spread of food on the table. I walked around the table, shaking my head. Bacon, eggs, grits, biscuits, gravy, hash browns, and even pancakes; a spread fit for company, not for two damned people.

"Jesus, Brandt..."

He wrapped his arms around me, hands wandering from my waist and coming to a rest cupping my crotch. "This make up for last night's sandwich?"

I let my head fall back to his shoulder. "Almost."

"Almost?" He kissed his way up my neck to nip my ear and slid one hand into my sweats. His breath at my ear sent goosebumps over my entire body. "Hell, you gonna make me work for it?"

I laughed and slid my hand in to rest on top of his, guiding him to stroke me off. "Sounds good to me."

He growled and went to his knees behind me, yanking my sweats down in one swift movement. Before I could complain about the sweats catching on my hard dick, he sank his teeth into my ass cheek, biting down sharply. My knees buckled and I had to grab onto a chair to steady myself.

"Oh, you son of a bitch!"

Brandt laughed and soothed the sting away, then worked his way around my hip, turning me as he did. He kissed every bit of skin from my hip to my dick and then proceeded to brush his unshaven cheek along my length.

The sensation was too much and it wasn't long before I hissed and jerked away. He pulled me back, slowly taking me into his mouth. I ran my fingers through his hair, guiding him farther down. He changed his angle and took in all of me, and my heart skipped a few beats.

"Oh, fuck yes ... Suck me, Brandt." He moaned around me and the vibrations that went through me nearly brought me to my knees. "And shit, don't do that unless want this to last about five fucking seconds."

He did it again and jerked on my hips with one arm, urging me to fuck his mouth. I realized then that he was already jacking himself off. It was a rare occasion to see him jacking

off—I was normally the one riding him, sucking him, or stroking that thick cock.

I made sure I could see both his hand and his lips, then shoved in deep, fucking that sweet mouth. My balls brushed his stubble-covered chin with every move and it wasn't long before I felt that fire building deep in my gut.

He pulled off without warning, apparently needing to steady himself as he came. I watched him shoot over his fingers, and my hand went right to my dick, jacking myself off furiously. After a second of him gathering his breath, he grumbled and pushed my hand away.

"Fuck my mouth," he snapped.

Before I could blink, he slid those warm, come-covered fingers behind my balls and pushed two of them deep into my ass. Just the knowledge of him using his own come as lube sent me spiraling headfirst toward getting off.

I fucked his mouth hard and fast, staring down at those beautiful lips around my cock. He took each and every thrust, moaning in pleasure and acceptance, and I came hard, ass clenching around his fingers as I spilled down his throat.

He held me in his mouth for a few moments after and then looked up, holding my gaze as he licked me clean. When he was finished, he withdrew his fingers and winked. I bent and captured him in a long, deep kiss, savoring the taste of my own come on his tongue.

"Love you," he whispered, as I pulled away.

"Love you too, baby." I smiled. "And that? Definitely makes up for the sandwich."

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Chapter Two

I had two more stops to make before heading home; the local newspaper office and the grocery store. With it being lunch time, the chances of finding anyone minding the newspaper office during that hour were slim. When the town whistle blew at noon, it was like every office in town automatically locked.

With nothing better to do and at least an hour to kill, I headed on over to Red's Diner. I knew Lisa would be working and hoped she'd offer up her office for me to hang out in. She would. She always did, every time I stepped foot in the diner alone. Hell, she'd even offered the office up a few times for Brandt and me to have a private dinner. Add in the little wink she'd made sure we both saw, and I was pretty sure she didn't have actual food in mind.

Little wench probably had a hidden camera nestled in between cook books and accounting books on the off chance that we might take her up on her offer some day. I'd always wondered if Howard—our ranch foreman—knew how pervy his wife really was. After our first year here? I'd found out that he not only did, but that he was twice as bad as she was.

If that was even possible.

I didn't make it two steps into the diner before Lisa appeared. Her curly blonde tendrils framed her face, making her look like an innocent girl. That nearly made me choke from wanting to laugh at the very thought, but the look on her face was nothing but serious.

"There you are!" she said, looping her arm through mine and whisking me toward her office. "I expected you an hour ago."

"Honey, I didn't know I was stopping in until about five minutes ago." I stopped her just down the small hall leading to the office. "What's wrong?"

"This guy came in about two hours ago," she said.

I stared at her. "And?"

"He's sitting at a table in the back and he hasn't done anything but stare at the menu and drink coffee."

"Maybe he's just..." I shook my head. "Lisa, darlin' ... people go into restaurants all the time and have coffee, never buying a damned thing else. Doesn't mean he's trouble."

"I don't think he is trouble, Dale. I think he's in trouble." I groaned.

"Brandt said if I brought home another stray..."

"Just go talk to him, will you? See if he's hungry?"

This wasn't like her. She normally had no problem whatsoever speaking to people. Hell, most of the time you couldn't get her to shut up if she started talking. Whatever was up with this guy had her on edge, and I guessed that, as her friend, it was my duty to ease her mind.

"Fine," I said with a sigh. "Where is he?"

Lisa grabbed my arm and led me a few feet back in the direction we'd just come from. She peeked around the corner and then looked over at me. "Very back table on the left."

I casually leaned around the corner and glanced in that direction. I couldn't see the guy's face. His weathered, brown

cowboy hat was pulled down low and he was hunched over his cup of coffee. I sighed and shook my head.

Probably just a homeless guy, passing through.

"Lisa!" one of the servers hollered from the kitchen.

"Delivery at the back door!"

"I guess the meat I've been waiting on is finally here." She sighed heavily and shook her head. "I'll be back in a little while."

I waited until she'd walked away to start over toward the guy in the back. As I approached, I realized that my first impression of him had pretty much been on target. His clothes were dirty and stained and hung on his rail-thin frame. The man shifted toward the wall as I got closer, his body language screaming out for people to leave him alone.

I stopped beside his table and cleared my throat. "Mind if I sit?"

The man turned his head slightly, but still didn't look at me. "Why?"

"Well..." Why did I want to sit? Good fucking question. I dug for an excuse and found nothing, so I went with the truth. "The lady that manages this place is a friend of mine. She asked me to check on you, see if you needed anything. So ... here I am."

"I know you," he whispered, slowly lifting his head.

When his eyes met mine, I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. He did know me—and I him. We'd only met once. At Jack's bar back in Texas. And when my night with Brandt had gone way south, he'd let me crash back at his motel room.

The man staring back at me now wasn't the same happy guy that I'd met. His blue eyes were haunted, the weight of so much pain easily visible. That once almost-too-pretty face was bruised and battered, and I was sure that, from the look of his clothes, some of his body was as well.

"Evan?" I quickly sat across from him and leaned over the table. "Jesus. What the hell happened, man?"

"Long story," he said. He tilted his head a little, as if trying to hide his face from the rest of the diner. "Lotta miles, lotta bad choices."

"Look, my friend's office is private. How 'bout we take a short walk and we can talk?" When he started to shake his head, I reached out and touched his hand. "Come on, Evan. Let me help you if I can, yeah?"

He finally nodded and I slid out of the booth. I gestured for him to walk ahead of me, but he shook his head adamantly. "You go first."

Whatever.

We took the quick walk to the office and I waited for him to come in before I closed and locked the door. Evan stared at the floor, hands shoved into loose jean pockets. I stepped over and stood in front of him.

"Take off the hat, Evan." When he did, I had to hold back an audible gasp. He had a large gash on the side of his head, close to his temple. It'd been stitched up, but it needed some serious attention with soap, water, and a hefty coating of antibiotic ointment. I was about to ask him to tell me what had happened to him, when his stomach let out a long, loud

growl. "We'll talk and you can fill me in on what's happened, but first, let's get you something to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Bullshit," I said. "You tell me what you want to eat or I'll order for you."

He sighed in defeat. "A burger, I guess."

I went to the door and just as I opened it, Lisa appeared on the other side, clearly wanting to know what the hell was going on. I stepped out and closed the office door behind me and she immediately started in with the questions.

"What's going on? I asked you to talk to the guy, not bring him back here to the office and..." She narrowed her gaze and those bright blue eyes held a wealth of worry. "Wait a minute. Did you find something out? Is he in trouble? Oh my God, was I wrong? Is he trouble?"

After about the fifth consecutive one without a pause for me to answer, I grabbed her by her shoulders. "Lisa, honey," I said with a laugh. "Slow down."

"What's the deal?"

"To make a long story short? I know him. His name is Evan, and we met back in Texas before Brandt and I got together."

"Before? As in-"

"No, just a friend. The night Brandt and I had a falling out, Evan was there. Gave me a shoulder to lean on, you know?"

"And he's here because?"

"I've been talking to him less than five minutes, girl. I'm not a damned psychic."

She grinned and shook her head. "All right, smart ass. Can I get him—or you—anything?"

"Besides the use of your office for a half-hour or so?" "Uh-huh."

"Get him a burger and some fries? That boy is starving."

"I'll bring you one too, honey."

I kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks, Lisa."

When I stepped back into the office, Evan was leaned up against the wall, hat in his hands. He was so much thinner than the last time I'd seen him. If he looked this bad in his clothes, I was afraid to see how he looked under them.

I pulled the chair from in front of Lisa's desk to the side and sat in her chair. "Come on over here and sit down."

He sighed. "I didn't come here for pity, Dale."

"And I'm not giving it to you."

"Right." He crossed the floor and sat down carefully in the chair. "You just want to help. Well, you know what? I'm about all helped out."

There was anger and accusation behind his words. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," he said bitterly.

"Hey, you don't want to be here, just say so."

"It's not that—"

"Then what the fuck is it?"

