



Rocky Mountain Heat

Six Pack Ranch—Book One

Vivian Arend

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Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Maria Rogers

Cover Artist
April Martinez

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Blurb

Blake Coleman is old enough to know that acting on impulse causes nothing but a heap of trouble. But when trouble's a blonde wearing a cowboy hat with slim legs that go on forever, what's a man to do? Wanting the sweet girl next door is just wrong. Hell, he was the one that taught her to ride a horse and now all he can think about is riding her. The responsible thing to do is keep his hands off.

Jaxi has other plans for his hands, and his heart. She may have considered Blake a big brother once but that was a long time ago. She's all grown up now and ready to convince him that she's just what he's been waiting for.

Add the complication of two sexy younger brothers who have suddenly noticed Jaxi and things heat up fast. Blake's gonna have to decide if a little trouble is worth fighting for.

Prologue

Calgary Stampede, Alberta, July

“Damn, are you sure you can’t last a little longer, Jaxi?” Travis looked away, but not before she’d spotted the disappointment in his eyes. The annoyance.

Jaxi leant her head against the stall door. The familiar scent of animals did nothing to ease the swirling in her head. She felt like the bottom of a horse stall and there was no way she could fake her way through any more of the day. “I’m sorry. I have to go home now,” she pleaded.

“We bought tickets for the grandstand show tonight and—”

“Why are you two still here? I thought you headed back onto the fairgrounds. The showings for all our stock are already done.” Blake Coleman’s deep voice soothed her pain, stilling part of the pounding. She opened her eyes to peer up at him.

“Ahhh, Jaxi’s being a wuss and wants to cut out early,” Travis bitched.

“Jaxi? A wuss? Get real, Travis.” Blake tugged her arm gently and pulled her closer. People wandered past, admiring the animals on display in the Livestock Pavilion of the Stampede Grounds. Watching the rodeo and chuckwagon races kept many of the visitors entertained, but there was a good crowd here in the quiet of the barns, far away from the roar of the fairgrounds and carnival rides. A low murmur of voices and the contented sounds of animals filled the oversized building. Blake’s hand rose to her forehead and she caught her breath.

In spite of feeling like a mule had kicked her, his touch had its usual effect. She dropped her gaze and bit her lip. He wasn’t supposed to affect her this way. She was going out with Travis and big brother Blake was firmly off limits.

“Damn, you’re burning up. Jaxi, why didn’t you say you weren’t feeling well? You guys could have come another day. Stampede lasts until Sunday.” Blake’s face folded into a frown.

“Travis wanted to come today and so did his buddies. I was fine until after lunch. I guess I should have stayed home,” Jaxi said, wrapping her arms around herself to contain the shivers that threatened to surface. She drew farther from his body and the temptation to lean into him, let him hold her close.

“Travis can take you home in my truck and I’ll stay and drive the others,” Blake offered.

“I want to stay for the show. All my friends are here and I don’t want to leave...” Travis’ voice trailed off. Blake slipped him the head nod that meant he wanted to talk privately.

Jaxi sat on a nearby bale of hay, holding herself as still as possible in the hopes the room would stop spinning. Their voices were quiet but clear even as Blake dragged Travis away from her down the length of the main barn of the Exhibition Grounds.

“She’s your girlfriend and she’s sick. I’d think you’d want to get her home safely instead of taking off and hanging out with your friends. Come on, Travis, do the right thing for a frickin’ change.”

“Hell, Blake, it’s just ... it’s the first time in a long time some of my friends have

made it to the Stampede. Things haven't been so hot with Jaxi lately and...well, I planned on breaking up with her soon anyway. It's a pain in the ass to leave when everyone else is sticking around having a good time and I have to go home with blue balls..."

Jaxi bit her lip. So, the other shoe dropped. Travis had enough of her not *putting out* for him, not playing his games.

The room spun.

Oh hell, she needed to lie down. She stumbled to the nearest empty stall, forced the door open and collapsed onto the clean straw. She closed her eyes but the ceiling kept turning in circles, the sound of their voices echoing strangely in her ears.

"Shit, she's messing up my whole evening," Travis whined.

A solid thump was followed by more complaining. "What the hell was that for Blake?"

The contempt in Blake's voice was thick enough to cut. "I shoved you because if I slugged you Ma would give me hell. At least until I explained why, and I don't want to have that conversation with her. Damn it, Travis, Jaxi's sick and you're bitching about not getting any? You're an ass. I'll take her home, I have to get some of the stock out of here anyway. You can drive the old pickup back after the show. There's room for everyone who came with us to town, but Travis, I'm warning you. You're the designated driver. You drink more than one beer between now and getting home, and I'll take you apart for more than being a shit to Jaxi."

Soft footsteps approached. The door of the stall swung open and Jaxi swayed as she sat up. Blake stared at her from his six-foot plus height, anger tingeing his face, but she wasn't the one who'd put it there.

He'd care for her, just like always.

"Ah hell, girl. You're a strong one, aren't you? In spite of Travis giving you shit. Come on, Slick, let's get you home."

* * * *

It took far too long to hitch the trailer and load the animals that were headed back to the ranch. Blake checked Jaxi a couple of times; she did nothing more than lift a finger to indicate she was still alive—although miserable—as she waited in the cab of the truck. She didn't seem nauseous, just dizzy. Blake shoveled down a quick burger as he forced the trailer doors shut. He didn't want to eat in front of her, just in case, but it had been a long time since dinner and they still had a good two and a half hour drive to get home.

He opened the door to find her asleep on the bench. She'd hauled an old blanket from behind the seat and wrapped it around herself but it hadn't stopped the shaking.

"Slick, what have you done to yourself this time?"

Blake lifted her slightly and managed to seat himself, lowering her head to rest in his lap. She muttered something before shivering from head to toe. He got them on the highway headed north out of town before he gave her much more attention.

She'd braided her blonde hair into two pigtails and she looked twelve instead of eighteen. At twelve she'd still been Jax and her best friends were his youngest brothers, twins Joel and Jesse. The three of them had forever been running wild in the horse stables and building castles amongst the bales in the hayloft of the Coleman's ranch. An only child, Jaxi had come calling at the ranch on a regular basis, longing for companionship.

Whenever her ma and daddy had gotten busy, she'd walk the field between their properties and jump whole-heartedly into whatever mischief the Coleman's were cooking up.

At fourteen she'd asked them to call her Jaxi, and that's when the trouble started. All of a sudden she wasn't only a great fishing and riding buddy, she was someone with hips and breasts and all the interesting parts that went along with being a girl.

Blake pushed a loose strand of hair from her face. She was burning hot and the shakes continued to rack her body. Her slim form fit on the seat with difficulty because of her long legs, now curled up tight as she lay in his lap.

And wasn't that the most damning part of it all. Here she was in his lap, and he had no right to want her. He was twenty-eight years old, old enough to know better.

But young enough to still be stupid.

Damn, even burning with fever she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He'd fought the attraction for years, feeling dirty for even thinking about her that way. He was ten years older than her. For heaven's sake, he'd been the one to hold the reins the first time she rode a horse. He was the one who'd carried her home the time she'd fallen off and gotten the wind knocked out of her. He'd become a big brother to the lonely little girl, and he had no right to admire her changing body, her bright eyes or her quick wit.

And his fool of a brother was going to break up with her? At nineteen Travis thought he was God's gift to women but at times like this Blake wondered if Travis was one shovel short of a full load.

Why was Jaxi going out with the ass? Why not one of the twins, even if they were a year younger than her? Hell, why not Daniel? Of the six brothers on the ranch, why did she have to pick the one with the biggest ego and the least brains?

Blake took the off ramp and got onto the secondary highway leading to the town of Rocky Mountain House. The small settlement near their homes was nestled in the rolling foothills up against the towering Alberta Rockies. The traffic was nonexistent at this time of the day; everyone headed to the city already long gone. His was the only vehicle on the road and behind him dust rose to the bright blue sky, a trail of gunpowder toward the barrel.

He was in so much trouble when it came to this sweet girl, and from what he knew she still was sweet, in spite of his asshole of a brother's attempts to change the situation.

He'd overheard them in the barn a few weeks ago...

* * * *

Jaxi and Travis were necking in the tack room and from the sounds of it, things were getting hot and heavy. He didn't deliberately step closer to eavesdrop.

Hell, yes, he did. He didn't trust Travis as far as he could throw him.

The kissing and the rustling noises built his curiosity to a peak before Jaxi muttered 'uh-uh, cool it' and someone knocked something over.

"Oh, damn, Jaxi, you're killing me here. I need you. I really need you, baby."

Jaxi snorted. "I'm not stupid, Travis. You won't die if we don't have sex. Get over it already. I'm not willing—"

"You don't love me."

"Damn right, I don't. You don't love me either. We're friends, that's all."

You tell him, girl. *Blake snuck to the far end of the hall where he could still hear but remained hidden in case either of them decided to bust out of the room without warning.*

"You like it when I touch you, you know I get your motor running. It's another thing I can do to make you feel real good. Make us both feel real good. Come on, sweetheart, it'll be special."

"In a barn? Travis Coleman, you may be considered the hottest thing around by the rest of the girls in town but you need a little work on your romancing."

The sound of creaking floorboards warned Blake to fade back into the corner more.

"Don't leave me hurting here, sweetheart. Come on back and help me a little. You know I like it when you touch me."

The door squeaked as she opened it. "Travis, I was enjoying myself, but you pushing it every time we fool around kills the mood. I've told you I'm not having sex. Not with you or anyone until I'm older, no matter what kinky games you like to play. It's something special and I want to save it."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Then why do you keep trying to convince me to go farther than I want?"

"Because I... Oh hell, Jaxi, are you going to help me here or what?"

The door slammed and Jaxi's strong voice rang out. "Talk to the hand, Travis, talk to the hand."

* * * *

Blake had waited in the shadows until Travis, cussing a fair bit, hauled his ass back to the house. It had probably been another step in the beginning of the end for the two of them.

He looked at Jaxi again, lying in his lap so innocently. He was such an ass. Even while he wanted to break his brother's head for trying to touch her, he had to force himself to stop from reaching to see if her skin was as soft as it looked.

She moaned and her limbs jerked, arms flailing. She struck the dash with one hand, the wheel with the other.

"Whoa, Jaxi, take it easy, hon." He laid a restraining hand on her shoulder.

"Travis?"

"No, Slick, it's Blake. Remember?"

Jaxi rolled over to stare at him. Her eyes were glazed and she seemed to focus on something beyond his head. Her face flushed hotter and anger flared across her face.

"Damn it, Travis, I told you I wouldn't give you head while you drive. Pull over right now."

Holy shit!

"Jaxi, it's Blake... you're sick, hon—"

"Pull the truck over now, you son of a bitch." She forced herself to a sitting position, body weaving from side to side. "I swear, Travis Coleman, you're going to be the death of me. Stop now or I'll tell him."

Tell who? Tell what?

She was yelling at him now, smacking her fists into his arm. She wasn't hitting him hard enough to cause any pain but she was knocking herself around. Blake grabbed her with one hand, pinned her arms against him, and steered the truck and trailer off to the side of the road as quickly as possible.

“Jaxi, you’ve got to relax. It’s not Travis, it’s Blake. Ah, damn it, Slick, you are one sick little girl.”

“Yeah, well, you’re pretty sick yourself. You want to break up with me but you want one final farewell, is that it? Fine by me.”

Hell, she must have heard Travis back at the fairgrounds. Now what did he do? Try to calm her down or let Travis drown in the hole he’d dug for himself?

She threw her leg across his lap like she was jumping on a calf in the roping contest.

“This is it. You hear me? As of tomorrow we’re not a couple anymore and you can go fuck whoever you want without me around as a decoy. I’ve had enough of the pretending.” While she spoke her hands slipped loose the buckle on his belt in one smooth motion. Blake jerked. He scrambled for her wrists, trying to catch her, trying to stop her as she dragged down his zipper and dipped her hands into his jeans.

They were pinned between the back of the bench and the steering wheel. It was the only reason she got her fingers into the fly of his boxer briefs where, against his will, his erection rose to meet her.

He wasn’t getting excited because it was Jaxi, it was just because it was a female wrapping her fingers around his thickening girth and pulling him free into the warm afternoon air. That’s what he tried to tell himself. It wasn’t because this was Jaxi and Blake had dreamed of this for longer than he wanted to admit.

No, it was strictly an automatic male reaction. He wasn’t the kind of asshole to sit and let his brother’s feverish, soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend give him a hand job at the side of the road. He wasn’t such a jerk he’d actually try to justify letting her keep touching him for a couple more seconds because it was the best thing he’d ever felt in his life, her soft hands running up and down the length of his now fully engaged cock.

And then he realized he didn’t quite know how to stop her. He didn’t want to talk and have her suddenly become aware of what she was doing to him, Blake, and not Travis as she imagined. He couldn’t reach to open the door and every time he tried to grab her wrists she swore and jerked harder, sending jolts of fire up his already sensitized nerve-endings. Stopping her that way might have a permanent impact on his ability to ever have sex again.

He was going to burn in hell forever for this one.

Blake’s powers of concentration were seriously challenged as Jaxi continued her assault on his erection. Her firm fingers stroked him from base to tip, taking the time to caress her thumb over the head on each pass. His body didn’t seem to care this wasn’t supposed to be happening and a happy amount of pre-come rose to the surface, making her fingers slip easier and easier the longer she tormented him.

If there were a little more room to maneuver he’d open the door and get them both out. It might be enough to force her to snap out of it without ripping off his penis.

He reached around to disengage the wheel lock and she leaned into his neck, her hot face pressing into him. One breast compressed against his chest as she tilted her body to the side to keep her hands free and yet snuggle closer. Her tongue slipped along his sweating neck and she made a satisfied noise.

He was such a bastard. He stopped for a split second, savoring the sensations rippling through his body, then forced himself to continue to swing the wheel out of the way. Finally he had room to shift. Blake leaned forward and reached for the door release.

No longer pinned in place by the wheel Jaxi slipped off his lap, onto the floor and

replaced her hands with her mouth. Blake shouted as moist heat surrounded him. His heart was in his throat. How this had gone from insane to totally fucked up he had no idea.

Forget going to hell, he was already there. Being tormented by Satan himself as the old boy directed the little fever-induced drama happening on the side of the 766 Secondary Highway.

Jaxi slid her tongue around him and pressed her lips down his shaft a little farther each time. The sight of her blonde head as it rose and fell in his lap made him even harder, all the blood in his body pooling in his groin, heating him to past boiling.

If Blake had been afraid Jaxi would cause permanent damage before, he was shitting bricks now. When she dragged her teeth up his length, in spite of all his good intentions, Blake knew he had little chance of convincing his body to agree with his mind about trying to stop her. He was seconds away from blowing up completely.

She sucked hard and the lights of the distant farmhouse blurred. His balls fled into his body, snugging up into little time bombs waiting for the lit fuse to reach them.

Then Jaxi slid him to the back of her throat and hummed and all hell broke loose. His whole body tightened and jerked, his cock blasting semen in hot spurts down her throat, filling her mouth as he continued to pulse in wave after wave. She swallowed and sucked and swallowed some more until he was clean before releasing him from her mouth to drop her burning forehead against the inside of his thigh.

Blake leaned his head back against the window, his heart pumping like an oil derrick. There was no way to explain this. All he could hope was that Jaxi was still feverish enough to think he was Travis. As long as she didn't talk to Travis about it.

Oh hell, he was dead.

He managed to replace himself in his jeans, only after he'd untangled a handful of Jaxi's blonde hair from his cock and zipper, smoothing the wisps away carefully in the hopes she wouldn't wake from her stupor. Blake opened the door and somehow wrangled himself free without kicking her. She knelt on the floorboards, legs tangled in the pedals, her flushed face resting on the seat.

"Oh, Slick, what a mess we're in."

He reached in and hauled her into his arms, her feverish cheek burning a hole into his chest while her still wet lips burned a hole in his conscience.

Chapter One

Rocky Mountain House Three Years later

"I'm fine, boys, stop your fussing." Marion Coleman shook her hand at the twins as they hovered around her. "I didn't need the wheelchair. It's just hospital policy." She rose out of the wheelchair, batting Jesse and Joel away.

Blake offered her his arm and she gave him a weak smile. She was making light of it but it was clear her arm was hurting. A lot. She tucked her fingers around his elbow and dragged him across the hospital parking lot, her feet unhampered by the fact her right arm was covered with a heavy cast from wrist to shoulder.

They stopped beside one of the huge crew cab ranch trucks, the twins scrambling up into the back. Marion stared in disgust at the hand pull she couldn't reach.

"Why did you boys all have to grow to over six feet? None of you have a nice little Jetta or Mustang for me to be able to slide into. Just these monster trucks I have to use a ladder to reach the seat."

"You fed us too well." Blake was gentle as he lifted her to the bench seat, careful not to jar her arm. He'd closed the door and stepped around to the driver's side before he realized there was no way she could buckle her seatbelt with the cast in the way. He slid behind the wheel and reached to help her. "Let me get it, Ma. You're going to find things a bit more awkward for a spell."

"I hate this." Marion stared past him out the window, a touch of fury in her eyes.

"Maybe you should have waited for help picking the apples," Joel piped up from the backseat.

"She did ask, you jerk, remember?" Jesse said. "First we had to finish the back field before the weekend and then Dad asked us to—"

"This is no one's fault. You boys are all busy working the ranch, with the hay ready to be cut and the animals to care for. I wanted to get the apples started before you had time to help me and, well, I've never fallen out of a tree before in my life. Been climbing that one for years." His mom wiggled around in her seat to shake a finger at her sons. "It was an accident. I don't blame either of you, so don't you think you did something wrong. But now I'm going to need some help. Not only do I have a bushel of apples to deal with, there's the garden that needs to be put up, laundry for the family and the cookin' and..." She returned her gaze to the window. "I've caused a mess, boys, and that's the truth."

Blake reached and touched her hand softly. His ma was one of the hardest working women he knew and it wasn't just at the ranch. She'd toiled beside his father for over thirty years, doing everything inside the house, caring for and raising six boys, working the garden and helping with the livestock. In addition to her chores at home, she was always there for the community, for newcomers and new babies and whenever a person needed a helping hand.

Her arm was going to bother her a lot—not only the pain of it mending—but because of everything she'd be unable to do for a while.

“Well, I guess it’s time the neighbors get a chance to repay a little lovin’ your way and come to give you a hand,” Blake said.

“Blake Coleman, I don’t do anything to be repaid someday.”

Blake backpedaled. “That’s not what I meant. We know you do things because you want to help others, Ma, but there’s got to be someone who can come and chip in. I’ll do what I can, we all will. Heck, if each of us does our own laundry that would take a huge load off your plate. It’s not like we haven’t all cared for ourselves before. We’re big boys.”

Marion shook her head. “You can do it, but you don’t have time right now. No one does. The fall is the busiest time of year between the animals, the fields and the furniture orders. You can’t tell me you have time to add laundry to your list. Everyone else in town is just as busy.”

She waved the cast around tentatively. “I’m going to have to figure how to work around this. I’ll get by.”

Blake looked in the rearview mirror and exchanged worried glances with his brothers. Something was going to have to happen. He didn’t know what, but sooner than later they were going to need help.

* * * *

The truck rumbled up the long drive toward the Coleman’s ranch house and pulled in amongst the gathered cars in the parking area. News traveled fast in small towns, even before the invention of the cell phone. Jaxi worked quietly in the kitchen, getting things ready for coffee.

The neighbors and community folk gathered in the living room all turned to watch Mike Coleman approach the passenger door like a bull headed for his mate. He’d been in Calgary fetching supplies when Marion had fallen from the apple tree. By the time the boys reached him there was no time to get to the hospital since Marion was already in a cast and being shipped home.

Mike yanked open the door, lifted his wife carefully and carried her to the porch, ignoring her loud complaints at his fussing. “I’ll carry you whenever I want, woman. Don’t you *ever* scare me like that again,” he said. He placed her feet on the ground and held her as close as the awkward cast would allow. “Well, she’s still in one piece, folks. I guess she learned to bounce pretty good.”

As a few of her friends surrounded Marion to talk, Jaxi poured coffee. She’d placed a couple of trays piled with cookies and squares on the long family table for people to serve themselves then snuck back into the kitchen. Mike followed her with a sigh of relief.

“You’re an angel, Jaxi. Thanks for helping.”

Jaxi grinned at him. “Mrs. Wade and Mrs. Leaner brought the baking. You’ve already got four casseroles in the fridge, and another six in the freezer. You can freeze anything else that arrives and—”

“Whoa, girl.” Mike interrupted. “I need to talk to you. The doctor called and told me Marion’s going to need help for a couple weeks. Around the house and personal like. I’ll do what I can, but you’ve got the training and he recommended you. Do you have the time to come and help us? It won’t require a lot of nursing.”

“I’m not a nurse, Mr. Coleman, but I do have first aid training.”

“And a bit more.”

Jaxi nodded. The strange assortment of classes she'd completed through correspondence and local colleges over the past couple of years didn't gain her a degree in anything, but she was well trained in many areas. Personal care was something she could do.

"It's short notice but Dr. Yale thought you were free."

Jaxi washed her hands in the sink and bent to get a new hand towel from the drawer. "He should know. I've been a nanny for him and Katie but she's decided to stay home and care for the kids herself. My last day was Friday."

Mike clapped her on the shoulder. "Will you do it? We'll figure out some sort of pay rate for the nursing and such."

She turned around and smiled to soften the words. "Please don't talk about paying me. You and Mrs. C. have always been there for me, and I'd love to return the favor by helping out."

"The thing is, Jaxi, you won't be able to do anything else to earn money. She's going to need you here twenty-four seven at first. And now that I think of it, with harvest time and the garden needing ... I don't want to swindle you. We'll pay, I insist."

Jaxi grabbed a tray from under the sink to care for the empty plates and cups starting to gather. "Let's discuss it later. You go and visit with your neighbors. I'm happy to come and help for as long as you need me."

He squeezed her hand briefly and returned to his visitors.

Jaxi wandered the main floor, cleaning up and making more coffee. She planned which of the casseroles to pop in the oven for supper, peeking in the fridge to see what else she could feed to the horde of hungry men who would descend on the house in a few hours.

All six of the Coleman boys were living at home right now. The three oldest had been living in another house on the family land, but had rented it to some needy newcomers in the community a few months ago. The twins would return to college in a few weeks but the rest of the boys—Blake, Daniel, Matt, and Travis—worked the ranch with their father. None of them had settled down with anyone special, so none had any reason to buy a place of their own off the ranch.

Jaxi finished her tidying and began peeling the mess of potatoes she'd found soaking in the pantry sink. She'd come over today with a notion she could help ease the load for Mrs. Coleman. She also needed to be honest, at least with herself. She was finally ready to make her play. She wanted Blake, and she was ready to do anything to get him to see her as more than the little girl next door.

Others in their little high school headed for Calgary or Edmonton after graduation, desperate to get away from the small town atmosphere. Most of them joked about the lack of culture and the lack of everything in Rocky Mountain House. She'd tried to explain to them it wasn't the place that made people uncultured but their attitudes.

