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Kansas Heat



Jenny Penn

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MENAGE EVERLASTING



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DEDICATION

To Tom for all his help.

KANSAS HEAT

JENNY PENN
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Chapter 1

Friday, June 20th

Amanda Johnson glared at the bar. Well, in the direction of the bar. She really couldn't see the damn thing with the bodies three feet deep around it. The mob of oversized cowboys shifted endlessly, allowing her momentary glimpses of where she needed to be.

Between the country music blaring out and the din of shouted conversations, there would be no hope that anybody would hear her if she tried to talk her way through the throng. Her only hope would be to circle the perimeter and try to squeeze in somewhere.

Squeeze in and not get flattened, which was just what happened on her first attempt. Darting for a hole that had opened up, she slammed into a damn mountain of a man. He smelled nice, an intoxicating mixture of man, soap and cologne. He felt even better with the soft cotton of his t-shirt stretched over a hard wall of muscle.

Amanda didn't care about any of that. She didn't want to be here in the first place. She was damn sick of men just pretending like she didn't exist. Her nose hurt. He'd probably broken it. If he had, she'd break something of his, because enough was enough.

"You all right?"

Concern might have sounded in his voice, but it didn't make her anymore charitable about being mowed down. Intending to unleash her

frustrations at the entire night on his sorry ass, but the words froze on her lips as she looked up, way up. Amanda found herself speechless under Cody Reese's gaze.

God had gifted each of the three Reese brothers with the most amazing set of eyes. Cody Reese's eyes were so pale blue they appeared to be almost crystalline, bright and piercing. A woman had to have a strong heart and nerves of steel to overcome Cody's devastating gaze.

Amanda had neither, and as she watched Cody's lip curl into a lopsided grin, her ability to form words became impaired. She settled for a humiliatingly weak head nod and a prayer he'd release her back into the wild before she did anything even more embarrassing, like faint at his feet.

"Are you sure? You look a little dazed."

Ah, don't touch my cheek. The feel of his warm, rough fingertips sliding over her cheek in a gentle caress did not help her condition. Amanda could feel her bones melting. If he didn't stop, she'd be nothing more than a puddle of molten lust soaking into the bar floor.

"Your nose looks a little red."

Probably because it matched the blush racing up from her feet to her hair line. She had to get a grip and get it fast. Closing her eyes, taking a deep breath, and stepping away from Cody helped a little.

"I'm...fine."

"Hey, Cody!"

For Cody, the mob had melted away. A clear path to the bar and the undivided attention of the bartender, that's the kind of power the Reese brothers had. That's the kind of power that had always irked Amanda.

"Another round?"

"Thanks, Tucker." Cody nodded toward the bartender with the cockiness of a man who knew he didn't have to ask for anything. Everything always got offered to him. Peons like her could be so lucky to even ride his coat tails. "Oh, hey, were you waiting to get a drink?"

Well, duh. "Yes."

Cool enough to know when to play at being a normal person, Cody actually acted like he'd done wrong. "Damn, I didn't mean to cut you out."

"That's all right." For all the snotty comments circling in her head, Amanda wimped out. She gave him a proper, polite smile. "I'll get a hole here soon enough."

He laughed. A deep, husky sound, it sent another round of shivers down her spine. The fact that he could so easily turn her on just irritated her even more. She didn't get a chance to express that to him as he turned to grab his pitcher from the bartender.

Thinking to take advantage of the gap he'd made, Amanda started to sidestep around Cody. He brought her up short again, this time with his pitcher. Handing it over to her, he actually almost smacked it into her chest as she fumbled belatedly to grab it.

"Hey, Tucker, I need to add to the order."

Floored at his arrogance, Amanda stared at Cody as the bartender turned his attention to her. "What can I get you?"

"Nothing." The answer snapped out of her without rational thought. Reason didn't count for much when she was so damn annoyed. "And I don't need you to order my drinks for me."

Not the least offended by her ungracious attitude, Cody just gave her a patient kind of look. "Going to go with gopher mode?"

"Excuse me?"

Glancing pointedly around the bar, he ignored her question. "It could take a while to burrow a hole through all these men."

"I can manage to get my own drinks, thank you."

"I'm still waiting to tell Tucker what you want to drink." And of all the outrageous things, the bartender waited right along with him. Given how many people were shouting for the bartender's attention, it made her feel guilty, almost bratty. "Or would you rather wait another half hour until you can reach the bar on your own, Amanda?"

"How do you know my name?" Amanda scowled. "And how do you know I've been circling this bar?"

"Been watching you."

"Why?"

"Tell me what you want to drink."

"Tell me how you knew my name."

"Tell me what you want to drink, and I'll tell you how I know your name."

She couldn't win. He wouldn't let her. As usual, the man had all the power. Amanda caved, giving him her order with a snarl. She really hated

the way his lips kicked up in the corners. He'd been smiling before, but as she gave into his demands, the very corners of his lips quivered.

A gloater, she hated men who gloated. Nothing more unattractive, and she didn't care if Cody Reese was six feet of sky-scraping muscles and angles. He might be considered the catch of the town, but right now she wished she could throw him back.

"You're Amanda Johnson." Cody turned toward her after relaying her desires to the bartender. "I don't think we've ever been formally introduced. I'm Cody Reese."

He tried to make it into a conversation, but she just wanted an answer. "How do you know my name?"

"You work with Carly Winters." Cody shrugged. "I escorted her to the county's employee picnic in April. You two were on the girls' softball team together. I remember watching you play. You humiliated the other team. Who were they again?"

Cody might be smooth, but he'd fouled that pitch. "I remember the picnic. I remember the day after, the day you broke up with Carly."

"Yeah, I guess that's true." Cody's smile hadn't dipped, but it did lose some of its glow. He might be grinning, but he wasn't amused anymore.

"And I guess it's true that after three weeks with one woman, it only takes twenty-four hours for a man to rebound with another." Amanda made a show of considering that before she leaned in slightly. "Because, correct me if I'm wrong, you were already onto Sandra Miller a day later."

"Here you go, Cody."

The bartender's sudden interruption saved Cody from having to answer her. Perhaps it saved her, Amanda corrected. Cody didn't turn right off to the bartender but let her see the weight of his lips flattening out. She'd pissed him off.

Good.

"Thanks, Tucker."

Cody collected her drinks instead of taking his beer back. She probably should have just shoved it at him, but she reached for her wallet instead. By the time she got a hold of it, Tucker had disappeared.

"Ah, damn." Amanda held his beer out for him. "I have money here in my pocket."

“Don’t sweat it,” Cody assured her with a quick grin, making her want to growl. “Tucker’ll put it on my tab.” He didn’t take the beer, his own hands full with her drinks.

“Then I’ll pay you.”

“It wouldn’t be very gentlemanly of me to take your money after I mowed you down.”

“I think I survived the collision well enough to afford my own drinks.” No way would she end up owing him over this.

“It ain’t proper.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m the man. I should pay.”

Amanda gaped at his totally flawed logic and attacked it in the only way she knew he’d understand. “This isn’t a date.”

His smile dipped. “I won’t take your money.” The hard cut of his words conveyed his annoyance.

“Then I’ll pay Tucker.”

Cody narrowed his eyes on her and his tone dipped even lower. “You can’t get close enough to the bar to give him money.”

She couldn’t argue that one. “Why are you being so difficult about this?”

“Why are you making such a big deal out of it?”

“I don’t like being in anybody’s debt.”

Cody pursed his lips, pretending to consider the problem. It didn’t take him long to find an answer, and a grin. “How about a dance?”

“A dance?”

“In payment.”

She should have seen it coming. “No.”

Cody didn’t wait for her refusal. He turned and walked off without a word, leaving Amanda standing there, holding his beers and with little choice but to follow him. The sheer arrogance of his dismissal made her ears burn.

Oh, she was so going to stomp his feet when they got to the dance floor. Amanda didn’t fool herself into thinking she could avoid her fate. Once Cody showed up at their table, her three friends would be like bugs to a zapper.

Cindy, Rosy, and Kathy had convened this emergency party session with the firmly stated agenda of finding Amanda a rebound man. Somehow, for some insane reason, her friends decided Amanda didn't do well with picking her own men. Amanda didn't have to wonder what their unanimous opinions of Cody Reese's prospects would be.

"Ah, here she is." Cindy gave a smug grin that matched her cheery tone.

Sidling up to the table, Amanda glowered at her best friend before turning on Cody. "Your beer."

Amanda shoved the pitcher toward Cody with little hope he'd take it and leave. It threw him for a moment, and he hesitated before sliding the plastic jug onto the table.

"Aren't your brothers waiting?" Amanda asked pointedly.

"Let them wait." Cody shrugged.

Amanda had a good response, but Cindy beat her to the punch. "Mandy loves to dance, don't you?"

There was no missing the implied threat in Cindy's tone. Cindy was the only person in the whole world Amanda would defer to. "Love it."

"Great, come on."

Cody's oversized hand engulfed her smaller one as he pulled her toward the dance floor. Amanda didn't fight him, sending one last spiteful glare back at Cindy before the crowd swallowed them up. Friday night and Studs & Spurs was packed to the seams, mostly with men.

Studs & Spurs attracted men like shit did flies. If a woman's taste ran toward large, rugged, egoistical men who worked long hours polishing their social skills on each other and their cattle, then she would find what she was looking for inside the bar.

Amanda didn't have any interest in hooking up with some stud fresh off the range. For all his looks and money, that's just what Cody was. Ranch owner, ranch hand, they all worked the same life. It showed both in his body and his social skill.

The feel of his big hand and thick fingers wrapping around her smaller one sent a wicked thrill through her. After five years of abstinence, Amanda had come to resent her skinny fingers. Not much fun to play with. Cody's hands, now they'd be worth playing with.

Amanda cut the wayward thought off before it could develop. She wouldn't let her hormones get the better of her. This was not a happy

occasion, and Cody was not an appropriate candidate to break her long-term fast with. He already proved to be arrogant, controlling, stubborn, and way too egotistical, just the type of man she hated.

Ah, damn he does feel so good. Amanda couldn't fight the thought when Cody pulled her deep into his embrace. A slow song blared out of the speakers setting the bar for all the voices raised in conversation. With the floor packed with couples, there was no room to do anything other than sway. Sway and melt all over the front of his shirt.

Oh, but he smells good too. The man probably sucked in bed, but he smelled like a lover. Leather, soap, and a musky, distinctively masculine odor created to intoxicate a woman's senses, it invaded Amanda's body. Breath by breath, her inhibitions dropped and her arousal began to simmer. If Cody Reese's scent could be bottled and marketed, it would become the female equivalence of Viagra.

Amanda breathed deep and sighed, involuntarily leaning into him. He felt good. Strong, hard muscles heated the soft fabric of his black t-shirt. This time she had no ability to control the urge to rub against him. Something thick and hard rose to salute her tiny motions.

Amanda blinked her eyes open in shock. Cody Reese had a hard-on. He got it from dancing with *her*. *Well, damn.*

"So, I know you like softball. Do you like rodeos too?"

It annoyed her when he spoke. The fantasy winding its way around her dissolved before her eyes, and she was left with reality. It wasn't half bad, being held close by Cody Reese while he murmured in her ear, but it wasn't near what her body was interested in doing with the big cowboy.

"I've lived in Humble, Kansas all my life. What do you think?" Her response portrayed her annoyance.

"Boy, you got a lot of sass in you, honey."

"If my words annoy you, maybe we shouldn't bother with the dialogue and just stick to the dancing."

"Hmm. So you like rodeos."

Damnit, he hadn't taken the clue. She didn't even attempt to be subtle, so he was either truly dense or beyond hardheaded. Leaning back to answer him, she became aware something else was growing bigger.

Well, shit. She'd been rude to him, and he got hotter?

"Yes, I like rodeos, but I *love* quiet men."

“Which event is your favorite?”

Favorite event? Instantly the image of a man riding a bucking bull popped into her mind. Powerful thighs clamped around a wild beast. The smooth line of a man’s body flexed with muscles as he moved in rhythm with the wild, thrashing beast. It didn’t matter how god-awful ugly he was, how many teeth he had missing or lumps in his nose, for those few seconds, he was the perfect symbol of raw masculinity mastering an animal capable of crushing him in a blink.

“What’s that smile for?”

Amanda blinked. “What?”

“I take it you do have an event you prefer.”

Oh, yeah. “Barrel racing.”

“Uh-huh.” Cody smirked in obvious disbelief. “Thinking about barrel racing is what put that gleam into your eye.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“No. I’m just a little amazed is all.”

“Why? Don’t you like barrel racing?”

“Sure I do, but I like watching the bull riders more.”

There was no doubt he figured out her little secret, but how? Probably because his older brother used to ride bulls and had women throwing themselves at him left and right. “Well, we each have our own opinions.”

“Hmm. I tell you what. There is a rodeo down in Dodge City tomorrow. I’ll pick you up around ten-thirty.”

A rodeo? Tomorrow? He was asking her out on a date? Cody Reese was asking her, Amanda Johnson, on a *date*? What reality had she fallen into?

Does it really matter? Do you need to drown to learn not to play in the deep end? “I don’t think so.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Excuse me?” She planted her feet and refused to move.

“I said I *will* pick you up at ten-thirty.”

“Well, you *will* be standing at my door looking like a fool when nobody answers it.”

“We’ll stop and get dinner afterwards.”

Dinner afterwards? What the hell is going on here? Then, in a blinding flash, Amanda understood. This had to be a joke or a bet of some kind. She’d seen it in movies and TV shows where the popular kids picked on the

unpopular by pretending to like them. It was always a set-up, and she wouldn't be dumb enough to fall for it.

"Okay, Cody, what is the deal? Did one of your friends dare you to pick up some random woman they chose for you? You going to wine and dine me, seduce me with your charm, and then after a quick screw in the bed of your pickup, go rushing off to tell all your friends you did it, so you can collect your bet money?"

"I don't do quick screws, Amanda."

His husky growl turned those words into a promise—a dark one. She swallowed in the face of his sudden seriousness and brazened ahead.

"But this is a bet."

He responded instantly by using the hand still resting on her lower back to pull her flush with his pelvis. There could be no mistaking the seriousness of his interest. He'd make a horse jealous with the size of the erection poking her in the stomach.

"I'm going to pick you up tomorrow at ten-thirty and take you to the rodeo. Then I am going to take you to dinner and bring you back to your house, and maybe, just maybe, if you are a good girl, I'll kiss you good night."

It took her a moment to process what he'd said. It didn't make sense. His cock was loaded with the safety off, but he didn't intend to pull the trigger. What the hell was with that?

Oh, I get it. He's working it the other way, just like Will. Amanda felt her ears go red as the possibilities raced through her mind. She'd put money on the table Cody had something going on with a woman he shouldn't be messing with. A married woman, perhaps, and what he needed now was a decoy woman. A proper, respectable woman to flash around town as if he wasn't digging the ditch with some poor man's wife.

Well, he could go screw himself. She might be willing to overlook Will's indiscretions, but they were friends, best friends. Besides, Will would never use her to help in his adulterous escapades. Cody, on the other hand, was a free-roaming pig.

"I see." Amanda jerked free of his hold. "I'm only worth a measly good night kiss."

"Excuse me?"

Clearly confused, Cody obviously hadn't expected her to see through his charm. Why would he? No woman had ever told Cody Reese 'no' as far as Amanda knew. It delighted her to be the first. She took to the honor with gusto.

"I don't understand exactly what the game is, Mr. Cody Reese, but I know you're playing one. How is this supposed to go? You're going to show up at my door and be the perfect gentleman, take me to the rodeo and buy me sodas and hotdogs, make sure everybody sees us together.

"Then, just in case anybody missed the show, you're going to bring me back to town, take me out to dinner for a second turn around the corral. Then you're going to dump me at my doorstep at a respectable hour and speed off into the night, so you can go fuck whatever whore it is you really want to dip your dick into."

"What did you just—?"

Amanda went full steam ahead, riding the wave of her own bitterness and anger. "Has it ever crossed your little bitty mind I might be interested in more than just a little hand holding and a few chaste kisses? Hmm? Perhaps I want to be the whore for once? Did you ever think about that?"

"Darlin', I don't—"

"Obviously not." Amanda poked him the chest. "Well, no thank you. I'd rather stay at home and play with myself than be dragged all around Saturday just so you can perpetrate some good-guy image. I'm not going to be your pawn. You ain't *that* good looking, Cody Reese."

With her beautiful breakdown complete, Amanda swooshed her hair over her shoulder and stormed off the dance floor. She didn't care if anybody heard her or gave her strange looks. Cody had it coming. Damn stupid men! They were always treating her like she had pigtails in her hair. Maybe she didn't flaunt her assets like some corner-stop hussy. Maybe she didn't flirt her way through life like some bubble-headed twit. Maybe she didn't have a reputation for playing fast and loose with her favors. He still shouldn't assume she wouldn't enjoy it.

No sooner than her butt hit the hard, wooden booth bench then three sets of disbelieving eyes pinned her in place.

Chapter 2

“What did you do?” Cindy leaned across the table in a threatening sweep of blonde curls.

Embarrassment hardened Amanda’s defenses. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Really?” Cindy cocked her head. “Because from over here it looked like you just told Cody Reese off, and then left him standing on the dance floor.”

Amanda crossed her arms over her chest and tucked her chin down. “He deserved it.”

“What did he do?”

Amanda didn’t want to say. It did seem like she might have overreacted, just a little bit. That revelation wouldn’t shock her friends, but it would embolden them to take up their favorite topic of the night—how Amanda tended to scare men off.

Cindy wouldn’t let her avoid answering though. “Amanda?”

“He asked me out to a rodeo tomorrow, and I said no.”

Rosy almost dropped her drink. “Are you insane?”

Maybe, probably. “I didn’t like the way he asked.”

“You told him a little more than no, Mandy,” Cindy corrected her.

The censure in Cindy’s tone made Amanda squirm. “I told you I didn’t want to go out. I’m—”

“Broken-hearted, we know.” Cindy rolled her eyes. “That’s no excuse for—”

“Shut up!” Kathy snapped. “He’s coming.”

Why the hell is he coming back here? His beer. Hopefully he’d take the pitcher and leave. She didn’t need any more reminders of what an ass she’d made of herself. This night already justified spending another week in bed, hiding under her blanket.

“Ladies.” Cody towered over their table, and Amanda tucked her chin into her chest. “You’ll have to excuse us. I need to talk to this one.”

She let out a squeal when an oversized hand latched onto her arm and yanked her out of the booth. Before she could think of struggling, he dragged her toward the back of the bar. When it did dawn on her to fight his hold, she became all too aware of the looks they were getting.

Yeah, this is going to be all over town by morning. The real question now was how long the rumors would run. Another scene could add a whole month to the babbling sure to start with the rise of the morning sun. She couldn’t risk fighting him publicly again. She’d have to wait until they had some privacy. It wouldn’t be long. With his long legs, he made fast work of herding her toward the back door. Her short little legs couldn’t keep up, and she found herself fuming as he dragged her across the floor.

Cody shoved the dented metal door wide open. A second later, he yanked her out into the hot, dry heat of the summer night. His hold didn’t loosen or his steps slow as he hauled her around the corner of the dumpster and into the shadowed blackness of the old building.

Finally he released her, shoving her up against the wooden wall. The rough, splintered surface cut into her back, and she bounced forward. Sucking in a deep breath, she prepared to give him the putdown of a lifetime. The words jammed in her throat when his mouth crashed against hers.

* * * *

Cody didn’t know what he was doing. In less than ten minutes, Amanda Johnson had driven him straight out of his mind. Obviously, her insanity was contagious, because he’d gone completely nuts.

Of all things, Cody prided himself on his control, but she’d ripped it away from him. Left at the mercy of primitive male hormones, he felt driven to corner her and bend her to his will. She tried to hold firm against his assault, but folded in seconds. With a whimper, she gave over control of the moment to him.

Cody growled, reveling in her surrender as it fueled his desire to make her submit. Drunk on the taste of her kiss, she drove him further into the delirium of arousal when her velvety tongue dueled with his.

The small defiant gesture fed his aggressiveness even as her body began hypnotic rubbing motions against him. All her soft curves molded into his body just as they had on the dance floor, caressing him from chest to knee with slow, sensual invitation. Beneath the bitch there was a hot, little vixen waiting for a man strong enough to take control and master her desires.

Cody flexed against her, silently assuring her he was the man for her. She rewarded his show of strength with another grind of her body into his. The hard points of her nipples pressed through her shirt to leave trails of fire across his chest as they circled over the ridged planes of his pecs.

Little, hungry moans tempted his ears, telling him how much she teased herself as she did him. The sexy little sounds grew as her rubbing picked up speed. Her motions became less controlled and she ground her breasts harder into his chest.

Cody lost it when her hips lifted, bringing her pussy to grind against his thigh. Gripping her hips, he pulled her tighter against his aching cock. It wasn't enough. Silently, he damned the jeans for being in the way of feeling her liquid heat against his hardened length.

Primitive instinct had him moving into her, forcing her back against the wall of the bar and pinning her into place with his weight.

Free of the obligation to hold her against him, his hands went to work, ripping her shirt free of her waistband and filling his hands with the delightful weight of her breasts, soft, plump and so responsive. He had to touch her, taste her. But Cody didn't have the will to pull away from the sultry excitement of her kiss.

Amanda made the choice for him. Breaking free of his kiss, she gasped for breath the moment he started rolling her puckered nipples between his fingers.

"Oh, God."

"It's Cody."

He corrected her before shoving her shirt up. Pausing only to push the lacy cup of her bra out of his way, his head dipped. Nothing stopped him from tasting the sweet flesh of flushed breast. She tasted like vanilla, his favorite flavor, and felt like satin, his favorite fabric.

He trapped her nipple between his teeth and bit, making her cry out and arch into him. She returned the tiny assault with one of her own, raking her fingers through his hair and letting him feel the sharp edges of her

fingerprints. The stinging pain sent shivers of pleasure down his spine, but her words excited him even more.

“Again. Please.”

He wanted to tell her the same thing but wasn’t about to give up his mouthful of luscious flesh. Instead, he taunted her by taking another nibble of her tit, but this time he brought his tongue into play. Giving her puckered little bud a quick flick, he rolled the pebbled nipple with his tongue, speared on by the husky moans and groans falling from her lips as her hands pressed him even farther into her soft globe.

The tantalizing scent of feminine desire thickened in the air around them. The alluring odor drew his attention south. He sent his hands to discover the hidden well of her arousal. Fumbling with the snap of her jeans, he made faster work of her zipper. Then nothing stopped him from plunging his hand beneath the lacy edge of her panties and touching the liquid proof of her heat.

Finding her hot and wet was no surprise, but feeling the soft, smooth skin of a naked cunt had him moaning with need. It had been too long since he had played with a bare pussy. It was the most delectable treat on the planet as far as Cody was concerned, perfect for eating, better for fucking.

There was nothing he liked more than watching the pink folds of a woman, swollen and wet, being parted as a thick, blood-darkened cock filled her. Just the memory of the image had him pushing his fingers deep into Amanda, imagining it was his own hardened length.

She was tight, tighter than anything he had filled before. The slick, velvety walls of her cunt clamped around his fingers, pulsing and sucking him in deeper. The ache in his dick to replace his fingers grew painful. Without a thought to their location, he began tugging his own jeans open.

It was only the honking of a car and the sound of voices calling out ‘hey’ to each other that pulled him back from the edge.

What the hell am I doing? He was about to fuck Amanda Johnson behind the bar. The reality of how he had completely lost control sent anger racing through Cody. He never lost control. It was his most prized possession and little Miss Johnson wasn’t about to take it from him.

He was going to fuck her. One day in the very near future, he’d sink balls deep into her tight little pussy. Then he’d ride her harder than any man

ever had. When he finished with Amanda, the memory of his cock would be burned permanently into the soft walls of her sheath.

It would happen, but it would be on his terms, not something her smart mouth had pushed him into doing. His control fortified, he released her breast.

With one last thrust of his fingers, he pressed upward, intentionally stroking her G-spot and bringing her as close as he dared to an orgasm. With a promise the next time he played with her pussy he'd bury his face between her soft thighs and drive her insane, he released her molten paradise.

* * * *

Amanda didn't comprehend the change in Cody's attitude. Her lust-dazed mind still struggled to climb the mountain of ecstasy, convinced he'd be returning to torment her body to its pinnacle.

He can't leave me like this. He just can't.

Amanda blinked to take in a world gone hazy. The only clear thing was the strong, determined look on Cody's face. Even in the darkness of night, she could see the dangerous will of steel glittering in his pale blue eyes. They'd gone almost gray with an intent that made her shiver as cold awareness started to flood through her inflamed senses.

He isn't going to continue.

"I could fuck you right here, right now. Tell me to do it."

Her body screamed "do it!" The idea of doing it behind the club where anybody could see them excited her. The lust flooding her system thickened with an exotic spice, making every pulse of her heart pump out a new, darker, more forbidden fantasy.

Still a voice whispered it would be wrong, perverted and wrong. Finally, sanity won out. "No."

"Good. Then I'm going to pick you up at ten-thirty tomorrow, take you to the rodeo and to dinner after. I'm going to open doors, pull out chairs, hold your hand and pay for everything. I'll take you home, give you a kiss and wait until you are safely in your house. None of this is open for argument or compromise. Is that understood, Amanda?"

God, he is so damn arrogant. Why the hell was it turning her on so damn much? She'd never gotten this hot for a man before. His words should

have cooled those flames, dousing them with rotten reality. They didn't. They fed the fire inside her.

Maybe he wouldn't be such a bad fuck. Maybe I should take his hard-ass for a ride. Two seconds after he finished, she'd kick his cocky butt right out the door. Maybe, just maybe if he satisfied her, she'd let him put his pants on before she threw him out into the street. Telling him wouldn't be wise. For now, she'd have to play the good girl, or as good as she could manage to play with both her desire and her temper ignited to dangerous levels.

"Yeah, I got it, but don't think I'm going to let you get away with bossing me around like this, though. In the future, remember you're supposed to ask a woman out, not tell her you're taking her out."

"I'll try to remember."

He stepped back, and even that small motion came with a heightened sensitivity. The heat and strength of his body branded her. As his soft-cotton shirt slid across the sensitive tips of her breasts, she groaned. The motion in itself was a new kind of caress.

The air fragrant with the scent of man and almost-sex made her loopy. She pushed him farther back, trying to get at least one breath that didn't have her body humming with regret over her decision.

There was no hope for it, not with so many long years without sex. Cindy was right. She needed to get laid. Then maybe she could start acting like a sane person and not almost screwing the first guy to kiss her in five years.

I'm just horny, and she could do a hell of a lot worse than Cody Reese. Assured her wanton break-down had a reasonable explanation, Amanda straightened her spine and righted her clothes. With each jerk of her hands, every inch of skin she covered back up, her plans for Cody Reese began to sharpen. After he'd satisfied her more desperate cravings, maybe she'd be the one to work him back into a frenzy. She'd get him all hot and bothered then bring him to his humble knees to kiss her ass before she turned and walked away.

For now, she let him play the gentleman and take her by the elbow as he began to lead her toward the dim light strung over the back door. God, she'd almost fucked a man she'd known for less than twenty minutes beside a dumpster, against a greasy back wall of a kitchen. No matter Cody was a

Reese brother, she'd taken a step down in life tonight. Strangely, it kind of made her feel a little giddy.

Several cars roaring to life suddenly caught her attention. The flashing strobe of red and white lights lit up the night as tires skipped and squealed over the gravel lot. Sheriff Tony Black's Bronco led the charge into the road, then, almost within an instant, silence and darkness reigned again.

Must be one hell of a party going on somewhere.

"Your lipstick is all messed up."

"What?" Amanda blinked, turning back toward Cody. He'd brought them to a halt just under the yellow glow of the old style lantern. Inches away, the metal door vibrated with the beat of the music blaring inside.

"Your lipstick. It looks like you've been doing what you've been doing."

"Oh." Amanda considered the problem for a second before deciding not to worry over it. Instead, she delighted in being intentionally difficult. "Well, fix it."

"Excuse me?" His look was priceless. Amanda figured it out. Cody Reese had a prudish, if not outright proper, side.

Only one thing to do with uptight people, mess with them. "Fix it."

Cody glared down at her. "I don't know anything about lipstick."

"Well, you're the one who snatched me out of the booth without my purse. So, I can't see it."

"I could take you to my truck. You can use the mirror in the visor."

"Why?" Amanda shrugged, seeing no reason for her to put out the effort. "You're the one who messed it up, or do you expect a woman to clean up after you?"

She didn't know what made her be so mouthy, but she loved the way his ears went red and his features all tightened down with annoyance. Cody Reese was even sexier when he was angry.

"Don't even start with that," he growled, trying to intimidate her by looming over her. "This isn't about me being lazy and unwilling to clean up after myself. This is about lipstick. Lipstick is a woman's thing, and you are the woman."

"I see. My lips, my face, my problem, right?"

"I didn't...what are you doing?"

Cody stumbled backward, trying to escape as Amanda went to her tiptoes. Before he could duck away, she rubbed a hard kiss into his neck. Amanda leaned back and admired the red smear along his neck. It stood out like a beacon against his tanned skin.

It took Cody a second to get over his outrage, but soon enough he belted out a roar. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"Now it's on your neck," Amanda smiled, "and your problem."

His eyes narrowed dangerously and she felt a strange thrill tickle up her back. "I'm going to remember this."

"Plotting your revenge?"

"No, sweetheart. No need to plot. I already know how to tame a wild filly."

Let Cody say whatever he wanted, not even the threat in his slow spreading, shit-eating grin could intimidate her. Whatever twisted thoughts went through his head, Amanda knew one thing. They were perverted to make him smile like that.

Damn if she didn't want to know what thoughts swirled through his mind. Then again, maybe she didn't. There was something dark and predatory about his expression. Perhaps the best thing would be to turn and run. Let him stand at her doorstep tomorrow looking like a fool. Amanda would count herself lucky to have escaped this encounter with her dignity intact.

It would serve him right if she stood him up, but Amanda was tired of playing it safe. She'd played it safe for the past five years, and she had nothing worth anything to show for it. Well, if Mr. Cody Reese thought he could get the best on her, she'd make sure she came out the winner in his little game.

"Fine then. Let's go."

Chapter 3

“It’s warm.” Jace Reese scrunched his lips. He glared at the pitcher as if it had offended him.

Cody shrugged. “I got distracted.”

He was still distracted, unable to take his eyes off Amanda. He left her at her table with a chaste kiss on the hands. An elegant move intended only to solidify his standing with Amanda’s blonde friend. Cody knew women well enough to know the blonde was giving Amanda hell right now. He could see it clear across the bar in the animated motions of their hands and the dramatic expressions on the women’s faces. They were arguing.

Give her hell, Blondie.

“Distracted?” Jace snorted. “It looked more like a dismissal from over here.”

Cody cut his eyes toward his older brother, giving Jace a dirty look. “Maybe you need glasses.”

“Really?” Jace smirked. “Nice shade of lipstick.”

“Oh, that.” Cody scrubbed his neck with his cuff while keeping his glare on Jace. “It’s not what you think, pervert.”

“You know what I think?” Knox straightened up and let his pool stick slide down his hands to thump the wooden floor with its rubber end. “I think you dragged the girl out back and molested her. I think she let you. I think any woman who would let you get to any base behind a bar is not the woman we’re looking for. What you think, Cody?”

Cody shifted under the weight of the question. Technically, Knox had it right. If he agreed, Cody could kiss his date with Amanda goodbye. He wouldn’t risk it, Amanda and a hot, mind-blowing orgasm. The combination of the two was all Cody cared about right then.

Knox and Jace could just continue going down the list of well-reasoned, perfectly suitable candidates. They wouldn’t find a wife there. They

certainly hadn't found her yet. They were at the very bottom of their second list.

"Cody?"

"Huh?" Cody turned toward Knox. His older brother wore an impatient scowl Cody knew too well.

"I asked if you think she is going to turn out to be a suitable candidate."

"Might." Cody shrugged in non-commitment.

His relaxed response just irritated Knox even more, and Knox started around the pool table. "What the hell kind of answer is that?"

"I don't know, okay? I got a date with her tomorrow. I'll see how it goes."

"Hopefully, it goes well," Jace whispered.

He spoke to himself, but Cody caught the comment. It gave Cody enough pause to glance up at Jace, but his brother didn't spare the time to notice. He was focused on something else. Fascinated more like, causing Cody's curiosity to track the direction of Jace's gaze right to Amanda.

"Stop that." Cody shoved Jace's arm, jarring him enough to get his brother's attention.

"Watch it, little bit. I'm still big enough to show you which one of us is the older brother."

Jace didn't scare Cody. He did have a whole inch on Cody and about twenty pounds. Actually, both his older brothers tipped the scales when it came to muscles. Jace might be a little thicker, a little taller than Cody's own six-foot frame, but Cody could hold his own.

It didn't matter. Knox stepped in, using his sizable bulk to divide his brothers. "Both of you stop it. Ain't no need to be fighting over a woman, and if there is, then she ain't the woman for us."

Cody rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

"It isn't whatever, Cody," Knox snapped. "This is serious business here, and quite frankly I'm concerned. We don't need the attention a woman like Amanda would draw in our direction."

God, Knox could be unbearable with his superior attitude and condescending ways. Before Cody could cut Knox down like the old man he was, Jace beat him to the punch.

“And just what kind of woman is Amanda?” Turning fully into their older brother, Jace’s arms crossed over his chest and he held himself like a man insulted.

Not one to back away from a fight, Knox met Jace chin to nose. “Amanda has already shown a temperamental nature given to causing public disturbances.”

“Can’t you speak like a normal person?” Jace snapped. “If you want to call her a bitch, just say it.”

Knox arched his brow. “Is that your assessment?”

“Don’t try to twist my words.”

“You’re the one who said it.”

“I didn’t call her a bitch.”

“Well, then,” Knox leaned in to ask, “what is she?”

Cody answered Knox’s loaded question before Jace could. “Sassy.”

His instinctive response drew both his brothers’ gazes Cody’s way. Knox snickered. “Sassy is what you call a woman who pitches a fit and tells you she wants to play the whore in the middle of a packed dance floor?”

Cody cringed. He should have known the details of Amanda’s loud tirade had made it back to his brother’s not-so-innocent ears. He couldn’t deny it, so Cody had no choice but to defend Amanda.

“There isn’t nothing wrong with a woman who just likes to get to the fucking.”

“That’s nice.” Knox snorted and shook his head with total disgust. “Tell me, Cody, you want to marry a whore?”

“Well, I guess it depends on the negotiations. Given what we’re looking for, it might make for an honest trade,” Cody smarted back.

Under normal circumstances those words would be worth a fight, but Knox always controlled himself in public because appearances were so important to him.

“We’ll talk about this at home.” Translated, it meant they’d throw down. Cody could accept the fight coming. A night with Amanda was worth it. Besides, it probably would leave him just as bruised.

Then again, Cody might not get his fight. Jace stepped in front of Knox, blocking their older brother’s way to lay down his own threat. “We’ll be talking about you calling Amanda a whore then, too.”

Jace's glare promised more violence than Knox's had. Cody didn't consider himself to be particularly intuitive, but he could see the obvious. Knox apparently couldn't, which just went to show who the real dumbass in the family was.

"This beer is warm."

Cody took the hint, wanting Jace to save all his energy for Knox. "Fine, I'll go get another round."

Cody took off, needing the break from his brothers. They drove him insane sometimes. This whole thing had them all on edge, and for what? They'd never find a woman like Sharon, so what did it really matter?

Sharon. For a while there, he'd forgotten about her. For a while, the ache had disappeared and Cody hadn't noticed. Now he felt like crap for it. *How could I forget the woman I love?*

The love he'd killed. When she had died, a piece of Cody's soul had been cut clean from him. He'd sworn on her grave he would never forget, never let go, not until he'd passed and they were reunited in Heaven.

Such a noble stance, but the grim truth was a body had needs and a life to live. That didn't erase his guilt, only added to it. Worse, he had his brothers to consider. If it had just been Cody, he might have retreated, sure in the knowledge his pain would never be punishment enough for what he'd done to the woman he'd loved.

His brothers, though, had a right to happiness. They wouldn't find their peace unless Cody at least pretended to find his. It had been an easy charade so far. Cody accepted he couldn't be physically loyal to Sharon, but he could be emotionally.

The only solace Cody had for his guilty conscience was this thing with Amanda would be going nowhere. Knox had it right. Amanda wasn't the type of woman they were looking for. She'd made the list, and only the bottom of it because Jace had insisted on adding her. All Knox or Cody had known about her was a short brunette who worked for the city and could stand to lose a few pounds.

Apparently Jace had known more—like how soft she'd be. *So soft.* Amanda might be a little thicker than the women at the top of their list, but damn she felt better than any of them had. The way she rubbed into him, all soft and sexy, just the memory had him going hard. He wanted to feel her do that skin to skin.

I will feel it once I have her down on her knees begging for me. His victory and his reward would be the hot, tight heaven buried between her legs. He would lie to God if that's what it took to get a chance to seduce Amanda Johnson. He certainly didn't intend to let his brothers get in the way of his fun.

Hell, he might even brainwash one or two of them into joining him. The first thing he intended to do once he had Amanda completely under his control was share her with one or more of his brothers.

* * * *

Knox flinched from the warm, bitter taste of his beer and smacked his glass back onto the table. *Fricken Cody.* His dumbass of a brother did more than screw up getting the beer. Cody had screwed up this whole damn evening. Him and that girl.

Knox's eyes found Amanda. It didn't take any looking. He'd been tracking the little brunette's movements since Cody escorted her onto the dance floor. Knox didn't care what Cody said. The dance had been a disaster.

Cody might wish it otherwise, but Knox already got an earful of the dirty details of Amanda's tantrum. Too many people had already stopped by to add to the pile of gossip. Not that Knox cared much about what anybody thought. Hell, he'd have shrugged off the entire incident if Cody didn't seem so intent on the girl.

Cody might turn out to be the least of his problems. Knox cut a glare at Jace, but his brother had gone back to staring at Amanda. It worried Knox, this fascination Jace had with her. He'd held his tongue when Jace insisted on putting her on the list.

Knox had buried her name at the bottom, hoping some woman would distract Jace before they got to Amanda. It hadn't happened. Worse, now something appeared to be going on between Cody and Amanda.

Knox certainly couldn't understand how one disastrous dance could lead to anything, but it obviously had. Cody was leading with his dick or his heart again, hopefully not both. *The last time he went with both, we ended up with Sharon.*

Sharon hadn't been so bad. In most ways, she'd been ideal and actually the standard which Knox used to define the list of attributes they needed in a wife. They needed a woman who remained calm, cool, collected. One who knew proper etiquette and had manners. After all, she would be raising their children, and Knox certainly didn't want to end up with daughters who cursed or dressed like they were streetwalkers.

No. Their mother would set the example of what it meant to be a proper, disciplined young lady. She couldn't do it if she was too busy at the bar throwing tantrums and making out with men she'd just met. No, sir.

Knox's eyes narrowed on Amanda. *Not appropriate at all.*

Chapter 4

Saturday, June 21st

“So, you forgive me?” Will McKinney twirled the phone cord around his finger and relaxed against his couch. On the other end, Amanda sighed and, he imagined, rolled her eyes.

“There isn’t anything to forgive. Who you screw is your bad decision to make.”

Will smiled at that insult. He screwed whoever paid him, but he couldn’t very well tell Amanda any of those details. She might have been his only friend, but some things were always better left private. “Older women have more experiences, more tricks in their bags.”

“That’s sick,” Amanda shot back immediately. “You’ll do me one favor. If you insist on putting the zippy in the mayor’s wife’s do-da, don’t share the details.”

“I’m just saying, you could learn—”

“Enough, Will.”

She made him laugh with her serious tone. His little puppy had teeth like a tiger, and he couldn’t help but to tease her into growling. Right now, though, she couldn’t possibly be in as a good mood as him. He firmed his lips and made a serious face in some attempt to be respectful.

“So you going to tell me what happened with Nick?”

“No.”

“Come on, Amanda.”

“No.”

Will sighed and stretched, reaching for the beer on the coffee table. He knew this game too. Punishment with silence, she’d dig her heels in more if he pressed. He could always annoy her into talking.

“So, I guess I’ll figure it out on my own. Let’s see, you two broke up. That’s obvious.”

There came that annoyed sigh again. “I don’t have time for this, Will. I got to get ready for my date.”

“Date?” Will perked up at her comment. “With who? Certainly not Nick.”

“No.” There was a strange hesitation in her tone. “I’m going to the rodeo with Cody, Cody Reese.”

Will about choked on his beer. “You’re shitting me.”

“Ah crap.” Her voice faded slightly, as if she’d moved the phone away from her mouth.

“What?” Will perked up.

“Cindy is coming up the path with Rosy and Kathy in tow.”

“You really do have a date then.” Will couldn’t wrap his head around it. Cody was a big fish for his little Amanda to catch. Rich, handsome, the man had it all, which made Amanda’s dour tone all the more humorous.

“Yeah and I got to get.”

Will had to hear how this story ended. “Lunch, Monday.”

“You’re paying.”

She hung up, leaving Will shaking his head as he lowered the receiver back into its cradle. *Classic Amanda, grumpy in the face of good news.*

Even she had to admit Cody Reese was a step up from the slimy dentist. Will would place some money Amanda had either discovered Nick with another woman or some sick sexual addiction. Nick just had the feel of a creep about him. Will knew all the signs thanks to his professional experience.

Despite his profession, Will considered himself to be quite normal sexually. He enjoyed it, but he wasn’t addicted. No, he had other addictions. *Other problems, too.*

Thumping a cigarette out of its pack, Will lit it as he dropped his feet from the edge of the coffee table. As his boots fell they revealed the money, stacks and stacks of worn, soft bills all neatly laid out. That was his current problem. Where it all came from Will wasn’t completely sure, but he had a bad feeling in his gut. *Who wouldn’t?*

Waking up with a shot gun by his side, a canvas bag full of pills and duffle bag full of money tended to spook a man. Bits and fragments of the

previous night lay scattered through his mind like so many puzzle pieces on a table. He just couldn't figure out what the picture was to put them all together.

It had been a rough week since Amanda barged in looking for his shoulder to cry on only to find Marion Myers, the mayor's wife, riding a different part of his body. It had been the inevitable crack in the fantasy he'd been selling to Amanda for the past year.

Always teetering on the verge of discovery, scrambling to keep all the little details hidden, just the stress of lying all of the time had gotten to him. It made him feel more desperate and panicky. In that moment, when Will had seen the look of disgust and repulsion on Amanda's face, he'd felt all the control he'd been exerting to keep up appearances shatter.

Convinced the only way to fix everything and feel right in his own skin again, Will had done the dumbest thing ever. He'd flushed his pills. All of his recently purchased supply went right down the toilet, and it hadn't take twelve hours for him to regret that impulse. Out of money and out of pills, he'd spent most of the past week spiraling into a frenzied state of need.

Last night, Will had broken down. He remembered the driving pain, the hunger and the need. The rest was just bits and pieces. That didn't mean he didn't know he'd done something bad last night. Nobody had given him this shit. He'd taken it.

And sure as shit they're going to be coming after it.

Chapter 5

Amanda glared at her image in the mirror. She looked like some overdone doll a three year-old wasted the whole morning getting ready for her date with Ken. Fingering the hem of the little pink sundress, Amanda's scowl tightened.

If somebody breathes too heavy, I'm going to flash the whole rodeo.

Then you should leave the underwear off.

Ah, hell, Amanda didn't know. This was what a woman wore if she wanted to get laid. That's what she wanted, but she wanted to wear her jeans while doing it.

Well, not while doing it, really.

Shut up! You're the one who got us into this mess.

It was her nagging, inner insecurities picking on her all morning that had led her to let Cindy, Kathy, and Rosy fuss with her make-up and do her hair three different ways. All the ho-ha just to match her outfit with what Cindy called the "total package". Amanda needed a "total package" for what?

More like who?

Cody Reese surely wasn't worth this much trouble. Why she had done this to herself for him boggled her mind. She should have just put on her faded and worn jeans and tried for a clean shirt.

Do it, I dare you.

I will too.

Yeah, change clothes for the sixth time in an hour. You really are making a fool out of yourself.

Amanda froze as a lyrical chime echoed down the hall. The moment had come, the date would begin, and if all went well, it wouldn't end until after

breakfast tomorrow morning. The very idea of which held Amanda paralyzed.

Get real. You don't have the balls to sleep with Cody Reese.

I most certainly do.

The argument ended at the front door, her last barrier. Not about to bow down to fear, Amanda jerked it open just as Cody pressed the bell for the fourth time. Flushed with indignation, she barely noticed how well he filled out his blue jeans, the thick muscles of his thighs bulging against the slightly faded denim. His t-shirt might have hugged and caressed every hard line of his abdomen and chest, but Amanda was immune.

No amount of sexy muscles bulging out the roll of his sleeve would undermine her confidence. Not even the way his soft blue tee made his eyes sparkle with brilliance under the rim of his hat could stop her gaze from locking onto his smirk.

"Do I pass inspection?"

He was laughing at her. Amanda's chin tilted up in defiance. "I might not be too embarrassed to say I'm with you."

Her eyes narrowed as his grin widened. "You're going to tell people you're with me?"

"Only if they mistake me for your daughter." That took away his smile.

"Well, you certainly look nice."

Nice as in not great, as in not so overwhelmed with lust I want to rip the clothes from your body. Amanda sighed, so much for all the work that went into making her look this good. "I guess I'll take that as a compliment."

"I certainly hope so." Cody grinned. "Because I'm really hoping to get through this date without losing too much skin."

His pointed reminder of her less than gracious attitude last night made Amanda blush. She really hadn't been very nice, but, then again, he really had been kind of pushy. It seemed they shared responsibility for that disaster, so she had every right to tease him back. "Afraid my bite is worse than my bark?"

"If you didn't melt like butter when I touched you, I'd have come with a whip and chair."

He might have meant to shock her, but Amanda welcomed his comment. "If this is all about the melting, why don't we skip the date and hit the sheets?"

“Excuse me?”

“Did I stutter?”

Cody’s smile straightened out right along with his spine as he stiffened up. Looming over Amanda, he drawled, “You might have.”

“I’m just saying,” Amanda whispered. Not about to back down from his challenge, she dared to step up and lay her hands on him. Warmed by his skin, the soft cotton trembled slightly as his muscles flexed and hardened beneath her fingers.

Looking straight up into his darkening gaze, Amanda tried for her best sultry look. “Sometimes, it’s just all about the heat.”

Cody seemed to grow an inch before her eyes as he straightened all the way to his full six feet plus. His jaw clenched, and she could tell the answer was no before he spoke. “Listen here, little lady, we went through this, and if you don’t start showing a little more decorum, you ain’t even getting the good night kiss I promised you.”

Amanda bristled in the face of such authority. Annoyed at his rejection, she didn’t make a fool of herself by continuing to rub into him. With a dirty look, she stepped back.

“Then what the hell is my motivation for going on this date?”

“I don’t know.” Cody rolled his eyes at her, like she was the fool. “Maybe having a good time with me at the rodeo?”

“I need more.” *Oh this is good. Negotiate the terms of the date first. Brilliant.*

“How much more?” Cody’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

The small motion sent a thrill through Amanda. He obviously disagreed with her genius. The man’s arrogance and commanding nature probably made it intolerable to bargain away any power. Tough shit. Amanda didn’t plan on moving until she got a guarantee things would work out her way.

“Well, you’re getting what you want, a date with me.” God that sounded arrogant and so satisfying to say to a man as hot as Cody. “It only seems fair I get what I want.”

“I’m not sleeping with you on the first date, Amanda.”

“Okay, we’ll settle on the kiss, but I get to pick the spot you kiss.”

“The spot?”

“You have to kiss me wherever I command.”

“I get a smiling, pleasant date for the day, and you get a kiss.”

“Of my choosing,” Amanda finished for him.

“Well, then, don’t you need to get your purse?”

“You’re paying for everything. What do I need to get my purse for?”

“Hell if I know. Women always carry one. It’s part of the image, isn’t it? You got the dress and the shoes, you’re supposed to have the purse.”

“Fine, I’ll go get it.”

* * * *

He was trapped in some third dimension of hell, and if Amanda didn’t stop smiling, Cody knew he’d lose it. The woman was certifiable. Devious, manipulative and completely insane, what other type of woman tried to barter a date for sexual favors?

Totally twisted, and Cody loved it. In fact, the only thing keeping him from seducing her was knowing how badly she wanted it. Cody liked his sex a certain way. Actually, he liked it a lot of ways. He liked to tie his women up, play with them, share them, try them in just about every position he could bend a woman into, but the most important thing—he liked his women obedient.

It would take a strong man to train a woman as wild as Amanda. Cody had the strength. *Boy, but she smells good...feels even better...damn but she gets hot quick.* Okay, it would be a test for him too. A test of his control and patience.

“So I said to her, ‘you really shouldn’t put the peanut butter in them. You never know who is allergic.’ Like Debbie ever listens to anybody. Little Miss Know-it-all always has to do it her way. She put the damn peanut butter in there. Do you know what happened?”

Cody closed his eyes and prayed for mercy. For the past five hours, all Amanda had done was smile, giggle and babble away like some cheerily chirping bird. Usually such behavior would have spurred him into rushing her home and hoping he never saw her again. Except Cody knew she was intentionally trying to drive him right out of his mind. It was a low-down, dirty trick.

“That’s right.” She kept on going as if he had answered. “Dean Allen damn near died. Oh, it was chaos, people screaming and sirens. They had to

rush him to the hospital. I swear, it's amazing what an allergic reaction can do. Are you allergic to anything?"

Amanda paused to suck in enough air to fuel another meandering monologue. "You know my hairdresser is. Bees. Once they made a hive up in the attic of the salon. Well, let me tell you, I was..."

Cody barely heard a word. Not that the corral below had his attention either. What man could pay attention to anything with Amanda dangling her sandal from her toes? She had graceful feet. High arches turned into dainty ankles and flowed into smooth, tanned lines of beautifully curved calves. The hem of her sundress had ridden up to reveal several inches of the softest looking thighs.

His gaze stalled there. Oh, but Cody wanted to touch. Her skin glistened with the late afternoon heat, making her look juicy. He couldn't help but wonder what other parts of her body would glisten under the sun if exposed to its brilliant rays. Cody's eyes traveled upward, his imagination removing the clothing in his way.

"Are you listening to me?"

Cody jerked his eyes from the tempting swells of her breasts, over the smug curve of her lips to meet the knowing look in her chocolate eyes.

"What?" Not a smooth response, his question pushed her smirk into a grin.

"Am I boring you?"

"Of course not."

"You seem a little distracted."

Cody scowled, annoyed more with himself than her. He'd given into his weakness, and she'd caught him. Just as Cody suspected, Amanda was a gloater. "I was just thinking I should get something to drink."

"Uh-huh."

Cody could tell she didn't believe him, but he didn't waste time trying to convince her. Instead, he stood up and bit back a groan when the motion constricted his jeans about an inch too tight over his erection. He'd split the denim if he didn't stop thinking about things he shouldn't be thinking about any damn way.

"Thirsty, right?"

Cody growled. Amanda's eyes were fixated on the indecent bulge in his jeans. It would be hard for her to miss when he'd gotten big enough to

almost tap her on the nose with his cock. Like a preening peacock, it straightened up and filled out, trying to reach not her nose but those luscious lips she was licking.

“You know, maybe if you’re a good boy and actually pretend to be an attentive date, I’ll give you a kiss wherever you want later tonight.”

“I’ll bring you a soda,” Cody snarled.

He didn’t wait for any more of her snide little comments before turning and strutting off. At least he tried to strut. Not an easy accomplishment with a wooden log wedged between his legs. The fact it was his own body giving him such grief didn’t stop Cody from blaming Amanda, especially when he heard her laugh. A true sound of amusement and not one of her forced giggles.

Damn arrogant woman. She would give him a kiss, yeah right. Soon enough she’d learn he didn’t ask for or ever barter for kisses. He commanded women. They obeyed or suffered the consequences of his displeasure.

Very soon, Amanda would learn. Then she’d know better than to tease him openly. She’d know her actions would be returned to her three-fold once his brothers got their hands on her.

The very idea made him smile and relax a little. He couldn’t wait for the time she’d be naked, her eyes glazed with lust, her pussy dripping with cream as she knelt before them and begged for the pleasure only they could give her. After they made her come twenty or thirty times, she wouldn’t have the energy for all the arrogance. She’d be putty in their hands.

Cody kept an eye on her as he worked his way down to the concession stand. No other stud better think about taking his seat and trying to charm his Amanda out of her sexy little sundress. That was his pussy, and until he said otherwise, any man who tried to make a move would get hurt.

Forget how possessive and completely out of control he felt right then. Cody didn’t care if the volatile emotion fueling his thoughts was dangerously close to jealousy, an emotion he’d sworn off. Amanda might be more than willing to be seduced out of her clothes by some other cowboy, but she belonged to Cody. He wouldn’t tolerate any argument.

“Cody? Is that you?”

The soft feminine voice had him turning around to meet the gentle green gaze of Lydia Arnold. Her stylish, short blond curls looked disheveled from

the heat and grit of a day spent at the rodeo. It still couldn't dent the sophisticated air of dignity that had always been a signature of the Arnold women.

For a moment, Cody saw Sharon staring back at him out of her mother's eyes. Such beautiful eyes, such a soft voice, so charming and innocent despite everything. How many rodeos had he ridden in, her standing there by the railing, cheering him on?

Win or lose, she'd throw herself into his arms, her curves fitting perfectly into the hardness of his body. Then she'd lean back, her hand against his chest and look up at him with love shining in her gaze. Cody could almost feel her hand stroking over his chest in the sweetest of caresses. The warm memory turned to pain as it dipped beneath his flesh and squeezed his heart in a painful vise.

"Cody?" Lydia's voice whipped the past away in an angry whirlwind, leaving him cold and alone in the heat of the summer afternoon. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." *No.*

"Are you sure?" Lydia's hand settling on his arm in a comforting touch made him flinch. Her hand lifted. "I'm sorry."

"No." Cody straightened. "I should apologize. I was just having a moment."

"I know," Lydia stated softly. "I have them too. It's hard to go back to living when there are memories everywhere of what you lost."

"Yeah."

They stood there silently for what felt like an eternity, sharing a grief never far removed. Finally Cody squared his shoulders and forced a smile.

"So, I didn't know you were coming to the rodeo today."

"Oh, yes. Marion invited me. George is good friends with the mayor of Dodge City and we're all sitting together." Lydia shot him a mischievous grin. "I'm hobnobbing with the upper-crust now."

Cody laughed. Lydia was a good woman. She'd worked hard her whole life and didn't have much to show for it. After Sharon passed, Cody pushed for his brothers to offer Lydia a job and a place to live at the ranch. It hadn't been hard to sell them on the idea.

Cody hoped it would ease some of the pain in his heart for what he did to Sharon, but it really hadn't. Instead, Lydia served as a constant, almost daily, reminder of his sin.

"I thought all you boys were going to be working on the fence in the east pasture today."

"I escaped. Couldn't stay away from the rodeo, you know?"

This time Lydia laughed, a haunted sound echoing with the ghost of her lost daughter. "I know all about you, Cody. If it wasn't the rodeo, it would be something else. You always find a way to enjoy the weekend."

"No matter how hard Knox works to ruin it."

"I won't tell him you said that. So," Lydia looked around, "you here with friends?"

"Just one." Cody didn't expand his answer. He knew it was hard for Lydia to watch them date other women. She never said anything, but he still felt like a scumbag.

"You need something to drink?" Cody gestured to the line of people waiting to get refreshments and junk food.

Lydia seemed to understand what he left unsaid and allowed him to turn the conversation in a more comfortable direction. She didn't let him pay for her soda or hot dog. She made a quick exit, saving him from having to choose between leaving Amanda unattended or introducing her to his latest soon-to-be lover.

As he watched Lydia walk away, he realized all the enjoyment, tension and excitement of being with Amanda drained away right along with his deflated dick. A part of him didn't want to return to his seat.

What the hell am I doing anyway? He didn't really like Amanda. She certainly didn't fit any of Jace's or Knox's outlined criteria. She was a good time waiting to happen. Cody considered himself to be better than that. He should do the right thing, return her home tonight and then go back to the ranch and scratch her name off the list.

Determined to take control of this situation and his own rioting hormones, Cody turned his gaze up the bleacher seats and froze. His hand squeezed the cup until the lid popped off and cold, sticky liquid oozed down over his fist.

There was a man in his seat.

Chapter 6

“So you’re not here with Cindy.”

“Disappointed?” Amanda couldn’t control the grin tugging on her cheeks. Sitting beside her, Tony shrugged as if it was nothing to him, but she knew better. Anthony Black might be known as the straight-laced, serious-minded sheriff of Humble, but she still saw him as the boy who wore his cowboy boots with his Spiderman PJs to bed.

Both of their mothers had worked for the Sheriff’s department. Since the cradle, Amanda and Tony were raised like siblings. As his self-appointed sister, Amanda felt it her duty to tease Tony about his one known weakness.

“Just curious,” Tony shrugged it off as if he didn’t really care Cindy hadn’t come with her. Amanda didn’t buy his act for a moment.

“Just curious, huh? And was it just curiosity making you stare at her all last night? Or wasn’t it you I saw lurking in the corner at Studs & Spurs?”

“I didn’t stare at her all night,” Tony snorted, though he didn’t deny anything else. “I wasn’t even there all night.”

“I noticed.” Amanda let him off the hook, knowing Tony’s limits when it came to a joke. “I saw you and your deputies tear out of the parking lot. What happened? Some idiot teen get kicked in the head by a cow again? I swear this new generation just doesn’t know how to tip a good heifer over.”

“I wish,” Tony grunted. “More like some asshole shot up the Shade Tree motel and managed to kill three people.”

“Ew.” Amanda never cared for blood and gore stories, at least, not real ones. When it came to reality, though, her curiosity always got the better of her. “Why would anybody do that?”

“Well that’s the million dollar question,” Tony yawned out as he stretched his arms over his head. “And I mean that literally this time.”

“What?” Amanda scowled, confused by his comment.

“Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

Amanda heard Tony clearly. He didn’t want to talk about it and she didn’t blame him. Pointedly, Amanda turned the conversation in a different direction. “You enjoying the rodeo?”

“It’s hot.” Tony grinned. “What about you?”

“I’m hot too.” It was Amanda’s turn to shrug. “Supposedly my date was bringing me a drink, but I’m beginning to wonder if I didn’t succeed in running him off.”

“You’re on a date?” Tony glanced over at her as if he’d just realized she was a woman.

“Look at me.” Amanda gestured down her length. “Do you ever see me dressed like this?”

That got her a laugh and a shake of his head. “Does this date know what he’s gotten himself into?”

“We negotiated the terms of the date beforehand.”

“Negotiated?” Tony gave her one of his infamous raised brow looks. It might have worked on a suspect, but Amanda just grinned back.

“It was a true stroke of brilliance on my part.”

“And what did you negotiate for, Mandy?”

“You’ll sleep better not knowing the answer.”

“Amanda Johnson.” Tony gave her a look only a father should give his daughter.

“What?”

Tony narrowed his eyes on her. “I think I might have a few words with this date of yours, make sure he understands certain things.”

“Aw, come on, Tony. Let a girl have her fun.”

“You can have all the fun you want, as long as he knows he is taking out a lady and should treat you as such.” Tony wasn’t kidding, and Amanda knew it. One of the pitfalls of having a sheriff as a self-appointed brother was he felt an overbearing need to intimidate the men she went out with.

“You’re no fun at all.” Amanda pouted and glared at Tony. “Besides you don’t have any right to talk to my date. This is a free country. I’m a free woman.”

“You’re a friend. That gives me all the right I need.”

“Which is no right at all.” Amanda sighed and let the smile building inside her tug the edges of her lips upward. Tony was a decent sort, even if

he was a tad overbearing. It really was sweet the way he tried to protect her. Pointless, but sweet.

“So who is this date?” Tony looked around.

“Cody Reese.”

Tony’s head snapped back around. “Reese? You’re on a date with one of the Reese brothers?”

“What?” Amanda perked up at the obvious darkening in Tony’s gaze. “Does he have a seedy side I should be worried about?”

“Yes.”

No hesitation, no room for doubt. Amanda didn’t even know what to say in response. Details, she wanted them, but she couldn’t ask. Tony wouldn’t give them to her. He knew they would only drive her to find out the truth.

Already he started going all big brother, sitting up straight and waving his finger at her. “This is your last date with any of the Reese brothers, Mandy. Don’t give me that look. I know you think I’m stepping over the line, but I only have your best interests at heart. You are not ready for what they are into.”

His warning sounded both ominous and damn exciting. What could Cody be into that would make Tony go all macho?

“You’re in my seat.” Cody bit those hard words out, looming over them like an avenging shadow. With the sunlight at his back, the brim of his hat covered his face in darkness. Amanda didn’t need the light to know Cody wasn’t pleased.

“I don’t see your name on it.” Neither was Tony. He looked ready to go fist-to-fist with Cody.

“What do you want, Sheriff?”

“To enjoy my friend’s company, and you’re getting in the way of that, Reese.”

“Your friend is my date, and I’m the one who gets to enjoy her company today.”

“Why don’t we let the lady choose who she’d rather spend the day with?”

“Amanda?”

“Oh, no.” Amanda waved the two bulls away. “I ain’t getting in the middle of this.”

“We’re moving,” Cody commanded.

Amanda didn't budge. She didn't like being bossed around, especially by the likes of Cody Reese. Tony stretched out an arm along her back in a gesture a good deal friendlier than their actual relationship warranted.

"I guess the lady made her choice."

"Now, Amanda."

She didn't know exactly how it happened, but suddenly she was standing. The response had her scowling as she tried to figure out why she obeyed.

Cody didn't give her a chance to reconsider her action. A hard, hot hand latched onto her arm. Before she had a chance to say another word to Tony, he dragged her up the steps before shoving her into a vacant seat and settling down beside her.

Amanda threw an elbow into Cody's side as he sat, making sure she hit bone. "Do you mind? I'm not a sack of feed, you know?"

"What were you doing flirting with him?"

"Excuse me?" She might have been willing to explain a few things to Cody, but with that tone, the man deserved to be smacked upside the head.

"Let me make this very clear you, Amanda. Nobody touches what is mine."

"Let me make this very clear to you, Cody. You don't own me, and I'll flirt with whoever the hell I want."

"Don't push me on this, Amanda." She swallowed, watching the feral hunger grow in his gaze. "I don't tolerate disobedience."

"Tony is just a friend." She should have told him to go to hell, explained she wouldn't tolerate such arrogant commands. Why she didn't, Amanda couldn't answer.

"I don't care what he is. He touched you."

"Because you came across like a jealous jackass."

"I'm not jealous. I'm possessive. There is a difference."

Amanda rolled her eyes at his correction. "Strange how they both manifest themselves in the same style of asshole behavior."

"You've been warned."

"What?" Amanda stared at him in amazement as he relaxed back into his seat. He didn't spare her a glance or even an attempt at an answer. "Oh, no you don't. We're still fighting about this."

"The conversation is over."

“Who says? You?”

“You remember our agreement? Smiling and be happy or...”

Bastard. Amanda growled. She knew exactly what he was threatening. If there was any possibility of getting what she wanted from somebody else, she’d have told him exactly what she thought of him. With no other options available, Amanda decided to go back to giving him just what he wanted.

* * * *

By the time Cody pulled his truck into Amanda’s driveway, he had given up all hope. The date had turned into a complete disaster. Only one person could be blamed for the outcome, and she sat not three feet away, smugly anticipating her end-of-the-date treat.

Cody would have been looking forward to sticking it to little Miss Obnoxious if it weren’t for the boner begging him to give into her carnal desires. He strongly suspected that had been her intent through their long dinner. The woman had to be a mastermind at the art of seduction. She even knew how to make eating sexy.

Instead of ordering a salad and picking away at it like all his previous dates had done, Amanda had demolished not only her appetizer and salad, but managed to fit in dinner and a big piece of chocolate cake to round out the meal.

Then, she asked if he was going to finish his dessert. Cody had stumbled over his response with his shock and lost his piece of pie in the process. If she found his reaction embarrassing, she didn’t show it. Without even waiting for him to find his tongue, she cleaned his plate until only the crumbs on her fork remained.

That’s when Amanda had deployed her worst weapon. Bringing her little, pink tongue out, she licked the tines clean, hypnotizing Cody in the process. The way her full lips had parted, the way she delicately lapped at the fork and her expression of pure pleasure...Cody had to adjust his napkin for the fifth time during the meal to hide his reaction.

Never before had he gotten turned on by watching a woman eat, but every little thing Amanda did seemed to drive more blood from his head to his cock. That he hadn’t passed out during the meal was nothing short of a miracle.

“Well,” Amanda turned toward him. “Did I pass?”

She failed with flying colors.

“I was a sweet, gracious date, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, honey, and I must admit I was surprised.”

“Good.” Despite all the smiles she bestowed on him throughout the day, Cody could see a true grin light up her face in the darkness of the cab. He knew what she was thinking.

“I guess you earned your treat. Slide on over here, and I’ll give it to you.”

Something he said hit a button and her smile faded. “Here? Don’t you think we’d be more comfortable inside?”

“No need to go to all the trouble just for a kiss.”

“Just a kiss?” Her head bumped against the window when she reared back. “I don’t think so.”

“I thought—”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Cody Reese,” Amanda snapped. “You said if I was nice, you’d give me the kiss I wanted.”

“The kiss you wanted?” Cody held back his humor. Yeah, this moment felt as good as he’d anticipated all day. “What kiss is that, sweetness?”

Her eyes narrowed on him and Cody wondered if she had the nerve to actually say the words aloud.

“You know what I want.”

She didn’t. Like a kitten pretending to be a lion, she didn’t have the strength to follow through. He did.

“I plan to use my tongue as long as you promise not to bite it off.”

“What?” She blinked, looking honestly confused.

“A French kiss. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“A French kiss?” Her mouth fell open. “Are you insane?”

“I know it feels a little weird the first time, but trust me you’ll enjoy—”

“I know what a French kiss is, you jackass. That’s not what I want and you know it.”

“Then what is?” Hell, if she actually said the word pussy, he’d give her what she wanted. Just the idea of hearing dirty words coming out of those lips had him hard.

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Amanda repeated, failing to give Cody the magic words. She did succeed, though, at pissing him way off. “Now get

your ass out of this truck and into my house! I want those pants off and your naked ass in my bed. That's my boner. I intend to be the one playing with it!"

"Enough!" Cody had it. He didn't know what ticked him off more. The way she openly challenged him, tried to command him—all of it was intolerable. Amanda needed to be taught a lesson, a very serious lesson.

* * * *

Amanda gave up trying to get a response from Cody. Ever since he'd yelled at her, he'd gone silent. Quiet but not still. Kicking down the hand break, he'd burned rubber into her driveway as he'd thrown the truck into reverse.

She'd banged her head against the window a second time, but he hadn't stopped to notice. Ignoring her curses and demands, he'd sped off down the road, leaving her no option but to buckle her seat belt. Now Amanda didn't have any clue what Cody intended to do as he turned down a worn, dirt road.

In hindsight she realized she might have gone overboard. Now she had a very large, heavily-muscled, pissed off cowboy driving her to God knew where with nobody around to help her if he became violent. She knew some basic defense moves, but Cody had an extra foot on her, not to mention about a hundred pounds. The only good defense would have been her gun, but it was safely tucked away in her bedroom.

Out here, Amanda was on her own and essentially defenseless against Cody. Eyeing him like he was a rattlesnake about to strike, she tensed as the truck came to a stop in the middle of a deserted pasture. Cody didn't kill the engine or cut the lights when he turned toward her.

"Get out."

It didn't take a genius to know the right answer. "No."

"Get out of the truck, Amanda." His voice turned soft.

"I'm not going to let you leave me here."

"I'm not going to leave you here. You said you wanted a kiss, and I'm going to give you the one you want."

God's truth, she was reconsidering the wisdom of her request. Not that Amanda believed him in the slightest. Cody certainly didn't look like he was in the mood to give her what he promised.

"I think I've changed my mind."

"Too bad."

"Seriously, Cody, I want to go home now."

"Seriously, Amanda, get out of the damn truck."

"No."

That one little word snapped whatever control Cody was exerting over himself. She matched his snarl with a shriek, jerking back as he reached for her. With the door at her back, there was nowhere to escape and no way to avoid the man invading her space.

Her hands shot up in an instinctive move cut short by manacles made of flesh and bone. Cody's hands latched onto her wrists, forcing her arms backward despite her struggles. Pinning her wrists together against the small of her back, Cody arched her straight up into his embrace. Before she could offer a protest or hurl any curses at him, his lips crashed down over hers. Like a storm breaking over the horizon, he unleashed the full force of his fury on her tender lips.

Sharp teeth nipped at her, making her gasp from the stinging pain. Her defenses weakened and before she could shore them up, Cody invaded. Like liquid chocolate, his tongue slid in to plunder the dark recesses of her mouth and intoxicate her with his addictive taste.

Demanding, hard and relentless, he ravaged her very soul with the savagery of his kiss. Primitive feminine instinct reared to life as logic and reason were drowned under the desire flooding through her body. She melted into the sensation, feeling the burn of aching need clench the internal muscles of her sheath as thick cream dripped down to dampen her panties.

The pulsing waves echoing from her womb demanded its due, its fulfillment. Only by pressing deeper into the strength of Cody's embrace could she find satisfaction. Just as she began to respond to him, Cody broke the kiss. Releasing Amanda as quickly as he'd captured her, he left her feeling cold, bereft and aching for more of his aggressive seduction.

"I'm going to give you exactly what you asked for, Amanda." The dark, husky promise of his words made her shiver as the very image of what he

suggested blossomed in her mind. Just the thought of Cody's kiss devouring the most sensitive flesh made her pussy unleashed a painful lash of demand.

"First, you will get out of this truck."

There would be no more arguing on this subject. She'd do as he said or she wouldn't get what she wanted. Amanda clearly got the message when he pushed open his door and disappeared into the night. She could hear him moving around, feel the truck shift as he climbed into the bed, see the flash of metal in moonlight as he opened the box back there. Still she hesitated.

Until this moment, she'd have said she knew what good sex was. Even would have suggested she'd experienced some amazing climaxes. Now, though, Amanda feared her definitions would change if she stepped out of the truck.

The small action would carry consequences she'd live with for the rest of her life. Amanda would be stepping from her safe world into Cody's forbidden one. She honestly didn't know if she was prepared for the transition.

Whatever pleasures he bestowed on her, Amanda knew Cody would exact a high price in return. What price and how he'd take payment sent fear sizzling through her. The spicy sensation only fueled her desire.

The bastard had her good and trapped by her own arousal. It didn't matter if she liked the man or not. Whatever Cody demanded of her tonight, Amanda would give. Like a moth to a flame, she had no choice.

Decision made, Amanda shoved open the door and stepped out into her future. Cody was there to greet her. Without a word or even a glance in her direction, he dragged her by the arm toward the front of the truck.

Releasing her by the headlights, he stepped out in their bright glare. Cody dropped the old, faded blanket he had thrown over his shoulder to the ground. Going to one knee, he took his time spreading it over the grass. When he'd finally smoothed all the wrinkles flat, Cody stood up and pinned her with the force of his gaze. She couldn't see his eyes under the shadow of his hat, but she felt his hard determination washing over her.

"Take off your clothes."

The cold command hadn't been what she was expecting. "What?"

"Take off your clothes."

"I..."

Cody stepped closer to her. “You don’t think you’re going to get what you want wearing that dress, do you?”

“I thought we’d...maybe start with something like a kiss first.” She didn’t recognize her own voice. It was too low, too breathless to be hers.

“We do this my way or no way, Amanda.”

“Couldn’t we at least—”

“Take your clothes off or get back into the truck.”

“But—”

“I don’t tolerate disobedience in my lovers. My will is supreme. My word’s law. You do as you’re told or you can find yourself another lover.”

“You’re insane,” Amanda whispered, in awe at her own conclusion. She should have seen this coming. She should have been repulsed by it. Instead, she trembled in the face of his domination, turned on to a degree she’d never been.

“Take off your clothes or suffer the consequences.”

Even as her mind told her to fight back, her fingers went to work on the line of small buttons holding her sundress together. He mesmerized her body with some ancient magic. Her breasts swelled, her nipples puckered, and behind the shield of her lacy panties, her pussy quaked to life with a flood of cream.

The soft cotton sleeves caressed her arms with a gentle sigh as the dress slid to puddle at her feet. She stood in front of Cody Reese in nothing more than a pair of lavender panties and her low-heeled sandals.

Amanda shivered as his finger traced a slow line down her neck, between the valley of her breasts, over her trembling stomach muscles to hook itself under the waistband of her panties.

His chin lowered as his eyes tracked his finger’s progress. When his touch halted, he stared at her underwear for a moment before looking back up. She was close enough to see how his eyes had lightened to a golden color. Like a cat’s eyes, they reflected back the light, glowing with a determination.

“You still have clothes on.”

Without daring to breathe, she pushed her panties down and waited for his response. It was less than what she had expected and more than she knew she could handle. He rubbed the backs of his fingers against the soft skin of her naked mound.

“Very nice.”

Some sick, twisted part of her reveled in his approval. Of their own volition, her legs parted. Silently, she invited him to slide his touch lower and give her a more intimate caress. The tips of Cody’s lips lifted as he accepted her offering, letting a single finger press through her swollen cunt lips to settle directly over her clit.

Slowly he began to roll her sensitive nub, making her gasp and grasp onto his arms for support as she swayed on unstable legs.

“Very nice, indeed. Smooth and wet, just the way I like my pussy.”

Amanda barely registered what he was saying. The pleasurable coil of tension tightening through her body moved with a languid, sensual motion. It left no room for her brain to compute anything other than the basic joy of her building orgasm.

His finger picked up speed, making her cry out as everything inside her leapt out of control. She could feel the break of the horizon as the promised land of ecstasy crested inside her.

“Do not come, Amanda.”

It was an evil command, one she barely heard, but her body responded nevertheless. With those few curt words, he held her back from the breaking climax.

He didn’t let up his intimate touch. It took only seconds for her to break down into a quivery, moaning mass. Unable to hold up her own weight, Amanda collapsed into him. Cody’s warm chest muscles pressed against the tender tips of her breasts, teasing her with a new sensation and adding to her heightened state of pleasure.

She couldn’t stop herself from rubbing against him, teasing her nipples with the same circular motion of the blunt finger on her clit. So close, any second now and she would be released.

“You are not to come without my permission.”

The bastard clipped her wings before she even took flight. If she wasn’t caught in violent throes of the most powerful lust she’d ever experienced, she would have taken issue with his command. Her protests were only provoked when his finger stilled, his free hand coming to press her solidly against him, forcing her small motions to a standstill.

“Want more?”

Amanda blinked, trying to gain a grip on reality. It slipped past her when he gave her clit another slow, rotating caress. Helplessly, she arched forward, her hips following his hand. Cody couldn't leave her like this. Amanda couldn't bear it.

"Please."

"You'll do whatever I say."

"Whatever you want."

"I want you to lie down on the blanket."

Amanda didn't hesitate. In a graceless motion, she collapsed onto the rough, woven blanket. She would have hit the grass if Cody hadn't directed her fall. There was no strength left in her body to perform complex motions like standing or walking.

It was irrelevant. Instead, he demanded she spread her legs, revealing herself to him in the most intimate pose. Her mind couldn't form rational thoughts, much less the idea of questioning his order.

Chapter 7

Cody knelt out of the light. He didn't want his shadow obscuring the view of the beautiful, pink swollen folds of Amanda's pussy. Her wet folds glistened with her desire and perfumed the air with the sweet scent of a woman in heat, the alluring odor about drove him out of his mind.

His control hung by a thread, but he wasn't about to lose it. If he did, then she would win. That couldn't happen, especially not with their first encounter. This first intimacy would establish the power balance for their relationship and teach Amanda exactly who was in charge.

Licking his lower lip, he sucked it under his teeth as he steeled himself to issue his next command. It was going to be hard to watch and do nothing, but he'd manage.

"Touch your breasts."

Her head lifted, her big, beautiful eyes widening. "What?"

"I want to watch you touch yourself. Don't make me tell you again."

She licked her lips, making him swallow down a groan. One day Cody would watch her lick her tits, but not tonight. Instead he had to settle for watching her slender fingers slowly, hesitantly cup her generous globes. Her tan hands contrasted sharply with the pale perfection of her shapely bosom. His hands itched to touch, but his eyes were mesmerized by the graceful motions of her delicate fingers as they began to move toward her pointed tips.

His breath caught, and he could almost feel the moment she brushed her nipples. Amanda gasped, her chest rising and forcing more of her own flesh into her hands.

With growing confidence and speed, she began to toy with her nipples, rubbing, rolling, pinching the hardened nubs and forcing husky moans from her throat. Cody bit his lower lip at the sight of her right palm straightening and hovering over her tit and twirling just the very tip.

He swallowed hard and tried to speak without giving voice to the groan of his own escalating desire. "Your pussy. Touch it."

Amanda gave no indication she heard his instruction other than her left hand twitching and then slowly gliding down over her stomach. His eyes ached with the need to blink, but Cody didn't dare. He wanted to see everything as her palm came to rest on the sleek skin of her bare mound.

One lone finger stretched out to barely part her folds and rest on her clit. She began to rub the sensitive nub, her finger twirling into a rolling motion, matching the rhythm of her other hand on her nipple. Faster, harder, her moans turned to cries as her hips lifted and her body began to tremble.

Cody could clearly see the tiny entrance to her pussy gasping and spasming with the desperate need to be fucked. His cock pulsed and thumped against his jeans, eager to fill the silent call of a cunt in need.

His hand gripped the rigid bulge of his erection. It pressed against his jeans. Cody almost enjoyed the pain. With a reassuring squeeze, Cody promised his cock soon, very soon, it would split Amanda's pussy wider than it had ever been and fuck it into exhaustion.

For now, he would have to settle for something a little less satisfying, but no less exciting. "Fuck yourself, Amanda."

Whether she did so because he demanded it or because her body needed it, Cody didn't know. He didn't care either. Watching her widen her cunt as she fed first one, then two and soon all four fingers into her channel was the most erotic site he'd seen in a long time. She set up a rhythm too slow, too shallow to give her what she needed.

Amanda deserved something thicker, harder, plunging faster and deeper. Her skinny little fingers weren't going to work. Snapping out of spectator mode, Cody stretched along her side, letting the sweet scent of her arousal envelope him.

He pulled her fingers out of the way. "Play with your clit."

Not bothering to see if she obeyed, he thrust two fingers deep into her, reveling in the heated cream greeting his invasion. So tight, he had to force her muscles to stretch just to fit another finger into her passage. It was going to be sweet hell trying to feed his full length into her when the time came. He would manage, and the result would drive them both insane.

Ladies first, Cody reminded himself. He fucked her with his fingers, hard, fast and deep. Amanda's response was instant. She screamed loud

enough for the sound to echo across the plains. Her entire body tensed, and he could feel her climax quaking to life.