Evan shook his head and stared at the hat between his hands as he flipped it around and around. "Tell me about you and how things have been?"

Okay, then.

"Things have been good. The ranch is doing well, and Brandt's still a pain in my ass."

"So y'all are still together?"

I started to say that of course we were, but then again, long-term relationships didn't always mean you'd be together forever. "Yeah, we are."

"And you're happy?"

I nodded. "Have never been happier."

"Guess he wasn't so straight after all," he said with a slight chuckle.

"Brandt?" I snorted. "That man is nowhere near straight."

"He did a good job of hiding that for a long time, though, right?"

"I don't think he hid it on purpose. Sometimes it takes a while for people to come to terms with things." I shrugged. "Hell, some people never do. They spend their entire lives fighting and hiding from themselves."

Evan fell silent, as if gathering his thoughts. "My dad kicked me out."

My gut twisted. "After you came out to him?" He nodded. "It was ugly, Dale."

"Just how ugly?"

"We fought. He kicked my ass six ways to Sunday." He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Bastard actually paid me to leave town. Said he wouldn't have the church and the rest of the town finding out his only son was queer."

Evan's dad was a real piece of work. He'd always been an asshole on a power trip, but thankfully, I'd never had to deal with him on a personal basis. He was on the town council, a

deacon in his church, and a member of the school board. His ranch was considerably smaller than the one Brandt and I were working at the time, but he thought he owned the best piece of property in Texas.

"So you left."

He nodded. "Wasn't too bad for the first few months. I drove until I found places I liked and hired on as a temporary hand. Money was never great, but I wasn't exactly hurting. Then I wrecked my truck."

"Aw, hell."

"Yeah. That was bad," he said. "I was drunk and ran a red light. Didn't kill anyone, thank God, but I ended up in jail for a while. My cash was getting low and work was getting harder and harder to find. Seems no one wants to hire hands anymore that've had jail time on their record."

"Most won't simply because the insurance premiums are outrageous."

"I get that, but I eventually got desperate and had to move on. Started hitching and finding a few things. When my time would run out, I'd go someplace else."

"Hitching? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Yeah, yeah. I know." He scrubbed a hand over his face, wincing when he touched the bruise beneath his right eye. "Wasn't too bad 'til some bastard stole my wallet. Things just went downhill from there."

"Hate to tell you, but I think things went downhill long before then."

"You know how sometimes you wonder how much worse things can get? It's like someone's listening when you think

shit like that and sets out to show you just how bad things can get." He laughed bitterly. "Couldn't buy food, so the next few hitches I managed to at least eat in trade—"

"What do you mean, in *trade*?" When a look of shame crossed his face, I could only shake my head.

"A fucking blow job never hurt anyone, Dale."

"Maybe. Until you meet the fucker where a blow job's not enough—" Evan looked like he was about to puke into his hat. "Oh, shit ... That what happened?"

He nodded.

"Got my fucking ass beat and left in the showers at a truck stop a few towns over. Don't remember how many there were, but none of them—none of them—used a fucking condom." He let his hat drop to the floor and leaned forward, damn near putting his head between his knees. "I ain't felt right since."

"I don't think anyone's supposed to feel right after something like that." I got up and walked around the desk. "You go to the hospital?"

"No."

"But you've got stitches—"

"Did 'em myself," he said. "A little fishing line and a hook goes a long way." No wonder his cut looked half infected. It probably was. I touched his shoulder and he flinched. "Sorry, think I got a bruise there."

"Stand up," I ordered gently. "Let me see."

"Dale—"

"You know you can trust me, Evan. Now come on, let me see if I need to take you to a hospital."

"No hospitals," he pleaded. "Please. I ain't got any money and they'll just stick me in a semi-private room and I just ... I can't."

"Don't worry about money." I helped him as he fumbled to remove his button-down shirt. When I peeled it off him, I couldn't contain my gasp of horror. He was covered in deep black and purple bruises, but he was so thin that I could count his fucking ribs. He started to try to cover himself, but I shook my head. "Jesus, Evan ... I don't know how you can even manage to wear clothes."

"Not like I had a choice," he said with a shrug.

There was a particularly nasty bruise at his rib cage and I gently smoothed my fingers across it. He gasped and nearly fell to his knees from the resulting pain. "Probably broken."

"Figured they were; hurts when I breathe."

I examined him a little more, shaking my head the entire time. His back was nearly black and purple and red all over. "You pissing blood?"

"A little."

"How much is a little?"

"Was dark the first day or so, but now it's more like a pinkish tint." He cleared his throat and looked at me, but wouldn't meet my eyes. "Probably not from getting kicked in the back, though."

"Your dick okay?"

Evan nodded. "Hurts, but it seems to work."

"Ass?"

"Doesn't work too well."

"Let me take you to County, get you checked out. At least they can give you something for the pain and see if you need a few stitches down below." I lifted his chin with my fingers and smiled when he finally looked at me. "I can patch up animals, but I suck at people."

"I don't think I can."

"What? See a doctor?"

"Have strangers touching me, looking at me ... doing things to me. I'd rather just take a few Tylenol and let things heal on their own."

"Well, here's the thing; blood when you piss isn't a good thing. If it's from a hit to the kidneys, you could end up with a kidney infection. I know, Evan. I got kicked right in mine after we moved here. Pissed blood a couple of days, thought things were fine when the blood disappeared, and then I ended up in the hospital with a high fever and a massive infection. That's not something you need." I gestured to his head. "And you could use a decent set of stitches on that head of yours. You've already got infection setting in."

There was a sharp series of knocks at the door. Evan grabbed his shirt and started putting it back on, moving faster than anyone in his condition should have been able to. I waited for him to get it mostly buttoned before opening the door. Lisa looked from Evan to me, lifting an eyebrow in suspicion.

I glared at her, warning her not to go there. She backed down, but I knew she had dozens of questions whirling around in that need-to-know-everything brain of hers. She

finally smiled and offered me the large tray carrying our plates.

"Burgers and fries," Lisa offered with a smile. "Wasn't sure if you wanted anything to drink, but I brought some tea, just in case."

"Thank you." I took the tray. "You need us to vacate your office?"

"No, no, no. I've still got a ton of checking to do on the meat that just came in. Make yourselves comfortable and stay as long as you like. Just let me know when you leave, okay?"

"I will," I promised.

She backed out and closed the door, and I moved to put the tray on the desk. Evan stared at the tray of food almost desperately. "She seems nice," he said as he watched me unload the tray.

"She is." I pushed his plate toward him, and he instantly took it and started shoving fries into his mouth. I wondered how long it'd been since he'd had anything to eat. "She's a very good friend of ours, and her husband is our ranch foreman."

"Hmm." He grunted around a mouth full of food, nodding his head. After a few minutes of him steadily shoving and half-chewing before swallowing, he paused and just sort of deflated when he looked back up at me. "Jesus, I'm sorry..."

"Don't be. Just eat, yeah?"

He began eating again and I started running through my head as I ate what to do with him. I couldn't just leave him here to fend for himself, and finding a shelter for him to stay

in was out of the question. Not only did we not have one in this little town, but the only place likely to be able to help was one of the local churches. No way was I going to do that.

If I brought him home, though, Brandt was likely to have a raging fit. One of our biggest fights ever had been about me bringing home strays. I promised him I'd never do it again but ... Hell, Evan wasn't a stray. He was a friend. All I could do was cross my fingers that Brandt would see this from my point of view.

"You coming home with me?"

"Oh, no, I—" He shook his head, swallowing down a mouthful of food. "If you'll just drop me off at a shelter or something, I'd be grateful."

"No shelters here, Evan; just a few churches."

He frowned and stared at his mostly empty plate. "What'll Brandt say?"

"Truthfully?"

He looked up, nodding. "I don't want to cause trouble."

"He might get pissed—really pissed—but I don't think it'll last." I smiled. "You let me handle Brandt, okay?"

Evan sighed heavily. "I sure hope you've got him wrapped around your finger."

* * * *

After we said our goodbyes to Lisa and made the stops at the newspaper office, the grocery store, and finally the drugstore, Evan and I headed back to the ranch. He dug through the bag from the drugstore, eyeing the contents warily.

"You sure you need all this?"

"Well, no," I said with a laugh. "I'd just hate to get home and cut that crap out of your head only to need something else."

"Cut it out of my head. You've certainly got a way with words." He shuddered and set the bag aside. "So, the ranch must be doing really well. This's a nice truck."

"Don't get your hopes up on driving it any time soon." I smirked as I glanced over at him. "I've only had the thing a few months and I'd like to keep it in one piece. Had to literally bend over backwards to get it ... if you know what I mean."

"Eh, you enjoyed it."

"Yeah..."

I slowed as we neared the main gate for the ranch and Evan sat up, eyes going wide. "This it?"

"This is it," I answered with a smile. Home. The place Brandt and I had worked very hard in the past two years to make our own. "The main bunkhouse is off to the left over here." I pointed out my window. "Another bunkhouse right behind it."

"Y'all got that many hands?"

"Eight that live on the ranch full-time and plenty more that live in town."

"Just how big is this place?"

"Over a hundred thousand acres," I said.

He whistled long and low as we pulled into the drive in front of the main house. "That's real nice, Dale."

Brandt walked out onto the porch a moment later, as if he'd been staring out the window, waiting for me to get

home. I knew he'd seen that I wasn't alone. His hands were shoved deep into his pockets and he glared at me through the windshield. I could almost hear him yelling at me inside his head.

Yeah, this wasn't gonna be pretty.

I put the truck in park and turned to look at Evan. "Brandt's been working the books all day so I can pretty much guarantee that he's in a real shitty mood."

"I didn't want to cause trouble."