She looked through the window of the rambling house toward the rolling foothills and the high Rockies rising beyond them. The Coleman ranch was set in one of the most beautiful areas in the whole world, yet young people were scrambling over each other to get away.

She knew better. There was nowhere she'd rather be than here, and no one she'd rather be with than Blake. She'd do anything to have Blake Coleman pull her in tight and kiss her, and it'd been that way forever. Every time she looked at him, pictured him—

heck, dreamed of him—it was enough to get her juices flowing. The man was a hunk of handsome, generous to a fault and smooth in all the right ways.

She was finally grown up enough there would be no arguments from the gossip-mongers. All she'd wanted her whole life was to be a rancher's wife. Blake's wife. She was in a good position now to let him know how things were going to go down. He'd been looking ragged around the edges the past couple times she'd seen him in town. He needed a little caring for.

"Jaxi? Wow, girl. Michael told me you were planning on lending us a hand for a bit but I never expected you'd..." Marion leaned on the doorframe to the kitchen, her arm clumsy with its bulk in front of her. She grinned and the smile took years off the older woman's face. "Well, actually, yes, I did expect you to jump in and make yourself at home. Your momma going to miss you if you bunk here with us?"

"No ma'am, I've been living at the Yale's place since the spring so she's fine with the occasional visit. I'm all yours," Jaxi said.

"Good. We'll have to see about where to tuck you. The upstairs bedrooms are all full since the twins got back. We can put you in the guest cabin or in the den downstairs or move one of the other boys from their room in the basement. The cabin is the most private."

"That's a lot farther away if you need me quick. Mrs. C, I really don't mind the den. Please don't ask any of the boys to move. I don't need much space for my stuff and there's an intercom panel in the den so you can call if you need me in the night." Jaxi poured the diced potatoes into a pot and swirled water over them. "For supper there's a green bean casserole from the Thiessens and a large pot of stew from the Laings. You got salad fixings in the garden?"

"Some. I can go—"

"You'll do no such thing. How are you going to pick cucumbers and lettuce with one hand? I can get everything else in the oven and warming in five minutes. You can stay and watch the potatoes don't boil over," Jaxi said. She gave a guilty smile. "Not that I plan on bossing you around in your own kitchen or anything."

Marion laughed out loud. "Oh, Jaxi, it's good to have you here." She tugged Jaxi in close for a hug, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "You go right ahead and boss all you want. I'll warn you if you step over the line. I consider you a part of this family, you know that, don't you?"

Jaxi glided around the kitchen, prepping things for supper. She grabbed the garden pail and hurried through the back door. From Marion's lips to God's ears...

* * * *

Blake finished up early in the shop. He'd seen the neighbors' cars trickle away and figured he should head in to help with supper preparations. His dad was all right in the kitchen but unless they wanted to live on pancakes for the next few weeks all of them would need to pull a little extra duty.

He marched around to the back of the house and the lower entrance. When his great-grandpa built the ranch house he'd included enough room for all six of his boys and a few extra hired hands. They had worked the land by hand and with horses, time consuming and backbreaking labor raising cattle and tending grain fields. In those days the bunkhouse attached to the house by a walkway but years ago the family closed it in and

turned the extra space into a shower room and private entrance for the boys living downstairs. It kept the mud and dust clear of the main living quarters. Even though the ranch was now fully modernized, it was still dirty and exhausting work.

Blake unbuttoned his shirt, stripped the soiled fabric from his body and wiped the sweat from his neck. It was hot for late August, and he hadn't been the one in the tractor with the broken air conditioning. Daniel had drawn the short straw this morning.

Blake headed to the outdoor shower. It was safe, as all the visiting vehicles were gone and he much preferred to shower in the open air while it was this warm. He stripped off his jeans and boots, pitching the clothes into a pile outside the door. He threw his boots on the rack inside and grabbed a towel from the shelf over the door before returning to the bright afternoon sunshine and blasting the water on. Joel, the music addict in the family, had wired speakers on either side of the outdoor area. With a flick of a switch the music of a country station blared about hurtin' and lovin' and leavin'. Blake smiled as he lathered up and sang along with Randy Travis.

Daniel and Matt sauntered by, silly grins on their faces.

"What's your problem? Either of you want the shower? I'm just 'bout done."

Matt snickered before entering the house. Daniel shook his head. "I'll use the indoor shower. You're a brave man, Blake, braver than I thought."

Blake turned off the water and toweled himself vigorously. "What the hell is the matter with you? Fry your brains in the tractor heat?"

"Let's say I like my privacy a little more than you, that's all. Is Mama all right?" Daniel asked.

"Cast the size of a lamb on her arm. We're going to have to pick up the slack for her. It'll be tough for her to get all her work done."

"Oh, she'll be fine, Blake. She'll get the help she needs. You plan on joining us at the supper table dressed that way or a little more formal?" Daniel grinned again as he stood and stared out from the house.

Blake stepped next to him, towel resting in a fist at his hip. He followed Daniel's gaze. He looked past the walkway, the garden and the greenhouse, clear to the sheep and cattle barns without seeing anything unusual. Shaking his head he retreated toward the house. "Shit, Daniel, you get harder and harder to understand. Of course I'm dressing, you think I plan on prancing around stark naked in front of everybody?"

Idiot.

Back in his room Blake pulled on clean jeans and a plain blue T-shirt. He scooped up his dirty clothes and deposited them in the laundry area, noting there were a couple loads already piled on the floor. He left the sleeping area of the basement, striding through the TV and recreation rooms toward the stairs to the main level.

Appetizing scents greeted him: rich beef stew, mashed potatoes and something that smelled like apple pie. The neighbors, it had to be. Damn it was good to live in an area where people took care of each other. Maybe his father's dreaded pancakes could be avoided for a few days.

Blake rounded the corner to see his folks resting easy in the family room, talking together quietly. In the adjoining dining area the massive family table that comfortably sat twenty was already set for the meal with pickles and salads, butter and sliced bread.

"Wow, ladies help set up before they left?" Blake asked as he sat next to his father. "Looks great. We've got a wonderful set of friends, don't we?"

Marion nodded. "Well, yes, we do, Blake, but it was actually—"

"You get that furniture order ready today, Blake?" Mike interrupted. His parents exchanged peculiar glances. "I know you had to take a break to help your Ma. If you need a hand after supper the boys and I will come and help load the last of it."

Blake sat back in his chair. "I'd appreciate that. There's still a couple of items to haul together, but it won't take long." The strange looks continued. "I swear, did they give you some happy gas while you were in the hospital today, Ma? Or is it a full moon tonight? Everyone is acting bewitched."

She smiled innocently and raised her eyebrows. "I don't know what you mean. Supper is ready, so ring the bell, please, Blake?"

Blake picked up the hammer for the dinner bell. They used an old fashioned triangle to call for meals and no matter how old they got they still loved to ring the meal in.

Soon the table groaned with food. He never would have guessed his ma had a broken arm by the way the food overflowed the bowls. He and his dad transferred dishes from the sideboard and his mouth watered. There were three different salads, a huge bowl of corn on the cob slathered with butter, mashed potatoes, stew, a couple of different casseroles and the biggest apple cobbler he'd ever seen in his life.

Blake sat at his usual spot and watched his dad seat his ma. She was going to have to eat left-handed, another tough challenge for the right-handed woman. The rest of the boys filtered in, all scrubbed and tidy. Jesse wore a collared shirt and Blake raised an eyebrow at him.

"Hot date tonight, stud?"

"Just looking presentable for the family," Jesse said as he grabbed a chair opposite Matt.

Joel wandered from the kitchen carrying a couple of pitchers of drinks. He held the door open with his hip and spoke to someone behind him. Blake did a fast check; there was an extra place set at the table.

Jaxi floated through the door carrying the gravy. She chuckled at something Joel said before depositing the boat on the table and taking her seat across from Blake. His mouth went dry and a loud roar of blood in his ears deafened him.

Shit, he was in a mess of trouble.

Chapter Two

Jaxi was so busy passing bowls she missed his question. Jesse nudged her in the ribs and she swung her head to see Blake's storm grey eyes staring at her. Jesse's fingers lingered on her side and she pinched his wrist to prompt him to withdraw them.

Jesse was fun, but Blake ... he made her body ache.

"Are you still working for the doctor and his wife?" Blake asked again.

Mike cleared his throat. "Actually, Jaxi's got a new job." Heads swung to look at the end of the table.

"She'll be my helper for the next bit," Marion said. "Doctor's orders are that I have a nursemaid, and if I have to have one, Jaxi's my first choice."

Joel leaned over and whispered as he scooped another spoonful of stew onto her plate, "You'd be my first choice as well. Wanna play *Doctor* with me later?"

Jaxi hid her laugh behind a cough. She was going to have to cool the twins off and fast if her plan for Blake was going to work. She looked across to see Blake's expression darken as his gaze flicked between her and where Joel's elbow rested on her chair.

Interesting.

Marion told Daniel about the compound fracture of her arm and how long the cast needed to stay on and all the details he'd missed while trapped in the tractor hauling bales. Jaxi enjoyed her supper, taking time to lick every drop of the savory stew from her fork, listening to the easy conversation around her about what needed to be accomplished in the fields the following day and what animals needed transferring where.

She watched each of the faces around her in turn to see what response she'd get for being in their hair for the next little while. Travis gave her his usual smoldering stare, the one that made her wonder if he was still attracted to her. Daniel and Matt seemed pleased to have her around. The twins were a little too delighted in her presence, but she'd already suspected she'd have to nip that idea in the bud.

"Pass the potatoes," Matt said, scooping the last of the sliced cucumbers onto his plate.

"Sorry, Daniel finished them."

Jaxi pushed back her chair. "There's still more in the kitchen, I'll go—"

"You sit. I'll go. Everything is delicious but you've barely eaten anything." Jesse held her in place as he grabbed one of the empty potato bowls and trotted to the kitchen.

Jaxi sat back in her chair and looked around. A feeling of contentment rose at being here with the family, accepted and cared for by all of them. She checked Marion with a casual glance. The woman was doing all right for her first meal with her left hand although she seemed to be running out of steam.

"Young lady, you make sure to eat enough. You'll be working hard the next couple of weeks and we don't want you to overdo it," Mike said.

Jaxi pulled a face at him. "Jesse exaggerated. I ate plenty, just not as much as he did. I'm not six foot something and two hundred pounds. Don't you worry, I'm strong enough. I'll do fine."

"You'll do wonderfully. I can't believe you found enough lettuce in the garden for a salad. How are things out there? Can we leave the beets for a few days?" Marion asked.

Jaxi's face flushed at the mention of the garden. Her gaze swung to Blake's face. She had to stop herself from licking her lips as she admired the way his T-shirt stretched over his shoulders, tight over the firm muscles.

The sound of soft laughter rose from Matt.

"Yeah, Jaxi," Daniel said. "I wondered too. When you were in the garden earlier, how were things? Did you see anything interesting? Anything that needed taking care of?"

Oh lordy, Matt and Daniel must have seen her gawking at Blake as he showered. She grinned at Daniel. Might as well let them know right off the bat what she was planning. They wouldn't give her trouble; heck, they might even support her.

"There're a few things looking mighty fine in the garden."

Matt choked on his drink and his shining eyes met hers. He raised his glass for a moment then spoke around Blake to Daniel. "Wonder what Jaxi's favorite vegetable is?"

"Carrots?"

"For better vision? I don't know, she's got pretty good eyesight already. Maybe the red hot cayenne peppers?" Matt teased.

"You think? Here I thought it was the zucchini." Daniel started piling empty plates together. "Course, the garden has such amazing views she—"

Jaxi rose quickly and went to the sideboard to serve the apple crisp. She'd been watching Blake and she knew the exact second he realized what the boys were teasing her about. He didn't look upset, more ... distracted. She closed her eyes for a moment and drew a slow breath in.

He'd probably never thought about her that way. He needed some time to realize little Jaxi was all grown up and it was fine for her to admire him as a woman admires a man.

Hmmm. Maybe he needed a little chance to do some admiring of his own.

* * * *

Blake and Joel finished hauling the last of the order into the crate and wrapped it carefully. A few years back the handcrafted log furniture his dad filled the house with became a huge success with the people living in Canmore and Calgary. In their spare time, the Coleman boys took turns creating the solid log bed frames, tables and other household items. Most of their work was done in the winter when field chores were slower but there was a constant trickle of orders they filled throughout the year to keep their name in the community.

Blake helped, although it wasn't his favorite thing to do. He preferred outdoor chores or working with the animals. Daniel and the twins were more into the woodworking but it was a part of the family business and he did his share to get it all done.

Besides, tonight it was mindless labor, and after sitting the whole meal across the table from Jaxi he needed a little mindless.

Since 'the incident,' as he thought of it, he'd tried his best to avoid Jaxi. She'd spent so much time with the Coleman clan over the years it hadn't always been possible. She was always invited to birthday parties and holiday dinners, like she'd been since she was a little tyke. He'd attempted to never be alone with her, always the first to leave the room and get chores started. Although he ached to touch her, all the reasons he had to stay away seemed more valid than ever. She was just a baby, barely twenty-one, while he was

over thirty. She still looked up to him like a little sister to a big brother.

When she and Travis broke up those years ago, Jaxi had gotten real busy with school and work, even though she'd never left the community. She'd never mentioned 'the incident,' and Travis hadn't said a word about any strange farewell message from Jaxi, so Blake assumed she either didn't remember or just thought it was a fever-induced dream.

A dream. That's where the blowjob haunted him the most. He still woke up in the middle of the night, picturing those wide grey eyes looking up at him as her mouth slid over his shaft. Woke up armed and dangerous and no amount of cold showers stopped the wanting.

Now she was in his house, sleeping in the room next to his. What was his ma thinking to let a girl sleep in the basement with three grown men? Not only was he next door to her, but Matt and Daniel slept downstairs temporarily again as well. The three of them until recently had shared a secondary house on the back section of the ranch. Blake now wished like hell that they'd never rented it to that single mom for six months.

Sleep would be tough but supper tonight—watching her lick the stew off her fork—was another kind of torment all together. He knew what her mouth and tongue could do and he wanted another round and more. More of Jaxi touching him, loving him.

More of what he couldn't have.

"What was the long sigh for, Blake? You feeling sentimental about shipping our trees to somebody else's house?" Joel asked as they finished packing the furniture into a crate, hammering the lid in place.

Blake looked up in surprise. "Did I sigh?"

"Like a dog that's been run ragged all day and just flopped down in front of the fire."

"It's nothing."

"It's Jaxi, I bet."

Blake jerked. Joel leaned back on the worktable, his arms crossed in front of him and a knowing expression on his face. "Listen, Jesse told me I had to talk to you, so remember if you have the urge to punch me you have to save half of it for him. What do you think of Jaxi?"

Blake hesitated.

"She's a good friend and it's going to help Ma a great deal to have her here. I appreciate her kindness." He looked around the shop for something to do with his hands. There was no way he could stand here and talk about Jaxi without fidgeting and Joel was no dummy. He'd know Blake was pissing into the wind with his 'good friend' comment if he fidgeted.

"You sure?"

"Why are you asking?" Blake found a table leg that needed hand sanding and he sat to smooth the piece as he spoke.

"He's asking because he and Jesse are hoping to sweet talk the girl into kissing them. I'm right, ain't I?" Daniel asked, joining them in the workshop.

Joel grinned. "We want more than kisses, but I'd settle for starting there. She's the sweetest kisser—"

"How do you know?" Blake demanded.

Daniel snorted. "You missed that one? The boys hogtied her back in high school, what was it, tenth grade? I heard about it for weeks, couldn't get them to shut up about how much fun they'd had, how soft her lips were, how she fit between them so well."

Daniel shook a finger at Joel. "This habit you two have of going for the same girl at the same time isn't very socially accepted around these parts, you know. You better step real careful around the girls' daddies until you know for sure they don't plan to shoot one of you."

"You both kissed Jaxi? At the same time?" Blake reeled. "Was this before or after she went out with Travis?"

"Before. I still don't understand why she ever dated him." Joel plopped on the bench next to Blake. "I know he's our brother and all but sometimes he's an ass. Of all the guys she could have gone to the prom with, why'd she pick him?"

"I still don't believe she kissed you and Jesse. Together."

"Well, it wasn't her idea, Blake. We were rather insistent. And she kissed us one at a time. It's not like I want my lips right next to Jesse's. I'm not into that."

Daniel sat and joined in. "I kissed her once." Blake barely stopped his jaw from hitting the floor. "Yup, only it was kiss her or kill her. She rode Thunder without permission and when she managed to get him back into the barn without getting killed I kind of lost my head." Daniel winked at Joel. "You're right, she is a sweet kisser."

Joel poked at Blake. "You ever kiss her?"

"No! Course not. She's just a little girl. I'm surprised at you, Daniel, she's five years younger than you."

"If I were fifteen and she were ten it would be a problem," Daniel said. "She was old enough and she knew what we were doing. I didn't give her much choice in the matter either. Looks like you're the only Coleman boy she hasn't kissed yet, Blake. Maybe we'd better set you up or something."

Joel bristled. "Hey, Jesse and I—"

"When did Matt kiss her?" Blake interrupted. All his brothers had kissed her. He didn't quite know what to think. She wasn't some kind of saint he'd expected to have never kissed anyone, but ... all five of them?

"Oh that. Matt kissed her when she was thirteen. She told me about it." Joel shrugged. "We were all down at the swimming hole and Travis was teasing her how she didn't need to wear a girl's swimsuit yet, that she could still join them like she had as a little tyke, shorts and nothing else. Matt stopped the teasing and escorted her home. Jaxi told me he talked about changes and how she would be a beautiful woman and not to worry when and where things would grow. Then he kissed her. She didn't remember exactly what he said because she'd been surprised but it was something about a kiss for the woman she was going to become."

"You talk to her a lot, Joel?" Daniel asked.

"Until she finished school. She's been so busy since it's been like trying to track wildfire, but now that she's here, right in the house, Jesse and me figured it was a good time to renew our interest. We're all old enough now." Joel said.

"Old enough for what? You weren't planning to do anything under Ma and Dad's roof you wouldn't do in front of them, right?" Daniel demanded.

Blake kept his lips buttoned tight. The thoughts flying through his mind weren't suitable for speaking out loud. Jaxi had kissed them all. Except him. He picked up the smooth leg and deposited it with the rest of the wood. He needed a ride to clear his mind.

"Blake, you ain't told me yet what you think."

"About...?"

“Jaxi and Jesse and me.”

Blake stopped and stared at his little brother. “Why are you asking me? She’s the one that’s got to decide if she wants you.”

Joel glanced quickly at Daniel before he spoke. “We like Jaxi, Blake, and we want to see if she likes us. But if you ask, we’ll wait until you get a chance first.”

“What? What makes you think...? Just because I’m the only one in the family who hasn’t kissed her—”

“Blake, I know you care for her. A lot.”

“She’s too young for me. Be my guest and go for it, I don’t think of her that way.” *Sweet mercy, what a bunch of bull.* He thought of little but Jaxi. It was no use though, she was too young. She still looked up to him like a big brother and he wasn’t going to step over that boundary like some hormone-crazed animal. Blake ignored his aching gut and turned to head out the door when Joel called after him.

“You’re lying through your teeth.”

Blake paused and shook his head. “Am I now?”

“Yeah. You remember camping in the back fields during lambing season?”

“Yeah.”

Joel jostled past him and paced backward for a few steps to stare Blake in the eye. “You talk in your sleep. You haven’t kissed the girl but don’t lie about how sweet she is to you. Think on it and let me and Jesse know when you’ve made up your mind. Only don’t wait too long or we’ll decide for you. One way or another.”

Chapter Three

“We need to go to town today and hit the thrift shop, Mrs. C.” Jaxi helped the older woman from the tub and into her husband’s robe. “You can’t wear oversized clothes until you heal, and I don’t think we should cut up all your regular clothing so your arm will fit.”

Marion sighed. “It’s a little like trying to stick toothpaste back into the tube. You’re right, we can go this afternoon. What else are you up for today?”

Jaxi paced around the room making it as one-hand-friendly as possible. “I can do whatever you tell me to do. I’m here for you, to make things easier. I can cook, I can clean. There are things in the garden to harvest soon and the apples you picked before you fell. I’m not planning on making coffee and sitting around all day. I never have enjoyed lazing.”

Jaxi stopped to admire the family picture on the dresser, the six boys ranged around their parents. She had missed so much as an only child. Her folks loved her but didn’t understand her need to be around others. They were quiet, independent people who shied away from social events and thought nothing wrong with their little girl spending evenings and weekends alone with a book. When they moved to Rocky Mountain House and her new neighbors had welcomed Jaxi in, it was like she’d come home. All the time she’d spent at the Coleman’s ranch over the years had opened her eyes and heart to the love of a big family.

The expressions on Mike and Marion’s faces in each picture made her heart skip. She could see it, plain as day. They were a team, loving and supporting each other as they worked the land, raised their family. Jaxi had seen that same kind of strength in Blake and she wanted to show him she could create the same kind of team with him. She was attracted to him physically but his responsible character impressed her even more. That kind of a connection was what she longed for, ached for.

What she was willing to work for, body and soul.

Marion smiled at her. “You always have enjoyed staying busy. Tell you what, let’s have a cup of tea and you and I can plan the menus and a bit of a schedule for the next week so I can get those boys of mine to chip in as well.”

“They don’t need to help.”

“Yes, they do,” Marion said, waving her good finger in Jaxi’s face. “I’m their Mama and if I tell them to help dry the dishes once in a while it won’t kill them. I don’t expect them to do a lot, only a few things so you and I can get by. And I won’t have you scrubbing and such. Mike already said he’d get the Wilson woman to come in a couple of extra times a week to do the floors and stuff. She usually comes once a week, so it’s just a little extra hand for now.

“You’re a hard worker, Jaxi. But cooking and caring for a family this size takes a lot of time and energy. I’m going to need extra help since I can’t even comb my hair by myself yet. I don’t want to scare you away.

“Come on,” Marion said, grabbing Jaxi by the arm. “Let’s go get that cup of tea.”

* * * *

After returning from the far fields, Blake pulled in next to the barn to see Jaxi's blonde head bobbing along the path to the chicken coop, her hands full of boards and tools.

Intrigued, he slipped from the truck and followed her, his eyes mesmerized by the sight of faded jeans cupping her trim ass as it swayed in front of him. She dropped the armload outside the fence surrounding the coop structure and snuck into the yard with an experienced air, shooing the chickens before her into the enclosure. Once she rounded them up, she closed the door firmly and spun around.

A flush crept over her skin as she spotted him standing beside the fence watching her. She grinned and he reacted involuntarily to the way her smile lit up his heart.

His whole body ached.

"What you doing, Jaxi?" he asked, trying to get a handle on himself. This is what he'd been trying to avoid, being alone with her. The setting was far from intimate and should be safe but the edge of uncertainty was there.

Any situation with Jaxi was potential trouble as far as he was concerned.

She pointed to a section of the fencing that had worked loose, a hole dug partway under the wire. "Someone's trying to make a break for it, either in or out and I don't want to wander the yard looking for eggs." She propped open the gate and reached for the boards at his feet.

"You don't need to do that. One of us will fix it. Ma never told us there was a problem or we'd have done it already."