Fully expecting his next order to be ignored, Cody nuzzled her hair out of his way so he could whisper directly into her ear. "You are not allowed to come, Amanda. Do not come."

* * * *

Amanda heard the words echoing in her head but ignored them. She was too caught up in the firestorm of sensations raking through her body. They shredded her insides, leaving her raw and on the pinnacle of the greatest explosion she'd ever known.

It didn't come. She didn't come, and Cody didn't stop. He drove the need higher and higher until her body filled with such pleasure the sensation turned sharply into pain. She screamed out her anguish, voicing the words whispering through her.

"Please, Cody. Please let me come!"

"No."

That was real. So were his hands suddenly stopping, bringing the cold emptiness of withdrawal. Amanda tried to make sense of it all, but her brain was too far gone to comprehend.

"You are not going to come until I fuck you, and I am not going to fuck you tonight."

It took a moment for his words to register. When it did, it hit hard and snapped her control completely. With a scream of absolute rage she turned on the warm, hard body beside her. Mounting him, she ripped at his clothes, trying to dodge the hands coming up to stop her frantic motions.

The body beneath hers shifted and they rolled across the edge of the blanket into the grass. Amanda fought him with every ounce of anguish tearing her apart, and still it was not enough. After several seconds of fighting, she ended up pinned beneath Cody's heavy weight. Arms stretched above her head, both wrists trapped in one of his hands, he held all the control.

"You cock-sucking, bastard-born, stubbed-dick asshole. Let me go!"

"A proper lady does not cuss."

"I'll show you what a proper lady does to a son of a bitch like you."

Amanda tried to knee him in the balls, but Cody quickly subdued her, forcing her legs apart so he could settle safely into the cradle of her thighs. The position brought the hard length of his cock directly in contact with her burning clit.

Instead of pleasure, the contact brought pain. The more she struggled, the more the rough fabric of his jeans teased her throbbing bud. So intense, the sensation brought tears to her eyes. Only by going still and shortening her breaths to shallow pants did Amanda find any relief.

"Are you calm now?"

"I hate you."

"You need me."

"I need a man, not you."

"Watch it now, Amanda. I will tolerate no more fighting, cussing or insults from you."

"You won't tolerate?" Amanda gasped, amazed by his audacity. "You're the jerk here. You promised to give me my kiss. Instead you humiliate me and leave me in a state of pain."

"There is no need to be humiliated by what just happened. You just gave me one of the greatest shows I have ever seen."

Amanda's jaw hurt as she held back the need to hurl more curses at his arrogant ass. She wasn't sure what he would do if she unleashed on him again, but wasn't in any condition to find out. He wasn't the one naked and half-mad with desire, and Cody definitely had the advantage.

"I have never seen a more beautiful sight than you masturbating for me."

"Shut up!"

"Careful now, Amanda."

"Don't threaten me, Cody," she snapped back. "You have no right to tell me how to act after what you just did."

"What did I do that was so bad?"

"What? What did you do? How about lying to me for starters?"

"I never lied to you."

"You promised me an orgasm!"

"And I plan on giving you one, several actually, just not tonight."

"Like I'm ever going to let you near me again."

“Oh, I think you are. You’re mad now, but you’ll calm down and realize this is the most fun you’ve ever had.”

“Fun? You think this was fun for me?”

“You certainly seemed to be enjoying yourself a few minutes ago.”

His smug smile had her growling and forgetting any worry over his earlier threat. “Why don’t you follow your own commands and go fuck yourself!”

The words had barely broken the air past her lips when he flipped her. Before Amanda could even understand his intent, Cody had her pinned, this time with her arms locked behind back, his arm holding her down and a heavy thigh holding her legs into place.

There wasn’t time to wonder why he’d changed positions. The loud crack of his palm across her ass shot not only revelation through her, but a streak of white-hot pain. Amanda screamed, and then again as he landed another blow.

She couldn’t count the number of spansks that followed as the pain piled on top of the pleasure still twisting tightly through her body. The two conflicting sensations blurred, blended into a confusing mass of need. Pure, molten lust consumed her, escalating her moans into screams.

When he stopped and pushed her thighs apart with his own, she put up no resistance. Amanda didn’t have any strength left to object, and when she felt his breath across the ultra sensitive folds of her cunt, she didn’t want to find the strength.

The soft feel of his lips nuzzling her in a caress as sweet as it was arousing made her moan, tilting her hips up to offer more of herself for his tasting. Tasting was exactly what he did, a slow sensual dance of lips and tongue.

Ah, Cody’s tongue. Warm, soft, and velvety, it slid around the edges of her pussy, slipping inward occasionally to lap at her clit with unhurried ease, dipping lower to tickle around the edges of her weeping opening. His lips moved over her in a barely-there caress as he traced every delicate inch of her cunt until they settled in a suckling kiss over her clit.

She felt his teeth scrape against the ultra-sensitive bundle of nerves and gasped in a mixture of fear and excitement. In an instant, the tasting turned into a devouring.

Teeth, lips, tongue, he unleashed an assault on her, making her fingers dig into the earth. Sucking, nipping and kissing sent pleasure spiced with pain sizzling through her system, even as his tongue came to soothe away any hurt. All it did was set her flesh to flame.

She couldn't bear it. The ache in her womb to be filled felt like every single muscle in her body bore down in demand for a release to the tension. Cody gave her a taste of what she so badly needed. His tongue pressed against the walls of her sheath and teased the sensitive surface with the age-old dance of push and pull.

Oh, God! It was barely enough, but it would do. Just one more heated stroke inward...*NO!*

Just like before, he stopped short, leaving her a panting heap on the ground. The only difference was this time she couldn't hold back her tears of frustration.

Whatever shifting demons possessed Cody, he pulled her into his lap. Cradled tenderly in his arms, Amanda sniffed, trying to stop weeping. It was all too much. The man was clearly insane, and she was no better off. She gave into his every demand, enjoyed his punishment, welcomed him back into her body, and even now, cuddling closer into the warmth of his embrace, she felt strangely safe and secure in his arms.

There could be no doubt about it. She was sick—a very sick woman. The emotions warring inside left her feeling drained and incapable of latching onto one. For that reason, she allowed him to lift her to her feet and dress her like a lifeless doll. Amanda didn't even mutter a protest when he swept her into his arms and carried her to the truck.

* * * *

Cody didn't speak a word as he drove Amanda back to her house. He knew she was pissed, and she had a right to be. He also had some rights. Really, it was more like authority and Amanda had given it to him. Cody hadn't taken it, no matter what kind of bastard she thought he was.

He wanted to though, or at least a part of him did. *Down boy, you'll get yours soon.* Well, maybe not exactly what he wanted, and not soon enough, but once he dropped Amanda off and made it back to the ranch, he'd take the edge off his erection.

Could've had the girl do it with those plump lips of hers, his cock whispered. Hell, Cody could have done all sorts of things to her, but she needed to agree before the lust took over.

Parking the truck in her drive for the second time, he felt much better about the future. It didn't even bother him when Amanda slammed his truck door and marched up the walkway without so much as look in his direction. He knew her game and followed silently behind, willing to play until he heard the door unlock.

"I know what you're planning." He pressed in close to her, letting her feel his heat and strength. "But no toy in this house, no man in this town will make you come. Only I can give you your release, Amanda, and I'm not releasing you now. You will not come."

He breathed the words so closely to her ear they sent her fine tresses airborne to tickle his nose. Amanda didn't respond other than a tensing of her shoulders. A second later, she slammed the door in his face without ever once looking back at him.

Cody grinned and then laughed as he jogged back to his truck. Yeah, messing with Amanda was fun. It made him feel alive in all sorts of ways, and soon enough he wouldn't have to be racing home to take a much needed shower. No, Cody would be taking one with her.

Fantasies of just how much fun he could have with Amanda in a shower blurred most of the trip home. He found himself rolling into the carport without much memory of leaving Amanda's. Not particularly concerned, Cody bounded from his truck and then had to restrain himself from moving too fast and waking up the ranch dogs.

They were good guardsmen and enjoyed the revelry of greeting people. They'd also rouse Knox from whatever he was up to, which would begin an inquisition and delay Cody's shower. Save a few seconds to lose an hour was not a deal Cody wanted to make. He kept his steps steady and light across the yard.

"How did your date go?"

The smooth drawl caught Cody off-guard. Obsessing over the dogs, Cody had failed to take note of the dark outline of a man tucked into the corner of the porch.

"Damn, Jace." He clutched the railing, using it to reach the first porch step. "Give me a heart attack, why don't you?"

“You’re too young for one of those. I take it your date went well for you to be so unaware of your surroundings.”

Cody shrugged as he cleared the top of the steps. What he really wanted was to get inside, but he knew if he rushed the conversation, Jace would become suspicious. “Well enough, and I was being quiet so I didn’t wake the dogs.”

“They’re not here.”

“What happened?” He knew something had happened. The dogs went out with the men for the most part and the men didn’t go out at night unless something happened.

“Old man Wilkes came around talking about wolves being out near the eastern pasture.”

Cody snorted. “Wolves?”

“More likely a pack of dogs, but don’t tell Wilkes. Either way, we’re down two cows and Knox got it in his head to go ride out and see—”

“See if there are wolves, oh excuse me, wild dogs killing our cows?” Cody grinned.

Jace shot Cody a dirty look. “Look, he was sober and wanted to do it.”

“But you didn’t join him.”

Finally sharing a little bit of Cody’s humor, Jace snorted. “It’s camping and you remember the last time Knox and I went camping together.”

“I remember.” Cody would never forget. “I was eight and you shot Knox in the ass.”

“It was an accident.” Jace stuck to his line, still devout after a decade.

“Tell it to Knox,” Cody retorted. “If memory serves me right, he was sixteen at the time and he fricken beat the crap out of you then.”

“And you laughed,” Jace shot back. “You laughed so hard you were rolling on the ground.”

Cody laughed just remembering. “Hell, man, I wished I’d have shot him.”

“We could go camping and you could take your chances.”

“I’d love to go camping.” Cody sighed. “But when? You know when I think back over everything, I don’t know how our parents found the time to raise us.”

“It’s easier when you got more than two parents. You think back to all those good times and it’s not the whole family. It’s either Dad or Father or

Pa, but rarely all three at the same time. We were spoiled rotten with attention, and that's what we're going to give our kids."

Kids. The idea had Cody going silent. When Sharon was around, the idea of family and stability warmed him. With her passing though, the image faded to old and gray.

"So what's she like?"

"Who?" Cody blinked at the sudden break in silence.

"Amanda, dumb shit, or did you swap her out over dinner?"

Cody cocked a smile. "No. I kept her."

"So?"

"So?" Cody shot back. Jace might have rights to ask these questions, but Cody could sense something deeper in his brother's interest.

"That's it? No more details you want to share?"

"Not really."

Jace settled back into his seat and held his silence for a minute. "You're a mean son of a bitch."

"And you're a nosey one."

"Fine. I'll let Knox grill you."

Knox would too, come first thing in the morning. Maybe he'd wait until after church when the brothers congregated at the table for brunch and Sunday afternoon games. Cody had better have some good reasons to keep Amanda on their list.

More like lies, and I won't even be good at giving them if I don't put this boner and myself to bed.

"Well," Cody got to his feet. "I guess I need my sleep if I'm going to tangle with Knox. Night."

* * * *

"Night," Jace called out almost as an afterthought.

The night was peaceful, and without the sun, almost pleasant. He'd been sitting out here with anticipation for Cody to come home. With hope for some details, some tidbits to fuel his imagination, Jace felt wholly disappointed in Cody's refusal.

Amanda.

Jace silently repeated her name.

He still remembered the first time he'd seen her. It was at the bank, nine years ago. He had just withdrawn money for the ring they'd been intent on buying for Sharon. Filled with thoughts of the upcoming proposal, Jace had almost flattened James, the bank guard.

They'd talked, James pointing out the man who had caught his attention. Outside the bank's tinted windows, a very rough-looking man had kicked the stand down on his bike. A cold sensation trickled over him, fueled by the knowledge that danger had arrived.

James might have been checking out the biker with all the tattoos, but Jace's attention had caught on his passenger. More child than woman, she hadn't been wearing a helmet. With her hands full of wild tresses, she had fought them back from her face. In a second, she had entranced Jace.

Rubbing his chest, Jace sighed. Yeah, he remembered the moment with both awe and shame. Something magical had happened, something so special, so exceptionally rare he'd hung onto it over the years. Every time he saw Amanda, he felt it.

Felt it and the guilt for feeling so much for a woman he didn't know, when Jace already had the love of a good woman. A woman he loved for all her sweetness and gentleness, for her compassion and for the beauty that went beyond skin deep.

Sharon. He'd never once wronged, never betrayed, her. Not physically, but in his heart, Jace had loved Amanda in every way he wanted. So many ways, so many nights, and he couldn't stop thinking about her.

Chapter 8

Monday, June 23rd

“So, how did your date with Cody go?”

Amanda watched Will shake the sugar pack before tearing off the top and upending it into his coffee. It was five minutes before noon, and already the diner was overflowing with customers. People were packed around booths and tables with barely enough room to fit everybody. Somehow, though, it all worked out. Nobody ever left The Lunchbox hungry.

“Mandy?”

She watched Will swirl his spoon through the coffee, clinking metal against porcelain, and gave a shrug. “I’m not going to be seeing him again.”

“Why am I not shocked?”

Will finally took a sip. As the beige rim touched his smirking lips, Amanda wanted to reach over and tip his cup from the bottom up. Spilling hot coffee on Will would have been cruel and fun all at once. That kind of explained her mood since Cody all but dared her to try and have a climax without him.

Pain-in-the-ass bastard. She’d have her climax, and Cody Reese wouldn’t be involved in the equation.

“Okay, okay.” Will’s cup hit the table. “I get it. You don’t want to talk about Cody. You don’t need to try to set me on fire with your glare.”

“Sorry.”

Amanda released a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. It was so odd, how they’d come to be here. Will was the only person alive to know the truth, the whole truth, about the night she lost her family. That single tragedy had bound them together, merging their grief into a single, shared memory. Nothing could ever break them apart.

Why, then, did she feel so worried? Amanda swallowed and tried to force a brave front. "I just didn't get much sleep this weekend."

"Well, I did." Something in Will's tone made Amanda's stomach tighten even more. "I've made a few decisions."

"Sounds serious."

"It is."

Amanda smiled trying to lighten the moment, but it was a tense, feeble effort. She'd sensed a darkness growing around Will over the past few months. Never particularly outgoing, Will withdrew even more. Their weekly bowling night faded into the past. Sunday morning breakfast gorging was put on a diet. One-by-one, all the little traditions and rituals binding Will to her like a brother over the years started to disappear.

She knew why. Like a true brother, Will might try to keep his secrets, but Amanda knew he had a problem with pills. After what she'd done to him all those years ago, he had a right to have a few problems, as well as secrets. Amanda didn't push.

Will looked down. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about my life and wondering how I ended up like this."

"Like what?" Amanda made a show of looking around. "Like everybody else?"

"Well...yeah." Will smirked, settling back into the booth. His hand slapped over his shirt pocket to pop out a pack of cigarettes.

"You really shouldn't smoke." Amanda just couldn't help herself.

"I know." Will clicked his lighter and the sizzling sound of dry tobacco held the moment for a second. "You tell me every damn day."

"I should have it tattooed on your hand so you see it every time you go to take a drag."

Will snorted and rolled his eyes. "Like that would stop me. I got to die some day from something."

Before she could respond, their plates came. They were both terse with the waitress, salting and peppering their food with agitation. Amanda paused with one ketchup-covered fry halfway to her mouth.

"So tell me already."

"Tell you?" Will actually had the nerve to look confused.

"Why we're having lunch together. You refuse to talk about your sick little affair with Marion Myers."

"Keep your voice down," Will snapped.

"And you're obviously not interested in my disaster of a love life."

"You're the one who refused to talk about Nick or Cody."

"So tell me what you've got to say, and I know you got something to say." Amanda pinned him with her no-bullshit look. It always worked on Will, even if it never worked on anybody else.

"I'm leaving town."

Her fry dropped back into the massive blob of ketchup and sank beneath the surface. She could have sworn her mouth fell open as she stared at him. Will met her gaze with a steady, determined look.

"Get out of here."

"That's my plan."

"Where you gonna go?"

"Not sure." He shrugged. "I guess wherever."

Amanda studied him for a second, but shook her head. "This is too much. You're actually going to leave Humble?"

"Yep."

"What about the Break Down?"

"I'm going to close it until I come back," Will responded way too calmly. "I talked to Eddie, and he's already talking to Cindy about getting a job down at the shop."

Amanda looked to heaven for patience. "If you close the Break Down, what are you going to do about money?"

Will's glance darted from side to side as if looking for something before settling back on her. "Not worry about it?"

"Not worry about it? Did you fall and hit your head, Will? You've had some strange ideas in the past, but this...how are you going to eat? Bathe? I mean where are you going to live? These things take money."

"Relax." She could tell he was getting annoyed now. Will always got irritable when she started being logical. "I'll get a job doing something to cover my bills, but I'm not going to be tied to anything. I've lived my whole life in this damn town. I only had one goal as a child."

"To get out of it," Amanda finished for him.

It was a common enough goal for most of the younger citizens of Humble. They normally went down to Texas or off to Kansas City. Some

place more exciting than a town whose biggest boast was having three traffic lights down its main street.

"You can understand, can't you?"

All too well. Hell, if it wasn't for her, Will might have realized his dream of escaping Humble long ago. Amanda wouldn't be the one standing in his way a second time. She just hoped he found his way to rehab. Amanda wanted to offer him money, a helping hand, but Will wouldn't take it. Worse, he'd get insulted. Instead, she faked a smile and shrugged.

"If you were eighteen, I'd say let's trade in the Jeep for a Harley and leave this town in our dust."

"Yeah? You know if I was eighteen, then you'd be ten and the cops would be trailing after us."

Amanda kicked him under the table and took some pleasure in the wince on his face. "You know what I meant. You're thirty-five years old. You're supposed to settle down to a nice, stable life, not go off chasing after the sunset."

"No. *You're* supposed to settle down." Will leaned in over his plate. "That's your dream."

"Let's not start *that* argument."

"You want to tell me why you broke up with Nick?"

"No. I want to argue about you leaving me alone in this damn town," Amanda retorted, not putting any real heat into her tone. "It's boring enough, and you've been cancelling on me for the last few months. Now you're just going to leave me to rot? I should get my gun and shoot you, Will McKinney."

"I'm going, so you might as well tell me about Nick while I'm here."

Amanda pursed her lips. She hated the way he blatantly forced the conversation in a new direction. Will had always been one stubborn pain in the ass, but he'd always been hers. Since she was fifteen and woke up to a world without family, Will was her anchor to the past. As much as Cindy had been there for her, she didn't really understand, not the way Will did.

"Come on, Amanda. You'll feel better."

With a deep breath and a dirty look, she gave in. "I caught him drilling his new dental assistant in the exam chair."

Will met her heated look with a straight face, but it didn't hold. An irritating smirk quivered around the edges of his lips. This time she kicked him harder, but it didn't even register in his eyes.

"I really am going to shoot you."

"I'm sorry, Amanda, but...I told—"

"Don't." She held up a hand to stop him. "I don't want to hear it. Nick is a low-down, dirty, stubbed-dick, smelly-balled bastard."

"That's what I told you." Will outright gloated, which got him another kick. "Damn, woman! I'll have to leave town just to let the bruises heal."

"I'm going to hunt you down just to kick you if you leave," Amanda shot back.

Will lost his smirk and cocked his head in a puppy-like fashion. It always had her forgiving him for whatever piece of stupidity had pissed her off in the first place. "I have to go, Amanda."

He was making her feel guilty. "I know. You are going to stay in touch, at least."

"I figure I'll give you a call every now and again."

This time her foot hit the hard wall of the booth and she cringed as her toes curled painfully under the impact. "Ow!"

"Too slow." Will's smirk had come back. "Aw, don't give me that look. You know I'm going to call you."

"Every night?"

"Gee, Mom, I was thinking I could have Friday night off to take Susie to the movies."

"You really weren't beaten enough as a child."

"You really do have violent tendencies."

He hadn't even finished his comeback when a fry hit him in the cheek and left a splat of ketchup. Will's eyes dropped, as if he could actually see the mess she'd made. His movements were slow and deliberate as he lifted a napkin to wipe away the goop. Amanda watched silently, another red-tipped fry ready.

"You know I'm really going to miss you. In fact, you're the only thing in this damn town I will miss."

"What a rotten thing to say," Amanda shot back. Now she had to drop the fry. If Will had come at her with anything other than sincere sadness, she

could have had an outlet for her anger. *But no, the bastard has to go all soft on me.*

“It’s true. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Stop it.” Amanda waved his comment uncomfortably to the side. “You’re not going to distract me with flattery. I want to know when you are leaving and where you are going.”

“Well,” Will’s look had her tensing, “like I told you, I’m heading in whichever way the car points, and I’m leaving right after lunch.”

* * * *

Amanda’s shoulders slumped when she saw who waited for her on her front porch. She didn’t want to handle him right now. The day had been long, draining and overdone. Time to crawl into bed and pray for a better tomorrow. *Apparently, life’s not yet done with me today.*

It sent her one last obstacle—Cody Reese. With his Stetson pulled low enough to block out the waning sun’s last brilliant beams, Amanda could barely make out the features of his face. From the way Cody’s head slanted forward with the brim of his hat dipping down low, he looked passed out.

Maybe he is. Maybe if I’m quiet enough, I can slip past him and get into my house. Clenching her keys in a tight fist, Amanda gave the porch a wide berth as she approached her front steps. Cutting a path through the grass, she avoided the cement path, afraid the clicking might rouse him from his afternoon slumber. Eyes fixed on Cody, Amanda went up the four short steps of her porch on her tiptoes, keeping to the very edge of the steps to avoid any creaking. She experienced a well-earned moment of victory as her key slid silently into its hole.

“Amanda, we need to talk.”

Her forehead hit the door with a thump.

“Why don’t you have a seat?”

She tilted her head to the side to see he hadn’t moved. To the world, he still looked like he was sleeping.

“Why don’t I go inside and you can sit out here and say whatever you got to say to the lawn? I’m sure it’s more interested in hearing it than I am.”

His chin lifted, his head tilted and she could barely make out the glint of his crystalline gaze. “Sit.”

"I'm not a dog, you know. I don't obey just because you command."

His lip curled to the right. "Are you sure about that, honey?"

Amanda narrowed her gaze on his smug look, not the least bit amused.

"You got a lot of nerve showing up here."

"True, but you don't really want to send me away."

"I'll tell you where I want to send you," Amanda muttered.

She didn't have the energy for this, or the defenses. Will had worn her out, leaving her feeling strangely empty. The temptation to distract herself from it was too great for Amanda to be safe with Cody sitting on her porch.

"Are you sure? Sure there is nothing you want to keep me around for?"

Amanda's eyes narrowed at his taunting reminder. The bastard knew. He hadn't come here to apologize for his dastardly behavior. He'd come to gloat.

"Not anymore." Amanda pasted a crocodile smile on her face and lied right through her grinding teeth. "Believe it or not, there are men in this town who don't object to taking care of a woman's itch."

"No doubt, darling, but sometimes there is only one cure for what ails us. Sit."

There came his commanding tone and damned if her legs didn't obey. The cocky son of a bitch might have control over her body, but not her mouth. "I swear to the good Lord, one day I'm going to give you yours, Cody Reese."

"You're not big enough to deliver on that threat, honey."

Her butt hit the seat with enough force to set the swing into motion. The hope that it would jar him enough to make his legs fall off the railing was in vain. Dumb to hope anyway. The man rode enough bulls in his time to first place finishes. He certainly had the muscles to hold the swing still without so much as flexing.

Amanda's annoyance turned to anxiety as the silence stretched beyond simple minutes. The sun dipped lower in the sky and shone its bright rays beneath the edge of the porch roof. The air warmed. The rich scent of leather and man thickened around Amanda, twining around her body and reawakening it to the pleasures she knew in his arms just a short day ago.

She'd gone on one date with Cody Reese, and he already had her body trained and her mind tied into knots of confusing impulses. It wasn't just his scent. It was the warmth of his body, the intangible quality of command

emanating over the foot separating them that drew her in despite her better intentions.

“You know, Amanda, I like you.”

“Yeah? Well, I don’t like you.”

“I don’t know why I like you. You’re difficult, snide, rude, use words no decent woman should, but you have the softest thighs I’ve ever buried my hand between, the sweetest tasting pussy and the way you respond to my commands—”

Amanda couldn’t take listening to what she ached for so badly. It was just a new level of torment, and she wouldn’t endure it. “If it’s just sex, then why are we sitting on this damn swing arguing when we could be taking care of business in the bedroom?”

“You are as single-minded as a sixteen-year-old boy, you know that?”

Amanda snorted at the censure in his voice. “You date a lot of sixteen-year-old boys?”

“Watch it now, honey.”

Annoying Cody was therapeutic in some twisted way. Maybe if she pissed him off good enough, he’d make her take her clothes back off. “Maybe you’re the one who should watch it, or don’t you remember my best friend, Tony, the sheriff?”

“What?” Instead of anger, Cody smiled. “Can’t handle me on your own, darlin’?”

“I’m getting the phone.” Amanda shot up to her feet only to crash down on her ass when Cody yanked back.

“Look, we both want something from each other. I’m sure we can negotiate a truce.”

“Oh,” Amanda widened her eyes. “Now you want to negotiate?”

“Well,” Cody stretched his arm along the back of the bench and slid even closer. “We could waste the night swapping insults until I get bored and leave. Then you can go inside, play with yourself some more and just wake up even grumpier tomorrow morning.”

He had her there. Amanda didn’t have any leverage. She wanted him enough to do just about anything. Cody, on the other hand, didn’t appear to want her enough to stop playing his stupid games. “Why are you doing this?”

There came that million-watt smile with the double dimples. “Because I’m kind of having fun.”

“Shows what a sick bastard you are,” she muttered.

“Are you going to deny you’re having just a tiny bit of fun?”

She probably should, it might actually get rid of him. As much as she enjoyed telling him to get lost, if he left, she couldn’t say it anymore. Not about to give him a yes, Amanda went with a silent pout as her answer.

“Well,” Cody relaxed slightly. “Perhaps you are ready to negotiate?”

“We’re back to that?” Amanda looked over at him, amazed at just how stubborn Cody could be.

“You want sex, right?”

“After the headache of putting up with you, I expect more than sex,” Amanda muttered to herself. Hearing her words, she liked the sound of them. They emboldened her to lift her chin and speak a little clear. “I’m talking at least four orgasms.”

Pure confidence shined in his eyes as he assured her, “Not a problem.”

Hold it together, girl. “In a row.”

“I’ll give you six.”

Six...oh, yeah that’s one hell of an apology, but... “Talk is cheap.”

“If you don’t watch your sassy mouth, you won’t get anything.”

“Fine,” Amanda growled. “Six consecutive orgasms. What do you want?”

Cody grinned, daring to stretch his arm around her shoulders. “To get to know you.”

Like she’d buy that shit. “God, what a—”

“Defenses down, Amanda,” Cody cut across her words. “I want to know the real you.”

“Sounds an awful lot like dating.”

“Call it friends with benefits. Isn’t that the modern term?”

Amanda didn’t know and didn’t really care. Convinced Cody would play her if she didn’t guard against him, she focused on the terms of their agreement. There would be no loopholes this time.

“What if one of us meets somebody else?”

Cody’s grin flattened, right along with his tone. “When you’re with me, you’re with only me.”

Not about to be intimidated, Amanda didn't let the subject go. "And when I'm not?"

"You're not."

"Same holds for you." She said it, but she didn't mean it. Cody's response just didn't give her any other choice.

Amanda could take some comfort in the grin tugging on his lips. "I'm not what you call a multi-tasker, darlin'. I have a feeling you're going to take all my energy."

She smiled, secretly warmed by his assurance. "Well, then we have—"

"There is one more thing." Cody slid in close, using the arm around her back to keep her from escaping. "I'll give you a fucking like you've never had, Amanda, but under my terms. I'm in charge of the sex. I command and you obey, got it?"

She got it all right, and it irritated Amanda's pride even as it excited her body. Stupid hormones. They might flood her system with arousal, but her brain remembered the danger of agreeing to his terms.

"You wouldn't leave me wanting again?"

"No." Cody's smile didn't comfort her.

"Fine," Amanda bit out, not at all certain of her decision. "You can play at being master, but the game ends when I say no. Got it?"

"It's called a safe word, and no isn't a good one. How about—?"

"Cock sucker?"

"Red light?"

"Fine, red light. We have an agreement."

This time Amanda didn't rush, and remembered to stick her hand out. He shook it with a smirk. Let the bastard smirk. Six orgasms from now she was going to tell him red light and send him packing.

"Now can we get to the sex?"

"Dinner first. I want to make sure you understand my wants before I give into your needs."

Chapter 9

“Well, this is quite uncomfortable.”

Cody didn’t look up from the menu to respond to Amanda’s snide comment. He already learned something about Amanda. When she felt threatened, she attacked and tried to lure him into an argument. He had to admit she was good at it, but she wouldn’t win this dinner.

“We could have just eaten at the diner.”

“The food is much better here.”

Cody still refused to look up. He knew what Amanda really objected to. Henry’s was an exclusive club only ranchers and politicians joined. It cost too much for almost everybody else. It was a place to be seen, which was just why Cody brought her here.

When they walked into the brimming dining room, they immediately became the center of attention. By tomorrow morning, everybody would know Amanda was Cody’s. They probably also knew she showed up to the exclusive club wearing jeans and canvas sneakers.

“I’m not dressed appropriately. You could have at least told me we’d be eating here.”

Yeah, he could have, but it wouldn’t have been as much fun. “You look fine.”

“I look like I belong at a diner.”

Cody finally lowered his menu to watch as her gaze darted around the room like a hummingbird jacked up on caffeine. “Are you going to obsess over this through the whole dinner?”

His question earned him a dark look. “I might.”

“Well,” Cody settled his menu on the table. “If you’re so worried about appearance, I’d advise you to order a salad.”

“What?” Amanda’s head snapped in his direction. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean your oversized appetite will draw more notice and comment than the fact that you’re wearing jeans.”

Amanda went the kind of still most men feared. “Are you calling me fat?”

Cody’s gaze dropped to where her breasts stretched out her cotton tee. “Actually, I’d say deliciously plump, but it would be nice to finish my dessert tonight, this not being a real date and all.”

Instead of taking his head off his shoulders, like Cody expected, Amanda just smirked. “Then I suggest you learn to eat faster.”

Cody clicked his mouth shut on his rebuttal as the waiter’s shadow loomed over the table’s edge. It didn’t take long for the first round of plates to be settled in front of them and the tease show to begin.

He watched in avid fascination as her lips closed in on the tines of her fork. Forming a slight pout, they pulled back and then it came, the most erotic part. Her eyelids would dip, her cheeks relax and, for one beautiful second, a look of pleasure would pass over her face.

Cody swallowed and forced himself to look away.

Yeah, Amanda had sexy down. It was going to be even sexier when it was his cock she was sucking. Distracted by her provocative behavior, anxious with plans for what came after dinner, Cody couldn’t relax. With Amanda’s constant taunting, the dinner turned into the sparring match Cody had hoped to avoid.

When the dessert plate was lowered in front of him, revelation hit. Perhaps, just perhaps, Amanda had been right. He should have just fucked her, then she wouldn’t be so twitchy and itchy with so much nervous energy. If she relaxed, Cody might be able to.

At least a little. Cody didn’t think for a second one screwing would settle him down. Hell, with her sensual nature, Cody didn’t know if a single screwing would work on Amanda either.

Six, though...six orgasms in a row and she just might be tamed.

* * * *

Oh, man. That was some seriously good food. Score one for Cody. Amanda had to give him this round. He’d outdone himself on dinner. The excellent meal made her relax, right up until the waiter had taken the final

plates and poured the coffee. It was a sign, the time had come for them to move on to her end of their agreement—the sex.

Am I really going to do this? Sleep with Cody? Let him have all control over me? Her pussy quivered to life at just the thought. Memories of what had happened in the field haunted Amanda. Cody had taken control and brought her to the horizon of the greatest orgasm she'd ever glimpsed. Then he'd held her back. If he did it a second time...

He won't. We did well through the dinner. He said he wanted us to be ourselves and we were.

Yeah, and now he'll want you to be something completely different. You think you can handle that?

Amanda really didn't have a choice. If she didn't, he'd torment her. *All I have to do is follow his lead.* With a deep breath, she told herself she could do it as the waiter stepped up to the table. He handed Cody a billfold along with a cryptic assurance.

"The room you requested is available."

With his grim-sounding pronouncement, the server bowed and took his leave. Amanda watched the stiff, older man work his way around to another table before glancing back to Cody.

"What room? What was he talking about?"

Cody just smiled, a not-reassuring twist of his lips. "Some things are better shown than explained. Shall we?"

Amanda didn't really think they should, but Cody left her no option as he pushed back his seat. He came around to help her, at least he gave the appearance. Really, Cody's fingers clamped over her arm, leaving her no room to object. Despite her pledge to be a good, obedient girl, Amanda had difficulty not resisting.

She wanted to know where he was leading her, though Amanda suspected she already knew. It didn't surprise her when Cody turned toward the elegant curved staircase and away from the front door. On trembling legs, Amanda mounted the steps by Cody's side.

"I don't like surprises." She couldn't resist. All the energy inside her had to come out some way.

"Too bad."

"For you," Amanda muttered.

“Don’t get snotty on me now, Amanda.” Cody guided her down an oversized hall.

“Or what?”

Cody paused to address her question directly. “Or I might be tempted to take you home and let you waste another night playing with yourself.”

Amanda licked her lips before sucking on the lower one. She wanted this, had bargained away her soul for it on her front porch. Now she just had to do it and let go. There was nothing for her to worry about because not a single decision would be hers. Nothing was her responsibility, so nothing could be her fault. In a way it sounded very liberating.

No, it doesn’t. It sounds terrifying. As he brought her to a stop in front of an elegantly-carved door, Amanda promised herself whatever awaited her inside, she wouldn’t screw this up.

Once I’ve gotten what I want from Cody, I’ll send him packing. For now...I’ll obey. Under normal circumstances the promise would have hurt, but standing here and now next to Cody, Amanda found it soothed the fear and uncertainty clamoring to take control of her. She did want this. Just this one time, then she’d be cured and capable of kicking Cody out of her life.

The door clicked open and Amanda forgot all about rattling her silent saber. The room drew her into its luxurious depths. It went beyond elegant, beyond indulgent. She’d never seen a room like this before.

The bed could have held an entire orgy and still kept everybody comfortable. Satin sheen and silk softness covered the room, inviting her to touch. Her hands itched to run over the fabric covering the bed, the walls, the pillows. Dozens of big, overstuffed pillows were strewn about. They filled the bed and littered the floor.

It invites you right in, doesn’t it?

More like lures, Amanda corrected herself as her eyes focused on the glint of metal. Hidden within the sweetness, buried into the softness lurked the hard reality of what this room was used for. Once noticed, her eyes jumped from rings to hooks. Everywhere she looked she saw the tools used to bind a person into submission.

Her body followed her eyes as she swung around to find Cody leaning against the door. He’d shut it when she was distracted. His face was dark, tense, and intent.

She watched silently, stunned, as Cody withdrew a key from the billfold the waiter gave him. It fit the black box under the doorknob. It sucked in the little white card, and it dawned on her he hadn't used the key to get into the room. Cody used it to lock her in.

There would be no escaping until he finished. Amanda swallowed. In the end, she might kick Cody to the curb, but not before he had his say and his way with her. As of right now, she was at his total mercy. That realization hit her hard.

It drove her nerves into a riot. The chaos merged and clashed with the onslaught of hormones flooding her senses. The warring factions left her immobile. Dumbly, she watched Cody shove off the door.

Like prey trapped by a predator, she didn't even breathe as he sauntered past. With barely a brush, he clipped her. The small contact burned his warmth and strength into her arm. The sensation tingled up her shoulder to spider web across her breast, making the tips harden almost painfully. It streaked into the rolling wave of heat coming from her pussy. Fed from the sight and scent of the prowling, primitive male, her pussy clenched, driven by its own most basic of carnal urges.

Still her anxiety held her motionless. Even as her eyes widened over the sight of what lay in the wardrobe Cody opened, Amanda didn't move. The signals to flee couldn't breach the band of molten lust spreading across her pelvis. The need distorted every sensation she received into one of pleasure. It fed on her nerves, turning anxiety into anticipation as Cody returned to her.

He held something in his hand, something that distantly triggered an alarm.

"Strip for me."

His words materialized through the static of her arousal. Smooth and dark, like liquid chocolate, the words melted into her conscious, becoming actions merely obeyed instead of authorized.

Her hands lifted, pulling her shirt up and over her head. Entranced, her fingers worked under his command, undoing her bra before dipping down to tug at the laces on her shoes. Each movement felt slow, drawn out and unreal. When she lowered her jeans all the way down, it dawned on her she now stood before Cody naked and totally vulnerable.

Instead of firing the normal chorus to cover up and become embarrassed, her body resonated with a million sparklers going off. One for each nerve tingling beneath the cool air-conditioned breeze tickling across her bare skin.

Amanda felt drugged, left only to the sensations her body could feel, as her whole reality narrowed to the hypnotic lightshow of Cody's eyes. They swirled in a never-ending oscillation. Slowly his eyes fogged with a cloudy haze. Beneath lay intent, a feral hunger visible in each darkening shard. The hunger held her mesmerized, feeding and fueling her own desires.

In a second, she lost all sight. Blackness settled over her with a velvety bind around her eyes. Despite the softness of the blindfold, it had the jarring effect of an arctic blast. The silken strands of the sensual web Cody wove around her faded. Instantly her hands rose to push away the fabric.

Cody caught her wrists. "No."

"But—"

"You're not to speak unless directed to do so."

"What?"

"Listen clearly, Amanda, because I'm only going to explain this once. The rules of this game are simple. You are to obey my every command and question none of them. If I tell you to be silent, you remain silent. If I put something on you, it stays on you. Understand?"

Amanda's senses, while awakened, still languished under the arousal's intoxicating elixir. Her brain read the tense messages coming in, but did little about them. Held hostage by the pleasure, her hands stayed by her side when he lowered them back into position.

Tense and anxious, her fingers curled and her body trembled under the pressure. Amanda's ears strained as she tried to order the world through the blackness. Did Cody move? Was he looking at her? Was he about to do something nasty or nice? Wouldn't nasty be so nice?

A single finger, callused and rough, slid straight down her spine, making her back arch. Amanda gasped, reveling in the shivers chasing in the wake of his fingertips.

"You are now completely at my mercy."

She could hear the satisfaction in his tone and felt the effects clear down to her toes. Every cell inside her body sparkled with the knowledge a hard and demanding male now had complete control over her.

“I’m going to do things to you tonight you’ve never let a man do, and you’re going to love every minute of it. You’re going to squirm and beg, and I’m going to make you come so hard you’ll be sore when you wake up. All you need to do is trust me. Can you do that, Amanda?”

Could she? “Yes.”

She didn’t know where the answer came from or even how it managed to form over the block in her throat. Once she gave in, she didn’t regret it. The reward for such obedience came immediately. Thick arms wrapped around her as the hard, solid feel of a male body warmed away any reservation. Like a sudden change into Prince Charming, Cody swept her right off her feet into his arms.

“I promise you’re not going to regret this, Amanda.”

He murmured the words across her lips, sealing the vow with a kiss. Like well-aged bourbon, the hot, potent kiss drugged her into submission as his velvety tongue invaded her mouth. Hard and demandingly male, his kiss called upon her own needs and wants.

Her arms twined around his broad shoulders, her nails digging into the hard muscle there as she pulled herself up. Meeting his kiss head-on, her tongue tangled with his, pushing him backwards until he savagely fought back.

The kiss turned into devouring. Without the aid of sight, her whole world narrowed down to nothing more than the play of his lips across hers, of his tongue dancing, stroking, and penetrating her. Blossoms of multi-hued pleasure wrapped her in the chaotic whirlwind of building ecstasy.

She stilled only when Cody released her lips. Sanity-giving oxygen flooded her lungs and revived her brain enough to realize he’d set her back on her own two feet. Actually, Amanda ended up on her tiptoes, her arms stretched above her head, trapped and bound by ties she couldn’t see.

“As I figured, you’re a little short. Up.”

He tapped on her calf and for a moment she didn’t understand what he wanted. It was his hand, curving around the back of her thigh and lifting her leg. Even then, all she could concentrate on was the heat spreading from his palm. It warmed up her already overheated pussy with anticipation.

The hope was for nothing, because that’s all she got. Instead of taking advantage of her position, he merely slid a high heel onto her foot and released her leg. It gave her a little support though Amanda wobbled

slightly, unaccustomed to such a balancing act. Hope bloomed again when he lifted her other leg. So wet and needy, her cunt actually wept for his attention. She could feel the warm roll of moisture trickling down her thigh.

In a flash, it disappeared under the moist smoothness of his tongue. Her whole body broke into tremors as he traced the wet path right back to its source. His mouth attacked, latching onto her pussy and making her scream as he fed on her tender flesh with the same ravenous hunger as his kiss.

Like a berserker gone crazy, his tongue ruled over her pussy. With long, wicked strokes, he delved into every crevice and licked her pussy clean, only to fuck his tongue deep into her and trigger another wave of molten desire from her body. She arched and twisted, trying to follow the erratic path of her lover's tongue.

The tension of so much rapture pulled Amanda as thin as any balloon had ever stretched. Her release weighed down on her, leashed and growing more violent by the second.

"Come for me," Cody commanded, fucking a hard, cool cock deep into her pussy. With no hesitation, he began to ruthlessly and savagely screw her with the toy. Harder, deeper with every thrust he fucked her until her system erupted into one single, soul-shattering release.

Chapter 10

Cody watched as she slowly emerged from the stupor of her own release. When Amanda came, truly came, she'd make the earth move. The only thing better than watching it would be riding her into the storm. His cock pulsed, ready to step up and mount her right now. Cody tried to temper his raging erection. His cock would get all it deserved shortly. It was a hard sell with Amanda standing there in nothing more than a pair of earrings and a sexy set of heels.

Damn, but isn't that a sight? Look at those legs and that pussy...all flushed and pink. Cody liked the dark-colored dildos the club provided. Something about the sight of sweet little cunts penetrated deep by something so dark and masculine made him hot. Right now he was ready to explode.

A slight sound drew his gaze up, and he watched Amanda's lips move silently over words. She wanted to say something, probably to ask to be released. The way she tilted on her heels told him she didn't have the balance or strength left to stay upright. When those full lips closed, Cody smiled.

"Uncomfortable?"

"Yes."

The breathless, strained sound of her voice made his smile widen. The rafters echoed with her screams as she came. Hell, the woman was so loud Cody knew the diners below heard her. Tomorrow, people wouldn't just know Amanda belonged to Cody. They'd know he owned her.

"How about I give you some slack?"

Cody undid the ropes from their anchors and gave Amanda some freedom of movement. Just as he suspected, she collapsed toward the floor, falling to her knees. He caught her as well as the rope, pulling it tense until he held her in position.

Now that's a fantasy come true.

Amanda knelt, legs spread for his pleasure. Her rib cage bounced her beautiful tits in a hypnotic rhythm as she panted at his feet. Cody eyed her puckered, pink nipples before dropping down to the shadowed heaven between her legs. *So many delicious offerings. Where to start?*

He should start with his cock. If he didn't, it might explode inside its denim prison and leave him with a problem he'd never faced. He wouldn't make it through all he planned for Amanda if he didn't take the edge off his loaded dick. *But where to put it?*

Cody could fuck her. Amanda would offer no resistance. He could go to his knees, lift her up, and slam her down. She'd take his full length and beg for more. That would be something, to be held captive inside all her confining heat. He'd bounce her ass hard and fast and give her a screwing like she'd never had before.

When the moment came, Cody would have her so humble and weakened by passion, Amanda would give him anything, even her heart. That's exactly how he wanted to possess her. He wanted to own her all the way to her soul.

Tonight, he would wage his war. Cody wouldn't stop until he bound Amanda so firmly to him the mere idea of letting another man touch her would cause her pain. He'd need to use all his skills to push her further than she ever let any man go. It would take stamina, a power source he needed to refuel with his own release.

Amanda's pouting lips drew his gaze to her plump, glistening mouth. Cody didn't even need a second to know what he wanted. Stepping up to her, he paused only to toe her legs farther apart.

"Legs spread. Whenever you are in my company, I want your legs spread and your pussy open and available for my entertainment."

She hesitated, and he could almost see the defiance in her fighting for control, quivering beneath her skin. Apparently, her own release marshaled her defenses. They didn't hold, and slowly, with jerky, unsure movements, her legs parted and stretched as wide as they could go.

Instantly, the smell of her desire tempted him to go down. Cody smiled. That's exactly what he would do once she did him the favor. Brushing a hand through her hair, he lifted it over her shoulders, giving her breasts no place to hide as he leaned in and let the rough fabric of his jeans torment her tips.

Amanda shivered and arched, a small moan escaping her lips. Desire relaxed her features but tensed her back right up. Her spine straightened almost in perfect rhythm with the rasp of his zipper being lowered. The quick slide of her tongue along her lips beckoned him to trace its path with his thumb.

“I’m going to fill this mouth with cock now, sweetness, and all I want you to do is suck. Later, when your hands are free, I’ll teach you just how I like my blow jobs. I’ll instruct you on all the wonderful things you’re going to do with these luscious lips and that slick little tongue of yours, but for now, for tonight, I just want you to suck.”

He didn’t ask her if she understood. If she didn’t, he’d merely punish her later. Instead, he freed his cock from his jeans and lifted it to her lips. With a brushing pump, he demanded entrance.

Cody gritted his teeth as her soft lips whispered across the head of his dick, slowly working around his flared edges. Her tongue licked out and twirled across his sensitive flesh, snaking around the edges in playful mischief. He’d told her to suck. Instead, she tasted and teased.

Every touch, every inch of hardened flesh she discovered whipped another brilliant lash of ecstasy. It cracked his control inch by inch until it shattered and his hands tightened in her hair. In one rough jerk, he pushed her down over his full length.

She choked, but he didn’t have the decency left to give her any time. With a firm grip on her head, Cody fucked her mouth over his cock in an ever-increasing rhythm. Sweet mercy in heaven, it had never been this good.

Her cheeks clamped down, caressing every nerve-filled millimeter of his cock. The amazing friction had him panting and groaning as she sucked him so hard he wondered why his head didn’t blow off. Again and again, Cody tormented himself with another stroke into her mouth. His hips joined the momentum as the ecstasy whirling through his body tightened down.

He knew he was just a few short strokes to total detonation. A distant thought occurred to Cody to warn Amanda. Then the sensitive head of his cock bumped into the back of her throat, sending ripples of release streaking down his shaft. He might have been able to hold out, but she swallowed the very last vestige of his control.

Sweet mercy, she swallowed.

Cody roared out his pleasure. All he could do was anchor himself to Amanda as his world shredded around him. Tremors overcame his muscles, and he reeled back, looking for something to support his weight before he crashed down over her.

Cody landed across the bed, staring at his reflection in the mirror overhead. He watched his chest rise and fall, sucking in painful pants of air to cool down his overheated system. Lower, his cock lay snuggled, wet, and content.

Goddamn, she sucked me soft. That never happened before. Cody always prided himself on sustaining power, but his dick just didn't feel up to the task. As he struggled to his elbows, he looked over at the woman who pulled off such a feat. *Definitely a keeper.*

She sat silently, naked and spread for his pleasure, her lips still glistening with his seed, and she didn't say a word. *Natural-born submissive.*

Shoving onto his legs, Cody grinned at how weak they felt. Amanda might not fit the criteria Knox outlined, but with a mouth like that, it didn't matter. Even Knox would see the wisdom behind Cody's logic. If he didn't, Cody would just have Amanda demonstrate.

Cody's cock perked up at his idea. Fantasies of having enough control over Amanda to order her to strip for his brothers, to go to her knees and suck their cocks, to spread her legs and let them mount her, to do all of that and so much more on his command got him hard. He would get her there, seduce her to that point.

* * * *

Amanda strained to hear where Cody went. She'd heard rustling minutes ago and then nothing. She couldn't help but turn her head searchingly, letting her ears lead her blindfolded eyes. Silence echoed back, making her grow more nervous and anxious as the moments passed.

Self-consciously, she licked her lips and tasted him again. The salty flavor made her shiver with heat. She'd never sucked a man until he came, and it made her feel both powerful and a little dirty.

The latter should have shamed and embarrassed her, but she had no more room for those emotions. Instead, she relished the wicked sensation. It

made her wonder what came next. She couldn't even begin to imagine. The trickle of fear at the unknown only added a sultry spice to the nerves and anticipation holding her tense.

She shifted to the sound of a door closing, then bit her lip as the motion caused the dildo filling her pussy to jostle. With every bounce and bump of Cody's blow job, her own body rocketed with the tiny explosions from the damn toy pushing against the sensitive walls of her sheath.

If her hands were free, she would touch herself, maybe undo the strap-on and use it to fuck herself so she could get some of the satisfaction he had. Not that she should complain. The first orgasm he gave her almost made her black out. Cody must have strapped her into this damn thing then.

She hoped he didn't intend to keep her in it long. Amanda bit her lip, staring into the blackness of her blindfold. The creek of the door cut through her arousal, unleashing apprehension of what the little sound meant. Had Cody left her like this? Worse, had he let somebody in?

Unbidden, the memory of his brother staring at her in the bar came to mind. Knox Reese starred in every forbidden fantasy Amanda would never admit to having. So intense and focused, Knox Reese had drawn her notice long before last night, but at the bar had been the only place he'd ever turned his attention on her. Even from a distance, she felt the heat of his hunger, the darkness of it. Had Cody and he orchestrated this? Was she going to be passed off or shared?

Amanda began to pant, but not in fear. The very idea of being shared awakened some dark, forbidden desires. Thick and potent, this was a rare type of lust. Even as it began to consume her, she feared giving into impulse.

"Cody?"

The rope above her gave way so fast she didn't have time to catch herself. Her chin should have smacked into a hard floor, but it found a soft buffer in a thick pillow. A set of hard hands pulled her hips back. The swiftness of the assault gave her no time to respond. Between two breaths she was positioned bowing down with her ass up. With the next breath came the first blow.

Without a word, he lit her ass so hot, her eyes bulged. The smacks came fast and hard until her ass burned. Each blow he delivered shook her body, jostling the toy buried inside her. The heat spreading from her ass melted

into pleasure until she was moaning, lifting her rear into the blows, praying the next one would be hard enough to deliver her into utopia's embrace. He brought her right to the edge and stopped.

"I'm going to let you come now. For the rest of the night, I want you to come as often and as many times as you can. You're free."

It seemed a strange thing to say to her befuddled mind. He'd just denied her and now released her?

Oh, sweet heaven of mercy above.

She gasped and arched as tiny bubbles of joy surfaced. Deep inside her, the cock vibrated. A hand settled over the toy's end, sliding it in and out, smooth and even, only to return with the same easy, slow motion. Keeping the pace steady, Cody fucked the vibrating cock into her, letting it tickle her walls as pressure slowly mounted within them.

Each pass brushed her sweet spot with a sudden explosion of chaotic rapture. Like an addict, her hips began to flex in search of another burst. Just one more and maybe the gates of heaven would open.

Behind her, Cody chuckled. "You should see yourself bowed down before me with your ass up and your pussy wide around this fake dick. It doesn't matter to you, does it? It doesn't matter this is nothing more than plastic with a little mechanical wiring. You still love every single inch of it, but it's not the one that gives you pleasure."

"I give that. Your pleasure is mine to command, and you will find it wherever I say. On this cock, on my cock, or maybe on another cock I order you to fuck. Would you? Would you let another man mount you if I ordered it?"

No.

The denial came instantly, but Amanda didn't know if was fed by fear or desire. There could be no hiding the arousal that swelled at Cody's wicked suggestion. Even if she didn't want it to, the idea of feeling another man's cock filling out her pussy while Cody watched excited her.

The image of Cody's brother materialized in her mind. A shadowed figure just as he'd been at the bar, wearing jeans and a tight black T-shirt with his Stetson pulled low so only the tense line of his jaw breached the light. Amanda imagined his head down, holding her still as he watched his cock slowly fucking into her.

Amanda shivered beneath the fantasy, feeling her whole body bloom with excitement. They lured her in, and she gave over to the lie. It was Cody feeding her inch after hard inch of cock while Knox watched.

“I think you would like it. Knowing you were being controlled, watched even in the most intimate of acts. You get so hot so fast, baby, but I can feel the difference even now. You’re thinking about it, envisioning it, and it’s making your pussy drip. Tell me. Who is it?”

“Your brother.”

The words came out without thought, without authorization. The moment they broke the air, she regretted them.

“My brother?” Cody chuckled behind her. “Which one?”

Don’t—“Knox,” the name whispered out of her.

That got another laugh from Cody. “You are going to need a lot of work to take on Knox.”

Everything stopped as she felt him shifting behind her. His warm breath heated the inside of her thigh as the cotton of his shirt tickled her knees, and she knew he’d settled himself right below her. She knew this position. Even as her hips dipped to find his wonderful mouth, he stalled her motions, letting his laughter tickle across her sensitive folds.

“Yes, this is one of my favorite positions, to have a woman’s pussy completely open to me. If one of my brothers were here, I’d have you strip for us and then settle yourself over his lap. Imagine what it would be like to be taken into Knox’s embrace. He wouldn’t undress for you. Knox would just pull that big dick of his out and beckon you to have a seat. You’d take every single inch he had to give you before he spread your legs and held them open for my tasting.”

His words slipped out, murmured between gentle, ticklish laps of his tongue. The teasing caresses sparkled boldly against the dark erotic images his words painted in her mind. She could almost feel Knox against her body, strong arms wrapping around to hold her prisoner to the wonderfully perverse intentions of the two brothers.

While Cody teased and tormented her cunt, Knox would toy with her breast. Rolling over her tits, he’d match the rhythm of Cody’s tongue circling over her clit. Faster and harder, they’d drive her as Cody tormented her with whispers of his own dark desires. She’d say no to none of them.

Trapped helpless between these two hard men, she'd be at their mercy. Nothing more than a puppet to their pleasure as she clawed toward her own.

She came in a screaming, writhing fit. Cody left her to ride out her pleasure but returned before the frenzy of her release dispersed. Into the mix of emotions pulling her thin, she felt a cool sensation followed by an unbelievable pressure stretching her ass, pain streaked into the beauty of her orgasm.

"The thing we like to do the most is tag team a girl, to fill her so full of cock from all sides until she can't swallow without feeling us."

He penetrated her as he spoke. Slowly, he filled her backside with the solid thickness of the toy. The pressure became almost too much to bear, and she squirmed in protest.

"Easy now." He gentled her with a soothing stroke to the back. "I know it's not comfortable the first time, but I promise you are going to love having this ass packed with cock. We just need to stretch it."

Amanda couldn't have responded if she wanted to. The harsh wave of pained pressure crashed into her euphoric party, inciting a war of conflicting emotions. With deep breaths, she tried to gain some semblance of control, but it slipped out of her grasp as Cody settled the full length of the toy into her.

"Very good." He smoothed a hand down around her hip and slipped into her splayed pussy. With one finger, he trapped her clit and began to torment the over-sensitized nub. "Doesn't that feel better, baby?"

She couldn't answer. Cody's finger tipped the scales in the favor of pleasure. In moments, he reduced her to a shivering mass of need. Everything inside her stretched thin. From every corner of her body, nerves tingled to life, flooding her mind with such an overwhelming volume of pleasure she could no longer tell one sensation from another.

The pressure of release built again, forged atop the slowly building heat coming from her pelvis. Even as her ass burned with pain, the intense sensation only added to the pleasure coming from the cock pumping into her pussy.

The constant retreat and withdrawal coinciding at the same time wound her tighter than she had ever been. Tears of frustration seeped from beneath her eyelids. They soaked into the blindfold, giving testament to the rapturous layers of pressure trapping her in their tension.

“Come for me, Amanda. Don’t hold it back. Let it all go, and I will carry you over to the bed and give you the fucking you’ve been asking for.”

Cody’s command snapped the leads on her release. The climax rampaged through her in an all-out assault. It sheared her body from her soul, freeing her ethereal being to float away into the celebrating heavens. Amanda trailed behind, savoring the ecstasy of physical release.

Reality became an incoherent sea of sensation around her. She couldn’t tell if the world actually spun around her or if Cody moved her. Even when her knees settled into the softness of the mattress and Cody lifted her hands to position them over the rim of a wooden frame, her senses were awash in a flood of rapture.

It wasn’t until he pulled the toy free of her pussy and replaced it with the much larger, rounded head of his cock that the world reordered itself around her. But it was too late. He ripped it apart at the seams as he slammed the full length of his cock into her. Thicker and warmer than the toy, he filled her to bursting, pressing against the toy in her ass and making the swath of skin between the two sizzle with an unholy pleasure.

“Oh, baby,” Cody groaned into her ears, wrapping his arms around her waist to pin her tightly to him. “You are the tightest, sweetest slice of heaven I’ve ever forged into. Ever since I stuck my hands down your pants at the bar, I knew I had to fuck this pussy. I knew it would be this good, but I never suspected you would be this good at it.

“I swear to you, next time I’ll reward you with the fucking you deserve. I’ll take my time and do you right, but now,” Cody groaned and flexed his hips, “now I just need you too damn much.”

He gave her no more warnings before setting a hard, fast-paced rhythm that had her clawing at the bed frame. She struggled to stay upright as he pounded into her from behind. With each flex of his hips, he filled her, setting off a powerful series of explosions that echoed back from her rear. With each jarring bounce of her ass against his pelvis, the toy inside her shifted, intensifying the pressure and the pleasure until she shifted and ground herself against Cody, trying to fuck herself with both cocks.

With an unsteady chuckle, he answered her silent demands and reached between them to take hold of the plug. In unison he stroked both cocks into her, riding her harder and faster until sweat dripped onto her shoulders.

Beneath them, the bed squeaked in protest as the frame began to smack against the wall. The steady beat marked the rising tempo of the rapture escalating inside her until, with a scream, she peaked. The orgasm burst over her, roaring through Amanda with such ferocity she went still for a second.

Long enough for the white light to consume both her body and her soul. It suspended her in a beautiful sea of pleasure that slowly faded into a peaceful abyss. There she remained until the siren's wail of her alarm clock pierced her sleep. Amanda bolted up in bed with the disorienting realization that it was morning.

For a moment, she wondered if it had all been a dream. Then she shifted under the sheets and felt the pressure from behind.

Chapter 11

Friday, June 27th

“You know Cody’s going to come after you, don’t you?”

Amanda’s gaze shifted to the side, but she didn’t turn her head from where she was silently studying the back of the bar. Another Friday night, another round of desperation at Studs & Spurs, only this time she really was the pathetic one. Cindy didn’t drag her out. Amanda had insisted Cindy come with her not even five minutes after refusing to go with Cody.

He knew she was here. He gave her one of those non-committal head nods but so far made no attempt to cross the room.

He probably thinks I’m totally lame now.

Possibly even crazy.

Is he looking over here?

Amanda whipped her head back to face Cindy’s smirk.

“What?” Amanda challenged her to actually say whatever obnoxious thing her friend was thinking.

“If you want to be with Cody, why don’t you make a move?”

Amanda scowled. “I don’t want to be with him. What makes you think that?”

“You’ve been staring at him since we got here, which makes perfect sense. You’ve spent every night this week with Cody.” Cindy twirled her straw around the edge of the plastic red cup. “What I can’t figure out is why he didn’t ask you here in the first place.”

“Do you really think I would come here and make a complete ass of myself if he hadn’t asked me?”

Cindy blinked, her glance narrowing with confusion. “Come again?”

“Cody asked me to come with him tonight.”

“Oh,” Cindy nodded her head in understanding, “he asked you out, but you called begging me to go out, so what? Is this the classic ‘don’t want him to know I’m falling for him, but I’m too obsessed to not see him’ syndrome?”

“No,” Amanda shot back instantly. “This is the ‘he’s not the right man for me, but the sex is so damn mind-blowing I think I’m addicted’ syndrome.”

Cindy snorted and glanced at the corner pool table. “Well, I think he might be addicted, too, and just as stubbornly refusing to come after you, which means you two have at least one thing in common.”

“You don’t understand,” Amanda complained. She felt like she was whining, but, damn it, she’d been going in so many circles this past week she couldn’t seem to find a center anymore.

“You’re right. I don’t.” Cindy didn’t sound the least bit sympathetic. “You’ve spent the past four nights with one of the hottest guys in the entire fricken state. Cody Reese is *every* woman’s type, unless she is a very stupid, stupid woman.”

“Okay, so I’m dumb.” Amanda rolled her eyes.

Cindy just didn’t understand and obviously didn’t want to. It wasn’t just Cody, it was everything. Will had disappeared, and despite his promise to call every night, she’d only gotten one five-minute pit stop from him. She would have felt bereft if Cody hadn’t twisted her into so many knots she wasn’t sure who she was anymore.

“Oh, for God’s sakes, Amanda. What can possibly be so bad?” Cindy scoffed as if reading her thoughts. “Seriously, you have issues. You spent the last four months dating Nick and calling that a serious relationship but refused to sleep with him. Now you have Cody melting your bedsprings every night, and you say he’s not the one for you? Jesus, what the hell do you want, Amanda?”

“Knox Reese.”

Her lips puckered as if something sour passed over them. With her eyes round, she stared at Cindy in shock at what she just revealed. It was a secret she intentionally tried to keep even from herself.

“Oh.” Cindy grinned lecherously at her. “You dirty, dirty girl.”

“I didn’t mean it.” At least, Amanda wished she hadn’t.

“Yes, you did.”

“Cindy—”

“I didn’t even know he introduced you to his brothers.” Cindy cast a speculative eye at the pool tables. “Knox, huh?”

Amanda took a deep, humiliated breath and let the weight of it sink her deeper into the booth. “Don’t look. Nothing’s happened. Technically, I haven’t even met Knox.”

Cindy raised an eyebrow when Amanda didn’t continue. “But?”

“Sometimes when I’m with Cody, I imagine it’s Knox,” Amanda muttered into her chest.

“Wow.” Cindy shook her head. “You really are screwed up if you’re going to let a little fantasy action ruin a real thing.”

Cindy’s total disregard for the issue tearing Amanda up had Amanda’s chin lifting. This time she gave Cindy a morbidly curious look. “You don’t think it’s despicable to imagine it’s your lover’s brother doing you?”

“No, as long as you keep it to yourself, but if you’re so worked up over the problem, I suggest you meet Knox.”

“Meet him?” Her whole body responded in alarm at the very idea.

“Yeah. I’m sure once you know him, whatever it is that makes you dream about him will disappear.”

Meet Knox. That’s just why she turned down Cody, to avoid having to meet Knox. Even from a distance, the man radiated a dangerous aura. He was a man among boys. The way he moved, held his beer, even the way he swallowed made a woman’s breath catch at the controlled power he exerted. It rallied some very naughty instinct in Amanda to poke the lion and rattle the calmness right out of him. The very idea of his response made her pussy melt.

And I’m supposed to actually meet this man?

* * * *

“I think it’s time you introduced Amanda to your brothers,” Jace stated.

Cody glared down Jace’s suggestion as Knox took his shot. He didn’t want to share. Not yet. Knox straightened up, coming around the pool table with a smirk. Just by the way his older brother smiled and *teased*, Cody knew Knox was drunk.

“Sounding a little anxious there, Jace,” Knox commented. “Already imagining taking your seconds?”

“Yeah.” Jace laughed unrepentantly, probably amused by a drunk Knox. Their eldest brother didn’t lose many inhibitions very often. “And thirds and fourths.”

“It’s only been a week,” Cody muttered into the rim of his beer bottle. Maybe Jace got a kick out of a liquored-up Knox, but Cody didn’t want Amanda meeting Knox like this.

“You’re sounding possessive, Cody.” Jace eyed Cody, giving him a once-over. “And acting it, too.”

“She must be one hell of a fuck.”

“Shut up, Knox.” Both Jace and Cody shot the same response at their older brother.

Knox just grinned back and slouched against the wall. “I’m just saying. I’d like to grin like Cody, and we all know he’s finding that smile deep inside Amanda’s pussy. You gotta figure it must be wet, tight, and sweet as hell, right?”

“Don’t be an ass, Knox,” Cody snapped. He’d about had it with his older brother’s attitude. Yeah, the alcohol might be helping Knox be more blunt, but he’d spent all week trying to write Amanda off as a good fuck and nothing more. The act had worn through Cody’s nerves.

Jace, though, had been much more respectful—until then. “He’s right, though, isn’t he?”

The hungry look in Jace’s eyes had Cody’s narrowing. “I guess you two are just going to have to find out for yourselves, *if* Amanda lets you.”

“Well, she can’t do that from all the way over there,” Knox cheerily pointed out. “So I think it’s time you brought the little darlin’ over here.”

Cody’s jaw clenched at Knox’s obnoxious taunt. The best punishment for his brother would be to bring Amanda over. With Knox drunk, it would be like “flame, meet gas.”

“Fine,” Cody lowered his arms, “but she doesn’t know anything, so behave yourselves.”

Knox rolled his eyes and shot Jace a hard look. “I don’t know why we’re putting up with his attitude when I could just pound it out of him.”

* * * *

"I don't know why I like you," Cody growled in her ear as he dragged her into the crowd.

"That's all right because I don't even like you," Amanda snapped back. "You didn't have to be so rude to Gavin. He's just a friend."

"Yeah, well, he wasn't looking at you like one."

"What do you care?" Amanda retorted but didn't resist as he forcefully led her toward the back of the bar. "I thought you didn't even like me."

"You have your positive points."

"You don't."

"Giving you more pleasure than any man ever has or ever will isn't a positive point?"

Not when they were obviously headed in the direction of his brothers. Amanda's stomach tightened and began to quiver. In a few short seconds, she would be surrounded by Reese brothers. The very idea was enough to cause an asthma attack in a woman with healthy lungs.

Twisting her hand, she tried to break free of his hold. When his grip just tightened, Amanda's annoyance increased, and so did her nerves. Feeling much like a virgin being dragged to a sacrifice, Amanda became almost desperate to escape her fate.

"Why are you doing this?" Amanda tried to dig her heels in, but it was a fruitless effort. "I thought I made it clear to you on the phone I didn't want to play pool with you and your brothers."

"You're not going to play. You're going to watch."

"Well, that sounds like so much more fun," Amanda snapped. "Too much for my delicate constitution, so why don't you just let go!"

She yanked as hard as she could, putting her whole body into it. With barely a flick of his wrist, he pulled her right along in his wake.

"I can't trust you to behave on your own." Cody didn't even bother to look at her when he delivered the insult.

"Trust me? Need I remind you of the terms of our agreement?"

"No, I remember. We agreed when you are with me, you're with me, and, look, you're with me."

"Only because you have my hand locked in a death grip. Come on, let go, Cody. I don't want to play pool."

“And I told you, you aren’t going to. Just because you know how to play with one type of ball doesn’t mean you know what to do with another.”

Amanda’s mouth fell open. All the insults and curses verging on her lips were stilled by shock. “What did you say?”

“You heard me.”

Yes, Amanda had, and she only had one response. “I don’t watch. I play.”

Cody didn’t take her the least bit seriously. Laughing, he gave her one of those good ol’boy looks, one that said he clearly didn’t think she knew what she was getting herself into.

“Do you even know how?”

“Why don’t you put some money on the table and find out?” Amanda suggested, seeing an opportunity to add to Cody’s coming humiliation.

“I can’t take your money.”

“Why not? It’s green. It spends.”

“Because it ain’t right for a man to take advantage of a woman.”

Her ears began to burn. “I’m going to kick your ass.”

“Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

“Don’t belittle a person before you know you can beat them.”

“Beat who at what?”

She completely forgot where they were headed. Knox Reese’s question brought her to a sudden stop at the rim of the pool table, right beneath Knox’s penetrating glare. Like molten molasses, sweet desire trickled down her spine as she became hypnotized by his gaze. The tension vibrating in her muscles snapped as his hand engulfed hers. Little electric shocks spidered through her at the small touch, making her nipples pucker and her pussy hum.

The way his blue eyes darkened to navy told her he felt it, too. Felt it and rejected it instantly. Jerking back his hand, he moved away. Cold despair clipped through her, and she scowled at Knox as he backed away. Instantly, her guard went up, and the tension between them shifted.

Jace Reese stepped in to fill the void and shocked Amanda with the sudden gentleness in his eyes. On the outside, Jace looked every bit as hard and intimidating as his older brother, but unlike Knox, his gaze was alive with warmth. She couldn’t help but relax under the protective comfort she felt radiating from him.

“And just what kind of beating were you discussing with my brother?” Jace asked after Cody introduced them.

“Amanda thinks she can beat me at pool.” The sound of Cody’s amusement drew her gaze back to his smug little smirk. “Apparently, the little lady fancies herself quite a shark.”

Jace raised a curious eyebrow at her. “Is that so?”

“Well, why don’t we let the little lady show us just how good she is at playing with sticks and balls?”

Innocent as Knox’s question sounded, Amanda’s mind couldn’t help but to pervert its meaning. From the look in Knox’s eyes, it hadn’t been a mistake. She knew just how to handle him.

“This show costs money, little boy.” Amanda cocked her hip in the classic challenge. “Are you sure you have enough allowance in your pocket?”

Knox stepped back into her, shouldering Jace out of the way. “I might have a quarter or two.”

“Is that all your dignity is worth?” Amanda smirked. “And here I thought you Reese brothers would have placed a higher value on yourselves.”

“Okay, then,” Knox’s hand went to his back pocket, “fifty dollars a game.”

“No.” Cody shook his head. “Put your money back in your wallet. I’m not going to let you bet—”

“You’re not going to *let*?” Amanda rounded on Cody. “What do I have to do? Chew through the leash? You don’t have any say in this, Cody.”

“I’m not going to stand by and watch you lose your money on a pool game.”

“Then close your eyes, or better yet, go stroke yourself until you’re blind. You don’t have any right to tell me what I can or can’t do with my money.”

“That’s not an appropriate thing for a lady to say in public.”

Amanda almost fell over herself when Knox ventured to voice his opinion.

“Excuse me? Just who the hell are you to tell me what I can and can’t say?” Cindy had been right—meeting Knox really broke the spell. “Why don’t you just shut up and put your money on the table, Knox?”

Chapter 12

“You hustled me.”

The statement lacked hard impact because Knox sounded more confused than angry.

Cody understood. He, too, was still stuck on shock. Amanda hadn’t just won, she’d conned Knox. Losing three games in a row to start, mouthing off enough to keep Knox indulgently upping the bet to “help her out”, all part of the classic hustle Amanda had just pulled on Knox. Hell, Cody had even offered her pointers.

“Tell it to the judge, my friend.” Amanda dropped her stick on the table and came around with a hand open. “I believe that’s seven hundred dollars you owe me, Knox.”

Cody couldn’t keep his chuckle to himself anymore. He’d been waiting for a day to say something like this to Knox, and finally it had come. “You got beat by a girl.”

“The offer is still open, little boy.” Amanda threw the challenge at Cody. “I’ll take your last fifty cents. I ain’t got a problem with robbing the cradle.

“I’m a year older than you.” Amanda had better watch her words because in a few hours she’d be the one at Cody’s mercy. “That’s why nobody will say crap when I leave you crying for your candy money back.”

“I don’t cry, little lady.” Cody grinned. “I get even.”

“Name the game and the time.”

Jace jutted into the conversation, actually stepping into block Cody’s view of Amanda. “You play poker?”

Amanda rolled her shoulders in a slow motion. “I’m sure I could learn.”

“I’ll take that smile as a yes.”

Cody could also see Jace just accepted the challenge Amanda knowingly or unknowingly laid down before him. Jace knew how to play

about every game Cody had ever heard of, so it didn't shock him when his brother started going down the list.

"What about chess?"

"What?" Amanda's smirk dipped as her brow wrinkled. "Chess?"

"Yes, chess," Jace repeated with a touch of annoyance. "You know the game that's kind of like checkers?"

"Yes, I know," Amanda snapped. "And I haven't played in a long time."

"Sunday afternoon," Jace retorted just as sharply. "We'll play for Knox's seven hundred dollars back."

"All right," Amanda nodded and then flashed Jace a true grin. "I'll take your bet. You're gonna regret it 'cause I'm the best that's ever been."

The words struck Cody as familiar, and he mouthed over them, trying to remember where they came from. Apparently, Jace didn't need to put much thought into it because he stepped up to tower over Amanda.

"This ain't Georgia, little lady, and sometimes the devil does win."

Amanda snorted in response. "I guess I know what I'll be praying for in church this Sunday."

"Prayers won't save you, baby girl," Knox delivered his warning, stepping up to trap Amanda between him and Jace. As usual, Amanda's arrogance made her too rash to see the danger closing in around her. Brazenly, she smiled and cocked a hip.

"How about a chair and a whip? Will that save me, or do I need to go buy a bottle of Jack to put you to bed, big boy?"

Cody saw Knox's jaw roll with tension as his lips parted. Blind panic and fear hit him. Before he could respond, Cody was already in action.

"Let's dance."

Cody grabbed Amanda's arm and whisked her quickly away from his oldest brother.

* * * *

Knox watched Cody spirit his little lover to the safety of the dance floor. The farther away she went, the smaller she got until she once again only looked five foot two. It was an amazing transformation, because before him, he'd have sworn Amanda was six feet tall. She certainly acted like she was six feet tall.

And a man. Men didn't have those curves, though, and they didn't smell half as sweet. Knox certainly never got a hard-on from watching a man bend over a pool table before. He couldn't decide which fate would be worse, discovering he was gay or falling in love with Amanda Johnson.

"I like her."

Knox's eyes cut to Jace. His brother didn't notice, too fixated on Amanda. Knox wasn't half as drunk as his brothers thought. Certainly, his head was clear enough to put the obvious pieces together.

"Yeah? And when did you decide that? Tonight or some time ago?"

"I don't see anything wrong with Amanda," Jace retorted, his gaze finally locking on Knox's.

Knox snorted, noticing how neatly Jace ducked his question. "I'm not sure you're really seeing the girl at all."

Yeah, Knox knew Jace's little secret even if his brother held it in a silent fist all these years. Jace didn't have to say anything. The way he watched Amanda said it all. It was Knox's first worry when they'd started putting names on the list, which is why he'd buried Amanda's name at the bottom of the list. Knox just hadn't anticipated getting to her number.

"Maybe it just scares you because you see it, too," Jace shot back.

"All I see is trouble with a tight ass and a nice set of tits."

"All I see is a list with very few names on it. Come on, Knox, give the girl a chance."

"So she wins by default?" Knox glared at the woman in question. He didn't like the feel of Amanda at all. From the moment she'd stepped into their circle, he'd felt the electric sparks showering all around him. The whole thing made him tense with pent-up aggression. "I don't want to get stuck with the wrong woman just because we're too lazy to find the right one."

"What do you suggest then?" Jace asked.

"Maybe we need to reconsider some of the women who we didn't put on the list."

Jace snorted, looking back at Amanda and Cody dancing. "Next thing you'll suggest is we have a party and invite them all at once for a speed dating competition."

Knox didn't get the part about speed dating, but the party idea he liked. "The Fourth of July is coming up next weekend. It would be the perfect excuse to have a large scale event."

"You hate large scale events," Jace reminded him, as if a reminder was needed.

"I'll suffer through it," Knox grumbled.

"You're an idiot." Jace straightened up. "I'm going to go dance with the perfectly good woman we have."

"He really needs to get the shit beat out of him on a regular basis," Knox muttered to himself. Silently, he wagered the odds Cody would say no to letting Jace take the woman molded to his front out of his arms. He wouldn't let her out of his arms.

Best not to ever have her there in the first place.

* * * *

"Come on." Jace grinned at Cody's scowl.

He knew his brother wanted to hit him. Jace also knew Cody wouldn't. Not here. Not now. Later, maybe, but for a chance to feel Amanda plastered along his length, Jace would take the pain. He'd waited his turn, letting Cody have her all week and Knox play pool with her. Jace was due.

"Why don't you find your own woman to dance with?" Cody snarled.

"Why go through the trouble when you have a perfectly good one right here?"

"I'm not a piece of beef, you jackasses," Amanda snapped, showing her own teeth and making Jace's cock pulse with need. He liked her spunk and was betting she was a real wildcat in bed. Hell, he knew she'd be one. He saw the scratches on Cody's shoulders and envied each and every one.

Knox could search all he wanted. Jace had always known what he wanted—Amanda in his bed, where he had all the time to devour the full banquet of her body.

"Amanda," Cody growled, "he's just trying to irritate me."

"Actually, I'm trying to hit on your date." Jace smirked. "It'd go a lot better if you weren't around. So do you mind?"

"Amanda is not interested."

"I might be." Amanda's little chin rose up. "It's hard to tell the difference between the two of you at this moment. Besides, I can always do with more friends."

Jace didn't get the friend comment, but obviously Cody did. Cody's eyes narrowed on Amanda, and he growled at her. "Best you watch yourself, Amanda. You might get what you wish for."

She jumped at Cody's bait, giving him a hard look. "Just what are you threatening, Cody?"

"Nothing." Cody backed down and Jace smirked. "Fine, dance with Jace, but don't think I'll forget this attitude later."

"Who said there'd be a later?" Amanda tossed the loaded question at Cody, but he'd already shrugged his way through the crowd.

Turning her dark look on him, Jace knew better than to say a word. He simply took her in his arms as he'd dreamed of doing for too long. Soft and perfectly rounded, Amanda fit against his body as if they'd been crafted as one. They were one, moving in perfect rhythm.

The only thing Jace could imagine loving more would be fitting together like this without clothes on. Nothing but skin to skin, and he'd be buried deep inside her...right now he had to cope with the frustration.

It wasn't bad at first. Three songs went by in a fast pace that kept their bodies separated for most of the time. Finally, though, a slow song wound its way around the dance floor, and it figured Amanda would stall out on him.

"I think I've had enough dancing."

Jace could read through Amanda's lie easily enough. She radiated apprehension. He understood. Just because he'd been dealt a stack of fast dances didn't mean he hadn't used every opportunity to touch Amanda in subtly suggestive ways. Inappropriate ways, given she was dating Cody. Though Jace had a feeling the not-so-innocent touches would have made Amanda skittish no matter what.

He might unnerve her, but she didn't reject them. It was just the opposite, if the darkening of her eyes and the licking of her lips were any indication.

Jace would have bet money Amanda was wet already. He knew women well enough to know the look on her face. He turned her on, but she didn't

want to be the type of woman lusting after her boyfriend's brother. A noble trait, but totally wasted on his family.

"Ah, come on, Amanda." Jace wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. "Just one more dance."

"Really," she breathed out in a rush, "I'm getting tired."

"Then step on my feet, and I'll carry your weight," Jace retorted, tightening his arms until he felt every soft curve of her body settle into his own hard angles.