"Trust me," I said. "It has a hell of a lot more to do with me than it does with you. But, let's get this part over and done with. Sooner Brandt and I yell at each other, the sooner I can get you patched up."

"You're, uh..." Evan shook his head. "You aren't afraid of fighting with him?"

"People fight, even when they love each other. Hell, especially when they love each other."

"If you say so."

I knew that tone. That short, bitter, if you say so sort of thing. He didn't hold much confidence in my words, but I did. I knew that whatever came up between Brandt and I—we'd always work it out.

It wasn't in either of us to give up.

I got out of the truck and walked around the front, heading toward the passenger side to get out the bags of groceries. I risked a glance up at Brandt, who was now leaning against the porch railing.

"Hey, babe."

"Hmm."

It wasn't a hello in return, not a welcome home. Just that annoying thing he did when he was pissed at me to let me know that he heard me, but that he was too pissed to make small talk.

I ignored it—as I always did—and set about getting the bags of groceries out of the back seat of the truck. Evan tried to grab a couple of bags to help, but I quickly took them from him.

"You shouldn't be lifting anything."

"I can help," he whispered. "I'm not helpless."

"No, you're not," I said. "And when you're well enough to do some lifting? Trust me. I'll definitely put you to work. For now ... Just take it easy, okay?"

He started to object, but I grabbed a few bags and walked to the house. Brandt moved to open the door and took one of the bags from me. Instead of moving so that I could walk in, he blocked the doorway and glanced toward Evan, who was coming up the steps behind me.

"What the fuck is this, Dale?"

"Um, I believe they're groceries."

"I'm not playing around," he growled.

"Gee, I couldn't tell," I snapped. "Don't be an asshole."

"And you're not? Bringing some guy home without calling? Without even introducing us before you bring him in the house?"

"I, uh—" Evan started to say something, but Brandt effectively shut him off.

"Stay out of it."

"Move it, Brandt." I stepped forward, leaving him with only two options: moving or getting knocked on his ass. He reluctantly moved aside, and I looked back at him as I stepped through the doorway. "Now be decent and hold the door open for my friend Evan."

"Evan?" Brandt frowned, the name obviously ringing a bell. He looked from me, to Evan, and then back at me. "Not the same—"

I sighed and walked into the house, leaving him to wonder and ponder, and hopefully hold the door open and not be a complete ass. But of course, since things were being sprung on him and I was, once again, bringing home a stray—in his eyes—I wasn't sure he could manage that.

After I made it to the kitchen, I realized that Brandt wasn't behind me. Evan stood on the far side of the room, leaning against the wall, hat in his hands. His body language was nothing but defensive and I wished like hell I could erase everything that had happened to him.

Starting with that bastard father of his.

"Well..." Evan looked up. "He hasn't changed much."

"What do you mean?"

"Sounds like the same angry man that was trying to claim you that night at the bar. Please tell me he's not like this all the time."

"I'll give you that he can be moody as hell sometimes, but he's far from being just some pissed off, angry-all-the-time jerk. If he was, we wouldn't be together." I started unloading the bags of cold stuff, getting things put in their places.
"Brandt is kind-hearted and loving and understanding—"

"Oh, I can tell." He shook his head quickly and stepped away from the wall. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to run him down, I just ... That's not something I can handle, you know? Men who think they've always got to be in control of everything."

"I hate that, too," I said, giving him what I hoped to be a reassuring smile. "You want to know the main reason he's pissed?"

"That'd sure offer some perspective."

"Brandt has this issue about me bringing home *strays*. Occasionally, I've met guys in town that are down on their luck. Sucker that I am, I offer them a roof over their head and a job to earn their keep. Next thing you know? Hands start coming up short on money in their wallets. Stuff around the ranch goes missing, and sometimes ... you come home and find that *poor hand* rifling through your bedroom, looking like a deer caught in the headlights when you turn on the light."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. So, his issue with me bringing people home isn't without merit," I said with a laugh. "And I promised I'd stop."

"And here I am."

"You're a friend."

"Yours, maybe," he said. "But to Brandt, I'm just another potential thief and troublemaker." He stepped up to the island bar. "He knew we kept in touch for a while after you moved, right?"

"Oh, he knew." I nodded. "We learned early on that keeping secrets just leads to disaster."

"Heh. Doesn't everything?"

Brandt came stalking into the kitchen, the majority of the rest of the groceries from the truck in his arms. He set the bags on the counter, stared at me for a moment, and then turned that anger-filled gaze on Evan.

"So, I've got a question for you."

"Okay..." Evan said hesitantly.

"Y'all kept in touch. You knew where we lived. Our address, town ... phone number and all, right?" Evan gave a combination nod and shrug. "But you never called. Never said hey, things are fucked up and can you help. No, you showed up in town, hoping to see him."

"It's not like-"

"Not like that?" Brandt finished for him. "See, I just don't buy it. You headed *here*, looking for Dale and Dale alone. Did you hope that I'd be out of the picture by now? That he'd pick you up, dust you off, and—"

"Stop it, Brandt," I warned.

"I got a right to ask some goddamned questions, don't I?" Brandt almost snarled at me. "This is our house, our life, and if someone's waltzing in hoping to get a little piece, then I think I have the right to fucking know."

"I should go," Evan said quietly.

"Yeah, you should," Brandt spit out angrily.

"You're not going anywhere." I pointed Evan toward the kitchen table. "You'd better be here when we get back." I grabbed Brandt by the arm and pulled him out of the room, shaking my head. "What the *fuck*, Brandt?"

"I want him gone," he hissed, jerking his arm out of my grasp. "Feed him, give him some clothes and a little money, and get him the fuck out of here."

"Because that's what you'd do for a friend?"

"No, because none of my friends would pull this shit."

I turned and walked away, not knowing what to say to that. This was so unlike him. Brandt was all about doing anything and everything he could for his friends. After a few moments of still not finding anything to say, I headed for the front door.

Brandt followed me out onto the porch. "Don't walk away."
"It's either walk away or have a *real* nasty fight."

Howard picked that very moment to walk up to the porch. "Uh ... I don't mean to interrupt, but I need to speak with Brandt before I leave."

"He's all yours," I said, then turned and went back into the house.

I closed the front door and then leaned back against it, shaking my head. There was a huge possibility that this was going to be worse than I ever anticipated. Hell, if I'd known Brandt would act like this, maybe I'd have just set Evan up with a motel room in town.

Oh yeah.

That would have gone over well.

When someone we knew saw me with Evan at said motel room and passed the word around that I was fucking around on Brandt.

I heard footsteps approaching and looked up. Evan was walking toward me slowly, shaking his head the entire time.

"Take me back to town," he said.

"No." I took his hat from him and put it and my hat on the hat rack beside the door. "Let's get you cleaned up and you can help me get supper started."

"Dale—"

"Just shut up and come with me."

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Chapter Three

"Ow!" Evan attempted to duck his head once again.
"Jesus! That hurts, you sadistic bastard!"

"And if you don't be still, I'm gonna beat you." I cut the last piece of fishing line that he'd attempted to use as a stitch. "You can't tell me this hurts more than shoving twenty-pound line through your flesh."

"That was different," he said with a whimper. "I had to do it."

"And I have to get this out and get the wound cleaned; it's already infected."

"You don't have any Lidocaine?"

"Oh, I'm sure we've got *something*, probably all in horse dosages, but I can run out to the barn right quick and check."

"Nah, just do it."

"A'right, then." I set to work cleaning his wound. There was much grunting and whimpering and him flinching, but I finally managed to get it all cleaned. His skin was more of a pinkish color when I finished instead of an angry red, so I took that as a good sign. After setting the Steri-Strips across the gash, I examined my work. "Looks better already."

He got up off the toilet seat and looked in the mirror. "I look like shit."

"Well ... yeah." I smiled and winked at him in the mirror.
"You need help with anything else?"

Evan downed his eyes, shaking his head quickly. "I don't think so."

"Mmm'kay." I didn't want to push the issue. With all he'd been through, the last thing he needed was for someone else to push to see him naked. "I've got something that might help, though. Be right back."

I closed the door to give him his privacy and went into mine and Brandt's bathroom, looking for that special little container that might help soothe some of Evan's aches. There were occasions when Brandt and I were a little too adventurous for our own good, and these little things did a world of good the next day.

"Hey, Evan?" I knocked on the closed bathroom door where I'd left him. He opened it within seconds, but only by a crack. Evidently, he'd already begun getting undressed. I offered the container to him. "Good stuff, if you need it."

He took the container, read the label, and then smirked. "Is this where you tell me that you don't get enough fiber in your diet?"

"Uh, no," I said with a grin. "This is where I smile and walk away, leaving you to wonder just how lucky I am."

"Geez, you win." Evan blushed and ducked his head, then gestured with the small container. "Thanks."

"Anytime."

He closed the door and I headed for the kitchen, pondering what to make for supper. I didn't make it to the end of the hall before I heard Evan call out for me. I turned on my heel and went back to the bathroom.

"Yes?" I asked, drawing out the word playfully. When he didn't answer, I cracked the door open and poked my head

inside. Evan was leaned up against the counter, jeans around his knees. "What's up?"

"I uh ... Man, I hate to ask, but..." He covered his face with his hands. "Would you just look? Make sure I'm not all fucked up?"

"I'm sure you're-"

"I'm bleeding," he said softly.

"Okay." I entered the bathroom and helped rid him of his clothes. Once they were off, I grabbed a couple of latex gloves from the second drawer. "Where are you hurting?"

"Besides everywhere?"

"Specifics would help." I touched his back gently. "Ass? Balls?"

"Both."