She leaned on the board, her bright eyes sparkling at him. "I know you can fix it, but so can I, Blake. I wanted a little sunshine and getting into the yard for some fresh air feels good." She waved the hammer at him briefly. "You go ahead and get your work done. I've got this under control."

Blake shifted back on his heels, a grin on his face as he watched her haul the boards beside her and kneel to tackle the stiff chicken wire. She did know what she was doing, pulling the staples holding the wire in place, twisting the hammer with enough leverage things popped into line rather than rolling away from her. The sun shone off her skin, a dusky tan showing on the muscles of her arms as she worked.

Jaxi glanced over her shoulder at him as she leaned back on the hammer, loosening an exceptionally tough staple. "You done work for the day or what, Blake Coleman? Or have you never seen a fence fixed before so you want to learn some tips from me?" She winked at him.

Minx. "Well, I haven't seen you fix a fence in a long time, Slick. Maybe you do it differently nowadays."

The hammer jerked and slipped from her grasp, her body falling back to land hard on her ass in the middle of the hen-scratched dirt. Blake stepped forward quickly to help her and she chuckled, brushing the dirt from her jeans as she smiled at him. "Maybe I do."

He checked to make sure she wasn't hurt and seeing nothing but amusement in her eyes he joined in the game. Nodding seriously at her, he teased, "I'm sure the last time I fixed a fence I didn't end up on my backside, but I suppose this method is more modern and sophisticated." He tugged the hammer she'd retrieved from her fingers and scooted around to remove the final staples, handing them back one at a time for her to hang onto.

It was like going back in time. Back to the days when Jaxi followed him around the farm all summer long, talking her head off about everything and anything. They worked

together, putting the new boards into place and pounding in a stake to support the chicken wire tight to the ground. All the while Jaxi shared stories about taking care of the doctor's kids and her work at a local greenhouse the past spring. She even rambled about a book she'd just read that taught how to build a fishpond.

"That's interesting, Jaxi, but we don't need to stock a pond around here. It's a short ride to the river and part of the fun of fishing is heading into nature to sit for a while." Blake tugged on her ponytail gently like he did when she was a kid. It had been good to work with her for a few minutes doing an everyday task. Something about it eased the tension within him and for the first time in a long time, he simply enjoyed her company as he had for many years before his sexual longings came between them.

Jaxi snorted at him. "You don't need to stock a pond but the Mitchells are considering it. I'm going to head there next Monday for a bit and see if I can help them get things ready. You want to come along?"

Blake nodded slowly. "I think I should be able to go. Ask me later and we'll see what's on the schedule."

Her grin lit the whole area and Blake's heart gave a leap. All his calmness left abruptly. He squatted to gather the tools together and their hands bumped as Jaxi grabbed for the hammer and clasped his wrist instead. Heads close, bodies near enough the scent from her skin rose to his nostrils and his body tightened with need. This was no little tagalong girl at his side, no matter how much he wanted her to be. No matter how much safer it would be.

Jaxi stared at him and her pink tongue snuck over her bottom lip to moisten it. Blake bit back the urge to lay his mouth on hers and lick over the wetness, tasting her skin and her sweet flavor. He needed to retreat, needed to stand and flee from temptation and the heavenly smell of her warm breath on his skin before he did something they would both regret. But heaven help him if he could budge.

She released her fingers slowly, drawing back over his skin with a butterfly softness that stroked up his arm and back down directly to his cock. Jaxi stood quickly, her hip bumping him hard and Blake fell backward in the dirt. He stared into her laughing eyes.

"Why, Blake. You do know how to fix fences the modern way after all." Jaxi's skin remained flushed but her smile was innocent as she gathered the scrap lumber and loose staples. "Can you let the chickens out before you leave, and return the tools? I've got to get dinner on the table."

She waved briefly at him before she headed back to the house, whistling. Blake chuckled as he sat and watched her go. It wasn't her fault his body slipped into overdrive every time she got near. He just needed to tamp down those feelings that should never have surfaced in the first place. Maybe this would work out, like the old days, and he would look out for her as a big brother should.

He spotted the time and swore, scrambling to his feet to finish his work in a rush before dinner.

* * * *

Jaxi eased the heavily laden cart around the corner of the grocery aisle, finally headed for the checkout. Glancing at her watch she figured she had an hour—hour and a half at the most—before Marion got home for a rest.

An hour to get things put away so Marion *would* rest instead of attempting to help.

She chuckled to herself. Mrs. C was a lousy patient, probably because she rarely had a chance to slow down while chasing after the boys and taking charge of things. Jaxi stacked the cart contents on the conveyer belt as quickly as possible and smiled at her friend Carol who manned the till.

“Jaxi, you having a party or something? You’ve got enough food here to feed an army. Oh, hang on, you’re at the Coleman place, aren’t you?” Carol rang through the items, her mouth and hands in a contest to see which could move faster. “Course I figured you’d help, what with being neighbors and all.” Carol winked at her but Jaxi shook her head.

“Don’t push it, girlfriend. Just get me through double quick so I can get back before Marion gets home and decides to scrub walls or rearrange furniture. It’s been a week since she got the cast on and she’s attempting to take on her full workload again.”

“Well, when you get done holding her down, we can head out for our usual RandR.” Carol said.

“I don’t think I’ll make it tonight, if that’s okay with you. I want to stick close so I can sit on my patient if she needs it.”

Carol shrugged. “Fine with me, I’m free all weekend. We can meet whenever.”

Jaxi paused in shuffling loaded bags back into the cart. “You’re free? What about Leo and the big date? That’s Saturday night, right?”

Her friend sniffed. “Wrong. He messed up one time too many. I’m done with him. *Jerk.*”

Jaxi hid her smile. Carol and Leo, the ultimate star-crossed lovers. A week didn’t pass without one pissing the other off, and yet they couldn’t stay apart. “What did he do this time?”

Carol propped her fists on her hips, her jaw hung open. “You didn’t hear? He went trolling with those wild Coleman twins and they weren’t by the lake from what I heard. They were fishing for females barely above the legal limit.”

Something was off in Carol’s information because it wasn’t Leo’s style, nor the twins. Women chased after Jesse and Joel, they didn’t need to prowl to find willing partners. Leo was rock solid when it came to Carol but the two of them didn’t communicate sometimes and assumed far too much. “When was this?”

“Two nights ago. Marci told Kerry who told Janice she saw them.”

Jaxi fought back the urge to rub her temples. “Carol, the boys were home two nights ago. All night. We had a Monopoly tournament and a game of Thirty-one that lasted until late. Everyone crashed after it was done.”

Carol’s mouth closed tight. “You’re not just saying that? I mean, to protect someone, ’cause I’d be really pissed to find out—”

Enough. Carol could rant for hours and Jaxi’s time was fading away. She handed over the cash for the bill. “Trust me. Games all night and a popcorn fight when Mr. C. lost his last penny. The man is a hoot—he cheats at cards like a shark and then distracts everyone. I don’t know where Leo was but I doubt he was anywhere near any jailbait. He loves you, girl. Just call him and ask him. Go out on Saturday. Have fun.”

Carol slipped from behind the counter to hug her and Jaxi squeezed her briefly before whirling around to exit the store as quickly as possible. She’d arranged for Marion to have coffee with a couple of the ladies from the church. They’d return to the house far too soon. The clock ticking fast, Jaxi shoved the cart outside and looked around for the

truck.

“You need a hand, Jaxi?” Jesse’s sexy drawl was nice, but it simply didn’t create the same chills big brother Blake’s rougher tones conjured. He pushed off the wall, his bright gaze trailing over her with admiration as he sauntered closer.

“Are you my ride? I want to beat your mom home.”

Jesse shook his head sadly, his arms reaching around her into the cart to pull out a bag of M-and-M’s. “Sorry, I’m meeting Joel to buy some supplies for the workshop. You’re making Blake’s favorite cookies this afternoon, aren’t you? I like peanut butter better.”

He lingered in her personal space, opening the bag and offering her a candy. Jaxi let a sigh loose from deep within her. He was incorrigible. “You want to move it or lose it? I’m not interested, Jesse, I told you before.”

His gaze continued to caress her body. “That was a long time ago, almost a whole week. Maybe I can change your mind. There’s no harm trying.”

Jaxi prodded her thumb into his chest, snickering at his hopeful expression. He was damn sweet but he wasn’t Blake. “There’s harm if I decide to lift my knee abruptly.”

Jesse danced backward and shook his finger in her face, his grin stretching from ear to ear. “You don’t play fair.”

She raised a brow at him. “Nope, I don’t. I play to win. Remember that.”

A truck horn blared and one of the Coleman trucks slid up to the curb, Blake’s dark expression framed in the window.

“You needed a ride?”

Between the three of them the grocery cart was quickly emptied and Jesse handed Jaxi into the passenger side before waving farewell from the curb. Blake peeled away, tires squealing, and Jaxi looked over her shoulder to see Joel join Jesse, the twins disappearing into the hardware shop.

She dropped her head back for a minute, closed her eyes and rubbed at the tight muscles in her shoulders. The past couple of days had rushed by in a blur. Marion’s warning that the workload for a family of eight, nine with Jaxi added, was hellish had been a complete understatement.

Jaxi loved every minute of it.

They were halfway home, sitting in what she thought was a companionable silence, before she turned to Blake. “Thanks for the lift. I hope I didn’t pull you away from something.”

He shook his head. “Had to drop off a delivery at the post office.” His lips clamped shut and Jaxi frowned. What bee did he have up his butt? Must have been a rush order or something.

“Jesse and Joel told me earlier you boys are playing pool tomorrow night,” she said, stretching her shoulders and neck slowly, working out the kinks.

He kept his gaze on the road. “Yeah.”

“Pass on a message to Leo for me? Carol’s feeling neglected, and he’d better not cancel his Saturday night plans or she’s going to give him hell. In fact, he’d better make sure it’s an extra special evening to smooth things for a bit.” Blake grunted but otherwise didn’t respond. Jaxi frowned at him, his reaction baffling. “What? What’s that look for?”

“Listen to you, handing out romance advice. Leo and Carol are old enough to take care of themselves. They don’t need little girls telling them how to live.”

Her jaw fell open and she bit back the swear words she wanted to hurl at him. What the hell was he talking about? "I'm not a little girl, Blake. I'm twenty-one and Carol and Leo are good friends of mine. I hate to see them screw up their relationship because they've forgotten to talk to each other."

"I still say it sounds ridiculous to hear you talking about relationships and romancing. Leave them be." He took a corner too sharp and she collided hard with the side door.

"Slow down, Blake. What's gotten into you?" Jaxi had never seen him this way. He was pissed about something and damn if she knew what it was. "I'm sorry if I messed with your schedule asking for a ride."

He glared at her for a second, his eyes darting away quickly. "I said it was no trouble." He stared forward at the road. "You look beat."

She snorted. Good to know he found her attractive. "Thanks for the compliment."

"That's not what I meant," Blake interjected. "You're burning the candle at both ends. Between helping Ma keep house and all the things you do in the community you're working too hard. The phone's been ringing off the wall for you back at the house for the last couple of hours. A whole bunch of ladies called with information for the community picnic, you got three calls from a guy named Royce and the Taylors wanted to know if you could babysit for them tomorrow night."

Crap, no wonder he was upset. He'd spent the morning acting as her answering service. "Sorry, Blake. I told people to call my cell phone but the battery died and since everyone knows I'm staying with you they called the house. I'll tell them to stop."

"Who's Royce?"

She blinked in confusion for a moment. "Oh, a guy from college. He's trying to convince me to sign up for another class." Why was he asking about Royce? Especially in that gravelly voice that made shivers scurry up her spine.

"The twins are already registered and start in two weeks. Can you still get into classes at this point?" Blake kept his gaze straight ahead on the road but his hands hung onto the wheel a trifle tightly, his knuckles white.

Curiouser and curiouser.

It was time to be blunt with Blake. It was hardly right for her to fault Carol and Leo for not communicating when she was guilty of the same thing with Blake.

"I'm not interested in taking any more classes. I figure it's time for the next stage of my life. Meet new goals, fulfill new desires." Okay, it wasn't a totally blunt declaration of wanting to jump him, but it was a start. Especially as she opened her shoulders to face him, pulling one leg up on the bench seat so that her knee bumped into his thigh. A gentle caress. Barely there but enough to get her heart pounding.

"Where's he live?"

Her mind clouded with the image of him reaching to touch her, smoothing his strong fingers over her thigh. His work-hardened hands opening her jeans and unbuttoning her blouse, caressing her bare skin...

"Jaxi, where does he live?" Blake demanded.

She shook her head and lifted her gaze from his hands. *What the hell were they talking about again?* "Who?"

"This Royce guy."

The urge to giggle rose and she beat it down unmercifully. Acting like a teenybopper

wasn't the image she wanted to project right now. "Don't worry about Royce. He's a nice enough guy but I'm not interested in him." She adjusted her leg casually, rubbing his thigh again.

Blake changed gears, his legs shifting away from hers. "Well, you let me know if he gives you any trouble, alright?"

She leaned toward him slightly, letting her body soften, letting her desire for him show in her eyes and the tone of her voice. "Now why would you do that? You're not my father to watch over me and save from the big bad wolves." *Come on Blake, make a move.* She was sure she'd seen signs of his attraction but the man was damn stubborn. Whatever held him back was driving her up the wall.

"No, I'm not your father, but I've thought about you a lot lately. I haven't been taking care of you as well as I did before you began college classes. I'm going to work on that, Jaxi. You need someone to watch out for you."

Hope rose in her heart. Was he coming around? Maybe his earlier anger was because he felt responsible for her and wanted more?

Then he dumped cold water on her dreams as he reached to pat her knee gently. Playfully. As far from a lover's caress as possible. "You're a good girl, Jaxi, and you deserve to be cared for. I'm going to be the best big brother you could ever have." With a final squeeze to her knee he turned up the radio and his strong hands thumped the wheel in time with the song, a peculiar pinched smile on his face.

Jaxi stared at him slack-jawed, her body and mind both reeling as she tried to understand what he'd just said.

He'd gone insane.

A big brother? Like *hell* that's what she needed. If he wanted to care for her it wouldn't be as a big boy reluctantly playing house with a little girl. Making mud pies good-naturedly when he would prefer to be anywhere else. They'd done that already, years ago. It was time to shake things up, time to show Blake she was no little girl and he was definitely not her big brother.

She'd told Jesse earlier she played to win. The game started now in earnest and Blake wasn't going to know what hit him.

Chapter Four

Blake entered the house long after dark. He'd ridden until the cobwebs cleared from his brain. He'd cared for his horse and cleaned a couple of the saddles in the tack room. Anything to keep his hands busy, anything to keep his mind off Jaxi and what her presence did to him. Sitting across the table from her at meals, playing games as a family. Every time they bumped arms in a hallway, his damn cock stood up and took notice.

What a disaster. He couldn't act on his desire for Jaxi because it wasn't right. Every time he thought about her, need built deep in his core. She'd bolt if he even hinted at how much he wanted to seize total control over every inch of her body, touching her inside and out completely.

The whole business of her dating someone else raised its ugly head again today with the calls from Royce. The third time the asshole phoned Blake actually growled at him before controlling himself. Imagining her with anyone else made his stomach clench.

Yet if he didn't approach her, the twins would think they had the go ahead to try and convince her to accept them. Seeing Jaxi with them today outside the store had made him pause. It wasn't that they weren't good enough for her, they were both smart, good-looking fellows who would care for her. They were a little younger but that was fine.

But both of them?

Blake threw his coat on the hook and brushed his boots clean. Whatever made Joel and Jesse think double-teaming a woman was a good idea in the first place? How could they watch another man, even their brother, touch skin that had flushed under their fingers moments ago? Or hear the woman they cared for cry out as another brought her pleasure?

Could he stand it if Jaxi did hook up with one of the twins? To have to watch them cuddle and kiss in front of the family? It was bad enough when she went out with Travis, and he'd rarely seen any signs of affection—let alone passion—between them. Blake's need to be with Jaxi seemed to grow instead of fade as time passed, and knowing his brothers were making love to the girl would just about kill him.

He ran upstairs and poured himself a glass of iced tea. The table was already set for breakfast, and in the kitchen three crock-pots lined the counter, filled with food to slow cook through the night. His ma used the pots once in a blue moon so this was Jaxi's doing. A slip of paper rustled on the bulletin board; a menu and a to-do list in her flowery print.

She didn't turn her dots into little hearts anymore.

Walking through the quiet house back to the basement he spotted the twins, deep in conversation on the deck. They waved at him and he joined them, sitting with his back to the house to look out at the lawn and road, into the starlit sky.

"House is quiet early."

"Jaxi made Ma take a couple of painkillers and Dad said he'd hit the sack early to care for anything she needed." Jesse darted a glance at Joel. "Daniel said he was wiped from sitting in the sauna of a tractor all day and Matt had a book he was trying to get finished before he crashed. They both went downstairs some time ago."

"Where's Travis?" Blake asked.

Joel spat out a sunflower seed shell and grinned. "Him? He's pouting in his room."

"Pouting? What happened now? Dad ask him to deliver the shipment to Red Deer or something?"

Jesse sat back, close to Joel. It was like looking at mirror images. "Yeah, well, Dad did tell him he's on the broken tractor until further notice since it was his responsibility to arrange for the air conditioning to get fixed. He's pouting because of Jaxi."

"Because she's here?"

"Because she's here and she treated him like he deserved." Jesse said. "We all helped do the dishes after supper and he was attempting to get on her good side and act all sweet and stuff. She told him to stuff it and if he touched her again without permission he'd get racked so hard he'd sing soprano for a week."

Blake stiffened in his seat. "What'd he try?"

"Relax, Blake, it was funny. He was pretending to brush against her by accident, nothing too bad. The funny part was she didn't get mad, just told him off in a matter of fact tone. Like we all knew he was an idiot so why should she waste energy getting upset."

Joel stood and stretched lazily. "Feels strange, all of us home and headed to bed early. The gang's meeting at Traders tomorrow. You're planning on going, right?"

Blake nodded slowly. "I told Leo I'd partner with him in pool for the night. No use letting you boys retain the title any longer than we have to."

"You think your game is on enough to beat us?"

"You know it."

Jesse swept the rest of the sunflower shells into the dustbin as he gave Blake a cocky grin. "Well, hope you sleep well tonight. Get enough rest. You know, being old and all..."

He danced out of Blake's reach. "Night, Blake. Jaxi said breakfast is at seven."

The twins slipped back into the dark house to the room they shared. They'd been a handful as kids but they'd turned into fine young adults. If they didn't want Jaxi he would have thought them even better.

It was sour grapes on his part. If he couldn't have her—and he couldn't—maybe the twins were the best thing for her. *One* of them, maybe.

Blake rose and made his way downstairs. He stopped and looked at the door of the den, closed tight. Behind those doors Jaxi would be curled up, her blonde hair draped over the pillow, her body nestled in the thick comforter covering the sofa bed. She probably wore one of those baby doll nighties, her long legs exposed, her soft shoulders bare under thin straps of some kind of soft shiny material. Sleeping in the room next to her the first night had been difficult but after a week of spending time with her, his desire for her had grown even stronger.

Blake bit back a growl and headed to his room. His ma needed the help but these few weeks were turning out to be sheer hell on his body. Even now he was harder than a railway spike, the thought of Jaxi close by teasing his senses. He swore the scent of her filtered into his room.

He stripped off his jeans and shirt and padded toward the bathroom door. Oh hell, he'd forgotten he couldn't go in. As the oldest son he'd taken advantage of picking the room with an attached bathroom. It had a connecting door to the den as well and Jaxi had all her things in there. He stood, his hand on the doorknob. He wanted to enter, hoped by

some chance she'd have left the other door open and he could torment himself with a glimpse of paradise.

Blake dragged a breath of air into his lungs in an attempt to cool his burning body. It wasn't right, he couldn't think about Jaxi that way. She was a guest in their home and he was as good as a brother to her. He was acting like a hound dog and he should be ashamed of himself.

He grabbed his travel kit from under the bed and instead stepped down the hall toward the large shower room in the annex. He, Matt and Daniel had decided to use the larger bathroom and let Jaxi have the privacy of the other for herself.

The sound of running water met his ears and Blake stepped into the dimly lit room, wondering why his brothers had turned on only half the lights. Splashing noises echoed. Leaving his kit on the sink counter he rounded the corner to the showers.

And froze.

The three showerheads in the open room were separated by nothing but space. Steam filtered the dim lighting into a moonshine glow.

All he saw was wet, naked skin. Jaxi's skin. Every inch of her bare to his gaze as the water poured from the middle shower, streaming in waves over her body. She faced away from him, head thrown back as she shifted her body to allow the water to slip over her face and down her chest. Blake, his body hot and needy, watched in a daze as the shampoo rinsed from her hair and undulated down her back, tiny bubbles racing over the curve of her waist. His gaze followed the bubbles along the soft swell of her hips and the full curves of her ass. Her skin was pale pink from the heat of the water, faint tan lines showing on her thighs and arms.

His mouth went completely dry. He had to retreat. He had to turn and leave before she spotted him. He was glued in place as she slid the soap over her body, lifted her hands to brush the hair back from where it clung to her shoulders in white ribbons.

Blake's cock tented his boxers as Jaxi rotated under the showerhead, turning the front of her body to his sight. Her nipples were soft; tender juicy pink berries crowning full taut curves. The perfect size for filling his hands and still let him take her into his mouth. The water slid in rivulets over her belly and through the pale blonde curls visible at the junction of the long legs he'd fantasized about so many times. Jaxi had her eyes closed and she swayed from side to side as she washed, her hands slipping over her body in a way that made Blake heat to near boiling just from watching her. She hummed, soft and low, her hips moving to the sound of the tune. Guilt shot through him. He had no right to watch her, no right to invade her privacy and treat her like anything but the beautiful caring person he knew her to be. She wasn't his to admire.

God help him, he wanted her to be.

He swallowed hard and tried to peel his gaze off her. Tried to not watch as her hands covered her breasts then slicked over her belly in soft circles. Tried to look away as she slipped her fingers gently through the curls covering her pussy, over her ass and washed every inch of her luscious body clean.

Blake watched, still and noiseless for so long he felt like a statue, every inch of his body gone as hard and rigid as his aching shaft. Indecision held him, immobilized him. The rush of blood through his veins drowned out the part of his brain saying he needed to leave. The pounding faded everything logical and rational away in him and stripped it bare to need and desire.

His eyes needed him to stay here, to fill his brain with the vision of her glowing skin, her seductive movements. His hands needed to touch her, run over her curves like the water caressing every inch. His mouth needed to taste; not only her lips but her breasts and the spot on her back where the skin dimpled above her ass.

He desired her. Every inch of his body wanted to show her how much but his conscience kept kicking his feet out from under him before he could cross the room.

This was *Jaxi*. No matter what Joel thought, no matter that Daniel said the years didn't matter. He couldn't have her. She was forbidden fruit, no matter how sweet.

He wished he had never walked down the hallway.

Jaxi opened her eyes, her gaze unfocused for a second before she noticed him standing in the steamy room like some ghostly peeping tom. Her quick intake of breath was enough for him to realize she didn't expect him, hadn't realized she'd be putting on a show.