"I don't think this is appropriate," Amanda murmured into his shirt, even as she shifted and adjusted their position so no gap existed anywhere between them.

Melded like one, there was no way she could miss the size of his erection indenting into the soft flesh of her stomach. Just to be sure, he slid his hand down her back and over the gentle rise of her ass and pressed. She didn't resist.

Just the opposite. She rubbed, and he almost groaned aloud with the pleasure the small motion gave him. What an absolutely delicious move. Now he knew why Cody had chased after her that first night. If she kept her teasing motions up, he'd come right there in his jeans in the middle of the dance floor.

In retaliation, he bent his head and nuzzled through her sweet-smelling hair to whisper in her ear. "Relax, Amanda. It's just a dance."

Then he bit her just lightly on the neck, scraping his teeth over the sensitive skin as his tongue snaked out to chase after the shiver he could feel racing down her body. He knew where those trembles pooled and would love to take a nibble there, too. She told him with her husky moan.

"Jace."

"Mmm, saying my name like that only gets you bitten harder." He matched his actions to his words.

"You shouldn't..." Even as Amanda's breathless words denied him, her head tilted, offering more of her neck to his tasting.

Jace couldn't resist the temptation. He took another bite, this one hard enough to leave a mark his tongue slipped out to soothe, making her rub against him in ways that returned his seductive caress tenfold.

"You taste so good, like sweetened apples." Jace nibbled on her earlobe between words. "I want to taste more. I want to take you back to the ranch,

strip you bare, and discover every sweet spot from here all the way down to that delectable pussy I can smell already dripping for me.”

Jace’s hand dipped below her waist to fan out over the plump cheeks of her ass. With his strength, he helped Amanda grind her pelvis even harder against his.

“It’s going to happen, too,” Jace groaned, giving up dancing to just sway with her in his arms. “One day, Amanda, you’ll spread those legs for my tasting. I’ll devour every inch of your tasty little cunt until you fall apart under my tongue.”

Jace panted just thinking about tucking his head up between her legs. The rough drags of breaths matched the heaving press of Amanda’s breasts against his chest. The pointed tips of her tits rubbed against him with a pace fast enough to assure Jace that she dreamed the same thing as he in the moment.

“I’m going to make you come so many times,” he growled, needing her to believe him. “You’ll be weak from pleasure, crying and begging for just a moment to catch your breath. I’m not going to give it to you.”

“You’re not?”

Amanda’s soft whisper held so much longing, Jace’s gut clenched with need. She was there, in the moment, with him, and he wanted it to be special.

“No.” Jace pulled his head back slightly to capture her gaze. “I’m not going to stop. I’m going to fuck you so good, sweet thing. I’m going to bury myself deep inside you and make scream with pleasure. It’s going to be hard, rough, and all night, Amanda. When I’m done with you, your cunt will pant at just the sound of my name.”

Her eyes widened at his vow. Jace tightened his hold, pressing her even closer with his words. “We’re going to touch heaven together, Amanda. You and I. Don’t you want to take that trip with me?”

Jace didn’t expect an answer, knowing she probably couldn’t even form one. He felt the shudders quivering beneath her tense muscles. The shallow pants rubbed her breasts into his chest with a rapid rhythm that drove him insane.

Damn, but he wanted to see those hard little nipples, feel them rubbing against his chest as she writhed beneath him in need. To see, touch, and taste

all the soft skin from the delicate curve of her ear to her pretty, pink pussy Cody shaved for their eating pleasure.

If Amanda didn't stop those enticing little motions, he'd drag her ass right off the dance floor to his truck where she'd be lucky to make it back to the ranch fully clothed. Jace wouldn't be able to wait before pulling over and letting his cock take a dip in the liquid depths of the pussy well he could smell creaming for him. Apparently, his words had the desired effect.

The last thing Jace expected was for Amanda to jerk backward out of his arms. Where she got the strength for such a move, he didn't know. Without a word, she left him standing alone with his erection and a grim view of his own future.

Chapter 13

Fresh air in the form of stale beer, cigarette smoke, and the musky odor of too many people filling such a small amount of space helped clear Amanda's head. It did little for the desire Jace stroked to life with all his inappropriate musings. So much for the quiet brother. Jace Reese obviously had a wild, wicked, dirty imagination and a hell of a nerve.

It might not be right, but Cody's brother had made Amanda hot, and now she needed a man—Cody, not Jace. Taking Jace up on his offer would be wrong, but pretending Cody was Jace...*Would be wrong.*

Amanda ignored her inner conscience as she looked for Cody. She didn't have to look hard. He retreated back to the pool table to loom in the shadows with Knox. Both stared intently in her direction, watching as she came toward them. It made Amanda pause.

There was something more reflected in Knox and Cody's gazes than idle interest. Speculation and some other emotions Amanda couldn't identify at a distance drew all their features tight. They'd been watching the scene between Jace and her unfold and...what? Waiting to see her response? Was this some kind of test?

The idea normally would have sent her into a full rage. Nobody screwed with Amanda. She'd take a piece out of Cody's hide to make sure he understood, right after she finished molesting him.

That's right. Amanda picked up her step again. No master and pet games tonight. Cody violated the rules of their arrangement the moment he unleashed his brother on her. Forget the fact he hadn't wanted her to dance with Jace. Cody had known what Jace had intended to do, and he certainly didn't warn her well enough.

At least Cody didn't make her walk all the way over and endure the hawkish gaze of his older brother. Bad enough to know Knox had observed

everything from a distance. Amanda really didn't need the added humiliation of seeing his smirk up close.

Cody met her in the middle of the bar. His hand latched on to her arm as he turned her toward the door. "Ready to go?"

She didn't answer, but apparently none was needed. Amanda didn't trust what would come out of her mouth, so she kept her lips tightly pressed together as Cody escorted her out of the bar and into his truck.

The whole ride back to her place, Amanda remained silent, stewing. Her wild thoughts and unspoken accusations fueled her anger. The fiery indignation melded with the arousal infusing her blood and driving her desires to desperate levels.

Amanda managed to maintain her sanity with the silent reminder that while they were in the truck they were also technically still in public. Nobody might have been looking, but that didn't mean they couldn't be seen.

The click of her front door closing, of the lock setting into place, snapped the last remnants of her composure, and she turned on Cody. Pinning him to the door, she didn't give him a chance to object as she went to her tiptoes to slam her mouth over his.

Their kiss went wild as he returned her ravenous fever. Her hands were all over his body, trying to rid him of the clothes in her way. Her fingers fumbled with his small shirt buttons, and she'd have ripped the material out of her way if Cody hadn't taken control of the situation.

With a smooth motion, he turned her until her back pressed against the hard, uneven surface of the door. A hard male body fit itself perfectly into her front, and Amanda was helpless but to rub herself against him.

Ah, God, Cody felt good. Every ridge of cut muscles teased her as she rotated against him. She needed more, needed to feel every single one of those sensations flesh to flesh. Amanda grasped the edges of her own shirt, clawing at the material as she fought to free herself from its confines.

His hands lifted, and a second later, the sharp sound of fabric being ripped cut through the silence of the night. Her shirt ended up in rags on the floor. Barely a breath later, her bra joined the pile.

Cody didn't stop until her entire outfit was nothing more than a soft pile pooled at her ankles, leaving her sensitive skin exposed to the rough rasp of his fully clothed body.

Amanda whimpered and gasped, completely lost in the wonderful friction created by rubbing into him. The tiny sparks rippling over her skin merged into waves of pleasure flooding her body with full-sized quakes of need. Cody chased her tremors with his lips. Lifting her up, he dragged her heated skin past his roving mouth.

Holding her firmly in place, he devoted his attention to the swollen globes of her breasts. He licked, sucked, and bit one straining tip, making her scream and buck within his grasp. Cody growled, his fingers tightening on her arms as his lips shifted to her other nipple. Tormenting it with the same wicked delights, he feasted, roving from breast to breast.

Only when both breasts ached from his ravishing did Cody finally release her nipples. His attention lowered even as his hands lifted her off her feet. Amanda felt the unforgiving ridges of the door press into her back as she slid up its hard surface. She didn't need his hands directing her thighs over his shoulder. The sudden instability of her position had Amanda bracing herself against Cody's strength.

It was only the heated breath wafting over the intimate folds of her pussy that distracted her. The nerves making her stomach roll clenched with tension at the soft brush of Cody's hair against the inside of the thigh.

Oh, God, she'd never been this vulnerable or this damn excited. She was completely exposed and totally at his mercy. Amanda already knew Cody had none.

His hands trailed a slow, tantalizing path down her sides and over the curve of her hip to melt her thigh muscles. The small lure worked, and Amanda twisted with her need for more, lifting her cunt straight up into his waiting kiss.

Amanda forgot everything at the first soft brush of his lips over hers. A gentle "hello," Cody's tongue swept out to lick straight up her slit. Stealing the breath right out of her, he feasted. Her own name got lost in the whirlwind of pleasure spiraling through her body. So powerful, the rapture threatened to drive her completely insane before release came.

Then it hit. Amanda's climax broke with such force, she couldn't tell if she was flying or falling. She didn't care, either. The world spun, faded from her reality along with her own screams. The only thing remaining was a sea of pure, undiluted ecstasy.

The trip wasn't over. Amanda didn't know if she was standing or lying. No part of her body could get a message through the chaos of celebration coming from her pussy as his thick, hard cock pumped itself deep into her.

Just as she needed, Cody took her hard and fast, fucking her with an unleashed savagery that spoke volumes of his loss of control. Never had Amanda felt so powerful, desirable, and completely helpless. Her own body reverted back to its primitive instincts, bucking under his rhythm and spiraling the tempo into a frenzy.

Her second climax rode out of the still-quaking dust of Amanda's last one. It spiderwebbed through her body, igniting every cell with pleasure until she vibrated all the way to her soul with joy. Every part of her rejoiced, calling out to the lover who gave her such pleasure.

"Jace!"

* * * *

Cody collapsed on top of Amanda. Every single one of his muscles spasmed under the impact of his own release. It was difficult to breathe, much less think. Still, through the blinding haze of soul-deep satisfaction, one word echoed back at him.

Jace. That bastard.

Ah, hell. At least I got his rewards.

That amounted to something. He also had the opportunity to tease Amanda. Cody smiled. Yeah, he had the upper hand on guilt right now. After all, he just treated Amanda to a deluxe round of fucking, and she called out another man's name. Even by her warped standards, Cody should be due something. *But what?*

He had a long list of wants to choose from. First, he had to get Amanda into the bedroom and a more appropriate setting than against the front door. God's honest truth, Cody didn't have the strength to carry her there. She'd have to walk, and knowing Amanda, he bet all she wanted to do was take a nap.

He'd have to stoke some fire back into her body if they were going to get to his reparations. Cody knew just what needed to be done.

"My name is Cody."

Big, beautiful eyes opened all dazed and foggy. *"What?"*

"I'm Cody," he repeated, waiting for her to take the hint.

It didn't take long. "I know that."

"You called me Jace."

Amanda tensed. "I did not."

"Yeah," Cody nodded. "When you climaxed, you screamed out my brother's name."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Amanda wiggled, trying to get free. Since he wanted her to get her ass into the bedroom, he pulled back, letting her go.

"It's all right, you know," Cody said as he adjusted his jeans. "I can call him up, if you want. I'm sure he'd be glad to come over and—"

"Shut up," Amanda snapped, stumbling on legs he could see wobbling. "God, you are such an ass."

"Oh, come on." Cody grinned. "It could be a lot of fun taking both of us on. Just imagine what it would feel like to have two mouths and four hands touching, caressing you all over. Not to mention being filled from both sides by—"

"Don't," Amanda growled huskily, telling Cody he'd gotten to her.

"I'm just offering you a fantasy come true, or maybe you would prefer me to insist."

"That's not funny!"

"I'm not joking."

"You are such a bastard." Amanda turned and stormed off toward her bedroom, still yelling at him the whole way. "Get your ass out my door and go home until you learn to grow up."

She punctuated her command by slamming the bedroom door. Like he was really going to leave. Cody smirked. He'd gotten what he wanted out of the argument. Amanda was now wide awake and in the bedroom. Time to get his due.

Chapter 14

Sunday, June 29th

Jace stared at the chessboard in an attempt to avoid staring at Amanda. Never had he seen one so empty when the game was still on. No pieces remained but his king and knight and Amanda's king. A more mature, experienced player would have conceded defeat. Not Amanda.

For the last fifteen minutes, they pointlessly circled their pieces around the board. If something didn't snap soon, they'd be doing this for another fifteen minutes. Jace really didn't want to spend all morning trying to corner her king.

Despite his annoyance at her refusal to admit the obvious, Jace had to admit she impressed him. The first three games went faster. She was playing offensively then, and a part of him felt a strange sense of pride at how quickly she picked up the strategy.

This last game, though, she reverted to defensive. Damn if she hadn't mastered the technique to perfection. Amanda had brought the entire game to a standstill and reduced it from a competition of skills to one of wills.

Damn if I'm going to admit defeat just to bring this silliness to an end. Something had to give. Every one of Jace's nerves strained from holding back the primitive urges her presence aroused. A five minute conversation would have been no problem, but this had been a torturous three hours of drowning in her sweet, apple-scented perfume.

Jace's stomach clenched every time she sucked in her lower lip as she concentrated. Amanda's stubbornness made him hot, and all her sexy little gestures were driving him nuts. She leaned in to move her king, and the flimsy little sundress she wore caught on the edge of the table. Caught between the wood and the luscious, sweet softness of her breasts, the

material stretched and strained, threatening to reveal more than Jace's sanity could withstand.

He'd either yank her right across this table and bury his face in her bosom, or Jace could admit he'd been beaten. "Defeat."

"What?" Amanda's big eyes rounded and blinked innocently up at him.

Innocent my ass.

"What do you mean? Are you conceding defeat?"

"Hell, no." Jace regained what little sense he had left and glared at her untrustworthy sweetness. "I'm calling it for you because you're just too damn stubborn to say the word yourself."

"You can't do that." Amanda laughed. "If it's my defeat, then I have to call it."

"Fine then," Jace growled.

How long had it been since a woman made him do that? How long had it been since one eroded his common sense and made him want to hunt her down, pin her beneath him, strip her bare, and make her beg? Hell, none of them had ever made him feel this way.

"I claim victory." Jace needed to escape before he gave into the feral desires stirring to the surface.

"You haven't won."

"I have more pieces than you."

Amanda snorted. "I didn't think that was how you won at chess."

"With only your king left, you can't win." Jace relished pointing that out.

"I could take your knight and it would be a draw."

She could wish. "I don't think so."

"Well," Amanda shrugged, "I guess we'll have to continue playing so I can prove you wrong."

"The hell you will."

"What are you two arguing about?" Knox barked as he muted the TV. Rousing from the depths of the leather sofa, he turned to glare over at the gaming table.

"We're not arguing," Amanda responded, sounding too polite and reasonable for Jace's peace of mind.

"Well, I am. You lost."

"Not yet."

Cody shoved off the sofa with a shake of his empty glass. "I'm going to get some more tea. Anybody want—" Cody's words stopped, and he took note of the chess board. "Look at that board."

"Yes, look at it," Jace demanded. "All she has left is her damn king. She can't win."

"But I *cannot lose*."

"What the hell? Not lose?" Jace snorted, rolling his eyes. "I have a knight. It's only a matter of time."

"I could take your knight."

"Who says?"

"I do."

"You wish."

"Now, now, children," Cody crooned. "Calm down, it's only a game. I know. Why don't you two arm wrestle to see who wins?"

Amanda's eyes narrowed on Cody. "Now who is being the brat?"

"He was born that way," Knox stated dryly.

"Just trying to help," Cody shrugged.

"We don't need your help," Jace snapped. "Because I already won."

Like a damn pit bull with a bone, Amanda wouldn't let it go. "Not yet."

Goddamn, the woman just doesn't know when to quit. Jace lowered his head, clenching his jaw as he fought the need to take this argument to the next level. Amanda tempted Jace to lunge over the table and wrestle her to the ground, to pin all her glorious softness beneath him. He knew she'd laugh, and he could hear her laughter turn to moans as their struggle transformed into an embrace.

The image of Amanda naked and kneeling before him rose in his mind. Her breasts bouncing, her head tipped back with her hair falling gracefully down her back. He'd keep her legs parted so he could watch the folds of her pussy swell, blush, and drip with her excitement. Oh, he'd entertained this fantasy too often. Jace knew it well. Now he wanted to hear her moan and beg for him to fuck her with his own ears. He wanted to see his cock lining up with her folds, to watch as his swollen cock head rubbed her clit and teased her into conceding defeat.

Jace!

He'd make her scream his name.

“Jace!” He blinked, focusing in on Cody’s knowing look. “Man, maybe you should walk away.”

Jace jerked back from the table. Without a word, he stormed out of the den.

“Leaving the game constitutes conceding defeat. I win.” Amanda hollered after him, making it that much harder for Jace to keep on walking.

* * * *

“You really are pushing it.”

Amanda rolled her eyes at Cody’s dire tone. So she’d hurt the cowboy’s little ego. Jace would get over it. It certainly wasn’t her fault he couldn’t handle competition.

Yeah, I’m really being a brat, aren’t I? Amanda couldn’t help but feel entitled to a little peevish behavior. After a very late and very active Saturday night, she did the unthinkable and got out of bed early on a Sunday morning. Okay, so it was noon, but she hadn’t fallen asleep until Cody slipped from her bed four hours before.

She’d deprived herself of sleep, and for what? For Cody to all but ditch her with Jace so he could watch some stupid game on TV? Amanda bristled and took her annoyance out on Cody when he muttered, “I should make you go apologize.”

“Make me?” The outrageousness of his arrogance got her out of her chair. “For what?”

Never one to back down from a challenge, Cody stepped up to own his statement. “For being a smartass and a sore loser.”

“I didn’t lose.”

Cody rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Get over yourself. You lost.”

“Go apologize.” Hard and inflexible, Knox’s order held a silent threat to anybody who dared to disobey.

“Excuse me?” Talk about arrogance. Amanda stared in amazement at Knox. With his arms crossed, he acted like he had the final authority over the situation. Knox’s scowl clearly said he didn’t bear any arguments. So did his grunt.

“You heard me.”

Amanda lifted her chin and crossed her arms, imitating Knox’s stance. “I will not.”

“Jesus,” Cody muttered before turning her away from Knox with his hand on her arm. “Amanda, just do it.”

“No.”

“Why must you be the most stubborn woman in the world?” Cody groaned.

“Why do you have to be the bossiest man?”

That got her a sharp smack on the ass. She jumped and turned to gape in amazement at Knox. Her mouth worked over a series of curses, but none could make it through her shock. He actually spanked her. *And it hurt!*

Damn, her ass still throbbed. The flash of intense heat made her pussy cream instantly. Humming with awareness, Amanda couldn't help but feed her arousal with a healthy dose of nerves as she took note of Cody and Knox methodically surrounding her. Two rough, rugged cowboys blocked her in, looking at her as if she were the pig offered for the roast.

“Run,” Knox's breath stirred the loose hair around her ear, “while you still can.”

Her muscles might have headed the warning, but her mind dug in. Stubborn in the face of Knox's blatant intimidation, her brain refused to give the order to move. Instead, Amanda tossed her hair defiantly, knowing it smacked Knox in the face.

“From what?” Amanda smirked at Cody. “From two little boys with nothing better to do than pick on a woman?”

Knowing she'd stepped over the line, reason finally pressed her to move before Knox smacked her ass again. She retreated with dignity, though. Chin angled up, Amanda forced her legs to move slowly toward the door. She offered a silent prayer to her maker when Cody moved out of her way. Even though her rational side told her to keep going, her pride dictated she stop in the doorway and turn to deliver one final parting shot.

“Don't mess with me, boys, unless you are prepared to lose again.”

She focused her gaze on Knox, delivering the insult right into his steely gaze. He tensed, shifted, and Amanda didn't wait to see if he bolted before hauling ass. Instinct replaced determination, and with a squeak, she flew down the hall and out the front door.

The spontaneous cowardice shamed her all the more when the only thing that gave chase was deep, booming laughter. It wafted after her, claiming victory over her obvious defeat.

Smug bastard. Amanda knew it was Knox laughing. Straightening off the front door, she swore to give him his one day. *And just when is this supposed day going to come?*

* * * *

“You’re such an ass.” Cody shook his head at Knox.

Knox scowled at his brother’s reprimand. “What? It was funny.”

“You can only torment a puppy for so long before it bites you.”

Cody’s warning left something to be desired in the threat level. Instead of feeling the least bit concerned, Knox laughed. “You are afraid of a woman? Get a grip, Cody.”

“I’m going to enjoy watching her take you down.” Apparently, his youngest brother couldn’t find one because Cody stormed off after making another hollow threat.

Knox shrugged it off, shaking his empty beer can as he headed for the kitchen. He didn’t want Amanda around in the first place. Maybe if he was a big enough ass, she wouldn’t want to come around. The plan sounded desperate to Knox, but he didn’t have many choices left.

Hell, she was technically only involved with Cody and she already started to make trouble. It had been a long time since anybody roused Jace into a temper, but she had him as tense as a calf trapped in a corral with a coyote.

Not that Cody was much better. Amanda reduced him to acting like some green teenager about to blow a load in his jeans just because the cheerleader smiled at him. Cody reverted back to eighteen, when he couldn’t seem to get enough screwing into one day, except this time, it was just one girl.

Knox’s attention diverted from searching through the fridge for another beer to the back door when it smacked the wall. Jace stormed back in much as he had stormed out. Shaking off his momentary start, Knox grabbed the last cold beer.

“I thought you were making yourself busy.”

“I saw Amanda’s car go down the drive.” Jace nodded to the beer Knox had just opened. “I could do with one of those.”

“Sorry,” Knox shrugged, “no cold ones left.”

“That sucks.” Before Knox could react, Jace snatched the beer out of Knox’s hand. “For you. I guess you’ll have to pull some out of the pantry.”

Normally, Knox would have gone head-to-head over Jace’s attitude, but he could see the tension in his brother’s muscles. Jace was brewing from the fight he’d had to walk away from earlier. No doubt, he’d like to find a new one with Knox. Only Knox didn’t feel like being hit right then. With a nasty look in Jace’s direction, he turned toward the pantry.

“Never knew you to let a woman drive you out of your own house.” Just because he was letting the beer go didn’t mean he wasn’t going to give a little of what he’d gotten. “Much less to drink.”

“Watch it, Knox,” Jace called out to him as Knox pulled a twelve-pack from one of the shelves in the pantry. “I’d be happy to oblige you if you are looking for a fight.”

“I can tell,” Knox muttered as he carried the case back into the kitchen. “What I can’t tell is when you are going to wise up and admit this girl is trouble. Of course, you are the one who put her name on the list, so I have very little hope.”

“Don’t beat around the bush, Knox. If you got something to say, say it.”

Pretending to almost ignore the conversation, Knox focused on loading up the bottom of the fridge with beer. “You know what I’m saying. What I don’t know is when you got stuck on this girl.”

“When?”

Knox rose off his knees and shot Jace a dirty look as he folded down the empty beer box. “How’d you even know her name in the first place?”

“Probably the same way everybody else does,” Jace snorted, “or don’t you remember the summer of ninety-seven?”

Knox settled a hip against the counter and raised an indulgent eyebrow at Jace. “Should I?”

“Remember the deputy who died in the car accident, and it turned out the other driver was her drunk son?”

“Vaguely.” Jace’s words did rouse a memory of everybody talking about how horrible it all was.

“Yeah, well, go to the library and do your research, brother, because it was Amanda’s mother and brother who died.” Jace paused, obviously waiting for Knox to respond. He didn’t, not at all sure what to say. Jace just

sighed and shook his head after a moment. "I didn't think there was anybody in this town who didn't remember the story or her because of it."

Knox scowled at the reprimand in his younger brother's tone. "Well, excuse me for being more focused on my own life than gossip, but I don't remember it. I certainly don't see why that would have any effect on our list. We weren't making one about people with tragic pasts, otherwise we'd have to put this whole damn town on the list!"

Jace stood tense, defiant for a moment, but then he folded as Knox knew he would. Of his two brothers, Knox felt the closest with Jace. They were the two older brothers, responsible for corralling their younger sibling and keeping everything together.

There was always a natural division in their family between Jace and him and Cody. It had more to do than with just age. Knox understood Jace, knew how his mind worked and respected his opinion when, more often than not, Cody left him wondering if he had any sense at all.

"Fine," Jace sighed, shifting back from his older brother. He settled against the countertop, and Knox could feel something powerful moving beneath Jace's calm surface. This couldn't be good. "I remember the first night I told Sharon I loved her."

Sharon. Knox hadn't been expecting to hear her name. He couldn't fathom what she had to do with Amanda.

"I remember I told her I loved her and would love her forever," Jace repeated, his voice going soft with regret. "I told her she was the only one here." Jace thumped a fist over his heart. "I made all these vows and promises to Sharon. Then the next day I got up, went into town, and ran into Amanda."

"Amanda?" Knox should've seen it coming. "You never met her before?"

"Oh, no." Jace shook his head. "And I didn't actually meet her then. I just saw her...from a distance..."

Knox waited, but Jace's voice faded out and didn't return. "I don't get it. You saw her from afar and what?"

"I knew it then."

Knew it... What the... Oh, no!

“Don’t even imply it, Jace.” Knox shook his head as he stumbled back from the blow his brother delivered. “You are not going to tell me you...you, what? Fell in love at first sight?”

Jace turned his head. That’s all the answer Knox needed to feel the world dissolving into some fifth dimension of hell around him. Instead of answering directly, Jace just murmured to himself.

“That’s why I never talked to her.”

Knox took a deep breath and counted to three. It didn’t help. He could still barely get the words through his tense jaw. “You are not in love with Amanda Johnson.”

“I felt so guilty over the years.” Jace’s chin lifted toward Knox. He could see honest pain in his younger brother’s eyes. “I felt like I had betrayed Sharon.”

“This is insane.”

“I wanted to put her name on the list. I had it all worked out so I could be her first, but then Cody bumped Marsha North up and—”

“It threw your rotation out of order,” Knox finished for Jace, totally disgusted at his brother. “If you had tried to move her up the list, *I* would have been her first. That scared the shit out of you, didn’t it?”

Jace’s features hardened, his tone sharpening. “It didn’t give me a warm feeling, that’s for sure.”

“So you just let her sit there on the bottom.” Knox stared at Jace in amazement. Of all the stupid-ass things he ever put up with from his brother, “love at first sight” shouldn’t have been one of them. It so clearly was, and as Knox stood there, more pieces started to fall into place.

“But you ain’t crying over it, are you, Jace? This all worked out perfectly. You kept her low on the list so you could dismiss everyone before her. What? You hoping to wear Cody and me out so we’d settle for your little Amanda?”

Jace stared Knox straight in the eyes and shook his head sadly. “You really don’t like her, do you?”

Knox took a deep breath. He felt cornered and tense. “Let me ask you this, Jace. Do you really think Amanda can handle a relationship with us?”

“Why not?” Jace shrugged, an actual grin tugging on his lips. “Cody said she called my name out when he was fucking her last night. I think that says she isn’t turned off by the idea.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” Knox couldn’t believe he had to spell it out. “The woman has no self-control. Seriously, our situation requires discretion. I think with Amanda that concept ends with not belching in public.”

“What an asshole thing to say and you got no basis for it,” Jace snarled back.

“No basis? Do you remember the pool game on Friday night?” Knox didn’t give his brother a chance to respond, going full speed into his point. “Now take that woman, put her in a dress, and show up with her on your arm to Henry’s ball.”

“I’d be proud to.”

“Yeah? Proud of the fact your date started a cat fight in the middle of the party with mine? Because that’s what a relationship with us means. It means Amanda has to control her temper enough not to maim our dates when we have to show up at public functions.”

A tic appeared in Jace’s cheek. Knox knew he had his brother cornered. Not that Jace would concede defeat. “Every relationship has its issues to be worked out. Even Sharon had a problem with that at first.”

“Yeah, but the difference is Sharon wouldn’t have cut your balls off while you sleep to get revenge.”

“You saying you’re afraid of Amanda?”

“Don’t even,” Knox retorted. “What I’m afraid of is your dick has you so twisted up you don’t even see the obvious. Amanda won’t be able to adjust to our lifestyle.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Oh, this is crap!” Knox snapped. He should just tell Jace he refused to accept the girl, but he couldn’t. Knox wouldn’t hurt Jace like that, wouldn’t rip his family apart over a woman. No, he had to figure out how to diffuse the Amanda time-bomb or wake Jace out of his stupor.

Either way, Knox had no clue how to get the job done. It made him want to hit something—Jace in particular. He settled for intentionally shouldering Jace out of the way as he passed him. Slamming through the back door, Knox took his foul mood off to his wood shop.

Chapter 15

Friday, July 4th

Amanda drove her Jeep down the long drive at a very slow crawl. Trucks and cars lined nearly the whole mile, narrowing the road even as people peeked and darted out from between the vehicles. It made her nervous she'd not only take somebody out, but that this entire affair was not as advertised.

When Cody told her last night that he and his brothers were grilling out for the Fourth and he wanted her to come over, Amanda envisioned a small affair, maybe the brothers and a few friends. Not this. As she pulled into the main yard, there wasn't a spot left. There had to be over a hundred cars from the entrance of the house to the end of their drive.

A constant flow of people moved in waves around the edge of the ranch house. Smoke billowed over the shingled rim of the house, and the sounds of a live band bellowed out over the din of the mob. The edges of the party grew before her eyes and nerves set in.

Looks like the whole damn town has shown up. Cody hadn't mentioned any of this. Amanda didn't like big crowds as a general rule, but the sight of this throng made her even more anxious. She thought she'd be Cody's date, if not at least his guest. Either way, she expected to pass the day with Cody at her side and now she felt kind of...*Stupid? Unsure.*

Well, she certainly did feel insecure with her little Jeep idling in the middle of the front yard and drawing way too much notice. People looked at her as if she were a moron for having driven all the way up to the house. One particular cowboy even took it upon himself to come up and tap on her window.

"Hey, darlin', parking is in the south field."

He said it like she had a broken bulb darkening her intelligence, which irked her. Never one to make a bad situation good, Amanda went ahead and made it worse. “Thanks, but I think I’ll just park there.”

“There?” The man’s eyes widened at where she pointed. “But that’s Cody’s spot.”

Exactly.

“I’ll just block him in.” *Keep him from escaping until I have a word or two with him.*

The cowboy actually laughed at her as he shook his head. “I don’t think so, darlin’. Parking is in the south field.”

“Yeah. I heard you the first time.” And she didn’t intend on hearing him again.

Without so much as glance in his direction, Amanda jerked the Jeep forward. The arrogant cowboy cursed and jumped back before she kicked up any dirt onto him or, worse, ran over a precious toe. She heard him spewing a long strain of profanities as he raced alongside.

Apparently, so could others. As she pulled her Jeep under the shaded overhang of the carport, Amanda could feel eyes gathering on her. More than she disliked large crowds, she absolutely hated being the center of attention in them. *Perhaps you should have considered that when you refused to park in the south field.*

Oh, well. She’d done it now, and Amanda wouldn’t back down. Instead, she brought her bumper right up to kiss the back end of Cody’s oversized pickup and threw the Jeep into park. By the time she’d climbed out, the cowboy caught up with her, dragging at least thirty peoples’ attention with him.

“You’re gonna have to move this vehicle.”

“You’re gonna have to get out of my way.” She mocked him slightly by imitating his tone and stance.

“Listen here, Miss—”

“Johnson. Amanda Johnson. I was invited by Cody.”

“Cody invited a lot of women,” the man snorted, telling her just where she stood. “That don’t give you the right to...”

Did he now? And when did he have the time to invite all these women?

We’ll just have to ask him, don’t you think? And just who are all these women? And where are they? Cody better not have...

Oh, my God! I'm jealous!

"...understand? Now I'm going to have to insist you move your vehicle."

Well, shit. Missed that little lecture. Amanda scowled at the cowboy, finally noticing he wore a name tag—Johnny. "What are you? The parking police?"

"Actually, yes." And he managed to sound kind of arrogant about it. "I work here at the ranch, so I'm going to ask you nicely one more time—"

"Well, then. Just go find Cody and ask him if it's all right if I park here." Amanda cut him off with a wave, enjoying taking her annoyance out on the nearest man.

Johnny got all stiff and proper, trying to make his authority felt, no doubt. "I don't have to ask him. If he had wanted you to park here, he'd have left special instructions for you to do so."

See? Told you so.

"Well, too damn bad." Amanda didn't know if she was responding to herself or to the cowboy. Either way, she went with it. "If he has a problem with me parking here, he'll just have to get over it."

"Please, ma'am. Let's keep the day happy."

Too late for that.

"I'm trying, but you're still in my way." Amada tried to get around him, recognizing a good exit line. Johnny, though, didn't agree, apparently. He brought her to a stop with a firm grip on her arm.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Leave?" Amanda raised a brow at him before glancing at his hold on her.

"I have my orders."

"None of the Reese brothers would order you to tell me to leave. Go find one and ask him." Amanda jerked on her arm. "Now let me go before I have your ass thrown in jail for harassment."

He didn't respond but tilted his head and yelled at one of the other cowboys who gathered around. Amanda failed to take note of them until that moment. Five lanky and rough-looking men encircled her vehicle, staying a ways back but obviously more members of the parking police.

"Hank, why don't you go get Knox for me?"

Knox. Great. Now he would tell me to leave.

She'd dug this hole, though, and certainly couldn't object now. She could wrench her arm free of the jackass holding her still. She couldn't help but notice the amount of attention she'd drawn to herself. All that noticing did was make the minutes tick by like hours before a deep voice behind her killed all her worries over the crowd.

"I should have known it was you."

Those grim words had her turning, her eyes shifting all the way up into the serious features of Knox Reese.

Oh, boy. He looks pissed.

"It's all right, Johnny. I'll handle her."

He'll handle me?

Amanda didn't think so, and she would have told Knox so if he hadn't latched on to her arm and started dragging her deeper into the shadowed overhang of the carport. She cursed at him, even kicked him, but Knox didn't even look in her direction. Around a wall and into a stall filled with equipment, he backed her right into a corner until all of her world was dominated by the sight of the simmering tension in his eyes.

Chills warmed to shivers as they raced down her spine to shatter into sparkling awareness across her ass. The little droplets of pleasure dripped down to pool into a growing shimmer filling her pussy. Oh, she remembered just how he'd taken care of her the last time he wore that expression.

Brazen, bold, action-oriented...dangerous. He spanked her once. Amanda had a feeling whatever punishment he meted out today would be an even greater sinful pleasure.

"Why are you causing trouble?"

Despite the desire making her want to melt, Knox's question made her bristle. "I didn't mean to cause trouble. If that guy had just let me park—"

"Why couldn't you just park in the south field?"

Knox spoke right over her, making her really itch to hit him. Instead, Amanda just growled. "Why can't I park where I did?"

"The carport is reserved for family."

"And I'm dating Cody," Amanda retorted promptly.

"You mean you're fucking him," Knox corrected with such bluntness, Amanda stiffened right up. He didn't seem to care if she felt any insult. Knox just kept on being an outright bastard.

“You think that makes you special?” Knox leaned in, closing the inch-wide gap that separated them. “Do you know how many women my brother has fucked?”

Knox wanted to hurt her. Amanda just didn’t understand why. She didn’t need to. He wanted a war, and she’d wage one. Arching into the hard wall of muscles he tried to use to intimidate her, Amanda rubbed. One long, smooth caress that let him feel every single one of her curves and her feel the long, thick length of his erection.

From under lowered lashes she smiled up at him and purred, “One more than you.”

His eyes flared, narrowing back as a growl of pure aggression rumbled out of his chest. That was all the warning she got before his head dipped and his lips took hers hostage. His kiss broke over her with the sudden onslaught of a spring thunderstorm.

There was no grace, no politeness to Knox’s kiss. It was an invasion with his lips prying hers open to give his conquering tongue bold access as it stroked into her mouth. Deeper, harder, he plundered her softness until Amanda arched against him again, grinding into him in the mindless rhythm of passion.

Overwhelmed by the whirl of frenzied lust, Amanda sought strength in Knox. Twining her arms around his neck, she lifted herself up into his embrace. Muttering something unintelligible against her lips, he reached down to lift her hips straight up, forcing her legs around him and her pelvis to grind into his.

The hardened ridge of his erection pressed through its denim prison and into the thin barrier of her panties to divide the folds of her pussy and expose her sensitive little bundle of nerves to the rough, rugged caresses of his flexing hips. Cataclysmic pleasure shot through her in bolts with each grinding pass of his cock.

Amanda gasped, breathing in Knox’s breath as he sealed their lips to once again claim victory over her mouth. With each stroke, he drove her further into a mindless frenzy until she clawed at his shoulders and took control.

Ravishing his mouth as he had hers, Amanda’s hips began to pump and grind in an escalating pace as she chased after the pleasure clustering into mini-balls of rapture. They bubbled up, popping all along her spine. With a

groan, she arched in primitive demand into the hard male body pressed against her.

What she wanted wouldn't come from playful petting. She needed Knox, needed to feel him deep and thick inside her. Driven by a mindless ache, she shoved her hand between them, trying to force it beneath the tight band of his jeans. Between the oversized cock stretching Knox's jeans taut and the thick leather belt, there was no give left to make room for Amanda's fingers. He hissed, his stomach sucking in as she scratched him in her attempt to breach the barrier of his clothing.

With a muttered curse, Knox moved. They stumbled backward. A hard edge caught her under the ass and bit into her skin. She didn't care about the small pain. The table took her weight and freed Knox's hands. They weren't gentle as they clamped around her knees. In a scraping, rough caress of calluses over the sensitive inner skin of her thighs, he forced her legs wide.

Amanda jerked her head back, dragging in the hot, stale summer air as it ripped with the sound of her panties being torn from her body. The air felt cool against the overheated folds of her cunt and then went molten hot as Knox boldly cupped her mound.

Knox growled again as he invaded her softness with bold intent. Her eyes rounded at the feel of first one, then two, then three thick fingers pushing themselves deep into her sheath.

So good...so damn good. His palm settled over her clit, and with every honeyed stroke into her body, he circled her joyous little bud. The slow, even rhythm lured her into its steady beat, and her head fell back as her hips arched upward, matching his fucking fingers thrust for thrust.

All the while, some part of her knew Knox watched. Knew it was him and not Cody. That evil little side of her nature thrilled at the erotic nature of this forbidden act. She was fucking her boyfriend's brother, and it was so good Amanda moaned.

So damn good, but she wanted more. Her breasts ached with need, demanding attention she didn't have the mind left to ask for. Instead, her own hands lifted to soothe the painful tightness in her chest. Cupping her breasts, she massaged them, twisting and arching as each pass of her palms over her nipples vibrated through her body on the sharp-edged waves of rapture's early light.

Reduced to a thing of wanton need, she let the pleasure dictate her actions. Rolling, rubbing, she let reality slip away as the erotic rhythm of the moment took control. She didn't even object when a larger, stronger hand settled over hers to dictate the motions of her hand.

Amanda's eyes tried to focus, but all they could see were those two brilliant blue eyes. Intent and frantic with navy curls of lust, those eyes captured her, and she watched as they loomed ever larger.

Then they dipped and the air trapped in her throat in a burning lockdown as his soft, warm mouth settled into the neckline of her sundress. Abandoning its post, her other hand came to twine into the soft tresses of his hair and guide his motions around the collar of her dress and over the heated rise of her breasts.

She felt the rasp of her strap as it slid down her shoulder. The right side of her dress drooped down to leave the naked tips of her tits vulnerable to the assault of his lips, his teeth, and that tongue. It twirled over her nipple before sucking it deep into the heavenly velvet of his mouth.

Amanda cried out as the whirlwind of desire congealed into a single tornado of lust. Driven by the beat of his mouth and fingers, her whole body began to oscillate and writhe under the violent lash of pleasure.

Oh, God, she was going to come. Amanda bit down on her bottom lip, trying to hold back the screams as her whole body went stiff under the edge of orgasm's horizon. Everything in her world stilled, coming to a complete stop in that second as Knox jerked back and left her clinging to only a whimper of a release.

She gazed at him blindly, uncomprehending at the sudden turn in events. He still held her pussy, his fingers buried so deeply inside her, he thumped into her G-spot with a rhythm too slow to give her release and too fast to let her regain her senses.

"I can have you whenever I want."

With those darkly growled words, Knox claimed victory over her and then released her, leaving her a panting mess spread out before him. Slowly, the heat of her own desires faded as the warmth of the day brought back the reality of the world around her. The musky odor of smoke mingled with the high-pitched hum of so many people talking. They were surrounded by half the town. Her shame hidden by nothing more than a warped, worn wood wall.

None of it would have mattered if Knox didn't stop, but he did. Now the harsh realization of just what this moment had actually been all about settled in her heart like a cold, lead stone.

He'd played her. Perfectly.

"You son of a bitch."

* * * *

Knox didn't respond, though he would have added dumb in front of what she said, because that's just what he was, a dumb son of a bitch. What the hell had he been thinking to touch her? Amanda Johnson was trouble.

Trouble. He needed to get the word tattooed on her forehead because no matter how often he reminded himself, it obviously wasn't enough. Like a dumb son of a bitch, he rushed right into the flames to get burned again.

Burned...shit. His balls were three shades past blue already. Knox needed release. There was a party full of women in his backyard, and he could have his pick. Knox thought about it right as he stormed into the house and headed for his bedroom.

No other pussy would take the steel out of his dick. It had seen the prey, and she was weak, soft, and so damn wet, there would be no resistance to his pillaging. Amanda's pink little cunt all flushed, glistening with cream, open and waiting to be penetrated...there would be no substitute his cock would accept.

One day, he would strip Amanda naked and fuck her every way he knew how. It would take hours, maybe days, but he'd bind her up in so many layers of pleasure she would break. Then she would be his, completely and totally at his mercy and under his authority.

Knox smiled at the very idea.

Chapter 16

Amanda watched Knox walk away as icicles formed, long and sharp, through her stomach. She 'd massively underestimated Knox. Not only her attraction for him but his willing ruthlessness to do whatever it took to make his point. The son of a bitch didn't even give her a warning. Sure, she'd taunted him, but he hadn't given her so much as a chance to take it back before he'd launched a full-on assault.

Definitely doesn't play the games Cody does.

He's already mastered them.

Cody.

Amanda's head dipped under the weight of the shame bearing down on her. She just almost screwed his brother, and what kind of woman did that make her? Not a good one. Not an honest one. *Tramp.*

Amanda groaned and rubbed her palms into her eyes. There was no getting around it. She screwed up royally. Even if she argued Knox forced the moment, she certainly didn't put up any resistance. No, she'd been all too eager to spread her legs for the older brother of her current lover.

Confessing all to Cody probably wouldn't make her feel any better, but it was the only way she knew how to get back to right. Hell, maybe he wouldn't care. He certainly hadn't shown any jealousy over his brothers yet.

This was different. This wasn't a little rub and tease on the dance floor, nor was it some spoken fantasy to add little zest to the moment. This had been real. What Knox had done, her response to him...it meant something, and if Cody could just let that go then she probably didn't mean anything to him.

Amanda didn't want to ponder the question of Cody's feelings, or even Knox's. It would mean she cared about both men. Instead of worrying about men, Amanda worried about her state of dress. Busying herself with the

shameful task of righting her clothes, Amanda swore she'd never let Knox get near her again.

In the shadowed darkness of the little storage nook, she hesitated. Amanda knew she'd look like she'd been doing what she'd done when she stepped out into the bright light of day. There was no hope for it but to pray nobody would be around to notice. Edging around the wood wall, she ventured back into the world of people. They milled about in small groups, moseying in the same direction across the yard as they headed to join the party out back. Almost nobody took notice of her lingering under the metal roof of the carport.

Almost nobody, but there were a few somebodies who were obviously very attentive over the past few minutes. Johnny and the rest of Knox's hired goons collected into a group along the open gate of the front yard. They all took turns glancing toward the carport, and she imagined they'd been keeping vigil since Knox dragged her off.

From the snickers and the way their lips moved, Amanda didn't doubt enough people knew what just happened for the rest of the town to find out in short order. That included Cody. She didn't want him to find out that way.

No more than I want Knox to tell him the story. Fighting the urge to flee, she stiffened her spine and raised her chin at the gossiping ranch hands. Let them talk. She didn't give a shit what they said or thought. Right now, all she had to do was find Cody and tell him the truth.

Then can I run?

Then I'll even let you hide under the blankets for the next week.

* * * *

They really had invited the whole town. Amanda looked around the packed yard with a sense of intimidation. She lost her bearings in the two hundred plus crowd of people. It was noisy and confusing. Sounds came at her from every angle, and eyes watched her from all sides.

All eyes but Cody's. Amanda had been surfing through this sea for over an hour. The crowds parted before her like butter being sliced with a hot knife. Maybe it was paranoia, but she could swear she heard clips of words already spreading the rumors about her arrival. Knox hadn't helped.

Unfortunately, she managed to find him. Even over the hundred feet separating them, when her gaze collided with his, Amanda felt the heat. Knox sat like a king on his throne at the top of the hill. Overlooking the party, he already had his favors tucked in on either side of him—both blonde and looking like they arrived for a wet T-shirt competition.

For some sick reason, the sight hurt. Amanda fled to the distant part of the party. She had to wander far to find a place far enough. As she passed through the swelling crowds, Amanda couldn't help but notice the number of women.

They easily doubled the number of men. To make sure the women stayed, they were entertained from all angles, from the stage and live band to the shows going on in the corral, and the brothers had even set up some carnival-like games off in another direction. The festivities rounded out with free-flowing alcohol and endless grill stations filling the field with tempting scents.

Obviously the brothers took their parties seriously. No expense had been spared. Amanda even heard there was going to be a big fireworks display at night. It was no wonder she couldn't find Cody. Maybe he didn't want to be found. Even in a crowd this size, she should have found some trace of him, unless, of course, he was off in some dark corner.

Doing what you were doing with Knox?

Shut up.

Jealous?

Absolutely not. It's just rude to invite me out here and leave me to mercy of his brothers.

Is that what you're going to tell him? It's all his fault you almost screwed his brother?

We're just friends! I'm allowed to...

Screw his brother?

Shut up!

Let's just say that's true. If it's no big deal, then why are you suffering this mayhem to find Cody and confess all?

Because she wanted to know. Cody had laid down enough hints over the past two weeks to make her think he wouldn't care if she screwed Knox. Hell, sometimes he implied he might order her to do just that. Amanda

needed to know the truth now. Was this all some kind of joke shared amongst brothers?

Knox didn't like her, but he seemed willing to fuck her. Amanda considered that normal male behavior, but maybe his intentions were darker. Maybe that's why men like the Reese brothers had lowered themselves to get involved with a normal girl. Maybe they had perversions they only felt safe in indulging with women who didn't matter—women like her. Because how could they care about a woman and share her?

How could they share? Hell, Amanda didn't understand any of this. If she found Cody and he got mad, then she'd know the brothers were normal. They wouldn't want anything to do with her, but they'd be normal. So maybe Amanda didn't want them to be normal.

God, I miss Will. That thought surfaced through all the confusion to wipe out the reserves of energy she'd been running on. Amanda didn't belong here. She really didn't know what she was doing with Cody Reese. Even if he offered her a normal life, it wouldn't work out. It couldn't work out because she didn't deserve family.

Knox thought she was trouble, and he had it absolutely right. If the man really knew what she'd done to her own family, he'd probably take out a restraining order to keep him away from his brothers. Well, he wouldn't have to. Amanda would be gracious and leave, right after she made her confession to Cody. That alone should be enough to prove she didn't belong here.

Defeated and alone, she let the crowd expel her, work around her until she slowly ended up at the edge, finally free from notice. Amanda lifted her head and looked around. She'd only been to the ranch once, last weekend, and then only into the house. Other than stepping out on the back porch for Cody to point out all the barns, silos, corrals and pastures, she'd gotten no other tour of the property.

Now she found herself at an angle with the barns way across the field and the house on the opposite stretch. At the base of the tree-lined slope, Amanda could see way out into the pasture as it seamlessly stretched out for miles, but it was what was tucked into the other side of the hill that drew her attention.

Protected from the ranch by a thin barrier of trees and tucked into the protective overhang of the hill lay a Garden of Eden. Surrounded by the

stretch of chain links, the garden grew lush and full. It stretched out so far it had room in the center to hold a towering greenhouse.

The lush foliage and the sweet scents emanating out of the garden beckoned her forward until her hands curved around the edges of the sign hanging from the gate. *No entrance allowed.*

Feeling much like Mary in the secret garden, she entered not a ruin but the mythical embrace of life all around her. In awe at the variety and health of so many strange-looking plants, she moved slowly through the raised beds, touching and admiring the beautiful blossoms of flowers and the strange veins of the thick shrubbery.

Somebody obviously loves this garden.

Amanda ran right into somebody as she rounded a corner. Her eyes watered as pain shot up her nose when it mashed into hard, warm muscle. Stumbling backward, she felt her feet tilt. She'd have landed on her ass if a set of strong hands hadn't gripped her arms and pulled her back upright.

"Amanda?" Jace's tone sounded as shocked as she felt. "What are you doing here?"

* * * *

Jace stared at the woman before him, unable to comprehend she was really there. He escaped into his garden nearly at the break of day. His brothers no doubt thought he fled the party they'd been planning all week due to his normal objection to oversized gatherings. Normally, they'd have been right.

This morning, though, Jace fled from more than just the mayhem consuming the ranch. He was fleeing the nightmares that butchered his sleep into sparse chunks. With very little sleep and feeling tense, Jace wasn't in the mood for a party. Actually, the last thing he needed was to be staring down into Amanda's beautiful face.

All day Jace labored in the garden. Barely drinking and sparing no time for food, he punished himself beneath the sweltering sun. Starving, dehydrated, completely worn down, Jace couldn't help but wonder if his mind somehow manifested the very person who drove him to such insanity.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude. I just...couldn't help myself once I saw this." She gestured around to the garden. "It's quite impressive. Is it yours?"

"Yeah," he answered slowly, slightly defensive.

Jace couldn't help it. He dreamt of this woman, but such beautiful dreams always faded to the haunting horror of how deeply he had betrayed Sharon. He could hear Sharon's tears through the darkness, murmuring with the whisper of the leaves in this garden, the garden where Jace went down on one knee and swore to Sharon to love only her.

If those dreams had only happened after she died, then maybe he wouldn't hate himself so much for having them. They hadn't. They came to him while he slept with Sharon in his arms. They lingered during the morning while he sat beside her at the breakfast table. They haunted his days, his nights, his years, and now, finally, here Amanda stood—the other woman. The one Jace had been denied.

"It's very lovely."

He could sense her distress. It weighed on him. Jace didn't need to hear the words to know something bothered Amanda today. He could feel it in his very own soul. She'd been hurt, weakened. Jace bet the answer began with a K and ended with his asshole of an older brother.

"I mean it, Jace." Amanda repeated herself, looking so very earnest. "I'd have never thought you could garden so well."

"I got a degree." He finally managed a response.

Jace guessed it didn't matter what he said. Amanda relaxed slightly at the first sound of his voice. "A degree?"

"A botany degree. Graduated with honors." He released his hold on her, turning as he muttered. "Knox didn't go to college, I got my botany degree, and I assume you know Cody got a degree in history."

"Actually, I didn't know."

Amanda said it softly, almost like she'd just been defeated by something. He sure wasn't helping the situation. Jace took a deep breath and told himself to get over it. It wasn't Amanda's fault he couldn't get her out of his head. She certainly didn't try to make him betray Sharon.

That was all him.

"So," Jace straightened up and forced himself to relax, "my humble garden pulled you away from all the excitement of the party?"

"I guess I just needed a break." Amanda's nose wrinkled slightly. "It's awfully loud and crowded."

For some strange reason, it comforted Jace to know Amanda shared his views on parties. Still, it didn't explain how she ended up here in his garden. "I'm surprised Cody didn't take you up to the main house."

There. It happened. The light in her eyes dimmed.

"I haven't found him yet." Amanda offered him a slight smile. "I've been looking for him for over an hour now. You wouldn't happen to have any suggestions?"

"Sorry. I've been here all day. All I can tell you is he isn't here." Jace shrugged, trying to brush her concern off as nothing. Truth was he believed it was nothing. Amanda may worry about the why, but Jace knew Cody well enough to know the answer wasn't another woman.

Amanda would just have to learn. Right now, she was at the sighing and looking lost stage. "Oh, well. That's sort of the story of the day."

"Not a good day, huh?" Jace could see the answer on her face, so he didn't bother waiting to hear it from her lips. "So, you want to tell me what Knox did to rattle you so bad?"

Amanda froze, telling Jace his lightly teasing tone hadn't helped make the question go down easy. The flash of humiliation and fear in her eyes told Jace Knox had really stepped over the line. He should have figured. Amanda wasn't acting like her normal fearless, mouthy self.

"You heard about it already?" She looked like she didn't have enough hope left to wish for a no.

"Heard what?" Jace retorted. "I haven't heard anything. Like I said, I've been here since the sun came up."

"Oh." Amanda chewed her lower lip in a gesture Jace found endearingly vulnerable. "So, how did you—?"

"It was a guess and not a hard one to make. Want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Absolutely."

Jace smiled, accepting her answer. Amanda didn't need the absolution of a confession. She needed the distraction of a very large garden. "Well, then how about a tour?"

"A what? Of the garden?"

“I prefer agricultural experiment.” Jace looped an arm over her shoulders and turned her down the aisle. “Sounds more manly, doesn’t it?”

Chapter 17

Amanda didn't know how Jace did it, but somehow he magically managed to suspend the whole world and make it stop just for her. Perhaps there were more secrets to his garden than just its hidden location. Or maybe it was the man himself and the silly, contented way he made her feel just by being near.

She didn't know and honestly didn't care. His tour took the whole afternoon. Filled with laughter and stories, with the simple peace of being with somebody who just fit, it had been a wonderful day. Like a fairy tale, it even ended with them snuggling up to each other under the cool shade of a fruit tree.

The lower branches drooped under the weight of ripe apples. Jace picked one before settling down along her side. A true boy scout at heart, he had a pocket knife at the ready to carve up the plump apple. Amanda watched his hands, so big and strong, work with controlled precision to cut a perfect wedge. Spearing it with his knife, he offered her the bite from the tip of his knife.

Amanda didn't hesitate to eat directly from the blade. The cool edge pulled free without even a whisper of a nick. The slightly sweet, crunchy treat filled her with more than contentment. This was it, one of those moments in life when every sense in her body felt relaxed and at peace. Too many times in life Amanda wished she could freeze time and live suspended only within the moment.

No amount of wishing could stop the sun from dipping lower and lower on the horizon. As if to mock Amanda, it waved farewell to the day in a vibrant fan of deep reds, succulent oranges, and sizzling yellows. The good-bye was only made more obnoxious by its beauty, so striking it polished off Amanda's moment perfectly.

"The fireworks will be starting soon," Jace commented. His slow drawl thickened the sweet tension around her, and Amanda sighed.

"You guys really go all out when you throw a party, huh?"

"It was Knox's idea."

"This make-out fest was his idea?"

"Make-out fest?" Jace chuckled. "It's a Fourth of July party."

Amanda rolled her eyes. "It's a hook-up party. Don't think I didn't notice how the women outnumbered the men."

"Can't help if the invitation list was written by men."

"Oh? Men, is it? And did you invite any pretty little thing for yourself?"

Amanda meant it as a joke, but even as the words moved through her, her throat tightened down with anger at the very idea.

"Nah," Jace drawled, "I let Cody invite her for me."

Amanda couldn't stop a laugh from escaping. He said just what she wanted to hear, but then Jace had already proven how good he was at that.

"Well, I guess I know where Cody is now. You two swapped dates, huh?"

"Actually, we prefer to share."

The dark promise in Jace's soft statement dried up her laughter. It happened. They came full circle back to the problem that drove her into the lush depths of Jace's exotic agricultural experiment. Was it all a joke?

And if it is, Mr. Wonderful here is actually the biggest asshole I've ever met.

Amanda didn't want to learn this moment, the whole day, had been nothing more than elaborate fabrication. Not with Jace. With Cody, though, she could give him both barrels of her temper and leave him to a slow death in the middle of the road, but Jace was her sweetheart.

"It really is a big party." Amanda turned her gaze up to the sky, intentionally ignoring Jace's comments. "It will be the talk of the town for weeks."

"Yeah." She felt Jace's attention shift back to the apple and felt the slight hurt in his withdrawal. "I guess Knox wanted to make a statement. It's the first party we've had since..."

Sharon. The answer popped into her head, leaving a sick, heavy feeling in her stomach. Cody's Sharon. It had been three years, and as Amanda

taxed her memory, no old rumor surfaced of any of the Reese brothers being involved with anybody since her death.

Cody's Sharon...Jace's Sharon? Knox? Her heart leapt over the rising moon at the very idea. It was insane and completely ridiculous to even think. There was no way three brothers shared one woman. *Well, maybe for a night, but a fiancée?*

No. She had to be stuck in a nightmare, deluded into believing she was awake by the realistic details of the dream, because this could not be real. Yet, it somehow fit. Amanda didn't deserve the fantasy, but the darkness was where she'd lived most of her life. Even if she managed to smile and perform through most days, none of it ever stopped the sadness, the loneliness from filling her nights.

"It's just been a long time since we enjoyed ourselves."

Jace shrugged beside her, seeming completely unaware of her mental breakdown. He'd been perfectly in tune with her all day, but now, suddenly, the bond snapped. He was too perfect. Too perfect for her, at least.

Of course, there was Knox. He was probably just what she deserved. For as close as she felt to Jace all day, the sensation paled in comparison to what she felt when she looked at Knox. He saw her, the real her.

"Besides, Knox doesn't know how to do anything with subtlety. You should see this place at Christmas."

This whole day was just some cruel and twisted backlash fate had planned for all the wicked things she let Cody do to her over the past weeks. All his teasing and joking wormed its way into some deep part of her head and concocted this entire fantasy that it meant something more. What a stupid thing to think—that she could take a bit of the forbidden fruit and still live in the Garden of Eden.

"It's all right, Amanda." A piece of apple waved in front of her vision. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Her head jerked up to meet Jace's gaze. The light blue shards in his eyes glimmered in the light of the pale moon. He knew, knew about the panic seizing her heart. She watched the tips of his lips lift in a gentle smile that warmed through her soul and stilled the wildness beating through her.

"It's gonna be all right, Amanda." Soft and rough, his palm curled around her chin, lifting her closer and closer to the murmurs falling from those lips. "I promise you, it's gonna be better than all right."

The words whispered against her lips in a teasing caress as everything inside Amanda stilled in anticipation for the next second when, finally, he brushed his mouth against hers. Within the stillness, she could feel a bolt of uncontrolled panic strike right through her. Even as the words sped past her throat, it tried to tighten down and choke them out.

“I almost fucked Knox under the carport.”

Boom!

The sky exploded into a magnificent shower of lights. Twinkling with a vibrancy that outshone the stars, the little droplets scattered and dripped downward in colorful symmetry. Amanda leapt up with the impact, stumbling backwards in horror at her own revelation.

Jace shot to his feet. With the clap of another firework, the world lit up bright enough for her to see the anger etching into lines of fury on his face. The dream spiraled out of control into a nightmare. The path to her descent into total humiliation was her own irrational behavior.

Nothing left to do but flee.

Her feet stumbled over the turn and the first few steps. Quickly, they found the rapid beat of retreat only to come to a tumbling stop, pitching her forward into Cody’s shadowed silhouette. He stepped out into the aisle, appearing suddenly not five feet from where she’d been cuddling with Jace.

He heard. The truth showed itself on Cody’s harsh features as another thunderclap rolled through the sky, lighting it up almost as bright as day. The panic in her seized, solidifying into true fear as she felt Cody’s eyes focus over her shoulder on Jace. That look told it all. He was joking. Cody didn’t share. Now there would be repercussions for this whole twisted day.

Amanda didn’t have the voice to say anything, let alone struggle, when Cody latched on to her. Without a word to Jace or her, he dragged her off into the night.

* * * *

Cody looked high and low for Amanda all day. *All damn day!*

Yeah, he ’d heard about the rumors of a skirmish up at the main house. Something about Amanda Johnson making a scene and Knox having to deal with her. He wasted a lot of time finding Knox just to get the jackass treatment from his older brother.

Knox might have been tightlipped when Cody caught up to him, but the ranch hands weren't. Cody got enough pieces to figure Knox either molested or mauled Amanda under the carport.

Either way, Knox's brutish behavior meant little in comparison to Amanda and Jace's snuggle fest. Cody had seen it. Standing there as the sun had set, it was obvious to him what happened.

Somehow Amanda found her way into Jace's secret world. It was Jace's magical world where he mesmerized women, seducing them not out of their clothes but into lowering their defenses. His brother charmed women into falling at his feet with such ease it made Cody sick.

Cody was the stupid bastard who put in two weeks' worth of work to get Amanda just to relax around him. Then came Jace, and in one afternoon, he had Amanda curled up at his side like a contented lover. Cody had seen the look Amanda gave Jace. She stared up his older brother like a woman in love. Entranced, Jace lured her slowly into something deeper, more intimate than sex.

It lit Cody up like nothing else could. The feral aggression blinding him from rational thought needed a physical outlet. Despite laying all the blame on his older brother, Cody intended to take his retribution out on Amanda.

This is all her fault, anyway. She did this to him. Every night she gave him everything he asked of her body but never anything he wanted from her heart. It hurt him more than he cared to recognize, making him feel an insecurity he would never admit to. Instead of dealing with either emotion, Cody went for the easy out and just let his anger and lust take control.

Pushing through the door to the old barn, he felt a certain peevish justice in dragging Amanda into Knox's domain. He was about to dirty big brother's workshop up with some wicked sex. Set away from all the new structures, it lingered behind the party. They'd draw no notice from the crowd or anybody else. Way out here, he could do a lot more than fuck. Cody had the time and the silence to dominate and brand Amanda in such a way that when he'd finished riding her tonight, he'd leave a permanent mark on her soul.

Spinning her away from him, Cody clicked on the shop lights Knox had strung up through the barn. He wanted to see this.

* * * *

Amanda stumbled away from Cody, unsure and more than a little nervous about the direction things had taken. The barn glowed with an eerie dimness, revealing the ominous mix of tools around her. They cast harsh, menacing shadows across the wooden slat walls.

The smells of dirt, wood, leather, metal, sweat, and the dangerous combination of male musk thickened around her as the very large and obviously pissed man in front of her advanced. She knew that look, knew the very nature of the wicked thoughts driving Cody forward. Despite all reason and fear, her body responded to Cody's look like a dog trained to a dinner bell.

"Don't you think we should talk about this, Cody?"

"Talk about what?" He blinked in fake confusion, prowling forward. Amanda didn't trust him, retreating for every step he advanced.

The underlying hardness to Cody's tone warned her that he knew about her earlier misadventure with Knox. "I really honestly didn't mean to hurt you, Cody. I didn't mean for anything to happen. It's just Knox's kiss..."

Amanda cut off her words, recognizing a bad direction when she heard it. From the way his jaw tensed, Amanda figured she said enough. She expected Cody's anger, just not where he directed it.

"Knox? You think I care about that?" Cody snorted, reverting back to growling. "I'm talking about Jace."

"Jace?" Amanda blinked, her mouth doing that speaking before thinking thing. "Why? I just kissed—"

Cody's head shaking cut off her words, and she shied back from the waves of anger Amanda could feel vibrating off him. The restless energy had his feet shuffling as Cody started to pace while he bit out his accusation.

"You know I spent the last two weeks trying to get you to lighten up enough just to tell me what your favorite color is and then in one afternoon you're all cuddly with Jace?"

Amanda tried to track Cody's complaint. He wasn't mad she almost fucked his oldest brother. No, Cody was upset she talked with Jace. All the confusion over just what kind of mess she'd sunk into with the Reese brothers just got more convoluted.

"So," Cody turned around to pin her with his gaze, "you wanna tell me what that's about?"

She might not have understood much of the deeper meanings, but Amanda could answer that question. “You never told me you went to college.”

That threw Cody for a moment, and his features lightened into a scowl. “What?”

“You never explained how Knox took after you on Christmas morning and crashed into the tree. You got cut above your eye, and that’s where that little scar comes from.”

Cody’s confusion narrowed into annoyance. “I’m not interested in hearing about my past, Amanda. I want to know what it is about Jace that had you going all soft today.”

Amanda shook her head. Cody really did need to have the obvious spelled out for him. “You’re mad at me for not relaxing around you, but you’re like Fort Knox when I’m around. Why should I tell you anything about me when you don’t want to share yourself?”

He didn’t like her answer. In fact, it appeared to make Cody harden all the more. Amanda had to swallow down her nervous as he closed in on her. This time she held her ground.

“You know what this place is?”

The question caught her off guard, and Amanda hesitated to answer, unsure of where it would lead. “No.”

“This is Knox’s special place.” Cody smiled, not the least bit assuring of a gesture. “It’s his workshop...and his play room. He works on special projects out here. In fact, Knox has quite an interesting array of toys in that cupboard. Wanna see?”

“No.” God, but yes. “I don’t think you should be playing with your brother’s toys.”

“Why not?” Cody’s head tilted in confusion. “Knox played with my date, didn’t he?”

All righteous thoughts of confessing fled under the dark intent shining in his shadowed gaze. Panic and excuses erupted into mayhem. “It isn’t what you think.”

“It isn’t?” Cody cocked his head. “So you didn’t tell Jace you almost fucked Knox?”

Amanda’s mouth worked over words that simply didn’t materialize.

“Exactly.” Cody’s lips lifted slightly. “Tell me, Amanda, was he any good?”

“No.” The response came instantly. Not to Cody’s question, but to the mere fact he had asked it.

“No? Well, it will certainly be fun to enlighten Knox on your opinion. Just what do you think his response will be?”

Amanda shivered just to imagine. “I...I...”

“You?” Cody raised an inquisitive brow.

“I should go.” She said it, but Amanda didn’t make a move to do it. Too afraid to get within grabbing range, Amanda found herself cornered with Cody between her and the door. The door was way, way over there now.

“Are you going to run, my pet?”

The dark purr was like a stroke against her most sensitive body parts. Beneath her dress, Amanda felt her body come to life. Her pulse started to race, her breasts swelled, and deep down her pussy pulsed, weeping with the need his damn tone inspired in her. It was happening again. Cody was mesmerizing her, casting her in a web of need Amanda had no choice but to obey.

“You know how I like it when you run.”

Oh, God, she liked him like this. It didn’t matter there were people out there. People who could wander in here. As much as the idea horrified her, it also excited her. Her mind conjured up images of what it would be like to be watched, for surely once Cody started on her, he wouldn’t stop, no matter who walked in. The very thought had her leaking desire down the insides of her thighs.

“Run.”

Chapter 18

Amanda did just that. Knowing it was futile. Knowing it would only heighten his aggression. Knowing she didn't want to escape. Amanda ran because Cody commanded. Obeying only fueled the fire in her blood, guaranteeing she'd come harder later.

She didn't make it past the rim of light before Cody tackled her. They rolled as he took her to the ground, fighting for position and fueling their desires. She loved this, loved giving into the wildness, loved how it only fired the savage beast lurking within him to life.

Amanda might not deserve the fantasy of happily ever after, but she earned her right to indulge in any of her darker passions. Giving over to them, she fought to keep Cody from stripping her naked and forcing her into position. As her struggles proved futile, her desire escalated to nearly climactic heights. This was foreplay Cody-style, and he managed to addict her to it.

Through ears pounding with the beat of her own racing blood, she heard the rip of fabric, felt the air against her bare skin, and knew she was losing the battle. She always lost, and only by losing could she truly win.

Despite her hurled curses and flailing limbs, Cody stripped her bare with a speed and precision that spoke of how determined he was to get his way. To get exactly what he wanted and to give her exactly what she needed.

Dirt and bits of straw scraped over her skin as he flipped her onto her stomach, his strong hands forcing her into the very position she expected. This was his favorite position, putting her on her knees, bowed before him and open to his pleasure. A calloused hand bit into her thighs, spreading them before his fingers slid up to take bold possession of wet flesh.

"So hot," he growled, forcing a moan from her as he pushed into her clenching sheath. "So damn tight and wet. Tell me you don't want me to fuck you."

Amanda didn't have it left in her to fight, didn't even have the strength for words. Her head hit the ground as her arms caved under her.

"Tell me!"

She couldn't. She showed him, arching her back and thrusting back on the fingers filling her, but not nearly enough. The motion drew a husky, arrogant laugh from the man behind her.

"I'm going to fuck this little cunt raw. This pussy is mine, Amanda. Mine to pet, to taste, to fuck, where, when, and how I want. You will not deny me what is mine!"

His hard, determined words made her shiver with both longing and need. She wanted to be his, wanted to be owned by his possession, to be controlled and conquered by his domination. Only in these moments did she ever truly feel safe, protected, and free.

The loss of his fingers left her feeling bereft and alone, but the sizzling sound of a zipper rasping downward reassured her he wasn't leaving her for long. Silently, Amanda offered up a prayer he would do as he said and fuck her, now, with no hesitation because she could not take any of his normal tormenting tricks.

Blunt, thick and full cock pushed into her, pressing past the constrictive ring of muscles at the threshold of her opening. He paused, barely inside her, long enough to make her worry he intended to tease her after all.

"Who do you belong to?"

She had to answer that question. Lessons already taught told her there could be no escaping this one.

"You." Amanda barely managed to make the word intelligible.

"Who?"

"You. Please, Cody, I ache."

The words ended in a scream as he slammed his full length deep into her. He went so far, so hard and quick, his balls slapped right against her, and she could feel his hip bone banging against her ass. It felt wonderful and frustrating because again he went still.

Amanda moaned and flexed her inner muscles in a silent demand for more. The invitation went unanswered, but she knew better than to do it again. She remembered the last time she tempted him into an early release by coaxing it out with her control over her sheath.

As much pleasure as she experienced that night, she did not intend to live through that moment again here and now. She went still, waiting for his direction, knowing he had something planned. What it was, though, became an alarming question as the sound of fabric ripping drew her thoughts into darker, more erotic directions.

Darkness, complete blackness, was exactly what came as he lowered a folded piece of shirt over her eyes and bound her world to nothing but feeling.

“Cody?”

“Silence!” He emphasized with a sharp slap to her ass. The blow ignited the embers burning in her muscles at his possession, and she couldn’t control the spasms echoing out of her pussy and through her body.

“You are worried about being watched. Well, now you don’t have to worry because you can’t see.”

Oh, God. Her breath skipped out of her and forgot to return.

“Since you can’t control that mouth of yours,” a piece of fabric brushed against her lips, and Amanda knew better than to deny him access, “I’ll just have to gag you.”

She couldn’t take much more of this. Everything he was doing to her made the desire flooding her system boil to dangerous heights. Soon, too soon, it would disintegrate her in its euphoric heat. At this rate, she wouldn’t last more than two strokes before her mind left her body and her soul went on vacation to the forbidden land of rapture’s utopia.

It wouldn’t stop him. He would force her further into the embrace of her own climax, making her survive one catastrophic explosion after another until he reduced her to nothing more than a pile of dust at his feet.

“Now, then, you’ll behave or I’ll bind your hands as well. Understood?”

Amanda nodded weakly, not doubting he would do as he stated. It was hard, though, to be still and simply experience everything when her body ached to rush forward.

“Good girl.”

Cody ran a hand down her back in a soothing motion, rubbing mini circles of warmth into her skin as he slid from her body. He left her empty and cold. His possession was just as she feared, nothing more than a tease. She heard the crunch of his footsteps as he moved off and away, to get the

toys Knox kept hidden about the place or to open the door for a public viewing of her conquering, Amanda didn't know.

Both ideas filled her with tense desire as arousal warred with anxiety. She strained forward, listening to the symphony of night noises as she tried to decipher the changing world around her. She heard the scrape and creak of hinges, or had it simply been murmurs from the mayhem outside?

Swallowing hard, Amanda tried to focus but still jumped in startled surprise when Cody's hand smoothed down her back. It had to be him, even if she hadn't heard him return. Surely, he would never let another man touch her when she was vulnerable like this. *What about one of his brothers?*

Amanda's throat closed up on with the thought, seizing all flow of oxygen until her skin prickled with awareness. Goose bumps chased shivers up her spine as a hand slid down to massage her ass cheeks. They exploded into full-body tremors as a second hand came up to assist, dividing her ass and giving her unseen tormentor direct access to her sensitive back sheath.

Despite everything that transpired over the past couple of weeks, Amanda still couldn't help but feel nervous as she felt the cool, smooth glide of his lubricated fingers penetrating deep into her ass. He pressed downward on a sweet spot filled with nerves. The brief touch sent a tingle of mini-explosions dancing up her spine, and she moaned under the impact.

"That's it, sweetheart," Cody crooned behind her. "Nice and easy. You like this, don't you? Like having my fingers fucking into your ass?"

Oh, thank God. It was Cody. She knew it, even if the proof snapped the tension washing over her in a backlash of desire. He hit the special spot again, and Amanda started to drool. Her hands weakened under the impact, and they slid across the floor until her head hit the ground.

"You got such a sweet ass, baby. Stretched, but still so damn tight. I'm going to fuck you here before this night is over, make you come so hard it just might kill you. I might die right along with you being trapped in this hot vise, feeling all these muscles clamped down on me, feeling every little ripple as I force you to take me deeper and deeper still. What do you think, Amanda? Are you ready?"

She whimpered her response through the gag. She was ready now, and if he would just press harder on the special spot, just fill her with something bigger, thicker, she could feel her release now.

"Soon, baby, very soon."

When his hand retreated, Amanda whimpered and tensed. Surely soon meant now, but when she felt the bulbous head of a cock pressing into the tight entrance of her backside, it had the cool, smooth feel of plastic and not the heated, satin feel of flesh.

He cut her train of thought as he forced the rounded top of the plug past her clenched opening. It slid deep into her body, filling her in a way she'd never thought she'd enjoy. Her reservations melted away as she arched into the caress, silently begging for a little more.

He gave it to her. A quick twist and a short stroke left her panting as bright lights popped in her eyes. Oh, yes, just another. One more, maybe two, and she'd be sated.

Cody, as always, was the master of denial, and true to his nature, he released the plug with a little pat to seat it firmly inside her. The need, the desires inside her were overwhelming to all sense of rationale and reason. The urge to jerk free and reach back to fuck herself with the toy should have shocked her. It would have if not for the desire blinding her normal sense of decency and inhibition.

She loved being vulnerable like this, knowing she was completely at Cody's mercy. At the mercy of his strong, capable arms. Soon, very soon, he'd take the sensation up a notch when he filled her from behind. He promised, and she anticipated.

His arms locked around her, and she felt the world whirling beneath her feet only to slam back into reality as Cody pressed her onto the rough, uneven surface of a wooden table. She could feel the sawdust and splinters cutting into her back and shifted to ease the sensation.

She forgot all about the slight discomfort. Cody lifted her legs, forcing her knees to bend and stretch, leaving the hot, swollen folds of her pussy completely open and vulnerable to the night air.

Smooth plastic from behind and hot, hungry man in front. The delirious contrast had her arching and moaning as his mouth descended onto her weeping cunt. Like liquid heat, his tongue left a molten flow of lava in its wake as it slid teasingly through her slit.

The sharp clenching made her feel every millimeter of the thick cock filling her ass as Cody pressed his mouth even tighter against her heated flesh. The plug held firm, lighting up her senses with nearly unbearable shockwaves of pleasure.

Cody lifted his mouth, letting her suck in much-needed air. He ruined the effort when his fingers dipped and filled her clenching sheath. The sudden explosion of pressure made her chest constrict even as her lungs fought to expand. A rough, large hand came up to cup her breast and hold it still for his feasting even as his fingers set a deep pounding rhythm in her cunt, making her flex and thrust back. Each motion of her hips echoed with a rebel's cry of rapture as she slid along the thick cock filling her ass.

Cody nipped at her sensitive nipples, scraping his teeth over their puckered edges to tighten around their bases and hold her captive for the teasing licks of his tongue. Amanda moaned, scraping her nails through the silky strands of his hair to dig into his scalp and try to hold him still as he moved from breast to breast, tormenting her with his heavenly mouth.

He brought her right to the edge, leaving her weeping and crying out against the injustice as his fingers plunged deep one last time before sliding free. Into the manic darkness came Cody's deep, husky voice. Whispering anew all the hidden fantasies he enjoyed tormenting her with.

"You like that, baby? Like being filled from both sides? I could slide my cock deep into you right now and fuck you against the dildo. That's just a taste of what it would feel like if one of my brothers joined us. You'd love it, wouldn't you? You fantasize every second it is Knox's cock you are riding so hard because it's what you really want, isn't it?"

Yes! She wanted to scream it at him, to give into the wildness and accept the perversion hounding her soul with whispered promises of pure ecstasy. She wanted it. She wanted to feel Knox buried so deep inside her she could feel him touching her soul. It was Jace she wanted mounting her from the front.

Slow and steady with a look of tenderness in his eyes, he would make love to her, but with each stroke, she would know it was the beast who held her, the savage who took her as no man ever had. Knox would be the perfect sour to Jace's sweetness. *That's what I want.*

Instead, she had Cody obliterating those thoughts from her mind as his mouth lowered a second time to the weeping wound that had become her pussy. It spasmed beneath his kiss, trying to suck him into its empty depth.

A raw chuckle teased her flesh moments before his lips locked on to the perky little bundle of nerve endings. In the blink of an eye, he went from hesitant to savage, attacking her clit with a ferocity that had her writhing on

the toy buried deep inside her. Then it moved, slid free, only to plunge back hard and deep. Amanda screamed as her whole body shattered under the hard lash of pleasure's pain.

Cody took her fast and rough, driving her right over the edge of sanity in a mindless frenzy until her world once again rocked with the explosion of fireworks. This time, all the brilliantly burning bulbs washed over her in an endless pelting of molten pleasure.

Slowly, the brilliant flares twinkled into dust and left her cold and alone in the blackness. Amanda had no sense of where Cody had disappeared. Along with his loss, she felt empty and knew he took his toy with him. It was both a relief and a disappointment. Her body went limp, satiated from the pleasure it had already endured. Still, her spirit yearned for more.

"You know, Amanda..." He spoke directly over her as his hand came to rest on the indent of her sweaty side. It slid downward, tracing the curve her hip and the flare of her thighs. "You are such a beautiful girl. I don't know why you worry about being watched. If I were to open those doors, every man who saw you would be jealous of me."

Amanda flinched. Not from his words but from the brush of his hand as it slid up her inner thigh and through her over-sensitized slit. Tickling her clit with its pass, he set off a new round of mini pops of delight through her body.

When he reached her waist, his other hand appeared, and he lifted her clean off the table. As he carried her, she prayed he didn't intend to take her outside. He wouldn't do that to her. Even if in the moment it added a dark thrill, Cody knew it would violate her trust in him and end their arrangement.

He knew it. Didn't he? She betrayed him not once but twice today. Amanda was the fool to think their arrangement had a future, and this would be his ultimate revenge.

He would do it, too. Cody had no mercy she knew of.