I set to work, checking him out. His ass might have seen better days, but there was no blood. That was a very, very good thing. I helped him sit on the closed lid of the toilet and checked out his dick and balls. That whole pissing blood thing? Probably wasn't all related to being repeatedly kicked in the back.

Poor guy's dick had seen better days.

Blood trickled down onto the white ceramic lid, though, when I touched his sac. Evan hissed and squirmed and I carefully looked until I found the source: a long but shallow cut, right behind his balls. Probably from being kicked with a boot or a shoe.

"It's not deep, but it's probably gonna hurt like fuck until it forms a scab."

"Everything else looks okay, then?"

"Well, no, it looks like you were beat all to hell and had a watermelon shoved up your ass..." I patted him on the leg. "But you're gonna be fine. I promise."

Evan let out a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry. I just saw the blood and freaked."

"Hey, I'd've freaked, too." I stood and peeled the gloves off, then opened the medicine cabinet. "Why don't you take a bath, yeah? Run the water nice and warm, use a little Epsom salt; it'll help."

He took the small box from me, nodding. "Thanks, Dale."

* * * *

I dug around in the cabinet, looking for the large stockpot I used to make stew and chili. After several minutes of banging around and cussing because the cabinet was a mess and pulling out one thing made other things fall out, I found the pot and the lid and slammed the door so nothing else would fall onto the floor.

I emptied the chunks of elk meat onto the counter, covered them with plastic wrap, and then proceeded to beat the living hell out of them with the meat tenderizer. Once satisfied with the state of the meat, I dumped it in the screaming-hot stockpot with a host of spices and a healthy helping of red wine.

The scent of what promised to be damned good food later on filled the air, and a little of my anger began to dissipate. I wasn't sure what I was pissed at more; Brandt and his ability to be a complete asshole, or those bastards who'd beat the shit out of Evan, used him like a cheap whore, then left him

injured and bleeding. Or maybe it was Evan's father. If he'd been less of an asshole himself, Evan wouldn't have been in the position he was now.

"Damn, whatever you're cooking smells good!" Evan said from the doorway.

I glanced over at him and pasted on a smile. "It's gonna be."

He came into the room, walking a little less stiff, adjusting the clothes I'd loaned him. The T-shirt hung off his shoulders and the sweatpants were at least two or three sizes too big. That went a long way in telling just how rough a shape he was in. We'd been about the same size last time we'd seen each other.

He went to the stove and looked into the stockpot, inhaling. "What'cha making?"

"Just some stew." I went to the refrigerator and started pulling out vegetables. "You up to peeling potatoes?"

"Hell, yeah," he said quickly. "Be glad to help."

I found him what he needed and got him situated. "You sure you don't want to sit?"

"Nooo." Evan shook his head quickly, and then moved to change the subject. "'S a lot of potatoes."

"Yeah. I'll make this tonight and we'll eat off it all weekend and then freeze the rest." I pulled out my own cutting board and set to work peeling carrots. "I tell ya ... I've been here a little over two years and I *still* ain't used to how cold it gets."

"Perfect food for keeping warm."

"Exactly."

"My momma used to make what she called stew. Never put anything in it other than hamburger meat, potatoes, and corn." He eyed the vegetables I had lined up on the counter. "You putting all that in the pot?"

"Yep."

"Oh, man, I can't wait," he said with a smile.

After a while of us chopping things in silence, I looked up at him. He seemed lost in thought and probably not one of those thoughts was pleasant. "Bread or cornbread?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter to me, either way."

"Come on now, vote for one or the other."

"Um, bread ... I guess."

"Bread it is, then." I was glad for that. I was too lazy to bother making cornbread and we had more than enough bread in the freezer that needed to be used up. "Been hungry for a good hunk of bread, myself."

Evan took the potatoes he'd peeled to the sink and washed them before bringing them to me. I made quick work of chopping the potatoes and then dumped them and everything else I'd chopped up into the stock pot. As I poured in seasonings, Evan cleared his throat and moved up beside me.

"He was right, you know."

"Who was?"

"Brandt." When I glanced over at him, he sighed. "I know it was shitty of me, but I *had* hoped you might have been single by now."

I wasn't sure what to say to that.

Hell, what did you say to something like that?

"I mean, it's not like I've been pining over you all this time, just waiting for you and him to split up or anything." He sighed again, obviously unnerved by my silence. "But, Dale, I don't want to be the reason that you two fight or split up."

"Well, I can tell you one thing for sure." I looked up and met his eyes. "Brandt and I are in this for the long haul. We fight, we argue, but we get over it. We work through whatever the problem is and we always, *always*, end up stronger because of it."

"I'm sorry."

I shrugged. "At least you're being honest about it."

"But I wasn't honest up front," he said. "And that was shitty. You're a damned good friend—hell, you're my only friend—and I don't want to lose that."

"Look." I gave the ingredients another stir and put the lid on the pot. "As long as you get that friends are all we'll *ever* be..."

"I do."

"Then we're cool."

The front door slammed and Brandt soon walked into the kitchen. He went straight for the coffee pot and yanked out the filter cup and tossed the old grounds into the trash. I watched him for a few moments as he fiddle-fucked with trying to get one new filter out of the stack to put in the pot. With each passing second, he grew more and more frustrated.

I went over to and took the stack of filters from him and fished one out. He snatched it out of my hands. "I can fucking make coffee, Dale."

"What's up with Howard?"

"Nothing."

He opened the cabinet above his head and rifled through it until he found the old green thermos. As the coffee dripped, he stood there, tapping his fingers on the counter. Once the pot was full, he poured the coffee right into the Thermos, turned the coffee pot off, and turned to walk out.

"You going somewhere?"

"Sleeping in the barn," he growled.

I was pretty sure his sleeping in the barn didn't have anything to do with our current situation. When he got so pissed off he couldn't stand to be around me, he locked himself in the office and slept on the couch in there.

Sleeping in the barn could only mean one thing: one of our mares was about to foal. We had five of them that were due to foal within the next couple of weeks. Since Howard had apparently made a point of making sure Brandt was going to be there for this birth, I had a feeling it was Shadow who was about to drop.

Brandt always made a big deal around the hands about hating being on foal watch, but he was a goddamned liar. That man loved watching new little foals and calves come into the world. Sure, it had something to do with dollar signs and money in the bank, but it had a lot more to do with his love of animals—horses, especially.

"Dale?" I blinked and looked up at Evan, who stood on the other side of the island. "Maybe you should go talk to him."

"Later, maybe."

I turned and went to the freezer and pulled out a long, plastic-covered log. If it was Shadow who was about to foal, I wanted Brandt nice and happy. And hell, after showing up at home with Evan, I could stand to rack up some points.

* * * *

The sun hadn't been down long, but the loss of its rays was immediately noticeable. That was the thing here in Colorado. As long as the sun was shining, it never seemed as cold as the thermometer showed it was.

I pulled on my coat and hat before picking up the basket that held Brandt's supper. I'd called out to the foaling barn through the intercom to tell him it was time to eat, but he never answered and he never showed up at the table.

Now who was the one who'd fucked up our eating together?

I opened the door to the barn and let out a small shudder of relief at the warmth that welcomed me. Most of the lights were down, except for the one in the far left corner where Brandt reclined on several bales of fresh straw. He didn't bother to look up as I approached. Instead, he calmly turned the page in whatever paperback he was reading.

Shadow nickered as I came closer and I paused just outside of her stall.

"How you doin', girl?" She stepped up to the rope gate and nudged me, then neighed and jerked her head away as I reached out to give her a scratch. "Ah, moody, are we?"

Brandt snorted, but otherwise didn't say anything.

"She seem to be close?"

"I ain't in the mood to talk, Dale."

"And I'm just asking about the damned horse."

"Horse is fine," he snapped. "Go on back to the house and keep playing doctor—"

"You're being such a fucking asshole."

"Yep."

I could go round and round with him, trading barbs, insults, and nasty words, but it'd all lead to nowhere. Just like it was now. I walked out the barn and headed back for the house. When I walked through the front door, I saw Evan curled up on the couch, sound asleep.

I took off my hat and coat and wandered into the kitchen, surprised to see that the food had been put away and the dishes had been loaded into the dishwasher. The plastic-covered log I'd pulled from the freezer earlier was still sitting on the counter. I picked up and stared at it, shaking my head.

What the hell had I been thinking?

That a couple of goddamned cookies would fix this shit?

Frustrated, I turned on the oven and pulled a baking sheet out of the cabinet. The dough couldn't be stuck back into the freezer—or so Lisa'd said when she gave it to me—and if I put it in the refrigerator, I'd just end up throwing it out in a week or two when I found it again.

I unwrapped the paper and with each slice off the log, I cursed Brandt; cursed Evan for showing up; and then I cursed myself for bringing Evan home in the first place. But, damn it ... Would leaving him at the diner with a few bucks in his pocket and a hot meal in his gut really have helped him out? My guess was no.

Then again, bringing him home and *playing doctor*—as Brandt so eloquently put it—might have been stretching it. Maybe I'd crossed the line somewhere. Giving a little too much to someone who could have gotten better care at a hospital, but had refused.

And why?

Because of money?

"I had hoped you might have been single by now."

Evan's own words drifted through my mind again and all I could do was shake my head. Why hadn't I seen it? That Evan ending up here wasn't some kind of coincidence? Oh sure, he'd mentioned that he hoped I'd have been single by now, but he'd conveniently left out the part about heading here on purpose.

He might have been through a hell of a lot getting here, but that didn't excuse his motives.

Guess Brandt had every right to be pissed.

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Chapter Four

"Evan," I whispered, shaking him lightly. Since it'd been a little over two hours since I'd found him crashed on the couch, I figured he was down for the night. "Come on and get up; you can't sleep on the couch."