Now was a perfect time for him to drop his head and slip away. He still couldn't do it. She stared back at him through the mist hanging in the air, her eyes as big as silver dollars. She bit her bottom lip and he fought to stay still, fought to stay quiet.

Then he noticed her nipples change. Tightening even as he looked at her and she looked back. Electric pulses shot through him and his hands itched to touch her, to lift the weight of her breasts and lap at those gems that had grown erect beneath his gaze.

Jaxi turned off the water and stepped slowly toward him, her head held high. She sauntered up, slippery and wet, naked as a jaybird. Every inch of her skin glowed with heat as she stopped inches away, staring unendingly with those big grey eyes. She reached out an arm, her naked skin brushing past his shoulder. She drew back clasping a towel she'd grasped from the hook from beside his head.

He thought she'd wrap herself up quick. Instead she rotated her fingers and let the towel hang as she held it to him. He looked down at the towel, saw the way her hand trembled even as she put on a bold face and kept her body still under his hot gaze. He reached for her, his hand moving of its own accord before his brain fully engaged.

What brain? All the blood he needed for thinking had pooled in his groin.

This was the second time she'd taken him by surprise and he couldn't make the same mistake. He'd been haunted daily since the first.

He couldn't let it happen again. It wasn't right for them to be together.

Blake pulled back his hand.

And fled.

Chapter Five

The morning passed in a blur of activity. Jaxi cooked and cleaned with a vengeance, but deep inside a huge lump sat and burned at her innards. Blake hadn't said good morning to her. He'd avoided her gaze at breakfast and hightailed it from the house as quick as a jackrabbit. She wasn't sure what to do because after she'd crawled into her bed last night she realized she'd been way out of line.

Apologize? That would be smooth. She could hear herself now. "Sorry for getting naked and hoping you'd ravish me in your parent's house with your brothers just down the hall."

Damn. How was she supposed to get him to make a move on her when they lived in the same house? When the whole family was always around or popping up unexpectedly? As much as she loved his family, it was Blake she wanted.

This wasn't going to be as easy as she first imagined.

After dinner Matt tugged her aside. "You want to go to the children's summer camp performance at the community hall this Wednesday?"

She hesitated, panic flooding her. Not Matt too. Sweet, considerate, insightful Matt. He excited her about as much as a bouquet of dandelions. The expression on her face must have shown her fear because he chuckled and quickly reassured her. "I don't mean *with* me, Jaxi. Hell if you need that kind of complication in your life right now."

Her muscles unclenched slowly as he patted her shoulder. A pat from him felt proper, caring and supportive. It wasn't a copout like the treatment from Blake the other day. If any of the Colemans was a big brother figure to her, it was Matt.

"I'm already going to the hall on Wednesday," Jaxi said. "I promised to seat people and sell tickets for the raffle."

"Maybe you should get some help. I know Blake is free on Wednesday and I bet he would give you a hand if you asked."

Jaxi snorted. "You here on his behalf? I don't think your brothers are too shy to ask me if they want to do something with me, Matt. They're grown men, they've got tongues in their heads."

He stopped and looked out the window for a minute before he answered. "Well... yes, we might be all grown up but that doesn't mean we can all see what's right in front of our noses. Some of us don't make the right decisions for ourselves because we try too hard to do what we think is right for everyone else. As for not being shy, you never know. Sometimes it's the biggest and seemingly boldest animals you've got to gentle along real slow and easy to get the right results. Too fast and they spook."

Her face flushed and she busied herself wiping the counter to avoid looking him in the eye. Oh lordy, did Matt know what happened last night? How shockingly she'd behaved?

"If you have a little extra time this afternoon you can switch your stuff into the far basement bedroom. Blake told me this morning he's taking the guest cabin so you can have a real bed and we'll be able use the office again."

Jaxi's heart choked off her throat. What had she done?

* * * *

In the end Blake asked Jaxi if he could help her at the play and she wondered if Matt had maneuvered the request. By the time Wednesday rolled around and the performance was over, most of the awkwardness she had caused by her boldness in the shower had faded away. She wasn't any closer to getting Blake to acknowledge he wanted her, but at least they were talking easily again.

They cleaned together, brooms in hand, sweeping the nearly empty hall. She planned her next step, considering Matt's suggestion of "gentling the shy animal along" when Blake dropped a bombshell.

"I've been thinking about the other day."

Lordy, so had she.

"This Royce fellow. How old did you say he is?"

She tripped over her own feet and landed on her butt. Did he just ask about Royce again? He wasn't talking about the shower at all?

The man had gone mad.

"I don't think I told you how old he is, Blake. What the hell does Royce have to do with anything?" she demanded, scrambling to her feet and brushing off her jeans. She'd spent the evening admiring how Blake capably dealt with last minute disasters for the theater company. Admiring the way he visited with the townsfolk during the intermission, chatting and laughing with people of all ages. Admiring the way he looked in his jeans, all muscle and tightly bound energy.

And now he wanted to talk about someone she knew from college? *What the hell?*

"I figured you two must have a lot in common, if you were in the same classes and all. Maybe it would be good for you to select another class or two and spend time with the guy. If he lives in the area you could call and ask him to join us for supper." Blake swept vigorously as he spoke, dust flying everywhere.

Jaxi dropped her broom and grabbed his with two hands, stilling his motion. She jerked them close together to stare into his face. He avoided her eyes for a moment before turning that ghastly smile on her, the one he'd worn ever since announcing he was her big brother.

"Enough, Blake. You are seriously pissing me off and I want to know what your problem is."

He shrugged and tried to remove the broom from between them. "I thought it might be nice if you like the guy for you to spend time together."

"I don't want Royce, Blake." Jaxi shook the handle violently, releasing it with a snap. She stepped back to glare at him, fists resting on her hips. "I want ... oh damn it, do I have to spell it out for you? I thought it was pretty clear what I wanted the other night in the shower. I want you, Blake."

He shook his head and resumed sweeping, ignoring her like she was one of the cats underfoot in the barn at milking time. "I'm too old for you. Heck, it's like I'm your big brother and—"

Jaxi ripped the broom from his hands and hurled it across the room. He was being a bloody jackass. It was a damn good thing she loved him because otherwise she'd be tempted to kill him.

"You are *not* my brother, by any stretch of the imagination. The things I want us to do, Blake, they are *not* brother/sister activities." She took a slow breath and calmed her

temper. At least they were talking, even if Blake seemed to be speaking some weird foreign dialect and she didn't have a translation book.

Slow down. Go gently.

She needed to get him to acknowledge what he wanted, not what he thought needed to happen. Get him to drop the damn sense of responsibility for long enough to see the real picture. Jaxi snuck in closer, resting a hand on his crossed arms. She drew a slow finger along his skin, speaking softly. "You ever dream about me, Blake? You ever think about taking me in your arms and kissing me? Touching me? I dream about you all the time. You in my bed, making me feel things I've never felt before."

"Stop it, that's not going to happen." Blake jerked away from her and Jaxi's stomach lurched. He didn't even want her to touch him. "You're an attractive woman—"

Red flashed before her eyes. He was the most frustrating man she'd ever met. She followed him closely, crowding into his body. "Oh, now I'm a woman. Well, that's a plus. You finally noticed I grew up. What's the problem, Blake? I think you like me too, so why aren't we acting on the attraction?"

Blake grabbed her by the shoulders and maneuvered her back from him. He paced away, his hands dragging through his hair in frustration, swear words floating soft on the air. When he turned toward her his face had gone grey and drawn, like he'd shut off his heart. His deep gravelly voice cut deep as he spoke quietly. "The issue is you're still a little girl compared to me and you won't be happy with an old man for long. Do I want you? Hell, yeah, you make my body ache so hard it's a fucking nightmare for me to wake from my dreams and realize you're not really there. But I'm too old for you, and I refuse to take advantage of the physical pull between us for a one-night stand. Stop trying to seduce me and prove you're as grown up you claim. Find someone your own age to play with."

She gasped as pain rippled through her belly. His words lashed her, stinging to the core. The seemingly caring tone he delivered them in made it worse. She wanted to smack him hard enough to knock off his blinders and turn this disaster of a conversation around.

Before he broke her heart.

"Oh, so now I'm old enough to play around, just not with you. Hmm, let's see, who do I know that's around my age and interested in me. Gee, two names jump to mind."

"Jaxi..." The emotionless face changed in an instant to disapproval and anger.

"What, you don't think Jesse and Joel are interested in me anymore? I was pretty sure Jesse said he was, just the other day."

He stepped toward her, forcing her to shuffle backward to stay out from underfoot. "I've warned them you're off limits. The only way I want to see you around them is if you pick one and the other swears to bow out. I won't have you messing around with them both."

Jaxi popped her eyes open wide and forced herself to display a delighted expression. "So it's true, they do get involved with the same girl at the same time. Damn, sounds like a bit of an adventure. Maybe that's what I need since I can't have what I want."

"You stay away from my brothers," he warned, his voice harsh and low.

She let out a burst of laughter, feeling hard and tight inside. "You're not the boss of me. Maybe I can't convince the one Coleman I want to be with me but I bet you I can sure as hell have a little fun with a couple others."

He loomed over her, dark and dangerous and she wanted to have him hold her instead of dealing with this whole stupid mess. “Let’s not throw it away, Jaxi, all those years of friendship,” he said.

Her throat was tightening up, all her anger melting away as she fought back tears. There was no way she was going to cry in front of him, not now. She had to figure out a solution to stop the train wreck from continuing. “I agree we’ve had something special in the past. But don’t you see, all those years of friendship were leading to something bigger and better and that’s what you’re choosing to throw away. You, Blake, you’re the one throwing it away. I know what I want.”

She stood on tiptoes and brushed a kiss on his burning hot cheek before whispering, “Let me know when your ready to admit what you *really* want. I’m getting tired of waiting for the right answer.”

Jaxi had never been keen on dramatic exits but time was of the essence to avoid bursting into tears. She slipped past his solid bulk and dashed out the fire exit.

Chapter Six

Blake took another draw on his beer and placed the bottle down carefully before turning his attention back to the surface of the pool table. He and Leo were maintaining their own over the twins, the score sixty-seven to sixty-four. Better than the previous Friday when he'd still been out of his mind trying to understand what had happened with Jaxi in the shower the night before. Damn, his life had turned into a cheap dime store romance gone sour.

Joel and Jesse relaxed nearby, cocky grins on their faces.

"Not bad for a tired old man," Jesse said, twirling his cue as he waited for his turn.

"Well, if Leo was a little less distracted we'd have you boys so far gone you'd tuck in your tails and head home," Blake said as he tried to decide which ball to sink. This week Leo was off his game, checking his watch and cell phone continually. "Leo, you got troubles? Other than the twenty we're ready to lose if you don't concentrate a little more?"

Leo grinned sheepishly. "Carol's supposed to get back into town tonight or tomorrow. I'm waiting for her call."

"Save us from the lovebirds. Leo, you and Carol are soooo sweet." Jesse turned and made a face at Blake and Joel.

Blake snorted. "Six ball, right side pocket." He lined up the shot and sank the ball in one smooth easy motion. Handing the cue to Leo he went back to his beer.

He wasn't going to let Jesse know he really was tired. Sleep was hard to come by since he'd left Jaxi in the shower. His nights had gotten worse after she'd blown up at him at the community hall. He tossed and turned, hard and aching, all night long with no easy solution to his problem.

"You enjoy living in the guest cabin, Blake?" Joel asked. His legs kicked freely as he sat on top of a nearby table watching Leo take his shot.

Blake grunted.

"Guess Jaxi needed a little more room than the office space. What a gentleman you are to offer your bed," Jesse said, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

Blake flashed him a dirty look. Damn twins could poke all they wanted but no way was he going to confess he'd changed rooms because he didn't trust himself to be close to the girl and not make a move on her. Hell, the way she'd acted in the shower, inviting him to touch her, he hadn't trusted her to stay away from him. There was no use in begging for trouble.

Then there was the whole 'Showdown at O.K. Corral' two nights ago. What a fucking nightmare. He hated that he'd hurt her, the expression in her eyes almost enough to make him reconsider, if only to be allowed to soothe away the pain.

He'd admit it. Jaxi had grown up, but he couldn't let her goad him into doing something she'd regret. She'd never want to be with him for the long haul and he was *not* having a one-night stand with her. The pain of rejection was for her own good, even though sticking to his guns choked something deep inside him.

"Course, staying in the cabin means you've got much more privacy if you need it." Joel jumped off the table with a whoop of delight. "Leo, you blew the shot. Our turn."

Joel and Jesse took turns sinking balls, raising their score to seventy-five before they made a mistake. Blake drank his beer and looked around the hall. The familiar décor soothed his tired nerves. On this side of the hall people sat and talked, or played pool and relaxed. Next door the music was loud, the dance floor wide and the bar open late. They were the only ones playing pool tonight, tucked into the back corner where it was quiet and private.

Blake was getting up for his turn when he saw her. Jaxi breezed in the doorway, pale blonde hair floating around her head.

“Sweet mercy, angel entering the room,” Jesse said.

She did look like an angel. For the past few weeks Jaxi had worn plain jeans or jean shorts with cotton shirts and pulled her hair into a sensible ponytail while she cooked and canned and worked around the house with his ma.

Tonight her sundress was made of layers of flimsy material that lifted and floated in different directions as she sashayed forward. The clinging top left her smooth shoulders bare, the scooped neckline revealing deep cleavage of pearly pink skin. The fluttering layers of the skirt slid over her smooth legs, stopping a couple inches above her knees. The whole thing was cut from shades of yellow and gold, making her shine like a ray of sunshine.

Jesse rushed to greet her. Blake bit back a growl as his brother took her hand and placed it under his arm to escort her back to their table, his head tucked in tight to her ear as he spoke. Jaxi’s eyes flicked to Blake’s for a brief second before she laughed softly at Jesse’s words and turned to beam at Joel and Leo.

“Evening, boys, I was looking for Lindy but I’ve been told she’s gone for the weekend. Mind if I join you instead?” Jaxi leaned in and kissed Leo’s cheek and Blake’s arms jerked as he held himself back.

So much for a relaxing evening.

“Leo, I haven’t seen you in forever. Where’ve you been hiding?” Jaxi stood close, her hands resting on Leo’s arm. Blake turned away and retrieved his beer. At this rate he was going to need another one pretty damn soon.

“It’s been busy at the shop lately. And you know, well, Carol and me...” Leo grinned back at her. “I owe you one. Big time. Can I get you a drink?”

“Whoa there, stud,” Jesse teased. “You’ve got yourself a woman already. I’ll get Jaxi her drink. What’ll you have, sweetheart?”

“Any you boys drinking draft tonight?”

“Joel and I are,” Jesse answered.

“Can I join you?”

Jesse grinned from ear to ear and twirled her into his arms like they were on the dance floor, snuggling her tight against his body. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Jaxi slapped his shoulders as she laughed at him. “Jesse, I swear. You’ve got the dirtiest mind. Get me a beer and get on with your game.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jesse dropped a quick kiss on her nose before he let her go.

Blake stared at Jaxi. She was deliberately flirting with the boys and ignoring him, like she’d done since Wednesday. He couldn’t believe she would taunt him. She wouldn’t dare follow up on the challenge she’d thrown and fool around with the twins just to spite him.

Would she?

“Ma alright alone tonight?” Blake kicked himself even as he spoke.

Jaxi did a slow rotation toward him, her face flushed. “No, Blake, she had a pounding headache, a pile of laundry to fold and just before I left I set a swarm of wasps loose in the house.” She strode over and hopped up next to Joel on the table, her skirts flaring to brush his thigh. Joel raised his eyebrows at his brothers then took a long slow look along the length of exposed leg next to him, smiling with appreciation.

“So, now that we’re all clear Blake is an ass, whose turn is it?” Leo asked, not even trying to hide his smirk.

Blake stepped forward. “Jaxi, I didn’t mean I thought you’d—”

Jaxi leaned a little closer to Joel, her left breast rubbing his arm as she ignored Blake. “You planning on dancing later?”

“If you need a partner.”

Jaxi slipped her fingers into his and winked at Jesse hovering on her other side.

“Your ma and dad went to visit friends and told me they didn’t need me until tomorrow morning. I guess I have some time to kill.”

Blake felt like shit as he turned back to the table. Although he’d decided it was best for her to not be with him, the decision haunted him. Watching her with the twins hurt worse than he thought possible. He wanted to be the one holding her hand and whispering in her ear. Taking her close against him on the dance floor and feeling her soft skin rub every inch of his body.

“Nine ball, corner pocket.”

Blake and Leo pulled the score to eighty-seven before they missed. It was an exquisite form of torture for Blake as he moved around the table to take shots. Every now and then he’d sight his cue in Jaxi’s direction, see Joel’s arm casually tucked behind her back. Jesse was on her other side, their thighs tight together, his fingers draped over both their legs. She was sandwiched between them just like Joel described days ago and Blake’s temper rose.

He had told them to stay away from her. Warned them not to get too close in private, let alone in public. Joel met his eye with a challenge that was about more than pool as he stepped to the table and the twins quickly took their score over one hundred to win.

“I guess that means we keep the record for another week, right, old-timers?” Jesse held his hand toward Leo and Blake. Leo handed over a twenty.

“We have time for another game,” Blake suggested. Anything to keep the twins from taking Jaxi into the dancehall before he decided what he was going to do. In spite of all his good intentions, there was a bitter taste in his mouth.

Jesse gave him a grin that said it all. “Well, that’s up to Jaxi. What do you say, sweetheart, can you wait a little longer for a dance?”

Jaxi wiggled her way off the table, letting Joel ease her to the ground. “You go ahead and play another round. I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

They all watched her hips sway as she headed for the ladies room, the layers of her skirt flaring around her legs like windblown leaves.

Leo whistled, long and low. “Sweet. That woman is one hot piece of action waiting to happen.” He turned back to the brothers, his face innocent and blank. “So, do I get to watch a fight to see which one of you takes her home to the Six Pack Ranch?”

Jesse and Joel snickered, their dark blond heads shaking. “Damn Leo, that nickname for our place kills me,” Joel said as he leaned back on the table. “We’re all taking her

home. She's staying with us to help our ma."

Leo flipped a hand at him. "I know that, and you know that's not what I asked. She's been waiting for one of you Coleman boys for as long as I've known her. I just can't figure which one. Spill."

Blake glared a warning at the twins. "What do you mean waiting for one of us?"

Leo shrugged. "I noticed it more after Carol said something to me once. Jaxi's willing to flirt with the twins, but she's got her eyes all over you, Blake. The way the woman watches you I'd think you'd feel her burning a hole in your backside." Leo examined Blake's face closely. "You had no idea, did you? Maybe you need to spend a little less time in the fields and a little more time around people. Jaxi's got plans and she's moving on them. I can hardly wait to see how this one shakes down!"

Jaxi returned by the time they'd racked the balls and Leo got ready to take the first shot.

"Playing one hundred again?" she asked.

"It's our favorite way to embarrass the old folks," Joel taunted.

Jaxi's gaze raked Blake from top to bottom. He stiffened at the blatant appraisal, the sexual gleam she didn't even try to hide. "Pretty nice looking for old folks." She turned to Jesse. "I haven't seen you play Challenge lately. Why don't you do a round of it for me?"

"Challenge?" Leo whispered to Blake.

What was the minx up to? Challenge was usually played with mixed teams and it often developed into a flirting game. Downright foreplay at times. Jaxi tucked her cell phone away in her purse and shimmied back onto the table.

"Challenge sounds fine to us," Joel called. "We can beat you faster than in a normal game since you'll be too embarrassed to sink any balls."

Leo shrugged. "I'm game." He pointed a finger at Jaxi. "I don't know what you're doing, little lady, but I'll play along this time. You got Carol to give me another chance and I can put up with a little tomfoolery for your sake."

Jaxi winked at him and sat back to watch.

The twins won the break and Blake tried to remember a game challenge that wasn't too raunchy.

"First ten points, consecutive pockets starting with far right."

Jesse hooted. "You worried about making us blush, big brother?"

"Just shoot."

Jesse and Joel took their turns, managing to sink eight balls in a row into the appropriate pockets before missing. Blake and Leo took over and they put away two more before Jesse cleared his throat to announce the next challenge.

"Triple Play."

"Hell, Jesse, you're kidding," Leo complained. "Do I need to worry about why you want to slip between me and Blake while we shoot?"

Jesse shook his head. "Not me. I figured we could talk Jaxi into helping us." He turned and held a hand to the girl. "What do you think, sweetheart? Run a little interference for us?"

Blake's heartbeat increased as Jaxi took the hand offered her and smiled sweetly at Jesse. The boy had the guts to clasp her by the waist and slowly lower her to the ground, letting their bodies rub together tightly.

Jaxi propelled herself back from Jesse's arms with a wink. "I'm in, but I'm supposed

to start with Blake's team. Troublemaker." She patted his cheek and turned toward Blake, her eyes flashing. "Unless you'd rather give up right now and admit defeat. I never took you for a quitter, but I guess you can't tell when things will get too hot for a person to handle."

Blake shoved down his anger. She wanted to play with fire, did she? He was hot enough to burn through her teasing and take her on the table, right in front of the whole world, if she didn't back off. Damn the consequences.

Blake examined the table for a sinkable shot. "Twelve in the side pocket, Leo." His partner nodded and eyeballed the line before placing his hand on the table for Blake to rest the cue on. Leo twisted his body far to the side, leaving plenty of room for Blake to make the shot using one hand.

Except Triple Play meant he had to have Jaxi between him and Leo. Touching them both at the same time. Blake threw Jesse an evil look and a roar of laughter shot back at him.

"I did shower recently," Jaxi said, moving in close.

Bloody hell. Don't talk about showers right now.

Blake wrapped an arm around Jaxi and tugged her into his side. She slid her arms over his torso to his back and clung to him as he leaned over the table, positioned the cue on Leo's outstretched hand and took the shot.

Jaxi's sweet scent rose around them, her breath hot on his neck as he stood slowly. Tension built in his gut, not only from the feel of her against his body. Nine more balls to sink before they went to the next challenge and he would go insane if he had to watch his little brothers spoon Jaxi between the two of them.

Leo picked a shot and Blake set up the cradle. Instead of hugging onto Leo, Jaxi slid close to Blake again, resting in tight against his chest, her breasts compressed against him, swelling to the top of the scooped neck of her dress. Blake bit back a groan.

"You got troubles, Blake?" Jaxi whispered in his ear. She licked him, her hot little tongue slipping into his ear, making his whole body jerk in reaction.

"Hell, Blake, stay still," Leo cursed. The ball bounced sideways shy of the pocket and rolled to a stop.

"Our turn for a bit. Come here, sweetheart, and give me some sugar." Jesse checked Blake for a reaction before bussing Jaxi on the lips.

Blake glared daggers at his little brother.

Joel got into position, kneeling with one leg up, his arm resting casually on the table to his side. "Ride side saddle if you want."

Jaxi flicked another glance at Blake then strolled confidently up to Joel. "Side saddle is for cowards."