That certainty sparked to life the fight in her. This was one line she wouldn't let him lead her across, and she fought back, twisting in his hold and breaking free to crash to the floor. He was on her instantly. Before she could even recover from her hard landing, he twisted her arms behind her back and bound with the stiff leather of his belt.

That became the least of her worries as the barn door creaked open. The slight whine had her instantly stilling. Somebody just entered the barn. She could sense it. Danger and heat emanated out in waves from the shadowed figure in her mind. She could almost feel him lurking there. The knowledge paralyzed her, leaving her defenseless to Cody's rough passions.

The fight triggered the worst of his barbaric tendencies, and he showed no gentleness as he forced her thighs wide and lined up the bulbous head of his cock to her dripping cunt. In one smooth, hard thrust, he embedded his full length into her. If he would just fuck her, maybe, just maybe, Amanda could forget the stranger in the room, but Cody didn't.

Instead, he stayed still, making her whole body prickle to life as she knelt there, bowed down before Cody, his cock embedded deep in her body. Amanda could only image the sight they made for the interloper. The very idea only made her sheath tighten down over Cody's full length, milking his dick in excitement.

Cody read her body perfectly and shredded the last shroud of her modesty as he looped his arms under her shoulders and lifted her onto his lap. The new position put her entire body on display, fully open and exposed. Amanda trembled with a need spiced with the forbidden pleasure in knowing she was being watched.

"I don't know why you fight it," Cody breathed into her ear. "I can tell how much this moment excites you. You're so lovely with your skin all pink and flushed with your lust. Do you think he watches and isn't tempted almost beyond his control to touch you?"

Amanda swallowed. Cody said "he," so somebody was in the room. The reality sunk deep into her stomach, not quelling her arousal but inflaming it. The sensation intensified as Cody petted a hand over her stomach, making her muscles quiver and contract.

"So soft, one touch would never be enough. Not for any man. And these breasts," his hand slid up to cup one, "so plump, topped with beautiful rosy nipples. My mouth waters to take a taste, to bite down on this tip and suck it deep into my mouth."

Despite knowing Cody was systematically drawing the voyeur's eyes to every place no spectator should see, Amanda couldn't help but moan and arch into his touch as he allowed his thumb to swirl over her nipple, rolling it in smooth, even motions that had her desperate for more.

“So responsive. That’s what really drives me wild about you, Amanda. You’re so sensitive everywhere.”

He bit down lightly on the lobe of her ear, making her jerk under a small spark of pain.

“So free and willing. I think you enjoy being watched while you are fucked. I think it excites you, makes your pleasure that much greater to know that another watches and wants while I claim you.”

Amanda panted out little mewling sounds, unable to deny Cody’s truth. More than just being aroused, she felt sexy, desired, beautiful, and she’d never felt it before. It was a heady, intoxicating drug fed by Cody’s husky murmurs.

“Just imagine what it would be like if one of my brothers were here. If Knox were here. Think of how hard and determined he is, how tense his features would get, how his muscles would tremble and his eyes would narrow as he watched my hand fondling your tits.”

Knox!

It was him. Amanda could feel Knox in the tension. The very idea of those rigid features and hardened eyes tracking every single flush and shiver of arousal over her body weakened her. She could almost see him looking at her with nothing but feral hunger in his eyes.

“He wants to touch you just as I do, but he wouldn’t. Not yet. Now his breath stops with yours in anticipation as I slide my hand over your stomach. Both of you waiting for the moment I open the folds of your pretty little cunt and expose all the sweet cream waiting to be tasted.”

Amanda froze, waiting for Cody to deliver. His fingers were so close. So damn close. All she needed was a little touch, just a momentary caress of her clit and she would be flying.

“Maybe he will taste it. Maybe he’ll step right up to you and let his hot breath caress your clit in a warning right before his tongue feasts upon the most intoxicating pussy I’ve ever drank from.

“Would you let him, Amanda? Would you like it? You’d like to have one man buried deep within you while another one pleasures you with his mouth? Think of all the pleasure the two of us could give you, dominating you, controlling you, making you come in ways you haven’t even dreamed of.

“I know you want it. I know the idea excites you. I can feel your cunt tightening down around me, trying to milk me into my own release as your own approaches. I know you’re ready to come just from the idea. To come now.”

He slid one finger over her clit and the world detonated around her as she did just as he commanded.

* * * *

Cody knew he pushed it. Pushed himself and Knox, who stood not four feet away looking ready to tear Amanda straight out of his arms and take her as his own. If he did...the pleasure might be explosive, but the aftermath would be just as brutal.

He knew in this moment he violated Amanda’s trust. Trust was so hard to earn in the first place. He didn’t have Jace’s charm, and even if he knew she was aware somebody entered, he didn’t given her any chance to deny this new kink.

He damned himself for the jealous fool he’d always been. Seeing her with Jace set him off. Cody had always been quick with his temper, and now he feared it might cost him more than he wanted to pay. Cody could lose everything. Amanda might be so excited by the idea of being watched she had come apart in his arms with barely a touch, but tomorrow would be a different story.

“Finish it.”

No sound broke the moment, but Cody didn’t need to hear the words silently moving across Knox’s lips to know what his brother said. Knox’s control hung by a thread. So did Cody’s.

Forcing Amanda back onto her stomach, he kept a firm grip on her hips. Even as her strangled moans passed over the strip of fabric he used to gag her, Cody turned them into outright screams as he began to fuck her with the hard, steady rhythm beating in time with the pounding of his own blood.

So damn tight. So damn wet. Pushing his way past the constricting confines of her muscles was pure heaven. Nothing ever felt this good. Nothing ever would. Maybe one thing. Cody reared free of her clinging depth to line his cock up with the tight rosette a little farther up. With one

sharp twist of his hips, he impaled himself into the sweetest ass Cody had ever fucked.

Cody gasped out as he fought for control over his balls. They threatened to explode then and there from the amazing constriction squeezing his cock. Beneath him Amanda screamed around her gag, bucking within his hold. The reigns of his control snapped, and he lost all conscious thought as his body drove toward the oblivion of release.

Only instinct had his hand curling around her hip to bury itself in the sopping wet folds of her pussy. He found her clit and tormented it, unsure if it was pleasure or pain making her go wild beneath him. He prayed for pleasure even as his own consumed him.

Pure, white-hot rapture erupted along his spine, spanning out with the sensation and forcing him to slam back into the release he pumped from the depths of her body. Over and over until the lava pouring out of every nerve ending condensed in his balls and erupted with such force Cody collapsed under the weight of his own climax, flattening Amanda to the ground as he found a soft bed against her body.

Chapter 19

Saturday, July 5th

The sun rose over Saturday morning like a nagging mother. It forced light into every corner of the ranch, exposing all the work to be done during the day. It didn't matter how hung-over or tuckered out anybody felt, the remains of the party had to be cleared out of the pasture. Cody didn't feel like working.

He'd spent nearly six hours with Amanda locked in the barn last night. By the time he 'd carried her up to the ranch, everybody had passed out, even Amanda, but not Knox. Cody had dressed her in his shirt, being there was nothing but rags left of her clothes. Without a word to his oldest brother, he'd carried his woman up to bathe her and tuck her into his bed.

That's where she should have been when Cody woke. It wasn't like he let just any woman actually sleep with him. Amanda complained he hadn't shared his life with her. Letting her in his bed had been his first attempt, and what did he get for the effort? Waking up alone and lonely.

Cody sighed and scanned all the men walking through the grass, picking up garbage. It didn't seem to make a dent in the mess, which felt just like his relationship with Amanda. She hadn't been wrong to accuse him of not opening up. Cody didn't like to open up and talk about himself. What could he possibly say to her? That he loved Sharon, loved her like no other, but he really liked Amanda?

Cody knew what a confession like that would get him. He couldn't risk it, couldn't risk losing Amanda over the past. It just seemed to him better to ignore it and move on into the future. It wasn't like a body had a choice. Hell, it wouldn't be such a bad future with Amanda in it...if Knox could get over himself.

“Always the baby, Cody.” Jace bumped him from behind, carrying a cooler he dropped at Cody’s feet. “Never wanting to work on Saturday.”

“I ache.”

Jace snorted, a grin busting out across his face. “That can happen with six straight hours of sex. I swear to God, Cody, we should put you in the Smithsonian.”

“Shut up.” Not in the mood for his brother’s teasing, Cody remembered his grudge from yesterday. “Besides, I had to do something big after you hogged her all day.”

“Hey, I’m not the one who failed to greet her,” Jace shot back. “You snooze you lose, baby brother, which makes me wonder. Where the hell were you yesterday?”

Cody shot Jace a dirty look for his accusatory tone. “Not where you’re thinking. I just got busy trying to keep up with the logistics, and unlike *some* lazy people, I actually had to work for the party.”

“Spare me,” Jace retorted. “I thought the whole party idea was stupid. You’re the one who went along with Knox.”

“That’s because Knox is bound and determined to find a way to disqualify Amanda.”

“So you decided to help him?”

“No,” Cody snapped, “I decided to let him tire himself out trying and you know where he spent all last night? Watching the show Amanda and I put on for him in the barn, so now you happy you spent the dark communing with your shrubs?”

Instead of taking the insult, Jace rounded on Cody to straighten up his one inch taller frame. “Knox watched? Amanda agreed to that?”

Jace already knew the answer if the tic going in his cheek was any indication. Cody wisely stepped back as he answered. “Maybe not, but...she knew.” God, he hoped she did.

“You son of a bitch,” Jace whispered. “Amanda’s going to bolt when she finds out about this, and I’m—”

Jace’s words snapped off as a shudder of rage rolled right through him. Cody knew, he understood. If Amanda bolted, Jace’s heart would break. Cody would be pretty damn miserable, too.

"She's not going to run." Cody tried to sound convincing, even though that's just what Amanda had done. Slipped right out of his bed and hauled ass. "She won't."

"Yeah?" Jace glared down at him, fist at the ready. "And how do you know that?"

Cody eyed Jace and knew of only one way to avoid being pounded into the ground. Pulling his cell out, he held a patient finger up to Jace as he hit the speed dial. It took about four rings before Amanda's groggy voice slurred into the phone.

"Ello."

"Morning, sweetness." Cody couldn't help but grin. She sounded like a mess. He'd love to see what she actually look like. Then he could brag about just what he did to the little darlin'. "You sounding kind of rough."

"Cody?" Amanda groaned.

"That's right. If you don't want to earn any extra punishments for skipping out of my bed without permission, your ass will be here tomorrow morning at eleven for games and brunch."

Even only half awake, Amanda knew how to give attitude. "I will?"

"Wear a dress." Cody's gaze locked with Jace's. "And leave the panties off."

He didn't wait for her to agree but clipped the phone closed.

"And what does that prove?"

"Nothing." Cody shook his head. "Tomorrow we prove to Amanda just who she belongs to."

Jace hesitated, obviously torn. "I hope this works."

"What works?" Knox asked, brining his scowl right up to his brothers. "Why are the two of you standing around chatting? We got work to do."

"Yeah, well, we're just sorting out some brother stuff," Cody retorted, turning into Knox. "And that brings us to just what you did to Amanda under the carport."

Knox's glare shifted from him to Jace before landing back on Cody. His shoulders lifted slightly in a gesture short of a shrug. "Nothing the little darling didn't ask for."

"You upset her." Jace pressed in, forming a line with Cody and making Knox snicker.

“What, you two going to tag team me now? Is that how you’re going to prove this girl isn’t trouble? By beating my ass?”

“I want you to play nice,” Jace shot back, “or, yeah, we’re going to be talking with our fists.”

Knox rolled his eyes at Jace before nodding at Cody. “And what about you? Is this a two-on-one thing?”

Cody took a moment to respond, wanting Knox to get how serious he was. “I want you to give her a chance.”

“Give her a chance? Or not be me?” Knox retorted, bending over to heft the cooler Jace dropped up onto his shoulder. He paused, already half turned away. “You know I am who I am, and my wife is just going to have to accept that.”

Chapter 20

Sunday, July 6th

Amanda tapped her pencil against her pad of paper and wondered what the hell she was doing back at the Reese brothers' ranch. When Cody finally released her, sending her home in the very early morning hours dressed in nothing but one of his T-shirts, Amanda swore she had enough.

She knew without a doubt Cody let one of his brothers watch while he screwed her in the old barn. The sick feeling in her stomach told her it had been Knox. The whole drive home, she vowed to no longer let these men toy with her like cats after a mouse.

They ping-ponged her around all day, working her into a frenzy of outright slutty behavior. *And, God, did I love it.*

So what if society said it was absolutely wrong to screw three brothers, especially at the same time? When those three brothers were as handsome and sexy as the Reese brothers, a woman would be insane not to spread her legs. *Especially if the opportunity is all three brothers at once.*

Amanda's stomach tightened, and something a little lower quivered at the very thought. That's why when Cody called Saturday afternoon and asked if she wanted to come over Sunday to play some games, she agreed. It had been a rash, totally hormonal decision.

One Amanda already regretted a million times since stepping through the doorway. She wasn't a brave woman stepping into the world of sensual adventures. She was a dumbass lamb offering herself up for the slaughter.

"The object of the game is to write down some words."

Jace leaned into her side, whispering his advice as if sharing a secret. The soft sound stirred the loose hairs around her face and made her shiver. This wasn't the first time Jace accidentally brushed into her.

Every little touch could have been written off as nothing, but Amanda could sense the tension. Jace was anticipating something, and that made her nervous. It made her even more nervous that the other brothers ignored what was going on under their noses. Cody and Knox weren't ignorant, so Amanda had to wonder why they pretended to be.

"Time's up." Jace knocked down the little hourglass with a negligent flick of his finger. "Amanda?"

It took her a moment to respond. "I don't have anything."

"Say what?" Jace smirked with enough smugness to annoy Amanda. "Don't tell me the mighty has fallen."

"I'm just hungry." More like horny enough to bite something. One could only imagine what the response would be if she turned and bit one of the brothers. Just the idea of how they'd respond made her shiver. "I can't think on an empty stomach."

Cody snorted, failing to cover his chuckles. "Sure thing, sweetness."

Amanda's eyes narrowed on Cody. "Here's a word for you. Jackass."

"Hey, the letters are actually there," Jace laughed, "good going."

Instead of being insulted, Cody acted confused. "Is that one or two words?"

"Good going?" Jace asked, sounding incredulous.

"No. Jackass," Cody snapped, showing his older brother the impatience Amanda had been baiting Cody for.

Jace responded in kind, tensing up in the way men did before they got violent. "You calling me that?"

"I'm asking if it's two words."

Knox snorted. "And they let you graduate from college?"

Like a good youngest brother, Cody groaned at his brothers. "I just need to know how to score it."

"You can't score that," Jace responded.

Cody shot him a look right back. "Why not?"

"Because it's a curse word."

"There is nothing in the rules says we can't use curse words."

Amanda and her empty sheet of paper had become totally irrelevant to the brothers' argument. This is what it had been like all morning. They were either picking on one each other or picking on her. It was actually kind of

fun, especially when Knox chucked the dictionary at Cody's head on his instance they look the word up.

"Go on and look it up," Knox snapped. "See if your picture's next to it And you," he turned his brooding gaze on Jace, "go get the damn woman some food so we don't have to go through this bullshit for another round."

Amanda cringed at Knox's hard tone. He sounded like one pissed-off father ready to bring down the hurt on his disobedient children. Of course, he wasn't any better than his brothers, just a little less polished and charming. Given what he did to her Friday in the carport, Knox could show a little softness and compassion. If nothing else, he could at least feel a little guilt. Instead, the man had the nerve to act as hard as ever. Amanda shot him back a look of equal measure. It said it all. Knox could go to hell, but the devil would probably kick his ass back out for having a bad attitude.

"Fine." Cody shoved his pad across to Jace. "I'll go get us all some sandwiches."

Amanda watched him leave, feeling as if she were watching her safety line disappearing into the ocean, leaving her to face the sharks alone. Tensing with anticipation at just what awaited her, Amanda turned her head toward the table and almost jumped out of her seat when she found herself nearly nose to nose with Jace.

"Look what I got."

He tilted his pad to show her words written in strong, even, masculine strokes across his page.

Lick. Suck. Caress.

Amanda swallowed hard.

"All the things I like to do."

Oh, God, save her now. Jace hadn't just said that right in front of Knox...*No. No. No.* Amanda would not weaken a second time in a row to these crass cowboys' perverted ways. She had come here to redeem herself.

"I also like to bite, but those letters weren't—Ow!" Jace's smooth tone erupted into a sharp objection as his head swung around to Knox.

Amanda heard the scuffle of a foot and suspected Knox just kicked Jace. Thank God for Knox's sullen disposition. Owing the man, though, was too painful an admission to make, but she would try. Amanda lifted a thankful look to Knox only to be stilled by the intensity in his gaze.

"I like to bite, too."

“He really just nibbles,” Jace murmured directly in her ear, making her shift in the wooden chair.

“That’s enough!” Amanda snapped. “Nobody here cares what either one of you likes.”

“Just making conversation.” Jace shrugged, retreating back to be centered in his own seat. “You’re free to share what you like.”

“I like men who treat women with a little dignity.” Amanda might be sinking in a tide of her own desire, but damn if she would go down without a fight.

“The kind that pulls out your chair and tips his hat?” Knox made it sound like a ridiculous request.

Amanda narrowed her gaze on him before responding as coldly as she could. “The kind that knows how to behave himself in public.”

“That’s why she’s with me,” Cody announced as he sauntered back in bearing a tray loaded down with sandwiches. “Because I’m a perfect gentleman.”

A perfect gentleman who fucked her for the viewing pleasure of one of the two other bastards sitting around this table.

“You boys aren’t being rude to my date, are you?” Cody asked as he placed the platter down in the middle of the gaming table.

“Far from it, brother.” Jace grinned. “We’re doing our best to make Amanda feel quite wanted.”

There, you have your answer. Cody didn’t say anything.

Jace leaned forward to snatch a sandwich, his arm accidentally brushing against the side of her breast. The small touch set off a stream of sizzling flames down her spine. She knew her breasts swelled, her nipples hardened, and she cursed the light cotton sundress she donned earlier for their trip to the Lord’s house.

Oh, God, I do have my answer, and now I’m deep, deep trouble.

“Want one?”

Jace held a sandwich up to her as if he expected her to eat from his hand. With a steadying breath, she sent him the best annoyed look she could drum up under the circumstances and reached for the food with her own hands.

A bite later, she forgot for just a moment to be annoyed with the brothers. This was no ordinary ham and cheese sandwich. The chicken held

between the slices of white bread was perfectly seasoned, moist, thick, not lunch meat at all.

“Wow,” Amanda breathed, “one of you sure knows how to cook.”

Cody laughed as if she’d made a joke. “As if it wasn’t a challenge for any of us to boil water. We didn’t make these.”

“You didn’t? Then who?”

“Lydia. I guess you could call her our housekeeper. We keep her around to play mommy, clean up after us, do our laundry, cook, that kind of thing.”

Cody’s tone changed from light to dark, receding into a sound that clearly said he didn’t want to go further with anymore words.

Amanda knew why.

She’d known enough about Sharon Arnold to know she’d been an amazing cook. So good, in fact, she’d gotten a scholarship to some fancy school in New York City. Sharon’s mom was named Lydia. Amanda guessed the cooking skill was a “like mother, like daughter” kind of thing.

She and Cody had never, ever discussed Sharon. It was one of the reasons she’d never let him in. They both had their scars, but where she’d delicately prodded the subject of Sharon, Cody had never once asked about her family. Whenever the conversation drifted into any intimate direction, Cody shut down. Now she felt the withdrawal from all angles, confirming the suspicions she had yesterday evening with Jace. It hadn’t just been Cody’s Sharon.

Had it been Knox’s Sharon? He was the only one who didn’t withdraw, didn’t even blink. Of course, Knox hadn’t exactly been open before, either. With his normally removed attitude, he barely seemed to notice the mood had shifted around the table. Knox must have, though, because, strangely enough, he made an effort to ease the moment.

“You cook?”

Amanda offered him a small smile of gratitude for breaking the thickening tension. “I can do more than boil water, but I wouldn’t say I can do much.”

“You should learn.”

Knox said it with just the right touch of arrogant authority to erode her charitable feelings and leave her annoyed again. “Oh, I should? And why is that?”

Knox shrugged. “A woman should know how to cook.”

“Well, I know enough not to starve,” Amanda shot back. “After all, I don’t have a nanny to take care of me.”

Knox’s head snapped up, right along with every one of his brothers’. “I don’t need a woman to take care of me.”

“Apparently, you do.” Amanda gave him a shrug, enjoying returning the obnoxious behavior.

“I work hard, little lady.” Knox snapped at her bait, leaning across the table as he growled at her. “You know some of us don’t have the luxury of sleeping late and getting home early. Some of us get up at four-thirty and come in with the sunset.”

Amanda glanced up, meeting his hard gaze with her own, but gave him one more chance to avoid an all-out conflict. “Are you saying I’m lazy?”

“Spoiled by an easy life is more like.”

“Knox—” Jace growled out a warning, but Amanda clipped off his attempt to interfere.

“Spoiled as in having a few thousand dollars lying around to throw some over-the-top Fourth of July party?”

Knox’s head cocked instantly to the side, and his eyes seemed to drill straight into her soul. “You enjoy the party?”

Son of a bitch, I knew it was him!

“I found it to be a little dull and uncreative, actually. Sort of tedious and boring.”

That might have been more of an insult to Cody, but Knox took it as his own. “Maybe you’re just too unsophisticated to appreciate the event.”

“Unsophisticated? At least I don’t polish my social skills on cows’ asses.”

Knox’s ass lifted out of the seat with that one. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you are the most arrogant SOB I’ve ever had the displeasure of meeting.”

“That wasn’t exactly the tune you were singing when your pussy was creaming all over my damned hand,” Knox snarled.

The minute the words broke the air, everything instantly stopped. Amanda’s eyes followed Knox’s and rounded with shock. He just broke the silent vow they all took not to mention anything about that part of the party. Before anybody could recover, Knox jerked out of his seat and stormed off.

A strange, uncomfortable silence filled the room, and Amanda imagined they were all thinking the same thing. What to say?

“Why don’t we just play Boggle?”

Jace offered up a distraction, and they all silently resumed the game. It didn’t take long, not even two complete rounds, before Amanda was back to Jace’s too-smooth advances. By the time they’d finished the third game, Amanda lost her nerve for putting up with anymore.

If the Reese brothers’ mission was to drive her insane, they were steadily succeeding at it. Right now, she’d had enough. All Amanda wanted was some peace to work things out. Peace, time, and space, that’s what she needed. Apparently, it wasn’t what she was going to get.

Alarm bells shot off as Jace rose and stretched. Cody suggested they head for her house, and Jace innocently said he would like to go for the drive. She didn’t trust either brothers’ looks for a moment. The sharp teeth of the bear trap were descending down on her.

Even as she climbed into Cody’s truck with Jace pushing in behind, Amanda could feel the predators circling. The slam of the truck doors sealed her fate. A fate she knowingly walked into. As Cody slid the key into the ignition, Amanda knew this was her last chance.

She didn’t make a sound as Cody turned the truck over but sat pinned between the two large cowboys, letting their heat and scent warm through her in the most delicious of ways. There could be no denying it. She wanted Jace. Worse, she wanted him and Cody, at the same time. After all the teasing and taunting, Cody managed to implant the idea so firmly into her head some sick part of her had begun to crave it.

The images were too hot, too erotic not to be desired. No matter how wrong and depraved it might have been, she secretly ached to discover the truth behind the fantasy. Would it be as hot as she imagined, or would it be awkward and difficult?

Amanda’s musing turned to tense anticipation when Cody turned the truck off the ranch’s main drive and headed out straight across the open field. Her head turned to the side, but Cody was still humming along to the radio and tapping out a tune as he maneuvered around a group of trees and began following what, even on its best day, could only be loosely called a trail.

The question pressed against the back of her lips retreated under the strange mixture thickening in the air. Excitement and anticipation seeped from the two silent men on either side of her. It twined and blurred with the rich aroma of dirt, leather, aftershave, and men.

The potent mixture infused her body and triggered her own excitement. The sensation was made all the more volatile as apprehension and anxiety were added into the mix by her overactive brain. Like too much liquor on an empty stomach, Amanda began to feel lightheaded and giddy at the possibility of what all this meant.

Her eyes cut to the side as she looked for any signs of what Jace was thinking. He gave nothing away as he stared straight ahead. Jace's rugged features tightened, and his arm, resting along the open window sill, looked tense rather than relaxed.

Unable to help herself, Amanda's eyes dropped, widened, and then quickly looked away when she saw the size of Jace's erection tenting his jeans. No doubt he could rival Cody for the prize of Biggest Dick in Humble.

The very fact that Jace sat there, hard and horny, only made her go all soft and wet. Neither brother had to touch her for Amanda's own needs to awaken. Sparkly desire shimmered through her, raining down a warmth that had her nipples puckering and her pussy quivering to life.

Oh, God, as much as she might fantasize about this, it couldn't happen. It was wrong. More than that, it was amoral. There was no hiding the perverted truth. She was sitting here in her Sunday's finest as her pussy cramped painfully with need to be split wide and filled with Jace's hard cock—not Cody's.

Her body itched with the need to be touched, to be filled. Worse yet, it began to smell. Amanda glared at her crotch as she tried to squeeze her legs together and hold back the scent of her arousal.

This is all Cody's fault. The bastard's twisted me into this wanton thing of need. He trained not only her body but her mind to constantly think about sex. Cody and his benefits. Amanda was insane to ever agree to his proposition. Not that she could have ever imagined where it would lead.

The truck came to a stuttering halt, breaking into her thoughts and drawing her eyes up. They were at the top of some hill. They could see the ranch in all its glory now. A sea of green pastures broken up by running

lines of fence and speckled with not only cattle but men on horseback. The slow-rolling hills were peppered with patches of dried-up brown grass, and baled hay looked like tumors in the distance.

Cody left the truck idling with the radio on and the air conditioning blowing. Neither brother made any move to open their doors. Instead, they both sat staring out at their land, apparently lost in their thoughts.

Amanda couldn't take it. She was primed and ready, desperately in need of a release that looked to be stalled out alongside the Reese brothers' dilly-dallying.

"What are we doing here?"

She hated the sound of her voice. Low, husky, it betrayed her need just as clearly as the scent of her pussy filling the air. Cody's head tilted toward her with the smile he used right before he tied her in knots of lust. The look was generally followed by hours of pleasure Amanda hadn't known she was capable of experiencing. Cody couldn't be thinking about that, not with Jace sitting on her other side.

"Have I told you how pretty you look in your dress, Amanda?"

"No," Amanda whispered, answering more than just his question. The minute the word slipped out, she hoped Cody would ignore it, take it at face value.

"You do. Pretty enough to make a man forget all his thoughts." A lone calloused finger came up to gently trace the line of her jaw before dipping down to follow the line of her neck to where she knew he could feel her pulse pounding.

"Cody—"

"I haven't kissed you today, either, Amanda, have I?"

"You did."

"Too long ago."

Before she could respond, his lips were on hers. Gentle, teasing kisses to start, nothing inappropriate in front of Jace. Softly, he traced the outline of her lips, sucking in the bottom one before letting his tongue forage deeper to explore the insides of her mouth.

Amanda moaned, unable to stop the sound of desire from escaping as his tongue teased her into action. The downward slope into wantonness was a steep one, and Amanda tumbled its full length within seconds.

The sweet, chaste kiss was lost in a fiery blast of need stroking to life inside her. Her fingers entwined themselves into his short, silky strands of hair, and she pulled Cody closer, opening her mouth to feed her growing hunger.

Their heads tilted, and their tongues dueled. Amanda pressed her lips down and sucked on Cody's tongue. He groaned a rough, ragged sound that never ceased to prod her aggression to higher levels, and she lightly raked her teeth along the top of his velvet tongue.

Hard fingers gripped her knee, making her aware of Cody's large hand resting there. He used his hold to pull her leg straight up onto his lap, opening her so he could caress his way down the length of her thigh.

The feel of Cody's hand on her body excited Amanda's senses and sent them into overload. Her pussy clenched and wept with anticipation as his fingers drew nearer.

Jace was forgotten until a second hand settled on her other knee. This one was just as big, just as warm and rough. It, too, pulled her leg across another set of hard, denim-covered thighs, leaving her completely open, totally vulnerable with her legs held wide by both brothers.

Amanda pulled back from Cody's kiss with a gasp. Her eyes took in the sight of his swollen lips, his heated eyes. Cody's dark gaze gleamed with the knowledge of what Jace had just done, was doing. Spreading her was only the first of the liberties his older brother took. The second came in the heated pressure of Jace's palm rubbing circles along the ultrasensitive skin of her inner thigh, slowly working his way toward her pussy.

"Cody?" she whispered, confused and hesitant.

"You haven't kissed Jace today."

Chapter 21

If Cody's words weren't enough to tell Amanda why he brought her here, the back of his hand nudging her to turn toward his brother certainly did. Another hand came up to turn and tilt her chin. Jace's hand. Her eyes met his and she saw the desire darkening in his hypnotic gaze. The breath caught in the back of her throat, choking any sound or words.

"I like to kiss, too."

It was all the warning Jace gave her before his mouth closed over hers and his fingers slid through the parted folds of her pussy. Amanda should have jerked back. She should have slapped his face, snapped her legs closed, and cussed out both brothers before demanding to be taken home.

She did nothing but moan out her desire as her body slouched down, giving Jace's finger free rein to torment the ultrasensitive bud of her clit. He trapped the little nub under his finger and rolled it, making her moan again and squirm beneath his touch.

Her mind gave up the fight, recognizing the futility of logical thought in the face of soul-shattering lust. This was the moment she'd been waiting for since she first met Jace. The promise that had been there simmering beneath the surface exploded into real life.

She tilted her head and kissed Jace back with all the need boiling through her veins. He tasted different than Cody. Instead of beer and man, Jace's mouth was flavored with the drugging mixture of apple cider and cinnamon.

Amanda couldn't get enough. She tried to force her way into his mouth, but Jace's tongue dueled back in the beginning of a game. More playful than Cody's demanding kisses, Jace teased and tormented her by attempting to block her at every pass.

With his hand buried between her legs, driving her desire to the peak, and his talented tongue thwarting her every attempt to get more, Amanda

lost any semblance of sanity. She closed her lips over Jace's tongue and sucked hard, drawing a moan of desire from the large cowboy.

His counterattack to her maneuver was instant. His finger dropped lower to the soaking portal of her cunt. Without hesitation, Jace thrust three fingers deep into her pussy as if he owned it. Deep and fast, he fucked her, stretching her tender muscles wide in silent preparation for the cock Amanda knew Jace would be giving her soon enough.

Her head fell back onto the edge of the seat, breaking the kiss so she could pant for breath, groaning with each exhale. A second hand joined Jace's tormenting on her pussy, Cody's hand. He went straight for the kill and began swirling her clit with a rhythm destined to drive her through the doors of rapture and into the abyss of Utopia.

"Do not come, Amanda."

Amanda cried out against his command. *Cody*. He was playing his game, seeing how far he could force her before she snapped and was lost forever to the world of the insane. This time it was too much because there were two of them. Amanda lost all sense of details, unable to distinguish Cody's touch from Jace's. The world fragmented into nothing more than sensations. A hot mouth, sucking on her neck, her back arching, a hand pushing her forward, something tugging on her dress, and her unguarded breasts against the frigid air-conditioning vents. Her nipples puckered, threatening to bring pain to her world of pleasure if their needs were not attended to.

"Play with your breasts. Show Jace how you like to be touched."

Yes. Amanda felt helpless but ready to obey Cody's wicked command. Lifting her hands to her aching tits, she pinched and rolled her nipples, showing Jace just what she liked. Her body writhed under the attention, twisting and turning to get more from each flare of pleasure rocketing through her body. Desperately, Amanda tried to match the speed and motion of the finger tormenting her clit, but the devilish digit changed its chaotic pattern. Like a dog chasing a jackrabbit, she couldn't keep up.

"You need a mouth on those tits, don't you, baby? You need to be sucked, licked, and nipped."

The mouth on her neck followed the last of its own suggestion, sucking the tender skin where her neck met her shoulder before nibbling on the

tender bit of flesh. Cody licked away any hurt with a slow, sensual caress of his tongue. Oh, but she wanted to feel his mouth somewhere else.

“You want that, baby?” Cody’s dark voice whispered into her ear.

“Please, yes.”

“Cup your breasts, offer them to Jace, beg him for pleasure.”

The words became more than a suggestion or a command, they became manacles of need, chaining Amanda’s will to Cody’s desires. Her fingers curled around to cup her soft globes and press them together, offering them up.

“Oh, God. Please, Jace, put your mouth on me, on my breasts.”

Never easily appeased, Cody growled, “Call them tits.”

“Tits, oh, God. Please, Jace. Suck my tits.”

Jace was there with his warm mouth, wet tongue, sharp teeth, worshipping her breasts and making her cry out with lust. These were just teasing touches, matching the slower, more decadent thrusting of his fingers into her pussy. They were pulling back on her, trying to rev down her need, but it only made it flare higher.

Amanda twined her hand into Jace’s short locks, silently demanding he cease his torment and give her the rougher mauling she desperately needed. The bastard laughed. The deep masculine sound breathed into her swollen globes and made them tremble with the force. A strong hand twined around hers, pulling it free from his hair.

“You want me to give you what you need?” It was Jace talking, his tone harsher, choppy than Cody’s seductive murmurings against her neck. “Then give me what I need.”

Jace showed her just what he wanted, lowering her hand to his lap and wrapping her fingers around the smooth, heated feel of his cock. It was thick, so damn thick. The feel of it pressing into her palm made Amanda ache to have it buried inside her body, pounding into her with all the strength and power it contained.

Amanda whimpered, following the commands of the larger hand around hers to tighten her grip and stroke his length. Jace’s groan echoed in the cab and his head dipped. No longer did he tease, but now he tormented.

Nibbling harder on her nipple, he trapped the tender tip between his teeth for his tongue to roll and lick. A second mouth came to torment her other breast and another oversized hand guided her free hand to another

waiting erection, leaking desire from its tip and growing even bigger as her fingers wrapped around it.

Faster, her hands pumped the two cocks, trying to keep an even rhythm even as the brothers made the task impossible. Faster, the hands buried in her pussy fucked her, a torrent of rapture beat at her body from all points, but still she stayed grounded, bound to the world by Cody's command.

"I need to come. Cody, please."

The mouths bringing such pleasure to her breasts lifted. "You know you're not allowed to come by a man's hand."

Amanda knew, and she really didn't object. "A cock. I need a cock, now!"

"Jace will give you his. Will you accept it?"

"Yes!" Amanda would accept Jace without hesitation, even if they'd asked before mindless lust had taken control of her body. "Oh, please, Jace. Fuck me."

"You know my conditions." It was Jace speaking, whispering dirty, dark, erotic words into her ears. "I'll give you what you need if you give me what I need."

"Anything. I'll give you anything you need, just tell me what it is."

"I want to taste your pussy. I want to bury my head between your soft thighs and lick your clit, fuck your cunt with my tongue, get drunk on the sweet taste of your arousal. Will you give me that?"

Give it? Amanda would beg for him to take it—her—if Jace asked. "Oh, God, yes."

The words were barely out of her mouth before she was lifted, turned onto her stomach, and pulled across the bench seat as the truck door opened. Jace's strong hands lifted her ass, forced one leg down to the floorboard, and spread her thighs to leave her pussy naked in the warmth of the summer wind.

Cody buried a hand in her hair, directing her lips to brush against the smooth, wet head of his cock. Amanda heeded the unspoken command and parted her lips to lick around the flared tip. For a moment she teased the cock with little licks and gentle tickles, delighting in the groans above her and the tightening of the fingers in her hair.

The game was lost when the scales tipped and another heated tongue came to lick its way through her swollen folds. This time it was Amanda who groaned.

Above her Cody chuckled and then pressed her head more firmly down. "It's two against one, Amanda. Now suck my cock or Jace will torment you and I'll never let you come."

Two against one...torment...oh, God. Amanda abandoned her will to theirs, allowing the hand in her hair to guide her mouth rhythmically, making Cody's dick swell even thicker. She couldn't concentrate on the task, too consumed with Jace's mouth laying siege on the sweet flesh between her legs.

A sucking motion on her clit pulled her sensitive bundle of nerves past the hard scrape of teeth. The tingling pain lit up the rapture blooming through her body until every muscles quivered from the effect.

Jace's tongue, his damned dancing tongue maddened her, drove her deeper into the depths of insanity as it twirled in elaborate patterns over her sensitive flesh. Amanda tried to scream, but the sound choked on Cody's cock. The warm wet length of Jace's magical tongue pushed into her, tickling the insides of her cunt. He caressed her in ways that had her unable to even tighten her lips back into their sucking motions for all the moans that flooded out of her.

So close, Amanda dangled on the edge of insanity, feeling the rush of ecstasy whirling up to consume her whole when both brothers stopped. If for a second she had the naiveté to believe their play had come to an end, Jace disillusioned her of the notion.

He gripped her waist and began to drag her backward. Backward and onto the thick stalk of his erection. Amanda's eyes rounded, shifting upward to take in Cody's tight features. He was actually doing it, letting his brother forge deeper and deeper into her body. Their eyes caught and locked, shared in the mutual excitement of the moment. Cody had been right. Being watched by one brother while another seated himself fully within her depths made the experience more arousing than it had ever been.

For a moment they shared the knowledge as a calm settled over her. The calm broke when Jace pulled her completely free of the truck. Forcing her legs to bear her weight, he actually made her stand with him still buried in

her pussy from behind. The drop of her legs to the ground constricted her cunt to nearly painful tightness around his cock.

Stumbling backward, Jace pulled her with him, refusing to unleash her from his body. The jerking motion of dick vibrated deep inside her, sending spasms of pleasure so hot it melted her strength. Amanda was reduced to nothing more than a limp, moaning doll in his arms.

Hard, cold, uneven metal bit into her breasts as Jace fumbled them right into the side of the truck. He had her pinned now, his fingers lifting hers, directing them to curl around the edge of the truck.

“Hold on. Hold on tight.”

Amanda obeyed the command in the hard grind of Jace’s voice. With his chest pressing into her back, he braced her for the moment his hands lifted her leg. He swung her knees all the way up, making them bend until they could flex no more. It was an awkward position, but one that made her feel his hardness pressing into every inch of her pussy. Amanda felt stuffed.

“I planned to go easy on you this first time. To be the leisurely lover I know Cody is incapable of,” Jace panted into her ear. “You’re just so damn tight, hot, you shred a man’s control with your responsiveness. With one taste of your sweet pussy, I knew I would have no restraint when the time came to fuck you, and now as I stand here feeling your little cunt clamping down on me, pulsing around me, I have only this to say to you. Hold on. Hold on tight.”

Like liquid heat, his words inflamed her desires until she wanted his possession in just the way he warned her it would be. Hard, fast, and furious, a rutting of two animals overwhelmed by the passion of their own coupling. That’s just what she got.

Reality thinned to the rapid rhythm of slide and pound. Over and over he filled her, slid backward, teasing all of her inner muscles with the loss of his hardness only to slam harder and deeper back into her.

Her world revolved around the rhythm. Her ragged breaths began to match the pace. Her body pressed upward, her breasts bouncing against the edge of the truck bed in perfect beat. Faster and faster, the winding tension inside her only tightened further until finally it snapped, catapulting her straight into the climactic depths of total euphoria.

Savage whips of pure rapture lashed her body until it melted into a puddle, leaving her a mumbling, trembling mess in Jace’s arms. His roar of

release was lost in the feel of her own molten climax seeping outward over the cock still pumping deep into her body.

Panting, Amanda let her head fall forward, as she bent over the edge of the truck bed. She would have fallen down if it wasn't for the strong man holding her in position. It was warm and safe there, protected by all Jace's muscles, but she feared it wouldn't last as he shifted, sliding free of her body.

Amanda's muddled mind tried to make sense as Jace rolled both of them. Ending up cushioned in his arms in nearly the same position, the only thing changed was now she pinned Jace to the truck. Apparently, Cody was about to pin her to Jace. He stood before her, and any doubts Amanda had about what came next were silenced by the heat in Cody's eyes.

She knew that look. Knew what it meant, but he couldn't...not here with Jace holding her into position and his brother's seed slickening the insides of her thighs. Cody did mean to. The hands on her thighs, lifting her legs up to wrap around his waist, assured her not only did Cody intend to have her now, she would not be escaping this moment. What a moment it was, too.

Despite the soul-deep pleasure still humming through her body, Amanda felt excitement like she'd never known. Not only was she being shared, but now one brother would fuck her while another held her securely. Some warped, twisted need aroused her back to a peak as Cody pressed his hardened length into her still-quivering pussy.

"Do you like that?"

It was Jace whispering in her ears. His hands came up to cup her breasts and tease her nipples as Cody pushed slowly, deeper into her body.

"You like being fucked, don't you, Amanda?"

Amanda didn't have the breath to answer, but Cody would never let her defy him. "Answer him."

Jace might have been her one-time lover, but Cody was still the master who held the leash to her desires. Amanda could no more deny him than she could stop her body's response from his persistent invasion.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

He never let her get away without repeating whatever dirty thing he'd said.

"Yes, I like being fucked."

“You like it even more when there are two of us, don’t you?”

“Yes. Two.”

“You burn hot at the thought. What would you do with three?”

Three?

“Oh, God.” Amanda couldn’t take it. These thoughts, these wicked ideas he implanted in her head, they were too much. Right now she only wanted to concentrate on one, on him.

“Please, Cody.”

“Please what?”

“Please stop teasing me.”

“I keep telling you, I’m not joking.”

“Not now.”

“Later then.”

“Later.”

Amanda didn’t know if she was promising to let him fill her head with warped ideas or if she’d promised much more. She didn’t care either. All she could focus on was the smooth glide of his cock in and out of her body. He returned to her with the same gentle rhythm.

She writhed in Jace’s hold, trying desperately to force Cody into a faster, harder rhythm. He would not be pressured. The man delighted in tormenting her, in stroking the need through her body until she could bear no more. Then he made her endure more.

It was worse this time, because this time he had Jace to whisper dark, dirty words into her ear. Then there was Jace’s hands teasing and tormenting her breasts. As if he needed to be the one to make her completely insane, Jace slid his fingers down over the trembling muscles of her stomach.

“No. No. No.” Amanda’s head rolled against his shoulder, pleading with him not to do what she knew he intended.

“You have the softest skin.” Jace murmured into her neck before nibbling on her and adding another layer to the shudders racing over her body.

“Sweet tasting, too. When we get you home, I’m going to lay you out naked on your bed and devour every delectable inch of your body. When I get here,” his finger pressed down over her clit, “I’m going to settle in for a feast that could take hours.”

Amanda gulped. Hours? Hours of his mouth ravaging her pussy? Her heart skipped a beat at just the thought. It skipped another when his finger started to rub her little bud in slow, even circles he matched with his other hand on her nipple.

Oh, God, she couldn't take this, couldn't bear the pleasure of his hands teasing her, of Cody's cock relentlessly stroking in and out of her. Amanda's head rolled across Jace's shoulder, her lips forming words that only turned into moans. They escalated quickly into screams as she came hard and fast.

The brothers matched her tempo as they drove her climax impossibly higher with their relentless loving. Bright lights blinded her as a wave of rapture cascaded over her. For a moment, she could almost believe she'd liquefied into pure pleasure.

Her world wasn't just defined by pleasure, Amanda simply knew nothing else. It was perfection that came to a sudden stop. Everything stopped. Every sensation, every sound, every feeling clicked off as her body caved under the power of her release and simply shut down, dumping her into the black oblivion of unconsciousness.

* * * *

Jace tucked the sweaty strands of hair sticking to Amanda's cheek back behind her ear. Cody and he had cleaned her up as well as they could and set her clothes back to right, but she still looked rough. They certainly hadn't been easy on her, which probably explained why she hadn't roused for even moment as Jace tucked her back into the truck.

Amanda would have slumped right over in the bench seat if Jace hadn't slid in beside her. Instead of hitting her head on the dashboard, he corralled her, snuggling her into his side as Cody slid in behind the wheel.

"You heading back to the ranch?" Jace asked as Cody popped the brake down. It would be the best destination by Jace's reckoning. They had beds big enough for three people to get a little creative on, and Jace bet Amanda didn't.

"Nah." Cody popped Jace's dream world as he spun the truck back toward the rutted dirt track. Cody glanced over at Jace. "We take her back there, Knox will get in the way. I don't think Amanda's ready for him, yet."

Jace conceded the point. Glancing out the window he considered his older brother's attitude problem and came to only one conclusion. "I don't care."

"What?"

"I don't care," Jace repeated turning to look at Cody. "I want Amanda in my bed, Cody. Every night. I ain't going to let Knox stand in my way."

"Agreed." Cody nodded. "But I'm just thinking to take this night to convince Amanda and tomorrow to explain a few things to Knox. It'll probably go a lot better in that order."

Cody had another good argument, but Jace just didn't want to be rational. It was hard with Amanda all soft and sleeping against him. She kind of made him forget himself. Jace liked the feeling. He wouldn't be giving it up. One thing he knew for sure, neither would Cody.

It remained to be seen with Knox, but Jace had hope. Amanda got under Knox's skin like no other woman Jace had seen. The two of them coming together would probably be one hell of an explosion. It would probably be good for both of them and one hell of a ride for Cody and him.

Jace grinned just thinking about it. It would all start tomorrow—their future.

Chapter 22

Amanda woke with a start, blinking her eyes open to take in the darkened sights of her bedroom. For a second, she stared in confusion at the hard male chest resting under her arm, trying to figure out how Cody could be there while also snuggled along the length of her back.

In a flash, it hit her. Memories flooded in to fill her mind not only with the images of what had taken place that afternoon in Cody's truck, but everything that had followed into the evening. This wasn't the first time Amanda had woken to the two men in her bed. The vivid memory of being pulled from sleep by the sensual rhythm of a hard shaft slipping in and out of her body heated her blood.

It had been Jace fucking himself deep into her greedy, welcoming pussy with smooth, easy thrusts. The hard bone of his hip had bumped into her backside as he took her while they lay on their sides. His hands had held her breasts, keeping her still while he tormented her puckered nipples.

Jace hadn't been the only one holding her in position. Cody, stretched out on his side in front of her, had held her leg up, leaving her open for his brother's possession. Open, but not wide. The position had allowed for little room, making Jace's oversized erection feel nearly twice as thick as it pushed against the walls of her sheath. Better than good, Amanda had come hard despite the easy rhythm Jace set. Her climax must have broken his control, because Jace's pace had changed. Pistoning into a hard, savage pillaging, he'd driven her climax to blossom even larger, forcing her to greater heights.

All the while Cody had watched. His baby blues latched on the site where his brother penetrated her. In the dim light of the nightstand lamp, Amanda had seen Cody's gaze sharpen, becoming more and more feral.

Jace had only just come, barely pulled free of her body, when Cody started pushing his cock into her still spasming cunt. Cody had driven

himself deep into her and took her with an aggression more explosive than normal.

It had been Jace's turn to hold her leg out of the way, to slide a hand between Cody and her bumping, grinding hips to pinch her clit at the same time he did a nipple. The brothers had driven her screaming back into rapture's embrace, and there she stayed.

That hadn't been the end, just the beginning. They'd taken her over and over again, turning her one way and then another. They used their hands, their mouths, and their cocks to suspend her in a sea of ecstasy, guiding her touch to their bodies, her lips to clean their cocks and prepare them for their turn to be buried once again in her warmth. It was too much, and as her body detonated with the most explosive climax of a lifetime, she tumbled head first into the black abyss of unconsciousness.

Despite the soreness between her legs, Amanda felt her pussy quake to life as the memories played through her mind. This time, instead of wiping out her ability to think, it fed the fear. *What have I done?*

Amanda had been a fool to go out to the ranch, stupid enough to think she could handle the Reese brothers. Worse, she'd thought she could handle this, but now Amanda knew. If they loved her, they wouldn't share. No man could share a woman he loved. Now Amanda knew how Cody and Jace felt.

It hurt more than she would ever admit, and she blamed herself. In no universe did men like the Reese brothers ever even notice a woman like her—average. That's just what she was. Amanda had a normal job that bored her, a house that would always be in need of repair, a car she couldn't afford to replace, a body that just blended in to all the other size twelve brunettes pushing their shopping carts down the grocery aisle.

There was not one thing in her life that made her stand out. Not that she ever cared, not until now. With two Reese brothers on either side of her, Amanda could see how pathetic she really was. They'd used her, probably because they could, because who would care.

Amanda didn't see the value in pain, but she did in rage. These two men might have treated her badly, but now they were going to get their pants on and get the hell out of her life even if she had to force them through the door at gunpoint.

First, though, Amanda had to get out from between them without either of the two muscled giants waking. Naked and in bed, they'd be impossible

to control. If anything was proven tonight, she couldn't control herself once one of them got started. No, Amanda needed distance and her gun.

As slowly as she could, she disengaged from Jace's embrace, then stilled for a moment of tense uncertainty when he muttered something and shifted. Thankfully, Jace rolled onto his back and fell still.

Silently as possible, Amanda shimmied down the bed. The footboard cut into her knees as she levered onto her feet. With self-preservation in mind, Amanda yanked on her robe before fishing her gun out of the nightstand. It had a full clip in it. Keeping the safety on, she clicked on the lamp. If she expected any response from the two lumps in her bed, Amanda was in for a disappointment. Other than another muffled curse from Jace as he rolled back onto his side, she got nothing.

With a growl, she backed farther away from the bed before resorting to screaming at them.

"Wake up!"

That got her a response, sort of. Jace smacked his lips and his eyes drifted open for a moment before snapping shut. She didn't think he'd really seen her until a second later when he shot straight up into a sitting position. The sheet fell down around him, revealing more of his naked torso than she was comfortable with.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Before she could respond to his indignant roar, Cody groaned and cracked an eye open to glare at Jace.

"What is your problem, man?"

"She's got a gun." Jace nodded to her.

"What?" Cody's head rolled in her direction, and, just like his brother, it seemed to take his mind a moment to comprehend the situation. When it did, he shot up and right out of the bed. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I want you out of my house!"

"Excuse me?" He managed to sound threatening despite standing there completely naked. Damn if his cock didn't start to harden, which just proved how perverted Cody was. Everything seemed to turn him on.

"You heard me," Amanda snapped, even as she took a step back. She didn't trust him, naked or not. "I want you gone. Now."

“Put the gun down.” Cody paced closer, apparently not comprehending a loaded weapon meant stay back. At least, Jace had the common sense to put on some clothes. He reached for his jeans as he shoved out of the bed.

“I’m not kidding, Amanda.”

Her gaze switched to Cody, and she matched his forward motion with her own backward one. “Don’t make me shoot you, Cody.”

“You aren’t going to shoot anyone.”

“I just might after what you did to me.”

“What did I do to you,” Cody had the audacity to look insulted, “but give you the best damn orgasms you’ve ever had?”

“And your brother. He gave me them, too.”

“No,” Cody snorted, actually managing to smirk. “He gave you the second-best orgasms you ever had.”

“Hey,” Jace snapped as he zipped up his jeans. “I resent that.”

Cody gave his brother a dirty look. “Not now, Jace.”

“I’m just saying my orgasms were every bit as good as yours.”

“Oh, really?” Cody turned on his brother. “Well then, why’s she holding a gun on us?”

“Maybe it’s because of your indelible charm.” Jace stepped into Cody, who matched the motion, bringing the two brothers nose to nose.

“She ain’t never done this when I flew solo.”

“Probably because you had her tied to the bed and she couldn’t reach the gun.”

“She stayed because she wanted to stay,” Cody growled. “You’re the one screwing up my good time.”

“Me?”

“You what?” Amanda gasped. Neither brother appeared to hear her, too involved in their own growing argument to be concerned about a naked woman with a gun.

“Yes, you. Always reading those stupid-ass books about plant propagation. Here’s a tip. Try reading one about humans. Maybe then you’d get a better reception from the fairer sex.”

“That’s it.” Jace managed to bump Cody back nearly three inches when he banged his chest into his younger brother. “I’m going to kick your ass.”

“Like I’m afraid of a man who reads *The Secret Garden*. Next time, check out *her* secret garden. Then you would know what to do with the equipment instead of just—”

Whatever Cody intended to say got lost in the fist Jace planted right into Cody’s jaw. Amanda couldn’t believe her eyes as the two of them started to exchange blows. Damnit, she was the one who had been wronged. She was the one who was pissed. If anybody was going to kick anybody’s ass, it would be her kicking their butts right out the door.

When they crashed into her nightstand and sent her lamp shattering to the floor, Amanda about snapped. She’d had enough of this stupidity. Aiming her gun straight up, she pulled the trigger.

The loud bang got their attention. As plaster dust and sulfur filled the air, the brothers broke apart. Jace looked at her half amazed and half concerned. Cody, on the other hand, just looked pissed, and he still had that damn hard-on.

“Damnit, Amanda!” Cody snapped. “Why you got to start acting crazy?”

“Me? Me? I’m not the jackass standing there naked with a woody while some woman holds a gun on me.”

Cody looked down at his body as if only now realizing what his wayward cock had done. When he looked up, Amanda took another step back. She knew that look.

“Put the gun down.”

“Cody.” Jace apparently recognized something too, because he sounded a little concerned.

Not like Cody listened to anybody. “Put it down now and I’ll only punish you a little.”

Amanda must be just as crazy as him for those words to have any kind of effect other than disgust. Damn if she would give in to those twisted desires. This was the problem with Cody Reese. He perverted her.

“Let me make this real clear, Cody. Get your pants on and get out of my house, or the next time I pull this trigger Mr. Happy Hard-On goes bye-bye.”

“If you don’t put that gun down this instant, I’m going to tan your ass so red, tomatoes will be jealous.”

“Cody,” Jace growled out a warning, but neither Cody nor Amanda paid any attention.

“I mean it, Cody.” Amanda stepped back.

“So do I.” Cody prowled forward.

Damnit! She couldn’t do it. As much as she wanted to shoot Cody just to teach him a lesson, she couldn’t pull the stupid trigger.

“God, I hate you!”

With that, she slapped the damn gun down on the dresser and turned to slam into the bathroom before either brother could react.

* * * *

Cody stared at the closed bathroom door in shock. Amanda could not actually think she could pull a gun on him and just walk away. *Crazy little vixen.*

Damn, but she turned him on. Since Amanda was the one to wake him out of Cody’s much-needed sleep to play out this little drama with her and Jace, it only seemed fitting she paid him for his pain. He put up with the damn crazy show. Now it was time for Amanda to give Cody his due.

With that in mind, Cody started after her. He forgot about his brother, Mr. Sensitive. Jace’s arm banged into his chest as his brother moved to block his path.

“What do you think you are doing?”

“Making good on my promise. Now get out of my way.” Cody shoved Jace’s arm back, but his older brother just latched his hand onto Cody’s arm.

“What are you going to do?” Jace yanked Cody around to meet his gaze. “Spank her?”

“The woman pulled a gun on me.”

“On us,” Jace corrected. “And I’d think even you would have the sense to realize that meant something was really wrong here.”

“Yeah, she’s lost all sense.” Cody could agree up to there. “Now I’m going to go help her find it, if you don’t mind.”

Jace’s finger dug in when Cody tried to shake him loose. “Damnit, Cody. Think with something other than your dick for once. The woman is obviously hurting and in no mood—”

“Hurting? I would’ve thought a brainiac such as yourself could tell the difference between anger and pain.”

“Amanda’s angry because she’s in pain.”

“Sure, Dr. Phil, whatever you say,” Cody sneered, not interested in his brother’s lecturing. “I got the cure for both of those problems right here.”

“She’s right. You are a jackass.”

“I didn’t have any problems with Amanda until you came along,” Cody delighted in pointing out. “So if anybody’s hurting her, must be you.”

He must have hit a sweet spot, because Jace released him. Actually, he shoved Cody. “Let’s get one thing real clear, little brother. I’m going to go in there and fix this problem. You’re going to stay out here and try to find the common sense you seem to have lost.”

Cody growled, his muscles tightening with the need to lash out. *Arrogant fucking bastard*. He was going to go in there and soothe Amanda? Yeah right. Who the hell did Jace think he was? He had, what, one afternoon spent in a garden with her and a night of passion? That entitled Jace to know how to handle Amanda?

Cody had two weeks, two solid weeks of building a...friendship. God, he hated that word. He knew Amanda. He was the one she was closer to, and if anybody was going to go in there and soothe over her hurt feelings, it would be him.

“I don’t think so, Jace. This is my problem and I’ll fix it.”

“God, get over yourself, Cody. This is our problem. We both made it.”

“And you think you know Amanda well enough to go in there and handle her better than I could?”

“I know going in there and spanking her wouldn’t help anything.”

“Get off it.” Cody about had enough of Jace’s attitude. “Amanda loves the way I treat her.”

“Does she? Or is it you just overwhelm her with passion?”

“What’s wrong with overwhelming passion?”

Jace cocked his head in that smart, smug way of his. “What about when you’re not around?”

“What?”

“What do you think Amanda feels after you’re gone? Do you think she daydreams of your domination?” Jace sneered. “Or has it ever occurred to you she might, just might, cringe at the memories?”

Cody stared at Jace, wondering just where the hell his brother got off. “Cringe? I don’t think so.”

“You’re probably right. I mean, what woman doesn’t like to be treated like a piece of meat?”

“I don’t treat her like a piece of meat,” Cody growled.

“Really? Then why’d she pull a gun on you?”

“Because you’re here.” As if Cody had to waste breath stating the obvious. “Which just goes to show I should be the one to go in there.”

“Or maybe it just proves she doesn’t trust you very much.”

Hearing his fear spat at him, Cody pulled back. A primitive urge to deny Jace’s accusation and then beat the hell out of him for making it filled Cody. His conscience wouldn’t let him. Not because he’d feel bad for hitting his brother. Just the opposite. Taking the time to indulge his urge would mean leaving Amanda alone and hurt in the bathroom.

“She trusts me,” Cody muttered.

“Maybe with her body.”

Cody bristled over the snide tone in Jace’s voice. Oh, Jace wanted a whipping, and Cody itched to give it to him. “With other things too.”

“Do I have to remind you of the gun?”

“No,” Cody snapped. God, he’d already heard enough on that subject. “But if it’s my mess, then I should be the one to go in there and explain to her—”

“What? Explain what?”

Hell if Cody knew. “Whatever it is she needs explained to make her feel better. God, you’re annoying.”

“And you’re dumb as dirt. You don’t even know what is wrong. How can you expect to know what to say?”

“You don’t know what’s wrong either!”

For several tense moments the two brothers glared at each other before Jace finally blinked.

“Why won’t you let me do this?”

Cody wasn’t about to let his brother guilt him into anything. “Because she’s my girlfriend. I’ve known her the longest. If she’s going to trust anybody to soothe her, it’s gonna be me.”

With the final word on the subject, Cody strutted toward the bathroom door. His hand had no more than touched the cool metal knob when Jace's response brought the brakes to his forward progression.

"If you don't want me here, I'll leave."

Damnit! Cody hit his head on the door. *Could this night get any worse?*

"Just give me the keys to your truck. As close as Amanda and you are, I'm sure she wouldn't mind giving you a lift back to the ranch, especially if it means getting rid of an annoyance like me."

"Oh, just stop." Cody turned to Jace. "You're a man. Guilting is beneath you."

"And you are acting like a selfish jackass."

"I just want to comfort Amanda. I do know her better than you."

"And I'm just asking for the chance to get to know her, too."

"Fine." Cody let go of the doorknob and stepped back. "I give up. Go for it."

Cody didn't admit defeat to Jace, but to his own insecurities, his own fear of his jealousies. Cody had never felt like this before. What the hell was wrong with him?

Chapter 23

Amanda hated crying. She saw it as a visible sign of weakness. She was not weak. Never that. She'd survived some of the most horrible events life could throw at a person. Hell, she'd been the cause of them.

Experiences like those had hardened her, toughened her, made her strong enough to handle anything, including being used by a man...two men.

Well, the joke is on them. She didn't care about Cody Reese or either of his stupid brothers. They were just big, dumb cowboys made to be ridden and forgotten. *Damnit!* Why did that make her cry even harder?

Amanda could hide her tears from the world under the showerhead, but not from herself. Pretending the hot rivulets of water streaking down her cheeks came from something other than her own eyes did not make it so. Those little tracks made a fool out of her, because they showed how much she cared about Cody and Jace.

She shouldn't. It was the dumbest thing she'd ever done, but knowing and feeling were two separate things. Absorbed in her misery, she didn't hear the bathroom door open or the shower curtain being pulled back. When a set of strong arms wrapped around her, Amanda reacted out of panic.

Spinning in blind reflex, she lashed out at the intruder and caught Jace with a sharp punch to the chest. Bastard didn't even wince. His lack of reaction coupled with the audacity Jace showed by interrupting her pity fest snapped Amanda's control, and she hit him again. And again. She couldn't seem to stop herself as she pounded his chest with blow after blow. She didn't even try. Only the weakening of her arms as exhaustion crept up them wound down her fury, leaving nothing but desperation and pain in its wake.

Without the strength left to fight him off, Amanda found herself wrapped in Jace's embrace. His warmth, his hardness, there was comfort to be found there, but not for her. *Why couldn't this be real?* Amanda deserved

to have a man who cherished her. Even if she didn't rank high enough to have the right to a rich man or a handsome one, she still had the right to be loved.

"Feel better?" Jace asked.

"No.

"I'm sorry."

Amanda didn't want to talk. She wasn't ready, so she intentionally misunderstood his apology. "You could have at least pretended I hurt you."

"Who says you didn't?"

Amanda sniffed, not interested in being placated. "You're not even sore, are you?"

"My chest?" At her nod, he answered. "I'm sorry, baby girl, but no."

"Figures," Amanda muttered.

"Not all pain is physical."

"I don't want—"

"It hurts me a great deal to see you so upset."

"Spare me." Technically neither Jace nor Cody had lied to her, yet.

"I'm telling you the truth. Knowing I am the cause of your distress bothers me more than anything has in years."

"Just shut up!"

Amanda tried to shove away from him, but he held on tight. All her struggle did was remind her they were both naked. His chest hairs tickled the sensitive tips of her breasts, making them pucker and bloom with interest. That wasn't the only part of her body blossoming, and it made her even angrier.

She didn't want to want him. His words, so close to the dream, so near to what a true lover would say, cut deep. They tempted her to let go of what she knew reality to be and allowed him to sweep her into a fantasy that had only one end. Total devastation.

"Let me go!" She needed distance.

"Not going to happen."

"Why? You already got what you wanted. Why don't you just put your pants on and go home? Leave me with what little dignity I can manage to scrape off the floor."

"Leave you? Like this? I couldn't."

The more Jace pretended to care, the worse she felt, but the anger seemed to be crumbling beneath the pain. Amanda became all the more desperate to chase him away before she broke down completely.

“Oh, but you could fuck me against the side of your brother’s pickup. You could hold me into position so Cody could have second honors.”

“Mmm.” Jace’s arms tightened around her, and to her horror she felt something beginning to grow a wedge between their bodies. “That was hot, wasn’t it?”

“It was humiliating,” Amanda muttered.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because...” Amanda fumbled, trying to find the words to express her anger and not expose her fears. They escaped her. Anything she said would reveal too much of her heart.

“Because you think if a man cared about you, he’d be too jealous to see you with another man.” Jace said what she wouldn’t let herself.

Begrudgingly, she admitted what she didn’t want to. “It’s human nature.”

“You would prefer if Cody and I fought over you?”

“What?” Amanda hadn’t even thought in those terms.

“If we destroyed our relationship to have the right to be the one with you? Would that make you feel better?”

It annoyed Amanda the way Jace tried to use such calm reason to turn the tables on her. “I didn’t say that.”

“But you would be happier if we fought over you than simply shared you, right?” Jace shrugged. “Then you would know you were worth fighting over.”

Amanda licked her lips, narrowing her gaze on him. She didn’t trust Jace right then. He was trying to distract her, to make her reason away her feelings. He wouldn’t trick her into answering his loaded question.

After a moment, Jace got her answer and gave her his. “I do care about you, enough to share you.”

“A moment ago you were doing it for the great nobility of not killing your brother and now you’re doing it for my benefit?” Amanda sneered. “What a bunch of crap.”

“It isn’t,” Jace snapped. “If I didn’t care, I would’ve put on my pants and left. Think about that.”

Amanda was not about to be swayed by that argument. “Unless you cared about the sex more.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“Never trust a man whose erection is poking you in your stomach, I always say. I guess I was wrong. You aren’t done with me yet.”

“No, I’m not, and I ain’t never gonna be.”

Amanda swallowed back the fear his hard words sank into her. They hit her stomach and made the poor thing roll, leaving her voice shaking as she tried to save herself. “I wish you’d leave now.”

“Yeah.” Jace shook his head. “That’s not going to happen.”

* * * *

Jace couldn’t let Amanda go. If he did, she might never allow him to return. He needed to know she would welcome him back into her life, into her body. He couldn’t explain why or how Amanda had come to be so important to him. She just was.

Maybe it was because her skin was so soft. Jace let his hands glide over her back, rubbing away the stress and tension he felt building there. So soft, he nuzzled his chin into the curve of her neck and breathed deep. Sweet smelling, but better tasting. He bit down on the delicate piece of flesh, enjoying the victory of her small moan and the way Amanda arched her head to the side to offer more of her neck to his feasting.

He couldn’t resist the invitation. Jace didn’t think he ever would. There was something addictive about Amanda. The way she responded, rubbing against him, such subtle, small movements, made Jace grind back. The velvety lushness of her slightly rounded stomach teased, almost tickled, the sensitive skin stretching tighter over his hardening cock, reminding his finicky flesh what heaven awaited at the end of this adventure.

True ecstasy, Jace had never experienced it before tonight. Many women could make him come and come hard, but only Amanda could make him come apart. She mesmerized him and entranced him in such a short time. From God’s lips, he’d never been this attracted to a woman. *Not even Sharon.*

The thought struck him hard, and instead of pursuing the end of where his nibbling would lead them, Jace found himself just breathing deeply and

pulling Amanda even closer into his embrace. There was something special developing here, something he wanted to savor. He wanted more than just a wild night of fucking.

He wanted to clean every inch of Amanda's body, slowly, enjoying the discovery of every place she liked to be touched, where she was ticklish and where just the right press of fingers would make her moan. Then he'd take the knowledge and Amanda back into the bedroom, lay her out on the bed, and give her a massage that left her weak and vulnerable in his arms. He'd make slow, tender love to her, show her everything he was feeling but couldn't express.

Cody. Damn it! His brother waited out there, and slow was not in his vocabulary. Even if it were, Jace would have resented his intrusion. Cody had his alone time with Amanda. He had three weeks of it. Jace wanted his. He'd get it. Not tonight, but tomorrow at the latest. If it came to winning the point with his fists, then so be it.

"Jace?"

"Mmm." Jace sighed, loving the soft, hesitant sound to her voice.

"How many women have you...done this with?"

"What?" *Oh, shit. Quicksand straight ahead.*

"How many women have you...um...shared?"

There was no good answer to Amanda's question. Jace should have never stopped seducing her. He should have overwhelmed her with passion when he had the chance. Then he wouldn't be about to hang himself with his own balls.

"Jace?"

"Does it really matter?"

"I'll take that to mean a lot."

He could feel her withdrawing from the moment and cursed the insatiability of a woman's curiosity. He had to do something. Something good and fast.

"Listen, Amanda." Jace cupped her face, forcing her big eyes to meet his. The sadness he found there bothered him more than anything. "Sharing is what we do, what we've always done. I know you're looking at it and think it's just some kind of kink, but Knox, Cody, and I, we were born to one mother and *three* fathers."

“How many? Do you even know the number?” Stubborn as ever, Amanda’s glare could not hide the vulnerability beneath.

“You really don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?” Amanda groused.

“How special you are.” That got him a snort and he could’ve sworn her eyes rolled. “You are to me.”

“Please.” Amanda rolled her eyes. “You couldn’t stand me just a week ago. You called me a brat and stormed out of the room.”

“Well,” Jace shrugged, “you were being a brat, and it was either storm out of the room or molest you right there in front of my brothers. I didn’t think you were ready for that, or was I wrong?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready for that.” Amanda’s eyes lifted to his. “What if I’m never ready?”

“Shh, baby.” Jace couldn’t help himself but to try and kiss the worry pouting her lips. “Don’t worry about it. Tonight you don’t have to worry about anything.”

“But, Jace...” Her eyes closed as he whispered light, butterfly kisses across her cheek and over her brow.

“I don’t want you to think about anything else right now, but me. Call me a selfish bastard, but the whole world and its concerns wait outside the bathroom door.” Jace slid his hands down her arms, marveling at how sexy her elbows were, all pointy. “In here it’s just us and I’m focused only on you. On how good you feel in my arms.”

Letting his fingers trail off to her waist, Jace rubbed his thumbs over the sides of her stomach. Delightful shudders rolled in his wake, telling Jace he pleased Amanda with just his touch.

“Your skin is as smooth as the finest silks, as soft as the plushest velvets. I love the way you feel beneath my hands.” Tucking his chin into his chest, he watched the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. Her pink nipples scraped over his chest with the motion, calling his fingers to their peaks.

“You love having my hands on you, too,” Jace whispered, cupping her breasts and feeling her shudder against his palms. “You tremble beneath my touch, rubbing into me, seeking more. Do you know what that does to me?”

Teasing her nipples with the lightest of touches, Amanda responded with a soul-deep sensuality, straining his control. She moaned slightly,

arching into his touch, openly offering him more of her body, but Jace held back.

“I want to bathe you, Amanda. I want to let my hands glide all over you, trace every curve, memorize every line. Will you give this to me, baby?”

Chapter 24

How could Amanda say no when his words wrapped around her heart with such warmth they melted all reason? Jace intoxicated her with the things he said, with the way he touched her—like she was some fragile piece of artwork he could easily damage with his rough, oversized hands.

It wasn't in Amanda's willpower to resist when he moved her so her back faced him. True to his words, Jace lathered up his hands and used them as her washcloth. Slowly, he worked his way down her shoulders and over her back. Using the palms of his hands to press in with deep, circular motions, he massaged her with every stroke. It took only seconds for her muscles to start going soft, making her slouch into his strength.

Jace shifted, pressing her forward to rest against the tiled wall. Free of her weight, he stepped back, placing a kiss on her shoulder. The simple gesture turned into a seductive lure as his lips traced after his hands. The rough glide of his stubbled cheek down the curve of her spine set off a frenzy of little electric shocks. They chased after his mouth, making pleasure bubble down her spine to pool where his kiss rested.

Two weeks ago it would have mortified her to let a man rest his cheek against the small of her back, to feel his lips brushing over the top of her buttocks as his hands rubbed the two globes between his hands. It did bring a flush to her cheeks when Jace slid one hand down into the crease, dividing her ass to trace the line straight to the clenched opening hidden in the folds.

"Has Cody taken you here?"

"Yes." She could hear the tremble in her own voice, the power of the suggestion she could feel coming.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes."

Heated memories melted away any reserves of nervousness, awakening an ache Jace fed with his touch. Dipping his hand lower, he followed the

curve of her body to cup the swollen folds of her cunt. The tension returned to her muscles. They shivered with it as her tender folds wept for a deeper, more intimate touch.

“Do you know how much I enjoyed fucking into this pussy? So tight, so wet, you keep heaven buried between these thighs. It’s a paradise unlike any I’ve ever invaded before. I could live the rest of my life here, melded as one with you, and die the happiest man in the world. But I can’t deny I want to take you here.”

Jace’s hand slid back up along the crease until his fingertips rested against the entrance to her back opening. Slowly he pushed one finger inward, then two, groaning slightly as her muscles clamped down, trying to restrict him from forging deeper.

“Will you let me have this? Have you like this?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Amanda. I promise I’ll make it good for you, make you feel better than anybody ever has.”

She couldn’t focus enough on the details to understand Jace’s vow included his brother. Even if Amanda had caught the implication, she would never have suspected it meant anything more than a passionate promise made in the heat of the moment.

A moment that dragged out into one long, sensual flow as his hands resumed their gentle, erotic cleaning. Jace worked his way down over her legs, melting muscles and turning bones to rubber. When he lifted one leg so he could clean it with deep, warm strokes of his hands, she arched her hips off the wall, silently begging for more.

Then he put his mouth on her, suckling kisses along her instep, tiny nips at her toes and then...

* * * *

Oh, God, he’s sucking my toes!

She slid straight down the wall. Who knew how she would have landed if Jace hadn’t caught her and lowered her the rest of the way into the tub. The deep, husky sound of his chuckle made her smile as he turned her over.

“I haven’t finished cleaning the front of you.”

"Forget about it," Amanda murmured as she twined her arms around his neck and tried to bring his lips to hers.

He resisted. "I don't want to."

"Please, Jace."

"No." He unwound her arms and leaned back on his knees. "I told you I intended to explore this entire luscious body of yours, and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

As he spoke, he pressed her back into the wall. Amanda didn't have the strength to fight. Instead she slumped there, letting Jace spread her legs wide, revealing every intimate detail of her body to his gaze. He looked. No shame or guilt crossed Jace's features as he took a slow tour of her body.

From the way his features tightened, his gaze darkened, Amanda could tell Jace liked what he saw. His gaze held the reality she hadn't been able to accept coming from his lips. For all his tender words, the truth gleamed from Jace's predatory smile. Amanda was his prey.

Fat droplets rained down from the showerhead, splashing over his head and shoulders, dripping down the ridges of his muscles, emphasizing their size and definition as she followed their path down toward the largest muscle he had. It was saluting her, assuring her that at the end of this night she'd find all the satisfaction she could stand, maybe even more.

She found herself suddenly feeling shy in the face of such focused power. She'd have closed her legs if Jace hadn't already pulled her low enough to lodge himself between her knees. Licking her lips, she looked for another way to hide.

"Maybe we should turn off the shower and turn on the tub."

"I don't think so."

"But you're blocking all the water. How will you wash the soap off?"

"I'm not going to let you hide from me, Amanda." As he spoke, Jace lifted one of her legs, running his hands down her calves to rub over her ankles and lift her foot toward his lips.

"I wouldn't let you hide anything. I want you to give it all to me. Your trust, pleasure, your honesty at all moments." Jace brushed a kiss across the arch of her foot before pinning her with his gaze. "Can you give that to me?"

"You're like a dream come true," Amanda whispered, knowing that, like a dream, this would all fade to nothing in the bright light of the rising

sun. For now, though, she lived in the moment, giving him exactly what he asked for.

“Then you must have some magical powers to have conjured me up, because I have never experienced anything like this in my life.”

Whether or not Amanda was truly special to Jace, he made her feel like she was. No man had ever made her feel this way, beautiful, irresistible, and desirable in a way that went beyond mere attraction of flesh.

Then he lifted her foot to his lips again and she couldn’t think at all. Who would have ever known feet were so sensitive? Every part of her felt sensitive under the tantalizing motions of his hands and the gentle caress of his lips. Slowly, almost painfully, he worked his way up her foot, around her ankles, along her calves, over her knees, and across her thighs to send a heated breath over where she most desperately needed his attention.

Closing her eyes tightly, Amanda waited for him to continue his sensual exploration. When instead her other foot lifted, her gaze flew open, catching on Jace’s smile. He had to know what he was doing to her, how he was driving her insane with his slow, steady explorations.

Amanda didn’t fault him for it. She appreciated the contrast from Cody’s hard-driven needs. Letting her eyes drift closed, Amanda gave herself over to Jace’s care. He treated her like a queen, like an angel, as he worshiped his way back up her body. Then he skipped over the part of her that ached for his attention so bad it hurt. She couldn’t help but vocalize a complaint.

“Jace?”

“Hmm?” He didn’t even lift his head from where he rested against her stomach.

“Please, stop teasing me now. I can’t take anymore.”

Murmuring between kisses, Jace made it hard for her to follow his words. “What is it you want, baby? Tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

“Make love to me.”

“I am, Amanda. I’m loving every inch of you.”

She moaned, rolling her head along the wall. “I need you inside me. I need to feel you deep inside.”

Finally he paused, lifting his head from her tummy to let her catch a breath. “But I haven’t even gotten to the good parts, baby.”

“I don’t care. Get to them later.”

"I want to get to them now. I want to learn everything about you, Amanda, every place you like to be touched, every way a man can please you. I want to know every secret to your desire."

"Why? Why do you want that?"

"So I can always please you, baby." Jace smiled, his gaze shining with something more than lust. "Every time I take you in my arms I want to give you more pleasure than any other man can. I want to be special to you."

"You are." *Oh, God, was he?*

Amanda would never forget this night. Never forget Jace. Whatever happened in the future, she'd hold this night close to her heart and cherish it.

"Let me have this, Amanda, and I will give you everything, anything you ever wanted."

"Jace..." Amanda didn't know the words to express what she felt.

"I need this Amanda. Don't deny me."

She couldn't. Jace stole the ability from her. He didn't rush, and Amanda didn't push him as he worked his way up her torso. No protest came to her lips, not even when he skipped over her breasts with barely more than a teasing breath across her swollen tips, but it didn't matter. Jace discovered all the hidden little places that made pleasure hum through her body. With his lips and hands, he worked her arousal up into a full-scale symphony of need.

By the time his hands covered her breasts, Amanda didn't care whether he showed them any attention or not. Her attitude shifted as he began to massage the swollen globes, his fingers sweeping over her nipples in a never-ending cycle of teasing.

The first swipe of his tongue over one engorged nipple trumpeted the arrival of his kiss and a whole new level of need. Jace treated her puckered tip to the same loving exploration he'd shown the rest of her body. When the first tremors of her release started to quake through her body, Amanda didn't have the mind left to realize Jace had pulled her orgasm forth with just his mouth on her breast.

It wasn't the violent explosion of rapture she'd grown accustomed to under Cody's tutelage. Like a mid-afternoon storm sweeping across the open plains, it started as the barest of breezes, slowly building in intensity. The pleasure multiplied as gentle waves cascaded over each other until they drowned her in a rush of pure, golden rapture.

Amanda didn't even notice when Jace's mouth dipped, following his hands. All she knew was he was there, breathing over the swollen folds of her pussy. With a thoroughness that guaranteed no end to her orgasm, Jace explored her delicate folds.

Amanda could no more stop the release flooding out of her body than she could the moans falling from her lips. Jace didn't appear to mind. He tasted her with the same slow tenderness, licking his way along the slit of her cunt, dipping in to tease the skin hidden beneath, teaching her anew how sensitive she was in more places than just her clit.

Eventually his kiss settled over her hidden bud, sucking it past his teeth and into the warm cavern of his mouth. His tongue teased and tormented the little bundle of nerves, but never escalated the speed of seduction, stretching out her climax into an endless abyss she just kept falling through.

She was lost in the heated light of Utopia's splendor. So beyond reason, Amanda could no longer distinguish one sensation from another as he lavished attention on her most sensitive flesh. Only the slight ease of the intense pleasure whispered through her when his head lifted.