He groaned and struggled to sit up. "Everything okay?"

"As okay as can be, I suppose." I offered my hand and he took it, allowing me to help him to his feet. "You need something for pain?"

"Guess just some Tylenol or something ... if you've got it."
"That's all I was offering." I turned and walked toward the bathroom. "Bedroom is at the end of the hall."

When I came out of the bathroom, I was glad to see that Evan had taken the hint and found his way to the bedroom. He'd crawled right into the bed and was still trying to get comfortable. He looked up at me as I came into the room.

"Something wrong?"

"You could say that." I handed him the pills and a small glass of water and turned to walk out. "But we'll get it sorted later."

"Hey, Dale?"

I stopped in the doorway and looked back. "Yeah?" "Thank you."

I didn't say anything else, just gave a curt nod and shut the door behind me. The phone rang and I glanced at my watch as I headed for a handset. Only one person we knew

would call after ten and her number was displayed across the caller ID, confirming it was her.

Or Howard, calling to check on Shadow. But since Howard had talked to Brandt before he left and knew Brandt would be keeping watch, I was pretty sure it wasn't him.

"Hello, darlin'."

"Hello yourself, cowboy." I could almost hear her smile. "I was kind of hoping that I wouldn't catch you in the house."

"He doesn't want me out there."

"So he's pissed, huh?"

"Slightly." I sighed and sat down at the desk in the office.
"I'm such a dick, Lisa. I should have never brought Evan
home with me—especially without calling Brandt first."

"Hey, now ... you're just helping the guy out. What's the big deal with that?"

"Uh, keeping in mind that he's the same guy I'd have gone home with if Brandt hadn't interfered a couple years back?"

"What does that have to do with things now?"

"Considering the guy hoped to catch me single by now?"

"Oh, shit-"

"Yeah."

"What are you going to do?"

"Honestly? I don't have a clue. I can't in good conscience just throw him out, you know?"

"But you can't let him stay with you and Brandt, Dale. That's just asking for trouble."

"I know." I leaned back in the chair and propped my feet up. "First, I need to talk this shit over with Brandt. Apologize for ... not thinking, I guess."

"Just don't let this come between y'all. You got too many years with that man to fuck it up over some stupid kid thinking he can worm into the equation."

"I ain't goin' to."

"Good." I heard what sounded like the refrigerator door shutting on her end. "Keep me in the loop. If there's anything I can do..."

"Be careful what you offer up."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry. When I asked you to talk to the guy, I'd have never guessed you knew him."

"We both lose points on this one, girl." In that second, I made up my mind what I needed to go do. "And right now? I'm gonna go out to the barn and try to earn some of mine back. You? You probably owe him dinner."

"Yeah, right. I'm not stupid, Dale. Me earning points back with bringing him dinner just means you don't have to cook."

I laughed. "Hey, it was worth a shot."

"I'm going to bed, you big jerk. Keep me in the loop." "Always do."

* * * *

All of the lights were down when I stepped into the barn. I could hear Brandt's soft, steady snores, and I smiled to myself. Foal watch was always harder when you decided to go it alone. I grabbed a flashlight off the shelf and made my way to the other side of the barn.

I flicked the light into Shadow's stall. She'd been lying down and was in the process of getting to her feet. It was

obvious that she was uncomfortable. Oh yeah, she was moving along more quickly now.

I put the cookies down near Brandt and grabbed the Vetwrap from the foaling bucket before going into the stall. Thankfully, Shadow was one of those horses that didn't get all het up over being handled when she was about to foal. Considering this was her fourth time through this, I was sure she was pretty clear on what all was about to happen.

I made quick work of wrapping her tail and checked her. The foal wouldn't come in the next few minutes, but it wouldn't be long now. Hopefully, Brandt and I would have time to do a little talking as we waited.

After I woke his butt up, of course.

I washed and dried my hands at the sink, then turned the set of lights above Brandt on to the lowest setting. He grunted and sighed, reaching out for a blanket that wasn't there before his hand fell lax. I tossed my hat down onto the straw beside him, straddled his hips, and then sank down over him.

He opened his eyes, a lazy smile spreading over his face. "What are you doin'?"

"Well, see..." I bent and kissed him, but then pulled back so I could look at him. "I did a stupid, stupid thing and," I gestured beside us, "I figured cookies and company was a good way to start apologizing."

Brandt frowned. "Do cookies suddenly trump stupidity?" "Work with me here."

He sighed. "Why?"

"Why what? Why'd I bring him home?"

Brandt nodded.

"Because I thought it'd be the right thing to do. He's been through a lot—"

"So he says," he grumbled.

"So I saw, Brandt."

He narrowed his gaze. "What do you mean saw?"

"See?" I shook my head and sat up. "If you'd have given me a chance to tell you what the deal was before you—"

"Aw, damn it, Dale..."

"I didn't come out here to fight."

"Fine," he said with a huff. "What's his deal?"

"Long story, but—"

"Oh no, don't you dare give me the abbreviated version. You always end up leaving out something pretty damned important when you do that, just like someone else we know."

That would be Lisa, of course, who always felt that if you left out the parts that pissed off your man the most, it'd make everything else seem a lot less worse than they really were. Brandt always thought it an endearing quirk of hers until Howard started confiding in him about it.

I rolled off him and snuggled up close. "I'm not that bad." "Start talking, Dale."

Reluctantly, I started the long process of telling Brandt all about the shit with Evan. It didn't take as long as I expected, but then again, a lot of the shit I'd learned had been throughout the day. He was lucky enough to get it all in report form. Brandt remained silent long after I finished talking.

"I'm having a hard time feeling bad for the guy—"
"Brandt!"

"But I do." He sighed heavily. "Now I understand why you brought him home."

I nodded. "But he didn't bother to tell me he'd hoped to find me single until we actually got here."

"Oh, I imagine he wanted to make sure he had a place to lay his head first. So where do we go from here? Do we hire him or send him on his way?"

"I don't know, but he can't live with us," I said quickly.

"No, he can't." Brandt turned onto his side to face me. "I need to apologize to you, Dale. When I saw him ... I freaked, you know? All I could see was that you were bringing someone else into our house that I'd have to compete with."

"What do you mean, compete?"

"Fucking tore me up just knowing you went home with him that night, even if not a damned thing happened." He closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "I know we're good. In my heart I know, but in my head ... Jesus, Dale, if I ever lost you—"

"We are good, babe."

He nodded and kissed me, just a soft, slow brush of his lips against mine. "Sorry."

"And now we're even." I rolled to my back and pulled him over me, grinning as he took the hint and wedged himself between my legs. "Wanna fool around?"

"I always wanna fool around." Brandt laughed and dipped his head, giving my neck a sharp nip with his teeth. "But we got work to do."

"Oh, she's fine."

"No, she ain't. I still gotta wrap her tail and—"

"Did it while you were snoozing." I grinned and slid my hands down his broad, muscular back, letting them come to rest on his lean hips. I held him against me and thrust up. "Promise you I won't take long."

He groaned and dropped his head to my shoulder. "Dale..."

The throaty, growly way he said my name had me hard in a matter of moments. I pushed my hands into those fitted Wranglers, getting two handfuls of tight ass. I squeezed to tease and then pulled him even closer, humping up against him.

He was long and hard in those jeans and I was just about to tell him to start stripping when Shadow made a noise in the stall. Brandt and I both sat up and turned to look, Brandt grabbing a flashlight.

Brandt got to his feet and moved to where he could get a better look at the horse. "Getting close."

"How close?"

"Real close." He turned the flashlight off and tossed it to the bed of straw we'd been laying on. He started unbuttoning his shirt and I watched, enjoying the strip show. The shirt eventually dropped to the floor and his hands went to his jeans. "Come on, cowboy, follow along."

I stripped my shirt off in record time, not bothering to unbutton it, just pulling the damned thing over my head and tossing it aside. I kicked off my boots and shucked my jeans almost simultaneously. When I looked up, Brandt was standing over me, that long, hard cock dripping with precome.

I rose to my knees and licked away a clear bead that threatened to fall, savoring that salty, sweet taste that was uniquely Brandt. He shuddered and laid one hand on my head, then slowly fed me his prick, pushing it between my lips.

His knees buckled when I moaned around him and I fought like hell not to grin. I worked up and down his length, teasing him, tasting him, enjoying the feel of him sliding over my tongue.

He stopped me after just a few minutes.

"You and that damned mouth."

"All yours, baby."

Something flashed in those honey-chocolate eyes and his expression became intense. "Lay back."

I did as he ordered, letting one leg fall to the side. "Got something for me?"

"Mmm-hmm."

He grabbed a bottle from the bucket and opened the cap. He poured the liquid right onto his cock and I whimpered a little, knowing that whatever was in it had to be fucking cold. But he didn't flinch, didn't hiss or hesitate. He closed the bottle and dropped to his knees, crawling closer.

He kissed my dick and then proceeded to nip and bite his way up my belly. I squirmed, both cursing him and begging for him not to stop. He settled between my legs and I groaned at the sheer heat of his body against mine. It might have been cold outside, but he was hot as could be.

I wrapped my legs around his hips and was about to pull him closer, but he shifted and grabbed his dick, angling

himself so that he could push that thick head against my hole. He didn't take his eyes off mine as he alternated between rubbing the head of his cock against me and pushing in just a fraction of an inch.

"Don't fucking tease me," I finally hissed.

"Oh, am I teasing?" When I nodded, he mumbled something under his breath and pushed himself inside me in one, swift movement. The pain was instant and bright, but it quickly morphed into pleasure as he wrapped his fingers around my prick and gave a playful squeeze. "You know I'm not the type to tease and not deliver."

"Shut up and fuck me."

"And they say romance is dead."