She stepped on either side of his leg and lowered herself to straddle him, her skirt lifting to expose more of her long limbs. Blake grit his teeth as Joel pulled her in tight, squeezing their bodies close as her pussy slid over him. Jaxi made a soft sound of pleasure, her expression nowhere near as confident as it was moments before. She bit her lower lip and Jesse swore, folding his body over them to sink the shot. Jesse lifted her up, and got ready for the next shot.

Blake drained his beer and tried not to watch as Jaxi and Jesse and Joel wrapped around each other for another six shots. Each time it took longer to arrange the positioning. Jesse slid his hands over Jaxi thoroughly as he prepared, pulling her tighter

to himself or pushing her against Joel as he pretended to adjust for line. Jaxi's face grew flushed, her heartbeat visible in the hollow of her neck, her breathing more rapid. Her eyes were huge, her gaze following Blake everywhere.

Blake died a little with every touch of his brother's hands on Jaxi. Every time their mouths brushed her skin, every time their hips and torsos pressed together.

He faced the wall and clenched his fists tight. He was going to stalk out the door or he was going to kill someone. Or some two.

Jaxi bit back a cry, breathless and low.

"Holy shit," Leo muttered.

Blake turned back to see Joel had Jaxi on his arm, bent forward, as he leant over her to take a shot off Jesse's shoulder. Joel moved slowly, slipping the pool cue back as if he needed more time to check the line. He bent his mouth to Jaxi's ear and whispered something while he caressed her breast with his free hand. She gasped and arched under him.

Both of Jesse's hands were free to slide along the long legs spread in front of where he knelt on the ground. One of Jesse's hands flowed under her dress over her ass. The other hand wasn't visible but Blake could imagine what Jesse was doing as the bastard stared into Jaxi's flushed face, Jesse's eyes wild as he watched Jaxi tremble under his touch.

Blake saw red, the blood rushing through him heated to boiling as his endurance failed. "Enough!"

The sensual dance fell apart. Joel stood slowly, keeping Jaxi in his arms as he backed them away from where Jesse knelt, head bowed, breathing uneven, fists pressed hard on his thighs. He rose unsteadily to his feet, his eyes glazed as he fought for control. Lifting his fingers to his mouth, Jesse's blue eyes riveted on Jaxi.

Leo's phone rang.

He swore and turned away to answer it, retreating to the front room and leaving the three brothers alone with Jaxi.

The only sound was the dull beat of the music echoing from the far side of the wall. Blake knew in the past two minutes something had changed and there was no going back. Either he stepped up or he stepped aside.

Did he want her?

Damn, he wanted her so bad he had to restrain himself from tossing her over his shoulder like a caveman and hightailing it to his truck for a little action in the back. Or forget even making it to the truck, he'd slip them into the back room and fuck her against the wall, hard and fast, until they both made more of those noises of pleasure she was so good at producing. His cock was rock hard from watching her with his brothers and every breath he took hurt.

But it was the expression on her face that brought him to his knees. She'd been in Joel's arms, Jesse's hand on her body, but she stared at Blake like he was the one who had just rocked her world.

The difference in their ages, her having been Travis' girlfriend, being a big brother figure when he wanted much more; all the issues haunting him faded to insignificance in light of how much he needed her.

Why in the hell had he kept them apart?

Blake took a step toward her. Her hair was tousled around her face, wisps of curls

stuck in the air in spots. A trickle of sweat ran down her temple to her neck, past her collarbone. She breathed hard, her eyes glittering grey stars shining straight into his soul.

“Blake?”

Her voice trembled.

She bit at her lower lip again and Blake drew in a harsh breath. He didn’t step toward her; frozen by the sight of Jesse’s fingers trailing down her arm, by Joel leaning in close to her side and nuzzling at her neck.

“So, Blake, you decided?” Jesse whispered. “Are we taking Jaxi home or are you? Or all of us? Because it’s high time this headed somewhere a little more private.”

Blake damned himself for waiting, for giving the twins a chance to touch her and make her want them. Now he couldn’t rip her from their arms.

She had to choose.

Blake flicked his head to the side; the twins stepped back a pace, leaving Jaxi standing in their midst. She swayed as her legs supported her full weight for the first time since the start of the game.

“Jaxi, who...” Blake hesitated. He wasn’t going to beg but he wanted her to know what he was asking. This wasn’t just about right here and right now. He caressed her cheek with his hand. “Jaxi, you offered me something pretty special the other night and I turned you down.”

Jesse and Joel exchanged quick looks.

“I was scared, I’ll admit it. But I’m not scared anymore. If you still want me.”

He was drowning in Jaxi’s eyes. The tip of her tongue slipped out and wet her lips. She narrowed her gaze and her voice dropped to a whisper. Soft and intimate, just for his ears.

“You still think you’re too old for me, Blake Coleman? Because I don’t want someone who’s going to be all careful and delicate with me when what you want is a woman to make love with—”

Blake crushed her to him, slanting his mouth over hers to taste her lips for the first time. Sweet honey and hops lingered on her tongue but the overwhelming flavor was Jaxi and nothing else. Blake ate at her mouth hungrily, lifting her body to his to mold her close, his fingers cradling the cheeks of her ass as he tried to wrap her around him more intimately. Jaxi had her fingers in his hair, keeping them so tight together that if he needed to breath it was going to have to be through her. He barely stopped his hands from ripping her clothes off, but as much as he wanted to touch her everywhere a small part of his mind still remembered they were in public.

A very small part.

He wrenched his mouth from hers and dropped his head to her shoulder. Somehow they’d crossed the room until they were against the pool table. Jaxi’s hips rested on the edge of the green felt, legs spread wide to allow Blake to fit between, snug against her crotch. The heat of her pussy burned through the thin fabric of her dress and his denim jeans and Blake took a deep breath and fought for control.

“You two want us to create a road block at the door or you going to make it home okay?” Joel asked quietly.

Jaxi squirmed.

“What?” Blake asked softly.

She pulled him close to whisper in his ear. “You don’t know how tempted I am to

say 'road block' right now."

Blake swallowed hard. "I'm not taking you for the first time on a pool table, Slick."

"How about the sixth? Or tenth? Promise me sometime we can do it on a pool table—"

Blake dragged her off the table and into his arms. "You keep talking like that and we won't make it anywhere but the parking lot."

Chapter Seven

Blake carried her out the door of the hall. A couple of wolf whistles echoed in their direction and Jaxi tucked her face farther into the crook of his neck. She was finally in his arms where she'd longed to be and it was new enough she wanted it to remain private.

By morning the whole town would know. Was Blake ready?

"You sure about this? You take me back inside and we can pretend this was a joke. We can keep it a secret for a bit. Otherwise everyone will talk."

Blake kissed her again, his hands possessive on her body as he drew their hips together intimately, pressing his rigid cock into the softness of her belly. His tongue swept over her teeth, tasting and teasing, as he leaned her back against the side of his truck, trapping her between the solid metal and the solid length of his body.

Jaxi's head was spinning before he drew back, his eyes dark with arousal. "This is no joke and I don't give a damn who knows I'm taking you home with me tonight. Unless you tell me right now you don't want me I'm planning on being buried as deep as possible in you, as soon as I can, and they could sell tickets for all I care."

"I want you. I've always wanted you." Jaxi gasped.

Blake closed his eyes for a second before he cupped her face in his hands. "Then you need to stop fussing. You didn't seem worried about people watching you when it was the twins who were doing the touching. I guess maybe I need to ask you the same thing you asked me. Am I too old for you, little girl? Are you able to offer me everything I need? Cause I don't want a shy little thing in my bed, or someone who's worried about what other people are saying. In fact, I want a woman who's not afraid to seduce me right under other people's noses, like I saw the other day in the shower. Someone who'll wear a sexy dress and maybe even leave her panties behind so I can touch her anytime and anywhere I want. Someone who can handle me as hard and as often as I need. So you look at me with those big baby doll eyes of yours and you tell me. Are you able to give me everything I need, Jaxi?"

Blake breathed hard, his chest rising and falling fast, his hands on Jaxi strong and firm. She'd watched him for many years, seen him in many different moods. She'd never seen him like he was tonight.

Raw. Needy.

All male.

Everything she'd longed for.

She reached to grab one of his hands and pulled it to her lips, her eyes staring back into his as she kissed his palm. Without a word she tugged until his strong hand rested between her legs, cupping her mound. Slowly, inch-by-inch, she wiggled up the filmy layers of her skirt until they slipped from under his hand.

And his fingers touched the soft curls of her body.

She was still looking deep into his eyes as he realized she was naked under her dress. The heat flash was enough to send a wave of desire through her body causing a flood of liquid to slip over his hand.

"Damn it, Slick, I'm not going to last thirty seconds with you, am I?"

Her head fell back against the window as he touched her softly, his thick work

toughened fingers gently caressing her pussy lips. He separated her and pressed to slick over the tight nub at the apex of her mound. Blake touched his lips to the side of her neck, nipped at the tendon there then soothed it with a sweep of his tongue. He leaned in close to her ear and spoke just above a whisper.

“I was going to drive you straight home, but before we leave here you owe me something, Jaxi. You owe me for letting Jesse and Joel touch you and bring you pleasure in front of my eyes. So we’re going to stay here until you drop some more sweet honey on my fingers and you make more of those sweet sounds from your lips. You’re going to let me watch you come apart and it will be my hand that takes you there.”

His mouth descended again—hot and needy, demanding and incessant. He kissed her as his fingers stroked, circled, teased. Pressure built through her core, the uneasy balance of pleasurable tension and tingling ache. Blake rubbed her clit while his tongue delved into her mouth, twisting her emotions even as his hand twisted her senses into overload.

He pressed one long finger deep, swallowing the gasp of pleasure that escaped from her lips.

They stood in the shadows on the side of the lot, lights flicking past from the occasional vehicle. The glare of headlights faded to nothing as Blake continued, slow and even, to press into her sheath. She opened her legs more, instinctively trying to ease his passage, trying to let him farther into her aching core. The warm August air gusted around them, heat flowing over her skin, as his fingers continued to caress, the heel of his hand hard against her throbbing clit.

He matched the motion of his tongue and finger, his other hand supporting her neck to let him angle her head to the right position for maximum pleasure. He rubbed their bodies together, friction heating their passion.

Her core tightened, her breasts grew hot and aching as they pressed into his hard chest. Moisture fell from her body to slide along her thighs. Still he continued, his groin pressed hard against her leg letting her feel how much it affected him to touch her, feel her response.

He bit at her lips, dragged her body closer as he sped the pace of his thrusting hand and hips a bit. Jaxi cried out as the increase in stimulation possessed her, swept around her, swept over her, and propelled her over the edge. Blake’s kisses grew more desperate as he rocked against her a few more times then clutched her hard. Their harsh breathing echoed off the parked cars around them.

Blake embraced her until she stopped shaking.

“Damn, woman, I haven’t come in my jeans since I was in tenth grade.” Blake’s soft lips brushed her temple, light and gentle, and Jaxi took a deep breath and tried to stop the world from spinning.

Sweet sounds of the night, the faint throb of the music from the bar, voices in the distance; all echoed loudly in her ears until the blood pounding through her slowed.

“You got your car keys?” Blake asked quietly.

“In my purse. Do you want me to meet you at home?”

“No way you’re getting away that easy, Slick, you’re coming with me. I’ve got your car covered. Keys.”

Jaxi slipped her purse from her shoulder and dug into it. She passed her keychain to him, wondering what he planned to do with her vehicle. Blake took the keys from her and turned around, searching the shadows. He threw them with a sudden snap and Jaxi bit her

lip as Jesse stepped forward and caught them in mid air.

Joel appeared next to him and the four stared at each other for a moment. Jaxi swallowed hard. The twins must have been there watching the whole time, but she couldn't find anywhere in her that was upset.

Turned on more than she imagined possible, but not upset.

Joel nodded his head once and moved away, fading like a ghost into the darkness. Jesse watched for a moment longer. His blue eyes flicked between her and Blake before he lifted his fingers and blew her a kiss. Then he too disappeared.

Jaxi shivered as a shot of desire raced through her. The night was getting hotter and hotter and she had a good idea where the next step would lead.

Blake turned her to face him, cupping her chin in his hand. "You mad at me for letting them see you're mine?"

Jaxi linked her arms around his neck and lifted her mouth to his. She swept one leg up the back of his thigh as far as she could lift, pressing hard against him. "You mad they helped set you up? To force you to acknowledge how much you wanted me?"

Blake froze.

"You planned it? The game, the flirting?"

Jaxi looked away for a second before she drew in her courage and stared him down. "Yeah, I set it up, but it didn't work as planned. Leo was supposed to get called away and I was going to end up your partner for the game of Challenge. But Leo was still there and Jesse pulled a fast one calling Triple Play. I thought to hell with it, hoping it would shake you enough you'd come to your senses and realize you wanted me."

Blake shook his head slowly. "Wanting you has never been the problem, Jaxi." He yanked open the truck door and helped her in the driver side, pulling her hip back against his when she would have scooted to the passenger side.

He looked at her hard for a minute. "You're one dangerous woman, Jaxi."

He chuckled.

The tension in her released in one fell swoop. He could have been upset, getting set up like that. Heck, he could have been upset with Jesse and Joel for being more than willing to play along and pushing it too far.

"You planned anymore games for tonight, Slick? Anything I need to know about before we go home?"

Jaxi shook her head.

"Good, I'm in charge of the evening from here on. No twins popping in and out, no games of chance." Blake reversed out of the lot and was on the street faster than Jaxi thought possible. "No worrying about what the old ladies at the salon will say tomorrow. No worrying about who's too old and who's too young."

They were on the gravel already, fast approaching the Coleman spread. Blake's hand lay soft on her thigh, his thumb tracing small circles as he inched her skirt further up.

"You always traipse round with no panties, Slick? Or was that just luck?"

Jaxi sucked in air as Blake exposed her bare crotch.

"Slide down a little, I want to see better."

Jaxi flicked a glance at his face. He watched the road, a smile curving the corner of his mouth. She wiggled her hips lower and let the fabric of her dress ride up more until her lower body was completely visible.

Blake hummed in approval. "Now that's a nice sight. But you don't look too comfy,

Slick, all scrunched up. Maybe you'd better shuck the dress altogether." His gaze was back on the road while his hand brushed the tops of her thighs like a soft wind caressing over the wheat field.

Jaxi slipped off her seat belt and tugged the light fabric over her head in one motion. She flushed red-hot, determined to follow Blake's lead however he wanted her.

Blake took the corner onto the long driveway to the dark and quiet ranch house before slowing the truck to a stop. He turned to look at Jaxi, his gaze gliding over her body as intimate as the touch of a hand. Her nipples tightened. She knew what he saw; the folds of her body still wet from earlier, her naked breasts swollen with need. Blake didn't speak. He just looked for a good long time before he put the truck back in gear and drove the final distance to the house.

"You're a pretty little thing, you know that, Jaxi? Soft everywhere." Blake's hand covered her mound possessively, cradling her. "Tell me what you like. How you want to be touched so you feel real good. You enjoy kisses down here? Such a pretty little bit of candy for a man to lick and suck."

Jaxi drew in a breath. "No one's ever..."

Blake swore and heat flushed her body, starting from where his hand held her like a prize. He pulled in beside the cabin and took away his hand to slam the shift into park. He took a deep breath through his nose and let it out slowly.

"Jaxi. I'm sitting here wondering what you're doing because I'm getting a tad confused by the signals you're sending. I'm going to carry you inside and you think about what you need to tell me when we get there. Just so there's no more surprises."

Blake jerked open his door hard but he was careful as he tugged Jaxi after him. Her naked body cradled soft in his arms as he strode to the cabin, his face covered with thunderclouds ready to roll.

She was in a pile of trouble from the looks of things.

Chapter Eight

Blake kicked open the door and deposited her on the bed. Stepping back he took a seat in one of the chairs set by the small table in the corner. His things were neatly tucked away, except for the pile of clean laundry she'd brought in after supper.

His eyes watched unblinking.

Jaxi forced herself to sit straight as Blake stared at her. His gaze ate her up, one inch of skin at a time, from top to the bottom before he spoke.

"We're taking this all the way, so you'd better tell me what you know and what you've been holding back." He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, a smoky smile building on his face. "Or maybe we'll turn it into a little puzzle for me to solve, since you enjoy games."

Blake yanked off his boots and tossed them to the side. He stood and unbuckled his belt. Jaxi licked at her suddenly dry lips and Blake chuckled. "See, Slick, that's what I'm talking about. I think you're a whole lot more innocent than you've been trying to let on. Then you go and do something like that, all sex kitten and wanton, and you tie my brain in knots. Now I'm going to get naked 'cause you made me go and lose all control back there in the parking lot, and I'm not sitting around in wet jeans anymore.

"I know damn well you've already seen me naked, so I don't want you to turn away or try to get shy." He popped open the button on his jeans, and Jaxi's heart beat faster.

"Can I help?" She couldn't take her gaze off his hands as they peeled back the zipper and opened his jeans.

"Not this time. You touch me and we'll be places you don't want to rush. So, no man's ever kissed your pussy?"

He dropped his jeans. His boxer briefs were wet, a dark patch showing against the front.

"Hey, Slick."

Jaxi dragged her gaze back to Blake's face with effort.

"Damn, you've got the biggest eyes. You going to tell me what I need to know?" He unbuttoned his shirt slowly, the rustle of fabric loud in the quiet room. He pulled it off and grasped the bottom of his T-shirt, his hard abs appearing bit by bit as he lifted the material over his head.

He stripped off his boxers and then, glory be, he sat naked in the chair, his muscles shifting as he leaned back to get comfortable and let her look him over. Jaxi had enjoyed her little voyeur trip the other day but it was nothing compared to gazing at Blake Coleman, gloriously naked, three feet away from her. She admired the muscles in his arms, on his chest, the ridges of his abdomen, the firm strength of his thighs. All there, while he showed himself off like a prize bull.

His cock rose from his lap, tapping toward the six-pack of his belly. Jaxi could barely breathe for wanting to touch.

To taste.

Blake rose to his feet and prowled his way to the bed, his cock aimed like an arrow at her. She scooted back on the bed, never taking her gaze off him, as he dropped to his knees and crawled toward her.

“Jaxi, lay on the bed, hands by your sides.”

A thrill shot through her at the tone in his voice. She’d suspected she’d enjoy being ordered around. She lay back and let her palms touch the quilt.

Blake suspended his body over hers, his legs straddling her knees. He was far enough away the heat of his body was a soft caress, a hint of energy radiating toward her.

He lowered a hand to touch her body. One finger.

Over her lips.

“You’ve kissed a few boys, haven’t you, Slick?”

“Not many. But yeah, I’ve kissed.”

Blake chuckled. “You’ve kissed all my brothers from what I heard.”

Jaxi flicked her tongue to touch his fingertip where he traced the shape of her mouth again and again. “I kissed them or they kissed me. That’s all, Blake. No one else.”

Blake’s mouth descended slowly, brushing her mouth lightly. “I’m the only Coleman you going to kiss from here on, understand?”

Jaxi strained upward, tried to regain his mouth from where it hovered inches above hers.

“Not until you say it, Jaxi. Your mouth is mine. Kisses only for me.”

She was going to die if she didn’t get his mouth on her now. “Yours. Only for you.”

Blake’s mouth descended like a dust storm, demanding entrance, lips feasting, licking and sucking and making her breathless. Her hands rose to his neck, slicking through his short hair before he pulled away quickly.

“Hands to the bed, Jaxi, I’m not done with my questions.”

Jaxi dragged her nails over his back as she dropped her arms.

“You touch me and I stop. Now, let’s see.” Blake’s finger was back again, tracing from her mouth, over the curve of her chin, down her neck. She shivered as he drew his fingertip over her breast, circling the tight peak lazily. “Beautiful breasts, Jaxi. I saw them in the shower the other day, all wet and glistening and I wanted to pluck these juicy tips like ripe berries. Tell me, who’s touched your breasts? Who’s sucked these pretty things with their mouths and made you squirm?”

Jaxi arched up, trying to get him to connect with more than her nipple. He continued his slow assault, the heat in his touch melting through her defenses.

“Couple boys touched me. Travis with his mouth. Jesse and Joel tonight with their hands over my dress.”

“Damn, my brothers have gotten more of you than they’re ever going to get again.” Blake’s head descended and he licked the tip of her nipple. “Mine. These beauties are mine, Jaxi. Mine to hold and caress, mine to nibble and bite and—”

“Yours. Oh, please, Blake, put your mouth on me now.” Jaxi sobbed.

Blake covered her with his hand, smoothed her skin, dragging his palm over the rigid peak as he caressed her. He lapped at her other nipple, sucking it into his mouth as his fingers rolled over her belly to her lower lips.

“You tell me who’s touched your pretty pussy. You said no one’s kissed you there. Who’s had their hands on you, bringing you pleasure, besides me and Jesse?”

“Damn it, Blake, stop with the questions and give me what I need.” Jaxi arched hard, thrusting her hips against his hand. She was on fire and he was keeping her at such a steady burn she was going to pass out from the need for more.

He lowered his body on top of hers, thigh to thigh, his cock hard on top of her curls

and stomach, hot fluid painting her belly. He increased their body contact and the weight pressed her into the bed so slowly every inch of his skin heated her to the melting point.

“You’ve never let anyone inside, have you, Jaxi? You don’t know what it’s going to feel like to have my cock press you apart, stretch you wide while you squeeze me tight. You don’t know how good it will feel when I pump into you hard and fill you up.”

Blake rocked his hips in short strokes, rubbing his shaft over her aching clit as she gasped and tried to press back for more. He stilled his body and she cried in loss. She wanted it all.

“No one’s ever made love to me.” She pulled her legs apart and sighed as he settled more firmly, his cock nestled hard against her needy core.

“Tell me why you’re still a virgin, Slick. It ain’t because you’ve never been asked.”

Jaxi hesitated then simply told the truth.

“I wanted you. And you never asked until now.”

*

Blake dragged himself down her body, panting in his need. His forbidden fantasies, all the things he’d longed for were coming true. His body sang with pleasure, his mind barely able to comprehend it was really happening. She was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen and she was going to be all his. Not shared with his brothers like the stolen kisses.

Just sweet ripe fruit, mature pleasure shared between a man and woman.

He wouldn’t last much longer. As much as he wanted to nibble every inch of her skin, as much as he needed to suck those firm breasts, he needed to be inside her more.

And he wasn’t going to do that until she was good and ready for him.

Blake pressed her legs further apart with his shoulders and stared at the swollen lips peeking through the blonde curls. Moisture beaded there, a hot sweet aroma rising to his nose. He used one finger to gently open her and the pink folds of her labia bloomed in front of him.

He lowered his mouth and licked down one side, tasting her sweet cream, covering her with the warmth of his mouth as his tongue slicked up the other side. Jaxi made little noises of pleasure, her hips moving and he pressed with his hand to lock her in place on the bed.

Blake swept over her again, concentrating on lapping every inch of smooth skin inside and out of the soft petals of her pussy lips. He thrust his tongue into her core as far as it would go. Her body responded like blowing on coals, heat pouring from her as she cried out.