The rough tickles of his coarse chest hair traced his movements as he came over her. The heavy weight of his muscles pinned her back into the cold side of the porcelain tub.

"Open your eyes, baby." He followed the order with a quick series of gentle kisses across her closed lids. Amanda did as he asked, finding his gaze as warm and tender as his loving had been and just as hot.

"You're so beautiful. I want to watch as I make you mine. And you are mine, aren't you, Amanda?"

She couldn't deny it any more than she could say it. If it hadn't been for the longing she saw in Jace's gaze, the love reflecting out, Amanda would have frozen at his words, at the fear they normally would have inspired in her.

Instead of being paralyzed with fear, she opened herself up to the hard nudge of his cock at the entrance to her body. Eyes wide and locked on his, she held nothing back as he slowly forged his way into her until he had seated his full length deep inside her body.

"It's like coming home," Jace whispered, and Amanda couldn't argue.

"It's never been like this before." She'd never given any lover more than her body until now.

“That’s because this is perfection.”

And it was. The perfect harmony of two bodies, two souls merging into one. A seamless joining, it didn’t even break as he began to pull back out. In a rhythm as old as the tides, he took possession of everything Amanda was and she gave it willingly to him.

Smooth, easy strokes kept her drowning beneath the sea of rapture claiming her body. The windstorm had built to hard and fast now. There was no holding back the ravaging break that tore her soul from her body, leaving her writhing beneath him. Then it all snapped back to her, and she was in the vortex. It was a place of pure beauty, and it entranced her.

When Amanda finally wafted back down to reality, she became aware of a few things. Jace weighed a ton. He was still hard, buried deep inside her and Amanda was almost positive he hadn’t come.

“The water’s gotten cold,” he mumbled into her shoulder. Jace lifted his head, and Amanda could see in the tightness of his features how right she’d been.

“Why?”

Jace blinked and then scowled. “Why what, baby?”

“You didn’t come.”

“Oh, that.” Jace smiled slightly, probably the best he could do under the strain. “I wasn’t making love to you for the release, Amanda.”

“You weren’t?” She didn’t understand.

“No.” His arms shifted from her sides so he could cup her face. Gently, Jace’s fingers traced over her lips and cheeks. “It was about me showing you how beautiful you are, about how much you mean to me. Tomorrow, when the doubts set in, when you think back about what this night meant, remember this, Amanda. Your pleasure will always come first.”

She blinked back the tears burning in her eyes. Nobody ever put her first, had ever cared enough about her. Nobody until Jace.

“I can see it in your eyes. You understand now, don’t you, Amanda?”

“Yes.” She breathed out the word. “I understand.”

“Good.” Jace grinned, breaking the intensity of the moment. “Because this water really is cold, and I imagine Cody’s gotten quite hot by now.”

“Cody.”

She hadn't even thought about him. Her eyes cut toward the door. He was waiting out there, stewing probably. There would be no escaping his wrath. Not after she'd pulled a gun on him.

"He's going to punish me for earlier."

"Probably." Jace pulled back, leaving her cold. "But not tonight."

"You're not like him." Amanda's gaze switched back to Jace.

He spun the faucets, cutting off the water, before he turned back toward her. "No. I'm not into the whole domination scene, but I do like to be in control."

"Is Knox..."

"Like Cody?" Jace offered Amanda a hand, helping her to her feet. Her legs wobbled and she leaned against the wall as Jace reached for the towels. "I'm surprised you even ask. I think it would be obvious."

It was. Knox breathed domination. He didn't know any other way. There would be no rules, no safe words, nothing but pleasure in Knox's bed. As if she needed to hear it, Jace paused, towel in hand. "Cody plays, Knox doesn't."

Amanda allowed Jace to lift her over the edge of the tub and wrap her in a big towel. She clutched the edges close, wearing the terrycloth like armor. "If I agree to this...relationship, I'll have to sleep with him? Knox?"

Jace didn't answer at first, focusing instead on taking another towel to dry her hair. Finally he sighed and met her gaze head-on. She liked that about him. Even when he knew what he had to say might upset her, he faced her directly.

"You're a free woman, Amanda. You don't have to sleep with anybody you don't want to. I'm just asking you to be open to the possibilities."

"Knox hates me."

"No, he doesn't."

Amanda shot him a disbelieving look. "You were there today. The only thing he might like about me is my body."

"No," Jace repeated adamantly. "That's not the way Knox is."

"Then what way is he?"

"Knox..." Jace lifted his eyes toward the ceiling as he searched for words. They appeared to be escaping him. "Knox's issues are best left for you to discover on your own."

Amanda rolled her eyes. "Issues. What crap."

“Please, Amanda, just give him a chance. He’s not half the cold bastard he likes to portray himself as. Speaking of devils, you don’t really think you can hide from Cody in here all night, do you?”

Damn. Jace saw right through her attempts to stall the inevitable.

* * * *

Cody gave in to the aggression prowling through his body and paced around Amanda’s bedroom. He should never have let Jace go in there. Any blind idiot could see the strength of the bond developing between Jace and Amanda and what had Cody done? *I facilitated it.*

And just how stupid was that? *Amanda is supposed to be mine first, just like Sharon.* The sudden thought froze him, bringing him to a sudden stop. He didn’t want to think about her, not now, not here in Amanda’s bedroom.

It made Cody feel like a traitor. Worse, because the jealousy he felt over Jace reflected how fond his heart had grown of Amanda. Sharing Sharon with his brothers had been easy for Cody, because no matter what happened, Cody knew in his heart he was special. Sharon never looked at either of his brothers with the love she’d gazed at Cody with. Amanda wore the same expression, but her eyes went to Jace, not Cody.

Settling onto the edge of her bed, Cody gripped his head, trying to get it to stop thinking so much. Things were out of hand. He couldn’t deny Amanda from Jace, especially not when it meant betraying Sharon. In a glittering moment of late-night revelation, Cody could see now he really wasn’t jealous of Jace.

I’m jealous of what she and Jace have. Angry because I had it and lost it. That’s what cut so deep. Seeing the two of them together only aggravated the still raw wound in his heart. It was the punishment he deserved, but Cody couldn’t handle it. It might make him the biggest bastard in the world, but he couldn’t be here tonight.

Chapter 25

Monday, July 7th

“He left?”

Cindy’s eyes rounded, her hand freezing in mid lift. A French fry hung limply between her fingers and Amanda reached out to snatch it. Her own plate clean, Amanda eyed the rest of Cindy’s fries.

“Where did he go?”

Amanda shrugged, avoiding the question by glancing around at the lunch crowd. The Pit served up the county’s best barbeque. Smoke and rich scents of slow-roasted meats pumped out of the old-fashioned barbeque pits luring in the hungry midday crowd.

Cindy and she had snagged one of the booths, an exceptionally rare accomplishment. Most of the other patrons sat at one of the long running tables that stretched across the dining room.

They needed their privacy today as Amanda spilled every salacious detail of the past week, right up to walking out of the bathroom with Jace to find Cody missing. Without Will around to explain the male side of things, Amanda needed Cindy to help figure out what the woman was supposed to do.

“Amanda,” Cindy snapped. “If you didn’t want to talk about it, you shouldn’t have brought it up. Now where did Cody go?”

“I don’t know,” Amanda retorted, focusing in on her friend. “When I took Jace home this morning, Cody’s truck was already parked back at the ranch. So whatever happened, he obviously ended up at home, but that can’t be a good sign, can it?”

“Why are you asking me?” Cindy laughed. “I can handle questions about how to deal with a man, but not two. I don’t know anything about taking on two.”

Amanda's shoulders slumped with the misery she'd been suffering all morning. It had been hard waiting for lunch to be able to escape the office and talk to somebody about what happened.

"You think I'm a slut."

"Me?" Cindy shook her head. "You do know me, right?"

"Okay, I think I'm a slut," Amanda corrected.

"I think you're safe from wearing that title." Cindy snorted, pulling her plate closer when Amanda tried to swipe another fry. "And food isn't going to help you feel better. At least, not mine."

"Sorry," Amanda muttered.

"You know, the way I see it, this thing with the Reese brothers could be the greatest thing ever. Three rich, hot men, servicing your every need. Not a bad deal."

"But?" Amanda knew one lurked in Cindy's pause.

"It could also be Pandora's Box." Cindy shrugged. "I guess it just all depends on what you do next."

Amanda had been asking herself the same thing all morning. Jace asked her to give him a chance, to give a relationship with all the brothers a chance, but if that's what Cody wanted, then why did he flee? Certainly not because she'd drawn a gun on him. Defiance turned Cody on. *So why did he leave?*

Did it even matter? Jace didn't know the real her. He probably wouldn't have been half as sweet if he did. Maybe he didn't ever have to learn about the rest. Maybe she could put the past behind her and actually become the woman he deserved, they deserved. Well, not Knox. He deserved her in "as is" condition.

"Ahh." Amanda dug the heels of her palm into her eyes and tried to scrub the tension away. "I hate men. I mean, there are too many of them in this equation."

Amanda's hands dropped to the table as she settled into her tirade. "Take all the considerations you normally go through with a single man, and then multiply it by three. It's too much. I mean, I like Cody, but do I see a future with him? Not really. Why would I? The man never talks about anything serious. It's all just fuck, fuck, fuck."

She couldn't help but roll her eyes. Cody drove her absolutely nuts. "Then there is Jace. He's great. I mean, cuddle-up-in-front-of-a-fire great,

but I don't know if he's starting any wild ones. Much more of a slow burner, if you know what I mean. Of course, Knox would burn down the whole house around me, and apparently he's next on the menu.

"Please." Amanda leaned in, dropping her voice. "I can barely keep up with Cody. I haven't gotten a good night's sleep since meeting him. Now I'm supposed to be scheduling two more brothers...that's just too much sex. I'll be getting laid more than the biggest porn star. I'm going to die young from exhaustion, probably waste away to nothing right there in the bed."

Cindy blinked and then just burst into laughter, completely unsympathetic to Amanda's plight.

"Gee, thanks." Amanda swiped a fry. "Thanks for the love and support."

Snorting back the chuckles, Cindy straightened up and made a show of clearing her voice. "You can go on all the tears you want, Amanda. End of the day, you only have two choices. Go forward or retreat."

Instantly, the image of Cody and Jace appeared in her mind. Never see them again? The very idea was physically painful. The choice wasn't just hers, and hadn't Cody made his decision last night with his vanishing act?

"So?" Cindy prodded. "Which direction are you headed?"

"Maybe I've been spending a little too much time with Cody." It hurt her to say, but Amanda felt compelled to be reasonable. "Jace and him have me so twisted up, I don't know what I want."

Cindy's lips pursed as she nodded. "All these years, how many times have I given you advice?"

This time Amanda got to laugh. "About every other breath."

"And how often do you actually listen to me?"

"Never." Amanda smirked.

"My point exactly. You always do whatever the hell it is you want. That's to say you always know what you want. Now you sit here and tell me you don't?"

Amanda shrugged. "Yeah."

"That ain't right." Cindy shook her head. "I can't tell you what to do in the long run, but I think you need a night off. Why don't we go out tonight?"

"Out?"

"Yeah, just you and me. A girls' night out."

Amanda thought about it for a second. "Sounds good, but what should I tell—"

"You're not getting the point. Don't tell them nothing. Let them sit and wonder what the hell is going on for the night."

Amanda smiled. She liked the sound of that. "We can go bowling."

Cindy stilled, giving her a funny look. "Don't get too wild now, Amanda. Maybe we should start off slow."

"Oh, come on," Amanda pleaded. "I know you hate bowling, but with Will gone I haven't got anybody to rent shoes with."

Heaving a sigh, Cindy wrinkled her nose. "Fine, but I get to choose what we do after. Speaking of the old dipshit, you heard from him lately?"

"Don't call him that." Amanda knew Cindy detested Will, but that didn't mean she liked the long-standing divide. "He's not dumb."

"Well, he certainly ain't bright," Cindy retorted. "Running off to find himself, he should try looking in a mirror."

Amanda groaned. "Cindy, you know it's not like that."

"No?" Cindy met Amanda's gaze. "You still think he checked himself into rehab?"

"It makes the most sense." Amanda shrugged. "I mean, he's completely incommunicado, which is what they do in those programs. Isn't it?"

"Well, I'll tell you this. If he comes back sober, I'll have a lot more respect for him."

"You should have some now," Amanda snapped. "You know what he's been through."

"The same things you have. Don't be trying to justify his problems to me. We all make our own decisions. If you just open your eyes, you'd see the man's no good."

It didn't matter to Amanda. Will was like kin, and a person never turned their back on family. "He's trying."

"Or maybe he's dead." Cindy snorted.

"What a horrible thing to say," Amanda gasped.

"Just saying, you looked at the news lately, Mandy? There's a drug war sweeping across the county and a whole bunch of bodies are piling up."

No, Amanda hadn't heard or paid any attention. Why would she? "None of that has anything to do with Will."

"I didn't say it did. It's just he could be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Innocent people do die."

Amanda blinked, letting Cindy's comments sink in. She could be right. It's not like any morgue would know to call her. Will didn't have any other family. They could just dump his body in a potter's field and he'd spend eternity lost.

"Oh, for God's sake, forget I said anything," Cindy muttered, drawing Amanda's gaze back to hers. "And don't be looking at me like that."

* * * *

"Where the hell did you run off to last night?"

It had been a long morning, and from start to present, it didn't go right in one single way. Jace had gotten back to the ranch late, missed his brothers and his breakfast. Catching up meant suffering Knox's annoyance for his tardiness. Dirty and tired, Jace had finally caught up with the originating source of his bad day.

Sidling his horse right alongside Cody's, Jace blasted his younger brother with the question he'd been waiting to ask. One he was sure Amanda would spend all day wondering. Jace had seen her look when she'd spotted Cody's truck parked under the carport. It hadn't been good. It had been thoughtful.

A scary thing in Jace's book. Instinctively, he knew a thinking Amanda could very quickly become a dangerous Amanda. After all the work he'd put in to setting everything to right, Jace intended to take his anger and his pound of flesh out of the brother who'd wrecked everything. Not that Cody looked particularly contrite.

"What's your problem?" Cody growled back.

"I don't know," Jace shot back, real short on patience. "Maybe it has something to do with my brother ditching me mid-course with Amanda last night. Why the hell did you leave?"

Cody shrugged. "I was tired. Honestly, that woman wears me out, and since I had you filling in, I figured I could just sneak off and actually get a night's sleep."

"Don't bullshit me, Cody."

"I'm not bullshitting you." Cody shot him a dirty look, one that had Jace stilling. He didn't believe his brother for a moment, but he began to suspect Cody hadn't simply sulked off. Something a good deal more volatile moved in his little brother's eyes.

"Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine." Cody scowled. "I would have thought you'd thank me. You pretty much asked for time alone with Amanda last night. I gave it to you. So why are you coming at me now?"

"Because you hurt her."

Cody swallowed and looked away. "Yeah, well, I didn't mean to."

"Just tell me why, Cody?"

"Amanda loves you," Cody snapped, showing Jace an honest emotion. "She loves you and not me. Okay? I'm sorry if it happens to bother me, being the third wheel."

Jace blinked, not following Cody's logic at all. Problem was, Jace kept getting stuck on the first part. "You think she loves me?"

"Oh, God," Cody grunted before shooting Jace a dirty look. "Yeah, I do. In fact, I know it. She looks at you the same way Sharon used to look at me."

Jace's goofy grin started to flatten out as he began to recognize Cody's problem. "I'm sorry, man. I know how hard it is for you. We all miss Sharon. It's—"

"You're such a fucking idiot," Cody spat. "It's not missing Sharon that's the problem. It's because I don't miss her...not around Amanda. I look at her and she's looking at you the way—"

"You're looking at her," Jace finished. "You're in love with Amanda."

"And she's not in love with me."

"You don't know that," Jace snorted. "I think she's pretty damn addicted."

"To the sex." Cody's shoulders slumped and Jace's heart went out to his younger brother.

Being the youngest had always been Cody's cross to bear. He'd never been better than his brothers at much, never gotten to do anything first. The only thing Cody had all to himself was Sharon's love. Jace had known, it had been obvious. Sharon had loved Cody differently—more.

“Listen.” Jace didn’t have any more anger left in him. “I get you got your issues, but here’s the thing. You’re punishing Amanda for something you don’t even know is true. I don’t know if Amanda loves you or not, or if she loves me. I do know running out in the middle of the night doesn’t help.”

Jace tugged his hat down low and gave Cody one last hard look before spurring his horse forward.

* * * *

Cody watched Jace ride off feeling worse than he had all morning. Right up until Jace’s talk, Cody had convinced himself he’d done the right thing last night. Now, though, a part of him felt itchy, argumentative.

It had been foolish to tell Jace he loved Amanda. Jace probably thought Cody was some kind of sop, and wasn’t he? Running off in the middle of the night like some chickenshit? Turned yellow by a woman, Cody’s shame knew no end.

Amanda wasn’t anything like Sharon. With Sharon, Cody had just known. It’d been easy to talk with her, to be with her. She’d relaxed Cody, and Amanda made him want to climb walls. God, but the woman lit an ache in him that just wouldn’t end.

He’d thought about it all night, trying to accept that all he had with Amanda was passion. Cody didn’t want to accept it though, because, God’s honest truth, he hadn’t felt this alive in so long. Cody had been lonely a long time now, and it had to end.

It would, starting tonight. Tonight Cody would undo the damage he’d done. Tonight he and Amanda would talk. No sex.

* * * *

Amanda glanced at the clock on her radio as she pulled into her drive. Three-thirty, more than enough time to shower, change, and get the hell out of Cody’s way. He was coming. Even if he hadn’t left a message on her cell phone saying he would be over at five, Amanda could have guessed his intent by the eight other missed calls she’d gotten from his phone.

Cody wanted to talk, but Amanda didn't want to listen. Jace and he had already screwed her head so far around, she didn't know which direction was forward anymore. Well, tonight she was going to untwist. And Cody? He could sit on her porch and wait.

Maybe the time to think would do him some good, because Amanda honestly didn't think Cody knew what he wanted. He said he wanted to get to know her, but the truth was he didn't make much effort. Hell, half the reason she didn't know what to do was because Cody didn't know what he wanted.

"Amanda."

Keys in hand, inches from her door, she froze at the familiar-sounding voice behind her. Slowly, almost fearing to see what she'd find, Amanda turned. There it came, the stillness, the numbness. She didn't know what to feel, much less say.

"What?" The large man in front of her smirked. The gesture pulled on the scar running the length of his cheek—a beer bottle in a bar fight. "No greeting for your old man?"

The snide humor in his tone hardened her emotions and Amanda knew instantly what she wanted to say. "You aren't my father."

"Oh." Davey Johnson's squirmy little brown eyes rolled up in the hairy ridge of his eyebrows. He had thick eyebrows, and they waggled when he got mad, something that used to strike fear into her as a child. "That's the line now, huh? Last time it was 'get the hell out of my life.' Now I don't even exist."

"I haven't got time for this," Amanda muttered, turning back to her door.

"I drove all the way from California, and you ain't got time?" Amanda knew violence could easily follow the hard sound of Davey's voice, and she rushed to get her door unlocked. "Look at me when I'm talking to you."

"No!" Amanda kicked the door in. Gaining the confidence of an escape, she turned to glare at her dad. "I don't take orders from you, Davey. I don't give a shit about you. All that I care about is that your ugly, old ass is littering up my yard, and if you don't get lost, you're going to be talking to the cops."

"Had that conversation more than once, dearie," Davey snarled. "So don't think that's much of a threat."

“Tony’s sheriff now.” Amanda ran a disrespectful glance down her father’s large frame. “You know it’s not uncommon for an old man to have an accident, especially in jail. Men your age...bones break so easily.”

Amanda bet on getting hit, and Davey took a step in like he planned to deliver, but at the last second he relaxed. When he coughed up a smile, she knew he wanted money. *Never beat the person you’re about to beg from*, first rule in Davey Johnson’s book.

“Yeah, you are most certainly my daughter. Guess I can’t keep telling people that slut bore me another man’s bastard, huh?”

Amanda didn’t jump to his bait, not wanting to take the trip. Instead, she worked on getting him off her porch. “How much?”

Davey’s eyes widened at the question, and for a moment it looked like he’d play insulted innocent. At the last second, he just shrugged. “I need thirty thousand.”

“Dollars?” Amanda gaped. He had to be out of his mind.

“No, chickens,” Davey snapped. “Now, you are going to be nice and help me out, or we going to do this the hard way, Amanda?”

She didn’t even have to think about it. Stepping back, Amanda slammed the door on Davey and wisely threw the latch. Not trusting he’d play it nice, she backed away, fumbling for the cell phone in her purse. The worry over calling the cops became moot when Davey’s heavy stomps moved down the porch steps.

Not a minute later, she heard the roar of his motorcycle. He must have been waiting on her or she’d have heard him coming. Anybody Davey Johnson took an interest in had a right to be concerned. Amanda, as his daughter, had the right to have a drink. *Forget bowling*.

Chapter 26

Tuesday, July 8th

“Come on, sweetheart. Wake up.”

The words might have been sweet, but the tone held the hard cut of impatience. Amanda blinked, trying to process the strangeness of her surroundings. The unrecognized male voice, the too thin mattress beneath her, the shoes still on her feet and a world defined by lines...actually metal bars. *Oh, yeah.*

Smacking her lips, Amanda rolled into a sitting position on the small cot tucked into the corner of her jail cell. She was too afraid of what the former occupants of the Humble City jailhouse’s lavish accommodations might have left behind to even take off her shoes when she’d stretched out on the cot. Even now she could almost feel bugs all over her.

A shower, Amanda needed one now. Rubbing a rough hand over her eyes, she watched the lights exploding behind closed lids as she worked her hand up and over her forehead to shove her hair away from her face.

“Come on,” the deputy snapped. “I don’t have all day.”

“I don’t really care,” she muttered to herself. Everything had just gone wrong since yesterday evening. It was all Cindy’s fault.

“That’s nice.” A beefy hand closed over her arm and jerked her up. “And I don’t really care if you want to sit on your fat ass all day doing nothing. You can’t do it here.”

“And I always used to wonder why people shot cops.”

That earned her a forceful yank as he dragged her out of the cell and down the short corridor leading to the exit. “Come on.”

“You know I’m a personal friend of the sheriff.”

"I have no doubt," the deputy shot back not even looking at her. He just pulled her through a metal door and back into the little office they'd used to book her.

"What happened to Cindy?"

"Who?" The deputy pushed her over toward the corner.

"The blonde I came in with last night," Amanda snapped.

"I wasn't here then."

Just because of the deputy's surly attitude, Amanda pestered him with questions for the next fifteen minutes. She managed to drag out the release process long enough to actually have the deputy all but shove her out the door—probably hoping she never came back, which Amanda could get behind. Being arrested hadn't been fun, and she didn't really want to do it again. Neither did she enjoy stepping out into the bright sunlight.

Given how quiet the square was, Amanda knew it had to be late morning, meaning late for work. *Screw it.* She hadn't taken a day off in over a year. Time to call in for once. Flipping open her phone, her eyes widened at the number of missed calls the little machine had logged...twenty-three. Amanda bet all of them were from either Cody or Jace. *I'm in trouble now.*

Amanda had drawn the line in the sand last night, and for the life of her, she still couldn't understand what had possessed her. She'd given up a night of wild pleasure in the comfort of her own bed, and for what? To be caught half naked in public, arrested, and put to bed in a filthy little cell? *And where the hell is Cindy?*

Oh, who gives a shit? Right then, Amanda felt too numb to care. She had a long walk home in clothes itchy with filth and a body stinking slightly with the sweat of sleep.

First gotta call the boss, before I lose the job. Amanda couldn't afford that, and thankfully Gina understood with almost no explanation needed. With at least one worry put to bed, Amanda clicked her phone closed and took the first step down Main Street.

"Well, isn't it shocking just which Johnson spent the night in jail."

Oh, my God. The gates of hell must have opened up, and she was getting her due for all her evil ways. Nothing else explained how Davey came to be standing on the sidewalk right in front of the police station. Surely, it was a place he'd like to avoid.

"So, you ready to finish that conversation now, little girl?"

Amanda clenched her jaw tight and stepped around her father. The move dared him to touch her, right there. He could go on and lay her out, it would be a short trip to his cell, and Amanda would at least have a night's worth of rest. Not dumb, never that, Davey just held his ground, letting her bang off his shoulder.

"You can't avoid talking to me forever, Amanda."

She could damn well try.

"Besides, I could just ask your boyfriend for the money. From the size of his truck, I'd say he has some to spare."

Twenty feet away, that's as far as she got before Davey reeled her in. The problem was she knew he wasn't just threatening. Turning slowly around, she looked at the man she'd been cursed with from birth and wondered what it would take to get rid of him.

"I don't have thirty thousand dollars, Davey." Amanda snorted. "Shit, I don't even have three, so I don't know what it is you want."

"But your boyfriend does."

"You leave him the hell alone, Davey." She shouldn't have shown him she cared, because now her dad knew her weakness. The bastard gloated over it.

"I got to say, honey, I am impressed. I grant you ain't as ugly as some dogs, but that man looked a might out of your league. Must be spreading them legs often to keep him around. You might as well go ahead and put a price onto that, honey." Davey winked at her. "Make it an honest deal."

"You can have your money when I'm dead," Amanda spat. Using it as her exit line, she turned to storm off, not bothering to respond to Davey's holler.

"That can be arranged, honey."

She made it two blocks down to the streetlight before it dawned on her she was walking in the wrong direction. Not about to cross over her father, she turned to make a wide U-turn around the bastard. It meant going one block over before heading back in the right direction.

Less than a minute later, Amanda found herself feeling like a rat in a trap as she ducked down the small service alley to hide. The bright rays of sun winked off the lights on top of the Bronco trolling down the street.

Tony. He was the last person she wanted to see. The bastard had laughed at her last night. Not to mention she cringed at Tony running into Davey. If

possible, Tony hated her father more than Amanda did. Tony had his reasons, things Amanda still felt guilty for.

That was kind of her dad's thing, making her friends suffer as a way of controlling Amanda. Now Davey had set his eyes on Cody or Jace, whichever one he saw her with. Amanda stumbled to a stop. *And just when would that have been?*

Amanda couldn't figure it out. Sure enough Davey wasn't above lurking and spying, but he'd only mentioned one. The last time she'd been with one Reese brother, she'd been with two. If Davey had seen that, he would have said so. It brought Amanda back to wondering just when her dad had gotten into town and how much he had seen.

It didn't really matter. Amanda shook her head and started back down the road. Soon enough, Davey would figure out whom she'd been seeing and how much he was worth. Davey was about to make life hell for her. Worse, he could easily succeed at destroying whatever she had going with Jace and Cody.

Amanda's grim thoughts got cut off by the ringing of her phone. Not really in a good enough mood to be social, she ignored it for the first three minutes. Whoever called, they didn't give up, and she pulled the phone out half expecting to see Cody's number on the screen.

Tony? He'd probably just finished with Davey, calling to warn her. A sweet gesture, it didn't improve her mood. Why should it? Thanks to Tony, she now knew what it was like to spend the night in jail. *Man has to know he's on my shit list right now.*

If not, Amanda would be happy to inform him. "What? What the hell do you want?"

"Amanda. Oh, thank God."

Amanda stumbled to a halt. "Cindy?"

"Yeah, it's me. Look, I need—"

"What are you doing calling me from Tony's?"

"Tony—"

"Never mind." Amanda cut Cindy off. "I don't care."

"Please, Amanda, I need your—"

"I don't want to hear it," Amanda snapped. "Whatever Tony did, you deserve."

"I know you're mad, but—"

“Mad? Mad?” Amanda gasped. “Do you even comprehend how incredibly pissed off at you I am right now?”

“Yes. I understand, but—”

“Thanks to you, I now have a record. I have a fucking mug shot because of you. And where is yours? You’re the guilty one, and I’m the idiot sleeping on a flea-infested cot!”

“I know and I’m really sorry, but I—”

“Sorry?” Amanda laughed, unable to believe Cindy’s pathetic apology. “You think that’s going to get me to forgive you? Because I’m thinking begging and lots of gifts and maybe—”

“Will you shut up for a moment? Please!” Cindy yelled.

“That’s not begging,” Amanda snapped. “So I’m going to hang up this phone.”

“I swear to God, you hang up and I will tell everybody you know you fucked two brothers at once,” Cindy snarled.

“Ah!” Amanda shrieked. “You’re blackmailing me?”

“Yes. I am that desperate.”

“This is so not over.”

“Fine. We’ll settle it at a later point. Right now, I need your help.”

“Of course, you do.” Amanda sighed. She didn’t believe for a moment Cindy would tell anybody Amanda’s secret, but the fact she would threaten spoke volumes of how much trouble her friend was in. That might force Amanda to help, but it didn’t make her happy about it. “What is it you need?”

“I need you to get over to Tony’s house and get me the hell out of these cuffs before he gets back.”

Amanda blinked. “Say what?”

* * * *

Jace slammed the chute down, closing off the end of the run. The last of the herd pounded down the little alley made of fencing and spilled into the corral. The day was almost half over, but they weren’t even close to being half done. They needed to sort the cows, have them examined before being moved into the feedlot or sent back out to pasture. With another herd being driven in behind them, it didn’t leave a lot of time to clear out the first one.

Among the hollers of men and the yaps of excited dogs, the herd grumbled around the corral, cranky and annoyed. Occasionally some of the more frisky heifers blared at the men ringing the corral, giving the wranglers a good old-woman's nag for upsetting their day.

The gesture reminded him of the woman who pretty much told him to go "fuck off" last night. Amanda had skipped out on them, so it probably wasn't terribly bright to expect her to call today. Reasonable or not, Jace jumped back down to the ground and looked at his phone. *Eleven twenty-five.*

Like an idiot schoolboy, Jace had been dumb enough to hope the girl he liked would actually make life easier for him. What a waste of effort. There really was no point hoping Amanda could just simply accept the obvious. Women couldn't do that. They had to question everything, worry every detail to death, and then, *maybe*, they might make their decision. Only once they'd preened and fussed enough to drive a man insane. *Even once settled down, women still preen and fuss.*

"Man." Cody jogged up beside him. "That was a hard morning's ride."

Jace lifted his hat to bang the dust out against his thigh. "I think Knox is trying to exhaust us for the night ahead."

Cody smirked, but the small gesture faded quickly away. "Speaking of, she call you?"

"Nah."

Jace settled his hat back, angling the brim down just so it blacked out the sun's harsh glare. He could almost guess the words about to come out of Cody's mouth. All morning Cody had been like a kid asking if they were there yet. If he didn't stop pestering Jace over Amanda, Jace just might have to hit him.

"You gonna call her?"

"Nah."

"Well then I will."

"Give her time." Jace caught Cody's wrist in his hand. "Just give her some time."

"Stop dawdling, you two." Dirt kicked up as Knox brought his horse in close. Jace stepped back as the horse circled around. "Get your asses in gear. We need to get out to the west pasture and help them boys bring in the second herd."

Knox didn't wait to see if his command would be obeyed. Bending his knees into his horse, he shot off in a rain of dust. Jace and Cody exchanged a look, both shaking each other free. The argument came to an artificial stop. It would be a good, hard hour-long ride before they reached the second herd. Nobody would be calling anybody for a while.

* * * *

That didn't mean anybody forgot he intended to call Amanda. Cody had enough of following Jace's lead. He had come to a solid conclusion last night as he sat outside Amanda's house, waiting for her to show up.

Right, wrong, whatever, all Cody knew was he had to have Amanda. The woman had done something to his head and his heart. Now he intended to do something back to her. If he could find her.

Every spare second, he hit the speed dial on his cell, knowing it would eventually annoy her into answering. It took about a half hour and fifteen tries before the ringing finally stopped and the shouting began.

"What?"

She did not just yell at me in that tone. Cody responded with the same harshness. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Sucking cocks. Where have you been?"

Cody's teeth clenched down on his growl. "I'm not in the mood for the attitude, Amanda. I want to know where you were last night."

"Didn't I just answer?"

"Amanda—"

"Cody." She shot his name back at him with the same warning.

"Listen here, little lady, I spent the better part of the evening searching this town for you. We had a date, and I don't take well to being stood up."

"Listen here, you big prick," Amanda snapped. "I'm not some bitch in heat who is at your beck and call. If I don't feel like seeing you at night, then that's my prerogative. You have a problem, maybe you should go harass some other woman."

Cody worked his jaw in one single rotation trying to loosen it up before it broke. "You are walking a fine line here, Amanda."

"Like I give a shit," Amanda snapped back. "I'm tired. I'm hungry. I'm sweaty. I've been walking over this damn town like a damn fool. Between

Cindy, Tony, and my father I'm ready to hurt someone. If you don't want it to be you, I suggest you back off until I get into my house and at least get to take a damn shower!"

"Fine," Cody snarled. "You get your shower and some rest, because when I get over there tonight we're going to have some words, unless of course you plan on running and hiding again."

"I didn't run and hide. I went out with my girlfriend, you bozo."

Cody didn't let the relief of her answer show in his growl. "Whatever. Just be there tonight."

"Fine. I'll be here. Now if you don't mind, I just got home and I'd like—*ahhhhh!*"

Cody pulled tight on the reigns as a scream pierced his ears through the cell phone. Instantly his horse jerked back, rearing up and sending him and his phone crashing into the ground. The horse threw Cody and he reacted instinctively, rolling out of the path of the horse's legs as they slammed to the ground. He gained his feet and swooped in to pick up his cell phone.

"Amanda!"

He could hear her in the fading distance of the phone, screaming and cussing. He strained to hear what she said, listening for another voice or any indication of a struggle. All he could hear was Amanda on the rampage.

"Damnit, Amanda, pick up the phone!"

He didn't know why he bothered. She'd dropped the phone. That much was obvious. In that moment of chaos, Cody wasn't sure what to do. He couldn't even figure out if Amanda needed help or someone needed saving from her.

The sun's glare blinked out as Jace rode up beside him, casting a large shadow all around Cody. "What the hell happened?"

Cody didn't even know where to begin. Instead he let the screaming litany of profanity pouring out the phone do it for him. Jace snatched the phone out of his hands, lifting it to his ear to almost immediately hold it back with a scowl.

"What the hell is wrong with Amanda?"

"I don't know." Cody grabbed back on to his horse's reins and mounted in one, smooth motion. "She said she was going to go inside and get a shower and a nap. Then she just started screaming."

"She's at home then?"

“Best as I can figure.”

Even as Cody answered, Jace already unclipped his phone from his belt. By the time Jace called an SOS to the police station, Cody kicked himself for not thinking to do the obvious.

“You two are lagging behind.” Knox rode up in a cloud of dust and barking dogs.

“I gotta go,” Jace stated, turning his horse, not in the direction of the ranch, but toward town.

“You aren’t leaving me behind.” Cody nudged his own steed into motion.

“What the hell are you two doing?” True to form, Knox maneuvered his horse around and sideways to block both his brothers from just riding off.

“We got work to do.”

“Then call some hands down,” Cody snapped. “We have to go.”

“Go where? What the hell is so important?” Knox’s jaw clenched so tight it cut off the flow of his words for a moment. “Oh, God. Don’t tell me this is about Amanda.”

Chapter 27

The plains separating Jace from Amanda seemed endless. It felt like it took forever for the grass to give over to dirt and dust. Finally asphalt clipped beneath Winston's hooves, and the outskirts of town loomed into the horizon.

Driven by the memory of Amanda's screams, Jace knew he was probably overreacting. No matter how much he tried to assure himself Amanda would be fine, Jace wouldn't be convinced until he saw her safe and whole. He just had to get there to see it with his own eyes.

When Winston's hoofs finally clopped around the corner and onto Amanda's street, the first thing Jace saw were the police cars. Parked in front of Amanda's house, the sight jacked the fear up in him. Things could not be fine if the cops were still here.

The sickening feeling of panic overwhelmed Jace. Time and place disappeared until the sound of Amanda calling his name cut him free. Jace's eyes swooped over the yard to find where she sat on her front porch swing, some blonde woman at her side.

She pushed off the swing, and by the time Jace's feet hit the ground, Amanda was there, throwing herself into his arms. Soft breasts, warm body, arms clinging to him with the strength of steel bars pressing into his sides, she was all right. Jace closed his eyes and squeezed her back, grateful to have his imagination make a fool of him.

Kind of smells funky though. The brittle texture of Amanda's hair chafed against his cheek, forcing him back. Jace leaned away, taking in the strain he could see darkening the skin under her eyes. Her pert little features were drawn tight with tension.

None of it mattered, not if she smelled like poo and looked like she'd rolled in the mud. She was still the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. He

tightened his hold and simply soaked in the comfort of having her pressed against him.

“You all right, baby?” Jace asked when he found his voice again.

“Yes.” The soft answer was smothered into the fabric of his shirt.

“You scared me.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“When I heard you screaming through the phone...Oh, baby, I love you so much.”

The air stilled the minute the words came out of him. Amanda leaned back a second time and looked at him as if he’d suddenly mutated in her arms, but Jace didn’t regret what he said. He spoke the truth. Just as he knew he couldn’t let it go without saying everything his heart demanded him to. Cupping her face in his hands he leaned down and whispered, keeping the moment for them only.

“I know you probably think it is too soon, but I can’t deny what I feel. I felt it last night alone in my bed, missing you, wanting to feel you if only just sleeping beside me. I don’t want to ever be there again, Amanda. I love you.”

She swallowed hard, and he could see the fear growing in her gaze. “I—”

“You’re making a scene.” Cody ripped Amanda clear of Jace with his harsh complaint.

Amanda didn’t struggle when Cody folded her into his embrace. She didn’t even look in Jace’s direction, just buried her face into Cody’s chest with a pathetic murmur.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you, doll.” Cody rested his cheek on Amanda’s head. “I’m just really glad you are all right.”

It took a moment, but Amanda responded. “I’m really glad you are here.”

Cody’s hands lifted up to cup her cheeks and force her head back enough to pull her gaze out of the shadows. “You want to tell us what happened?”

No. Jace could see the answer in the way she hesitated. “About last night?”

"I think it's best we just put that discussion behind us," Jace retorted. He broke into their conversation and, with his words, broke them apart. Amanda stepped back, straightening as she tensed.

"Somebody broke into my house."

Jace met Cody's look as he tried to process all the questions her brief response brought to mind. The fear in him latched on to one. "When you got here, you realized somebody broke into your house, and then you went in?"

"They trashed my house." Amanda stared at him as if her upset justified putting her life at risk.

"They could have been in there," Jace snarled.

"Oh, I wish they were."

"What?" Cody gaped at her, turning his head from Amanda to Jace as if checking he heard what their woman just said. Jace heard all right.

"Are you insane? They could have hurt you!"

"I'd have hurt them," Amanda snapped as if she weren't dreaming. "Trust me. The scales were weighed in my favor."

"You are insane." Cody glared down at her. "I hate to break this to you, doll face, but you are just a little woman."

What Amanda did next, Jace would have never anticipated. She punched Cody straight in the gut. True, she had a tiny fist, but it must have packed quite a wallop because Cody grunted and slouched over.

Not enough of an impact though to steal his breath. "What the hell was that for?"

"Now you won't doubt me the next time. I can handle myself, Cody."

"Amanda—"

She didn't wait around to hear whatever Cody had left to say. With a toss of her head, she flounced off.

"Pain-in-the-ass woman," Cody muttered.

Jace slapped his brother on his back as Cody straightened up. "Way to go."

"What?" Cody lifted his head to pin Jace with an annoyed gaze. "This is my fault?"

"You have to pick a fight when my woman is obviously worn down? What did you think was going to happen?"

"Well, I didn't think she'd hit me," Cody grumbled as he rubbed his stomach. "And she's not yours. As far as everybody around is concerned,

she's mine, so you could try helping by not making another touching confession."

"Excuse me?"

"Unless you forget, the whole town thinks she's my girlfriend. Just what do you think people are going to be talking about when they hear how she ran into your arms and you began pledging your love for her. Hell, I thought you were about to kiss her there for a moment."

Jace shot Cody a hard look before storming after Amanda. He hated to admit Cody had a point. *Whatever*. Let the town talk. It didn't matter. What mattered was Amanda, and right now she needed him.

Back on her porch, Amanda held an animated conversation with her blonde-headed friend. It didn't take a genius to figure out whom Amanda complained about. If she had something to say, she could say it to him.

"Where do you think you're going?" A large deputy blocked him at the bottom of the stairs.

"Excuse me?" Jace paused only out of respect for the man's position. Otherwise he'd have flattened him and kept on going up the steps.

"This is a crime scene." The man crossed his arms over his chest. "The public is not allowed."

"We're not public." Cody snapped. "I'm the victim's boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" The deputy raised a brow. "As in not related to the victim. I'm going to have to ask you gentlemen to leave."

"I'm not going nowhere," Jace retorted.

"Do you need to be escorted?" A little smile tugged on the edges of the deputy's lips, letting Jace know he would be glad to comply.

"Do you need to have your face smashed in?" Jace answered back without any thought. It got rid of the smile.

"Are you threatening me?" Before Jace could do something rash, like say yes, Cody tried to shrug past the deputy. The big man deflected the move with reflexes fast for his size. "And where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to walk up those steps and talk to Amanda." Cody got right in the deputy's face. "If you try and get in the way, that's your bad decision."

"Try it."

“Enough!” The blonde moved to the top of the steps. “Thank you very much, Braden, but I think we should let Amanda decide if she wants these two here.”

Braden gave the blonde a sullen look before turning his gaze on Amanda. That’s when Jace saw it, a flash of softness in the deputy’s gaze. That man wanted her, wanted what was Jace’s. The sudden urge to flatten in the deputy’s pretty looks had his hand clenching painfully into a fist.

“Amanda.” Cody might have meant to ask her, but he couldn’t keep the demand out of his tone.

“Whatever.” That was definitely the sound of a woman not impressed by any of the three men standing before her. Amanda rolled her eyes and waved them up. “If Jace and Cody need to be beaten down, I’ll do it.”

“Fine.” The deputy gave them both a sharp look. “Don’t get in the way.”

“Don’t get in mine,” Cody responded with the same amount of threat in his tone. Obviously Cody had caught the deputy’s interest. They might like to share, but it stayed in the family.

“Are you ready to apologize?” Amanda greeted them with a cold look and an upturned chin.

Cody crowded his way onto the swing, looping a heavy arm over Amanda’s shoulder. Almost drawing her right into his lap, Cody made Jace sigh with his too obvious behavior. “I’m sorry I was an ass to you on the phone.”

Amanda’s gaze narrowed as she studied him silently for a moment. “Say it like you mean it.”

“Amanda.”

“Fine.” Her glare shifted to Jace. “What about you?”

“Me?” Was he supposed to apologize for something? Jace couldn’t think of anything. “I’m sorry Cody was an ass to you on the phone?”

“Ha. Ha. What about the stunt you pulled down by the curb?”

Stunt? Ah, hell. Amanda wanted him to apologize for telling her he loved her. “I’m sorry you are so stubborn you can’t see the truth before your very eyes.”

“I’m sure you can do better than that.”

“Well, you’re not getting anything else until I get mine.” If she wanted to be illogical, then so could he.

“You?”

“Yes, me.” Jace smirked. “After all, I’m being accused of lying.”

That got her out of her seat. “Don’t you even dare to pretend to be insulted.”

“Why not? I get you’re having a bad day and you think it gives you rights to be a little grumpy, but—”

“A little grumpy?” For a second Jace thought she’d punch him. Instead she just started shoving him back, yelling every step of the way.

“Try totally pissed off! In the last twenty-four hours I have been ogled, felt up, totally humiliated, forced to sleep in some bug-infested cot, walked all over this stupid town without a shower or even a single drop of coffee, only to get home and find some jackass has torn my house to pieces. You think I’m a little *grumpy*?”

Jace honestly didn’t care right then. “Who felt you up?”

“That’s not the point,” Amanda spat.

“Oh, the hell it is.” Cody lifted off the swing to bring his weight into the conversation. “You’re going to tell us the name of whatever man touched you, Amanda, as in now.”

“That’s enough.” Amanda’s blonde friend shoved herself right into the mix, pushing Amanda behind her in a protective gesture. “Unless of course, you want the whole world to know you both slept with her.”

“Cindy!” Amanda hissed from over the woman’s shoulder.

“What?” She arched an eyebrow at Amanda.

After a mini-staring contest, Amanda settled back down on the swing. “Fine. We’ll fight later.”

“Good plan. Right now I’ll go get you a bag packed. I’m taking you home with me so you can get a shower. Sorry, honey, but you’re kind of rank.”

Amanda didn’t respond. At least not with words. The dirty look Amanda sent Cindy went unnoticed by the blonde as she disappeared through the door. With a heavy sigh, Cody glanced from Amanda to him. “I’m going to go see how bad it is. Try not to get hurt while I’m gone.”

Mindful of his brother’s suggestion, Jace led Amanda back to the swing and settled down with her. He waited, but Amanda didn’t say anything, wouldn’t even look his way. Jace decided to go for the first move and reached slowly over to take her hand. She didn’t resist, neither did she return his gentle squeeze, but after a while she sighed.

"I know I'm being a bitch."

Jace smiled, there was his Amanda. "From what it sounds like, you deserve to vent a little."

"Yeah." She lifted her scowl to him. "But it's not your fault."

"No, but I'm strong enough to take it," Jace assured her, smoothly moving his arm up and around her shoulders.

"You're developing a habit of being around when I'm falling apart."

"I guess I'm just lucky." And pretty damn good, because he managed to pull her into his side without getting bit.

"Not so lucky," Amanda muttered.

"I don't know." Jace gave her a quick squeeze. "I kind of like playing the knight in shining armor to your damsel in distress."

Amanda rolled her eyes at him, a slight twitch pulling on her lips. "Is that why you said it? Playing into a role?"

"It?" Jace repeated, hoping she didn't mean what he knew she did.

"You know what I mean." Amanda's voice dropped to a whisper. "Your poetic moment down by the street."

At least she called him poetic. "I said *it* because I meant *it*."

"Please. You don't know me well enough to mean it."

"I know what I feel."

"It's just infatuation."

"Is that what you're telling yourself about the way you feel?"

"No. I tell myself it's lust. I was just being polite." Amanda tried to jerk back. Jace held on, unwilling to let her derail the conversation into a full-out argument.

"Why's it so hard for you to accept I might actually love you?"

"A man who loves a woman doesn't share her," Amanda whispered harshly. For a tense moment they glared at one another. Jace refused to respond here and now, not with so many busy ears moving around the place. Finally, Amanda looked away and shook her head.

"Fine," Jace sighed. "Just forget I said anything. Why don't we just go with you? I want you to come home with me and let me bathe you, feed you, carry you off to my bed, and screw your fucking brains in every single position in the Kama Sutra. Can you agree to that?"

"At least you're being honest now."

Jace held back his instinctively sharp comment and managed to simply ask, "So, you in?"

"You going to wash me with your hands again?"

"And my mouth." Jace grinned, feeling instantly happier. "Whatever you want to get you to say yes."

Amanda's bottom lip disappeared between her teeth for a tense moment. "And Knox...is he going to be bathing me as well?"

No. Knox didn't do showers, but he did all sorts of other things probably best not mentioned now. "Only if you want him to."

"No pressure?"

"None."

"I got your bag." Cindy's cheery proclamation came from over Jace's shoulder. "You ready to go?"

Amanda lifted her gaze from his to turn her attention toward her friend. "There has been a change in plans. I think I'll go home with Cody and Jace."

Jace let go of the breath he was holding. "I'll take her bag."

* * * *

Cody didn't relax, even as Humble faded into the background. Instead of taking the horses down the side of the highway, they turned off through the fields, preferring the scenic view. Normally riding through the plains brought him a quiet peace. Having Amanda in his arms should've made everything better, but it just made him tenser.

The edgy feeling in his gut wouldn't leave him alone until he and Amanda had settled everything. True to form, she'd been quiet, pretending everything between them was fine, but Cody knew better. Not wanting Jace involved in what would be a difficult enough conversation, Cody let his older brother gain some distance between them before clearing his throat pointedly.

"I think you and I need to talk, Amanda."

"Hmm." She sighed, softening into his chest. "Can't I just take a nap? It's been a long few days."

“Yes it has.” Cody could agree easily enough with her. “Still, I think you and I have to get some things right between us, starting with—we’re not friends.”

It took her a moment to perk up, straightening off him as she glanced over her shoulder. “We’re not?”

“No. We’re more than that.” Cody took a deep breath and broke her gaze. It was hard enough to talk without having to see the guarded confusion in her gaze. “You were right at the party. I don’t share easy with other people, least of all women, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care.”

Amanda smiled, turning back to rest in his arms. “I know, Cody. You don’t have to worry about it.”

But he did. “If you know, then why’d you run to Jace?” She didn’t answer him, but to slump her shoulders forward. Cody read her response to mean just what his gut told him. “Because you love Jace and not me.”

“What?” Amanda’s reaction was instantaneous. Bursting into laughter, she didn’t make him feel much better. Pulling up on the reins, he brought Oliver to a stop, just so he could appreciate how seriously she took him.

Lifting her by the waist, he swung her around before planting her ass back in the saddle. Shrieking over the motion, Amanda clutched at his arms, giving him a dirty look. “What’s got you all upset?”

“You. Laughing at me.”

“Oh.” Amanda’s scowl lightened as her arms circled his waist. “Come on, Cody, I wasn’t laughing at you. It’s just...you’re talking love, and I’m worrying over next week. I mean, we’ve only known each other like two weeks.”

“Closer to three,” Cody corrected. Begrudgingly, he admitted Amanda had a point. Maybe he and Jace were moving faster than she. In Cody’s mind, it just meant she had to catch up. “But I get what you are saying. I still want to know why you ran to him.”

“Honestly?” Amanda shrugged at Cody’s nod. “Because the last time I saw you it was over the barrel of a gun, and if memory serves me right, you threatened to spank me.”

“I didn’t threaten nothing,” Cody grunted. “That was a promise, and I’ll be delivering on it later tonight.”

Not intimidated, Amanda retorted with her own verbal assault. “Then, of course, you ran off.”

Cody winced. "Yeah, I guess I owe you an apology."

"You don't owe me anything," Amanda assured him. "Just don't be asking why I ran to the man who spent the whole night treating me like a princess and telling me how wonderful and beautiful I am over the man who skipped out. Kind of like a no-brainer, Cody."

"I said I was sorry."

"Yeah, but you haven't said why you left."

He'd known they'd get here eventually. It had been the whole point in him pressing this conversation, but it didn't make it easier for Cody to say. His answer came out muttered and a little annoyed. "I was jealous."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Damn if he would repeat his confession.

"Jealous?" Amanda stared at him as if she hadn't met him before. "But you're the dumbass who pushed me toward Jace. I thought this was all normal for you guys?"

"I'm not jealous of the sex," Cody snapped. "It's the damn googly-eye thing. I mean, I worked so hard with you, and when am I going to be the one you run to?"

"I get it. You want me to get off this horse and run and jump into your arms so you can have your special moment?"

"No, dammit! I want to be special to you." There, he'd said it. Tensed and braced for her sarcastic comeback, Cody was surprised when she deflated right in front of him with a shake of her head.

"No. No, you really don't."

"I don't?" Cody repeated, lost somewhere.

"You don't want to be special to me, Cody." Amanda's head lifted. "Not now. In fact, I probably shouldn't even be going out to your ranch."

Cody could sense the subject had changed and he had a pretty good guess to what. "Is this about your house? Are you in some kind of trouble, Amanda? Whatever it is, I can—"

"It is my father and you can't help. All you can do is become a liability."

Cody scowled at her cryptic words. This is why he hated having these kinds of conversations. He didn't do well with reading between the lines. Blunt and direct, he understood. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It just means you'd be better off away from me for a while."

“See, *this* is what I mean.” Cody was mad enough to spit. “If I was Jace, you’d tell.”

“I would not.”

“Then prove it.”

“Prove I wouldn’t tell Jace? How? By not telling him, because I haven’t.”

“Tell me.”

“Cody—”

“You really think I’m going to let this go?” Cody asked, lowering his nose to hers. “I’m going to find out. If you make me do it on my own, I just might end up in more trouble than if you’d just be honest with me.”

“Fine. You want to know? I’ll tell you. My creature-feature of a father has dragged his slimy tail all the way back to Humble to try and get thirty grand from me. The thing is, I don’t have it. Not that Davey would ever believe anything. He has this sort of ‘I got shat on, so now I shit on you’ view of the world. So he’s going to be shitting on me and anybody near me for a while.”

The hard bitterness of her tone told Cody he’d waded way into the deep end of the pool without a lifeguard on duty. Where the hell was Jace when he needed him? Not around, and that left Cody having to figure out what to say given he’d forced this confrontation.

“Did you tell the police?” It sounded both practical and lame to his ears.

Apparently to Amanda’s too. She rolled her eyes as she snorted with disgust. “Of course. Trust me, it’s not like Tony doesn’t know what Davey’s like, but that isn’t going to save you. Davey’s already figured out I’m with you and you can afford to pay—”

“I’ll give it to him.” Cody thought he sounded very noble.

“You don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me because I’m really confused here.”

Instead of a glib answer, Amanda sighed. “If Davey was a good ol’ boy who just liked it rough, I could handle him, but he’s not. My dad is...no good. He comes sniffing around once every decade for money.

“Davey won’t leave until he’s gotten it all, and he won’t threaten much either. Bad things will just start happening. Friends’ pets found hanging from porch railing kind of things. If Davey turns his eye on you...” Amanda

shook her head. "With all you got to lose, you really should just take me home now."

"And maybe you should stop insulting me," Cody retorted. "I'm not going to leave you to handle this bastard alone. In fact, I don't want you handling him at all. We'll take care of your dad, Amanda. Don't you worry about him. Worry about Knox. I'm going to do you a favor and not mention what you just said to Knox or he'd tan your hide redder than I would."

"You weren't listening—"

"I heard you just fine, Amanda." Cody didn't want to hear her again. "Your daddy is a big bully who goes around terrorizing people, and if you think I'm going to let him scare you, I'll tan your hide when we get home. Hey, look at me." He swept a hand under her chin to force her gaze up to his. "You're important to me, Amanda. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"You don't have to say that," she whispered. "I don't care more about Jace than you."

"Ah, sweets, I ain't saying it because of Jace's stupid ass." Cody took a deep breath and spoke slowly, holding his words even and steady. "I've been there before, Amanda, to the graveyard. I know what it is like to lose somebody you...care about, and I can't do that again. Promise me I won't have to."

A smile tugged on Amanda's lips and Cody started to see a little of the cloudy goodness in her gaze. She was looking at him like she had Jace earlier. "You won't."

"Good." He brushed a quick kiss across her lips before spurring Oliver back into a trot. "Now let's get you home, and we can get to the spankings you're due."

Amanda giggled, snuggling into his arms. Tucking her head into his shoulder, she brushed teasing kisses along his neck, making him flinch under the ticklish caresses. Cody knew what those frisky propositions meant, but her timing left a lot to be desired.

"Amanda."

"Hmm?" Her hand slid down to cover the bulge in his jeans. "You know, we could always try and make Jace a little jealous."

That wouldn't be wise, but Cody wouldn't suffer the consequences, so he kept his opinion to himself and let Amanda have her fun.

Chapter 28

Jace welcomed the sight of the ranch blooming in the horizon. He could feel every one of his thirty-two years in the ache of his body. Not that the pain came from a hard ride. Not today.

Today, all of Jace's discomforts could be laid on Amanda's head. For the past hour and a half, she'd intentionally made a spectacle out of her and Cody. Snuggling into his brother, making out with him, groping, doing just about everything two people could do on a horse without stripping down to naked. Jace got the message because her gaze never left his.

Focused on him the whole time, she'd panted loud enough to torment him. *Cody's the greatest...best she ever had...her master.* Too outrageous to be taken seriously, Jace knew Amanda's game. She wanted him jealous.

Not the cutest of all traits, her game could be quite dangerous if Knox got a whiff. He'd have every right to be mad. Amanda had to realize in a ménage relationship, some lines couldn't be crossed. Jace figured on teaching her that lesson the second they got home.

He planned it all out. Dismounting before Cody could, catching Amanda before her feet hit the ground, Jace planned it down to the smallest detail of tossing her over his shoulder. No romantic carrying over the threshold for his Amanda. She got lugged into the house like a sack of feed.

Jace didn't know what happened to Cody and he didn't care. Probably taking care of the horses, because his brother didn't follow them into the house. Getting no resistance from Cody didn't shock Jace half as much as getting none from Amanda.

All Amanda did was laugh as he carried her down the hall toward his bedroom. A bubbly joyous sound, it vibrated through his back, telling him he thought she won the round. Just wait until he got her naked in the bedroom.

“Awfully barbaric behavior, Jace. What’s wrong?” The minx taunted him, not even trying for subtlety.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Jace lied as he kicked in his bedroom door. “Horny. Please note the difference.”

“Duly noted.” Amanda giggled. “And totally reciprocated.”

“Is it now?” Jace shouldered his way into the bathroom he shared with Knox.

“Yes, your brother certainly does know how to make riding a horse interesting. He’s left me with quite a need,” Amanda purred.

“And here all I have to offer is a shower.” He dropped her to her feet, watching as she swiveled her head around to take in the bathroom. Jace could see it in her gaze, the awe. Like most women when they saw it, the sight of decadence kept her distracted while Jace went to work.

“Wow,” Amanda breathed as he reached for the hem of her shirt. “That tub looks big enough for three people.”

Her words stopped, smothered behind the cotton of her T-shirt as he pulled it over her head. It gave Jace the opportunity to correct her. “Try four.”

He expected a saucy comment once he pulled her shirt free, but all the action revealed was a flash of pain. There and then gone, it slipped from her gaze as she forced a smile. *So she does care.*

It would be dastardly to use Amanda’s feelings against her, but given how she’d treated him since he confessed his love, Jace felt he was due a little bad behavior. Pausing with his fingers on the button of her jeans, he shot her a dirty grin.

“Sometimes five, it just all depends where the night leads. Like this one time...” Jace closed his eyes and let his smile grow. “Oh, what a great night.”

“It sounds like you had fun.” Icicles could have formed on her breath.

“You don’t understand.” Jace snorted with a hint of a laugh. “That girl was flexible.”

“I’m so happy for you.”

Jace sighed and went back to working on her jeans. “I wish I could do that over again.”

“Oh, shut up,” Amanda snapped.

“What?” Jace shoved her jeans and panties down her thighs in one single push while he looked innocently up at her.

“I don’t want to hear about you and some other woman.”

“What’s wrong? Jealous?”

Her eyes narrowed on him. Yeah, they understood each other now.

“No.” Amanda smiled tightly. “Not at all, just not interested.”

“Sorry.” Jace lowered his head to focus on undoing her sneakers. “Didn’t mean to offend.”

“With all the opportunities you’ve had in life, I would have thought you learned a little more manners.”

“Manners?” Jace lifted her ankle to pull her shoes and pants free of her leg. “Like what? Always apologize with a kiss?”

Before Amanda could respond, he leaned up to give her an open-mouth kiss right on her parted pussy lips. He lifted her ankle higher, bringing it to rest on his shoulder and leave her more vulnerable for his foraging tongue.

She was soft, wet, and tasted so damn good. He nibbled on the fleshy side of one fold and her gasp turned to a moan as he let his tongue come out to soothe the small wound. Licking his way upward, he lapped at her clit, teasing her into a frenzy. Only when she scraped her nails along his scalp and moaned his name, did he remember the game.

Time to stop.

It wasn’t easy, but he managed to lean back and force a grin. “Hmm, smooth pussies. My favorite midday snack.”

He stood up and faced a panting Amanda. She looked delectable with her puckered nipples and breasts heaving. The proof of her arousal lingered on his lips even as it kept her eyes glazed, her skin flushed, and her mouth pouted and looking delectable. Man, he wanted to kiss her.

Instead he grinned down at her and said, “Do you know how many cunts I’ve shaved right here on this very counter?”

It was outrageous, completely ungentlemanly, and the answer wouldn’t have impressed anybody, but she didn’t know that. Amanda couldn’t even understand the question at first. She just stood there blinking while he started the shower. When it hit her, she hit him, smacked him right across the shoulder.

“Jerk.”

“What the hell did you do that for?”

"I thought we agreed no more comments about the sluts you've been with before."

"I'm sorry. It just slipped out." Jace rubbed his hands down her back and did his best to sound sincere. "I promise no more. I'm going to focus only on you."

"Good, because my patience is at its end," Amanda muttered, pouting. "I've had a really bad day, and if it's too much to ask for a little sympathy, then I'll go find Cody. I'm sure he'd be happy to scrub my back."

Low blow. Blow, what a great word. It gave him an idea. It was cruel and normally the worse thing a man could do, but this had turned into open warfare. He'd show her jealousy was an emotion best left unprovoked, and he just might get her to reveal some truth about her emotions while he was at it.

"No need to find him, baby, really. I'm going to take good care of you." Jace backed his pledge up with a little kiss to the tip of her nose and then a more thorough one on her lips.

Again he got lost in Amanda's taste, in the feel of her naked and soft in his arms. For a moment, the game was forgotten and the passion fueling his soul took over. Only the need for air drove them apart and returned some measure of sanity to his brain.

"Go on, baby, the water should be warm." Jace turned with her until she faced the oversized stall and gently pushed her through the arched doorway. "I'll be there in just a minute."

With that promise, he retreated around the curved wall encasing the stall and steadied himself for what came next. *I have to make this point to her. Amanda has to get it, truly get it.* Keeping his mind focused on the ultimate goal, Jace stripped out of his clothes.

Pausing to ask God not to let this gamble end in his broken heart, he pushed in the shower door and headed into battle. The first round went to the grumpy Amanda who'd already soaped up her body. Lifting sudsy hands to her head, she cast him another one of her quick little sexy smiles over her shoulder, a challenge as much as it was an invitation. *God, I am in love with this woman.*

"Here, let me."

Jace brushed aside her hands, taking over the task of massaging the shampoo through her hair. He knew just how to touch, where to touch, how

much pressure to exert to make her moan. She melted before him, slumping into his chest as she gave herself completely over to his control.

He didn't disappoint. In a repeat of their first shower together, Jace worked his sudsy hands down over her neck and shoulders, moving slowly as he worked out the tension gathered in her muscles. Soon nothing was left but a sweet, vulnerable woman.

It was time to strike. *May Amanda forgive me for this.* Jace turned her around and took her lips in a kiss. Sweet-tasting, soft-feeling, her tongue dueled with his in a dance as old as time. Playful and fun, the kiss brightened the desire tensing his muscles.

Until Amanda sucked the sweetness right out of him. Locking her lips around his tongue, she pulled his savage desires up to the front. Not in the mood to be teased, Jace broke their kiss so he could push her lips downward. Neither kind nor gentle, Jace kept enough pressure on her head to force her to her knees.

His dick bobbed in the direction of her breath, drooling against her lips as he thumbed her in the mouth. The silent command earned Jace not the kiss he wished, but a teasing, tormenting tongue. Leaving a wake of searing pleasure trailing behind her wicked lips, Amanda slowly, gently explored his cock.

Her touch was so light it was almost ticklish, igniting every cell of his body in a glorious dance as she worked her way down the length of his dick, to the very base. Then she sucked. Jace sighed, letting his back arch as Amanda sucked a trail of pure ecstasy right up one side of his cock and down the other. Swirling her tongue around his balls, the little vixen made him jerk hard under the lash of pleasure.

He couldn't control the tremors working their way through his muscles as she rolled the tender sack around her lips, applying just enough pressure to bring him to the edge of his control. *Jesus, I'm ready to shoot now, and she hasn't even begun to blow me.*

Jace didn't know if he'd survive this experience, but what a way to die. He slumped back into the smooth stone surface of the shower stall when Amanda released him, taking the moment to catch a breath.

The relief lasted barely a moment as she feathered kisses back up his length, only to rake her teeth across the sensitive head. The slight sting, the

instinctive warning of that small action had him jerking upright, only to groan as her tongue came out to smooth his hurt.

“Mmm, talk about tasting good,” she purred against him, letting him feel the words move across his flesh in their own kind of caress.

Oh, God. I'm going to embarrass myself. No. No. No. He had to remember the plan. Any hope he had of catching on to that thought was lost when her full, soft lips parted. They slid down over the flared head of his dick as she took him into the heavenly paradise of her mouth.

Jace's breath shortened, coming in hard chops as Amanda took him all the way to the back of her throat before she locked those lips tightly around him and pulled back. Slowly, sensually, she repeated the motion until his eyes watered and the pleasure turned painful. Jace couldn't take any more. His need overwhelmed him and he overwhelmed her.

Burying his hands in her hair, he flexed his hips and forced her into a motion matching the savage beat of his own desire. No longer was Amanda in control of the moment. He took that away from her as he fucked himself hard and furiously into her mouth.

Jace's balls felt like they were on fire, burning with the need to unload. He fought to hold back, trying to hold out for just one more stroke before it all crashed on him. There was no stopping the pressure from bursting through the gates. Even as his seed spilled from his body, Jace didn't stop the motions of his hands, keeping her head bouncing over his length until every last drop of his strength was exhausted and he collapsed into the wall.

“Oh, baby.” Jace swallowed, trying to find a voice that wasn't scratchy and hoarse. “A—” *The plan!* “Abby!”

Jace closed his eyes even as he said the words, knowing the world would explode around him in seconds. Just as he predicted, Amanda went ballistic.

“What?” She had to be standing on her tiptoes. Her eyes almost reached his nose. “What did you call me?”

Jace blinked, playing the role of the confused man for one last line, one last strike. “I called you Abb...*Ohh...*”

“You are the lowest, most despicable man I have ever met!”

She hit him. He had kind of figured that was coming, just as he anticipated her storming out of the shower.

“You’re lucky I don’t have a knife on me or you’d be singing soprano.” She jerked her shirt off the floor. “I should have bitten it off!”

“Amanda—”

“Bring that thing near me again and I will!”

“Amanda.” Jace snatched up her jeans before she could grab them. “We need to talk.”

“I’m not talking to you! Don’t think I won’t walk out of here naked. Now give me my pants!”

Jace ignored her demand, not even bothering to play the repentant man. She’d turned this into a war and he intended to claim his victory. “What do you care if I called you by the wrong name? You’re the one who said this was just about sex.”

“No. I said you were just interested in sex and I was obviously right. You with your fancy line about love and you can’t even remember my fucking name!”

She turned and stormed out of the bathroom wearing nothing but her shirt. He wasn’t about to let her get away. He caught her halfway across his room. True to nature, she turned on him with clenched fists. Jace knew he deserved the beating, but he didn’t intend to take it.

“Let me go, you cockeyed son of a whore.”

She tried to wrench free, tried to kick him, and when all else failed, she tried to bite him. That got him annoyed enough to lift her off her feet and toss her on the bed. Sometimes it was good to be the bigger, stronger one.

Before she could roll off the side, he was on her. Grabbing her arms, he kept both wrists locked in one hand as he forced her thighs apart and settled himself between them. She twisted, bucked, but could do no damage. Giving over to words, she lashed out at him, cursing and screaming, calling him just about every dirty word he knew and making up some creative combinations.

It took over ten minutes before she even began to show signs of settling down. Well, not calming down, but at least accepting nothing she said was going to get her free. When she fell silent, Jace still gave her an extra minute to stew before he spoke.

“I think perhaps it’s time for a little honesty here.”

“Do you even know what the word means?” Amanda sneered.

“I know you tried your damndest to make me jealous on the ride out here.” Amanda didn’t deny it, nor did she own up to it. Silence and a heated

glare filled with rage and hurt were all the response she gave him. “And I returned the favor.”

“Oh, please.” That got her. “Are you actually going to claim this was planned?”

“I’ve never been with a woman named Abby.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Yeah, right,” he shot back at her in a mock of her disbelief. “Abby is the name of one of the dogs who works on the ranch.”

“Like I’m going to believe you.”

“I can haul your naked ass out onto the range and introduce you, but I’m warning you, she likes to lick people.”

“A dog?” She still didn’t look like she believed him. “You realize I can check that out?”

“Do it. I’ve never lied to you.” Jace paused. “Well, I did lie about one thing.”

“Really?” Amanda smirked. “And I guess you’re confessing now.”

“I am. I—”

“Wouldn’t the list be shorter if you just told me what you have been honest about?”

“Shut up, Amanda, I—”

“I’m not listening to this, to anything you have to say. You are a lowlife dirtbag and I regret the day I ever met you or your brother!”

“Do I have to gag you?” Jace asked with enough tolerance to make her teeth grind.

Amanda’s head drew back in offense and she responded very coldly. “Fine. Say it and then get off me.”

Because I don’t give a shit what you have to say. Jace knew the end of her sentence. As long as Amanda kept silent, he could live with it.

“Ménage relationships aren’t easy, and there is always some amount of jealousy lurking beneath the surface. We are human, and we suffer the same emotions as other people. I can’t lose my relationship with my brothers. I wouldn’t let a woman come between us. Do you understand?”

Amanda didn’t respond, but she did look a little less pissed and ever so slightly guilty. “That’s why you did this? Pulled this horrible stunt?”

“You really left me no choice.” Jace relaxed slightly before sighing. “You are as thick-skulled as a mountain is dense. I know you wanted to

make a point, just as I knew I had to make my point in such a way you could understand how devastating the consequence of making somebody jealous can be.”

Amanda’s eyes narrowed. Jace knew no matter how noble his goal, he’d pay for it. “You hurt me to make a point? Did you ever think about just talking to me?”

“And that would have worked? You wouldn’t have taken what I said and seen it as a vulnerability to manipulate?”

“How dare you?” Every muscle in her forehead wrinkled as she glared at him. “I would never—”

“Didn’t you already?” Jace cut her off. “How do you think I felt on the ride home? Good? Or hurt? Don’t laugh. I love you, Amanda. Whether or not you want to accept my feelings, they’re real. You know what I think?”

Amanda groaned. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

“I think you’re scared to admit you love me, too, because you think this is all some kind of game, but it isn’t. This is real, Amanda.”

“Real?” Amanda smirked. “You want to share me with your two brothers and yet you love me. You don’t think maybe that’s a little insane sounding?”

With a sigh, Jace released his hold on her wrists and rolled to his side. She surprised him when she didn’t jump out of the bed and take off. Maybe, just maybe, he had actually survived this skirmish.

He’d taken a big risk, but now he had to take another. “You want to know why.”

“Yeah. I want to know why.”

“It’s just the way we are. It’s the way we were raised.”

“You mean...your parents...”

“Yeah. We had three dads and one mother. They had two fathers and so on down the line all the way back to the eighteen hundreds.”

“So this is like tradition for you guys.” Amanda curled onto her side and he could feel her studying him.

“Yeah. We have a lot of rituals in our family, like we don’t have any women. No aunts, no nieces, no daughters. Just boys.”

“You don’t have any control over children, but your family traditions, you choose.”

“True enough,” Jace conceded. Given her calm and rational response, he dared to loop an arm over her and snuggle Amanda in closer as he spoke. “But the way you are raised does impact you and, believe it or not, we had a great childhood, a great family.

“There were a lot of advantages to having more than two parents. Somebody always had time for us, to play, to teach, to raise us. We had more choices when we had problems, more experience to learn from. There was more love in the house, more contentment, more fun, more of everything. It was a great way to grow up. It’ll be a great way for my kids to grow up. All we have to do is find the perfect woman for all of us.”

“You’re serious.” She still didn’t sound like she believed him.

“I am.”

Amanda went silent and he could sense her thinking. He didn’t expect her to laugh, but she did. “You’re insane and worse, stupid. There’s no way all three of you are going to agree on one woman.”

“And why not?” Jace didn’t think it would be wise to point out they already had with Sharon. He’d mentioned enough women tonight. One more might cost him some skin.

“Well,” Amanda lifted up to her elbow, so she could look down on him, “you say you love me and I’m banking Knox is a no, so what are you going to do? Are you going to push me aside because he disagrees or...what?”

That was a question Jace didn’t have an answer for. It was the nightmare he feared lurked in the shadows of his future. If Knox rejected her, could he give her up? How would he ever survive without her? What would he do without his brother?

Jace looked over at Amanda, and he could see the same fear on her face. He knew what she wanted to hear and wished he could give it to her, but he just honestly didn’t know. All he had right then was the truth in his heart.

Brushing a wet strand of hair stuck to her cheek, he placed a gentle kiss on her lips before whispering, “You know I love you.”

With a muffled whimper she turned into his embrace and buried her face in his chest. “You shouldn’t say that.”

Jace hugged her close. “I think I should. I should say it constantly until you grow accustomed to hearing it and doesn’t scare you anymore.”

“Then you’ll be saying it for the rest of your life.”

“I only hope you give me the chance, Amanda.”

She raised her head to give him a serious look. “You know, I expect to see this dog, Abby, and I’ll be asking around to make sure there are no other Abbys in your past.”

Jace couldn’t help but grin at. “I have no doubt.”

“You really did that to me just to make a point?”

“Pretty bastardly of me, wasn’t it?”

Amazingly, she smiled when she spoke, and he could almost hear pride in her tone. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Well now you learned something about me, Amanda. When it is something worth fighting for, I’ll do anything to win.”

Chapter 29

Knox rode into the main yard behind the ranch in a chaotic whirlwind of dirt, barking dogs, moaning cows, and the heavy snorting breaths of Molly. They rounded the select group of heifers in record time, mostly thanks to Knox's agitated determination.

He just couldn't get done fast enough, because he really wanted his pound of flesh from Jace and Cody. Thanks to those two dipshits, their schedule had been screwed. There would be no early night or late rise because they had the trucks coming in tomorrow. The sorting had to be finished, but damn if he'd be the one doing it.

Riding Molly into the barn, he intended to just pass through, looking to see if his two worthless siblings had made it home. The sight of Cody brushing down Winston in his stall had Knox pulling back on the reins. His little brother just pretended like he wasn't there, waiting.

"So did you take the princess to the salon to get her nails fixed?"

Cody refused to even look up, making Knox chuckle. Always the baby, Cody couldn't take it when the joke was on him. Well, Knox wouldn't let his baby brother duck the humiliation he had coming.

"Come on, Cody," Knox harassed him. "Spill it. What had the princess' panties in a knot?"

Cody shot him a dark look over his shoulder before muttering, "Amanda is fine. That's all that matters."

Yeah, right. That was far from all Knox cared about. "Of course she is, but I'm getting the sense she was fine all along."

"Whatever you think, Knox, just go on thinking it." Cody didn't even bother to look at him this time. "After all, you know *everything*."

"That's right, I do." Knox leaned over his saddle horn, settling in for a good gloat. "So, I'll tell you what happened. Amanda walked into her house, saw a spider hanging from her ceiling and screamed like a little girl. Of

course, being a drama queen she had to have her two knights in shining armor rushing right over to kill it. Isn't that right, Cody?"

"Not hardly," Cody snarled.

"Really? What was it then? A roach?"

"Somebody broke into her house, you smug bastard."

That took the fun out of Knox's bubble. "What?"

"Someone broke in and tore her house up."

"What do you mean tore it up?"

"I mean somebody kicked in the back door and trashed the place." Cody threw down the brush, turning on Knox with enough speed to make both horses shy with sudden nerves. Cody ignored them as he continued tearing into Knox.

"The bastard smashed all her stuff, cut up her upholstery, smashed her furniture, and then left profanity written all over the walls. The best part is the number one going suspect is Amanda's own father, who just happens to be in town terrorizing Amanda to get money from her."

Cody came to rest, arms crossed, glaring right at Knox. "So just go on and say it, Knox. I know you want to. Amanda's trouble."

Well, shit. Knox didn't know if the sentiment came from being wrong or from the sudden sickening feel in his stomach at the fact Amanda might have actually been hurt. Cody said it was her father, though, and, really, what father would hurt his little girl?

Unfortunately, Knox knew the real-world answer to that question. *Hell if I'm going to panic. I do not panic.* "I take it the cops are handling it."

"Yeah," Cody snorted. "They're handling it."

Knox could read something buried in his brother's response, but he just didn't know what. "You don't think they can?"

Cody shrugged. "From what Amanda says, no." Knox should have seen what came next, but it still caught him off guard. "She's going to be staying here until the matter is handled, though."

A sensation worse than the panic broke over him—fear. "She's here?"

"Yep."

Shit. "Why?"

"Because she can't stay in her house the way it is," Cody retorted in exasperation. "And I'm not going to send her back there just to be harassed by her father."

Knox didn't intend to give up the argument so quickly. "I get that, but doesn't she have any friends she could stay with?"

"Does a boyfriend count?"

"Only when her boyfriend discusses it with the two brothers he lives with." Molly pranced beneath him, shying away nervously as Knox tensed above her.

"Why?"

"Because this decision affects all of us. How can you not get that?"

"Jace said he loved her."

"He did not." The rejection just popped out of Knox, a denial he needed to be true. Cody didn't give him the comfort.

"It was like a scene from some cheesy movie." Cody's nose wrinkled. "When we rode up to her house, Amanda came running down the steps to throw herself into Jace's arms and then bam! He's telling the girl he loves her."

"Jesus." Knox rolled his eyes.

"I think I'm falling the same way." Cody's chin lifted. "So maybe you ought to get over yourself and make Amanda feel welcome."

Knox couldn't say much to that. Sliding from Molly's back, he laid down the only defense he had. "Yeah, well she's got to accept me."

"Yeah, right." Cody caught the reins Knox tossed him. "And I'm sure you're going to make it a real easy adjustment."

Knox snorted, but didn't respond to Cody's bait. Instead, he turned and swaggered out of the barn. He'd put in his day's work. Now Jace and Cody could pick up the slack. Knox's schedule consisted of a shower and figuring out what the hell to do about Amanda.

One thing had become quite clear. His brothers wouldn't be tiring of her. Getting rid of her would take some work. Consumed with his worrying, Knox almost got smacked in the head when the back door flew open. Lydia rushed out and right into him. Despite her size, she had momentum, and Knox's ass met the hard planks of the porch floor before he could respond to the impact.

"Hey, now. What's got you in such a rush?"

"Oh, my God. Knox." Lydia stumbled under the collision but managed to keep her feet. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see you."

"I kind of figured." Knox grunted as he pushed off the floor. "Damn, Lydia. For such a small package, you pack quite a wallop."

Lydia cringed, looking more concerned than she should have. "You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

"Nah." Knox shook his head. "I probably deserved the spanking, so don't worry over it."

"I really am sorry."

"You really were in a rush."

"I'm..." She danced around him. "Yes, I'm in a rush. If you could, tell the other guys there is a casserole in the oven."

"Sure. Where you headed to?"

"I...I just got to go."

With that cryptic statement, she took off. Knox watched her flee across the yard toward the small cabin she called home. Lydia didn't lie. She was in a rush, an all-out run, actually. He couldn't help but wonder what put the spring in her step. Turning into the kitchen, he paused long enough to toe off his boots and hang up his hat. Snatching a beer out of the fridge, he headed for his bedroom.

A beer, a shower, and then it would be time to handle Miss Johnson. Handle her, strip her down, fuck the need for her out of his balls, and then be the biggest bastard he knew how and chase her out of the door. It sounded like a plan to Knox.

"Ohhaaa."