I pulled him down for a kiss to shut him. It worked to stop his talking, but as a moan passed between his lips, I fucking whimpered. Just knowing how good I made him feel turned me on even more.

He rose up on his knees and pulled one of my legs up to rest on his shoulder. The change in angle was intense and I found myself practically fucking myself on his cock. He watched me intently; one hand sliding over my chest and down my belly, pausing to tease my dick before sliding his thumb down to rest where we were joined so he could feel the taut, soft skin of my hole as he pushed his way inside.

If we were going for nice and slow, I'd have laid there forever, letting him fuck me for as long as he could. But after several times of getting almost to the point of getting off and losing it before I could come, I pushed at Brandt's chest.

"Lay back, baby."

He pulled out and lay down in the straw without question, apparently knowing exactly what I wanted because as I straddled his hips, he held his cock with one hand and my hip with the other as if to guide me. As I sank down onto his thick length, I couldn't help but shudder in total and complete pleasure.

His eyes rolled back in his head the first time I moved and suddenly both hands were on my hips, holding me, guiding me. I rode him hard and fast, each movement sending me closer and closer to ecstasy. He flicked my nipples and then pinched them both between his fingers roughly.

Like there was some chain linking my dick and my fucking nipples, I nearly screamed. I was right on the edge when Brandt ordered me to come all over him in that deep, growly voice of his. I grabbed my dick and jerked twice before shuddering and spilling myself all over him.

He flipped me without warning, pulled out, and bent to suck the head of my dick. He rose up a moment later and shoved in hard, kissing me as if his life depended on it. He fucked me hard and deep, never once breaking the kiss. When he finally came, the moan that passed from his lips to mine was long and loud. He collapsed on top of me, utterly and completely out of breath.

We lay there for a long while, both trying to figure out how to move. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Shadow go down in the stall. We'd been watching her pace, lie down, then get up and pace some more, but this time ... she didn't get up.

I pushed at Brandt's shoulders. "She's down."

He moved off me in record time, grabbing his jeans. "Showtime, baby!"

I grabbed my jeans and pulled them on, shaking my head. I swear, it was like Christmas every time a foal was born. After I got my jeans on, I turned on another set of lights. Brandt had already washed his hands and was just inside the stall, hoping for that very first glimpse of Shadow's foal.

I went ahead and washed up as well, then took my place beside Brandt.

He bumped my shoulder with his. "You weren't kidding when you said you wouldn't take long."

I glared at him. "You were pretty quick there, yourself."

"Was, wasn't I?" He laughed and stole a quick kiss.

"Enjoyed the hell out of myself, though."

Yeah.

I had, too.

And my ass was gonna be sore for at least a couple days.

Shadow grunted and her breathing became more and more intense. The contractions were coming right on top of each other now, and you could actually see part of the foal's nose and at least one of the front legs.

Brandt moved farther into the stall, kneeling down to check on Shadow. "Goddamn it!"

"What's wrong?"

"Only one leg coming out."

Shit.

If there was one thing I hated, it was a complicated foaling. Sometimes things could be going so perfectly well

and then bam ... everything went ass over shoulders and you were working like hell to save both the mother and the foal.

"You want gloves?"

"No, no ... ain't time for 'em. Just grab the oil and squirt a little on my hands. I don't want to hurt her." I grabbed the bottle of oil we'd just used and opened it, pouring a good amount onto his hands and wrists. "Don't let her up, babe."

Most horses you couldn't force up once they were down and in active labor, but some of them insisted on being up and down throughout the entire damned process. Which really put a damper on things when she laid down wrong and injured—or even killed—the foal before it was fully delivered.

But Shadow wasn't going anywhere. She was down for the count, obviously in distress, and ready to have this thing over and done with. I quickly grabbed a couple of straps from the bucket just outside the stall, just in case Brandt might need them to keep the foal from slipping back into the wrong position.

He quickly set to work getting the foal repositioned, and after several tense moments, he got the leg that was bent back pulled forward. It wasn't but just a few more minutes after that and he was helping pull and guide the new baby foal into the world.

Brandt grinned like a fool as he worked, cleaning the sac away from the foal's face and making sure its nose was all nice and clear. Then he tore away the rest of the sac and laughed long and loud.

"It's a filly!"

"Well, I'll be damned."

He'd been going on and on ever since finding out Shadow had taken to breeding about wanting a filly out of her. All three of her previous foals had ended up being colts. Brandt swore up and down that it was good luck to have the first foal of the year be a filly.

He knelt quickly at Shadow's head and gave her a quick pet. "You did good, girl."

She nosed him and laid her head back down, still trying to get her wits about her. He gave her another pat, and then we both moved away to give her and the new filly time to bond and recover ... and to let nature take its course.

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Chapter Five

The door to the barn opened and Dillon—one of the hands—poked his head in. "Everybody decent?"

"Nope!" Brandt and I called out in unison.

"Oh, good," he said with a laugh. "Y'all didn't call me down here for nothing, then."

"Yeah, yeah." Brandt couldn't take much of that kind of joking around. He'd get flustered and red and then the guys always turned the jokes onto him, so he always stopped them from going too far into his comfort zone. "Got us a filly."

"No shit?" Dillon looked into the stall, shaking his head. "Oh, she's a purty one. Looks just like her momma; little white star on her head and everything."

Brandt grinned like a proud papa. "She needs a name, but I'm too damned tired to think that hard."

"That makes two of us."

Dillon laughed. "Y'all go on and get some sleep. I'll keep an eye on these two until Howard gets here in the morning."

Brandt stared long and hard at Shadow and her filly, and then sighed. "You call me if something seems off."

"Don't worry; I've done this a time or two," Dillon said, his tone sympathetic yet full of admiration. "Nothing gonna happen to either of them on my watch."

I grabbed our stuff and the bag of cookies that hadn't even been opened. "Come on, babe. The shower's callin' your name."

He laughed. "I'm coming, I'm coming."

"Again?" Dillon snorted. "More than once in a night? I'm so jealous."

Brandt blushed. "Fuck you."

"Hey, you two are the ones rolling in the hay with the video camera going."

"Oh, Jesus..." I thought Brandt was going to pass right the fuck out. "I—"

"Relax," I said, rolling my eyes and shooting a glare at Dillon. "It wasn't on, Brandt."

Dillon shook his head. "You never let me fuck with him." "With good reason."

Since I was the one that had to deal with Brandt freaking out over having his bare ass broadcast on the network—or worse, the 'Net—there was no way in hell I'd let anyone get him that riled up. For a tough ol' cowboy, he could be so full of drama.

I tried to usher Brandt toward the door but he stopped about mid-way, casting one last glance back at the stall. I'd known he wouldn't want to leave so soon, but he'd done his part. There wasn't anything left to do but sit and watch and make sure things *stayed* fine.

They would.

Both Shadow and her filly were doing excellent. The filly was a little unsteady—as were all newborns—but was nice and healthy. I was sure Brandt would feel much better once Carter, our veterinarian, came out and gave the two a onceover. Until then, it was up to me to keep his mind off things going wrong.

And sleep was first on the list.

* * * *

We'd conserved water and showered together, but Brandt had high-tailed it out of the bedroom as soon as he'd slipped on a pair of boxers. I found him in the kitchen, standing in front of the open refrigerator.

"You hungry, babe?"

"A little." He sighed and scratched at his belly. "Where're those cookies you had?"

"I'll get them."

He got the milk out of the fridge and poured us each a glass. We sat across from each other at the bar and I watched as he dunked and downed his cookies and milk. I ate a few cookies and was about half finished with my milk when Brandt touched my hand.

"So what are we gonna do about him?"
Him.

Evan, who was zonked out in the guest bedroom. I blew out a harsh breath and shook my head. "Depends on you, I guess."

"Me?"

"I'd offer him a job, but I don't want to have to spend months or years convincing you that you are the one I'm interested in." I met his eyes. "If it's gonna put stress on us, I'd just as soon he went on down the road when he's well enough."

After a long bit of silence, Brandt finally sighed. "I'll talk to him."

"Brandt-"

"He knows we're good and to keep his nose out of our business? He stays. He can't get that through his head? He goes. Either way ... he talks to me or it's a no go."

"That's fair."

"I'll even be nice about it," he added.

"Oh, geez."

When Brandt was *nice* about things? There was this ... almost *sinister* way that he'd smile while getting his point across. The words weren't pretty, but his smile never faltered. I'd always likened it to talking face to face with the devil. He'd smile and promise you the world, all the while plotting and planning to make your soul his.

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Chapter Six

It'd been an entire day and was well into Sunday, but as far as I could tell, Brandt and Evan hadn't had their little talk yet. Evan was still mostly laid up in bed, nursing those ribs and other aches, but he'd venture out every now and then for a breath of fresh air. I was sitting on the porch with my morning cup of coffee and the paper that Howard'd brought up when he arrived when Evan opened the door and walked out.

I looked up at him. The bruises had taken on a yellowish hue, but seemed to be diminishing. "How're you feeling?"

"Better." He wrapped the blanket more tightly around his shoulders and sat in the chair across from mine. "Don't think I've slept this good in months."

"That's good."

We sat in silence for a while and Evan finally cleared his throat. "Did I hear y'all have a new foal?"

"Yep, had a filly night before last. You're welcome to go have a look at her. In fact, Brandt's out there now and he can tell you all about it. He's still in that proud papa stage where he can't help but show them both off."

He smiled, but I could tell that Brandt was the last person he was interested in talking to. Brandt had been accommodating, and even polite, but there was still a lot of tension between the two of them.

"Maybe later."

I just nodded.

Guess it *was* awkward to go have conversation with the significant other of someone you'd been hoping to have for yourself. I had a feeling it was gonna get even more awkward for him before it started getting better.