He needed two hands to restrain her. The taste of her, the scent of her passion overwhelmed him and he lifted her hips into the air, hauling her closer to his mouth to feast easier. Blake dragged his tongue hard over her clit and the convulsion that shook her body nearly ripped her from his grasp. He did it again, laving the length of her wet pussy harder and faster until Jaxi screamed and her core pulsed in waves with her orgasm.

Rising over her, he pressed the head of his shaft into the scalding heat that squeezed around him. He thrust in an inch and withdrew, drawing her cream farther and farther up his cock on each motion until she froze.

Blake dropped his mouth to hers and bit her lip, licking his tongue against her mouth until she opened for him. As she responded to his kiss he pulled back his hips one last time and thrust to bury himself deep.

Jaxi gasped into his mouth, her body suddenly tense and Blake locked their hips in place, forcing himself to wait until she relaxed and eased around his girth. He kissed her softly, licking and nibbling until she squirmed under him.

“Alright?”

“Damn, you’ve split me in two. It feels, oh hell, it feels good but...”

“Oh, Slick, you’re amazing. Just wait, I’m going to move. Nice and slow.”

Blake watched Jaxi closely as he withdrew a short way and eased back in. He grinned as her eyes rolled back in her head and she moaned.

“Oh yeah, that feels better. Do it again.”

Blake kissed her as he rocked in and out slowly, dragging his body over her as he memorized the taste of her lips, the feel of her soft tongue as it tangled with his.

“Bend your legs, open to me a little more.”

Jaxi shifted and on the next thrust the crown of his shaft touched her cervix. Jaxi squeaked a little but the way she tried to open even wider let him know she wasn’t opposed to the sensation.

Her hands clutched the quilt with a death hold and he chuckled. “You can touch me if you want.”

Jaxi instantly wrapped her arms around him and helped pull him deeper. “I wasn’t going to take a chance and have you stop. Blake, I need more.” She lifted her hips toward him a couple of inches, speeding his movements.

He was only going slowly for her sake. On the next thrust he went a little harder, forcing her back into the bed deeper. He slipped a hand between their bodies, looking to step up her pleasure quicker. He wanted to feel her come, feel her body welcome him in and delight in him. He found her clit and stroked it as his hips pumped faster. She squeezed him, her passage slick with moisture but tight around him as his cock rubbed her sensitive nerves.

Under him Jaxi shook, her breath coming in short tight pants. Her wide eyes stared at him as her body took his thrusts willingly, eagerly. She tightened around him and cried out, waves of pressure squeezing around his shaft. He pumped twice more before he released his control to explode into her hot depths.

It was like coming home. Locked together, hearts pounding wildly, Blake had never felt such a sense of belonging. Such a feeling of being right where he needed to be. He stared into Jaxi’s pleasure-glazed eyes and leaned down to kiss her again.

He managed to roll to the side and avoid crushing her, their bodies still tangled together intimately as their hands stroked each other, unable to stop touching. Blake nudged her head back to get at her mouth. He couldn’t get enough of her taste, the feel of her gentling under his mouth. The reality of loving her beat all the fantasies he’d ever had.

He would be ready to go again if he kept this up and it was too soon for her to handle him yet. He needed to clean her up, care for her. Blake gave her one last kiss before pulling away to get a washcloth.

She was all soft and relaxed when he returned, lying on the surface of the quilt with her arms back by her sides, one leg bent up. As he cleaned the traces of blood from her thighs he realized he was wiping away his semen as well.

He’d taken her without a condom.

He tossed aside the cloth and drew her back into his arms. He’d never done that

before. Never been tempted before. Every time he'd been with a woman he'd sheathed up early with no questions asked, even if she said she was protected. He was clean, but hell. Jaxi curled in tighter to him, her warmth scorching his body as his guilty conscience burned his mind.

Blake dropped another kiss on the top of her head. If he let himself admit the truth... he'd probably done it on purpose. On some level he'd wanted to mark her permanently as his, make sure this wasn't just a one-time deal.

There was nothing more permanent than a baby.

Jaxi laughed soft in his arms and jostled him back a bit, her bright smile fading as she caught a glimpse of his face.

"What's wrong, Blake?"

"You on the pill, Jaxi?" He tried to sound gentle and caring, but he was afraid it came out a little scared.

Jaxi looked confused for a minute before her lashes dropped and hid her eyes from his view. "Oh, damn."

He kissed her cheek, tried to convey his emotions with the action since the words were stuck in his throat. Jaxi wiggled back and he reluctantly released her.

"Are you going to flip out on me? You regret making love and now you're going to head for the hills?" Jaxi's eyes filled with moisture and Blake's heart cracked a notch at the hurt he'd unwittingly caused.

"I ain't going anywhere, Slick. I know what I feel inside. I just don't want you to think you have to agree to anything just because I made a mistake."

She shivered and sat up.

"I hate that word. Mistake. Don't you ever use that word again, Blake Coleman. If we made a baby right now it's no mistake. Even if we used a condom I could get pregnant."

"What you telling me?"

She blushed. Hard.

Harder than he'd ever seen.

"You want me to spell it out for you? I hear you say my kisses are all yours, and my body is all yours, and I tell you no one's ever made love to me before because I was waiting for you. If you weren't thinking about forever, Blake, fine. But I was. That's why I don't care that we didn't use a condom, and why if I had my way we'd be making love again in about two minutes, condom or no. 'Cause even if it scares you I've got to tell you—I've been thinking about you and loving and forever. I've been thinking about it for a long time."

Blake stared at her, all bold as brass as she sat naked at the foot of the bed.

Damn, she was glorious.

He reached and enveloped her in his arms; tried to ease the tension in her shoulders, relax the tightness from her body with pets and caresses and whispers against her skin. He slid her over him, letting her weight cover him with heat and silky pleasure. He took her face into his hands and kissed her tenderly on the eyelids. Used his lips to brush away the tears that hung there.

Had he thought about forever? He'd wanted her forever, and she felt right in his arms. A part of his heart had always belonged to her. He kissed her mouth, simple and soft, before whispering over her cheek.

“You make me feel the biggest fool, Slick, ‘cause you’re braver than anyone I know. I can tell you with my body how I feel about you, but saying the words is mighty hard.”

He brushed his hands down her back, stroking and soothing. He rolled them to their sides and kissed her cheeks, feathered his fingers over her collarbone, tracing the delicate lines. He looked in her eyes. The hurt was still there but a trace of something else lit the corners. He smiled at her.

“I think I can say it if I try. I love you.”

Jaxi snuggled in under his arm, burying her head against his chest.

Anticipation rose as her breath heated his body, her hand floating over his ribs to the curve of his ass. He shifted her until he reached her mouth and started kissing again, the taste of her delighting him with its sweetness and passion.

He pulled them both to a sitting position and snuggled her between his legs.

“I never got enough time to show you how much I appreciate your breasts.” He filled his hands with their weight, lifting them as he brushed the rosy tips with his thumbs. Jaxi hummed with pleasure as he lowered his head and suckled gently.

A loud pounding on the door of the cabin jerked Blake back from the delightful place he was headed.

“I’m going to kill them, whoever it is.” He dragged himself away from Jaxi’s warmth, and stumbled to the door. He yanked the door open a crack, his body shielding the room from prying eyes.

Joel’s white face stared at him. “I’m damn sorry to bother you, but we’ve just got word. Mama and Daddy collided with a moose on their way home tonight. The truck’s a wreck and they’ve both been taken to the hospital in Red Deer.”

Chapter Nine

Blake sat in the easy chair in his father's hospital room listening to the soft sound of breathing. Jaxi was curled up in his lap, her warm breath drifting over his neck, soft bosom pressed against his arm.

They'd checked in on his ma first. The nurses there told them with the pain medication it was unlikely Marion would wake before morning. His dad, however, would be woken soon to monitor him for a concussion. Blake was grateful neither of them had been more seriously hurt.

Although his ma was going to be right ticked when she heard the news.

As he waited for his dad to wake, Blake looked at the soft bit of woman in his arms. Soft, yet strong, and definitely all woman. He couldn't believe she was there. After denying them both for so long it felt right to have her warmth penetrating all the way through to his heart. Even if a bit of him was scared shitless they'd made love unprotected.

"Blake?" His dad's voice scratched a little.

Blake went to put Jaxi down but his father stopped him.

"You're fine sitting right there. How's Marion? She okay?"

"Ma's fine, no new injuries. She's still going to be a trifle upset when she hears they recast her arm again, to be sure it was still set proper. She's got extra weeks to wait until the new cast comes off."

Mike's face said it all. "Hell, I should have been more careful."

"Don't go blaming yourself. Those moose are damn near invisible, right until they jump out and commit suicide," Blake said. "It's not mating season so you couldn't have expected it and that corner is a scary son of a bitch. We're all just glad you weren't killed outright. Maybe a busted leg and head aren't too high a price to pay."

"Leg? Marion break a leg too?"

Blake shook his head, worry creeping in. "You didn't notice you're wearing rather stiff long johns, Dad? It was a clean break but you're carrying plaster too."

His dad shuffled the sheets to examine the thigh to foot white cast. "Well, hell. Nope, didn't notice a thing until now. Damn pounding in my head is drowning out everything else calling for attention."

"Yeah, well, you may have a concussion, but they said that should clear up plenty quick." Jaxi shifted in his arms and Blake snuggled her in tighter, brushing back a curl that fell over her face.

He looked back at his dad to see a rather large grin waiting for him.

"So, does the fact you're finally holding that little bit of heaven in your arms mean you're over being worried about what you never needed to worry about in the first place?" Mike asked.

"You knew? You knew I wanted..." Blake trailed off. Just how much did he want to talk about this with his dad?

Mike snorted. "Son, the entire county has known for years you had it bad for Jaxi. I don't know if it's because you're our firstborn or what but you have a bad habit of trying to do what you think will please everyone else. You can't do that, son, without missing

out on what's going to please the people that are the most important to you."

"You don't think she's too young for me?"

"Pffftt." How much older am I than your mama?"

Blake frowned and thought about it for a minute. "I'm not sure, sir."

Mike nodded. "Right, because it doesn't matter one bit if there's a difference between us. Is the age thing what's been hindering you all this time, Blake? I wished I'd known. I didn't understand how you could be so stubborn to let her loose for so long. Heck, even your little brothers thought about—"

"I know what they were thinking and that's finished. Jaxi and I are..." Blake hesitated again, this time because he wasn't sure what to say. They were lovers, heck, they'd talked about babies. But he didn't know where they were at right now.

Mike raised an eye. "You're what? Don't tell me you need a little more time to figure this one out. After all the girl's done the past few years to get ready to be the best rancher's wife possible?"

Blake puzzled over that one for a minute. "You want to explain?"

Mike pointed at Jaxi. "She took me for coffee the summer after her high school graduation and showed me a couple flyers from the local colleges. Asked me to mark the classes that would teach a woman to be a real help around a ranch. Someone able to pitch in, make sure things got done, and done right.

"She and Travis had just broke up and I wondered if she was trying to get back on his good side or something but when I suggested that she laughed in my face. Well, politely—you know how she is. She said she'd been with Travis for one reason and since they were through she was going to concentrate on what was important.

"Every semester she brought me another one of them flyers and sometimes she'd have marked a few classes to see what I thought, some of them were plenty interesting. She's spent three years working and training for the position of rancher's wife. Hate to see all that training go to waste. Or get picked up by someone else smart enough to see what a treasure they've got waiting for them."

Blake kissed the top of Jaxi's head. It seemed he was a bit more stupid than he'd dreamed. He needed to think this through a little more before committing to anything but being with Jaxi permanently felt awfully right.

Curiosity tickled for a minute and he looked to his dad's smiling face.

"So, what kind of classes did you think were 'interesting'? I don't think those were the cooking or horse care kind."

Mike grinned. "You need to ask her, I was sworn to secrecy. You've got yourself a damn good woman, son, and I hope you don't do anything to mess it up."

Blake sat back more comfortably, the beating of Jaxi's heart solid against him as he and his dad discussed work plans for the next couple weeks at the ranch.

* * * *

Jaxi dropped a final peach into the jar, filled it with syrup and sealed the lid. Placing the jar with the others in the large pot on the stove she closed the cover with a hum of satisfaction. She still had a couple of hours until supper and after this last canner was done she was caught up on her work.

She gave a little hop to sit on the counter, eating a ripe peach while she waited for the water to reach a boil before she could set the timer for the last batch. Juice dribbled

down her fingers and chin and she was slowly licking it off when she spotted Blake standing in the doorframe of the kitchen.

Watching her with hungry eyes.

Heat welled inside.

“You want a peach?” She held out a ripe fruit and beamed at him as he padded closer. He took the peach from her fingers, placed it carefully on the countertop and lifted her hand to his mouth, licking along the edges and between her knuckles. He opened her legs, pressing her thighs to the side as he slipped against her body.

“Just the sweet juice.”

His tongue lapped the juice from her chin, short little strokes like butterfly flutters along her skin. Jaxi closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensations slipping over her. It had been a long day with little sleep last night, between the loving and the worry of the trip to Red Deer.

Mike and Marion were in the hospital for at least another couple days. Blake had brought Jaxi home and set out the work schedule for the boys based on Mike’s suggestions.

Jaxi last saw Blake in the morning when he’d kissed her goodbye after breakfast. A sweet, lingering kiss that made her toes curl. Knowing the fight between the two of them was over and they were finally together made satisfaction settle deep in her soul.

“You didn’t stop for dinner. Want me to warm something?” she asked.

Blake licked her neck and her collarbone. He unbuttoned her shirt; his fingers smoothing over her skin as he pushed it open to reveal her bra.

“I see what I’m looking for and it’s plenty hot already.” He slid the shirt off her shoulders to the countertop. “I like your bra, Slick, very lacy and pretty pink, but it’s a little too nice for what I have in mind.” While he kissed he brushed his fingers around her back and the cool air of the kitchen flowed over her as he undid her bra. Fascinated, he tugged off one shoulder strap at a time to let the cups fall away from her breasts.

“I was doing something real interesting yesterday when we got interrupted.” Blake lugged a high stool from the corner of the room and returned to his spot in front of Jaxi. His head lined up with her breasts and he hummed with satisfaction.

“We’ve had that stool since I was little. Ma used it to let us get a better reach on things and it works as good now as ever. Maybe even better since the treats are sweeter.”

He cupped a breast in each hand and lowered his head to cover the exposed surface of one with his hot mouth. Jaxi braced her arms behind her on the counter as an electric shock pulsed all the way to her womb. He alternated between sides, lapping and sucking. Jaxi shut her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of his intimate touch.

“Keep your eyes closed.”

She sensed Blake slide away and somewhere nearby a drawer opened and closed. She debated peeking when soft drops of liquid touched her skin, rolling down the swell of her breast. Moisture trailed to the tip of her nipple and clung there, cool in the moving air blowing in the window.

She opened her eyes to see Blake had the peach in slices. He’d squeezed one piece between his fingers, letting the juice land on her body.

“Close your eyes,” he warned.

Jaxi giggled and squeezed them shut. And waited.

Moist heat flicked as he lapped at the juice. Blake followed every sticky sweet line

with his tongue, licked her skin clean, covered her with kisses. His fingers rolled her nipples, pinching and teasing. Ripples of desire spread through her body; her panties grew damp. The sound of something bumping and rattling slowly filtered through her sexual haze. The canner was ready, the water boiling.

"I've got to set the timer, Blake."

"How long you need?" he asked around a mouthful of breast.

"Thirty minutes."

Blake drew back with a satisfied suck. She looked down to see him stare at her with admiration, his hands still supporting her.

"Blake?"

"I'll tell you when thirty minutes are up." He stood, knocking the stool behind him to the floor. He plucked her off the counter and carried her to the dining room, laying her on the solid wood table. He slipped the button on her shorts and tugged at the fabric until they slipped off, leaving her with the matching panties to the bra he'd discarded in the kitchen.

"Blake Coleman, I hope you've got your brothers working on something that's going to keep them far away from the house. Ohhh!"

Blake slid her down the table to where he usually sat, her panties suddenly dangling from his fingers.

"Nobody's going to show up here for a while. I want to see you, Jaxi. All of you. I want to sit at my place at the table and remember touching and sucking at your pretty pussy. Everyone will wonder why I can't stop smiling." He shifted her slightly to get a better view.

"Open yourself for me."

Jaxi flushed. She already sat naked on the table where she'd shared Christmas dinners and birthday cakes with the Coleman family. She let her legs fall open and used one hand to slide her curls apart.

Blake leaned forward and licked and Jaxi's leg twitched so hard it slipped off the table. He smiled at her.

And did it again.

Sensations wrapped around Jaxi to meld into one enormous collage of emotion and touch. The pot bubbled on the stove, the canning jars rattling as they processed in the high heat. The windows were open and a light breeze blew through the house, ruffling the curtains before coiling over her heated skin. Blake licked and sucked, slipped a finger inside her sheath and pulled her cream up and over her skin before rasping hard with his tongue. Time stood still as he loved her with his mouth, his fingers, his patient touch. Jaxi shook as her release came, waves of pleasure Blake drew out by licking again and again.

Then he stood, dropped his jeans, and slid in.

He was hot and hard, stretching her, as he forced his way into her body a little more with each stroke. She tried to meet him, tried to join with his timing, when he touched his fingers to her clit and rubbed.

Bursts of pleasure, hard and fast, broke over her. He held her by one hip and leaned into the table, pressure mounting, his movements more desperate than before. He thrust fast, hard enough the table rocked. He drove deeper still and shouted. His semen, hot and wet, bathed her inside as she shuddered around him again, her passage squeezing him tight.

Blake dropped his hands, one on either side of her body and stood breathing hard, buried in her body. His eyes stared into her face, the grey storm clouds swirling. She gasped for air, her breasts jiggling with each breath she took. A trickle of moisture escaped from where they connected and she tensed.

He'd done it again. They'd done it again. No protection.

Blake gave her cheek a gentle caress before he pulled out and tucked himself back into his jeans. Without a word he slipped her panties back on, helped with her shorts before carrying her back to the kitchen and assisting with her bra and shirt. Every time she tried to speak he stroked a finger over her lips, or brushed her to silence with a kiss.

Once she was fully clothed he lifted the canning pot from the stove to the hot pads and helped her remove the steaming jars to the sideboard to cool with the rest of her labors.

He took her in his arms and kissed her senseless one final time before grabbing another peach from the countertop and strolling to the door.

"Supper at 6:30?"

Jaxi blinked in surprise then nodded dumbly.

He took a big bite of the peach, wiping the juice from his chin with the back of his hand as his eyes twinkled at her. "Peaches. My favorite." He winked and scooted out the door, leaving Jaxi a little dizzy in his wake.

Chapter Ten

Blake jingled the contents of his pocket as he waited by the bay window in the sitting room. Jaxi had the table all ready to go for supper, the smell of chili and cornbread filling the air with spicy tones. The woman could cook all right.

More ways than one.

“Hey, Blake. Time to ring the bell?” Joel asked, looking much better than the last time Blake saw him, eyeball deep in sheep muck.

“Jaxi’s not here yet, let’s wait until she’s back.”

Joel nodded and broke the crispy edge off a piece of corn bread. He looked Blake over while he nibbled on it. “So...”

Blake stared back.

“You’re not going to tell me how good it was, are you—”

“Shut up, Joel.”

Joel snickered. “No, I figured as much. You’re lucky she’s wanted you all this time or I would have given you more of a fight for her after last night.” He backed away as Blake took an involuntary step toward him. “I’m teasing. I’m glad she’s here and I’m glad she’s with you. Jesse, on the other hand, was a tad more upset we went home alone last night.”

Blake laughed. “Alone? Yeah, right. That’s why I saw the extra car in the driveway when Jaxi and I headed to Red Deer. Who’d you bring home? And please tell me it was more than one girl between the two of you.”

Joel winked. “If you don’t kiss and tell, I won’t either. Actually, Jesse did go home alone. He didn’t seem to want to play any more after we left you. Not even with the sweet thing who was very willing to join us both.”

Blake shook his head slowly. “I don’t want to know the details. Hey, Jaxi told me you’d agreed to play the game last night as a lesson for me. You pushed the limits there. A lot.”

“Yeah, well, we never realized having you watch would make it that much more intense. And Jaxi was so damn responsive. Jesse went a little further than we’d intended because it felt so good we lost track of...” Joel looked at Blake and grinned from ear to ear. “She’s yours and all, but, holy shit, last night was hot. I’ve never played pool like that before.”

“Joel Coleman, I’m going to wash your mouth out with soap if I ever hear you mention last night to anyone again. You hear me?” Jaxi swung into the room to their side, her long legs showing thigh high in another pretty sundress, this one bright red.

Joel leered at her for a minute, spun her in his arms and gave her a quick hug. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll be good.” His stomach grumbled loudly and he dropped her to her feet again. “Permission to ring the bell?”

“Ring away, then help load the table.”

She turned and settled in Blake’s arms for a kiss, nuzzling close as Blake drank in her scent. He’d begun to accept the walls he’d built between them were made of straw. Still one thought kept popping up and poking him hard in the nuts.

She’d dated Travis first.

All the Coleman boys had a similar cut. Solid features, clear lines. The twins were the fairest with their dark blond hair, but with the other four it was clear they were family. And he and Travis, other than the age difference, looked a lot like twins themselves.

Blake couldn't bear to find out if Jaxi had really just been chasing a dream all these years. Trying for a substitute for Travis.

She tugged on his hand and he blinked. He'd been woolgathering while his brothers sat at the table. He seated Jaxi before joining the others and digging into the spicy food before him. He grinned from ear to ear thinking about the afternoon and Jaxi lying naked right about where his bowl now sat.

She was hotter than any five-alarm chili.

"You think Dad will be able to help at all this harvest or should we plan on finishing without him?" Matt asked.

"Let's plan to do it alone. He won't be driving machinery with that monster of a cast."

Daniel scooped more salsa and chips onto his plate. "I'll take care of the next furniture order. It'll take most of tomorrow but after it's done I'll have time to help out wherever I'm needed."

Blake relaxed into his chair, his gaze on Jaxi as she sat across from him. She looked around constantly, checking the table and the food, eyeing the boys and the expressions on their faces. She caught him staring and she blushed.

He chuckled softly. She'd sat naked on this table three hours ago and now she was blushing while he looked at her fully clothed. She was too good to be true.

Talk continued for a bit before Blake turned from his conversation with Daniel to check again on Jaxi. The content expression she'd had at the start of the meal had faded and Blake followed her gaze. Both Travis and Jesse looked like they'd swallowed a bug.

"Can I get someone to help dig beets tomorrow?" Jaxi asked, her voice falsely bright and Blake paused for a minute. What was going on?

He nodded toward Jesse. "He should finish the fences by dinner. After that he can give you a hand."

Jesse ate slowly, all his focus on his plate. When Jaxi laid a hand on his sleeve to get his attention, he jerked away. He shoved his chair back and rose to his feet. "I'm not real hungry. Got chores to finish in the barn," Jesse said. Avoiding Jaxi's eyes, he stomped from the dining room.

The sound of forks on plates grew loud in the suddenly quiet room. Travis wiped his mouth then threw the napkin on his plate. "Well, I may as well go too. Thanks for supper, Jaxi. Appears you still know how to cook up some heat when you want to."