Knox stumbled to a stop in the doorway of his bedroom. He knew that sound, the sound of a woman being pleased. It came again. The feminine groan twisted into one single word. "*Please!*"

Oh, yeah. Knox had assumed Jace had gone back to work. Apparently his brother had—on Amanda. Listening to her husky *pleases* wafting down the hall, Knox couldn't resist the allure. Edging down the hall, he peeked around Jace's wide open door and bit his lip as his dick jerked at the erotic show taking place before his eyes.

Jace's bed sat opposite the doorway, giving Knox a good position to see all the details, and what he saw took his breath away. Just like it had been in the barn, he couldn't take his eyes off her. *So beautiful.*

Amanda rode his brother with a slow sensuality that mesmerized him. Sweat glistened and rolled down between her breasts as they bounced and

swayed with her easy rhythm. Like a sensuous cat, her back arched as she ground herself into his brother's groin. With each smooth rotation of her hips, the beautiful globes of her rounded ass lifted, making the muscles in her thighs flex in a show of strength guaranteed she could hold on when the ride became bumpy.

Knox traced the line of her leg from her foot tucked up along his brother's thigh up to where her thigh ended and heaven waited. Sunlight poured in through the window, stretching across the bed as the sun sloped downward in its nightly descent.

The golden rays fell right across Amanda's pussy, paying homage to the pink folds he could see so perfectly stretched wide. The heated caress left nothing to Knox's imagination, allowing him to watch every intimate detail as those flushed, pouty lips lifted over Jace's hard length.

His cock glistened in the sunlight, slick with Amanda's cream and he could hear the sweet suckling sounds as her cunt ate back up every inch of Jace's dick. He could only imagine what it felt like to experience that most intimate of caresses. What it would feel like to hold a woman as responsive as Amanda in his arms. One who moaned with her pleasure, digging her nails into his thighs as she arched backward to take every last inch of him deeper into her wet cunt.

Knox breathed out deeply, unable to tear his eyes from the sight of Amanda fucking herself along Jace's cock. She loved it. He could tell. He could hear it, see it, even smell it. Sweet feminine arousal and the spicy musk of sex thickened in the air around him, seducing him into becoming a part of the scene before him, even if only at a distance.

Jace's hands shifted, sliding up her sides and drawing Knox's gaze with them. He knew where his brother's touch was headed, just to where Knox wanted to touch—her breasts. Perfectly round, tipped with the most tempting pink nipples, they were made to be touched, tasted, even bitten. Amanda's response to Jace cupping her breasts, thumbing her nipples was instantaneous. She gasped and then groaned, her hips losing beat for a moment, only to resume at a quickened pace, fast enough to make her find her release at any moment.

Knox tensed, waiting for the explosion, knowing he just might feel the aftershocks all the way across the room. But Jace had different plans. In a move Knox hadn't expected, his brother's hands dropped to Amanda's

waist. With enough speed to blur the motion, Jace lifted her right off his dick and pulled her dripping cunt up to his waiting mouth.

Oh, God, he's going to make me come. This was no easygoing tasting but a devouring. The sounds of Jace giving Amanda the tongue lashing of a lifetime were drowned out almost immediately by her screams. She begged, she pleaded, she demanded until the words lost form and she splintered apart in a writhing, screaming explosion.

In the chaos of her release, Jace slammed her back down on his cock. This time it was his game. His brother pushed up to a seating position and bounced Amanda's ass in a hard, furious rhythm that had her screams going hoarse as she clung to him, clawing at his shoulders as her whole body began to quake.

She came again—hard, fast, and furious. He could see the tears tracking down her cheeks, rolling over her swollen lips even as broken sobs managed to break free of her throat. Jace, though, hadn't come. Apparently he'd saved himself for the most delectable treat Amanda's body could offer.

Knox forgot to breathe, to blink as he watched his brother lift Amanda once again. He moved her only slightly, nudging his cock into the divide separating her ass cheeks, and then he split her wide.

Amanda screamed. It was a sound of rapture, not of pain, and she jerked backward, fucking herself into each savage thrust his brother made. They rutted like animals, in a mindless, senseless race toward the pleasure that could only be found in a lover's embrace.

It didn't last long. When Amanda's back arched and her whole body went up in spasms, Jace followed her right over the edge, collapsing into a sweaty, panting heap on top of the disheveled sheets. Finally Knox remembered to take a breath.

Make Amanda feel welcome...I think I know how to do that.

* * * *

Jace didn't know how long it took him to regain any semblance of reality. All he knew was Amanda had gone limp. Her sweat-slickened body collapsed in a sticky mess on top of him. Cracking open an eye, he couldn't help but smile at the sight of her.

As awkward as the position seemed, she still looked like she'd already passed out. Gently as he could, he pulled himself free, eliciting a groan from Amanda. In a movie he might have been smoother, but as a real man his muscles were tired and sore from their exertion. They left him no strength and no choice but to drag Amanda back rather clumsily into his embrace.

She sighed, offering no objection. "That was fun."

"Did that qualify as tender and sweet lovemaking?" Jace couldn't help but smile at the thought. He felt her lips following suit against his chest.

"Who cares? I had more than one orgasm, and that's all that really matters."

He had to laugh. "I take it then you are feeling better?"

"Much. And very tired."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Jace let the conversation die off for several minutes as he stroked Amanda's back. He should just let her fall asleep, happy and content, but his conscience wouldn't let him find such an end to their encounter.

I shouldn't say anything. It'll just piss her off. Avoiding the argument, though, would be the wrong thing to do. She had a right to the truth, and if he had any hope of making this relationship work, he needed to be honest.

"Amanda?"

"Hmm."

"You know Knox watched, don't you?"

She tensed beneath his touch. Jace followed suit, expecting the explosion of a lifetime. What he got instead was a hesitantly murmured, "Yes."

"You want me to go kick his ass?"

Where she found the strength, he didn't know, but she lifted her head to gaze solemnly down at him. "I don't want you to fight with your brothers over me."

"And I don't want you to be upset or uncomfortable."

"I wasn't." Her lashes lowered. "Besides, he's watched before...only Cody didn't have the balls to admit to it."

"You liked it, didn't you?"

Amanda looked toward the door and then back at him before nodding. Jace knew what the admission cost her, and it pleased Jace that she trusted him enough to be honest. *Don't push her any further.*

He'd gotten a little of what he wanted out of Amanda. To ask for any more would be greedy, and Jace knew the old saying. Pigs got fat and hogs got slaughtered.

With his arm around her back, he pulled her downward to settle her back against his chest. He'd expected she would gratefully accept his offer to let the conversation die, but she didn't. After several long minutes, she whispered his name.

"Yes?"

"If I tell you a secret, will you keep it just between us?"

Ah, shit. "I...I shouldn't promise to do that."

"Why not?"

"Because there can't be secrets here, between us. There are too many people involved. If you and I share a secret and you and Cody share one, then Knox and Cody share one, it leads to a place where paranoia and jealousy can easily get the better of all of us. In this kind of relationship, honesty is necessary. Otherwise there will come a time when everything implodes."

"I understand," she said hesitantly and with doubt in her voice. Jace gave her a quick squeeze.

"It's hard for me to say no to hearing your secret," he whispered into her hair. "I'd love nothing more than to share something special, just you and me."

The minutes slipped past, marked only by the slow creep of shadows across the room. As her body relaxed and her breathing evened out, Jace was certain Amanda had finally passed out.

"Jace?"

"Hmm?" He responded to her sleepy whisper with his own, though he felt anything but tired. He just didn't want to disturb her.

"Will you tell me again?"

It took him a moment to understand her question. When he did, he smiled and kissed the top of her head.

"I love you, Amanda Johnson."

Chapter 30

“Shut up!”

Davey didn't really have a choice but to obey, given that the sheriff's hand cut off all air flow through his throat. Tony's hand tightened around Davey's neck and he could see it in the other man. He couldn't kill him.

“If another foul accusation about your daughter comes out that mouth, I will rip your tongue out and shove it up your ass.”

The sheriff sealed his hollow threat with a heavy fist. Pain shot out through Davey's face as he found himself fumbling backward. The sheriff released him to crash onto the floor, spitting blood across the linoleum surface.

“You know, sheriff, I believe this is called police brutality,” Davey groaned, feeling his teeth with his tongue to make sure no new ones were lost.

“Yeah?”

Davey grunted, folding over the kick Tony punted into his gut.

“That's called ‘for my puppies’.”

Despite all the pain, Davey laughed. The sheriff might be all grown up and tough now, but he still held a little kids' grudge over those damn puppies. As if Tony couldn't see the unreasonableness of his position. Heck, if Davey offered him fifty grand to kill six puppies, the bastard would do it.

“As much as I enjoy this walk down memory lane,” Davey sighed as he rolled to a sit. “Can I stand up now or you just going to knock me back down?”

Tony didn't respond, just glared down at Davey. He took Tony's silence to mean ‘yes’ and lumbered back to his feet. Davey barely managed to get himself right when Tony's hands shot out. Two palms smacked into Davey's chest and he went wheeling backward, crashing into the ground.

This time he caught the corner of the half-sized bookcase tucked in along the wall.

This shit is getting old. Davey shook his head, feeling the burn in his muscles to give the boy what he deserved. If only he could tempt Tony into letting him have the opportunity.

"This ain't exactly fair." Davey straightened along the bookcase's shelves, using it as a backrest as he smirked up at Tony. "I mean, not only do you have youth on your side, you have that shiny little badge. Not exactly a man-to-man thing, is it?"

"No, it ain't," Tony grunted. Instead of going for honor, which Davey actually thought Tony might care about, Tony's hand just went to rest on the butt of his gun. "I'd really love it, though, if you took a swing. Then I could shoot ya. Wanna do me the favor, Davey?"

"Yeah and I'm sure the coroner would have a lot to say about these bruises," Davey grunted.

Tony laughed, a harsh, cruel sound. "Don't sweat it. I played high school ball with Danny." Squatting down to meet Davey's gaze, Tony assured him, "And the judge was my boy scout leader...he helped deliver those puppies. Trust me, nobody's forgotten them.

"Then there is the DA, we go hunting together and he gets his dogs from Jerry Spindal who breeds them." Tony grinned, going to still. "Jerry also happens to be the only public defender in this town, so I can hit you as much as I want. Isn't that right, Deputy?"

The large, bored man leaning against the office door just shrugged. "I didn't see you hit nobody, Sheriff. Hell, looking at the body, I'd say Davey Johnson lived a hard enough life that any number of people could have put a hurt on him. No reason to bother with an investigation, much less an autopsy. Why even wait until he's dead? We could just go bury him in potter's field right now."

Staring up into that one's eyes, Davey knew he could do it, too. Tony didn't have the hardness in him to take a life so coldly, but the deputy did. For a second, Davey actually felt a little concerned.

"Murder's a little extreme given I ain't the one who tore up Mandy's place." Davey tilted his chin up to lie straight to the sheriff's face. "And you know it, so you're just wasting your time while somebody else out there is trying to hurt my daughter. Don't make you much of a good cop does it?"

“Let’s get one thing straight, Davey.” Tony leaned in, his voice going soft with threat. “You’re guilty of whatever the hell I say as long as you’re in my town.”

“Is that your way of suggesting I leave?” Davey asked. The kid had never grown up. Tony had always been the big talker. Hell, it was his damn fault those puppies had died, not Davey’s. Tony had been the one to convince Amanda not to sign over her mother’s life insurance.

Bratty little bitch had been all puckered up with borrowed strength thanks to Anthony Black. He’d thought he was the shit back then, threatening Davey not unlike he did now. He thought he’d taught Tony a lesson then. When he’d strung those damn puppies up from Tony’s porch, Davey had thought the kid had gotten the message.

Apparently not. Not according to the fist clip to Davey’s chin. That one hurt, and Davey let his head hang there as he absorbed the pain.

“I don’t know, Davey.” Toney straightened up. “I’m kind of enjoying hitting you. If you leave, there goes my fun.”

Before Davey could respond a tap echoed on the office door. A second later the big deputy got shoved as the door pushed in.

“Sheriff Black.”

Davey rolled his head toward the sight of a new deputy walking in. Two men in suits trailed behind him and Davey had a lifetime of experiences to identify them. *Feds*.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but—”

“I’m Agent Tagger, and I need a word with you, Sheriff Black,” the fed cut off the deputy with expected arrogance.

Tony appeared unimpressed by the aura of authority coming from the scrawny agent. He grunted his welcome without much sincerity. Nodding at the deputy, Tony suggested he help. No newborn twat would help him to his feet. Davey shoved up just in time for the deputy to latch onto his arm.

The deputy didn’t hesitate, dragging Davey toward the door even as he asked the sheriff, “You want me to start booking him?”

“For what?” Davey asked, highly insulted.

“Just sit him outside the door. I’m not done talking to him.”

Davey let the deputy drag him through the doorway and shove him into a metal folding chair without any resistance. With a look that didn’t intimidate Davey in the slightest, the deputy barked at him to stay and

sauntered off. He watched the rookie's swagger with a cynical eye. Big and muscular, one day the deputy would learn those two things didn't count for much against a vicious and determined opponents.

If he'd been about ten years younger, Davey might have considered teaching the kid a lesson. He wasn't, and despite the fact his daughter hated him, he might actually have to come back to Humble. *For something like a funeral...I wonder if Amanda has insurance.* After all, it might be easier to cash out all at once.

"Son of a bitch!"

Davey's head turned in the direction the cussing came from. Sheriff Black had his hands flattened on his desk again. As much as Davey would have loved to see the sheriff lift the little fed up by the neck, he felt certain Tony would manage to control himself. *Shame, love to see a fed get walloped.*

Letting his head roll down his shoulder as if to take a nap, Davey let his cheek hit the window dividing the sheriff's office from the lobby. With an ear pressed to the glass, Davey had no difficulty hearing Tony, even if he did have to strain to hear Agent Tagger.

"You're interfering in my case." The agent had some heat in him after all.

Not that Sheriff Black was impressed. "You're interfering in my ability to keep my town safe."

"Your town won't be safe until I solve my case." Tagger shot back. "This is a sensitive case, everything you need to know, you know. Your cooperation could mean saving people's lives, Sheriff."

"Yeah and what does the lack of yours cost?" Tony shot back. "Or don't you think I need to know a cartel money man was killed and twenty-five million dollars was stolen in my jurisdiction?"

Davey sucked in a deep breath. *Damn.* Maybe he should leave town before one of the cartels blew it up. Of course, it wouldn't be so bad to get his hands on some money first. Straining to hear more, Davey's mind already swirled with ideas. After all, a drug war could mean a lot of innocent would die, *innocent like Amanda.*

Chapter 31

Amanda yawned, stretching wide in the oversize bed. Lazily, with the veil of sleep still about her, she took in her surroundings as the past day slowly played out in her mind. Her life had gone from sugar to spice to shit and then back to spice, all in twenty-four hours. *Jace said he loved me.*

Amanda frowned into the darkness. Love, what good was that emotion anyway? It was a temporary condition. More than half the time it faded. Like a shadow on the wall, it shrank and shifted with the movement of life around it.

Love didn't guarantee anything to anybody, except pain. As if she actually needed to be taught that lesson again, fate had sent Davey to town as a sour reminder. Davey could change everything. Despite Cody's blind loyalty to machismo, he didn't know what he was signing onto. It wouldn't be long before Knox would say she was trouble, Cody's pride would end up crippled and Jace...well, he loved her, so he would probably end up bitter.

The only obvious solution would be to kill her dad. Amanda grinned into the darkness at the very idea. Tony would cover it up for her. Sure, it would destroy their friendship, but Tony wouldn't send her to jail over Davey.

Nope, she'd just have to live with being a murderer. Slumping her shoulders, Amanda knew her limits. She'd reached them with her mother and brother. Another death on her hands would break her.

Tired of those thoughts, Amanda lifted her chin. It would be much more practical to start handling life in the little moments and stop worrying so much about the long run.

This particular moment found her naked in Jace's bed all alone. Obviously, the next moment began with finding some clothes. It quickly became apparent Jace didn't want her to find any. Not only had he disappeared, but everything she'd been wearing had vanished from the

bathroom floor and the bag Cindy had handed off to Cody was nowhere to be seen.

Perverved bastard. Amanda didn't think for a minute this attempt to keep her naked was an accident. Without clothes as armor, her one major defense had been stripped away. It didn't take a bright woman to figure out what their plans were. They probably began with Knox.

Insulted, enraged, ready to rip some arrogant asses to shreds, that's what she should have been feeling instead of the excited butterflies fluttering around in her stomach. Remembering the feel of Knox's hands on her body brought tension to the arousal warming through her.

What he'd done to her under the carport still had the power to make her pussy cream with need. This time, though, his brothers would watch, participate. There would be no stopping them because he didn't want to. *I am easy.*

No, she just had a weakness for the Reese brothers, and if she'd learned anything so far, it was that they all took immediate advantage of any weakness. *I need to take control of the process.* Just because she couldn't win didn't mean Amanda couldn't write the terms of her surrender.

All she had to do was figure out how to seduce *them*. They'd never expect it, particularly not Knox. Just the idea of startling that arrogant jerk made Amanda smile. Not particularly skilled in the art of seduction, Amanda went with what she considered a classic—a naked woman in a man's shirt.

She tried on seven of Jace's shirts, checking for her best look in his closet mirror. Settling on a button down one, she didn't bother to do all the buttons, hoping it encouraged a little less conversation. *But perhaps a little too slutty.*

Dallying for a good ten more minutes, Amanda finally admitted she was a little too chicken shit to strut around the Reese brothers' house in nothing but a shirt. The problem was she didn't have anything but a shirt to wear.

Amanda couldn't stay there in the bedroom. She wouldn't be reduced to a pet waiting on its master. Better to be the timid coward peeking out into the hall to see if the coast was clear. *Silent and dark.*

The only sound came from behind what she knew to be the den door. Light cut across the floor from beneath its edge. *They're probably all in*

there watching some game. All three brothers gathered together like a pack. A pack better left undisturbed.

As quietly as Amada could, she tiptoed down the hall, past the den and into the open living room. To the right was the doorway to the kitchen and hopefully a laundry room.

Bright light flooded the room as she clicked on the light. For a moment it blinded Amanda, making her blink the details into focus. The very first thing she noticed was a gigantic black lab lying right in front of the back door. The dog's head lifted, pinning her with its unblinking chocolate gaze and sending shivers down her spine.

Amanda had never been much of a dog person. They were messy, smelly, required too much attention, and if they bit you, it hurt. Chewing her lower lip, she looked back down the hall toward the open door of the bedroom she'd come from. *Maybe I should have stayed in bed.*

Before she could decide whether to go back there or not, a frantic scratching sound had her head snapping back around. A second too late, she saw the dog charging. The world tipped and spun beneath Amanda as she went down screaming under the lab's powerful claws.

"Stop it! Stop!"

Amanda yelled at the beast keeping her pinned to the ground as she tried to fight it off. Every which way she tried to dodge, she was met with the stink of dirty dog, the cold slime of a wet nose and that tongue—Everywhere, lick, lick, lick.

"Abby!"

Suddenly the dog was gone, the crushing weight removed from her stomach and chest and she could actually take a deep breath of clean, dog stench-free air

"Come on, girl, out with you."

Amanda blinked at the sight of Knox opening the back door to let the big, black beast trot out, her slender, whip-like tail cracking in the air. Then the door slammed behind her and it was over. Amanda's head hit the floor with her relief.

"Hey, honey." Two solid denim clad knees bent into her sight and Knox hovered over her. "You all right?"

"I'm covered in dog spit."

That got a laugh, something that kind of surprised her to hear coming from Knox. Amanda attributed the bizarre sound to her sad situation, figuring he'd find enjoyment in her embarrassment.

"I'm sorry about Abby. We normally don't let the dogs in the house, especially her. She gets a little excited when meeting somebody new."

"Excited?" *That's an understatement.* "I've been molested."

Another laugh, deep and sexy, fell down over her. *Damn, but everything these brothers do is sexy.* But this was Knox, and she knew how quickly he changed from easy to hard.

"So you just going to lay there on the floor?"

"I'm thinking about it. That dog was pretty damn heavy. I didn't think labs were supposed to be so big."

"Abby's a big girl, that's for sure. She's—"

"Abby?" The name struck her and for the first time she actually turned to look at Knox. She'd been putting it off, knowing how devastating direct eye contact with any Reese brother could be. Fortunately he didn't meet her gaze, but kept his lowered.

"Yeah, we call her the Happy Abby. She's sort of insanely enthusiastic about life. Happy. We normally keep her away from newcomers, but Jace insisted she stay in the house until you met her."

He did, did he? That was kind of sweet, if Amanda could get over the sick fact he had actually called her a dog's name when she'd been giving him a blow job. There was something really twisted about that fact.

It certainly didn't help her mood any that he'd set her up to get clobbered and slobbered by his favorite pet. *Maybe I should have stayed with Cindy.*

"Little bastard."

"Who? Jace?"

"Yes, Jace," Amanda snapped. Her patience had come to an end with this game. She wanted to see him, just so she could tack his ass to the wall.

"Where is the little bastard?"

"Cody and he went to your house to start cleaning it up."

Meaning they'd left her here with Knox all alone and Amanda had been right. The plan did start with Knox. It certainly explained why she didn't have any clothes. *And what the hell is Knox looking at?*

Knox had yet to make eye contact with her. He kept staring down at her body, and for the first time her gaze followed his. Outrage and embarrassment clogged her throat, letting only a strangled screech out instead of the scream burning inside her.

The one thing definitely out were her breasts. When Abby trampled her, she ripped the buttons to Amanda's shirt, leaving all of one breast completely free for anybody to see and the other almost just as naked. Not that Knox's gaze rested there.

In her flailing about with Abby, the shirt had ridden up, the hem barely covering the top of her pussy and leaving more intimate details for any man with enough indecency to look to see. Amanda already knew Knox had no decency. She didn't see much reason she should bother with it herself.

She smacked the crap out of him. It felt good to send him from a squat to flat on his ass as she scurried to her own feet. Gripping the sides of her shirt closed, she glared down at him.

"Dirty, rotten pervert!"

"You know this is the second time a woman has kicked my butt to the ground today." Knox scowled as if he had any right to be upset.

"You probably deserve to be smacked down twice daily."

"Only if a man deserves to be hit for being a man."

Amanda was over it, over this whole damn game. If Knox wanted to get with her, he had to get with the program. Until then, she'd be locked in Jace's room, and she didn't intend to come out until her clothes were produced.

With determination lifting her chin high, Amanda stepped on top of Knox, reveling in his grunt as his chest took her full weight and walked right over him and out the kitchen.

"Amanda!" She could hear him scrambling off the floor to follow her. "Amanda, wait!"

As if and to think I actually started to consider taking him as a lover. Well, I have enough lovers, one too many actually.

"Hold up!" Knox didn't just order it. His hand locking onto her arm forced her to a stop. Amanda resisted his attempts to turn her, but it didn't stop him. Only once she'd met his gaze did he have the audacity to lie to her.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have looked."

Amanda flexed her lower jaw, fighting the urge to deck him. "It would help if you weren't grinning like a donkey's ass."

"I didn't know asses could grin."

"Ahhhhh!" Amanda screamed again, this time stomping her legs to expel the energy painfully building in her muscles. "I can't take it anymore!"

Knox cocked his head. "Does that mean you're conceding *defeat*?"

Amanda went silent as she watched him chuckle over his own proclaimed victory. This wasn't Knox, this grinning, joking fool in front of her. He was up to something and it made her more nervous than his normally severe disposition.

"Don't mess with me, little girl, unless you're prepared to lose."

Having her own words thrown back in her face was one indignity too much. Without thought of the consequence, Amanda lashed out, taking Knox down with an unexpected, full-body tackle.

She had the advantage of surprise. He had the advantage of strength and it took him less than half a second to reverse their positions. For the second time in the same day, Amanda found herself pinned down beneath the heavy weight of a Reese brother.

"Get off me you dim-witted, limp-dicked bastard!"

"But I'm quite comfortable." Knox grinned down at her. "And given how I can smell your pussy creaming, I'd say you aren't really all that offended."

Amanda's eyes narrowed at Knox's statement. "No more offensive than I find your breath. It's called a toothbrush, dog breath."

"At least I didn't kiss the dog." Knox smirked, completely unfazed by her insult.

"I did not kiss that filthy beast," Amanda snarled. She felt ready to hit Knox again when it clicked, why he was acting so weird. With knowledge came power, and she actually managed to relax, smile even. "So is this the new game, Knox? Are you going to play at being a relaxed, charming rascal, just getting your dick wet with minimum fuss while you wait for your brothers to get a grip?"

Knox shrugged. "Well, you're wrong about one thing. You're putting up a lot of fuss, but you're right I am about to take a dip in that sweet cunt of yours."

Amanda opened her mouth to blast him again, but never got a chance to make a sound. She'd known she had been running down the clock because time just expired. *Did Knox know how to kiss?*

Only like Michelangelo knew how to paint. Not demanding like Cody or playful like Jace, Knox's kisses overwhelmed Amanda, filling her with such intense wanton passion she had no will to resist. It didn't matter. All that mattered was lips devouring her own, his hands—hot, rough and devilish—pushing up beneath the hem of her shirt.

Knox held nothing back, not hesitating for a second to slide one hand straight up to cup her breast, the other dipped right between the V in her legs. Amanda groaned, her head banging onto the floor as Knox released her lips. Right or wrong, he felt so good against her Amanda offered herself up with an arch of her hips to the hand molding itself over her mound.

Knox's fingers pressed in, dividing the swollen lips of her pussy to discover the creamy center. The rough scrape of his calluses over her clit cast an electric web of rapture over her body, making her muscles jerk as she panted from the force. He was there, inside her, fucking his fingers past the clenching ring of muscles at the entrance of her sheath.

"I'm going to fuck this pussy, right here, right now, and you're going to beg me for more," Knox growled into her breast as he forced another finger into her clenching passage.

Amanda's neck arched under the strain. Her mouth opened on a soundless scream as he began to fuck his fingers into her with a hard, rapid rhythm. The slick sounds of suction gained speed as her hips flexed and bounced, finding the beat as she pushed herself harder, faster onto the thick fingers pumping into her. They filled her, but not deep enough, not wide enough, and she was left suspended on the painful edge of ecstasy, unable to reach the last pinnacle that she knew lay just beyond her reach.

"Ah, yeah, baby. That's it, fuck yourself on my fingers," Knox murmured into the skin of her stomach as he licked and nibbled his way lower. "So sweaty, so flushed, so damn sweet tasting."

His lips covered her clit and sucked the little sensitive nub hard. Amanda could not control the spasms overcoming her body as pleasure broke over her in a mind-numbing wave. She floated way above the world, happy and content as she traveled through Utopia. Slowly, the merry plains

and winds rippling with laughter faded into the cold reality of the hard floor beneath her, the hard man above and the very hard length filling her.

“Fucking perfect. Jace and Cody didn’t lie about that.”

Amanda blinked, clearing her vision to find Knox staring down at her. Hands flat on either side, his arms bulged slightly as he held up his own weight. With a boyish grin a man his age shouldn’t be allowed to wear, Knox looked like a naughty little bastard who had tricked a silly girl into giving him just what he wanted.

“Well, you certainly don’t wait to ask for permission, do you?”

“You’re not saying no now, are you?”

Knox punctuated his question with a slight roll of his hips, smirking when he made Amanda gasp. She couldn’t hold in the sounds of pleasure as her pussy exploded, sending rivulets of molten lava rolling up her spine. Her muscles contracted, lifting her legs to clench more tightly along the sides of his thighs. *Oh, God. He still has his jeans on.*

The image they must make. Her naked and pinned to the floor with a large, dominating man fucking her without even bothering to take off his boots. Unbidden, a dark, luscious strand of desire unfurled through her. She wanted to see it.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Knox gloated.

Amanda couldn’t win, but she remembered her vow not let them set the terms of her defeat. Instead of giving Knox what he expected, she decided to give him what he wanted. Rolling her hips to stroke herself down his length, she groaned, “The question really is, what are you waiting for?”

Chapter 32

Amanda's attempt to weaken Knox's defenses failed. Instead of giving into her silent come on, he held still. "I'm just thinking." Knox sounded way too cheery, way too in control, like the cat purring over the mouse. "This is our first time and I'd really like to do it right for you."

"You gonna go pluck rose petals *now*?" *Oh, God, Knox's worse than his brothers.*

"Hardly. I was thinking more about the breakfast table. It seems a little trite, but it would really piss Cody off to find out he was eating breakfast off the table I screwed you on." Knox gave her a wink, locking Amanda in a moment of disbelief.

"Who am I fucking here? A five-year-old?" Amanda snapped.

"Well, I don't hear you coming up with any suggestions."

"There is no need for suggestions. Unless you failed to notice, you're already inside me."

"And it's a comfortable position, but I'm thinking I'd like a little more from this moment."

"Think quick, because your moment's about up," Amanda snarled, completely annoyed at how rational he was being when all she wanted was him to finish what he'd started.

"You think this is so easy?" Knox grunted. "Why don't you try it? What great idea would you come up with to make this redeemable?"

"I'd stop complaining and find a fucking mirror!"

The words hit her ears with the horrifying realization they were hers. A second later she realized how badly she'd been played. Knox's grin widened with a look in his eye that made her toes curl.

"Well, now, that's how the little lady likes it, huh? She likes to watch."

"Get off me." Amanda hit his shoulder.

"And I already know how much you like being watched."

"I'm saying no now, you jackass."

"Now, but not for long," Knox promised her and just like that he lifted off her.

The slow drag of his thick cock over the sensitive walls of her pussy made Amanda clench her jaw, holding back a moan. Damn, he felt good. It would feel even better if Knox pushed back in. Amanda breathed through her desperate thought, turning her own pain into anger at the bastard who put her in this impossible situation.

Wrenching closed the tattered edges of Jace's shirt, she gathered the remains of her dignity and pulled herself off the floor. Knox watched her with a smirk that just made her want to smack the crap out of him. Tempting as it was, Amanda gave her most haughty look, the one that told a man he'd be sleeping alone for a long time to come.

"I think I'll get a shower now."

She hadn't even fully turned before he blocked her path. Arm out, hand flat against the wall, Knox leaned into her like they were actually holding some kind of conversation. "I was thinking you might actually like to watch a movie."

It hurt. It really physically hurt not to say what she wanted. Her jaw moved over the words, but thankfully her throat didn't give voice to them. Snotty, obnoxious responses would not work with Knox.

"I don't think so."

"Oh, come on." He lifted her hair over her shoulder, snuggling his head into her neck. Her body sizzled as he licked and nipped an enticing path downward over her shoulder. "It could be a lot of fun. We could snuggle up on the couch."

He matched his words with the press of his body into hers. His heavy weight settled her back into the wall, a smooth, unforgiving surface that offered no quarter as Knox continued to lean into her. Her hands fell beneath the weight, leaving her shirt unprotected. It parted easily with the smooth glide of Knox's hard body against hers.

"Maybe I could give you a massage, rub every aching part of your body."

His hands lifted, leaving a tidal wave of heat in their wake as they rose up to cup her breasts. Held steady by the thick, heated length of his fingers pressing into her smooth flesh, Knox ground his chest into hers. The rough

caress of Knox's shirt made her nipples pucker and tighten, sending nearly painful sparks through her already swollen and flushed breasts.

I should really stop him. He just didn't give her a chance. With his mouth trailing lower, his words held her paralyzed. "Perhaps a kiss will convince you."

Ah, the hell with it. The warm whisper of Knox's words teased her tits, making her back arch in a blind search for something just out of reach. Amanda gave up her resistance and joined the battle, twining her hands through his hair and forcing his mouth down onto the needy tip.

Knox's chuckle vibrated through her softness, a devilish sound ending in a devouring. Mouth open, he ravished her breasts with stinging nips, heated licks and soul-shattering sucking. He moved over her like a storm, striking the breath out of her as he tormented every inch of her flesh as he roved from tip to tip.

Then he dipped and her fingers curled into fists in his hair. Not to force him lower, but to hold onto some measure of sanity as Knox's rampaging mouth settled over her pussy in an all-out bludgeoning of pleasure.

Her poor flesh, already worn down from its recent release, blossomed almost painfully to life in renewed demand. The nearly violent assault ended too soon, leaving her weak-kneed and lightheaded as Knox straightened before her. He still held on to her, though. His hands spanned her back in the warm, comforting gesture of support.

"So, about that movie?"

Movie? He's doing this on purpose. Knox had caught her completely off guard by intermingling charm and aggression in contrasting waves. Amanda really only had two choices—walk away or agree to becoming Knox's after-dinner snack. Given she didn't have the will power to control the insane urge to go forward into danger, Amanda would just have to beat Knox at his own game...or end up suffering the consequences of too many orgasms.

In light of that dire outcome, Amanda relaxed. She'd follow Knox down this strangely merry road and try to keep it interesting for him.

"A movie, huh?" Amanda smiled. "Why don't I get dressed and I'll meet you in the den?"

"I don't think so, babe." Knox pressed one denim-clad thigh between her legs and gave her weeping pussy a little press. "In fact, I think you're

gonna have to come up with a pretty damn good reason why I should let you keep the shirt on.”

“Because I want it on, and that’s all the reason needed.” *Because there is no way in hell I’m going to walk around naked in the Reese brothers’ house.*

“Fine then, keep the shirt.” He looped an arm around her waist and all but began marching her down the hall. “But I get to pick what we watch, agreed?”

“Agreed.”

With that, Amanda sealed her fate and accepted the consequences, letting Knox escort her into the brothers’ very masculine den clutching a shirt offering no real protection. The sight of a throw over the back of the leather couch let her take her first real breath in minutes. In less than a second Amanda cocooned herself in the soft fleece while Knox watched with a smirk.

“That’s right, darlin’, get comfortable. I’ll go get us something to snack on.”

Amanda didn’t know why, but she didn’t trust his smile or the look in his eyes before he turned and sauntered off. All she knew was Knox Reese was trouble. Of all three brothers, he was the one mothers should warn their daughters about. *At least he’s not boring*, and the likelihood Knox would cheat was pretty slim. Amanda couldn’t see him putting out the effort to lie.

The thought made her smile. She’d done boring and disloyal long enough. No matter what happened or how it all ended, she wouldn’t regret this night or any other night she had with one or more of the Reese boys. *As of this moment, I’m going with the flow.*

That reckless vow didn’t stand up under the prickling sensation of apprehension’s cold breeze when Knox walked back in carrying more than a snack. His hands might have been full with a big bowl and sodas, but she could quite clearly see the box he had tucked up under his arm.

It drew her immediate notice and comment. “What’s that?”

“Fruit salad.” Knox settled down beside her on the sofa as he placed the large glass bowl on the coffee table. “Two forks, see? Isn’t that romantic?”

He grinned around the two forks he held up, as if she hadn’t noticed him letting the box slip down and fall on the other side of him.

“What is in the box, Knox?”

“Nothing.” He drawled out the word with just a little too much enjoyment.

For just a second they eyed each other. When she lunged, he whipped the box right out of reach, leaving her to fall across his lap.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he chastised her as she struggled to right herself in the prison of the blanket. “No peeking.”

“Damnit, Knox. Tell me what is in the box.”

“Cody’s right. You *are* bossy.”

“What?” Amanda gasped. “I am not bossy.”

“Yeah, kind of. He also mentioned you had control issues.”

Amanda gagged on her outrage. “He did not. That from Mr. Domination? Talk about control issues.”

“It’s what makes it so damn hot though, isn’t it?” Knox’s grin took a decidedly wicked curve. “You two struggling for control. I’ve seen you make him weak in the knees. I’ve watched him make you suck him off just so he has an excuse for coming early.”

Amanda’s mouth opened, but nothing came out. She knew he’d been there in the barn, but not like this. Leaning close, Knox feathered a set of sweet, little kisses across her jaw.

“You’re not going to take me down like that, Amanda, so just relax and enjoy the burn.”

The signal came to laugh, but it was choked by the large, warm hand finding its way through the folds of the blanket. It settled over her breast, heating the side as his thumb slid out to roll over her nipple. Burn she did. Slow and easy, she melted beneath his touch.

“That’s it, baby girl, just relax.”

Amanda knew the devil was luring her down the road to damnation, but she didn’t care, didn’t offer any resistance as he moved her. Snuggling her into his lap so that her ass was nestled intimately into his groin, Knox rewarded her submission with a series of molten kisses down her neck.

“Now we’re just going to settle in and watch a little movie.”

In a smooth move, he reached forward to snatch the fruit salad off the table and had her settled back into his lap before the finely-woven magic around her could break. The chunks of fruit in the bowl drew her attention as Knox fiddled with the remote.

This was no lady's afternoon snack of finely diced sweets to be spooned up in a chaotic mix of flavors. This was a man's salad. The oversized portions of bananas, strawberries, pineapple, whole grapes and plump blueberries were way too big for any spoon.

"Looks good, doesn't it?"

She glanced into Knox's grin and had to smile. "I see why you brought the forks."

"Hmm." Knox reached into the bowl and plucked a large piece of banana up. "I was thinking maybe I'd just feed you."

The soft, moist edge of banana kissed her lips. With eyes locked on Knox's darkened gaze, Amanda opened her mouth. There was something so decadent about being fed by a man. It was an intimate sign of trust that triggered an instinctive softening of her body and senses.

Lulled by the warmth of his hand smoothing slowly up and down her back, Amanda gave into the sense of security and comfort. She let her body melt into Knox's embrace and her limbs go limp even as his hands worked over them, igniting sparklers of pleasure.

He has such big, wonderful hands. Knox certainly knew how to touch. He knew where to press his palms and when to feather his fingers lightly over her skin, working her into a slow steady simmer. Sizzling with the need for just a little more, she shifted, opening herself slowly up until he once again had access to anything he wanted.

As his hands worked around her front, he settled her back into his chest, brushing the blanket out of the way. Amanda offered no objection, needing the cool air against her flushed skin. His hands kept her hot. Settling over her knees, he worked them slowly up the insides of her thighs and down the outsides. With each pass he coaxed them wider apart, traveled a little higher until she burned for the second when he'd finally make contact with the very heart of the inferno searing through her.

Oooooohhhhhhhh.

She thought at first it had just been a thought, but when another scream pierced her haze, Amanda's eyes opened. They blinked, beating back the fuzz desire had made of her vision then widened. Going dry-eyed, she stared at the images playing out before her on the big screen. *Porn. The man picked porn to watch.*

Even as the camera zoomed in to watch as a man licked his way through a woman's pussy already stretched wide by a cock, Knox's finger mimicked the motion straight through her slit.

"You like watching, don't you, baby?" Knox murmured as his finger began a slow massage on her clit.

Amanda couldn't deny it. She couldn't take her eyes off the scene as the men maneuvered the woman into position to take both their cocks at once. Even as Knox worked her body steadily toward a frenzy, her vision remained locked on the screen. In a low, husky voice, Knox began an erotic narration that had her body shimmering under the phantom touches as fantasy and reality blurred.

Twisting and writhing on Knox's lap, Amanda gave into her release, letting it roll over her. It left her limp and sweaty in its wake, no match for Knox as he moved. Throwing off her blanket completely, he hands pulled the shirt free of her body. Naked, exposed and totally vulnerable, she couldn't even work up a little anxiousness as he reached for the box still lying tucked along his side.

"I think you've earned a treat."

He opened the small box to reveal a bottle of lotion and some rubbery-looking device with a remote. The big secret was actually quite tiny. Amanda wet her lips and let her eyes drift closed as her head rolled back across his shoulder to a more appropriate position for sleeping.

That's just what she wanted, and when she felt him strum his fingers through her still splayed open pussy, she murmured a protest and tried to close her legs. All she succeeded in doing was trapping his hand between her thighs.

"Come on, baby, wake back up. There's a second feature to this film fest and I think you're really going to dig this one."

Ignoring his prod, she tried to roll away from him and off his lap instead.

"Oh, no you don't."

Knox caught her with an arm around her side, deftly slipping one finger deep inside her. Amanda's eyes blinked open. His was an intrusion that couldn't be ignored even if it was unwillingly enjoyed.

"Knox, I'm tired."

"You'll get over it."

“I don’t want to get over it.”

Despite Amanda’s protest, she didn’t resist at all as he arranged her just as he wanted on his lap. Legs wide open, back tucked into his chest, his erection burrowed against her ass and that maddening finger still remained buried inside her.

“Trust me, Amanda, this is worth staying up for.”

I bet.

“Now open your eyes and watch the new movie.”

Amanda sighed and opened her eyes. They went wide with shock and horror as she took in her own image reflected back at her. She could see herself in perfect intimate detail with Knox’s hand covering her mound. The contrast of his thick, denim-covered legs holding her soft, smooth-looking thighs wide and the tanned skin of his other hand, splayed out over her stomach, made her look weak, almost fragile in his grasp.

A vulnerable woman at the mercy of a very capable man, Amanda couldn’t take her gaze off the man staring back at her in the TV. Knox’s eyes promised all kinds of forbidden pleasures as they met hers on screen. The very promise in them had her skin flushing as they swept over her body. The intense need darkening his gaze left her breathless as her eyes collided with a second male gaze. *Cody.*

The other two Reese brothers had returned home. Two rough and tough-looking cowboys now watched as their brother put her body and pleasure on display for them. The reality of her situation staring her in vivid detail on the TV paralyzed her with the explosive combination of fear and out of control arousal.

Amanda didn’t have a chance to pick an emotion and follow through with the response. Knox’s finger rolled inside her, pressing along the sensitive walls until he hit her magic spot. Amanda bolted upright with electric shock as his finger began to vibrate at an unnatural speed. Ecstasy pulsed though her in rhythm too fast for her heart to keep pace.

She went wild under the impact of a release detonated not only by physical pleasure overwhelming her senses, but by the image of herself in the large screen. She watched through bleary eyes as she bucked and rode Knox’s finger, the two male bodies in the background a dark menace of things to come.

Even as the world came apart, she sought Jace's eyes in the screen. Gone was her tender lover from this afternoon. A beast glowed in his eyes, savage and ruthless with need. The very promise of the threats in his gaze had her orgasm eclipsing its previous heights and sent her rocketing into the universe's abyss.

Chapter 33

Amanda collapsed down onto Knox with a sigh. *Damn, but she put on one wild show.* Knox was tired of waiting for his turn. He'd put on the good boy act and charmed little Miss Johnson into her current submissive state. Wet, weak, in no condition to refuse the fucking he intended to give her, it was time to claim his prize. He just had to get his jeans undone.

It wasn't an easy task. Hard and swollen, his cock had stretched the denim to the limit, making it an almost impossible task to work his zipper down without snagging anything Knox certainly didn't want snagged now. The pressure became too much and the zipper ripped out of his fingers as it sped away under the force of his dick springing toward freedom.

Knox winced as the metal bit into the tender flesh at the base of his cock. As gingerly as he could, he worked his pants downward enough to give him all the freedom of movement he'd need to fuck the sweaty beauty draped over his legs.

Bent over as she was, Amanda unwittingly offered him the flushed, luscious bounty of her ass. He'd be tapping that delight for sure tonight, but right now his eyes traveled down the dark, shadowed crease leading down to the enticing folds of her swollen, pink pussy.

That pussy is mine. He bent forward, trying to lift Amanda up enough to get her on her knees. Instantly she balked, grumbling in annoyance as her arm blindly spiraled backward to smack at him. She sounded like she meant it this time, but there was no way in hell Knox intended to let her escape until he'd gotten his.

What Amanda needed was a little incentive to stay awake and he had about ten inches he wanted to give her. Ignoring her pathetic attempts to wiggle away from him, Knox lifted her by the hips and backed her right up onto his erection.

With one smooth thrust up, he embedded himself in the hottest, tightest little cunt he'd fucked in a long time. His eyes drifted closed and a moan escaped his lips as her greedy little sheath sucked in every hard inch he fed her. Her fingers molded around his calves, digging in until he felt the hard pinch of her nails through his jeans. Knox retaliated by penetrating her as deep as he could.

"Knox...I...I..." She panted as he settled his full length into her.

Knox watched her reaction to his invasion. Her arms wavered and lifted, bearing her weight as she forced her ass deeper into his lap, grinding against him. Wild and wanton, her image on the TV was pure seduction and Knox hesitated to admire it.

Dark hair curled and cascaded around her generous breasts. Flushed all pink with puckered little nipples, those glorious globes swelled and rose with each ragged breath as her stomach flexed with another rolling grind. Bent as she was, the shadow of her body blocked his view. With an annoyed growl, he jerked her straight up against his chest, exposing every inch of her to his eyes.

"Now isn't this worth staying up for?"

Her mouth opened as if to respond, but the action fizzled out into another grinding roll of her hips. Knox teased her with his own upward twist of the hips.

"That's what you want, isn't it, baby?" He bit into her shoulder, eyes trained on his hands as they roved openly over the feminine banquet offered up before him. "You want a good fucking, don't you?"

"Please."

The whispered plea contrasted with the sharp bite of her fingers into his thighs. She tried to lever herself upward and bounce against his cock, but he held her down. Knox loved fucking, but this moment, this last enticing round of teasing addicted him. He dragged it out, savoring the feeling of a woman going wild from the inside out. Right now Amanda would give up all her secrets. With just a touch, he'd be able to tell what she liked by the way her little pussy clenched and pulsed around him.

"You like fucking, don't you, baby girl?"

Oh, yeah. He felt the deep throb of her answer as she twisted in his arms.

"You like it even more when somebody is watching."

Oooohhhh, yyyyyeaaah. The suckling response of her sheath to his statement had Knox's eyes drifting closed. He wanted to tease her more, to make the velvety fist wrapped around his dick squeeze even tighter. The pressure intensifying in his balls choked him, drawing all his muscles dangerously tight.

Clenching almost painfully tight around his cock, she jerked with sudden ferocity. The velvety walls of her pussy convulsed in such deep spasms, Knox shuddered from the impact.

His groan drowned in Amanda's scream. They were both under assault, and as his eyes lifted, he saw the culprit was Cody. His brother moved to join them. In the TV Knox watched as his brother bent to bury his head between Amanda's splayed thighs.

The bastard was tonguing her clit and sending Knox right over the edge with her. Knox growled and took command of the situation. He wasn't about to let his brother screw him out of his fucking.

* * * *

Amanda couldn't take it anymore. She'd lost all sense of reality as Cody's mouth lifted, leaving her clit throbbing in torment. Knox's strong, hard hands gripped her hips, bouncing her hard and fast over the thick length of his cock. Even as she tried to gasp out her pleasure over the sudden grueling pace, Cody's hands knotted in her hair, forcing her down over another hardened shaft.

It filled her mouth and reflexively she clamped down on it, sucking in mindless rhythm to the hand controlling her head. She had no will left to interject into the moment, but gave herself freely over to the demands of the two men and the pleasure.

Knox shifted behind her, for one blinding second he left her and Amanda cried out. Her denial melted into a moan as he lowered her ass onto the sticky cock waiting to fill her. He stretched her wide, impaling every delicious inch of his dick deep into her.

A glorious puppet trapped between two demanding men, Amanda gave herself over to her lovers' ferocious savagery as both brothers pounded into her from either end. No mercy came as the demanding cowboys fucked her hard and fast, right into insanity's embrace. The universe erupted into a

firestorm of ecstasy. Even as she felt the hot wash of Knox's release, she forgot his and Cody's existence and she gave herself over to the rapture. Like molten lava, it incinerated everything in its path, leaving her to twinkle back down toward earth as nothing more than ash.

That's how she felt as she came back into her body, worn to dust and ready for rest, but this new reality she'd brazened into didn't just come with one lover or even two. It came with three and she hadn't even begun to satisfy one of her men. *I might not be athletic enough for this.*

She didn't even have the energy to smile at her own joke. Amanda did manage to groan, though, when a set of hard hands lifted her up at the waist. Her whole body sieved on a ripple of pleasure as her ass clung tightly to the cock shrinking in its depths. With a pop, Knox slid free and she floated upward into the hard embrace of another man, Cody, and he was smirking down at her. *Not good news for the tired and weary.*

Amanda knew Cody well enough to know that look. He wanted to play, only she didn't think she had the stamina left. The decision wasn't up to her. Cody made it for her and she didn't dare object as he put her in the position he wanted—kneeling on the couch.

Bent over, ass in the air, legs splayed, Amanda was glad to not be facing the television. She didn't need her own image to haunt her now that she had Jace to keep her mesmerized. He lingered in the doorway, his eyes dark and trained on her with predatory intent. Slowly he straightened, starting to stroll toward her with a dangerous arrogance that made her arms tremble as her fingers bit into the back of the couch.

Balanced there on shaking limbs, Amanda barely recognized the grind of the coffee table's wooden legs across the floor much less the tear and crinkle of a condom being pulled out. Her focus remained captivated by the man coming to a stop before her and the wonder of just what Jace planned to do to her.

Cody caught her completely off guard. The soft brush of hair against the back of her thighs teased her a moment before his lips parted over the dripping folds of her pussy to bathe her in the tantalizing wash of his breath. The air jammed in her throat as she waited for a more intimate kiss.

Having momentarily forgotten, Amanda remembered the other threat still standing before her when Jace reached out to stroke her. Brushing his

fingers over the sides of her breasts, he touched her as if she were nothing more than a possession, a pet to be stroked at his leisure.

There was nothing wild or out of control about Jace this time as he ran his thumb right over the tip of her breast. This time he caressed her with a controlled precision, playing her body with mastered perfection, but with no emotion. Part of her cooled under the difference, wanting to rally an objection to the situation, but there was no time left as Cody's hands settled over her ass to part her cheeks.

The rough feel of Cody's hairy thigh brushing against hers warned what came next. Amanda had just been there. As catastrophic as the results had been, she didn't think she could survive another explosion so soon.

"Easy, darlin'." Knox's words comforted even as she felt the wide, rounded head of his brother's cock pressing into her rear.

"Oh, God," Amanda whispered the plea to Jace. He just smiled and pinched her nipple at the moment Cody sunk himself deep into her. She mewled under the impact, falling forward into Jace. Drooling over the soft cotton of his shirt, she grunted with the pleasure of feeling Cody sliding in and out of her body.

"It's gonna be all right," Jace soothed her. "It's gonna be slow and easy this time. Isn't that right, Cody?"

No immediate answer came except for Cody's ragged pants as he sank another inch into her ass. He jerked suddenly, following a thump. Amanda knew Knox had kicked him when Cody snarled, "Fine. Slow and easy."

"I mean it, Cody."

Amanda couldn't believe they were arguing at a time like this, not with her body straining under the impact of Cody's slow invasion. The sharp edges of the painful pressure blurred and faded into an erotic symphony of pleasure. Still Jace held her transfixed. He was truly the most handsome man she'd ever met, more so than his brothers.

Even as Cody settled his full length into her, she found herself drawn toward Jace. Letting Cody work his magic over her body, she lifted her hands off the back of the couch and reached out to work her own magic.

* * * *

Knox forced himself to stay in the den with his brothers. He wouldn't flee from this scene. He didn't care enough about Amanda to feel any hint of jealousy. That certainly wasn't the emotion tightening painfully through his stomach as he watched his two younger brothers make love to the woman in front of him.

She didn't mean anything to him, and the fact he envied his brothers was only a natural response to watching a beautiful woman getting fucked. It was because he knew how amazing fucking Amanda was. He'd just learned and damn if he wasn't ten inches of hard and ready to go again.

At thirty-four, it had been a good ten years since Knox had burned this hot. It had certainly never been because of the woman, but because of the kink. As much as he might want to write off his response to Amanda as nothing more than a hormonal overload, the pesky pain in his heart made a liar out of him.

Hell, I knew she was trouble. Right from the start, he'd known. All the planning he'd done to put her under his thumb had backfired when she'd so willingly let him arrange her on his lap. Cody had said she was a natural born submissive, but Knox hadn't been ready to handle how eager it would make him.

His plan had backfired. Now he was stuck watching Cody ride her at his leisure when it should have been Knox ordering Amanda to mount his brother...or bend down before him. There would be time enough to get to all sorts of wicked things, Knox assured himself. Any second now, he'd put a voice to those commands.

Any second now. His mind caught on the thought as Amanda turned from Jace to him. Knox watched in amazement, his plan slipping from his mind as her hand reached out to curl around his cock. The little vixen had already freed Jace's dick. Now apparently she wanted her third.

Not content with Cody riding behind or Knox's cock trapped in her fist, Amanda turned to face Jace again and took a lick of his swollen cock. Even as she began sucking his brother, Amanda matched the slide of her lips with the pump of her hand. Knox's jaw clenched, making his breath hiss through his teeth as his whole body tightened under the whiplash of pleasure. *She will not make me lose control. She will NOT make me lose control.*

He knew Amanda did it on purpose, trying to keep him on a leash, her leash. He would break it any second now. *Ah, hell, I knew she'd be trouble.*

* * * *

It was just as Jace promised, smooth and easy. The slow slide of Cody's thick cock filling Amanda up only to retreat sent alternating waves of warmth and spice up her spine. The intoxicating sensation mixed with the sparkly pleasures radiating out of her cunt. It was delightful, but by far the most gratifying sensation was to feel the shudders running through Knox's body as she took him in her hand.

Still sprawled out on the couch beside her, he muttered a curse, his hand coming to tighten over hers. So far, he'd let her set the tempo. In a silent test of wills, they battled, and she knew Knox tested his own control, proving he could take her steady, slow torture.

It cost him, though, and Amanda gloried at the growls and shivers she knew he worked hard to suppress. Each small sign of her power over his body thrilled her like nothing else had that night. Big, hard Knox Reese was about to crumble before her. All he needed was a little push.

Her hand dipped, intent on giving him a little extra stimulation. It got caught though, in a large, unbreakable hold. Amanda twisted her wrist, but Knox only tightened his grip as he pulled her hand free. Her head reared up to offer a protest, but Jace's grip tightened in her hair, keeping her mouth sucking his cock with an easy steady rhythm.

Dark and low, Knox's words wafted across her ear, letting her know just who was really in charge. "When I fuck, it's on my terms."

He emphasized his point by reaching out and giving her nipple a painful twist. The small assault had her rearing back under the shock and banging into Cody, who cursed softly and gripped her hips harder to hold her still. She couldn't stay on rhythm. Not with Cody, not with Jace, not when Knox treated her other tender tip to the same harsh torment.

"Damnit, Knox," Cody growled as she bucked again.

"I think the little one has been revived, so why don't you guys speed it up?" Knox suggested. "I'm getting tired of this show."

His words cut through the magical web of passion to bare her to the suddenly harsh light of reality. She stiffened under the impact, feeling humiliation tense her muscles as she suddenly, desperately wanted to be anywhere but there.

“Jackass.”

Cody said it, but it was Jace who smacked Knox for her. Knox came alive. Bolting right to his knees, he delivered a solid punch to Jace’s chest. Jace stumbled backward, his dick popping free of her lips. Gaining his footing with a snarl, Jace latched onto Knox’s arm and yanked him right over the couch to crash way down onto the floor. She couldn’t see Knox’s reaction, but she could hear him cuss and a moment later Jace went down.

“Ah, hell,” Cody muttered, responding instantly to the violence erupting around them. Forgetting all about his pledge to go easy on her, Cody began fucking her with mind-numbing quickness. In moments, he reduced her back to a wild thing of need whose frenzied desires matched the chaos of the fight tumbling around them. The grunts and thuds of male aggression blurred in with the sweaty slaps and moist murmurings of male dominance, surrounding her in an electric cocoon of masculinity as Cody drove her right over the edge. Writhing, bucking, trying to claw her way through her release, it hit Amanda so hard she almost shot right over the edge of the couch.

Cody held her tight, keeping her fully impaled on his cock even as she cried out for more. She needed it. As fine as her release was, it was but a mere whisper of the explosion waiting to detonate through her body. In painful pulses, her cunt clenched down, rebelling against the emptiness by withholding her ultimate pleasure. The rapture flooding her body became a nightmarish prison, leaving her nerves painfully raw as it twisted through her body in piercing knots.

Before her eyes, Knox rose up. Bruised and bloody, he looked like a dark avenger come to rain judgment down over her. She could see the verdict in the dark shards of black piercing his navy eyes. His tussle with Jace had unleashed his primitive side. He no longer cared about domination and control, but of capturing and taking.

When Knox lifted one leg to step right over the back of the couch, Cody backed up, taking her with him until he had the audacity to expect her to stand. Her feet couldn’t hold her weight, not with her legs trembling over the deliciously tight squeeze of her ass molding around his dick. Standing there with Cody still buried in behind her, she watched Knox settled himself down before her.

He was hard and pointing right at her. Amanda licked her lips and stared at what she knew was coming. Knox's cock had filled out bigger than before and there wasn't much room left in her body with Cody still packing her in behind. Not that Knox would care.

With a rough grip, he captured her thighs and hefted them right up over his hips, dragging both her and Cody down. Amanda found herself trapped, open and vulnerable between two of the hardest men she'd ever met, and they intended to fuck her together. She remembered all too well what it had felt like before. The pleasure so overwhelming it scared her.

Wide-eyed, she met Knox's darkened look, and with a single hard push, he impaled her onto his full length and sandwiched her between him and Cody. She couldn't breathe without feeling the press of their hard bodies, the pressure of two oversized cocks stretching her to her limits. As long as nobody moved, Amanda might live through this moment. She couldn't help but move.

Heated from the outside and within, drugged on the overwhelming scent of men in heat, buffeted by strength, her head rolled as her body lost its strength and her eyes fluttered over the image of her own naked body caught between the two brothers standing tall. Oh, God. It was dirty and wrong and felt so damn good. The sight of it made her whole body shiver, even as her eyes locked onto Jace's smirk.

He knew... He'd driven Knox to this and she was about to suffer the consequences because Knox had no more than a second's worth of mercy in him before his fingers bit down around her pelvic bone and his hips started moving. Her back arched and her mouth fell open on an endless moan as Knox pumped rapture, hot and pulsing, through her body with each savage thrust.

Pure molten ecstasy rolled up her spine as he forced her to grind harder onto his brother's cock. Then Cody moved, shifting his hips as he began to fuck her back in alternating strokes with the iron pole burning her sheath from the inside out.

"Too much..." The words disintegrated into a moan, her plea did not go unanswered.

"Too bad," Knox growled as he gripped her hips and jerked her back down on his cock, forcing her own tired body to participate in her own

fucking. Harder and deeper, he slammed her back and forth, making her ride the chaotic seesaw of two cocks pillaging her from either side.

Male groans grunted out beneath her cries as the slap of sweaty flesh and slurp of a body being pumped whirled around as everything gained momentum. Harder and faster, the two ruthless brothers forged their way deep, hard into her body.

Amanda screamed as they drove sharp spikes of rapture through her very soul, ripping away her humanity and reducing her back to a lust-crazed animal. She bucked between them, forcing them to match her tempo as she unleashed the full wrath of her desire.

“That’s it, baby girl, fuck me,” Knox snarled, hitting her with his full strength and forcing every bit of his dick deeper into her than any man had ever gone.

“Oh, God, yes!” Amanda arched right into his merciless thrust, loving every hard inch of his domination.

“Fucking come, baby girl. Come for me now!”

Knox bit her hard on the neck, thrusting into her so hard she slammed back down onto Cody’s dick, fucking him deep into her ass and shattering under the impact. A scream ripped out of her as her very soul sheared clear of her body and went soaring into the heavens. Violent fireworks exploded in her spirit’s wake, raining down an inferno of flames licking across her flesh and consumed her whole. Under the brilliant display of ecstasy’s limits, Amanda collapsed, falling deep into the recesses of slumber.

Chapter 34

Wednesday, July 9th

“I think you pulled my shoulder out of its socket last night.”

Knox ignored Jace’s grumbling as he washed off his breakfast plate. Jace sat at the table dramatically rotating his arm. “You know you really gotta watch it. One day you’re going to do some damage. Might put me in the hospital.”

“Pick up your plate and put it in the damn dishwasher,” Knox growled back. He’d been feeling edgy all morning and Jace’s nagging started to wear thin.

“I know,” Jace snapped, shoving back from the table. “God, you’re in a mood this morning. After last night, one would think you could actually crack a smile.”

“Knox never learned how,” Cody smirked at him. “Even after a whole night spent with a hot woman in his bed, he still looks as grumpy as ever.”

“Speaking of,” Jace dumped his dishes into the sink before turning to level a finger at Knox. “You got Amanda in your bed last night, so she’s mine tonight.”

“That’s the old rotation.” Cody balked. “I brought her in, I should have had her first night, so I’m due the second.”

“You were in Knox’s bed with her.”

It’s like living with infants. “Oh, will you two shut up,” Knox snapped. “We don’t even know how long the girl is going to be here.”

“The girl’s name is Amanda,” Jace snorted.

Cody grinned, daring Knox’s black mood with such a cheery gesture. “And we’re keeping her, just in case you hadn’t figured that one out.”

Jace paused as he passed Knox on his way to the dishwasher. “You’re not going to run her off, are you, Knox?”

Knox's shoulders ached at the soft sound of Jace's voice. Hell, he should chase her off just for Jace's own good...and his. For all their bickering, it wasn't like Knox had wanted Amanda in his bed. He just hadn't had any choice once she went and passed out on him. Heavy as she was, it had been hard enough carrying all the weight back to his room and he certainly hadn't wanted her draped over him all night long. Knox had gotten next to no sleep thanks to the girl.

Too damn soft and squirmy. Knox ground his teeth as he felt his dick pulse at the very memory. That's exactly why he hadn't gotten any sleep and he needed his sleep.

"Knox?"

"She can stay as long as she wants."

"And you're not going to encourage her to leave *in any way*."

"Jesus, Jace." It annoyed Knox the way Jace acted like he would do anything to hurt the girl. He wasn't a bully. In fact, last night he'd shown how charming he was. Look at what it had cost him? His control.

"Knox?"

Knox shot Jace a second dirty look for pressing him. "I'm not going to do nothing to Amanda, okay? You have my oath. If she isn't here when you get home tonight it's because she don't want to be here. Not because of me."

"I'm holding you to that."

"Yeah, whatever," Knox grunted. "Why don't you go focus on finishing up sorting the cattle you blew off yesterday, because the trucks will be rolling in about a half hour."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

With grumbles and mumbles from both brothers they filed out the back door, pausing only to snatch hats and pick up thermoses. The sun hadn't even begun to rise over the horizon as his brothers disappeared into the darkness. It would be another hour before Lydia showed up for work and one more before he had to drag Amanda out of bed and send her off to her job.

That gave him two solid hours to get all the paperwork done before those trucks rolled back out. It might have been Knox's day off, but none of the brothers ever really took them. Even if they didn't ride out into the range, there was still a ton of work needing to be done around the ranch and they always saved the paperwork for him.

Being an older brother to Jace and Cody had damn near been a full time job, seeing how easily trouble found the youngest Reese brothers. Well actually, trouble generally found Jace while Cody courted it with open arms, which explained why they'd both fallen for Amanda so fast.

Of all the trouble a man could find in the world, the soft, gentle lure of a woman had to be the worst. They screwed with a man's head, with his ability to be logical and rational. Just look at him. He sat at that desk for nearly two hours and got less than thirty minutes worth of actual work done. Try as Knox might to focus on business, his mind flaunted his attempt at control and slid back into hot memories of the night before.

Knox's lack of attention gnawed on his gut and made him even testier. By the time he managed to pull his head out of his ass, sunlight streamed through the windows and he could hear Lydia moving about in the kitchen. At least Jace had put Cody and his dishes in the dishwasher. No point in making the woman work harder than she had to.

Shoving back from the oversized wood desk he helped his daddy build, Knox lifted his empty coffee mug and went to greet Lydia. He found her on her hands and knees, scrubbing out the refrigerator. Not a task he ever asked her to do, but she did it at least once a month anyway.

"Mornin'."

"Knox," Lydia flashed him a quick smile before it faded slightly. "You look a little rough around the edges. Didn't sleep well?"

Hard to when there is a vixen rubbing herself all over you.

"Nah." He lifted the pot of coffee and spoke casually, not wanting to make more of it than it was. "We do have a guest this morning."

There was a pause in all sound, a slight tensing of the air that had him shifting uncomfortably.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm going to get her up here in a moment, but you don't have to worry over breakfast. She wants to eat something, let her cook it."

Knox about cleared the doorway when Lydia spoke up, catching him at the last moment. "Knox?"

He turned to find her looking unusually fidgety, almost nervous like.

"I know it's not my place, but...well, this is the first woman who has stayed over."

"I wouldn't make too much of it, Lydia. Her house got vandalized and she just needed a safe place to rest. I'm going to be heading over there this afternoon to taken care of it for her so she can stay there tonight." Knox paused and then added for his conscience. "If she wants."

"I see."

The look in Lydia's eyes said she saw too much, making Knox uncomfortable. *Damnit. She is not going to be moving in here.* It would only lead to trouble, more trouble than Amanda already led to. Her moving back into her house as soon as possible would restore order to his house faster.

That's what Knox wanted out of life. Order, structure, control. He might never have loved Sharon the way Cody had, but he'd appreciated all the qualities that had making her a perfect fit in their family. *Amanda has none of those qualities.*

Worse, he knew she would never learn them. A man could hope to tame a vixen, but he'd be a fool to think he could ever turn her into a paragon of womanhood. It would be best for everybody if she decided to return back to her house, but he'd promised Jace not to push. *That doesn't mean I'm going to pansy around my own house just to make the girl feel welcome.*

Bracing himself, Knox entered his bedroom to find Amanda just where he'd left her, sprawled out naked across his bed. The bed sheet twisted around her like a seductive veil. It drew graceful lines over her body, hiding the most enticing parts in its shadowed folds. *How much fun would it be to unwind that present?*

Knox clenched his teeth and bit down on the urge. So he wanted her, any man with a functioning dick who walked into this room would want Amanda. Whether or not they remembered she was nothing but trouble was what separated the boys from the men. Knox had become a man a long time ago.

* * * *

"Rise and shine, sleeping beauty."

The low, husky voice prodded at Amanda in the most annoying way. She didn't feel up to responding. Instead, Amanda used what little energy she could muster to roll deeper into the soft, warm mattress engulfing her in the safe and comfortable scent of her lovers.

“Come on, sunshine, get up.”

“Go away!”

She had to speak this time, the ruthless little bastard bounced her world, trying to jar it back toward reality. Amanda stubbornly clung to the shifting edges of her dreamland, unwilling to let go of the peace and simplicity of sleep.

“You want just five more minutes, don’t you, baby girl?”

“Yes.” *Good. He’s willing to negotiate in five minutes...that’s all I need...*

“Too damn bad,” the voice barked a second before he ripped her dream world to shreds.

Amanda shrieked as the sheet whipped around her so fast it left a slight sting along her body. The cold air hit her warm skin even as piercing shards of sunlight lacerated the darkness. She screamed in outright outrage at the inhumanity of whoever dared to disturb her.

Knox. She should have figured that out minutes ago.

“Time to get up.” He tossed the sheet dangling from his hands onto the floor and without another word started to saunter out the door.

Aye, aye, Captain Jackass! Amanda bent over and wrenched the sheet back onto the bed. Sticking her tongue out at Knox’s back, she rolled the sheet right over her head and fell backward. Cocooned in the warmth of sleep remembered, Amanda waited. The solid thumps of his footsteps came to a sudden stop and she could sense him turning around.

Thud...thump...thud...thump.

Beneath the sheet, the air grew hot with the release of her pent up breath. Under her ribs her heart kicked into high gear, sending flurries of nerves out with each pump of blood. Her whole body felt on fire as she tensed in anticipation of what the man looming over her intended to do.

“What are you doing?”

The growled demand sent all the butterflies trapped inside into a flutter and she couldn’t help but smile. If he needed an explanation, then he wasn’t half as smart as she assumed. Amanda knew Knox was a bright man, bright enough to figure out when he was being insulted silently. Amanda rolled, presenting him with her back.

“So, it’s going to be like that, is it?”

She clenched the pillow she held tighter as if it had the weight to anchor her in the storm she could sense brewing overhead. Let him crack thunder, she'd show the stupid bastard lightning struck from the ground up.

"You sure you want to play this game with me, baby girl?"

Oh... In a dramatic display, she reared up. Clutching the sheet like a cloak, she rose right up on top of the mattress to boldly confront him nose to nose.

"Listen up, Dumbo." She projected, making sure he knew he didn't intimidate her one inch. "The name is Amanda. If it's too many syllables for your little masculine brain to remember, then just go with Mandy!"

With that, she collapsed back down on the bed, rolling to her stomach. She fully expected to be ripped right out of the bed. It actually kind of disappointed her when nothing happened. He still stood there, a dark, heavy shadow across the sheets and she could almost see his outline shiver as he fought for control.

Control was important to Knox, she'd already figured that out. After last night's performance, she also learned he was most fun and most dangerous when unleashed.

"What about your job?"

"I'll call in. I got the days."

"I'm not supporting you if you get fired."

That whipped Amanda's head right out from under the sheet. "Excuse me?"

"I'm just letting you know the rules of this game. You can spend any and every night in any and every one of our beds, but don't expect to be compensated."

It took a moment for that one to sink in just because it was so insulting. He knew it, too. She could read the anticipation gaze. Knox wanted her mad, well she would get even instead. She just had to figure out how.

Ah, just smack him.

And what? End up stretched out beneath him moaning how much more you want, because that is what he's going to do. And how much more humiliating would that be?

Even as the idea occurred to her, she knew Knox's game. They weren't going to play his game. They were going to play hers, once Amanda figured

out what it was. She certainly couldn't do it with the Grand Master Asshole looming overhead.

Without a word to him she rolled off the bed while sweeping up the sheet with her. Wearing it like a gown she glided off toward the bathroom without a backward look at him and slammed the door.

* * * *

Knox flinched slightly at the bang of the door hitting its frame. *You called the girl a whore.* Right after he promised Jace he wouldn't chase her away. A broken promise to his brother didn't bother him half as much as the look he saw in her eyes. He'd hurt Amanda and he didn't mean to do it.

Damn woman, I warned her about playing this game. Of course she hadn't listened. He already learned Amanda ignored all signs and so she got burned. Damn if he would apologize for it. She already knew what kind of ass he could be and she still toyed with him. Well, she wouldn't make that mistake anymore.

Knox sighed. He might as well just admit it. He had a problem. He liked Amanda Johnson, couldn't stay away from her when she was near. He liked her a lot, and that fact irritated him into being a bigger ass than the girl deserved. He probably should just apologize. As he stared at the door he tried just to say the words.

"Amanda, I'm...I shouldn't..."

Okay, so that's not happening. Besides the idea of what Amanda would do with an apology, a real, formal apology made Knox a little nervous. He'd make it up to her in some way or maybe he'd just do her the favor of staying out of her way for the rest of the morning and hope the shower helped calm her down.

* * * *

Amanda had not calmed down by the time she finished showering. She still wanted a piece of Knox's hide, intended to have it once she found some clothes and armored herself. *And just where the hell are my clothes?*

She tore apart Knox's room, delighting in trashing it as she looked for her bag. Truthfully, she went a little further than necessary just out of spite.

Looking through Jace's room at the other end of the connected bathroom didn't produce any different results except he wouldn't have to waste an hour cleaning tonight.

That consideration didn't negate the fact she still had nothing more to wear than a towel, an annoyance quickly blossoming into an outrage. She knew Cindy had packed some clothes for her. She saw Cindy give the bag to Cody and it had been on strapped to the back of his saddle...*Ah, crap. Those bastards probably left it out in the barn just to keep me naked.*

Well if they thought she wouldn't walk out to the barn, proud and regal in nothing more than her towel...they were right about that. *Damnit!* Left with only one door and one hope, Amanda prayed she'd find her clothes in the last bedroom at the end of the hall. Expecting a guest room or an unused master bedroom, Amanda was unprepared for what waited on the other side.

Sweet, feminine, perfumed air wafted out as the knob slid from her hands and the door rolled back on its hinges. *Wow.* Amanda stood stock still in the doorway stunned by the enormity, the elegance of the room.

Twice as big as any of the other bedrooms, it housed a bed that could only be so big for one single purpose. Canopied in lace, it sat directly across from the door and took up almost half the wall. Night tables covered in soft, pink fabric with delicate, floral-painted, porcelain lamps centered on them banked either side of the bed.

Light flooded the room from windows set in all three exterior walls. Twinkling, glittering crystal vases, perfume dispensers and Q-tip jars cast a rainbow of soft colors across the floor as sunlight fell across the vanity tucked under one set of windows.

Feminine and frilly, this went beyond being a girl's room. It was a room for a true princess. *Sharon.* The realization this room belonged to her, even years after her death, made something sad and savage twist through Amanda. Jace's confession of love drifted through her head, but instead of filling her with warmth as it had moments earlier, it drenched her in a cold reality. He might love her, but he worshipped Sharon.

How can I ever compete with a ghost? Amanda couldn't. She couldn't compete with this. This room wasn't stale or musty. There were no cobwebs or gathering dust to proclaim this a shrine to a mistress so long forgotten time had been allowed to overtake it. This was an open wound, still bleeding, still keeping imprisoned what belonged to it.

That is exactly what the Reese brothers are, prisoners of the past. How much more evidence did she need? They kept a room as homage to their lost love. They kept her mother basically under the same roof. It proved they were capable of great love, even as it showed the position had already been filled.

No man will ever love me like this. Amanda wasn't that special. Just the opposite.

"What are you doing?"

Amanda's head snapped around at that piercing shriek. She almost got bulldozed over by Lydia as she came rushing down the hall in a frantic frenzy. Not shockingly, her screams of protest as she charged Amanda drew Knox's dark shadow to the den door.

Heat flooded her face and she stumbled over her words as well as her feet as she got out of Lydia's way. "I'm just...looking for my bags."

"Well, they're not in there," Lydia snapped. "I told you not to go snooping!"

Amanda's legs didn't move, frozen with fear and humiliation. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Get out of there."

Lydia shoved her right through the door and slammed it in her face. Amanda stared at it in horror. She'd never meant to cause the woman that kind of distress.

"What did you do now?"

As bad as Amanda felt, she still tensed as Knox's dark growl hit her. Turning, she squared her shoulders and faced him. Amanda might not be ready for this confrontation, but she wouldn't buckle under it. "Nothing for that woman to go all psycho about. I was just looking for my clothes."

"That woman," Knox growled back, "is the mother of our deceased fiancée, and I'd think even a woman of your class would know to show some respect."

Amanda's jaw dropped and then snapped back with an audible click. "A woman of my class?"

"Yeah, one that doesn't know where her clothes are."

"Well I guess that makes us a matched pair considering you're the type of man that *hides* a woman's clothes from her."

“Your clothes are in the guest room,” Knox snarled. “That’s what you are here, a guest. Let me show you where you belong.”

Amanda clenched her teeth and bit back just what she wanted to say. Couldn’t the man show at least one second of softness? Apparently not, and she hated herself for doing it, but she followed in his shadow. She had no choice if she wanted to wear anything other than terry cloth.

Silently brooding the whole way, she followed him back down the hall, past the doorway to the kitchen and through the living room until Knox brought her to a stop in front of the door tucked into the far corner of the living room. He threw it open to reveal a small, orderly, sterile looking bedroom.

With a grim look, Knox left her standing alone in the cold, clinical-style room. *Jackass!* The man was certifiably cruel. Amanda might have made a mistake in entering Sharon’s old room, but it was an honest mistake. She certainly hadn’t meant to trespass or cause any harm. Of course the jackass hadn’t give her any opportunity to explain. No. He’d treated her like some gold-digging slut who needed to be put in her place.

Amanda had enough.

Chapter 35

“So I wrote, ‘Thanks for last night. Had a wonderful time.’ Then I lathered up the lipstick and gave the paper a big old kiss, slid a twenty into it, folded it over and wrote ‘Knox’ on the top in big, bold letters.”

Amanda paused to take a swig of her beer. She didn’t care too much for the bitter taste, but tonight she needed just a little liquid fortification. All day she’d been obsessing over the details of her morning misadventure at the Reese brothers’ ranch. Half the time she felt justified and almost giddy at the idea of what kind of response her departure would cause.

Other times, though, she wondered if maybe, just possibly, she’d completely lost it. That’s why Amanda had dragged Cindy out for a beer right after work, even though Cindy never drank. She needed an objective person’s opinion.

“You’re insane.” Cindy stared at her as she shook her head.

“Ah what the hell do you know,” Amanda shot back. “If you woke up with your lover telling you he isn’t going to compensate you, you’d probably kill him.”

“No. I’d want him to suffer a long time before he got that release, but at least crushing his balls in a vise would be kinder than screwing around with his head.”

Amanda glared. “I’m not screwing with anybody’s head.”

“No.” Cindy exaggerated the word, making it into a joke before she leveled a straight look at Amanda. “So, what do you think happened if Lydia found that little love letter?”

“She’d steal the twenty.”

“Amanda!” Cindy’s eyes widened.

“I’m sorry.” Amanda hunched her shoulders. She didn’t want to be sorry. “But just because the woman lost a daughter doesn’t mean she isn’t a bitch.”

“Well you’re screwing the men who belonged to her dead daughter. I think that gives her some right not to be welcoming,” Cindy shot back.

Amanda wrinkled her nose in disgust. “That’s so unfair. Just because I’m sleeping with her daughter’s former fiancés, I have to be nice to her no matter how horrible she is to me?”

“Yep.” Cindy smirked. “That’s the way it works.”

Amanda glared at her beer. “What bullshit. I lost my mother and my brother and I don’t see anybody going out of their way to be nice to me.”

Cindy snorted. “Why do you think I’m your friend?”

“Tonight? To hide from Tony, or am I keeping you from a bed and a pair of handcuffs?” Amanda smirked.

Cindy stilled. “We are not discussing *that*.”

It might have been wrong of her, but Amanda perked up at the sight of her friend’s distress. “Why not? Don’t want to admit you liked it?”

“He took advantage of me,” Cindy snarled. “I was cuffed!”

That deserved an eye roll from Amanda. “Still made you come, didn’t he?”

Amanda couldn’t look at Cindy as she delivered that punch, but twirled her bottle between her hands across the unsmooth, pitted surface of the table. The bottle clanged and swirled off as she jerked under the impact of Cindy kicking her in the shin.

“Ow.” She shot a dirty look at Cindy.

“What about Knox?” Cindy sneered. “You come for him?”

“You’re such a bitch.”

That brought the obnoxious little twist back to Cindy’s lips. “You want to say no, but you can’t.”

“No I can’t. I just hope he’s paying for it now.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Why should I tell you?” Amanda straightened her empty beer bottle.

“Amanda.”

She cut a hard glance at Cindy, thinking now maybe she should have just drank alone. “What?”

“What did you mean by that?”

“Nothing.”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll have to figure it out.” Amanda watched morosely as Cindy settled back into the booth, thinking aloud. “You left an

inflammatory note right there in the middle of the living room and apparently not just to piss Knox off or horrify Lydia, so that means you expect the other brothers to find out about it, right? Nobody else in the house.”

“Nope. Nobody else,” Amanda agreed as she waved her empty at the waitress. With a nod the woman disappeared around the corner.

“So, let’s see. There’s Cody, who we all know likes you.”

At least parts of me.