I scanned the classifieds to make sure our ad had made it into the paper. It had. A nice big ad, boxed in and easy to see. Thank God I'd remembered to put in for them not to show up before eight. Last time we'd put in an ad, we had guys show up at five in the morning and rouse us out of a dead sleep by banging at the door.

Brandt had met them at the door with a shotgun.

I glanced at my watch; it was just coming up on eight, so I figured there'd be company any time now. I folded the paper and looked over at Evan. He seemed to want to talk, but I wasn't in the mood for anything earth-shattering in the way of conversation.

"You got any ideas for supper?"

"Me?"

"Well, I wasn't exactly asking myself."

He shook his head. "Oh, I don't know."

I was half-tempted to leave supper to Brandt, but knew that if I did, we'd end up with sandwiches. I was in the mood for ... something, but sandwiches were far from it. An idea started forming, and suddenly it sounded good, better than more leftover stew.

"You like okra?"

"Oh, yeah. Fried, in gumbo ... Okra is good."

Gumbo? I rolled the idea around in my head a little, contemplating which would be better. Goulash or gumbo. I

was more in the mood for goulash, but I had the stuff for gumbo in the freezer, too. That'd make a good meal for another day later in the week.

"How 'bout goulash?"

He arched a brow. "What do you put in yours?"

"Hamburger meat, tomatoes, okra ... little ketchup and a few other spices. Put it over some rice, make a little cornbread? Sheee-it. That's some good eatin' right there."

"Sounds damn good to me," Evan said with a laugh.

"Goulash it is, then."

A truck coming down the drive drew my attention. Another two followed the first and Evan soon sat up, looking out down the drive as well. "Guess those are your potential hands, huh?"

"Yeah, I'd better go round up the applications and something for them to write with."

"Applications?"

"Yeah, we've had more than one occasion where people changed their history between the time they applied and the time they were nearly getting fired," I said. "This way? We got it in writing and our asses are covered. And? I do background checks now on the ones that look a little ... suspicious."

"Damn."

"Eh, you gotta realize that when you bring a hand onto the ranch that you're also letting them into your life a little. You want to make sure that the people you hire to tend to the things you care about aren't going to try to run off with them, you know?"

"Well, when you put it that way ... it makes sense."

"We typically have at least one applicant walk away when they find out we do background checks. Whether they're hiding from Uncle Sam or they got other things they're running from ... who knows?" The trucks were getting closer and I saw more than one person in the first one. "You have them wait out here for me?"

Evan nodded.

I went into the house and headed for the office, finding the box we kept on top of the corner filing cabinet. It was full of clipboards, applications, pens, and pencils ... and probably a few spiders.

When I went back outside, the first truck had pulled up, but no one had gotten out yet. I set the box down and opened the lid, putting it aside. Evan sat quietly, his gaze locked on the first truck that had driven up.

Three guys got out of the first truck and started toward the porch. The one who'd been driving tipped his hat. "We're here about the ad in the paper."

"A'right." I gestured to the box. "Grab an application and go ahead and get started filling it out. There are pencils and clipboards if you need 'em."

The other two trucks parked and we ended up with an additional nine applicants. Good start for the day, I reckoned. I went through the same spiel about the applications and stuff with the new guys and sat back down in my chair, waiting for everyone to finish.

I took a sip of my coffee and grimaced when I found it cold as ice. Evan seemed to be as cold as my coffee was with the way he was shivering. "Hey, Ev? You want a cup of coffee?"

"Please. Just black is fine."

He'd said the words so softly, I almost didn't hear him. I went back inside and poured us both a cup of coffee. I was in the middle of doctoring mine up when I heard yelling outside. I looked out the kitchen window, thinking some of the hands were in the ring with a horse or something, but found it empty.

"Dale!"

I heard Brandt call my name from the front of the house and dropped what I was doing to run to the door. When I walked out the door, all I could see was two guys on the ground, fists flying, and Brandt and Howard were both running toward them.

Evan's chair was now empty and I cursed when I realized he was one of the guys on the ground. I jumped off the porch and ran to separate him from the other guy. He cried out in pain when I grabbed him around the waist, but still kept trying to get at the other guy. I pulled him away and then Brandt was there, yanking the other guy up off the ground.

"What the fuck is going on?" he asked, anger filling his words.

The guy he was holding pointed at Evan. "He started it, man."

"You fucking started it!" Evan spit out, still trying to get me to let him go. "I'm about to finish it, you sorry fuck! I'll fucking kill you, I swear it!"

"Hey, hey," I said in his ear. "Come on, Evan. What the hell's going on?"

Evan shook his head, and in a matter of seconds the fight went right out of him. "'S him, Dale."

I walked him away from the gathering group. "Him, who?" He covered his face with his hands and shook his head again. "That fucking bastard," he whispered. "He's one of them."

"Oh, god*damn*..."

It suddenly hit me that *one of them* meant that the guy he was pummeling was one of the ones that'd raped him. And here he was, coming face to face with him again in the place where he should have been able to feel safe.

"I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "I just saw him and he started winking and shit ... and I lost it."

"Don't you apologize," I said. "Do I think you're stupid for jumping him in this condition? Yes. Am I gonna fault you for it? Fuck. No. You go on in the house and we'll deal with this, okay?"

"I'll leave."

"Shut up and go in the house, Evan," I said more firmly, forcing him to meet my gaze. "Brandt and I will take care of this."

He swallowed hard and gave a curt nod, then made his way up the steps and into the house. I turned and headed for Brandt. "Call the sheriff."

"Sheriff?" Brandt shook his head. "What the hell for?"

"Trust me." I met his eyes and I guess he saw something in them that made him not question any more. I pointed to

the guy that Evan had jumped. He seemed so ... normal. Not like a fucking rapist. And I'd have probably hired him, too. "Take that piece of shit out to the barn and do *not* let him leave here."

"What the fuck?" the guy said. "You can't hold me here! I didn't do a damned thing!"

The rest of the guys stood around, bewildered looks on their faces. Some of them seemed ready to drop their applications and blare ass out of there. I didn't want to go into any detail about what had happened because if we hired any of them, I didn't want them giving Evan any shit.

"Can until the sheriff arrives, anyway," Brandt said, getting Howard to help direct the guy to the barn.

I picked out the two guys that Evan's attacker had ridden in with. "Y'all know that guy before today?"

They both shook their heads and one of them cleared his throat. "Met him at the diner this morning and offered him a ride. Don't know him, other than that."

"Good thing," I said, then turned my attention to the rest of the men. "Look, guys, if this has turned you off applying, I get it. No hard feelings if you want to walk away."

"This don't happen every day, does it?" one of them asked.

"Not at all. You can't get along here? You don't work here. This here? Trust me, there's a rhyme and reason to it all, but it's personal and I won't go into it."

They all nodded in agreement.

"One more thing," I said. We normally got this part out of the way before they even started filling out applications, but I apparently wasn't on a roll this morning. "Mr. Tall, Dark, and

Sexy that hauled the guy to the barn? He's mine. Got a problem with that, I suggest you look for employment elsewhere."

"And there you have it," one of the guys said with a chuckle.

I laughed and sat down on the edge of the porch, amazed that no one had walked away yet. We normally had a couple that walked away when they found out Brandt and I were more than roommates, but I took that as a good sign, too.

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Chapter Seven

While waiting for the sheriff to arrive, Brandt and I had interviewed all of the applicants. We let them go, with promises to contact them within the next few days. We'd pretty much decided we were going to hire every one of them, depending on the outcome of the background checks. One of the guys had a record, but he was upfront and honest about it and most all of his issues seemed to be alcohol-related.

He seemed like a good guy, though, and Brandt and I were willing to give him a shot anyway. We just weren't about to put him in any of the trucks as a driver. *That* was insurance we couldn't afford.

As the guys left, Brandt walked up and stood beside me on the porch. "You talk to Evan yet?"

I shook my head. "I checked on him, but he was curled up in bed."

"I'll go talk to him."

"Probably not a good time for you to do that."

"Actually? I think it is." He patted me on the ass. "Sheriff ought to be here any minute now. I'm sure he'll need to talk to Evan, but you can fill him in on what he needs to know."

"Brandt—"

He silenced me with a quick kiss. "Don't argue."

It was clear that arguing with him wasn't going to get me anywhere. Once he got his mind set on something, there was

no changing it. I just hoped that he wasn't quite as harsh as I knew he *could* be.

Tyler Hanson—a.k.a. the sheriff—arrived a few minutes after Brandt went inside. I waited on the porch as he unfolded his tall, thin frame from the black cruiser. He shook his head the entire time he walked up to the porch.

"You do know it's Sunday, right?"

I smiled. "Yeah."

"Damn it, Dale, what have you gone and gotten yourself into this time?" He offered his hand, smile plastered over his face. "Brandt said you brought home another stray."

"He did, did he?"

"Well, not in those *exact* words, but we been here before, haven't we?"

"Technically," I said with a sigh. "But this's a little different, Tyler."

"If you say so."

"Can I get you some coffee?" I asked. "I can make a fresh pot."

"Actually, that'd be good," he said. "I was about to stop in at the diner for a late breakfast when Brandt called."

We started to go into the house when I noticed Howard standing outside the barn where they'd taken the other guy. "Shit."

"What's wrong?"

"I forgot all about the guy in the barn."

"I'll still take that coffee," Tyler said. "You can tell me what happened as you're settin' the pot."

Brandt and Evan weren't in the living room or the kitchen when we went into the house. I took it as a somewhat good sign that all was quiet and there was no yelling going on. Tyler took a seat on one of the stools at the bar and I got to making a fresh pot of coffee.