She sucked in a quick gasp of surprise and Joel placed a comforting hand on her arm.

"Travis, what kind of rude ass remark was that?" Blake was on his feet.

His brother shrugged. "Didn't mean anything. I'll be in the barn if you need me." His footsteps echoed across the floor, the door slamming shut behind him.

Matt shook his head and turned to Jaxi, her face white. "Hush, sweetheart. It's nothing but Travis being an asshole again. You know how he gets."

Jaxi nodded silently and poked at the food on her plate. Her big eyes looked suspiciously like she was holding back tears.

"Excuse me." She left the room, slipping into the kitchen, her eyes downcast.

Blake made to follow her but Joel held up a hand. "Let me. Please, Blake. I can at least ease her mind about Jesse."

Then there were the three of them. Blake looked at Daniel and Matt, at the unfinished meal in front of them. Silently Daniel gathered plates together. Blake's stomach was tied tighter than he thought possible.

"I don't think I've ever had a meal at this table end like that."

Daniel snorted. "It hasn't always been roses either, Blake. What did you expect? You won and they lost. Give them time." He picked up dishes and headed for the kitchen.

Matt cleared his throat.

Blake turned to him. "You planning on offering me advice too?"

"Depends if you need it or not. I wanted to ask you. This thing with Jaxi, is this a keep to play or a play to keep thing?" Matt asked.

"Why is everyone expecting me to propose to the girl the day after we—"

"Because Jaxi's the kind of girl you should have proposed to before you took her, that's why. She may be hotter than the peppers in the chili but she's a good girl. Treat her like one." Matt left the table, leaving Blake sitting alone.

He rose and paced to the window. The irony of it was he'd already decided what he was going to do before all this unsolicited advice had come his way. He juggled the contents of his pocket again and headed to the barn to do some damage control.

With a short stop first in the kitchen to kiss Jaxi better.

* * * *

Travis was on his butt on the straw-strewn floorboards, blood flowing freely from his nose. Jesse wiped at his mouth and glared at Blake who'd just hauled his brothers apart. Jesse spun on his heel and headed for the door.

"Oh no, you don't." Blake yanked him to a stop by the back of his collar. "First you tell me what this is all about and then we're going to settle any troubles you two have with me and Jaxi."

Travis and Jesse exchanged angry glances, but neither of them spoke. Travis heaved himself to his feet and tried to staunch the flow of blood. He backed away to stand warily as Blake eyed Jesse.

"Me and Travis had a difference of opinion. We're done." Jesse spat at the floor, his tongue licking at his bruised lips.

"Nothing else to say?" Blake demanded.

"Travis is the King of the Assholes. Happy?" Jesse snapped.

Blake barked out a laugh, "We already knew that. Of course, it looks like we need to put your name up for the title as well. You think you could work a little harder to hurt Jaxi? If you tried, you might beat Travis out of his crown."

"I don't have an issue with Jaxi," Jesse insisted.

"Well, it didn't seem that way to her," Blake said.

Jesse bent his head against the cool wood of the wall and stayed quiet for a minute. He spoke toward the straw-covered ground at his feet.

"Blake, you need to back off a little on this one. I'm happy for you, really I am. But last night it could have been me making love to Jaxi. How would you have felt? She's been a good friend for a long time and I'm not about to stop caring for her but...I got a taste of something I'm not gonna be able to forget overnight. If I seem a little tense it's

because I'm trying to do right by her and you. Give me time."

Jesse looked up at him, his blue eyes dark with emotion. "If you hurt her, you need to know I'll take you apart and then I'll take her away from you."

Blake hauled him into a bear hug like they were kids again and held on tight. Jesse relaxed in his grip, the short angry breaths of frustration slowing over time. Finally he slapped Blake's shoulders and stepped away, head held high.

"I've never been so glad to head back to school as I am right now. It would kill me to watch the two of you spooning all over the house for the next couple months." Jesse wiped his fingers over his mouth again before examining them for blood.

Blake smiled softly. "This will last a little longer than that."

Travis cackled, a harsh brittle sound. "Damn right it should last longer, if she's got anything to say about it. Stupid little—"

Blake's blood rose to a boil. "Travis, you stop right now or I'll pick up where Jesse left off and pound you into the dirt. Whatever your problem is you watch how you speak to Jaxi from here on. You got an issue, you tell me and we can take it outside. I'll knock the shit out of you anytime you need it but you leave Jaxi alone, you hear?"

Travis was the final thorn in his side and right now swinging a few fists sounded like a fine way to work off some steam. But when he'd seen Jaxi in the kitchen before coming outside, she'd made him promise not to bash anyone. Damn woman already had him tied to a ball and chain.

"You got something more to say?" Blake asked softly. Dangerously.

Travis kicked a seed sack. His eyes flashed at Blake. "You've been so damn righteous the past few years it's made me sick. Everyone knew Jaxi was setting her heart on you and yet you ignored her for some damn stupid reason, pretending she wasn't the one you wanted—"

"I thought she was still in love with you," Blake roared. "I thought she was trying to hook up with me because you'd broken up with her and I was the next best thing."

Travis's jaw dropped, his eyes black with anger. "You stupid son of a bitch."

Jesse moved between the two of them, wary and watching.

Travis shook his head and spat to the side. "You deserve every bit of pain you've experienced. Both of you. You know, if it didn't hurt so damn bad, that would be the funniest thing I'd heard in years. Jaxi pretending to be in love with you because she was still in love with me? Lord, listen to you. Damn." Travis wiped at his eyes, his voice shaking as he spoke. "She couldn't have done that, you ass, because the reason she went out with me in the first place was because she couldn't have you. Every time she kissed me, every time she touched me, she was closing her eyes and pretending she was with you."

"Stop it, Travis. That's enough." Jaxi's soft voice cut through the chaos.

Three heads whipped in her direction. She'd changed into blue jeans and a T-shirt and she looked soft and broken.

She stepped toward Travis and stared at him for a long time. "I'm sorry. That's not how it started. All the old-timers in town told me I was too young for Blake, that I should find someone closer to my age, so I tried. I thought that maybe if I was with you it would be enough. But it wasn't."

"I wasn't enough for you," Travis choked out.

Jaxi nodded slowly. "It was wrong and I'm sorry I caused this wall to build between

you and Blake. I should have known better. I should have just told you.”

“You did tell me, remember?” Travis spat the words. “You called out his name while I was touching you!”

Jaxi’s head snapped up and her whole demeanor changed, her quiet expression hardening. She marched forward three steps to face Travis, pulled back her fist and decked him on the chin. Travis reeled backward but kept his feet.

Her voice was a bare whisper in the open air of the barn. “Don’t you push me too far, Travis Coleman. You want to air dirty laundry in front of your brothers after all these years then it’s *all* going to come out. Every last sordid little detail. Be careful, or your secret life won’t be so secret anymore.”

Blake shifted, getting between his brother and his woman. He didn’t know if he should assume control or let them work this through.

She continued talking to Travis, the tone of her voice all the more frightening by its softness, “You’re such a self-centered bastard. You twist the truth so far you forget where it started and you’ve begun to believe the lies you’ve told. Face it—I wasn’t enough for you either.”

Travis swallowed hard and Blake’s head pounded. Something was royally screwed up, beyond anything he’d imagined. “Jaxi? What the hell is going on?”

She tucked herself under his arm, burrowing her face into his chest for a moment before lifting her gaze to meet his. “It’s okay, Blake. It’s old business between Travis and me and it’s water under the bridge. No need for you to worry.”

“Jaxi,” Travis’ voice shook as he spoke. “I didn’t want to give you up. It wasn’t you.”

She turned in Blake’s arms, keeping herself wrapped tight in him. Standing in the midst of the three brothers she was clearly choosing his protection, his comfort. Blake hugged her, his heart ready to burst. Travis had been a substitute for him, instead of the other way around. All this time he’d been worrying and picking at a wound that hadn’t even existed. He drew her closer.

“Travis, let it go.” Jaxi breathed out a long sigh. “We’ve both said enough and it was never my intention to hurt you again. Let’s just let it go.”

Jesse sniggered from the corner where he leaned on the wall, watching the whole insane situation unfold. “Jaxi, you are one hell of a woman. Look at you; you got three grown men tied up in knots ‘cause we’ve all been head over heels for you at one time or another.”

She threw him a dirty look. “You’re not helping, Jesse.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Yeah, well, the truth sucks,” Travis said, plopping down on a bale.

“So, what do we do now?” Jaxi asked. “I can’t stick around and pull your family apart—”

“What?” Protests rose from all the brothers.

Jaxi drew away from Blake slowly, shaking her head as she hugged her arms around her body. “Your family has been rock solid for years. There’s no way I’m willing to come in and screw it up. It was never my intention to mess with anyone’s life. I committed to help Marion, but I’ll make sure I stay away from all of you. I can drive out early in the morning and stay—”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Jesse stepped forward, a scowl covering his

face. “You’re not going anywhere. Is she, Blake?”

She sure as hell wasn’t but turning into a caveman right now wasn’t what she needed. The edge of hurt in her eyes, the fear hovering around her broke his heart and he wanted to wrap her up and protect her from any more chaos. She was on the verge of taking flight and he caught her to him gently, cradling her against his torso. “You and me need to talk, Slick, but let’s finish this off once and for all. Jesse, you got a problem with me and Jaxi being together?”

Jesse paused, his tightly coiled body poised before them, his hair and eyes wild. “You really want him, don’t you Jaxi?”

Her blonde head bobbed and Jesse breathed long and hard before raising his gaze to meet Blake’s. “No problems. You’re a lucky man, and you’d better treat her right.” He blew a gentle kiss toward Jaxi, squared his shoulders and left the barn.

Travis still sprawled on the bale. Dark eyes flicked between Jaxi and Blake and he spoke softly. “I’ve got no problems with it either. I’m sorry I was such a fool, both now and years ago.” He stood and shuffled toward the door. “I’m not going to lie and say everything is wonderful and I’m happy for you and all that shit. It hurts, burns like a brand inside me, but maybe a little time will help. If I don’t look cheerful, it’s not because I’m wishing you ill. I’m jealous as hell, that’s all.”

He stopped and chewed on his lip for minute before raising storm-filled eyes to meet Jaxi’s. “Thanks for not saying anything. Someday I will ... but not yet.”

“I know, Travis. When you’re ready.” Her voice was angel soft, tender.

Travis strode away, leaving Blake alone with Jaxi as she shivered in his arms.

Chapter Eleven

For long minutes Blake held Jaxi close, the familiar scent of the straw and the tack and the earth itself easing away the frustration and tension of the last hour. Whatever secret Jaxi and Travis shared it was staying that way for now.

He wasn't sure he was upset she had a secret. It seemed there was a lot about Jaxi he didn't know. He hadn't realized how much she'd impacted Travis, how involved Jesse had become while Blake stubbornly pushed her away. His father had to share about her training, and only recently had Blake noticed the way the community rallied around her and looked to her for an opinion...

The bigger question was did he really know the woman he had fallen in love with?

Blake knew he would work the Coleman ranch after his father. Had always known as the eldest son he had the privilege and responsibility to keep the family together and strong, leading them into the future. For the first time the picture looked a lot larger than just deciding what crops to plant in what fields and when to buy and sell stock. The family needed him to set the pace inside the home as well. Something his father had demonstrated by doing what was right even when it was tough.

He stroked his hands over Jaxi's hair, loving the way she fit into his body perfectly. Loving the smell and the feel and the rightness of her in his arms. There was nothing wrong with their bodies' reaction to each other, but that was another problem, another mistake he had made. He had let his body dictate his reactions since the beginning of this relationship with Jaxi. After approaching the whole situation wrong now he would have to pay the price to make things right. He needed to step back so they could progress forward together if it was the right thing for them.

Damn, he wanted her. But he wanted what was best for her even more.

Blake cupped her face in his hands and kissed her softly. Sweetly. When she would have crowded against him and offered more he resisted, holding himself back. It was going to kill him, but it needed to be done.

"Jaxi, we need a breather. I think what we've got happening between us is what we've both wanted for a long time, but we need to be sure."

He led her to a bale, sitting across from her to watch her face. Watch the expressions that flitted there for him to see plain as day. The fear written all over her was strong enough to choke off his throat.

"Hey, Slick. Don't look like that. I'm not letting you leave the family because you think you're tearing us apart. We had a misunderstanding as brothers; we'll get over it and move on. I'm not calling us off as a couple—just changing the pace. We're both guilty of moving too slow for many years and now we've rushed like a Chinook blasting through the area. With all my heart I want this to be a forever thing between you and me. So I want to court you. I want to woo you." He reached and clasped her hand in his. "You've spent years imagining me the way you wanted, while I was too scared to even be around you for fear of how I'd react. I don't think you've had enough time to see what I'm really like."

"I know what you're like, Blake, I know what kind of man you are." Jaxi insisted.

"Do you? We haven't done things together on a regular basis since you were about

sixteen. Since I decided it was dangerous for you to be around me.”

A flicker of confusion passed over her eyes. “Dangerous?”

He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles, his tongue stroking between her fingers. “Uh-huh, dangerous. You weren’t ready for me and I wasn’t ready for you.” He turned her palm over and pressed a kiss to the center before folding her fingers tight, closing his hand over hers. “My idea isn’t something you’ll dislike, Jaxi. I’m talking about spending time together to play and work and just be. I want you to be sure this is real, that it’s not something you’ve dreamed about for so many years you risk everything to see the dream come true.”

She stared at him with those big eyes of hers, silence echoing around them. His stomach tightened. What if at the end of it all she decided she didn’t want him? What if giving her time meant in the end he would lose her?

Even though the thought made his gut ache he realized he loved her enough that he’d let her go. He would miss a piece of his heart forever but if she needed something other than him, he’d let her go.

In the meantime he was going to take his best shot at convincing her to say yes.

Jaxi wrinkled her nose at him. “So, what does this ... wooing ... look like to you, Blake? Are you going to call at my bedroom door with flowers and chocolates? Escort me to the movies so we can make out in the backseat of the theater?” She looked at their linked fingers. “Are we going to make love?”

Damn, she had to ask that question. His body knew what it wanted but he didn’t think that was what the answer should be.

“I’ll bring you flowers and chocolates if that’s what you want, only I’ll bring them to the door of the guest cabin. You’re going to move out of the house and I’ll move back in. You’ll have more privacy there and yet you’ll be close enough Ma can call you if she needs you.”

Jaxi protested and he laid a finger on her lips. “We can go to movies, or we can go fishing. We can enjoy long rides and fix fences together, as long as I don’t have to sit in the dirt after every fence post.” She snorted for a moment, her smile starting to return.

Blake stroked his hand over her cheek, smoothing her soft skin, tangling his fingers in her hair before he dropped his lips to hers again. The kiss was deep and needy, a joining together of hearts and souls. Not desperate and hard but desperate and soft. Lingering, caressing and more meaningful than any kiss Blake had ever given or received in his life.

They both drew back at the same time, breaths mingling as they remained inches apart. Blake reached deep for the strength to finish the job he’d begun. “I can’t promise I won’t touch you but let’s try to keep sex out of this. We don’t have any troubles in the physical compatibility department, Jaxi. We need to see if we’ve got everything else it’s going to take to last forever.” His thumb stroked her lips tenderly, sweetly. She kissed it and nodded acceptance with little jerks of her head.

Their foreheads rested together and Blake breathed in her scent, storing the feeling for the days ahead. He snorted softly. “So, Slick, in the kitchen you made me promise I wouldn’t throw any punches tonight. You planning on explaining that right cross to Travis’ jaw?”

The twinkle returned to Jaxi’s eyes and she shrugged mischievously, one brow rising high. “You never made *me* promise not to hit anyone, now did you, Blake Coleman.”

He stood and lifted her, swinging her in circles as their laughter rose to the heavens.

* * * *

The children led her through the maze, a dark bandana blocking her vision. The little fingers tugging her hand were sticky from the picnic dinner, giggles rising around her as they guided her around obstacles toward the finish line. Suddenly there was an extra loud burst of laughter and Jaxi smiled in amusement.

The past couple of weeks had been better than anything she'd ever expected. She'd continued to work around the house but at every possible opportunity Blake found time to 'woo' her.

He'd taken her to the movies and bought her the biggest box of popcorn possible. They'd held hands and snuggled but hadn't been able to neck because for some insane reason the rest of the family showed up at the last minute and sat in the row behind them. Jaxi and Blake surreptitiously threw popcorn over their shoulders throughout the movie, giggling together like children.

They'd gone to dinner, they'd gone dancing. Jaxi suggested a game of pool just to watch Blake's reaction...

"You ain't going anywhere near the pool hall for a good long time, Slick. My heart can't handle any more games right now."

Jaxi opened her eyes wide. "But you promised we could—"

He'd covered her mouth with a finger, followed by his lips, kissing her into oblivion.

And that's about all they'd done. Held hands, snuggled on the couch watching movies. Kissed. It was a step backward, taking it sweet instead of sexy. She missed his touch, his intimate caresses, but she had to admit there was something intoxicating in seeing his eyes clouded with lust when she turned from washing dishes or doing chores and have him simply give her a gentle kiss. She knew no matter what clothes she wore, he found her attractive.

That he wanted her, but wanted to be *with* her more, shook her to the core.

A tug on her hand brought her back to the present and the picnic.

"Miss Jaxi? You gotta hold this now, okay? We'll lead you with the rope."

She smiled at the sweet sound of the child's voice. "Are we almost through the maze? I need to serve coffee and dessert soon, you remember."

A chorus of voices all assured her she was nearly at the end, so she grabbed the section of rope they pressed into her palm.

More giggles and a few 'shhh' noises rose before another tug led her forward. She inched forward with careful steps, trusting the little ones but knowing they might miss a gopher hole under foot. The sounds of voices faded and she hesitated. "Are we still going the right way? Kids, what are you up to?"

The rope jerked again and Jaxi held back, uncertain.

"Don't you trust me?" Blake's deep voice was unexpected and she sucked in air.

"Blake?"

His fingers linked through hers and a hand caressed her cheek, his touch soft and gentle. "Well, you've been playing with everyone else, I figured it was my turn. Follow me, not much farther."

Her heart thumped a steady beat at the easy tone in his voice. The tension she'd noticed building over the past years had faded away, leaving behind the man she

remembered. The caring individual with a wicked sense of humor and the patience of a saint. He must have been sexually frustrated since they hadn't made love since his wooing started, but he seemed content. She reached for him and clasped his elbow, tucking in closer to his side. His arm wrapped around her and she blindly walked at his side with confidence.

She'd go anywhere he wanted to lead her.

"Blake, can I tell you something?" Suddenly it was important she share what she felt, what a joy it had been to find he was right about slowing down. Even though she physically ached for him, seeing him with new eyes had been the right thing.

"In a minute, Slick. Let me get that blindfold off you first." His arms reached behind her head to untie the knot and she felt his lips caress hers, brushing back and forth tenderly. She opened her mouth a crack and slipped out her tongue a tiny bit, meeting his touch, tasting his flavor. They stood wrapped together kissing tenderly, slowly, savoring each other until he pulled back and she sighed in contentment.

"You need to open your eyes, Jaxi."

She looked around with delight. He'd arranged a blanket on the grassy bank of the river, a basket with food open to the side.

"I watched you. You were so busy helping everyone else, as usual, you never got anything to eat." He led her to the blanket and sat, patting the spot next to him.

"I'm supposed to serve—"

"You're supposed to be with me. I arranged it all in advance. Jesse and Joel agreed to serve the desserts, Carol and Leo are working coffee and the rest of the boys are doing cleanup." He held out his hand. "You, on the other hand, I have assigned a different task. It ain't going to be an easy one for you, Slick, I can tell you that now."

She joined her hand with his and snuggled in close, feeling guilty that she wasn't helping at the picnic yet ecstatic to be alone with Blake. "What's my task?" she asked.

He reached over her to grab something from the basket, the heat from his body covering her and she couldn't stop from leaning into him, letting their bodies touch. A groan broke from his lips as he sat back, desire clouding his eyes.

She gazed into the depths of his soul.

Blake breathed heavy for a minute, his chest heaving, his hands shaking as he handed her the sandwich. "I can see this task ain't going to be easy for me neither. Holy hell, woman, you're driving me insane." He collapsed back on the blanket, covering his eyes with one arm.

Jaxi nibbled on the sandwich silently. The blood pounding through her body made the sound of the river fade until all she heard was the constant thump of her heartbeat and the echoing throb in her core.

"Blake, I need to tell you something." He rolled on his side to stare at her. "I'm not sorry about teasing you until you caved, and I'm not sorry we made love, but I'm also not sorry you took over and made these past weeks special."

He chuckled. "That's the strangest 'not apology' I've ever heard. I'm not sorry either. About any of it."

She handed him a can of pop from the basket. "I need to ask you something. You said we needed time to see the truth about each other, to see if what we felt was real or just an image." His throat moved as he drank and Jaxi found herself having to swallow hard.

He made every inch of her tingle just sitting next to him.

"I did." His hand lifted to play with her ponytail gently.

She closed her eyes to gather her thoughts. Facing him square on she held his hands tightly in hers. "Blake, what I've seen is a man I trust. A man who has the respect of both the community and his family. Jesse went off to school last week after hugging you to pieces and giving me a chaste peck on the cheek. He's got no bitterness brewing with either of us and I'm so grateful. That's because of you, because of the way you talked to him and shared with him. The way you treated me when he was around to show you were the best one for me. Even Travis has lightened a bit and his burden is a hard one. You haven't urged me to share his secret, you haven't asked me to give up reaching out to the others. You've supported me around the house and in the community. Heck, even today, stealing me away and making me relax. That's what you want me to do that's supposed to be so tough, right?"

He grinned at her with his new cocky smile that made her heart melt and her panties wet all at the same time. "Well you do seem to have a problem with the word 'no'. Using it with others, that is. Did you notice I had to find seven people to replace you?"

She lifted his hand to her mouth and kissed his knuckles. "What I've also seen is a man who put his sexual desires on hold, even when tempted by a very naughty tease. Your strength of character and your..." She couldn't go on. Her throat was closing and it all came down to one thing. "I love you, Blake Coleman. I always have but I know it more now than ever before."

Blake brushed his thumb over her mouth and she kissed it. He leaned in close and tugged her to him, nestling her body alongside his, the hard length of his muscular body heating her up. She relaxed back on the blanket and stared at him, at his strong features relaxed into a smile that reached his eyes.

"I've got a whole lot to say about you too, but I'm starting with the end. I love you, Jaxi." He leaned down and kissed her again, this time harder, his tongue dipping into her mouth and stroking hers. His hand cradled her neck, directing the angle to mesh them closer, nibbling and tasting each other until they drew back breathless.

Blake grinned at her and continued. "You're not a little girl, you're all woman. Not just your body but your mind and your heart. The only person I've ever seen work as hard as you is my Ma, but she's nowhere near as good looking." He winked and she swatted him teasingly. "It's not just the energy you use when you serve others but the way you pour in love. Everything you touch is better because you've been involved. It's humbling to see how much you love others and realize you love me too." He kissed her nose, kissed her cheek, touched a finger to the moisture leaking from the corner of her eye.