“Then there is Jace, a man who has already confessed his love to you.” Cindy paused to narrow her eyes on Amanda. She just stared blankly back. “That’s who you left the note for, isn’t it? You think Jace will question Knox about what happened this morning once he finds out about the letter. Then what? You think Knox will actually own up to calling you a whore to his brother?”

“Actually, I do.” Cindy had put it all together quick enough Amanda didn’t even bother to lie about it. “Denying what happened would be cowardly and weak.”

“And just what do you expect Jace to do when he finds out his brother called the woman he loves a whore?”

Amanda leaned in and said it. “Beat the fucking shit out of Knox for me.”

“Amanda!”

“What?” Amanda snapped back, more than willing to defend her position even if she knew it was wrong. “The man deserves a good beat down and don’t try to tell me he doesn’t.”

“I agree. He does, but Jace is his brother. You’re turning two brothers against each other.”

That was the very reason she felt the nasty, gloomy tendrils of guilt trying to worm through her all day. She fought back, unwilling to concede the point.

“Look, you said it yourself. If a relationship is really going to work with all of them, then I have to be strong. I can’t just let Knox say and treat me any way he wants because I’m afraid a fight might upset Jace, okay? If Cody and Jace weren’t in the picture, I would have done exactly the same thing just to be a bitch to him.”

“But they are in the picture, and you can’t just treat this situation as if you’re having separate, individual relationships with three men. You’re having one relationship with three men.”

“I’m not having anything with three men. Let’s get real here, do you know how tired and sore I was this morning? I still fricken ache, and if I had gone back to the ranch I’d be naked right now and being ridden hard. Think about it, three men, every night. They would have to compensate me because at some point I really won’t be able to get out of bed.”

“So you’re just going to walk away then?”

“Yes.” The answer came out quick and straight from the heat of the moment. The sound of the word almost immediately sent a strange panic through her and her mouth moved to stop the riot. “No.”

Cindy raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t know.” Amanda caved. “Who knows if they’ll even want to continue after that note.”

“I do. You really think there are not three Reese brothers scouring this city for you right now?”

Amanda smiled.

“Oh for the love of God.” Cindy rolled her eyes. “That’s what we’re really doing here, isn’t it? This is the second time you’ve run out on those boys. What is it? You just like knowing they’re going insane looking for you.”

“It’s not a bad feeling.” Amanda shrugged.

“I think you need to grow up and deal with the fact you are in a relationship with three men. The odds are you will be returning to the ranch at some point and one of them, probably Knox, is going to piss you off again and you can’t constantly put those boys against each other every time you get into a snit. Somebody is going to get seriously hurt one day if you don’t.”

Amanda scowled. “You sound just like Jace.”

“Well, that just shows you how smart he is.”

Amanda didn’t want to have to think about Cindy’s point, but she did. As the waitress dropped off her second beer and disappeared, Amanda kept turning Cindy’s argument over in her head. It annoyed her because it pierced the logic of the carefully constructed defense she’d erected against all the guilt.

It angered her to feel guilt about this. She might have done wrong, but he still deserved it and certainly started it. *Okay Miss Bratty, you'll be working with Mr. Jackass on the fifth grade science project—how quickest to destroy two brothers' relationship. Extra points for extra brothers.*

"Look, I'm just saying you really need to figure out how you're going to handle Knox, because you can't rely on this method. I'm not saying I don't understand why you did it."

"I get it," Amanda groaned, wishing Will was here instead of Cindy. He'd have let her wallow. "Message received."

* * * *

Knox kicked the brake down with more force than necessary. The storm clouds had been gathering overhead, reflecting his mood perfectly. Fuck the fact it was the middle of the week, he was going to get rip roaring drunk. It would suck come morning, but he could give a shit less. Bottom line, tomorrow would suck no matter what.

Knox had let Jace beat the crap out of him and he just wasn't young enough to rebound with ease. The next few days would be filled with aches and pains. Already his jaw throbbed and his eyes started to swell shut. Knox deserved the hits. He'd made that decision when he saw Amanda's cute little note and known then Jace would want a chunk of his flesh.

That's what he'd told himself, but it wasn't the reason he didn't defend himself against his brother's wrath. No, it had been the look in Amanda's eyes right before Knox had dismissed her by the guest room door that haunted him. He'd hurt her, not once, but twice that morning.

Guilt had led him into putting in a long nine hours worth of work on her house. Despite his earlier comments, Knox had ordered up and paid for all the repairs, making decisions without even thinking to call Amanda. As much as he knew she'd probably throw a fit over that fact, in Knox's mind he'd made his apology.

Not that he waited to see her reaction. He'd split before she got home from work with the justification if he lingered, Knox would only make things worse and probably end up owing the girl another apology. Knox just didn't think he had the stamina for it.

Besides, he'd still had his brothers to face. It wasn't often Knox's ass found the hot seat, but he'd certainly been burned tonight. Accepting he'd earned it, he'd held his tongue as his brothers erupted. He even let his baby brother get in a few licks. The last time Cody had landed a punch, Knox sure as hell hadn't taken it.

At least they hadn't wasted too much time tearing him up. Both Jace and Cody had been in a snit to run off after the girl. They expected him to choke up an actual apology, because Amanda would be coming back to the ranch. Maybe not tonight, but tomorrow at the latest and Knox would be back at the beginning of the same problem—trying not to fall for Amanda's less than gracious charm.

Hopping out of his truck, he slammed the door with more force than necessary. Knox parked in back, all the space up front having been filled earlier in the night. He'd pay later, having to stumble out in the rain through the mud, but what did he care?

He didn't care. He didn't care about a single thing, not even...*Amanda*.

Knox froze in his tracks. There sat his nemesis on the back step of the bar where he'd come to drink her out of his mind. She hadn't noticed him, too focused on staring at the cell phone in her hands. He should get back in his truck and go somewhere, anywhere else before she realized he was there.

Even as that certainty hit him, Knox felt his legs moving forward and not away. *What the hell am I doing? What am I going to say to the woman?*

"Amanda."

Her head snapped up, her eyes going wide with surprise to find him standing over her. Knox could see the surprise turn to pain and felt the heavy weight of his own responsibility bear down on him.

"I'm sorry about this morning." Had he really said that? "I didn't mean to hurt you." *I'm going to beat the shit out of Jace!* "It was wrong of me and I apologize."

Hello, my name Knox and I'm a fucking Weenie. Knox clenched his jaw, holding off any more humiliating statements from coming out. It would have helped if Amanda would say something to fill the gap. As Amanda rose to her feet, though, Knox decided he didn't really want to hear anything she had to say. Whatever gloating, smug words came out of her mouth would only increase the number of beers he'd need to wipe this conversation out of his memory.

“Whatever, jackass. I don’t care what you have to say.”

Knox blinked, taking in the fact she’d just thrown back his heartfelt apology into his face. He could feel his ears go red as steam boiled up through his blood. Knox never apologized to anybody, and this little girl had the audacity to respond with sarcasm. *What the hell had I expected from the Queen of Obnoxiousness? Where the hell does she think she’s going?*

Wherever Amanda had intended to run off to, she almost got away. Knox brought her to a quick stop with a harsh grip to her elbow, jerking her back to face him.

“Let me go.” Amanda wrenched her arm, but didn’t manage to break free of his hold.

“What did you just say to me?”

“I said get your oversized paw off me, you two-legged dog.”

Amanda all but shouted the words right in his face as she stepped up. She might not have meant for it to be a turn on, but the way she pressed into him, letting him feel her breasts brush against his chest made more than just her nipples go hard.

“But you like my paws on you. Don’t you, Amanda?” Knox stepped into her, flattening her breasts against his chest when she refused to stand down. “I can feel your nipples, all puckered and hard. I didn’t get a chance to taste them last night. Maybe we should rectify that, or don’t you have another twenty to spare?”

Her eyes rounded and he could feel her heart racing in her chest. The frantic beat echoed his own, making him rush carelessly forward into the storm building between them.

“I was really quite insulted by that. I remember how hot you got, how wet and tight you were when I pumped my dick into that needy little pussy of yours. You begged me to fuck you and passed out when you came. I’d say that was worth more than a twenty, don’t you?”

“It isn’t even worth remembering,” she snarled, hot and heated right into his face.

“Then maybe I’ve got you confused with somebody else. Somebody who is actually worth a little compensation.”

She smacked him so hard Knox could feel the imprint of each single finger throbbing into his cheek. The crack of flesh on flesh echoed the snap

of his control. His hand released her arm to twine into her hair and yank her head back.

Amanda's mouth opened on a scream he swallowed as he sealed their lips together. Wild, savage, the kiss went beyond a simple tasting or duel for control and into the ravaging range of carnal desires completely unleashed.

He'd been starving all day and hadn't even known it until he once again filled himself with Amanda's intoxicating taste. Sweet, hot and spicy, the flavor of her kiss drove him deeper into the vortex of aggression-fueled passion. Knox wanted to brand her until it was only his touch, his kiss, his dick that could bring her any kind of satisfaction. He wanted to scar her soul as she had already scarred his.

Knox ripped himself free of her embrace, releasing her to breath in ragged breaths. He wouldn't do it. *Not this way*. Not a second time.

Without a word of explanation, he latched back onto her arm and began to drag her off toward his truck.

Chapter 36

Amanda fought Knox the whole way only to end up getting a face full of seat as he all but threw her into his truck through the driver's side door. She'd have gone out the other side if he hadn't latched back onto her arm, twisting it up behind her back. She only had two options, go forward into pain or stay still and accept her fate.

Both options were unacceptable to her and she unleashed her anger on the big brute who thought he could treat her any way he damn well pleased. Elbowing, kicking, clawing, biting, she unleashed her full fury onto Knox. All her efforts earned her was to be pinned beneath his awesome weight with her wrists trapped in one hand and her legs pinned together by his massive thighs.

Damn! Why does being held like this turn me on so much? Turned on was an understatement, given the painful level her arousal had taken. She couldn't help it. Knox did something to her, filled her body with energy and fight. Every cell in her knew where this road ended and thrived on taking another trip with Knox.

Knox made short work of binding her wrists with his belt. With a yank, he had her sitting up, wrists tied to the hand rail over the passenger side window. Amanda anticipated his next move, waiting for whatever insult he intended to blast her with, but he didn't even look at her. Even in the darkness, she could see Knox's ears flushed with anger, his jaw tense as he clenched it. His motions were short, jerky, full of aggressive energy as he kicked over the truck engine and threw the oversized vehicle into reverse.

Within a second, he had the oversized vehicle spinning out of the parking lot. Apparently the negotiations were over and he intended to claim victory by force. *Knox must have stolen this move from Cody's playbook.*

Outside her window, the night flew past in a blur of pastures marked by the occasional blip of a dark wood telephone pole and the shallow pool of

yellow light. As the world whipped past, she made no comment, but worked steadily on twisting her wrists free.

Amanda knew how he wanted this little drama to end, but she wouldn't go down with Knox the way she had with Cody. Cody enjoyed control, but Knox needed it. He used it as a defense to protect himself, which only made her that much more determined to rip it away from him. Whatever Knox wanted hidden, she wanted to expose.

In a replay of her first day with Cody, Knox jackknifed the truck off the paved road and gunned it into the darkness. She gripped the handle as the seat beneath her bounced. Each pounding impact forged her determination to make this night end differently until her will power was made of pure, six-inch steel.

When Knox slammed the brakes down and jerked the truck to a shuddering halt, Amanda sat ready to do battle with Satan himself. She'd had enough. The leather bind around her wrist had loosened enough she could pull her wrists free at any time.

For the moment she played at being subdued. Cowering in the corner with her fingers still curled around the handle, she silently, eagerly, anticipated Knox's next move. She'd expected a full on assault, what she got was a dismissal.

The truck door whined at being thrown open. The whole vehicle shifted, bouncing slightly as Knox jumped out. Amanda stared in absolute confusion as Knox stormed off into the night. He prowled like a dangerous beast around the truck, and she knew he was trying to work off his aggressive energy.

Trying to save his control again. He needed another push. One that would shatter his will power into dust. Just the idea of all of Knox's aggression unleashed had her insides fluttering with excitement and some very sensitive parts of her body swelling with glee. She would reduce him to a thing of wild need. Then they'd be equals.

The very idea made her smile and tempted her to do something every sane part of her screamed not to. Sanity had no place here and she hungered for a taste of the insane.

* * * *

Knox took a deep breath and tried to force the feral lust beating at his control back into its place. He would not give in and become another victim of Amanda's allure. That woman would not rip away all the defenses he had developed to keep any woman from actually touching the beast's heart within him, no matter how much arguing with her just made him hunger.

No, damnit. He would control himself. If Amanda was the choice his brothers made, he'd only give her what was safe for him to give. He'd be strong, calm, rational. He'd get back into the truck and soothe Amanda's little tantrum with honeyed words and keep his emotional distance.

I will not allow her to push me around anymore.

The sound of the truck door slamming had his head snapping around, half expecting to see Amanda charging at him with more accusations flowing from her lips. Instead of curses, Knox's ears rang with the sound of the truck's engine revving. Like a dumbass, he just stared in amazement as the truck spun around, coming within feet of hitting him and throwing dirt into his face.

Son of a bitch! She was stealing the truck!

Oh, hell NO!

Knox barely latched onto the tail gate as it whipped past. Banging his knees, he managed to lift up on the bumper before the truck cut hard and he went tumbling into the bed.

Cussing as he rolled to his knees, Knox could have busted through the rear window open with his fist. Just the fact that it was his truck and he didn't want to pay for nothing to be fixed had him holding back. He still banged hard enough to make Amanda jump, not that the crazy lady obeyed when he roared, "Stop!"

Like that's going to happen, but the damn woman didn't have to fishtail back onto the highway, sending Knox tumbling around the bed. Amanda Johnson would pay like no other, Knox growled. Just as soon as she pulled this truck over he'd—*splat!*

Knox turned his face up into the big, fat drops of water starting to spatter out of the night sky. *Oh, yeah, she's going to pay for this.* That thought kept Knox warm as the sky opened up above him and unleashed a torrent on his head.

Bring it on. Every second, every smack of rain on his face, every nick of dust and dirt against his skin, every bump and bang of the bed beneath him

renewed Knox's determination. He'd be accepting her babbling apologies when she was on her knees, ass in the air, his hands in her hair, holding onto it like a leash while he rode her harder than he had ridden any other woman.

Relentless and furious, Knox would fuck Amanda until he'd reduced her to exactly what she was, a soft, weak woman, begging him for her pleasure, willing to do anything to see to his. He'd screw the arrogance right out of her and when it was over, he'd own her body and soul. With all the power over her, his obsession would be no more than a short phase. Soon enough he'd be bored with screwing her and that would be the end of this insanity.

When Amanda spun the wheels back into the dirt lot of Studs & Spurs, Knox knew just what her plan was. Too bad for little Miss Snotty, she wasn't going to make it out of the truck, much less into the safety of the bar. He climbed over the edge of the bed and balanced on the side step.

Before she'd even brought the truck to a complete stop, he already had a hand on the handle. The truck jerked to the stop right beside the bar's back door. The rain came down harder now and he caught her completely by surprise as he threw open the passenger side door. Just as he suspected, she'd been diving for it in the hopes to make it out before he'd realized which direction she'd gone in.

Amanda shrieked and reared back, scrambling for the driver's side door. Knox dashed whatever hope of freedom she'd entertained when his hand clamped down on her calf. In a smooth motion, he dragged her upside down, kicking and cussing, back over his lap. With the other, he slammed the door and locked them into the private confines of the truck cab.

Amanda still had her work clothes on, a skirt which ripped easily within his grasp. Ignoring her screaming curses and the wild jerking of her body as she fought for freedom, he tore her panties out of the way and revealed the smooth, golden globes of her ass.

He didn't hesitate before he cracked his hand right over the fleshy curve of her rear. Venting his anger, his frustration, jealousy and sense of betrayal into every smack, Knox let all the volatile emotion pour out of him.

Knox lost all focus, barely aware of her curses blending into moans or of the way her hips lifted, blindly arching upward, in search of her punishment. Then, in a split second, he realized how bright red her ass had become, how he could see the imprint of his own hand on her flesh. In a

moment of sizzling comprehension, Knox's emotions jackknifed and he began to regret his action, fearing he might just have gone too far this time.

* * * *

Amanda swallowed, trying to breathe though the pleasure. It had been too much. Knox had unleashed the full force of his fury on her backside, leaving her tender and sore, but so damn in need the desire clenching her pussy had become more painful than the echoes of the spanking he had given her.

She'd driven him ruthlessly toward this moment and she would be damned if he didn't give her what she wanted out of it. Pushing herself up on weak and trembling arms, she felt her cheeks slide through the pool of her own tears which had collected on the seat. Forcing herself upward, she straddled his thighs with her own and looked down into his eyes. *Is that regret there?*

"Amanda—"

She cut off the soft sound of his voice with her kiss. Amanda didn't want to hear anything he had to say. Taking his lips with the fire of her own arousal fueling the savage beast he'd awakened in her body, she forced his lips open with her tongue and invaded his mouth like a conquering dictator. Knox sat still, a puppet beneath the mastery of her kiss.

It thrilled her for a moment, before doubt turned to unease and insecurity. Maybe she was screwing this up? He might really not want her, and she was just making a complete ass of herself. What the hell was she supposed to do now?

Her determination weakened and she wavered on the very verge of retreat. Her muscles gathered and tensed, anticipating the order for withdraw and gathering up its strength to see the motion through. In that second, a grim reality hit her. She didn't enjoy this. She got off on being manipulated, used, bossed, bullied and ordered about, but she didn't thrill at being in charge. *Well, shit...*

The striking revelation had her lips lifting from his in surprise only to be recaptured as Knox exploded into motion beneath her. One second she was straddling him and the next he had her pinned beneath his heavy weight with

his mouth ravaging hers. Grinding into her, Knox teased her entire body with the hard rub of his muscles.

The tattered remains of her skirt left little protection to the tantalizing pass of his still covered erection over her mound. Thick and long, it distorted his jeans, making the denim stretch until she could feel every rough fiber scrapping in teasing caresses over her sensitive skin and setting flame the burn overtaking her pussy.

Oh, God, he's so big! Bigger than any man she'd ever ridden. Deliciously thick, scrumptiously hard, and orgasmically long, her pussy drooled with the very thought of getting filled by Knox again. It clenched in painful demand for tasting its treat, and her hands hastened to obey.

Crammed between the hard press of bodies, fighting the hard stretch of denim, her fingers wiggled maddeningly about, but couldn't free Knox from his jeans. With a grunt, he freed her lips and lifted up just enough to undo his own jeans. In seconds, hard, smooth, velvet covered heat filled her hand and she squeezed, loving the way his cock jerked in her grip.

"Is that what you want, baby girl?" Knox growled, dipping his head to place biting little kisses down her neck. "You want me to fuck you with that?"

Oh, yeah. Amanda tried drawing him down with a tug on his cock, but his hips remained arched, leaving her fingers to slide down his length with a pull that made him grunt. Knox's fingers curled around the collar of her shirt and, with a jerk, the material ripped clean down to the hem. A second later her bra snapped and fell away, allowing Knox's warm, callused palm complete access to her tender globes.

His fingers curled around one tender tip, tightening in a silent warning that had her moaning.

"No. Please."

"No, what, baby girl?" His tongue snaked out to tickle the very tip of her nipple. Like an electric shock, the there-and-then-gone caress had her bucking. She jerked in his hold and his fingers pinched down, making her cry out even harder.

"You like that, don't you, baby girl?"

Oh, God, yes.

"You like having your tits twisted."

It was so wrong, but she did. She couldn't stop her body from writhing any more than she could the wave of cream that slid out to bathe his cock in her desire.

"I think I'd like to know just how much you like it."

That was all the warning she got before his hips arched and plunged, impaling her hard and fast on the full length of his erection. Amanda's eyes bulged under the sudden penetration. He filled her like nobody ever had, and it burned with a marvelous pain, making her squirm just to set off more sparks.

"Now show me how much you enjoy my punishment."

The dark, dirty words trickled around her neck, warming her flesh for his kiss. With a scrape of his teeth, he soothed her with a lick just before he pinched down hard on her tit and a slight twist had her exploding beneath him. Bucking into his strength, she shuddered as deep inside she could feel the walls of her cunt ripple down the length of his cock.

Low and husky, he chuckled. "I do so enjoy being buried in your tight heat, baby girl."

And Amanda loved his fucking, especially when his hips lifted and took flight in an escalating rampage of hard, pounding thrusts. Seizing possession of her body and control her soul, Knox commanded her as he drove her higher and higher. Details disappeared in the frenzy, the mouth ravaging her breast, the hands tormenting her, and his cock stroking with tantalizing speed over the sensitive walls of her pussy. It all blurred until in one great, rounding lash the chaos went white and she snapped free of the binds of reality.

Chapter 37

Knox went down roaring under the force of his orgasm. Collapsing into the soft, plush bed of Amanda's curves, he let the release wash over him. Stronger than any force he'd ever endured, his muscles trembled under the strain. They burned, not from overuse, but from the lack of oxygen. His heart thundered too fast for his lungs to match the beat. The air whipped in and out of his chest so quickly it became almost painful to try and actually capture a breath.

Condoms. The thought hit him, forcing all the air right out of his lungs. *Ah, shit.* This was the second time he'd forgotten about that all-important protection. A sobering and chilling thought, the worry brought Knox back to more harsh realities, like they were still sprawled out across the seat of his truck, parked in a public lot.

Ah, hell. If he knocked Amanda up like this, she'd probably never forgive him. Knox wanted to cuss out loud, to give voice to the harsh litany of profanity resting just behind his lips, but he kept them in. He could only imagine what Amanda's response to him cursing up a blue streak would be while his cock still rested burrowed into her heat.

That won't make this situation any better. I need a real solution to this problem. Knox needed to figure out how to control this skid they'd slid into, because two facts became painfully obvious. Amanda wasn't going anywhere but back to the ranch with him, and he'd better figure out how to control her before she tore up his home. He needed something to leverage Amanda to bring her into line.

"You know, I'm beginning to think putting up with you is worth some compensation."

Knox's jaw flexed at the too happy, taunting sound of her voice. The baby girl was giddy, thinking she'd won. Obviously she'd forgotten a few important points.

“You kissed me, remember?”

Yes, she had. She’d started this whole misadventure. Whether Knox wanted to claim it had begun in the bedroom this morning with her snotty attitude, or with her cute little note or the way she stole his truck, he could lay it all at her feet. Amanda could argue it, but then they’d get to that kiss. It had been all her. *And it hadn’t been very good.*

“But I didn’t rip my own clothes to shreds. I think that kind of says it all, don’t you?”

No. Knox didn’t. A pearl of wisdom appeared to him. It hit him with perfect clarity just what Amanda’s goal actually was. *She doesn’t want to be under my control. She wants to be at my mercy.*

He smiled against her neck, reveling in just how the scales had shifted. Amanda must have sensed the change in the current, because he felt her tense beneath him. When she spoke again he thrilled the tinge of uncertainty creeping into her tone.

“You’re smiling. Why are you smiling?”

Knox lifted his head, letting his evening stubble scrape against her cheek. He enjoyed the way her body shivered ever so slightly beneath his in response. “Well, I just came, but I’m still hard. Lucky for me I’m still buried in your hot, little cunt. I got you naked and at my mercy. That’s worth a smile, don’t you think?”

She wouldn’t say it, but he knew she agreed. He felt it in the sudden clench of her sheath around him. Yeah, her body melted right around him in celebration of his victory, but Amanda didn’t wave the white flag by any means.

He might have figured out a way to subdue her physically, but Knox could see the mischief swirling in her dark eyes. Leverage, he still needed it if he hoped to keep Amanda from figuring out some way to cause trouble. *Something or someone...*

“I think maybe it’s time we bring this party to an end, or have you forgotten we’re parked behind a bar?” His silence must have made her itchy, because worry squeaked in her voice.

Knox stretched his neck, making a show out of looking around at the fogged windows. Nobody could see anything, but anybody passing by would know what kind of show they were missing. If any of his other brothers had pulled this stunt, he’d have torn into them good. Amanda

probably knew that. She was needling him again, but he wouldn't take the hook.

"Yeah, you're probably right," he drawled out as he let his eyes settle back into Amanda's shadowed gaze. "But I think you'll take the harder hit in the eyes of the good citizens of Humble. After all, it's natural for a man to want to screw his brother's girl. It's up to the girl to be above it."

Amanda's eyes narrowed and he knew his words had pierced her afterglow. "Why are you always insulting my honor?"

"Why are you always trying to push me beyond my control?" Knox retorted. "Because it's fun, but it's also destructive, which is why we're going to stay like this until we come to an understanding."

"Understanding?" Amanda arched a brow and pushed hard against him. "Then maybe you should understand a woman doesn't like to have a serious conversation with a man who just beat her ass and then fucked her in his truck outside a bar packed full of people. You can understand that, can't you?"

"Understand it, just don't give a damn about it." Knox shrugged.

Her gaze narrowed on him. What she said next didn't shock or worry Knox. "I think Jace would care, don't you?"

"Yeah, that's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about."

He arched his hips, pulling himself free of her clinging depths. Fresh beads of sweat began to gather between his shoulder blades as he forged slowly back in. He didn't let her see the strength it took not to pound into her. Instead, Knox continued talking as if he weren't gently screwing the woman beneath him.

"Here's the thing. We aren't going to play that game anymore."

Amanda panted, her eyes fluttering closed as every muscle in her neck strained. Despite the heavy, breathy quality of her voice, she still managed to get out her question. "We're not?"

"Not unless you want me to go home and tell Jace I caught you screwing some man out in his truck behind the bar."

Her lips opened, they even moved, but only a moan came out as her entire body twisted beneath his. All around him, he could feel her clenching as her little cunt began to pulse with a strengthening rhythm. He knew she wasn't anywhere near an orgasm, but she wanted it.

"You wouldn't dare," she managed to whisper.

“Yeah, actually I would,” Knox smirked, giving her a little harder thrust to punctuate his vow. “I am just the type of man who will do anything to get what I want. What I want is for you to be wet and willing, waiting in my bed. I want you to remember women are supposed to be sweet and gentle, not manipulative vixens driving two brothers toward violence.”

“Please, Knox,” Amanda gasped beneath him.

Her eyes had glazed over and he knew her need had grown a little too dense for his words to penetrate. Time to stop. When he did, it took her a moment, but a second later her eyes popped open and narrowed on him. Amanda was back.

“You son of a bitch...ahhhh!”

Amanda’s snarl turned into a scream as he gave her one hard, deep thrust to remind her just who held all the power. Her whole body shuddered under the impact and deep, deep inside she melted around his persuasion. Panting out little sexy sounds, she snapped back to her old self faster this time.

“This is so unfair,” she managed to grind out.

“That’s what I was explaining a moment ago. I don’t play fair.” Knox laughed at just the thought. “Not when it comes to my family. I know what you are. You’re trouble and I happen to love my brothers. I don’t want to see you hurt them.”

“I’m not going to hurt them.”

He had her mad now. Amanda shifted and twisted trying to dislodge him, but Knox didn’t budge. He knew it added to her fire that the man pissing her off also happened to be stretching her pussy wide over all ten thick inches of his cock. Every wiggle and shift had him pressing into her tender walls, and damn but it felt beyond good, especially the way she clenched and pulsed around him. *Baby girl might be mad, but she’s still hot.*

“Get off me.”

Amanda hit him, right on the shoulder. As a punch it was so dainty and small it made him grin all the more. “Settle down now.” He gave her more of his weight, flattening her into the seat. “I told you, we’re not going anywhere until we sort things out.”

“There is nothing to sort out. You’re a bastard, and I’m the innocent unjustly accused. Now if you don’t mind, will you please get your dick *out of me?*”

“That’s not really what you want, baby girl, because the last thing you are is innocent.” To emphasize his point Knox started rocking into her again with a slow, steady roll meant to drive her insane.

“Will you stop doing that!” She managed to make it sound like a demand despite the way she groaned it out.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t think when you’re teasing me like this. Either be a man and step up or be a boy and go home.”

“You’re not going to insult me into giving into your desires anymore, Amanda.”

“Ahh.” Her nails scraped over his shoulders as her fingers curled into tiny fists, pinching just a little bit of his skin. A slight tinge of pain that emphasized her annoyance. “You are being intentionally difficult about this. And I know what you think you are doing, but it is not going to work.”

Knox cocked his head, in mock curiosity. “What’s that?”

“You know.”

“No. Tell me.”

“Fine. You’re intentionally doing everything to piss me off the way I piss you off. There, I said it. Are you happy?” She mounted an all out pelvic assault, bumping and grinding into him in a direct attempt to force the fucking. “Damnit!”

Knox smirked at her annoyance when he brought all motion to a stop simply by collapsing into her. “So you’re not even going to bother denying it was all intentional?”

“What do you want? You want me to say I am an obnoxious brat who intentionally set you up to get a beat down by your own brother as revenge for you being a jackass? There, I said it! I admit it. I’m an evil, horrible monster and you better remember that, because this isn’t a role or a game. This is me and if you want to play then bring it on, baby boy. I’ll take your ass down.”

Knox laughed. He couldn’t help it. The woman had a few cans missing out of her twelve pack. “I guess we fit then. I’m a jackass and you’re a bitch, that about sum it up?”

Amanda paused on her response, and then, just like that, he felt the tension drain right out of her. “I guess so, but the next time you call me a bitch I’m smacking the living shit out of you.”

“Fair enough, but you hit me and it’s on.” He gave her another spontaneous hard thrust to emphasize just what would be on. “I’m not going to stop until you’re on your knees, naked and whimpering at my mercy.”

“Maybe it will be you on your knees.”

“Honey, I don’t go to my knees for any woman.”

Even as the words rolled out, Knox knew he’d just laid down the ultimate challenge and just what a mistake that might have been. Amanda’s lips lifted and the sparkle lit in her eyes.

Baby girl is back to plotting. His ass was cooked if he didn’t stay one step ahead of her.

* * * *

Amanda smiled to herself, imagining just how much fun it would be see Knox on his knees. She’d bring him to them, that much was a given. The how was the part of the equation she needed to work on. She’d figure it out, but not tonight, not pinned beneath Knox, stretched out over more than just the bench seat.

“Well I guess then we’ve reached an understanding.”

“Not completely.” The tightening in his tone had her eyes glancing back to find his sudden smile fading fast. “There is one more thing. I’m going to make you a doctor’s appointment in the morning.”

“For what?”

“Birth control.”

Amanda smirked. It was a little late to be worried about that. “I have a handle on it.”

“I haven’t seen you handle it yet,” Knox retorted with such condescension it made her bristle.

“I haven’t seen you handle it either.”

Direct hit. Amanda saw Knox flinch under her retort and could easily guess forgetting a condom wasn’t something he did often, if ever. It was a testament to how completely he lost control when they came together and, she’d have bet money, a weakness he didn’t want to be reminded of.

He reminded her of a few facts too with a simple, easy glide of his dick. *Oh, yeah...*

“I’m taking you to the doctor in the morning.”

Amanda knew Knox wanted her to agree. By agreeing, she would be doing more than letting him take control of this one decision. It would be proof he could control her with sex.

“No.” Her body might be saying yes as it responded in all the pleasurable ways to the slow rhythm set by his hips, but her mouth ran free. “I won’t go on the pill. It’ll ruin my maniacal plan to take over your entire life. Pregnancy is the first step. I can use it as leverage for marriage.

“Once I got a ring on my finger and my signature in the check book, I’ll play all three of you little boys like strings on a guitar until utter chaos reigns down on the ranch and I drive it into ruin. You’ll be a broken man when I’m done with you, Knox Reese.”

Amazingly, she actually managed a laugh. A truly amused sound as she relished in her rebellion, it got cut short when Knox responded with a hard, sharp thrust. Instead of being a one shot punch, he pounded into her with renewed savagery.

Every single part of her rejoiced at his loss of control and she gave herself over to the celebration. Letting the sweetened edges of her release gather around her, she matched him pull for thrust.

“Oh, God, yes. That’s it.” She gasped at the final clench as her climax stole over her body. It tightened every muscle and she raked her fingers over his back as she began to shudder with the early tremors of her release.

Shudders turned into terror and had her eyes ripped open to stare in horror as he pushed off her. With every muscle quivering under the strain, he levered himself up and withdrew completely from her body.

“Let me set you straight, baby girl.” Knox’s smile was grim. “You won’t control me with sex. There isn’t going to be no baby made between us.”

Without his heat surrounding her, filling her, Amanda’s anger kept her warm. She snapped at him with enough venom to make it hurt.

“Sure thing, daddy.”

Chapter 38

Knox knew she'd done it to him again. Despite knowing just what angle Amanda worked, he couldn't stop himself from falling victim to her taunts. Sanity and reason didn't come to save him, but the half hour ride home to the ranch did. The silent, tense trip did miracles for his perspective.

She would be going on birth control and he wouldn't fuck her until it was safe. Sure, he could have used a condom, but after feeling the wondrous heat of her pussy along the naked length of his cock, the idea of using a rubber just sucked too much. No, the way Knox reasoned it, he put up with a lot to pump her sweet, little pussy, and it earned him the right to ride her bareback. Knox suffered and for that he deserved some compensation.

He wouldn't give up his pleasure, but he would Amanda's. He'd keep her from having a single orgasm until she bent to his will. By the morning, she'd be begging him to take her to the doctor and then back to bed. All he needed was no interference from his brothers.

Knox didn't trust Jace to hold up under the strain. Cody would have been able to handle it. Hell, with his bag of tricks, Cody would have been handy to have around right now. Problem was, his younger brother was kind of pissed at Knox. Knox didn't trust a mad Cody. He didn't really need the help any way. Knox knew just what he planned to do to the baby girl.

As grass crunched beneath the truck tires, Knox grinned at the sight of the empty yard. Neither his brothers had returned. There would be no interference, nobody to help save Amanda from the things he planned to do with her.

She apparently took note of that fact, too. As he brought the truck to a stop just in front of the porch steps, she finally broke her silence. "Where is everybody?"

"Out looking for you." Knox grabbed onto her wrist and pulled her out of the truck behind him. Amanda at least had the good sense not to resist.

“Don’t you think you should call and tell ‘em you found me?”

“Why?” Knox shoved through the front door without releasing his prisoner. “They’ll figure it out come morning.”

“The morning? Damnit!” Finally she resisted. Halfway through the living room Amanda dug in her heels and tried to bring him to a stop. “I don’t have any clothes with me. All my bags are in my car back at the bar.”

“So?” Knox jerked her forward. Her strength was no match for his. “You’re not going into work in the morning. You don’t really need clothes to go to the doctor I’m going to take you to.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you in the morning, because I’m not spending the night here!”

Amanda fought him down the whole length of the hall, struggling, nagging, ultimately cussing and even hitting him. Knox barely paid her any attention, letting her ride out her tantrum. When it came time to cart her off to the doctor’s, she’d walk out the door willingly, if not naked.

“Are you listening to me?”

“No, not really.” Knox jerked her into his bedroom. “Whatever it is, it’s your problem. Not mine.”

“You really are a jackass.”

Knox didn’t think that deserved a response. Maybe he was, but it didn’t change the facts. The fact was she was here alone and entirely at his mercy and this time he didn’t intend to play.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Amanda’s tone went from annoyance to suspicious alarm as he dragged her right through the wreckage that was his room and into the bathroom.

“I’m wet, sweaty and I have your cream smeared all over my dick, so I’m thinking a shower is in order.” He matched his actions to his words, releasing Amanda to turn on the hot water.

“I’m not showering with you.” She backed up toward the door. “I’m not doing anything with you ever again.”

“More like in five minutes, sweetheart.” Knox shrugged out of his ruined shirt as he studied her. He’d torn her clothes nearly to shreds. Two little, white-knuckled fists clenched around the tattered edges of shirt and skirt in a vain attempt to retain some modesty. “Don’t make me chase you through this house or you’ll really see the end of my patience.”

“You think I care about your patience?” She challenged him, but didn’t move any further toward the open doorway.

Knox wasn’t about to start making threats now. Engaging in petty dialog or pointless arguments didn’t work with Amanda. She only understood one language, force. Lucky for him, he was fluent in the dialect.

Sitting on the closed toilet lid, he began to unlace his boot, letting Amanda prattle on without comment.

“I don’t think so,” came back the expected response, followed even more by the feminine posturing. “If you think I’m going to just do as you tell me to, you got another thing coming mister. I’m not some doll you can dress and undress and order about like a mindless piece of plastic with a set of tits and pussy for you to use at your leisure. I happen to be a woman. A strong, competent woman more than capable of making my own decisions.”

Knox stood up with a sigh. “Suit yourself.”

He reached for the buttons on his jeans, pushing down the stiff, wet denim as she continued on her tirade. God, save him from the feminist movement and all the yammering about rights and strength. Great, whatever. If a woman wanted to be a doctor, fine. If she wanted to run for office, even better.

Hell, he didn’t even care if she wanted to ride in a rodeo or chase down cattle, but when it came time to go home to her man, a woman should be soft, sweet, and complacent. If she wasn’t, then it was a man’s job to put her in her place.

“And I’ll tell you another thing.” That finger, the one a woman used to try to assert her authority, waggled in his direction. “If you think I’m some damn bitch for you to get fixed so I can be at the beck and call of your perverted desires, then you better watch yourself, buddy. This puppy has teeth. I ain’t afraid to bite your assshhhhhh!”

Amanda screamed loud enough to pierce an eardrum when he lifted her right off her dainty little feet and placed her directly under the pounding spray of water raining down from the shower head. Her hands came up and she twirled around like a drenched ballerina on drugs.

Knox had to smile. *Damn, but she’s so much fun.* And pretty fucking cute. Not many women could pull off looking so sexy in some drab-colored outfit better suited for a librarian than a little sex pot, but Amanda did it. The

water helped. It molded the stiff, oversized fabric into a form-fitting sheath, leaving nothing to his imagination.

It didn't hurt either that he pretty much destroyed her clothes in the truck. Her hands just weren't big enough to hold enough of the edges together and they flapped open, revealing the lush curve of a thigh, the plush underside of her breasts, little peaks and teases for his eyes.

Just as he suspected, Amanda was turned on. Her firm, puckered nipples gave her away. She couldn't claim to be cold this time. That water steamed, but then again, it may have been the woman.

"You are...I...this is..." Amanda couldn't seem to find the words as she sputtered. "Look what you did? I can't even wear these clothes now!"

As if to emphasize her point, she wrenched her shirt right off and threw it at him. The wet fabric splattered against his chest before sliding down to plop onto the floor. Quickly her bra and skirt followed. Her panties had been destroyed and lost somewhere between his truck and here. She was left standing naked in front of him. Knox wondered if Amanda realized she tried to punish him by stripping.

He suspected so. It was just more drama for the queen. A condition Amanda thrived on proven by the way she flipped her hair and turned her back on him. A calculated dismissal, she reached for the soap and started lathering up her body as if he wasn't even there.

Now there is a tempting offer. One Knox didn't plan on letting slip past him. Stepping into the shower, he intentionally pressed into her as if there wasn't more than enough room for them in the stall. Her head turned slightly and he could see the edge of her lips compress, even as she stepped away from him.

Knox followed, silently perusing her until she reversed track and tried to step backward into him. He held under the assault, letting her press into him as hard as she could. The plump globes of her ass rubbed against his cock, making a soft cushion for his hardened length.

That's exactly where he intended to fuck her before they got out of this shower. He'd have her bent over and whimpering with need to come as he rode her slow and easy. By the time his release threatened his control, he'd have already wiped out her sanity and reduced her to nothing more than a plaything for his desires.

Time to begin. He used the moment to wrap his arms around her sides and effectively impress her.

“Knox—”

“It would only be gentlemanly of me to bathe you since I got you all dirty,” Knox cut her off, enjoying the way his words made her shiver ever so.

Even as her body started to melt into his, her words reflected her internal resistance. “I can manage all on my own, thank you.”

He’d expected that response and she hadn’t failed him. She’d been right about one thing tonight. In this, Amanda was innocent. She didn’t know all the moves a man could make, but she was about to get a crash course. Molding his fingers around hers, he nuzzled his way through the sheet of wet hair to nibble on her ear as he whispered, “Allow me to assist.”

Amanda squeaked, a forming of words disintegrating under the movement of their hands as Knox directed hers up and over her breasts. He was stronger, and even when her hands tried to wiggle out from beneath his, he managed to keep them pinned, making her palms massage the flushed globes of her breasts until he slid their hands down to cup them and offer them up. Knox hooked his chin over her shoulder and watched the heavy rise and fall of her chest.

“You really do have beautiful breasts, all smooth and creamy with such rosy little nipples.” His thumbs propelled hers upward to twirl over her puckered tits. The slow roll had her hips echoing the motion as her head sank into his shoulder. “So responsive. You like that, baby girl?”

Amanda moaned out her response, arching into the touch of her own hands. No longer resistant, her fingers shifted beneath his taking control of the sensual teasing. Knox nibbled on her shoulder, eyes fixated on the arousing site of Amanda pleasuring herself. He could feel his dick press harder against the softness of her rear as it swelled in silent demand.

He held his darker impulses in check, letting Amanda wind herself up. It not only aroused him to watch, but the irony of it amused him. She didn’t know it yet, but Amanda would become her own torturer, because he had no intention of letting her find any satisfaction, by his hand or hers.

She shivered and shuddered in his embrace. Her body beginning the sensual dance of desire as her hand slipped downward over her stomach. Knox tensed, waiting for the moment when she’d show him everything. He

could feel her legs shift, opening up to make room even as he prodded her on.

“That’s it baby girl, show me how you liked to be touched.”

“Knox.”

The husky whisper stroked against him even as he heard the faint plea within it. It was the call of a woman to her man, seeking mercy and solace. The sound cut through him, through all the games and manipulations to touch a part of him he didn’t want any woman touching. Toughening his reserves, he forced the reminder Amanda was nothing more than a momentary plaything by pressing her hand over her mound and penetrating Amanda with not just his own fingers but hers as well. The sudden violation had her hips arching as Amanda’s sheath wept and pulsed heated cream down over his hand.

“So, damn hot and tight, do you feel it, baby girl? How your little pussy suckles and tries to pull your fingers deeper? It wants to be filled and fucked. It begs for it.”

Amanda panted in his embrace, unable to form the words, but Knox heard her through the wanton grinding of her body. Her hips arched and rolled, a seductive caress against his cock that had him swelling almost painfully in response to the silent invitation. The teasing motion had her little pussy clamping around their fingers in demand for his dick.

Her fingers responded. Pressing back against his, they set a slow rhythm to the fucking, pressing her into his erection in a sensual tease. Knox clenched his jaw as he fought to maintain control of the moment. When he plunged his fingers deep into her sheath, he rolled them across her velvety walls until he hit the magic spot, making her jerk and cry out.

He made her twist over and over, bringing her to tears as she begged for more. With each cry, each soulful rub of her body, Knox’s control frayed a little more before it snapped. With no conscious thought, his hands and body moved, lining up the head of his cock with heaven and plunging him into its molten depths.

Driven by some primal need to possess her clear to her soul, Knox drove himself harder and faster into her. She fell forward, her hands splaying across the tiled stall to give her leverage as she humped and ground herself onto his cock. Then it hit her and he felt the walls of her sheath clamp so tight his cock swelled painfully under the constriction.

His eyes closed as his body shuddered to a stop, enjoying the magic of Amanda's release from the inside out. It would be so easy to join her, to let the heated lava of ecstasy consume and destroy him.

Condom. Knox growled and bit back on the temptation to forget that practical concern. He'd be damned if he scrounged one out of the bathroom drawers. He dragged Amanda in here for a reason and she already made him forget his goals enough to grant her a release. He would not allow her to claim total victory.

Sliding out of her pussy had to be one of the hardest things he'd ever done, but he managed. Knox even managed to catch her whimpering, shuddering form and lift her into his arms before Amanda hit the floor. He was still hard and far from done playing with his new toy. The satisfaction he felt at having her curl into his embrace, panting and pleading, rivaled the buzz from his recent release.

She's mine now. Knox could do anything to her, with her. He could demand whatever he wanted from her and she would give it to him. There was one thing he wanted more than anything. Turned on by the mastery he now had over her, he carefully arranged her across his bed. Legs splayed, arms limp, she didn't resist his positioning.

Cupping her creaming cunt in one hand, he leaned over her as his fingers slid through her folds to torment her tender little clit. As if hit by an electric shot, she jerked under his touch, twisting and moaning as her hips arched upward in blatant invitation for more.

"Amanda, look at me."

Lust-dazed eyes opened to glow up at him with a golden beauty that had him softening for a moment. Beneath all the attitude and defenses lay a woman with a sensuality so deep it called him like a Siren's wail, tempting him to crash into her and drown in the warm waves of ecstasy she alone could give him.

The depth of his response terrified him. Instinctively he sought a way to rip the intimacy from the moment and return it back to what it should have always been, fucking. That's all he'd let himself have with any woman, because his body was the only thing he was prepared to give her.

"Knox," she breathed out his name with the same gentleness her hand cupped his cheek with. "So serious. Don't worry. I won't hurt you."

Her words, and the fact she now gazed up at him with a strange warmth darkening the desire in her eyes, made Knox aware of two things. His hand had stopped its distracting motions and Amanda had seen clearly into the turbulence of his soul.

He jerked back, distancing himself physically as well as emotionally. It was a lie, a deception, and he wouldn't let it dissuade him from his ultimate goal. Stepping up to the edge of the bed, he let one knee sink into the mattress as he reached for her. With a flutter of her eyes, she smiled up at him.

"Come on, baby girl. Time for me to fuck that ass." Knox was intentionally crude, wanting to jar her out of any stupor she'd tried to lull him into.

Apparently she liked crude, because she smiled at him and purred. "Is that so?"

"You like the sound of that, don't you?"

"I like the feel even better."

Knox fought the battle for control and she tested him along every inch. That smile, those words, made him sweat. As big as he was, not many women had ever let him in the back entrance, but the way Amanda bit her lip and gazed up at him with such need told him she'd not only let him in, but she'd love every inch he gave her.

The very invitation in her eyes stirred a primal urge in him and he wasn't gentle as his hands lifted to settle over her body.

"On your knees, baby girl." Even as she moved to obey him, he forced her thighs wide. "Legs spread. I want to see your pretty pussy dripping for me."

Amanda moaned and arched her back, bringing her ass up and letting him see every intimate detail of her swollen folds. They gleamed with her cream, all lush and inviting. Knox couldn't help but take a taste.

A quick kiss turned into a ravaging exploration as Amanda went wild under the lash of his tongue. So sweet and delicious, Knox lost himself for endless minutes in the intoxicating taste of her. Only the spasmodic writhing of her body and piercing screams snapped him back to reality and reminded him, he'd once again gotten side tracked and allowed an Amanda an orgasm he'd intended to deny her.

With a grunt of disgust at his own lack of control, Knox shifted away from Amanda and back onto his feet. Leaving her collapsed in a sweaty, panting heap on the bed, he went to fish some lube out of the night stand. When he returned she still whimpered, listless in the middle of the bed.

He used his thighs to prop her back up. She didn't even seem aware of what he was doing, only showing some recognition when he pressed the hard, rounded head of his cock right up against her anus. Matching her gasp, he pressed into the tightest ass he'd ever had the pleasure to fuck.

Chapter 39

Jace pulled his truck to a hard stop under the carport and kicked his door open. He was grumpy, pissed, and very much annoyed to see Knox's truck parked haphazardly in the middle of the yard. Cody's truck didn't cramp the space next to his which meant he was still waiting on Amanda's porch. Knowing him, he'd wait there all night.

Jace had searched all over Humble, looking left and right for Amanda, and the only thing he'd found was her car parked in back of Studs & Spurs. Tucker had said she'd been in earlier with her friend Cindy, but they'd disappeared. With Amanda now in Cindy's car, Jace had given up. Eventually Amanda would show up, and he and Cody would set everything back to right.

All his searching had done was made Jace itch to hit Knox again. The fact that Knox's truck sat like a barricade in front of the steps only irritated the urge. Knox would never have parked there. More likely somebody else had driven his drunk ass home because that's the only way Knox would let another person drive his truck.

Besides, Knox had muttered something about going to get liquored up. Jace would bet money his older brother was passed out, face first across his bed. It wouldn't hurt enough if he ripped into Knox now. Morning would be better. His brother would already feel like crap. Jace smiled coldly at the thought of making Knox feel as shitty as he did right then. It might not be possible, but Jace surely would try.

Locking the front door closed behind him, Jace tugged off his hat and shrugged out of his coat. Leaving both hanging on the rack by the door, he headed for the den and the liquor. Knox wasn't the only one who needed a drink tonight. Jace got sidetracked as he entered the hall by the soft, guttural groans coming from the opposite end.

He could see the light coming from Knox's room, hear the sensual sounds of a woman being pleased. The squeak of the box spring, the musky scent of sex, Jace froze under the implications. *Son of a bitch! He brought a woman home.*

Jace's fingers curled into fists as he stormed down the hall. He could not believe Knox could be that stupid or drunk as to bring home some cheap piece of ass from the bar when he knew it would mean the death kernel to his and Amanda's relationship. The death to Jace's relationship with Amanda.

The very idea blinded him with a rage more violent than he'd ever experienced. Jace rounded the corner of Knox's bedroom door with curses already forming on his lips to come to a stuttering halt as his eyes took in the sight before him. She looked like the mythical goddess Venus to him, so beautiful and sensual. Bowed down before Knox, her back arched in a graceful line, she swayed and bounced in rhythm to his brother's fucking.

Amanda flipped her hair and caught his gaze. The smile she gave him warmed him through, making Jace's cock swell with need. So filled with feminine satisfaction, he knew Knox hadn't forced her into this moment. If anything, it was Knox who appeared unsettled. He followed Amanda's gaze to cast a scowl in Jace's direction.

"Don't even think about interfering," Knox growled, a harsh sound chopping through his ragged breath.

Jace raised an eyebrow, and other than lifting his fingers to begin unbuttoning his shirt, he made no real response.

"Damn it, Jace."

Amanda's smile shifted as Knox took his annoyance with Jace out on her. It dipped slightly and then opened to release a moan as Knox's hands settled on her shoulders. The slow, steady tempo of Knox's hips picked up, becoming a fast-paced bump and grind that had him holding her into position.

Every inch of the way, Amanda begged for more of his brother's rough fucking. Jace could hear it in the breathy little moans spurring Knox on. Her teeth bit into her lower lip as Jace watched her whole body flush and begin to tremble with the climax tightening down her muscles.

Over the steady slap of sweaty flesh, he could hear Knox snarling. Soft and harsh, his brother's words were vulgar and perverse. All Knox did was

drive Amanda into panting even harder. His little woman liked it rough and dirty, which just made her all the more perfect.

Toeing off his boots, he let his jeans fall to the floor. Naked and more than ready to join in on the party, Jace eyed the action, trying to figure out how best to get in on the fun. Knox shot him a hard look. The feral aggression glinting in his older brother's eyes told Jace he wasn't welcome.

Amanda didn't mind. She welcomed him with a hand reaching out to curl around his erection. Jace closed his eyes against the sweet pleasure of her soft grip on his hot flesh. Her fingers tightened, molding perfectly to the curve of hardened cock before sliding down his length.

Jace's eyes flew open as his groan turned to a growl at the loss of Amanda's touch. Knox met his hard gaze with his own determination. With a hand on her wrist, Knox folded Amanda's arm back into her stomach.

"This is my night."

"I'm not leaving."

Jace backed that statement by kneeling right on the bed. The small advance brought his dick within inches of paradise. Bent over as she was, Amanda's head hovered just above the engorged head of his cock. Near pain, he watched as her full lips parted. The puff of heated breath washed over his swollen flesh in a fleeting caress.

Then the universe stopped as her wicked little tongue snaked out for a quick taste. Jace groaned as every muscle contracted under the sharp spike of pleasure. The tension bowed his back and arched through his neck. It snapped back a second later when the sensual motion abruptly stopped.

Knox had a hold on Amanda's shoulders and used it to pull the unresisting woman straight up. Jace watched as her jaw flexed and fell as his brother impaled his full length straight into her ass. His brother was longer, thicker than most men and few women had ever taken Knox that deep.

The rapture in his brother's eyes gleamed in Amanda's as well. She writhed against Knox, trapped in his embrace by the two hands holding her breasts hostage. Knox growled in warning as Jace reached for Amanda. His older brother's eyes narrowed, and his hands tensed as Jace's touch came close to her breasts.

"She's mine."

Jace settled for her sides, letting his hands smooth down to the indentation of her waist. "You had her last night."

In the blink of an eye, he wrenched her from his brother and right into his arms. Her mouth fell open, panting out sexy little sounds as he lowered her slowly but steadily down his own aching length. Her pussy welcomed his invasion with a pulse of heated cream.

Jace smiled at her, feeling all the warmth inside him explode as her lips lowered to brush over his. His mouth opened to take control of the kiss, but Amanda's shriek cut him off as their weight shifted and suddenly they were tumbling backward. Jace took most of the impact, banging full force into the floor with Amada's weight coming crushing down on top of him. Over her shoulder, Jace could see Knox's evil smile.

So it's like that, is it?

Yes, it was. Knox answered with the bash of a pillow to his head. "Get out of her, you rutting mutt. Baby girl isn't allowed cock in her pussy tonight."

He followed that absurd declaration with another whack of the pillow. Jace growled. He was not rutting, he was loving. He certainly didn't appreciate being smacked with a damn pillow, not to mention being pushed off the bed while enjoying his woman's company. Knox had to be dealt with.

"Give me just a minute, darling," Jace murmured hastily to Amanda as he lifted her off. Paying very little attention, he rolled her to the side and rose up to meet Knox's challenge. "Bring it on, big brother. I got your pill right here."

* * * *

Amanda blinked and stared as Jace took a wild swing with his fist and Knox bashed him with another pillow shot to the head. Rolling into a sit, she watched in utter disbelief as the two brothers hurled curses and punches at each other. Things had been going very well, better than before Jace had showed up. At first sight, she'd thought her night had gotten even better, but somehow she'd become totally irrelevant.

Naked with hard-ons at the ready, she rolled her eyes. *What a waste.* She could be getting both of them at the same time. Damned if she wasn't going to get something and get it now. She picked up one of Jace's boots and chucked it at them.

“Ow!” Jace gripped his arm, turning and ducking as she threw his second boot. “What the hell did you do that for?”

“Because she wants you to leave,” Knox growled. “Just like me...ow!”

“Stop, both of you!” Amanda scrambled to her feet, holding off for just a second before she chunked Knox’s bedside clock at him. He managed to duck the missile, and now she had both brothers’ attention firmly on her and their very enticing erections pointing in the right directions.

“Are you insane?”

“She is insane,” Knox retorted. “You should have seen what she did to my truck earlier.”

“What?”

“No! Damnit.” Amanda did not intend to let the two of them get distracted a second time. “Will you two focus? This is supposed to be about sex. We,” she waved a hand between her and Knox, “were having sex when you,” she pointed at Jace, “interrupted. That’s fine, join the party, but don’t break it up! You two juvenile delinquents have turned what could be a fun time into a disaster with your childish bickering, and I’ve had enough. Until you can figure out how to get along, I’m just going to have cut you both off.”

Knox raised an indignant brow at her. “Cut us off?”

“Don’t take that tone with me, mister,” she shot back. “This is the second time you’ve interrupted my sexual odyssey with your ill temper and your inability to restrain your more violent tendencies.”

Jace snorted. “She’s got you on that one.”

“Shut up.” Knox snapped a punch to Jace’s arm.

“Enough!” There was only one thing that might actually put these two back on course. “You two can just stand there and bicker. I, for one, intend to get back to the sex.”

With that grand proclamation, she plucked Knox’s cell from the nightstand and began to pick her way through the crap strewn over the floor. With as much haughtiness as she could muster naked, she made her way to the door with a certain amount of disappointment that neither brother made a move to stop her.

It was Knox who caved first. “So you gonna go on this one solo, baby girl?”

That's just what she'd been waiting for. Waving the red flag in front of her two bulls, Amanda tossed a wicked smirk over her shoulder at Knox and Jace. "No. I'm going to call Cody."

She said it and ran, making it to the end of the hall before colliding into a living wall. Too obsessed with looking over her shoulder, Amanda flatted herself against the solid heat of a man. Instantly a set of strong arms clamped around her waist and lifted her right off her feet. The walls, ceiling, and floor whirled around her, and she couldn't help but laugh at Cody's, "Gotcha."

Dumped over his shoulder like a sack of feed, Cody carried her back down the hall to where his two brothers waited. "You know, you two should put some pants on. We—"

"Back off Cody," Knox snapped. "This is between me and Amanda."

"No," Jace disagreed, making Amanda wonder if he was about to start another fight. "This is between all of us."

Cody dumped her back on Knox's bed, ignoring her completely as he turned to address his brothers. "Sorry, big brother, but first it's about punishment. I still owe Amanda for pulling that gun on me."

"She pulled a gun on you?"

A wicked thrill unfurled through her body like a heated whiplash at the savage glimmer in Knox's eyes. He cast her a dark look with his question, and Amanda couldn't help but to smile back.

"I think Cody's got a point." Jace circled the bed, wearing much of the same look Knox had on. "She ran off Monday night...and just where did you go to, Amanda? Where did you spend the night?"

"Somewhere where she got felt up." Cody felt some need to remind Jace.

Unfortunately, Knox got the message, too. "Felt up? Who the hell touched you?"

Amanda found herself surrounded with a brother on every side. Jace on the right, Cody to the left, and Knox looming right over the foot of the bed. Despite those exciting odds, the three scowls made her think no fun would be had.

"Amanda."

Glaring at Jace for using that tone on her, Amanda's mood didn't improve as she watched him pull his jeans back on. "I wasn't felt up."

"It's what you said," Cody reminded her.

"But it wasn't what I meant." Amanda sulked, narrowing her gaze on Knox as he followed Jace's lead and started tugging on his jeans. This was not looking good for her.

"Then what the hell did you mean?" Knox stilled, leaving his jeans unbuttoned to glare at her. "And you better stop with all this attitude, Amanda, because every snotty comment is getting added to your punishment."

"I was frisked," Amanda shot at him. "You know that thing they do when they arrest you?"

"You got arrested?"

"What the hell did you do?"

Jace and Cody's questions came one on top of the other from both sides, but she didn't have a chance to answer before Knox grunted. "She's trouble. Didn't I tell you both? And trouble always lands in jail. Whatcha do girl? Rob a liquor store?"

Amanda gave Knox a dirty look for that one but couldn't con her way around the answer. "Well, it did actually involve a lot of alcohol..."

"And?" Jace prodded.

Hanging her head, Amanda slouched with the weight of the truth. "And removing my clothes to go swimming on property I hadn't been invited on."

It took all three brothers a moment to digest her confession. Of course, Knox would be the one to speak first. "So that would be...what? Indecent exposure and trespassing?"

"And resisting arrest," Amanda muttered before throwing Knox a big smile. "But all the charges have since been dropped. As you might not know, I'm good friends with the—"

"Wait a minute," Cody cut her off. "That deputy who was being such a prick to us yesterday, is that the guy who arrested you?"

Amanda wouldn't lie, but admitting the truth seemed a pretty dumb thing to do. Not that either Cody or Jace needed the words when the heat burning in her cheeks had them cussing.

"Oh, for God's sake," Jace groaned. "Please tell me you were at least dressed when you resisted arrest."

“Well, I wouldn’t have been resisting if I had my clothes on,” Amanda snapped. “And don’t look at me like that, Knox. It wasn’t even my idea. It’s just—”

“Enough, Amanda.” Jace shook his head. “I think you best stop right there.”

“Yes, do,” Cody snapped. “You’ve earned enough punishment to keep us entertained through the night and right on till tomorrow.”

“And you ain’t going to come once.” Rolling her eyes at Knox probably prompted him to cross his arms, or maybe he just knew how his hard look turned her on. “Not until you agree to go to the doctor.”

“Is she sick?” Jace asked, instantly alarmed.

“She’s going on birth control,” Knox snapped. “And there isn’t anybody in this room who is going to give her a climax without it, got me?”

Ah, hell. She couldn’t shrink enough to disappear under Cody and Jace’s combined gazes. The punishments were piling up, and Amanda had a sick sense for how the rest of this night would go once Knox found out—

“Amanda’s already on birth control.”

“Thanks, Cody,” Amanda muttered, trying even harder to disappear as Knox appeared to grow right before her eyes.

“Is that so?”

There was no hope for this situation, so no reason to try to placate any of them. With a great sigh, she flopped onto her back. “Fine. I’ll just give myself my own orgasms. It’s not like I didn’t have some perfectly good ones before you three came along.”

Amanda matched her challenge with action, spreading her legs wide and letting her hand dip low to pleasure herself. Her eyes drifted closed as her finger swirled over her clit. She was so damn wet there could be no hope her fingers would extinguish the ache in her sheath, but she could get off this way. One little release to take the edge off...*ohhhh*.

Amanda forgot all about teasing the brothers as the spirally whirls of pleasure cascaded out of her very core to consume her whole body. She gave herself over to the moment, letting her back sink deeper into the mattress as her hips lifted and rotated with the driving rhythm of rapture taking over.

Expecting them to interfere at any moment didn’t prepare her for rope. In one second, Amanda went from the rim of ecstasy’s edge all the way to

having her wrist wrenched away by a hard grip. In one smooth move, four hands rolled her, pinning her wrists at her back, and that's when the rope started to twine over her skin.

Panting into the pillow, she shifted her chin over the folds to find fresh air. With a glance at Jace as he straightened up, Amanda smiled.

"You really think a little bit of rope is going to keep me in my place?" The question tugged a little smirk at Jace's lips. The sight of which had her own grin flattening out. "Jace?"

Smack!

"Ahhh!"

He'd popped her good, right across the ass. Before Amanda's body could even absorb the beauty of the blow, her left cheek lit up with fire as Cody delivered his slap. One right on top of the other, the brothers spanked her hard and good, making her burn so bad her back arched, lifting her ass up for more than just their punishment.

The ache to be mounted, filled, and gripping down on a hard cock was so intense it had her chewing through the pillow as she tried not to give voice to her desires. The words wouldn't save her. Not now.

Amanda would have collapsed into a soggy mess on the mattress as their blows came to a stop if it hadn't been for the hand rubbing over her inflamed flesh. She'd know that proprietary touch anywhere.

"She really does love a good spanking," Knox gloated. "I had to give her one out at Studs & Spurs tonight and made the little girl so hot she had to be fucked right there."

Knox paused, leaving Amanda waiting for whatever way he intended to twist everything into being her fault. *No good piece of trouble, I just deserved to be punished.* Like he read her mind, Knox spanked her so hard Amanda actually lifted up with it.

She almost toppled over, losing her balance as she squeezed her legs together, savoring the vibrations. One more and she'd come. Amanda would defy even Cody to hold her off. She just needed one more.

But she couldn't even sit up with her wrists tied behind her back. Doing a face plant, Amanda smacked back down into the mattress, in little condition to resist or help as the brother's rolled her back onto her stomach.

In short order, they had her back on her knees, ass in the air, this time with her legs forced wide. Amanda could have blushed with just the thought

of the image she made, but the knowledge they looked only made her wetter. It teased her into shifting her hips, showing off her pussy in blind hope it would inspire one of them into giving her what she wanted.

It seemed a miracle, though, when she felt a set of callused fingers parting her folds. Not about to be lured into believing they'd finished, Amanda's head lifted, watching as Jace lined up his thick, swollen cock right between her legs. Her sweetheart, she should have known Jace wouldn't leave her to his brothers' torment.

Sighing over the feel of the massive head pressing into her sheath, Amanda buried her face back into the pillow and arched her hips, begging for more of his hardness. Jace fed it to her, one deliciously hard inch after another, keeping a hand on her waist to stop Amanda from jerking hard and swallowing him whole.

That's what she wanted, but being stretched slowly didn't make the pleasure of having her pussy filled any less sweet. Despite the intensity of the night, Jace seemed in no rush as he began to sway, not thrusting, not fucking, just teasing her by rolling his big dick all around inside of her pussy.

Amanda moaned and bucked, forgetting all about Cody and Knox and any worries about punishment. All she wanted was for Jace to put a little power into his motions and take her to heaven again, but her gentle knight had been turned into a rogue by his two deviant brothers. Left alone with no champion, Amanda moaned out her protest when instead of giving her a fucking, Jace started to retreat.

"Please don't stop."

She shouldn't have begged, it only enticed them. Now 'them' included Jace, who growled back at her. "Oh, I'm not."

Chapter 40

The breath caught in Amanda's throat as he followed his assurance by spreading her ass. Widening her eyes, everything in her felt like it was being pushed right up and out as Jace began another steady invasion.

Amanda got some help with breathing when Knox buried a hand in her hair and lifted her head out of the pillow. Holding her up, he even made it a little easier to take his brother's possession as Jace pressed another satiny, hard inch into her ass. Panting over the intrusion, she clamped her muscles down, giving them both a squeeze and setting the shudders running across her back.

"Go on and take what you can now, honey," Knox breathed into her ear. "Because it's going to be a long night."

Knox paused, letting her gasp as Jace fed her a little more of his cock. When she regained herself, Knox was there, waiting. "In fact, you might have to call in sick for the rest of the week because it's going to take us some time to break you in right."

Amanda swallowed, daring to meet his hardened gaze with her foggy one. "I expect to get my twenty back."

Her taunt ended in a squeal as Jace punished her, sinking the rest of his dick hard and fast deep into her ass. Mewing with the pleasure, Amanda tried to adjust to the spasms vibrating down to her cunt and up along her spine. Instead of helping, Jace made them worse. With a hard tug on her hair, he wrenched her head back, making sure she took every bit of him before growling.

"Look at him, Amanda. Look at Knox."

Licking her lips, she tried to obey, to see through the lust fogging her vision at the man smirking down at her. Jace apparently wanted something more than silent obedience. Giving her another hard tug and a sharp roll of his hips, he pounded another shudder over her body.

“You see all those bruises?”

This time Amanda managed to whimper out a, “Yes.”

“I put them there.”

“Hey, I helped with that,” Cody interjected, reminding her he was there somewhere in the bedroom, but where exactly became lost in the haze of pleasure as Jace gave her another grinding pump.

“Listen to me when I’m talking to you,” Jace snarled. “I want you to look at Knox’s injuries and tell me what we talked about yesterday, Amanda.”

She knew this one. It was there in her mind. If only he’d stay still long enough for her to grab onto the thought. Jace didn’t even give her more than a handful of seconds before he shattered her concentration. This time with a full-scale thrust, laying her back out on the bed as she fell forward, free of his grip.

“I can’t...please, Jace.”

Not appeased in the slightest, he punished her again, making her sob even harder as her body writhed with need Amanda knew he wouldn’t fulfill.

“What did I tell you?”

“Not to cause fights.” God, she hoped that was the right answer. Even in her precarious situation, Amanda felt honor bound to tack on, “He started it.”

“I.” Jace had to all but shout the word out over her shrieks as he delivered it on the end of a savage thrust. “Don’t. Care.”

“*Oh, please.*” Amanda sobbed into the pillow as her body bucked, trying to take what she needed. Jace held her still, his fingers digging harder into her hip the more she fought. Even if she could match his strength, Amanda didn’t have the energy. She’d have cried out in demand for her release, but demands didn’t work with these men.

“I’m sorry.”

“What was that?” Knox lifted her chin out of the pillow, exposing her tear-stained cheeks to the cool air. “I’m not sure I heard you right.”

It was so hard just because it was Knox, but Amanda found the strength in her to give voice to the words a second time. “I’m sorry, Knox.”

His lips quivered up into a slight smile as they dipped in to brush against hers. “Not yet, honey, but you’re going to be.”

Before she could comprehend his vow, Knox's mouth took hers in a kiss, robbing her of all thought. The intimacy of Knox's kiss drew her attention from Jace, making her strain as she matched his ferocious hunger. Gently at first, the slight sway of the brothers pressing her between them grew into a steady rhythm.

Knox kissed her so sweetly, but Jace began to fuck her with unleashed aggression. It wasn't long before she broke free of Knox to gasp as Jace drove her right up a stiff peak of pleasure. The golden rays of release started to dawn right over her when the whole world whipped into chaos.

Lost in the writhing denial of ecstasy's fading retreat, Amanda couldn't make sense of what they were doing to her now. Jace was still there. His heated piece of iron branding her from the inside out shifted and bounced inside her, making her world explode, but just not enough.

Cussing, twisting, straining, nothing worked to bring her back to the second right before release. After a moment, Amanda started to realize nothing she did even seemed to be moving her body more than an inch.

Blinking open her eyes, she tried to make sense of how she came to be in the position she now found herself. They'd rolled, spread her out over Jace's chest and still impaled on his cock. He must have undone her wrist because somebody else had lassoed them to the bed frame, along with her feet.

Cody and Knox had spread her out and tied her up for their viewing pleasure. Those two bastards certainly did enjoy taking a look, but Amanda almost wished she couldn't see. All she could stare at was Cody's hands and the two...*whips?*

That's what they looked like with their thick handles and long, thin tassels. Amanda swallowed, unable to stop wondering why he had them, what Cody intended to do with them, and worse, if he really meant to hand one of those things to Knox and unleash him on her body.

Jace tried to steal the worry from her by taking her sight. A folded swath of silk blackened her world as Jace tied the blindfold into place. Within a second, Amanda decided not seeing was worse than seeing because now her mind played out all sorts of dark, dirty images. It made her want to experience all of them even as she tensed in anticipation of which one Cody and Knox would choose.

Jace nuzzled his chin over her shoulder to give her just a little warning. "Now, Amanda, it's time to take your beating."

They're really going to whip me! The thought hit a bare second before the first lash licked over her breasts, sending frantic tendrils of boiling pleasure cascading downward. Soaking into the heat already inflaming her ass, the droplets of pleasure morphed into full on bubbles of rapture as the leather strips danced over her pussy, snapping at her clit.

Amanda screamed, arching into the leather licking over her skin as Cody and Knox set her entire body to flame. One right after the other, they drove her to fight her bounds as she twisted to get closer, ever closer to the climax she could feel cresting. So close it didn't matter anymore, Amanda would pay any price.

"Please. *Please, let me come, Knox!*"

The words barely broke the air before Cody's roar ripped through them. "What the hell?"

Knox burst into laughter, and Amanda knew she'd screwed up. She'd pissed Cody off, and now everything had come to a stop. As if she needed to be told, Jace assured, "Oh, you are in for it now."

The question was, what? Amanda could feel Cody mounting the bed, muttering to himself. "I put the two weeks into this pussy, and now it's Knox's?"

"Sorry, baby brother." But Knox didn't sound it.

"Shut up, Knox."

"Shhh." Jace's hand covered her mouth, blocking her words when Amanda would have spoken. "You've done enough."

"And you." Amanda felt Cody's angry breath washing over her face and went still. "Who do you belong to, Amanda?"

Uh oh. She was in trouble because there was no good answer to Cody's question. Not that he gave her the moment to find one.

* * * *

Cody didn't want Amanda to have to think about it. He might share her with his brothers, and she might one day grow to love them all, but Amanda would remember who she belonged to first. When he asked, the answer should be instant.

If he hadn't taught her that lesson before, he would tonight. Not even bothering to undress, he ripped at his jeans, freeing his cock and not much else before he settled himself between Amanda's thighs. Held wide open by the ropes, the folds of her pussy parted under the stretch. It left all her intimate secrets exposed.

It wasn't enough. He had to feel her. The delicious heat of her creaming cunt seared Cody's hardened flesh as he ground his cock through pussy. The harder nubbin of her clit flicked under the ridge around the rim of his cock head, making Amanda gasp. Her hips rolled, rubbing her bud into him.

Hot, sweaty breaths warmed his neck as Cody pressed down into her, sandwiching Amanda between him and Jace as he ground into her over and over again. In minutes she was whining, swaying, and Cody knew her climax was close.

Sliding back, he brought the head of his cock to rest at the opening to Amanda's tight sheath then hesitated. "Who do you belong to, Amanda?"

They all waited as her head rolled across Jace's shoulders. "Please, Cody, let me come."

He sure as hell wasn't about to let her duck out like that, but he'd give her a taste of what she was missing. Cody didn't even hesitate, he slammed her down as he thrust upward with his hips, impaling her on his full length and making her fuck his brother at the same time.

"Yes," she panted out her welcome as the walls of her sheath sucked him deep.

Unleashing all of his aggression on Amanda, Cody let that thrust be the first in a series of stampeding strokes. Quickly, his own lust raged nearly out of control, and Cody found himself growling under the strain of holding back.

"Who do you belong to?"

"Please, Cody..."

* * * *

Amanda couldn't take anymore. They'd taken her back to the magical moment when she was trapped between Cody and Jace's hard bodies. Being stretched, filled from the inside out without enough room to even take a

breath, took her to the special place. One of pure decadence, thanks to the Cody's wild drive.

He fucked her with hard, furious twists of his hips, sweating and grunting above her and giving her absolutely no reason to tell him what he wanted to hear.

Not that she could. Knox took the ability for speech away from her. Kneeling onto the bed, his hand cupped the back of her head to stretch her neck to the side. The sticky bump of a cock head against her lips matched the demand in his tone.

"Suck me, honey. Get me good and ready to take over once you wear Cody out."

"Fuck you, Knox. This pussy belongs to me tonight."

Before they could break into an argument that left her on the edge again, Amanda opened her kiss to Knox's invasion, giving him every reason to ignore his younger brother. The plan backfired a second later as Knox's finger tightened in her hair and all three brothers began to fuck her in earnest.

Like savages, they took her with an unrelenting force that wiped out every civilized rule she knew. Amanda became a thing of wanton, wicked needs, flexing, arching, sucking in time to the sensual dance her three lovers set. Hard, nearly painful grips held her hips and head in position as they ravaged her from every quarter.

Through the din, she could hear Cody grunting out his question, never-ending. "Who do you belong to?"

Cody wouldn't release her till she answered, but Knox wouldn't release her to answer. They trapped her in a vicious cycle that just wound her release into a dangerous pressure. Soon enough it would have to pop, otherwise her body would simply shred to pieces under the pleasure. It was that fear that bought her the second of strength to pull free of Knox's cock and answer.

"Yours, Cody, please. I'm yours, now please release me." She'd have begged more if Knox hadn't pressed her back down on his cock. Her words seeming to have ignited an even rougher need in Knox. Jace, as well, began to match Cody thrust for thrust, no longer keeping her suspended in a tide of alternating strokes.

With one pounding thrust after another, Cody pillaged her pussy while Jace forced himself deep into her ass, driving so much glorious pressure into her body it all became too much. Already stretched so thin by the need for release, Amanda didn't have any stamina to take the bombardment of rapture flaring out from her core.

Clawing, screaming, bucking, she gave over to her release and let it consume her body within ecstasy's inferno.

* * * *

Knox watched as Amanda came apart in Cody's arms. Pulling free of her lips to make sure she didn't choke on her scream, he eased back off the bed to watch her find her release with his brothers. She was beautiful, and he was jealous. Knox, who had never before coveted a woman enough to envy his brothers, now found himself feeling the pangs of jealousy for a second night in a row.

It wasn't so much that envied them her pleasure, but he couldn't watch and not want. Knox couldn't hear her cry out Cody's name and not wish to hear his own. He wanted his moment alone, and as the threesome on the bed collapsed with grunts and groans of release, Knox had already started to work on Amanda's binds.

He had her free before Cody could roll off her. Knox helped his baby brother with a shove then helped himself to Amanda. Lifting her off Jace, Knox earned a glare from his middle brother. For all the dirty looks Jace and Cody shot his way, neither appeared recovered enough to lodge any real complaint.

Amanda didn't even appear to be awake, grumbling and muttering as he carried her off to the shower. Only once the shower started to steam up did Amanda rouse herself to open her eyes even a sliver, or maybe it was his hands cleaning the scent of his brothers off her body. For several minutes she just rested there against the shower wall, watching him with those dreamy eyes shaded by her lashes. When he straightened, coming to a standstill in front of her, Amanda smiled and sighed his name.

"Knox." She lulled him with soft whisper, and her arms circled around his neck. "It was fun tonight, wasn't it?"

"Who said the fun was over?" Knox matched her grin.

Still hard from the naughty kiss she'd given him earlier, it was time for him to claim his satisfaction right along with his woman. Holding her by the waist, pinned to the wall, Knox lifted her up, pleased when her legs circled him. He could feel her heat, her desire, as his cock lodged against the opening of her pussy.

"Maybe it's time to discover just who you really belong to." Because he planned to make her beg.

"Knox?" Amanda's serious whisper had him meeting her level gaze. "I belong to me."

Something in the quiet statement unnerved him. Knox couldn't help feeling like Amanda was telling him, no matter what, she'd never be his. It took some of his pleasure, and he scowled.

"You belong to me."

"Only when it comes to sex," Amanda instantly qualified.

There came that painful prickle again. "Are you saying this is only about sex?"

She hesitated, and in that second he hated her, but when her head slowly shook, his momentary rage began to fade. It left behind a determined kernel to defy her next words. "No, but outside the bedroom, I'm my own woman. You were right to put me in the guest room. Friends with benefits...it will work—"

Knox didn't want to hear the rest because her ass would be sleeping in whatever bed he tied her to at night. End of discussion.

Knox hammered that opinion home with a hard thrust of his hips, cutting off words he didn't care about. All he cared about was driving himself into the sweetest woman he'd ever held and making damn sure he didn't lose her after the moment left.

Just the depth of emotion driving him angered Knox, making him that much harder with Amanda, forcing that much more pleasure on her until she cried out his name. Deep inside, her little sheath pulsed with the rapid beat of her release, desperately attempting to milk the seed right from his cock. With every muscle tense and trembling under the strain, Knox fought to hold out for one more delicious dive into heaven.

The sweat rolled down his back, and his balls burned as he slammed into Amanda's tight sheath. It started as a shiver then snowballed into a tremor as every one of Knox's nerves snapped under the strain. Like lava,

his release scorched the inside of his dick as it exploded into the warm welcome of Amanda's womb.

In that split millisecond, as his whole body convulsed with the power of his release, Knox wished he had given her a child. A primal male instinct wanted to bind this woman, this pleasure, to him always and forever. Then even that insanity was wiped out as blinding, white-hot ecstasy obliterated everything in his world.

Collapsing against Amanda, Knox waited for the world to condense back into the pounding beat of his heart, the cool spray from the showerhead and the mumbled protests from Amanda. As he tried to right himself and release her, she almost fell to the floor before Knox caught her.

This time Amanda really had passed out, putting an end to the evening, at least for a few hours. With her tucked into his bed, he might have a chance at another round before the sun came up. That's just why, after cleaning her off a second time, he carried her back to his bed. It pleased him to see Cody had left, but Jace still remained.

"Cody said he's getting her in his bed the next two nights, and you can kiss his ass."

"Like I care what Cody said," Knox grunted as he lowered Amanda into the middle of the bed. "And don't think about bogarting the girl tonight."

Jace snorted, and a small tug of war ensued as they both struggled to claim the best position. In the end Knox won, pulling Amanda nearly onto his chest as he stretched out. Jace had no choice but to do the spoon from behind. *Too bad for him*, Knox sighted.