I started telling him Evan's story, making sure to give him only the pertinent details. Tyler didn't need to know how, exactly, Evan had made it from Texas to Colorado without any money. When I was finished, Tyler shook his head.

"I hate to tell you this, Dale, but..." He frowned and shook his head. "It's gonna be mighty hard to prove this guy— Evan's—story. Since he didn't go to a hospital or get some kinda help, it's gonna be his word against the other guy's."

"He's beat all to hell and said that this guy was one of the ones that did it. That doesn't count for *anything*?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"I've seen the damage done to him first hand, Tyler." I poured us both a cup of coffee, then grabbed the creamer from the fridge and put it and the sugar on the bar. "He was raped, and any doctor or nurse would agree."

"That may be." He fixed up his coffee with more spoonfuls of sugar than I thought anyone should be able to stomach. "But without hard evidence, it's gonna be hard to prove that the guy you've got out in the barn was one of the ones responsible for it. That's all I'm saying. I didn't say I don't believe it happened, but it'll be damned hard to try to bring a case against him. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the guy out in the barn wants to press charges—on Evan for jumping him, and on you and Brandt for holding him against his will."

Shit.

I hadn't thought about it that way.

"We wouldn't have kept him here if—"

"Oh, I know that, Dale. But goddamn, you've got to look at it from my point of view here. From the *law's* point of view."

I sat on the stool across from Tyler and sighed heavily. "So now what?"

"Now? I guess I-"

There was a knock at the front door, followed my Howard's voice. "Hey, Dale? Brandt?"

What the hell was he knocking for?

"Come on in, Howard," I called out.

"Uh ... Well, I'm not sure that's a good idea," he said. "Y'all wanna come out here? This guy wants to talk to Tyler."

"He wants to talk to me?" Tyler shook his head. "That can't be good."

"Damn it." I shook my head and grabbed my coffee. "Be right out, Howard."

Tyler and I went out to meet Howard on the porch. The other guy sat at the far end of the porch, well away from where Howard stood. Tyler grumbled and headed across the porch, then tapped the guy on the shoulder.

"Bad news, Howard?"

"No, actually." He leaned in close and lowered his voice. "Guy admitted to everything."

"No shit?"

Howard nodded. "Think he's scared of Brandt."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, you know that way he smiles when he's threatening you?" When I nodded, he laughed. "Well, he wore that smile as he told the guy he'd kill him if he ever showed his face anywhere near Evan or this ranch again."

I nearly dropped my coffee.

"You're shitting me."

He shook his head. "And by the look in Brandt's eyes? He wasn't kidding."

I was too shocked to say anything else. The fact that Brandt had taken up for Evan in such a way had me scratching my head. He didn't even like the guy, yet he stepped up to the bat for him?

"There's fresh coffee if you want some," I said after a few minutes.

"Nah, I'm gonna get going here in a bit. If I don't, Lisa's gonna have my ass for being gone all day. I just wanted to be here when Carter looked at the new filly, but then this happened..."

"Speaking of Carter, where is he?"

"Oh, he finished up and left while you and Brandt were interviewing the potential hands," he said. "Both momma and baby got a clean bill of health."

"Figured they would."

Howard and I watched as Tyler led the guy he'd been talking to over to the cruiser and put him in the back seat. When he reached the porch again, Tyler handed me his empty coffee mug.

"I'll need to speak to Evan right quick," he said. "Just a few words now, but if you'll bring him down to the station in

the morning, I'll get a formal statement from him to put in the case file as well as a few pictures to put in evidence."

"That gonna fly?" I asked, remembering what he'd said about it being difficult to make a case.

"Seeing as the guy admitted to everything? Yeah, it'll fly." "I'll go get Evan."

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Chapter Eight

The door to the bedroom Evan was staying in was cracked, but there didn't seem to be any sign of conversation as I neared it. I opened the door and found Evan sitting on the bed and Brandt leaned up against the wall. They both looked at me.

"Everything okay?" I asked tentatively.

"Yep," Brandt said curtly. "Everything's fine."

I turned my attention to Evan, who looked ... well, like he'd been through the wringer. "Sheriff wants to talk to you right quick."

"He taking me in?"

"Don't think so. He's in the living room if you want to go on ahead."

Evan sighed and slowly got up off the bed, groaning as he straightened up. I started to follow after him, but Brandt caught my arm and pulled me back into the room. I waited until Evan was gone before asking what the hell had gone on between them.

"Nothing bad, I promise," Brandt said, as if reading my mind. "We talked, I said my part, and I gave him some advice."

"And..."

"He'll be staying." He came over and hugged me, holding me tight. "I'm sorry I was such a jerk, babe."

"Brandt, we already talked about this and—"

"Instead of getting over it after we talked, I still acted like a jerk," he said. "To both of you. I apologized to him, and now I'm apologizing to you."

There was more to this that I couldn't figure out. I pulled back and looked up at him. "What's wrong?"

He ignored my question and pulled me back against him. "Love you, Dale."

"I love you, too, baby." I swallowed hard and kissed just below his ear. "You okay?"

"No." He sighed and buried his face into my shoulder. "Don't think I am."

"Talk to me, baby."

I waited and I waited and finally, he sighed and pulled back a little. He cupped my cheek with his hand. "We had a rough start, but I think I forget a lot of times that we have it pretty damned good."

"We do have it good," I agreed.

"Don't think it was you Evan came here looking for," he said after a few moments. "I mean, he was looking for you, but I think what he was looking for most is what you represent to him."

"What?"

"Home, friendship, acceptance ... That's something he hasn't had for a number of years. I think that when he was faced with moving forward and figuring out to do with himself, he remembered the kind of friend you've been to him."

Oddly enough, that actually made sense.

"So he came looking for me."

Brandt nodded. "And you know what? I can forgive that." "That's mighty big of you."

"I don't know about that, but..." He cupped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me close, pressing his forehead to mine. "I know how it is to be so fucking lost that you don't know what to do or where to turn. We can't give him everything he needs, but we can give him a starting point."

I pulled back so he'd have to look up at me. "What's with this sudden change of heart?"

"Guess it's one thing when someone tells you about what happened to someone else." He shrugged. "A little different when they tell you in person and you get a glimpse of what it actually did to them."

"So the talk went okay?"

"Oh, yeah," he said, brightening up a little. "He needs to go into town as soon as possible, though. Be a damned good idea for him to get an HIV test and maybe even see a doctor about those ribs."

"He doesn't have money to pay for that, so unless you want to pay for it..."

"He's an employee." Brandt chuckled. "I want him able to work as soon as possible."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You're one of a kind, you know that?"

"I sure as hell hope so."

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Chapter Nine

"I knew hiring him was a damned good idea." Brandt bumped my shoulder with his, grinning. "Look at him work, that bastard."

I rolled my eyes and kept my attention on Evan, who was currently in the saddle on one of the wildest stallions I'd ever come across. Brandt had seen the horse at auction, fell in love with the black beauty, and bought him when no one else would bid against him. Evan had jumped at the chance to break the stallion, and Brandt had given him the go-ahead. For weeks, all they'd done was talk about that damned horse and plan for its future.

The two of them had had a pretty rough start on the getting-to-know-each-other front. In the four months since Evan arrived, I'd watched them go from damn near enemies to pretty good friends.

Evan had settled in nicely. He'd made friends with the rest of the hands surprisingly fast, and it wasn't long before he was cutting up with them as if he'd known them for years. Two weeks after I brought him home, he moved into the bunkhouse.

Brandt and I were damned glad to get the house to ourselves again. If I ever heard him complain about not being able to walk through his own house naked again, it'd be too damned soon.

The stallion bucked, and this time Evan fell right on his ass, rolling away quickly. "You really think he should be on that horse this soon?"

"Aw, he's fine."

I didn't have anything else to say, so I just grumbled and leaned against the railing. Evan calmed the horse as best he could and then climbed back up in the saddle again. He tipped his hat at Brandt.

"Might take a little longer than I thought," Evan called out to him, wearing the same damned grin Brandt did. "But we'll get it."

"You're doing damned good so far!"

"A swift kick in the ass is what you both need," I said, mostly under my breath.

Brandt chuckled. "I heard that, Dale."

"Good."

After a while, he looked over at me. "You want to go for a ride?"

"On that?" I shook my head quickly. "Fuck. No."

"No, not on *that*," he said. "I'd like to ride out and get a look at the north pasture, but I'd rather not go alone."

"The north pasture? That's a pretty long ride."

"Well, I was thinking that maybe we could take an extra horse with a few supplies, take our time." When I didn't say anything, he cleared his throat. "Got each other to keep warm."

It'd been months and months since the last time Brandt and I had ridden out onto the ranch like that. Sure, we could take the truck, but it just wouldn't be the same. On

horseback, you pretty much saw everything. Something you really couldn't do while bouncing along in the cab of a truck.

Last time we'd taken the truck instead of gone on horseback, we'd missed the bear tracks that'd been getting closer and closer to the house. Wasn't until the bear killed one of the calves that we'd found the tracks and where the bear had been denning up—which had been too close for comfort.

"So?"

I realized I still hadn't answered, and nodded.

"You know what? That sounds good. When do you want to head out?"

"Oh, I don't know. Soon as we can get our shit rounded up?"

I thought about it for a moment. If we left in the next hour or so, we could ride the rest of the afternoon and get about halfway to the north pasture. Set up a little camp, get something to eat and a little sleep, then ride on and reach the north pasture by noon the next day.

"I'll go round up some food and a few other things if you want to get the horses saddled up." He gave me that look—the one that meant he wanted to know why *he* couldn't round up the food instead. I met that look with one of my own. "I really don't want sandwiches."