"I could go on and on about how you care for my family so tenderly it makes me ache inside in the part of me that needs family to be number one. I can't just love you, Jaxi, I've got to love my family. The way you fit in and belong with us all is incredible. So important."

Her heart was full to overflowing. She closed her eyes to stop the tears from squeezing out.

His voice scratched. "Thank you for being stubborn enough to force me to see you belong with me." He lifted her to a sitting position across from him and clasped her hands again. She stared into his eyes, and he took a deep breath.

"Jaxi, I want to—"

A series of giggles broke the intimacy of the moment and Jaxi snorted in disbelief.

“Miss Jaxi? You gonna come hand out the awards for the coloring contest?” A trio of children traipsed over the ridge to surround Blake and Jaxi. One of them crawled into Jaxi’s lap as she sat up, another crawled into Blake’s. The oldest of the three glared at Blake in disapproval.

“You’ve been kissing her, haven’t ‘cha?” he complained.

Blake nodded slowly and solemnly. “I have.”

“Ughhhh. Don’t ‘cha know girls got kooties?” he whispered in Blake’s direction.

“Children, come back. I’m sorry Jaxi, I didn’t know they were looking for you until a minute ago.” Carol tried to round up the strays and shoo them away, even as she checked the details of the setting with interest.

Blake laughed out loud as the tyke in his lap wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him. “Well, it’s fine, Carol. I forgot Miss Jaxi needed to hand out awards. I guess we need to go and do that right now.”

He rose to his feet and shifted the little girl to his hip, reaching a hand to Jaxi. Guilt at ruining his wonderful surprise rushed her and she tried to make it better. “We don’t have to go, Blake.”

A chorus of disappointed cries rose from the children and his playfully stern shake of a head brought more tears to her eyes.

“Of course we have to go. This is important, handing out prizes. Come on kids, show me where we need to take Miss Jaxi.” He nodded at Carol and she winked before moving to pick up the blanket and basket. He lowered his voice conspiratorially to the little boy standing waiting. “You see, I haven’t been in a coloring contest for a long time and I can’t remember where they hold it.”

Jaxi ambled slowly, a child in her arms. Beside her Blake listened to the running monologue of the little waif, nodding and ‘ahaing’ at appropriate times.

If this was what a family felt like...

Bring it on. Every single little bit.

Chapter Twelve

Blake looked around the table with pleasure, enjoying seeing Jesse and Joel back for the weekend. Ma and Dad were at the hospital for a check up and x-rays for the afternoon, friends staying with them to drive them home in the evening. Blake turned to talk to Daniel about a new furniture order, the quiet sound of conversation peaceful in the room. A soft touch brushed his groin, and he flicked a hand at it, thinking one of the cats had gotten into the house.

Jaxi's foot rested in his lap.

He jerked up quick, checked to see if Daniel had noticed anything, then snuck his chair in a bit tighter before he looked back at Jaxi.

She talked quietly to Jesse, not a single indication about her that anything naughty was happening. Certainly not something like her soft bare foot rubbing back and forth over his crotch until it was damn near impossible to concentrate on the conversation he was pretending to have with Daniel.

A hand waved in front of his face and Daniel snickered. "You need more sleep, Blake. Jaxi asked if you wanted dessert."

He turned a hot glare on Jaxi that made her take a little gasp.

"I'd love some dessert. I'll help serve."

He shoved back from the table and marched around to haul her from her chair. He didn't care it was clear he sported a hard on he could hang a horseshoe from. She'd started the game.

He was going to finish it.

"You need anymore help there, Blake?" Jesse's voice called as he shouldered through the door to the kitchen with Jaxi hanging from his arms.

All the boys laughed and Matt complained, "I bet we don't get any dessert until it's gone cold."

Cold would be good right about now, because he was headed for spontaneous combustion. Having kept his hands off her for this long he was ready to break. He dropped her by the sink and looked her up and down slowly, his gaze taking in the long length of her legs rising from her bare feet to the hem of her sundress.

"What's for dessert?" He circled her slowly, a finger trailing over her waist, over her hips. Up her back and along the bare skin exposed on the edge of the neckline.

Jaxi swallowed and dropped her head to the side. His hand rose to support her neck. Blake wrapped himself around her until she had nowhere to go but hard against him.

"Jaxi? You've got a bad habit of not answering questions."

"I was distracted..."

Blake kissed the beating pulse in her neck. "What's for dessert and did you know that's a very sexy dress?"

Jaxi smiled. "Apple pie and ice cream and if you want to know if I'm wearing panties you've got to find a setting a little more private than the kitchen, Blake Coleman."

"What's the matter? You never been naked in front of a crowd before?" he joked, smoothing his hands over her ass. No panty lines, but she might be wearing a thong.

Since the picnic he'd been scheming and plotting to get her alone and been frustrated at every turn. He'd almost given into temptation and snuck into the guest cabin with her but that wasn't how he wanted to finish this. Before that, he wanted to take them to the next stage.

It was time for the next step. Oh hell, it was past time.

Jaxi slipped from his arms and served slices of pie onto plates. She had a little smile at the corner of her mouth and Blake stopped even as he reached for the ice cream scoop.

She couldn't have.

"Jaxi? You've been naked in front of a crowd before?"

She stole the scoop from under his unmoving hand and added balls of ice cream to the plates, her smile turning into more of a smirk by the minute. He tugged the scoop back out of her hands, picked her up bodily and set her on the counter.

Eye to eye he looked at her. Leered, to tell the truth.

"Tell me."

"I took a modeling class to learn how to dress nice in something other than jeans all the time. I got asked to pose and there was—"

"You posed? For a Sears magazine or a—"

Jaxi pressed her finger to his lips. "I posed for a group of artists. Nude." She grinned at him. "It was really very fortunate because I wanted to take a dance class and one of the artists was an exotic dancer. I went to her studio and she gave me private lessons."

Blake was getting hotter by the minute, the ice cream in danger of melting to puddles from being in the same room. Holy shit, she knew how to exotic dance?

Did his dad know about this? Is that what he meant by 'interesting' classes?

Blake pulled her off the counter and handed her a couple plates of pie. She had no idea what she'd just let loose. He'd had a tentative plan in place but this beat anything he could have devised, even with weeks of planning.

"Go deliver these. Then gather whatever you need to put on a show for me. I'll wait in the barn."

"The barn?"

"That a problem, Slick?" Blake asked. "You got a better place in mind?"

Jaxi backed against the door until it opened. "No, the barn is fine. You want to arrange a seat by the training pole?"

Blake delivered the rest of the plates to a group of silent men all wearing enormous grins on their faces.

"Someone here got the bad habit of listening at doors?" Blake asked, letting his possessive feelings show in his body and voice.

"Holy shit, Blake, you've got to let us come watch." Joel begged.

Blake plopped a plate of pie in front of him. "In. Your. Dreams. I find any one of your scrawny hides near the barn and I'll convince Dad to let you handle the newborn lambs Christmas Eve all by yourself."

He ignored his own plate of dessert and hightailed it out the door. The boys could clean up—he had a show to attend.

* * * *

Jaxi slipped through the door into the long hall of the barn. She dropped her bag onto a chair and tugged off her robe.

Blake had turned on the overhead speakers and the walls strummed with the local country station. She paced to the far end where the training area for the horses was located, with the solid metal post concreted in place they used for walking foals through their paces. Her heart beat faster as she anticipated his reaction. It seemed forever since he'd touched her intimately, and she had no intention of waiting anymore.

Blake reclined in his chair, relaxed and at ease. Until she noticed his fingers gripped his belt buckle a little too tight. His eyes a little too wild.

Perfect.

She took a deliberate stroll behind him; close enough to drag her fingertips along his shoulders and through the short curls at his neckline. She stepped away from him to the upright pole cemented in the middle of the room.

And danced.

Starting slow and easy with her hips and torso close to the pole. Her jean shorts rode high on her ass and low on her hips and showed off the long expanse of leg exposed between the top of her cowboy boots and the shorts. The studded denim vest pressed her breasts until her cleavage threatened to fall out every time she breathed.

She'd picked the outfit deliberately. The girl who trained her wanted her to wear high heels, and Jaxi learned to dance in them, but the boots said it all. She was a country girl through and through and there was nothing sexier.

She let her head drop back, hanging onto the cowboy hat she wore. She wrapped a leg around the pole while she swung her upper body free, one hand touching her skin, over the vest and the buttons, letting a couple loose and exposing more of her body to Blake's vision.

Jaxi pulled off her hat in one smooth motion and let the long blonde hair she'd tucked inside bounce around her shoulders, swinging soft and loose. A curtain of silk curling over the satin of her skin.

She danced, feeling wicked and sexy and totally in control of her body. The beat of the song echoed in her heart, bounced off the walls and traveled through her limbs to heat her from the inside out. The song finished far too soon. She closed her eyes to focus, breathing hard for a minute before she stepped back from the pole and faced Blake.

He'd opened his jeans and sat stroking himself as he stared at her, raw desire flushing his skin. She watched in fascination as he pulled in long firm motions, the length of his cock hard and ready. It had been so long and she was more than ready to renew the physical part of their relationship.

He called her to his side. "Take off your vest."

Jaxi took her time, unbuttoned the final snaps and let the garment fall to the ground behind her.

"Holy shit, Jaxi, you've got nipple rings."

"Clip ons. You like them?"

He growled at her. Jaxi licked her fingertips, rolled her nipples. She let the sound of her pleasure flow over him.

"The shorts. Off."

Jaxi moved with deliberate slowness, unsnapping, unzipping, turning around to lower the material over her ass an inch at a time. She wanted to drive Blake mad with want. She startled when his hand touched her skin, hot and moist from his cock. He tugged her hips to draw her closer.

“You going to leave those boots on for me, sexy cowgirl?”

“You know it.”

Blake stripped down, all hard glistening muscles, replacing his own boots before standing up. He circled her again, like in the kitchen, only this time they were both naked. Except for their cowboy boots.

Blake stared at her, his gaze eating her up. “Slick, I don’t even know where to begin on you. I need to taste those nipples with those pretty little rings. I want to lick your entire body. I want to kiss your sweet lips all night long. But all I can think of right now is finding out how good a cowgirl you are.”

Jaxi ran her hand down his chest, playing with the hairs that led to where his cock stood at attention, weeping with need. “You wanna take me for a ride, cowboy?”

Blake swept her into his arms. Jaxi wrapped her legs around his waist, felt his shaft hard against her heated core. He shifted his hands to her ass and with one quick adjustment he penetrated her. He was hot and huge and Jaxi felt every inch as he forged into skin that was tender from too much, too soon, but she didn’t want him to stop. The pleasure rose above the faint discomfort as more fluid coated them both, smoothing the thrusts of his body as he drove deeper and deeper. Blake used his strong arms to support her, to weld them together intimately while he stood in the middle of the room. She squeezed him hard, reveled in the heat of his body as it raced over her skin. The tingle of the breast clips radiated out, upping the sensations slowly driving her higher, increasing the stimulation as he struck her clit on every plunge.

He lifted her suddenly and spun her around to nestle her hips back against him. Blake centered himself and pressed in from behind, his hands cupping her breasts, his thumbs and forefingers tugging on the nipple rings while his hips pistoned.

“I need to touch, Slick. I need to feel you, all soft and welcoming under my hands. So wet and tight and everything I need. Damn, I need *you*.”

She was going up in flames, all the heat from teasing him at the table, the knowledge she’d turned him on dancing, all the love she’d seen in his eyes pulling her closer and closer to the edge. He drew both breasts together into one hand and dropped the other to reach around to brush her clitoris and she cried out. Her body squeezed at his cock, tried to lock him in place as he continued to rub and thrust.

“Give it to me, Jaxi, don’t hold back. I ain’t going to stop until you come around me one more time.”

Tension drew toward a peak again. She was so wet fluid clung to the inside of her thighs, easing their joining.

“Blake, oh hell.” The explosion radiated from her core to the tips of her fingers, every ridge on his cock more pronounced as her sheath clutched tighter around him and Blake cried in triumph, his arms supporting her against his torso as his cock pumped and jerked inside her.

He cradled her close while he shuffled backward, his cock still nestled deep within her. He collapsed into the chair, draping her legs over the arms to let him touch where they connected. Jaxi leaned her head on his shoulder and tried to stop the aftershocks from ripping her away from him, still hard between her legs.

One hand cupped her breast. With the other Blake ran a slow finger along the seam between his cock and her pussy, the wickedest sensation ever.

The most intimate touch.

“Damn, that was the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, Jaxi.”

She couldn’t speak. Could barely breathe.

They lay in the chair until Blake softened enough he slid from her body. He twisted her in his arms, both of them sticky with sweat and come and Jaxi realized she didn’t care one bit. She’d never felt more alive.

Blake loosened one of the nipple rings. He pressed his palm against the stinging tip for a minute before removing the other one. Dragged his jeans closer, he reached into a pocket to slip the rings away. He kissed her and cradled her against the beating of his heart.

“Jaxi, I tried to ask you something the other day before the munchkins invaded our picnic.”

She sat up a little, still glowing from their shared heat.

Blake grinned at her. He kissed her hand and slipped something cold on her finger.

“It’s temporary. We can go pick up something real in Calgary or Edmonton, or even online I guess. I wanted—”

Jaxi kissed him to silence and leaned back to examine the ring. He’d woven two horseshoe nails together, smooth and shiny. It was simple and beautiful and evoked feelings in her she hadn’t thought possible to grow any stronger.

He held up his hand to show off a matching ring and she fought back tears.

“Can we can be ready by October? Ma and Dad got married Thanksgiving weekend and I figure a wedding would make it a real fine reason to be thankful.”

Jaxi drew a contented breath and nodded.

He paused for a minute then gave an embarrassed cough. “You notice we forgot to use something? Again?”

Jaxi blushed. “I was too interested in what we were doing to worry about it.”

Blake chuckled. “This past week I thought about the fact we had sex with no protection, a couple times already, and I did something I’d never done before. I did some math. You know when I was born?”

“May seventeenth.”

“Hmm. I’ve heard that planning for life takes different routes for different folks. But it sure looks like I’m following in my Daddy’s footsteps in more ways than one.” He nuzzled her neck and rose to his feet.

“You talking six boys?”

“Maybe. Hate to remind you, it’s tradition. Great-Grandpa started it.”

They dressed and strolled away from the barn hand in hand, Blake playing with the ring on her finger with his thumb.

“So, when are you going to ‘fess up and tell me what other classes you’ve taken? The interesting ones you wouldn’t share last week...”

Jaxi raised her gaze to his. “Let’s see. Self-defense and boxing.”

“Handy for those six boys we’re going to have.

“Stop it. Personal massage.”

“Nice. What else?” Blake drew her close as he led her back to the cabin. It had been worth the wait to know she was finally his. No more questioning if he’d be able to hold her heart.

She was his. He was hers. It was enough.

Chapter Thirteen

Two Months Later Canadian Thanksgiving

"How long we do we wait?" Blake asked, plopping down on the edge of the mattress.

Jaxi burrowed a little farther under the covers and groaned. "Oh hell, Blake, don't rock the bed."

Blake pulled the edge of the quilt free and smoothed his fingers along her neck, rubbing gently. He leaned over and kissed her nape. "You've got to get up sometime, Slick."

"Go away."

Blake chuckled and drew the blankets back, a tug at a time. She was still warm and soft from sleep, cheeks rosy, the subtle scent of her skin rising causing his mouth to water. He rolled her carefully to her back and smoothed his hands down her body all the way to her toes. He picked up a foot and massaged it.

"Oh, yeah. You keep that up and I promise I'll be real nice to you later."

Blake snuck in a nip to her arch. "You're all ready going to be real nice to me. How long do we have to wait, Slick?"

Jaxi opened her eyes with reluctance. "I don't know, read the box. Why do we need that thing anyway, Blake?"

"Cause I want to know for sure."

Jaxi sat and snuggled in close.

"You ready for today, Jaxi?"

"I've been ready for a long time, Blake, but..."

Blake kissed her eyelids, stroked her hair, held her close.

Three more hours and they'd be standing in front of their family and friends saying the words to join them as a couple. Together and forever and everything that went with it.

It felt so right.

"But what, Jaxi?"

Those big eyes stared at him as Jaxi traced a finger along his jaw. Her touch was light but it echoed through his whole body.

"I'm a little scared."

Blake shook his head. "You? Scared? Hell, woman, the first thing I admired about you was how fearless you were. Even as a little tyke, the first time I saw you, half-naked, covered in mud and wailing on Travis. You were so damn proud you never gave a hint how much you hurt."

"I was only seven and Travis deserved it. You're never going to let me forget that fight, are you?"

Blake stroked a finger over her lips. "Nope, I like it that you know how to use your fists."

"You like a woman who fights?"

Blake kissed her. "I love a woman who fights. I fell in love with you the day I found

you taking on that boy who was planning to drown the kittens.”

Jaxi’s eyes flashed. “You never did let me finish him off. He was ready to go home crying to his mama—”

“Yeah, but he was about three years older than you and a whole lot bigger. Tell me when you knew you wanted me.”

Jaxi nuzzled at his neck, her soft lips brushing his rough stubble. “I fell in love with you when you came to the school for the Professional Day talks. You told everyone all about how the ranch was managed, and the hard work and caring needed to keep the animals happy. I decided right then and there I was going to be the one that helped you.

His jaw dropped. “Jaxi, you must have been about ten years old when I gave that talk.”

She flashed him a gorgeous smile. “I told you I’ve loved you forever.”

He cradled her tenderly, enjoying their embrace. There was one last lingering concern he had to share. He had to start this marriage with a clean slate and somehow he’d never managed to bring it up while they were ‘wooing’. His chest tightened. “Jaxi, I’ve got to tell you. Travis and you and me. I mean, there was this one time...”

Jaxi wiggled back and looked at him, her cheeks slowly flushing with color. “Oh shit.”

He narrowed his eyes. She looked guilty but he was sure that was his own emotion reflecting back at him. “I have to confess the first time you touched me wasn’t the night after the pool hall. You kinda ... went down on me once before.” He hurried to reassure her. “I mean you were out of it and while it was amazing I don’t think you were aware you were with me.” He stuttered to a stop, not sure there was much else he could say.

Her face glowed red but her eyes twinkled with mischief. “Um, Blake, if you’re talking about the blowjob in the truck on the way home from the Stampede ... I knew it was you.”

A funny feeling tickled his stomach. “You knew?” *Holy shit, she’d known all the time?*

She licked at her lips and nodded. “I didn’t know at first but when I touched you it was like I woke up and...well, let’s just say you and Travis are...shaped different. I wasn’t sure how I’d gotten into the situation but there was no way in hell I was going to give up the opportunity once I had it.”

He stared at her. *Unbelievable*. “You are more trouble than anyone I’ve ever met in my life.” Blake shook his head and they both laughed, soft at first and then louder until he was lying flat on his back beside her.

When they finally calmed and he wiped the tears from his eyes he noticed the time. “Damn, you’ve got to get ready.”

Jaxi stood slowly, biting her lip. Blake swung around and wrapped his arms around her waist, keeping her close as he sat on the bed.

“I’m sure it’s done by now,” Blake teased.

Jaxi leaned into him as he kissed her belly. “I can’t believe you woke me early to pee on a stick. Just remember I already told you the answer.”

Blake followed her into the tiny bathroom, crowding against her back. He dropped his chin to her shoulder as she lifted the small white indicator.

“What’s it say?” He kissed her neck.

“It says you owe me a trip to Calgary to buy maternity clothes like I already told you

last week.”

Blake slipped his hands over her still flat stomach imagining how it would to feel round and heavy with their baby. All the doubts, all the worries were a thing of the past.

The future was feeling mighty fine.

* * * *

Jaxi looked at the community people gathered around, faces gleaming at them with delight. Blake’s fingers interlocked with hers as he led them firmly down the path toward where the outdoor BBQ reception was being held.

“You sure we need to stay for this?” Blake whispered in her ear. “Cause I got plans for you.”

Jaxi poked him in the side. “We have a whole lot of tomorrows for sex but you are only getting married once. Behave.”

Blake grumbled under his breath. “I want to get to the good stuff.”

They were swept apart into a sea of well-wishers.

Everywhere Jaxi looked she saw family. Matt and Travis manned the BBQ with Mike, grilling thick steaks in a steady stream. Joel was in charge of the music and he ran around making sure everything was ready at the large dance area they’d built on the lawn. Jesse mixed drinks and flirted with all the girls while he restocked the large ice-filled buckets with long necked beer bottles. Marion, finally free of her cast, visited with Jaxi’s parents while Daniel hovered at her side.

Jaxi watched Blake as he spoke with their friends, laughing and receiving congratulations from their neighbors. Her heart swelled with emotion at the realization she was living her dream.

It wasn’t long before they were back together, swaying on the dance floor for a first dance. Jaxi slipped into his arms and sighed with happiness.

“You’re looking mighty sexy in them boots, Mrs. Coleman.” He twirled her a bit and let her skirt flare against his legs. “You going to tell me if there’s panties under that pretty little dress?”

Jaxi lifted a brow. “Of course there are panties.” Blake’s face fell a little. “You going to pout because I wanted pretty undies to remember this day?”

“Oh, you’ll have plenty to remember it by without needing some bits of fluff and lace.”

Jaxi shook her head. “Think of it this way, Blake. You enjoy unwrapping presents, don’t you?”

Heat swelled between them and Blake drew her closer in his arms, his fingers splayed possessively over the open keyhole in the back of her dress. Jaxi dropped her head on to Blake’s shoulder, dancing close and easy. She waited until he relaxed before she spoke. “Of course, if you don’t want to unwrap I made sure nothing would get in your way.”

Jaxi counted slowly, aiming for ten. Before she’d reached five Blake’s arms jerked for a moment and they stumbled. He quickly recovered and kept them upright but she felt the increase in his heart rate.

“You saying your panties have no crotch? Hot damn, woman, are you trying to kill me right here on the dance floor?” He nudged his erection harder into her body. “Now we have to keep dancing until I can walk past my ma without blushing and embarrassing

everyone.”

Jaxi giggled.

His voice, dark and husky, drifted over her skin like a caress. “There will be a price to pay.”

“I love paying my debts. You can strip search me later.”

Blake stumbled again and laughter welled up from deep inside her until it burst out and flowed over them both. Swaying on the dance floor, family and friends all around, Jaxi felt the satisfaction she’d been working to achieve for so many years. She’d finally come home, and it wasn’t the land, or the house or even the family she’d just joined.

It was Blake, and he was all the home she’d ever need.

The End

About the Author:

Vivian was playing hooky the day they taught about the importance of getting a “real” job; she was hiding out at the local library rereading everything for the fifth time. Since then she’s become a Jack-of-all-trades with a job experience list only slightly smaller than the average phone book.

She’s hiked, biked, canoed, kayaked and camped throughout Canada, seven European countries and twelve states, including Hawaii and Alaska. All these adventures have now become settings for her overactive muse to wander through.

Vivian lives in Western Canada with her longtime sweetie, two wonderful kids and a dog that looks like a stuffed toy.

The best place to come and visit is at <http://vivarend.blogspot.com> and you can also send an email to Vivian at vivarend@gmail.com

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