Closing his eyes, he let his head sink into the mattress with that thought. He should have faded right off into sleep, everything was that perfect. Instead of relaxing, though, the feeling started to worry him. Things were moving way too fast. Just look at the wreckage Amanda already caused, and she hadn't been there but one night.

In her natural state, Amanda caused problems. In an agitated state, Amanda made tornados. One had obviously already torn through his room this morning...*ah, the hell with it*. Knox gave up.

He felt too damn good to muster the strength for his normal worries. All Knox wanted right now was to slip into the sweet, restful oblivion of sleep. He almost made it when Jace spoke up, making Knox really regret having a brother in his bed.

“You know she has feelings, don’t you?”

Smacking his lips, Knox didn’t even bother to open his eyes. “What?”

“Amanda. She has feelings,” Jace repeated. “You hurt them this morning.”

Knox didn’t want to talk about that. It had happened, and it was over. He said what he thought Jace wanted to hear in order to shut him up. “Yeah. I know. Wouldn’t happen again.”

“It better not, Knox.”

There was a quiet authority in Jace’s tone that finally had one of Knox’s eyes opening. He looked over Amanda’s head to see Jace focused on the woman. A big, callused hand gently stroked her hair as he watched, apparently fascinated by his own caress.

“You really love her, don’t you?”

There was no hesitation in Jace’s response. “She means more to me than anything else.”

“Even your brothers?” Jace looked up but remained silent. Knox didn’t like that answer. “Don’t you think it’s a little soon to be proclaiming your undying love to the woman?”

“Sometimes things just click, and you feel what you feel.” Jace shrugged. “I know you don’t feel the same and might never, but really, Knox, who are you going to love? Sharon’s gone.”

“You really want to pick a fight *now*?” Knox just didn’t have the energy for one. Jace didn’t know what he was talking about.

“No.” Jace heaved a deep breath and shook it off. “Just promise me you’ll try to remember Amanda is as human as the rest of us and not some toy for you to play with.”

“Fine. Sure. Whatever. *Goodnight*.”

“Don’t ‘fine, sure, whatever’ me. I want you to swear you’ll not do anything more to try and chase Amanda off.”

Knox had enough of Jace’s superior attitude and shoved up onto his elbow to confront his younger brother over the very woman they argued about.

“You know, she’s not half as fragile as you act, and I’m not near as big an ass as you like to make me out to be. Did you notice I managed to get the girl back with absolutely no assistance from you? I think that says something.”

“Yeah,” Jace snorted. “You overwhelmed her with passion when you should have been apologizing.”

“I apologized, and you know what she did?” Knox gave Jace the moment to guess, but all he sent Knox was a dirty look. Jace knew. “That’s right. She threw it back in my face.”

“As for the rest, I certainly didn’t overwhelm her with passion. If anything, it went the opposite way.” Knox smirked, reveling in the memory. “Trust me, Jace, Amanda’s already figured out how to push every one of my buttons to get just what she wants.”

“You think that scene you walked in on tonight was me being in charge?” Knox laughed at the very idea. “Please, your delicate little lover intentionally riled me up and issued an almost outright challenge about not going on birth control. Why would she do that? Why wouldn’t the damn woman just tell me she was on the stupid pills?”

Jace snapped at Knox with annoyance. “Probably because you pissed her off with how you asked.”

“No,” Knox snorted. “Because she wanted to goad me into dragging her ass back out here and fucking it all night long. Believe it or not, your sweetheart likes it my way, rough and hard. So why don’t you just get over yourself and accept that two nights in a row it’s my bed she’s passed out in and me she snuggled up to.”

The minute he said it, he stopped. *Damn, that sounded more than a little possessive.* It had Jace looking at him funny, too. As slowly as Knox relaxed back down into the mattress, Jace spoke.

“Well, I guess I stand corrected.”

Shit!

Chapter 41

Thursday, July 24th

Thunder rolled over the plains, rumbling even as the window lit up with another blinding flash. Amanda held her breath and counted...*One...two....three...*

BOOM!

That one shook the house. She clenched the blanket tighter in her fist, pulling it just a little up over her nose as another streaking crackle of light blinked down to the ground. The window lit up with so much brilliance it hurt her eyes. There was no time to count before the house shuddered and quaked beneath the force of a boom so loud it could have easily signaled the end of the world. It actually managed to pierce the dead slumber of the man behind her.

Cody muttered something unintelligible and shifted, tightening his arm around her. Daring a little lift of her head, Amanda looked over her shoulder to see if he'd actually woken up. Long black lashes fanned out, casting fingered shadows across his cheeks with another popping flash of lightning. The harsh white light cut around the handsome planes of Cody's face, enhancing his very natural sex appeal.

For all of his hard angles, there was still a softness about Cody, a smoothness to his skin keeping him from the league of ruggedly handsome. Instead, Cody had to settle for adorable. *The king of adorable, really, given his personality.* Over the past month, Amanda learned Cody really only had three gears. Work, play, and sleep.

Play. All the brothers scheduled time for that in their days. It was actually a real schedule. In all their brilliance, Knox, Jace, and Cody had devised a rotation system for sharing her. It was pretty simple, each brother got her alone one night a week.

The other nights were lady's choice, which really translated into a free-for-all with each brother trying to persuade her to pick him. Amanda didn't have the stomach to choose, so she tended to take all three at once. Everything was more fun that way.

Of course, Cody had a tendency to disrespect the system and tried to claim any and every day as his. Amanda brushed a wayward curl back from his cheek and tucked it behind his ear. Knox had been riding Cody to get his hair cut every day for well over a week. The more he nagged, the less likely it became Cody would go see the barber.

Being in a relationship with three men didn't just make the sex complicated. All three brothers were so vastly different, and she enjoyed their company in all different ways, but sometimes it made her feel guilty. Like tonight, with the thunderstorm raging, Amanda wanted to be smuggled into the possessive embrace of a man so barbaric she could have put in a loin cloth and sent out to hunt buffalos with a spear.

Cody may be a lot of things, but he was not a warrior. Disengaging from Cody's embrace as gently as she could, Amanda slid free of the covers. She hesitated when Cody grumbled and rolled, but he settled back into his pillow without further fussiness.

Jace's door stood slightly ajar directly across the hallway from Cody's. Stepping into the warm, leather and male-scented room, Amanda instantly felt at home. Not her warrior, but more like her Prince Charming, Jace was Amanda's security blanket, and just being in his room made her feel at peace.

Lured by his grumbling, Amanda tip-toed over to the edge of the bed. The sheet had twisted and knotted around Jace's body. Normally a peaceful sleeper, he rolled and tossed tonight. Whatever night demons haunted Jace, she didn't know, but as he begged and apologized, she didn't really care.

Settling onto the edge of the bed, Amanda tried to soothe him. With gentle hands, she stroked through his hair as with even softer words she assured him everything would be alright. It took several minutes for her coddling to wear through the noise of the storm and the chaos of his dreams, but eventually Jace settled down with a sigh.

"Sharon..."

She should have seen that coming. Whenever Jace had nightmares, he talked to Sharon. Amanda knew she didn't have any right to hold it against

him, to feel hurt and rejected by his devotion to his former fiancée, but as always, it drove her from his bed. Not that she could escape the woman's ghost that easily.

Sharon lingered everywhere, in little knickknacks, in pictures, in the way the brothers would go silent when something reminded them of her. While she'd never say anything, Amanda resented the ghost. Almost all her life, she'd borne the weight of her own past. She might have escaped her own personal demons at the ranch, only to be swallowed whole by the brothers'.

The only place Amanda didn't feel haunted was Knox's room. As Amanda moved through the bathroom into Knox's room, she found him in much more restful sleep than his brother.

As much as it might have irritated Knox to be anything like Cody, they were like twins when they slept. Always on the right side of the bed, curved to the left, watches on the nightstand faced so they could roll over in the morning and see exactly what time it was with their first blink of the day.

Unlike Cody, there was nothing soft or cute about Knox. As another bolt of lightning struck, his face blossomed from the dark shadows. For a second, the light clung to the edges and dips of all the little nicks aging Knox into the sculptured masterpiece he was today.

The bump in his nose from when it had been broken on the hard shoulder of a bucking bull, the dent in his chin from barbwire whipped into his face when he'd been stringing it up as teenager, the scar hovering just over his right eye from when he'd been thrown from his horse on a cattle drive, all the little marks told the story of Knox's life and just made him that much more sexy.

Amanda smiled at the thought as she pulled back the blankets and crawled into his bed. With not near as much gentleness as she'd shown Cody, Amanda lifted Knox's arm and fixed herself firmly into his embrace. Sluggish as it was, Knox seemed to slowly become aware of her presence.

His arm tightened around her, tucking her even closer into the curve of his body. At least one part of him rose quickly to attention. Amanda squirmed, trying to adjust her position so he didn't poke her uncomfortably.

"Keep doing that and I'm going to wake the rest of the way up," Knox grumbled into her ear. She went perfectly still, but feared it might be too late

when Knox smacked his lips and muttered, “Aren’t you supposed to be in Cody’s bed?”

“It’s after midnight, that makes it your day,” Amanda whispered.

“And you were counting the seconds until you could be with me again, is that it?” Knox murmured as he began to string nibbling kisses across her shoulder and up her neck.

Amanda couldn’t control the urge to roll her head and open more of her neck to his tasting. “I figured being the oldest, your bed would be the safest bet to find a good night’s sleep.”

He bit her for that one. “You issuing a challenge?”

“Knox,” Amanda moaned as his hand slid up to cup her breast. “Please, I really am tired.”

That got her another stinging bite followed by a soothing kiss, before he lifted his mouth to respond. “Then go to sleep. Your participation really isn’t required.”

Amanda laughed just because she knew he wasn’t kidding. Rolling over to face him, she tried one last futile effort to reason with Knox. She didn’t even get a chance to speak before his head dipped, and his wandering lips began their journey southward.

“Knox, I have to get up early.” Even as she complained, her back arched, lifting her breast in an instinctive offering.

“Call in sick, and we can spend the whole day in bed.”

A whole day...with Knox. The idea was like a rare treat. The very fact he offered warmed her like nothing had in years. Getting a chance to truly spend time alone with any of her guys was rare. While three nights a week she got dragged off to a dark bedroom with just one brother or another, the rest of their time they hung together.

The prickles of Knox’s midnight beard refocused her attention as he scraped his cheek up one side of her breast and across her sensitive tip. Sighing, she twined her fingers into Knox’s soft tresses and tugged. The contrary man actually obeyed. As his lips parted over her nipple, Amanda gave over all worries about tomorrow.

Chapter 42

Friday, July 25th

“Tony?” Amanda blinked in surprise as she bent her head slightly back to meet the tall sheriff’s gaze. “What are you doing out here?”

“I thought I’d stop in to have a chat with you, or is this a bad time?”

The pointed arch of his brow had her blushing and backing up. “No. Of course not. Come on in.” Even as he swiped off his hat and came through the door, she kept rambling on. “Would you like some coffee? Maybe tea?”

“I’d like a beer,” Tony grunted. “But if the tea is sweet, I’ll take some.”

“Sweet it is. It even comes with a lemon wedge if you want.”

“Lime?”

“Lemon,” Amanda retorted firmly.

“You drive a hard bargain.”

“Yeah, you really got screwed,” Amanda laughed as she shut the door.

There was a sense of awkwardness she tried to cover with her forced lightness. It felt weird to greet one of her friends at the Reese ranch, opening the door and inviting them in like she had rights to the place. Even if she’d spent the last two weeks living here, she still didn’t feel at home.

Amanda just acted like it, gesturing for Tony to follow her. “Come on into the kitchen.”

Tony dragged his feet, pointedly looking around before asking. “So, you alone?”

“Actually, Knox is home, locked in the bedroom.” And Amanda didn’t really want to talk about it.

“Alone?”

“Of course, alone.” Amanda shot him a dirty look for his suggestive tone as she wrenched open the refrigerator door.

“Well, you never know with these boys,” Tony grunted. He dropped his hat on the counter and his ass into one of the bar stools. “They have an interesting reputation in town.”

Snapping the refrigerator door closed, Amanda turned on Tony. “And I never listen to gossip, which is why I don’t know anything about their so-called reputation.”

He shot her a dirty look. “Now, Amanda—”

“Don’t, ‘now, Amanda,’ me, Tony. I know your mother raised you with better manners than to enter a woman’s house and make those kinds of lewd accusations.”

“A woman’s house?” Tony gave a quick laugh. “You married and didn’t invite me to the wedding?”

“Don’t try and change the subject.” Despite her sharp tone, Amanda settled the pitcher of tea on the table and not over Tony’s head as she’d considered a moment ago. “Cindy told you, didn’t she?”

“No,” Tony grunted a little indignant. “It’s hard to keep some secrets totally silent. I’ve known about the Reese boys’ particular perversions for quite a while. I just never thought you’d be the one I had to come out here to see.”

“Oh?” Amanda leaned back slightly to peer around the cupboard door as she pulled down two glasses. It would probably be best not to ask who Tony thought would be more appropriate for her men. Not only would the answer probably give her an inferiority complex, but ultimately the answer didn’t matter. Knox, Jace, and Cody were with her. Their choice.

“You want to talk about it?” Tony asked, giving her a concerned look as she set the glasses onto the counter.

“No,” Amanda answered honestly before forcing a smile. “But you can tell me how you knew to find me here.”

“Cindy’s been picking up your mail,” Tony retorted as she poured him a tall glass of tea. He tasted it tentatively before nodding and taking a big, lip-smacking gulp. “Man, that is good tea.”

Amanda scowled in mock anger at Tony’s comment. “You can thank Lydia for it. She might be painfully unpleasant, but she does know how to work a kitchen.”

“Lydia? Lydia Arnold?”

“Yeah, she was—”

“Mother of Sharon Arnold, the great love of Cody Reese’s life,” Tony finished for her. There was something about the way he said it that unnerved Amanda.

“I didn’t realize you were aware of the details of Cody’s life.”

“I was around three years ago. I investigated Sharon’s death.” Tony slid his glass across the table, bouncing it from hand to hand as he watched the motion with a thoughtful eye.

“Duh, huh?” Amanda gave a nervous laugh. “I guess I should have figured that one out at the rodeo.”

“We need to talk about Davey, Amanda.”

Tony hijacked the conversation, turning so sharply she almost dropped her glass. For a moment, she wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly. He’d spoken so softly, but when Tony glanced back at the door, she knew she’d heard him right.

“I guess you’re about to tell me he’s the one who broke into my house and trashed it.” Amanda spared him having to say what she’d already figured out.

“Well, yeah,” Tony responded with slight hesitation. “But I can’t prove it in a court of law. He must have worn gloves because there were no prints. That’s not why I’m here.”

Amanda knew it. Cindy had filled her in on all the details of the case over the past week. Tony had to know it, too, so he certainly hadn’t driven all the way up here to tell her yesterday’s news. “Cindy said you chased him out of town.”

“I did.” Tony nodded, but the silence after just made her more nervous.

“And my house hasn’t been burned to the ground, so...” Amanda laughed, trying to figure out why Tony hadn’t joined her.

“Your dad’s staying down in Dodge City.” Tony met her gaze with his own somber one. “I don’t think he’s going to go anywhere anytime soon, or be bothering you.”

It didn’t make sense, his words. Through all the jumble of reactions, one very clear question formed on her lips. “Then why’s he staying?”

“Nancy at the bank told me Cody made two cash withdraws these past two weeks. Twenty-five grand each.” Tony shook his head and spoke bluntly. “Did you ask them to pay him off? ‘Cause you know that ain’t the way to get rid of Davey.”

“No.”

Amanda just stared at him. Not a single one of the brothers had ever mentioned talking with her dad, and she didn't know if it was just Cody or they'd all started making decisions for her.

“You got to get them to stop, Amanda. Davey's just going to want more and more. Eventually those boys are going to have enough, and then Davey's going to get vicious, and somebody might actually get hurt.”

Amanda understood. That's why she'd told Cody no over two weeks ago. She'd been a fool to think he'd listen to her. “I'll take care of it, Tony.”

“I got the sheriff down there on notice, but they got a lot more problems to keep them busy.” Tony shifted in his seat, checking the door again. “You're a strong woman, Amanda. I remember when you lost your mother and your brother. You sat right there in the front row at church, silent and still through the whole funeral service.”

“I remember.” But she didn't want to. Her quick response didn't stop Tony, though.

“The only thing I've ever seen break you is Davey.” Amanda winced away from Tony's words. “I'm not going to let him do it to you again.”

Despite the fear his words put into her gut, Amanda drew herself straight. “He's not going to. I promise you, Tony, this time I won't let him win.”

Her father wouldn't destroy what happiness she'd found. After all the years of loneliness, she deserved some love. And what but love would have Cody paying off her dad? As much as the arrogant gesture made Amanda want to hit him, it also made her melt a little inside.

Tony sighed and shook his head, one oversized paw crossing the table to cover her hand. “I'm worried. I'm worried now Davey knows these boys have money and something to lose...you being out here isn't safe. I want you to come stay with me, just until we know Davey's out of Kansas.”

Since the old sandbox-days, Tony had always played the role of champion. They'd grown up, and what had been cute now threatened her happy little world. There simply would be no way to tell Knox she thought Tony could protect her better and she'd be moving in with him without losing Knox. Trying to pawn the idea off as her protecting Knox wouldn't go over any better.

“No.” Amanda turned her hand to give his a gentle squeeze. “I want to stay here.”

“You’re making a mistake.” Tony straightened up with a deep breath. “But I know better than to argue with you. I’ll leave that up to Cindy and Will.”

Just the mention of Will’s name had Amanda withdrawing. “You mean just Cindy.”

“I do?” Tony cast a confused glance around the room before connecting with her gaze and leaning in. “Why? What happened to Will? You actually kick him to the curb?”

“He left town.” Amanda shrugged. “Besides, it’s not like he could cast a stone. He was screwing the mayor’s wife. Now there is bad taste.”

Tony acted like she’d said he’d gone to have a sex change, even more shocked than hearing about the mayor’s wife. “What? When? Where the hell did he go?”

“I don’t know, over a month back I guess. I walked in on them doing their things and trust me—”

“Not that,” Tony snapped. “When did he leave, Amanda?”

Amanda scowled at Tony’s too interested look. Tony never cared much for Will. It didn’t seem normal for him to look so concerned. “Just about a week after, not even. I guess about a month back.”

“Where’d he go?”

It just pained her to have to repeat Will’s lie aloud, but she’d never tell Tony about Will’s little problem. Will was like a brother to her, and Tony was one of her best friends. Amanda minded her secrets.

“To find himself.”

“Find himself?” Tony sounded as dubious of the concept as Amanda had been. “And where was he going to look?”

Amanda burst out laughing. She couldn’t help it. Tony just sounded so indignant. “I haven’t got a clue. We talk every now and again, and he always says he’s nowhere. I guess that’s the perfect place to look for something that’s lost.”

Tony didn’t laugh. No, he had a serious, thoughtful face on. “I didn’t realize he left. Damn.”

“I’m kind of shocked you care,” Amanda commented. “You two weren’t exactly close.”

"It's not that. It's just...some people you never figure will leave town." Tony shrugged. "It's all kind of weird sounding if you ask me. Either way, next time you talk to Will, tell him to give me a call. You shouldn't be getting his hate mail."

* * * *

"What the hell did the sheriff want?"

Amanda's head snapped around to find Knox standing there with his arms crossed over his chest and a scowl on his face. His sudden appearance had her snapping out of her stupor to step back and shut the front door.

She'd been standing there staring blankly down the drive, just trying to figure out what Cody had thought he was doing. Then there was what she should do about it. None of those worries distracted her from the sight of Knox.

"You're dressed for work." Amanda scowled at the sight. "Why are you dressed for work?"

"Because I'm going to work," he answered like she was a complete idiot. "Don't change the subject. What did the sheriff want?"

"But you said last night we could spend today together, remember? That's why I called in sick." Amanda didn't even recognize his repeated question, too stuck on shock. Why was she shocked? This was typical Knox.

"No, I don't remember," Knox snapped. "What I remember is asking you a question, now answer it."

"He just stopped by to chat," Amanda shrugged dismissively. She'd talk to Cody first.

"To chat?" She should have known Knox wouldn't leave it alone. "What the hell do you two have to chat about?"

"Tony and I are friends, Knox. Get over it."

Knox's eyes narrowed on her. "Tony? Since when are you on a first name basis with the sheriff?"

"Since we were three years old and our mothers bathed us together." Amanda rolled her eyes and then grinned. "Jealous much?"

She knew he was, but Knox just shrugged and surprisingly let it go. "No because I'm the only man who gets to bathe you now."

"Well, that's not completely true."

Amanda moved forward to wrap her arms around Knox, intent on convincing him the rest of the day would be better spent with her than with some stinky cows. As usual, he remained stiff for a moment before returning the hug. She figured out early on Knox wasn't comfortable with showing affection, but cornered into it when in private, he could actually soften.

Burying her face into his chest, she mumbled, "You are my favorite back scrubber, though."

"I prefer to scrub your front."

She smiled and lifted her head. "Then maybe we should take this conversation back down the hall."

Knox cupped her cheek and frowned down at her with a look that said everything before he even spoke. "I wish I could, baby girl, but there is work to be done."

Damn it, getting Knox to bend was like trying to melt steel. "But it's your day off."

"That's not a luxury I can afford right now."

"Not even for a few minutes?"

Amanda smiled and let her hand slide down to boldly cup the growing tent in his jeans. Molding her hands around the hard ridge, she squeezed. He tensed, and she knew it cost him to step back.

"I've got to get to work, and you just made that a little more uncomfortable now."

She couldn't help but grin. "I'm going to pay for it later, right?"

His gaze darkened with the anticipation, making his words come out sweet and slow. "Yes, baby girl, you are."

"Well then, I look forward to dusk."

"I got something else for you to look forward to."

She didn't trust his grin. Knox was up to something, and that certainly couldn't be good. "What?"

"You'll just have to wait and see, but I expect you to be ready in the things I laid out on my bed by six this evening."

Amanda's eyes darted down the hall.

Things?

The image of black leather and metal studs had her swallowing. This couldn't be good. She didn't even respond when Knox dropped a quick kiss on her head and firm swat on her ass before sauntering off. She paid

absolutely no attention, being drawn slowly down the hall in fascinated horror at what lay in wait at the other end.

The ideas swimming through her head had her almost quivering with need when she finally turned the corner into Knox's bedroom. Her expectations left her totally unprepared for what awaited her.

Gifts actually wrapped in expensive paper with bows Amanda knew none of the brothers had tied. They lined down the bed, going from big to small. Knox hadn't even left the decision of where to start. Post-its were stuck to the ribbons with hand-scrawled notes on them.

Put me on first. Amanda pulled the yellow slip of paper off and stared at it. In all likelihood, Jace had arranged this. It had his sensitive touch, but Knox had certainly followed through. There was just something about him taking the time to write the note that touched Amanda. It might have been idiotic, but she couldn't help to think it showed Knox cared...about her...*about me.*

Whether she deserved it or not, Amanda reveled in the moment. Ripping into the paper, she shred it along with the bow until a navy blue garment box lay in the middle of the carnage. It didn't look like it'd come from some brown-paper porn shop. No, the box had a thickness to it, an almost linen feel to its top, even the smell said 'money'.

Just the whiff of class made Amanda hesitate again. Her stomach tightened as silly thoughts lifted in her head. *What if this was a true gift?* A real one they'd given her just to surprise her, just to let her know these past weeks were leading somewhere other than the bedroom.

Feeling the silly little girl stirring inside her, Amanda took a deep breath and reminded herself she wouldn't be disappointed if there was nothing in the box. They didn't owe her anything, and she shouldn't expect anything.

All of her bracing mantras fell silent as her fingers worked the stiff lid off. It fell to the side, forgotten right along with how to breathe. Every time she doubted them, they surprised her. The black dress folded into the tissue paper melted her.

It looked soft and sultry, inviting her fingers to touch. *Velvet.* So very soft, her hands curled into the material, lifting the dress from the box. Jace had definitely picked this out. It was just too perfect, with its simple neck line and thick straps. The dress could have been pulled from the old black and white movies.

It just had that kind of class, and as Amanda pressed it up against her body, she already felt the elegance infusing her. Turning toward Knox's closet, the door already hung open. She stepped up to admire herself in the full-length mirror hanging on the inside.

Smoothing the dress flush against her, Amanda studied her image. It would fit, and she'd look gorgeous. More importantly, she'd feel it, and that's why she knew Jace had picked this out. They'd never discussed it, but Amanda knew he sensed her insecurities, her fears that she didn't really belong here. Every time, Jace gave her hand a little squeeze, made a distracting comment, something to let her know she did.

Smiling, Amanda eyed the other packages, assured now of just what waited in them. It didn't take a genius to figure it out or Amanda more than a minute to rip through the boxes. Shoes and sexy lingerie were a given, but the quality overwhelmed her. Amanda actually suspected the stockings were made out of silk, *real silk*. Rubbing them against her cheek, she couldn't believe it.

Despite all her giddiness, one gift remained—small and with a note that read, 'From Me' on it. All her senses said jewelry, but even her most preposterous dreams couldn't have prepared her for what lay inside.

Chapter 43

“Knox, do you have my cuff links?”

Jace stepped into Knox’s bedroom door to find Cody standing still as Knox fixed his tie and had to shake his head. Cody had all his ties for church pre-knotted by his eldest brother, but tonight they were in full black-tie dress, meaning bow tie. Something none of the Reese brothers would be caught dead in, outside of a tux.

“Why would I have them?” Knox scowled over at him as Jace looked through the small box Knox kept those kinds of things in. “Have you looked in the bathroom?”

“Amanda won’t let me in.” Having no success at finding them in Knox’s possessions, he snapped the box lid shut.

“Jesus, what the hell is that woman doing in there?” Knox muttered. “It’s been near two hours. I told her to be ready at six, and that was twenty minutes ago.”

“I don’t know.” Jace shrugged. “When I tried to get in to take a shower, she told me she wouldn’t be coming out until she was all done. Apparently it has something to do with making an entrance.”

“It has more to do with driving men insane,” Knox corrected him.

“You two don’t understand jack,” Cody snorted. “Women like to walk into a room and have men go *wow*! Seeing her running around in her bra and pantyhose beforehand sort of ruins the effect.”

“Speak for yourself, kiddo.” Knox smirked. “Personally, I always go *wow* for a woman running around in nothing but a bra and pantyhose.”

Jace laughed. He couldn’t disagree. He’d watched Amanda dance between the bathroom and bedroom a couple of times these past few weeks, and it had more than a temporary effect on his day. Waking up next to Amanda, seeing her clothes hanging in his closet, smelling the sweet

fragrance coming from the feminine bottles cluttering the bathroom counter, all of it filled him with a warmth he carried through the day.

“And you accuse me of being the pig.” Cody snorted as he turned to look at Knox’s handiwork in the mirror.

“At least I know how to tie a tie,” Knox shot back.

“And I know how to get somebody else to tie them for me, so who’s really the dumbass?”

Knox threw a light punch at Cody who ducked and fled out of the room with a laugh. The small scuffle kept Jace and Knox from noticing right when the bathroom door started to open. The dry, slightly annoyed cut of Amanda’s voice couldn’t be ignored though.

“This is the problem with dating three men at once. They’re easily distracted by each other.”

Jace’s eyes cut to the doorway and then widened at the sight. He could feel the tension blossoming all around him as Amanda smiled and strutted toward Knox. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. Jace honestly didn’t think he’d ever been so shocked.

“It’s a good thing you’re brothers and not lovers or I wouldn’t get any attention around here.” She’d come to a complete stop directly under Knox’s nose, and that asshole smiled down at her as if he were actually happy with what he’d done.

“Don’t worry, baby girl. You’re going to get more than enough attention tonight in that outfit.”

“You like?” She did a little twirl.

“The real question is, do you?”

Amanda’s smile bloomed into a thing of unrestrained joy. With a squeal, she launched herself into Knox’s arms and started to cover his face with kisses. “You know I do.”

With a great, excited gasp of breath, she stepped back and turned to stare at herself in the mirror. Jace could see her eyes dip down to that damn necklace. Her fingers fluttered over the sparkling diamonds before sliding down to shape the sides of the little black dress Jace had bought for her.

“The dress is beautiful.” Amanda turned a smile on him before stepping up to drop a quick kiss across his lips. “Thank you, Jace. I love the gift.”

Not as much as she loved that necklace. Her fingers had already begun to caress it again, and she smiled so dreamily. Jace couldn’t believe Knox

had done this, but he had. His older brother was quite pleased with himself and as close to happy as Knox came. Even as Amanda darted out of the room, Knox stood there grinning after her.

He turned, and slowly the happiness in his features drained back toward its normal tenseness until they'd reassumed their natural scowl. "What?"

"I can't believe you did that!" Jace hit Knox in the arm, eliciting a growl from his older brother.

"Watch it, Jace. I wouldn't want to see you get your tux all bloody."

"It's going to be yours, once Cody sees what she is wearing," Jace shot back, not the least bit concerned with Knox's threat.

"Cody?" Knox managed to look both confused and pissed at once. "Cody ain't got nothing to be pissed over. Neither do you. I didn't claim all the gifts as mine. He'll get his kiss and thanks, too, for the shoes and bag."

"I'm not talking about that, you moron," Jace snarled. "The necklace?"

"What about it?" Knox's face broke as some understanding hit him. "Oh, I get it. You're pissed because my gift is the best. Well, too damn bad. I can't help it if—"

"Sharon's necklace."

"Sharon's necklace?" Knox shook his head. "That's my necklace."

"You bought it for Sharon."

"But I never gave it to her."

"Her fucking mother picked it out!" Jace wanted to yell, but his voice just hadn't fully returned to him.

"And I paid for it." Knox shot back. "I bought it. I never gave it to anybody. That makes it mine, mine to give to who I want."

"God!" Jace released a great deal of tension into that one word. "You are such an ass."

Knox stepped right into Jace, glaring straight down his nose at him. "Excuse me?"

Jace wasn't the least bit intimidated. "How do you think Cody's going to feel when he sees that necklace? And how do you think Amanda is going to feel when she finds out her necklace was bought for another woman?"

Jace couldn't believe Knox hadn't considered any of the consequences, but from the look on his face, his older brother really was that dumb.

“So Cody will be upset,” Knox stated softly. “He’ll get over it. And even if Amanda somehow finds out that the necklace had originally been bought for Sharon, she’ll get over it, too. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You are so delusional,” Jace whispered.

* * * *

Amanda couldn’t take her eyes off the necklace. As nice as all the other gifts had been, none of them could compare to the three solid rows of diamonds gracing her neck in a classy pattern. The reflection of the light off so many sparkling gems almost blinded a person, but that wasn’t what held her so spellbound.

Every woman will know tonight that I’ve been claimed. It would be all the right women, too, because this was her fairy tale night. While Amanda had certainly heard the brothers talking about the formal at Henry’s, she hadn’t actually thought they’d go. Well, that she’d go.

It hadn’t really bothered her. Cody and Jace both knew how she felt about being at their club—sort of like the rabbit in the lion’s den. Cody hadn’t seemed interested in the coming party, and somewhere along the line Amanda had assumed he’d be staying home with her.

At the time, it hadn’t occurred to her they’d be taking her to the ball. *And why not?* Amanda was legitimate. She was living with them, sleeping with them. By now, her title had to have evolved from friend to lover to girlfriend, significant-other kind of territory. Knox’s necklace proved it.

As if drawn in by her thoughts, Knox’s reflection appeared behind her in the living room mirror. The smile he’d worn minutes ago had faded back into his usually hard expression. Warm and firm, his hands settled on her shoulders, and she smiled up at him.

“The necklace really is beautiful, Knox.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it?” Amanda turned in his arms so she could hold him in a loose embrace. “Try love it. I know I should be saying it is too much and I can’t accept it, but I can’t bring myself to lie to you.”

“I wouldn’t accept it back, anyway.” The intensity in his eyes warmed her, and it felt almost like he was making a vow to her. “I gave the necklace to you, Amanda. No matter what happens, it’s yours.”

He melted her with his words, and her hands slid from his waist around his back, as she snuggled into his front. “You better watch it, Knox, or I just might start to fall in love with you.”

The words slipped out without thought, and she instantly regretted them. A woman didn’t tell a man like Knox she’d fallen for him. She certainly didn’t do it after he gave her such an extravagant gift. He’d only read it as a sign her affection could be bought, but Amanda felt too good to let that worry darken her night.

She knew he heard her but wasn’t the least bit shocked when he ignored her confession in its entirety. Instead, he gave her a quick hug back before disengaging from her embrace and talking as if nothing had just happened.

“Remember, tonight you are Cody’s date, and the rest of us are just your boyfriend’s brothers.”

Amanda rolled her eyes and turned back to the mirror.

“I mean it, Amanda.” Knox’s tone sharpened. “This is our first public outing, and you need to behave appropriately.”

“We’ve been out before, Knox, and I didn’t embarrass you then.”

“Playing pool at Studs & Spurs doesn’t count. We’re going to a formal at Henry’s. We’re going to have to socialize and network.”

“Believe it or not, Knox, I know how to do both those things.”

“I don’t doubt you can pull off being graciously polite if you try,” Knox conceded with a little doubt in his tone. “But you need to mind your manners even with our dates.”

Amanda’s hand froze over the cool diamonds as her eyes darted to meet Knox’s in the mirror. “Dates?”

“It’s expected.”

“And you just happened to have a few phone numbers hanging around, didn’t you?” Amanda whipped around with her accusation.

“Listen, Amanda—”

“No!” She gripped the necklace in a fist and tugged. “If you think a gift like this buys you the right to treat me any damn way you want, then I don’t want it, and I don’t want you!”

She’d have flung the damn necklace at him, but the clasp actually held. Snarling, she blindly tried to undo the latch at the back of her neck.

“Stop it!” Knox stepped forward to grip her wrists and pull her arms forward, holding onto them even as she tried to wrench free of his grip.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Jace’s shocked question had both of their heads snapping in his direction.

“And you!” Amanda managed to break free of Knox. “This coming from him,” she jerked her head at Knox, “not so shocking, but *you*?”

“What the hell did I do?” Jace asked indignantly.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“Tell you about what?” Jace’s voice rose along with his demand for an answer. “What is she talking about, Knox?”

“Your dates,” Amanda snarled.

Jace froze, and Knox actually winced. She couldn’t follow what the hell just passed between the two brothers until Jace’s question decoded their look. “When the hell did we get dates, Knox?”

“We always have dates, Jace,” Knox snapped. “This is the way it always works, so don’t go acting all shocked.”

“Well, it doesn’t work for me.” Amanda brought the pointy end of her high-heel right down on the tip of Knox’s shoe. He winced and stumbled back, giving her the perfect opportunity to shove him the rest of the way to his very arrogant ass. Pleased her work there had been accomplished, Amanda ended with a dramatic exit.

“Amanda, wait.” Jace managed to catch her right at the top of the porch steps. With a hand on her arm, he not only brought her to a stop, he forced her to turn around.

“What?”

“I know you’re mad, and you have every right to be, but do you really want to walk away?”

Amanda’s eyes narrowed on him. “Just take one for the team, right?”

“You’re looking at this the wrong way.” Jace’s desperation sounded in his tone. “They’re not dates. They’re more like escorts, and I swear this will be the last time you ever have to do this.”

Amanda wasn’t the least bit swayed by his reverent vow. “Escorts with boobs that hang on your arms and believe they might get lucky enough to share your bed at the end of the night, or do you honestly tell these women how you are using them?”

Jace cringed under her accusation. Knox came to his rescue, not at all intimidated. “Obviously, we don’t tell them the truth, but you’re missing the point.”

"No." Amanda turned on him, feeling out-flanked and overwhelmed by the large cowboys. "You're missing the point, Knox. It doesn't matter if anything happens. It's the fact you go to such extremes as to fool people that tells me you're embarrassed. Jesus, you're the ones who want a relationship like this, and then you turn around and act ashamed of it. Don't you see how hypocritical that is?"

"That's very noble," Knox snorted. "But we don't exactly live in a noble world, do we? We live in a world where appearances matter. If everybody was to know the truth about our situation, life would become very uncomfortable, particularly for one of us."

Amanda lifted her chin at the insinuation in his voice. "And what is that supposed mean?"

"It means while people might wonder about us, they wouldn't be as reserved in their speculations of you to keep their thoughts private."

"Oh." Amanda gave a bitter laugh. "So, you're doing this for me? You are really trying to tell me that you need to go out on a date with another woman for *my* protection?"

"I'm saying this is the way the world is," Knox growled. "Sometimes it's better to keep your private life private."

"You act like *nobody* knows," Amanda snapped. "Surely the women in your past didn't sign confidentiality agreements."

"A little kink is not the same as a serious relationship," Knox shot back just as harshly.

Amanda stilled, not sure if she believed him or not. "Is that what we have?"

"Given that you're living with us, I'd say yes!"

"So you're having a serious relationship with me, and who is your date tonight?"

"That's not—"

"Who!"

Knox's jaw clenched so tightly his muscle started to twitch. "That's not relevant."

"Whatever." Amanda turned her back on him and stormed down the steps. "I'll send the dress and everything back to you."

"No." Knox didn't sound like he had moved, but the next thing she knew, she was levitating nearly two feet off the ground. Nose to nose with

Knox, she could see the rage spiking his navy gaze with black shards. “We are expected at Henry’s within the hour. After everything we’ve done for you, the least you could do is smile and put on a front for the evening.”

“Oh, I owe you?”

“Yes, you do, and not for that damn necklace, but for the several dozen orgasms we give you on a nightly basis.”

Amanda’s mouth fell open, knowing words should be coming out. They just didn’t form. Of all the outrageous and outlandish things he’d said so far, Knox had finally said something that left her speechless.

“I know you want a strip off my hide,” Knox continued on. “I say bring it on *after* the party.” His face softened, his eyes widened slightly, and she could hear soft hints of desperation as he spoke. “Please. You’re not really going to walk away from Jace just because I’m an asshole. You’ve known that all along.”

Yes, she had, and damnit, he had a point. It’s just she’d thought...*whatever*. Amanda deserved to suffer for her stupidity in thinking it in the first place. It was all right. She might not deserve the picture-perfect family, but Amanda could carve out one that lasted.

She just had to be strong. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll go tonight, but if I sense even a second of inappropriate behavior, I’m making a scene to end all scenes. Don’t think I won’t go down just to take you with me.”

Knox heaved a suffering sigh. “You don’t have anything to worry about, Amanda. I swear nothing is going to happen.”

“It better not.” She spared Jace a quick glance before focusing back on Knox to make sure he understood her conditions. “And next time and every other time after, you go stag. I don’t care what anybody has to say about it.”

“You better think about that, darlin’,” Knox growled. “Stag means open to be hit on by every woman in the place. The question you have to ask yourself is do you want to worry about one woman or a roomful of them.”

He had a point, and that just pissed Amanda off even more. She vented her frustration by kicking him. If nothing else, it got her released and back to standing on her own two feet.

“Hey, what are you guys doing out here?”

Cody’s question broke the tension in the air with a mild slice. With one last evil look at Knox, she left his question unanswered. “Jace and Knox are lucky they’re still men,” she explained with a frigid look at Jace. “Whether

or not they still are in the morning...well, we'll just have to see which pound of flesh I find most useless when we get home tonight."

Cody laughed, not at all intimidated. "Amanda—"

"Just remember I'm going to have to disinfect any part of you that touches another woman. That means bleach and steel wool." Amanda couldn't stop from lobbing another insult at Knox before stepping around Jace to grab onto Cody's arm. "Let's get the hell out of here before I change my mind."

Amanda expected a swift response from Cody. He was good for it, but he didn't deliver. Caught by his silence, she glanced up at him. His grin had faded right along with most of his color, and he stared at her neck as if she had some mutant growth there.

"Oh, this." Amanda fingered the necklace before pointing at Knox. "That jackass gave it to me. He'll be lucky if I don't pawn it and use it to finance my honeymoon with a man who doesn't feel the need to take other women on dates."

"That's it, baby girl," Knox threw back at her. "Get it all out of your system now because in twenty minutes I expect you to be all smiles."

"Enjoy tonight, Knox."

She gave him a smile that said the rest. It would be the last night he enjoyed for a long time. With a smirk, Amanda yanked on Cody's arm and led the march toward his truck.

* * * *

Knox watched Amanda storm off, dragging his brother by the wrist. That was one severely pissed off woman. So much for the points he'd earned by giving her the necklace. He should have known Amanda wouldn't be so overcome by jewelry. *Hell, I did know. I just hoped...*

"Well, this night is turning into a peach," Jace sighed. He could feel the heat and strength of his brother just behind him. "I can't tell which one of them is more likely to actually take your head off when we get home."

Knox scowled. "Cody didn't seem upset."

"He was stuck on shock. You know that's not going to last, and you better hope when he snaps out of it, Cody doesn't tell Amanda just where that necklace came from."

"It came from a jewelry store," Knox growled, turning on his brother as Cody's truck engine roared to life in the background.

"It should be interesting to see how Amanda takes that reassurance," Jace snickered. His eyes tracked something over Knox's shoulder, and he had no doubt it was Cody's truck spinning tires and gunning down the drive.

"It'll work out, Jace." Knox sure as hell hoped so because he'd honestly thought he'd done good. They had to have dates and he wanted her to have the necklace. In pieces it had sounded good, but Knox worried now as a whole it sort of looked bad.

"It had better." Jace sighed. "Now you want to explain to me just how we came by these dates tonight?"

Knox didn't want to talk about that, either. "It's the way we did things with Sharon, and I just thought..."

"You could have just asked."

"What's done is done." Knox didn't handle guilt well, actually at all. He felt more comfortable with anger. "I know for the future, okay?"

"Yeah, for future reference, don't make a date without clearing it with your girlfriend first, and don't give her jewelry once belonging to your dead ex-lover. Those are pretty good rules to learn."

"Let's just hope she doesn't find out I slept with my date," Knox muttered. Might as well get it all out there and let Jace explode privately.

"Excuse me? Just who the hell is your date?"

"Melody Winters."

Knox said it as if those two words were the trigger to an explosion that would scar him. Melody Winters was known around Humble as The Body. A former Dallas Cowboy cheerleader and now cheerleading coach over in Dodge City, Melody was physically the most perfect woman who had ever lived in Humble. She knew it. She liked to rub it into not only the women's faces, but the men's, as well.

Not once had she ever gone out with a single man from Humble, but for Knox. It had only ever been about the sex. Good sex, though, could be addictive, and Knox admitted Melody and he had gone through a phase.

"Why?" Jace whispered. "Why in the world did you pick her?"

Knox scowled at Jace, feeling bad enough without his brother's look. "I didn't think Amanda would still be in the picture when I made the date, okay?"

“Who the hell did you pick for me?” When Knox didn’t answer quick enough, Jace’s eyes widened and his head started to shake in denial. “Oh, please tell me it’s not...Julie Brown?”

“Yeah,” Knox dragged the word out, feeling that damn weight press even harder against his heart.

Julie Brown was just as bad as Melody Winters, if for totally different reasons. Julie Brown had it all, looks, money, intelligence, and she ran her daddy’s ranch. Perfect in every way, but one, she hated Cody. Jace was in the number one position when they had tried to strike up a relationship with Julie. Love developed, at least on Julie’s part, and at the time, Knox thought on Jace’s part, too.

Then Cody had entered the picture and everything had gone terribly wrong. Cody and Julie had been a cataclysmic disaster. Even though the relationship failed, Julie made it clear Jace was welcome in her life and in her bed anytime he wanted.

“You know there is a real special place in hell with your name on it.” With that, Jace turned and stormed back into the house, leaving Knox to stare off into the sky.

Please, God, I’ll give you anything if you fix this one little thing...

Chapter 44

Amanda glared through the glass at the swirling mass of elegantly dressed women. The black, crisp lines of men in formal dress cut through the fluid flow of skirts and the sparkly wave of jewels. Before her eyes played out the fairy tale party of princesses and princes, and there she stood, the toad on the outside.

Her prince had already worked his way through almost half a bottle of Jack. What had gotten into Cody, she didn't know. He'd roared away from the ranch barely saying a word to her. Refusing to look in her direction since they'd entered the fancy ball, he'd then abandoned her for the bar.

Abandoned was a good way to describe her night. Knox was working the main ballroom with The Body. Amanda's jaw clenched, and the sudden need to be violent rolled over her. Melody Winters, the bastard just had to bring the best looking woman to ever be born in Humble.

Though, that was nothing compared to the threat of Julie Brown. While both women had made it clear to Amanda they'd already had their turns in the Reese brothers' bed, only Julie truly seemed interested in earning the privilege again. *At least with Jace*, Amanda's fingers curled into fists.

Just where had Jace and Julie disappeared to? She'd been standing there on the balcony, watching the party for nearly thirty minutes and hadn't spotted either of them. Which just went to show how lame she was, all dolled up and standing out here like a lost little girl.

Being disgusted with herself only soured her mood even further. Maybe it was time to read the writing on the wall and take her exit. The brothers might have dressed her up, but she'd been a fool to read anything more into it than them trying to save themselves embarrassment.

If a single one of them actually wanted her here, then they wouldn't have all ditched her. It would serve them right for her to return the favor, but

then again, it wouldn't serve her need to make them suffer. Walking off in a pout really wasn't much good if nobody was around to appreciate the exit.

Chin tilted up, Amanda decided to go find somebody to appreciate it. Knox had his hands full on the dance floor, but this time with somebody's eight-year-old daughter. The little girl stood on his shoes, staring up at him with an all too obvious crush in her big brown eyes.

With Knox playing the good guy and entertaining the kiddies, Amanda couldn't really cuss him out the way she wanted. Cody, though, sat undefended and half slumped over at the bar, inspiring no sympathy at all. Whatever Cody's problem, Amanda didn't care.

Coming up alongside of him, she didn't even wait for him to pointedly ignore her. "Please don't make your brothers have to carry you out of here tonight."

Not a word. Cody just lifted his glass and tipped back the rest of his shot.

"I'm really going to make you pay for this attitude tomorrow."

Finally his gaze shifted toward her. Not his chin though, just a quick outside the corner of his eye look before he poured himself another.

Amanda sighed. Whatever funk had gotten into Cody, she knew it began with the name Sharon. He'd never been this bad before, but Cody did have his moments. Maybe something about the formal tonight triggered them. None of his sad story gave him an excuse to act like this to her, but it did give her one for letting him off, for the moment.

"Fine. Do you at least know where Jace is?" If any of the brothers might be susceptible to getting her out of this nightmare, it would be him. Knox would just babble on about responsibilities or some such shit.

Amanda could be so lucky for Cody to be as talkative. He just shrugged and downed another shot. Rolling her eyes at his obnoxiousness, Amanda didn't even ask him for his keys but dug them out of his pocket.

It didn't seem worth the breath to tell Cody he wouldn't be driving anywhere tonight. Leaving him to his misery, Amanda went in search of Jace. Thankfully, it took less than five minutes to find him in the gaming room.

A public setting and one where he didn't press himself up against Julie Brown. Unfortunately, he hadn't swapped her for a twelve year old, and the woman sat right beside him, all too close. Even from a distance, Amanda

could see the other woman trying to lure Jace with sexy little looks and the way she bumped into him as she anted up.

Julie was after Amanda's man, and she didn't care if Amanda knew it. The look Julie gave her as she approached the poker table said it all. Julie Brown might be sophisticated, intelligent, strong in many ways Amanda would never be, but Amanda had one thing Julie didn't—Jace's love.

He glanced up at her, greeting her with his special smile, the goofy one he wore only for her. It schooled itself in a second to a more appropriate grin, but Julie saw. The narrowed annoyance in the brunette's gaze only made Amanda feel even better.

"Jace, I need to talk to you for a moment, if you can spare it."

"Of course." Folding his cards, he nodded to the rest of the men at the table before giving Julie a quick look. "I'll be back in just a moment."

Not if Amanda could help it, but she kept her smile polite as Jace escorted her away from the table. Apparently afraid she'd come to harm him, he started murmuring the second they were out of ear shot.

"If you've come to bitch at me, I just want to say, I had no idea—"

"It's not that," Amanda snapped, keeping her voice in a whisper. She wasn't about to be reduced to some jealous-girlfriend status. That would be a weak position, and Amanda wanted the high one.

"While, we will be getting to the subject of Julie Brown later. Right now, I just thought you might like to go catch Cody before he falls off his bar stool."

"What?" Jace brought them to a stop near the door to the gaming room. It lead out into the lobby and right across from the ballroom, but the double set of solid wood doors managed to keep the noise out of the dimly lit man's den. "Cody's drunk?"

"Drunk?" Amanda smirked. "He's half way through a bottle of Jack, and I'd say well on his way to closing the night with a good, old-fashioned stomach pumping."

Jace cringed, glancing at the doors before focusing a hard look on her. "Has he said anything to you?"

"To me?" Amanda could have laughed if the truth didn't hurt so much. "Not a word. Not a single one since we left the ranch. In fact, he won't even look at me. I have to tell you, I'm about to get in his truck and take my ass home because this is bullshit."

“Amanda—”

“Don’t ‘Amanda’ me,” she cut him off, not interested in being soothed. “And don’t think I mean the ranch when I say home because I don’t make my home with men who go out on dates with other women, much less with men who can’t even manage to speak a civilized word to me. I’ve had enough.”

“Don’t.” Jace grabbed her arm, stopping her from matching actions to her words. “Look, it isn’t Cody’s fault he’s in the shape he’s in.”

“No? Somebody forced half a bottle of whiskey down his throat?”

Jace didn’t waste his time arguing her point. “And it isn’t my fault I have a date. I didn’t make the damn thing.”

“Oh.” Amanda got it now. “You’re going to put this all on Knox.”

“I’m not putting anything anywhere it doesn’t belong, but I am asking you to give me a chance to explain everything. I’ve earned it, haven’t I?”

He might have, but Amanda wouldn’t let herself be duped by her soft spot for Jace. “Fine, you can have your chance, but I’m not going back to the ranch until this is settled.”

“Thank you.” Jace’s hand fell away from her arms as his lips kicked back toward silliness. “You know I’d kiss you now if we weren’t—”

Amanda cut him off with a quick brush of her lips against his. Over and done with, she assured him before he could object. “Nobody saw.” Nobody but Julie. “How about I play your hand while you go take care of Cody?”

“Uh?” Jace looked nervously back at the table, probably at Julie. “You know how to play poker?”

“I can hold my own.” Amanda smiled. “After all, you know how much I like to win.”

Jace could take her challenge anyway he liked. Amanda knew a good exit line when she said it. She also knew how to put a little wiggle into her walk when a man watched her.

* * * *

Julie Brown was a woman used to getting her way. She wielded power with ease, accustomed to being in control. There had been a time when Jace had considered her the ideal woman. Actually, he still did. Everything Julie

did, she did with grace. Like an Olympic fencer, she could parry and thrust with the best of them.

Amanda, on the other hand, was a street fighter. Wild and untamed, she came at her opponents full force and unrelenting, bent on total destruction. Nothing called to Jace like Amanda's passion. Watching her strut across the room, knowing she intended to go to battle over him, it made Jace itch to shed his civilized skin and unleash the primitive male inside.

He controlled himself, just barely, but if Amanda pushed too much harder, she'd find herself stretched out over this game table being ridden hard and fast. Everything else had gone to hell tonight, why should he be the only sane one in the group? Because he really didn't want Cody to end up with a stomach pumping.

Not that Jace would waste his time tending to the baby of the family. That's why they had an older brother. As far as Jace could reason, Knox had made this mess. He should clean up some of it. Finding Knox didn't turn out to be too hard, given Knox found him.

Stepping out of the crowd filling the ballroom before Jace could even wade into it, Knox didn't bother with a proper greeting or even the appearance of one. Snatching Jace's arm, he started pulling him along into the lobby.

"Have you seen Amanda?" Knox glared as he looked around. "She was on the balcony not ten minutes ago and now I've—"

"She's playing poker with Julie," Jace cut off Knox's tirade before he started going down some dark path. His plan worked. The tension in Knox instantly eased.

"Oh." Knox released Jace. "Well then, I guess I'll—"

"Go take care of Cody," Jace finished for him. "Because the way I hear it, he's downing a whole bottle at the bar."

"Yeah, so I noticed." Knox snorted. "What am I supposed to do about it?"

Jace stared at Knox in amazement. "I don't know? Take him home before he—"

The shrill scream of a woman yelling, "*You son of a bitch!*" pierced through the roar of the ballroom, silencing it within a matter of seconds as a second voice roared out.

"Go fuck yourself!"

Cody. Jace groaned and glared at Knox, who scowled back before giving in with a muttered obscenity. Shoving his way back into the crowd, Jace assumed Knox thought he would follow. *Not my problem.*

He hadn't set any of this into motion, but Jace would pay for it. Well, not tonight. He could start paying tomorrow because right now, he was going to join the 'crazy club' and do just what he felt like doing.

Turning, he shoved his way back into the gaming room as the shouted curses increased. It sounded like the lady had found herself a champion, which meant Cody had somebody he could hit. Knox better hurry his ass up because Jace surely did.

Completely unconcerned and willing to meet Amanda's reaction with any force necessary, Jace walked right up behind her and ripped the cards from her hand. Dropping them on the table, he met Amanda's startled gaze with a curt command to the whole table.

"The lady folds."

"Jace!" Amanda's indignant gasp barely registered. Nor did her struggle as he latched onto her arm and yanked her right out of her seat. "What are you doing?"

"Jace?" Julie rose with them, concern apparent on her face. It bothered him enough to pause and give her an appropriate goodbye.

"I'm sorry, Julie, there's been a family emergency. Is there any way you can find a ride?"

Julie smirked. "Yeah, sure."

So he was a bastard and both women thought it, Jace didn't care. With barely a glance at the rest of the shocked observers, Jace dragged Amanda across the room. He knew she struggled to free herself, but it didn't cause him any problems as he shouldered through the door into the lobby.

The sounds of an all out battle in the ballroom assured Jace Knox hadn't gotten there in time. *Ow!* The sharp toed kick Amanda delivered to the back of his calf actually did hurt, reminding Jace he had his own fight to tend to.

"Let me go!"

Amanda wrenched hard on her arm, pivoting at the waist and using her entire body to break his hold. Stumbling backward on her heels, Jace didn't give her any chance to follow the move with an escape. With a snarled obscenity expressing his annoyance, he turned and put a shoulder into her stomach.

Amanda's screech echoed the much louder screams coming out of the ballroom, but nobody really paid them any mind as they joined the exodus flowing out the main door. Jace found it surprisingly easy to abduct his woman given the chaos erupting all around them.

Men's shouts, the crack of wood splintering, glass being smashed and the screams of women panicking, it all drowned out Amanda's demands and pulled any attention away from the scene they made as he carried her off to his truck. Whatever Amanda had to say, he didn't want to hear it.

This night had gone completely to hell. All Jace ever wanted out of any night was to be with Amanda and end it with her snuggled up to his side. That's just what he would get tonight, even if he had to play Cody and Knox's game and command it. Amanda heeled for them, and she could damn well do the same for him.

No amount of profanity or litany of tiny punches pelting his back would change Jace's mind. He was taking her home, to his ranch and his bed, no arguments allowed.

* * * *

Amanda felt like laughing as Jace stuffed her into his truck, but she held back. Instead, she played into the part of the wild and indignant woman, cussing at him and kicking him as he shoved her across the seat and settled in behind the wheel. She could have gone out the other side, but she didn't really want to escape.

Why would she? This was an unexpected treat. Not only had she stolen Julie's date from her, Jace had converted completely into behaving like one of his brothers...like Knox. Whatever drove Jace, Amanda wanted to keep it fueled right up to what promised to be an explosive orgasm because that's just what she deserved for putting up with this entire fiasco of a night.

A disaster that appeared to be spreading from her evening to the entire party. Amanda glanced around at all the people spilling in every direction. "What the hell is going on?"

Her head twisted further to the side as Jace pattered down the drive and past the front of Henry's. Random puddles of people gathered and amassed themselves on the steps, all keenly focused on some drama going down inside the foyer. She'd heard the commotion boiling over as Jace carried her

off but had been much more focused on her own predicament. Now she had to smirk at all the elegant people.

Not too classy for a drunken brawl. Amanda thought as they inched past the people starting to stream out and away from the mansion. The crowds shifted and parted. For a just a second, she could see straight into the brightly-lit foyer.

“Is that Knox?”

At her question, Jace hit the gas, and she jerked back in her seat at the sudden acceleration. His response didn’t so much alarm Amanda as it did annoy her. “Is that my answer?”

“What?” He didn’t even pause at the end of the drive, barely slowed down. With tires squealing, he twisted the truck right out onto the highway.

“Don’t *what* me. I want to know what is going on.”

“As if you don’t know,” he shot back. “Don’t bother playing innocent, it doesn’t suit you.”

“Don’t you turn this around on me,” Amanda shot back, not having to act indignant anymore. “I’m not the one going all He-Man in the middle of a fancy party.”

Jace hit the brakes so hard the ass of the truck felt like it lifted up for a second. Instinctively, she threw a hand onto the dash, bracing herself as the large vehicle shuddered to a stop. In the space of a breath, Jace had her crowded against the door.

“Do you really think I would let you get away challenging me publicly like you did?”

Amanda had no clue what he was talking about, so his question threw her completely off track. “Challenge you? What—”

“Don’t even bother with that innocent look,” Jace grunted. “Did I not tell you I love you?”

Amanda scowled. “Yeah, so you have mentioned it in—”

“And do you think I’m the type of man who tells a woman he loves her and then goes off to screw some other woman?” His tendency to cut her kept Amanda from answering. Jace gave her the moment but then rolled on. “The right answer is no, Amanda. Obviously you don’t get that, so I’m going to have to teach you a lesson.”

A lesson? Amada didn’t know if she heard right, then she didn’t care. Not with his kiss on her lips. Actually, it was more like a devouring. He

took her lips with a harsh promise, leaving her breathless and weak. Under the force of his lips, hers parted, baring the sweet sanctuary of her mouth vulnerable to the aggressive invasion of his tongue. Like a molten flame, his challenging tongue worked hers into a duel.

Just as abruptly as it had started, the kiss ended. Jace jerked back into his seat and popped the hand brake before she could even catch her breath. Still a little light headed, Amanda adjusted her position and locked her seat belt into place. Outside the plains swept by, and inside the silence stood still.

The spectacle at Henry's was forgotten, and all Amanda could focus on was just what would happen when they got home. It compelled her to speak.

"You may have won the battle, but the war will go to me."

She turned to stare at him as she laid down the gauntlet. If Jace wanted to play, he better be damn good at the game because she hadn't lied. Amanda played to win.

Jace said nothing, but the tip of his lip lifted into a devilish grin as they picked up even more speed.

Chapter 45

The whole way home, Jace went through every possibility of what might happen when he brought his truck to a stop. He knew one thing that wouldn't be happening. Amanda wouldn't be winning any war. No. She'd be begging for mercy in the very near future.

With the force of his will power, Jace controlled the urgency swirling through his blood and parked his truck in its appropriate spot under the carport. Not daring to give away any weakness, he climbed out with smooth, relaxed movements. Like a master chess player, Amanda matched his calm, cool demeanor and slid out to offer him her hand. They'd just cleared the lip of the overhang when she suddenly stopped.

"Wait."

Jace hesitated, unsure and suspicious. "What?"

"I left my purse in your truck."

He rolled his eyes. "Get it tomorrow."

"I'm three feet from it now, why not take care of it? Unless, of course, you're in some kind of a rush."

Isn't she just too cute. Be even cuter on her knees, naked, and sucking my cock. Amanda could test him all she wanted, he wouldn't break. With a smirk he handed over his keys and waited while she stepped back up to the side of his truck. Perhaps he was a fool, not to see it coming. That's why when it happened he just stood there like a dunce for a minute, giving Amanda more than enough time to lock herself safely into the cab.

What the hell is she doing? Knowing how she'd taken off in Knox's truck, Jace stood poised and ready to jump into the bed and go for a bumpy, backseat ride when the light inside the cab clicked on. She gave him a big smile and a saucy little wave. Like a red flag to a bull, the very gloat in her features pulled him in and to the side of the door.

"You don't really think you can keep me out of this truck, do you?"

Her response to that was a naughty little wink as she shrugged her shoulder toward him. Jace intended on getting the spare key from the house, but she lowered her chin and with a little nudge sent the stringy strap of her dress dipping down over her arm.

Her lips formed a perfect O of surprise even as her eyes darted. With a grin full of promise, she raised one finger to slide beneath her second strap. She followed the lacy strap down, pushing it out of her way so her hand could dip beneath the neck line of her dress.

With a deep breath that raised her breast right up toward her touch, he heard her moan as her eyes slid closed. With the dress in his way, he couldn't see but only imagine what her fingers looked like rolling over her beautiful pink nipples. They puckered under the roving attention of her hand, making his mouth water for a taste.

It seemed impossible she could pull off a strip tease in such a confined space, but somehow Amanda managed to make all the wiggling look sexy. With provocative little looks and naughty touches, she held him rooted in his spot. The spare key disappeared from his mind as it focused instead on watching the dirty little play Amanda was putting on for him.

Naked and alone, she propped herself up against the driver's door, arching one knee to rest a foot on his dash and leave every one of her secrets vulnerable to his gaze. Jace cursed the dim lighting and rubbed the fog out of his way as he pressed himself right into the truck in a pointless urge to be the one cupping those breasts.

"Oh, yeah, baby girl," Jace breathed out without thought. "Lick them for me...Damnit!"

His breath fogged over the glass again. By the time Jace managed to scrub another peep hole clean, she was already sucking on one succulent tit with those lush lips. His lips parted in silent jealousy even as his hand mirrored hers on a long, slow glide downward. He didn't have her patience. Jace's fingers gripped his erection through his slacks, giving his dick a comforting squeeze in a desperate bid to hold on just a little longer.

The erotic scene playing out before his eyes blurred as another round of fog had him cursing again while he used his elbow to clear away another porthole. Amanda wasn't taking things slowly by any means. In the few seconds it took to bring her image back in focus, she already had her fingers buried in her cunt.

Such a nice, tight little cunt. So hot. That's just the way it likes to be fucked. Hard and fast, baby girl, give it to yourself. Every cell in his body swelled with the need to feel the heavenly clutch of her pussy again.

God, Jace was addicted to being inside her, to feeling all her molten heat clinging to every inch of him as he slid out only to plunge all the way back in. That was perfection, being squeezed tight in her body while feeling it sweaty and shuddering against his.

The slurping sounds of her cream as he plundered her body, the sweaty slap of flesh, the way she gasped and moaned, egging him on as her nails raked across his shoulders and dug in...

Oh, that's it, baby girl. Bounce that ass...so fucking beautiful. Amanda's eyes had long since closed, and as her head arched back into the window, her chest lifted those gorgeous breasts high. The muscles along her legs tightened, contracting as her whole body flushed with her impending release. Jace's eyes went dry as they fixated on those pale, skinny fingers pumping into the creamy folds of her pussy.

I'm going to tear her pussy up when I get my hands on it. Hands, mouth, all ten inches of the hardened steel making its presence known painfully in his pants. *When I'm done with her, that pussy will be so well used she'll be sore for over a week.*

Click.

The slight sigh of sound took a moment to register. Probably the only that sound could have dragged his eyes away from the erotic little show Amanda put on, it drew his attention to the little rod that was now standing up. In her writhing, Amanda had accidentally unlocked the door.

A feral satisfaction had him grinning as his fingers wrapped around the cool, metal handle.

* * * *

She was almost there. Amanda moaned and arched, thrusting up into the downward stroke of her fingers as she fought to crest the edge of ecstasy. She had been ruined over the past few weeks, conditioned to being overfilled. Now her scrawny little fingers had to work twice as hard to get her off.

The seat gathered between her shoulder blades as her stomach muscles began to burn. Every fiber of her being stretched toward the golden horizon. The first glorious waves of heat broke over her in a liquid shower, making the sudden wash of cold air over her body that much more striking.

Amanda didn't have time to wonder, much less react before Jace was on her. With an almost painful grip, he ripped her hand from her sopping cunt. In the next breath, his mouth replaced it. Amanda's entire body arched under the impact as she screamed.

Jace had a wonderfully long, thick tongue. *God, does he know how to use it.* Over and over again he tickled and thumped into the magical spot hidden deep in her sheath. Each teasing brush and tormenting caress had her jerking, cursing, and begging as he staved off her climax even as he drove the wildness of her passion to an even higher, more frenzied pitch. She went insane with a need made painful when his mouth lifted.

"I'm claiming victory."

Jace growled the declaration against her lips before taking them with a hunger that matched her own. The taste of her own arousal only intoxicated her even more, and she lost herself in his kiss, giving over to his domination with a feminine whimper. Jace growled in response, his fingers flexing, pressing hard into her hips.

Then just like that he retreated, dragging her naked right to the edge of the open door. She gave a shriek as the cool night air fanned across her bare ass. It jarred her enough to shriek and try to edge backward.

"My dress—"

"Leave it." Jace interrupted her protest, lifting her right off the edge of the seat and down onto the full length of his cock. "It will only get in the way."

Amanda gasped, her eyes widening as her whole body exploded with joy. So thick, he filled her with a need so desperate she managed to cling to him with muscles that trembled but held strong. It was perfection, only made more glorious by the vulnerability of her position. Naked, exposed, impaled on the cock of a man strong enough to hold her in position as he closed the truck door, she'd never felt more like a woman.

The movement jarred his dick, making it press and shift in the most delightful ways deep inside her. She shuddered and tried to issue a plea, but his hands, palming her ass, twisted her words into an incoherent moan. He

lifted her up, making her slide over every thick inch of his hardened length. Just as the swollen head of his cock stretched the very opening of her sheath wide, he stepped into her.

Amanda shrieked and jerked at the sudden, hard penetration, but he didn't give her a chance to catch her breath for a full scream. In a steady march, he fucked her right across the front yard. By the time he angled her upward and came in for a hard thrust as he mounted the front steps, Amanda had lost it. She needed her release, and she needed it now. No matter what it cost.

"Please, Jace." She gasped into his ear as he lifted her for another mind blowing step up. "Take your victory."

She didn't know what she was saying and certainly hoped it had been the right thing when he hesitated. In a flurry of movement blurring around her, Amanda suddenly found herself freed, lowered onto the steps. Her eyes focused on the line of the top step and the bottom of front door as she took quick stock of her sudden position. He bent over the front steps, a rough hand forcing her knees to split wide along the wooden plank of a step.

He wouldn't dare... Jace rammed a scream from her stomach and out her throat as he pumped every delicious inch of cock deep into her pussy. He took her with a harsh rapid beat. Amanda couldn't possibly keep up with the speed of hips. It didn't matter, a warm, hard hand held her still as he drilled himself into her over and over.

Each full-length stroke set her pussy on fire until an inferno boiled out and over her skin. She was so hot she was surprised she didn't burst into the very flames licking through her. Above her, Jace's chest hairs rasped against her back, molten droplets of sweat dripped down from him to evaporate as steam the minute it hit her skin.

Amanda's mouth opened on a silent scream as every muscle in her body contracted under the first tidal wave of her release. It crashed down over her, bathing her in a magnificent splash of ecstasy. It should have rippled on and bloomed under the impact of the next round, but Jace thwarted her at the last second.

He kept her hips pinned to his, the full length of his cock stretching her spasming muscles so wide they didn't have a chance to contract and release the second wave of her climax. Instead, he rocked her hips with his, teasing little motions kept her bound at the crest of where pleasure blurred into pain.

“To the victor,” Jace slid himself completely free, leaving her cold and anxious about what he intended next, “go the spoils.”

Any questions Amanda had about what he meant were wiped away when his hands smoothed over the rounded curves of her ass. Parting her cheeks, he made her breath catch in her throat as the sticky, bulbous head of his cock kissed the entrance of her second channel.

“Oh, God, Jace. Don’t. Not here.”

He did right there. With a swift thrust of his hips, he fucked his full length deep into her ass. With the same relentless rhythm he’d used on her pussy, he pounded into her. Amanda clawed at the steps, screaming as wave after alternating wave of pain and pleasure erupted through her body.

Amanda lost herself to the wildness, giving over to the primal urges flooding her body. Rearing up on an unstable arm she not only met him thrust for thrust, she latched onto one of his hands and dragged it right down to where she needed his touch the most. Jace growled and jerked her straight up against his chest.

“You like to touch yourself, don’t you, baby girl?” He reversed their hands, manipulating her fingers into a teasing, tormenting dance through her swollen folds. “You like to play with this pussy, make a little show out of it to drive a man insane. Well, now it’s my turn.”

With that growled promise, Jace’s other hand slid around to swoop up over her quivering stomach and cup one tender breast in his large palm. His thumb snaked out to circle her nipple. Giving it rough little rubs and piercing little flicks, he lifted her breast upward.

“Go on and suck it, baby girl.” He gave her tender tip another rotating caress of the callused pad of his thumb. “This poor little tit is begging for attention. Don’t deny yourself. Suck it.”

It wasn’t herself she couldn’t deny, but the hard demand in his tone. Dipping her chin into her neck, she let her tongue slip out to lick over the pebbled ridge of her nipple. Amanda’s eyes rolled back, as her breath panted out.

So good... Even better when he trapped her finger beneath his and began to circle over her clit. A mesmerized and obedient servant to his control, Amanda helplessly followed Jace’s growled commands. Her tongue licked over her nipple in perfect rhythm to the finger driving her insane. Sparkly

and sweet, her whole body glimmered with a pleasure held in check by the pressure coming from her ass.

Tighter and tighter, the tension wound through her until she felt tears gathering painfully behind her eyes. She broke down then, pleading with him to fuck her with each panted breath she took.

“Promise me tonight you will never deny me this body,” Jace growled into her ear before he took a slight nip at her lobe. “For as long as you live, you belong to me. Promise me.”

“I promise.” She’d have said anything to put an end to her torment.

“You belong to me.”

“Belong to you.”

“Forever.”

“Forever.”

Amanda wasn’t even aware of what she had promised. Only Jace’s reaction mattered. With a growl, he released her completely. In one swift movement he gained his legs and slid free of her body. She cried out in denial, offering up some feeble struggles as he lifted her into his arms. He didn’t even seem to notice.

Mounting the remainder of the steps, he kicked in the front door. There, in the light, he paused to look down at her. She swallowed down the panic as she read determination in every hard angle of his face.

“Since we got a lifetime to enjoy, there really is no need to rush this moment. Is there, baby girl?”

No. Wait. This isn’t going the way I planned.

Too late, Jace kicked the front door closed behind him.

Chapter 46

Saturday, July 26th

“You hungry?”

Cody perked up at the sound of Jace’s voice. Wincing, Cody dragged himself upright along the headboard. Yeah, he hurt, and if it were up to his two brothers, Cody would probably be in more pain before the day ended. He didn’t really care. No amount of physical pain could make him feel worse than the knowledge of what he’d done.

Moving deeper into the bedroom, Jace set the tray of cold cereal and milk across Cody’s thighs. The small weight made Cody cringe again, not that reaching for the glass of orange juice made him smile.

“You think you need to go to the doctor?” Jace settled down onto the edge of the bedside chair. “Maybe get those ribs looked at?”

“They’re just bruised.” Cody’s voice wavered even as he spoke.

Jace shrugged. “They’re your ribs.”

“Yeah.” Cody paused over his OJ to take a deep breath. “See? I can breathe with no pain. No pain, no break, right?”

Jace snorted at such an accomplishment. “Well, I’m sure Knox will fix that for you in the near future.”

Cody smirked. It showed how little Jace knew. Knox had already gotten in a good number of hits last night. Of course, Knox being Knox, he might feel the need to add a few more today, once he heard all the details. Glancing from the door to Jace, he had ask, “Speaking of, where exactly is Knox?”

“Out working.”

“I’m surprised. I would have thought he...”

“Would have come in here at first light and torn you from stem to stern?”

The hard edge in Jace's tone made it clear, he and Knox had already talked. "Oh, so you do know."

"Yeah," Jace nodded. "I got the full briefing after Knox came home and helped make sure Amanda was too tired to ask where your drunk ass was."

Cody nodded. "Well, I'm sure he'll have more to say."

"All he said was you had to tell Amanda what happened."

He greeted Jace's quiet statement with silence as he stared forlornly into his glass. Finally, Cody sighed and rolled his shoulders forward. "He's probably thinking there won't even be enough remains to identify me after she's done."

"I don't know about that."

"I do. That girl is going to explode and rightly so." Their eyes met, and Cody could see Jace understood. "If I tell her about the necklace, she'll just be more hurt. If I don't, then how am I supposed to explain?"

"I can't answer that for you." Jace smiled slightly. "Honestly, Amanda's going to find out about the necklace at some point. That's just Knox being dumbass Knox. What you did last night...it's going to hurt her, but it doesn't have to be fatal."

"It doesn't have to be?" Cody shook his head. "I might have been tanked last night, Jace, but I have a really good memory of telling the entire ballroom that Sherri Dixon was a cheap and easy cunt, just like every other woman in this town. If I remember correctly, I went on to pledge my undying devotion and love to Sharon."

Jace just stared at Cody, appearing unmoved. When he spoke, Cody knew it wasn't an act. "If that's all you remember saying, then you've forgotten some of the better parts."

"Why?" Cody felt a numbness come over him as he tried to think of what he'd done. "Did I say anything about Amanda? I know I didn't do anything to her."

Jace said nothing, just stared back until Cody wished he felt well enough to hit his brother. He had to settle for just yelling at him and bearing the cost to his aching head. "What?"

"What do you think you could have said to Sherri that would overshadow the gossip of you pledging your love to a dead woman and then starting a brawl in the middle of Henry's formal?"

He asked it so calmly Cody couldn't believe it would be the answer leaping first to his mind. Some small gesture gave away his thoughts because Jace confirmed them. Leaning forward in his seat, Jace delivered the bad news in a whisper.

"That's right, Cody. I already got four calls. Sherri is telling everybody when she asked you if you were with Amanda, you told her Amanda prefers to fuck and suck your brothers' cocks more than yours."

It was like the gates of Hell had opened, but it turned out to be cold burn. *Freezing, actually*. Cody swallowed down the unpleasant sensation of panic. He hadn't felt it too often in his life but knew it well enough to diagnosis the frenzied scatter of every single cell in his body.

"Oh, my God!" They clapped back together at Amanda's horrified exclamation. She was in the doorway and a blink later at his bedside. "What in the world happened to you?"

In the fine tradition of women, Amanda immediately set about pampering and fussing over him. Cody caught Jace's hard look and nodded, accepting what he, and he alone, had to do.

"Well," pushing out of the chair, Jace rose, "I guess I'll leave you in Amanda's hands now."

He paused to drop a quick kiss on Amanda's head. She didn't even seem to notice, too concerned about Cody's comfort. "Don't fuss over him too much, darlin'. He deserved what he got."

"What a rotten thing to say about your brother." She smacked him on his arm. "You be nice, or I'll be mean."

"How about I get while the getting is good," Jace shot back at her.

"I'd say you are a bright man, Jace Reese."

Cody watched as Jace gave Amanda a hug from behind. He knew what his brother was thinking. In ten minutes, Amanda would be out the door, never to come back. The sadness was there in Jace's features, in the deepening of his tone as he spoke.

"I love you, Amanda. Don't forget that."

Cody scowled at the finality in Jace's words. Fortunately, Amanda misread his intent. With a forward step out of his arms, she shot Jace a dirty look over her shoulder. "Don't think all the poetry in the world is going to get you out of our talk. You and Knox have some explaining to do about those dates."

Jace smirked. "I'm going to hold you to talking with me later."

"Geez." Amanda rolled her eyes and shot Cody a grin. "You'd think he was the one being put out. What is this?" She lifted his spoon to swirl his cereal around the bowl.

"Amanda—"

"Fruit Loops? Oh, for God's sake. You don't need to be eating this crap."

"It's alright. I'm not really—"

"No it's not. You need to a thick, hearty breakfast in your condition. Protein and nutrients help heal bruises, not sugar." Amanda lifted the tray up as if she intended to carry it right back out of the room. He caught her hands in his at the last moment, forcing her arms to lower the tray back into place.

"Amanda, please! We need to talk."

She must have heard something in his tone. Amanda stilled, her eyes lifted to meet his. Despite her almost hyper attention to his health, he could see the darkness lingering in her eyes. Try as she might to cover it up, he knew he'd hurt her last night even without knowing everything.

"Fine." With a deep breath, Amanda released the tray and straightened up. "What do you want to talk about?"

He really didn't want to do this. He just had no choice. With a steadying breath, he tried to begin. "Last night, I—"

"Was a complete jackass," Amanda finished for him. "Yeah. Believe it or not, I remember. Trust me, I woke up this morning totally intending to beat your ass, but seeing as how somebody else beat me to it, I guess I'll—"

"Will you shut up!" God, having her ramble on was worse than saying what he needed to say. He needed to say it because it was burning a hole in his throat. "Please, just let me say what I got to say."

"You really don't understand the art of an apology at all. Do you, Cody?"

An apology? He hadn't even started the confession.

"Look, Cody. I'll save you the headache of apologizing if you just tell me why. What did I do to make you so mad at me?"

Cody's head hit the back of the headboard as he closed out the sight of Amanda's pain. It took him so long to get through all her defenses and actually get close to her. In his gut he knew what came next would shatter

that connection. Worse, the pieces would fall down as bricks in a new wall she'd build to hide herself behind.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Amanda breathed out the words softly. "Well," the tray lifted off his thighs, "why don't I just go make you a more appropriate breakfast. I'm surprised Lydia hasn't gotten on it already. Really, where is that woman when you need her?"

Before he could stop her, Amanda escaped, clearly not wanting to be in the same room as him. Problem was, time wouldn't heal Amanda's pain. Only Cody could do that, and it meant overcoming his own.

It required strength, though, to drag his tired ass body out of bed. Cody didn't let physical aches deter him. Through the nausea and piercing sharp pains that came, he managed to pull on a pair of jeans and went trailing after Amanda.

He found her in the kitchen. True to her word, she'd already pulled out the bacon and the eggs. They rested on the counter while her butt stuck out from behind the refrigerator door. He could hear her muttering to herself as she shoved things around.

"Stupid jackass. Figures he'd get his ass beat just to screw me out of revenge. Now I got to make his sorry ass breakfast."

Her words made him smile. The small gesture hurt, a reminder of just how much he had lost. He might love Amanda, but that wouldn't stop him from losing her. "It's just not fair, is it?"

Amanda jerked upright, her eyes widening on him a second before narrowing. Cody didn't expect her to be embarrassed at being caught complaining, and she obviously wasn't.

"What are you doing out of bed?" She slammed the refrigerator door shut. "Damnit, Cody. You're hurt, and you need to lie down."

She came at him like she intended to corral him right back into bed. Arms out, mad face on, he caught her just before Amanda latched onto his hands. The sudden reversal threw her for a moment and gave him just enough time to turn her and force her down onto one of the kitchen stools.

"What—"

"No." Cody covered her lips with a finger before she could get to the second word. "I talk, you listen. Understand?"

Obviously annoyed, she still remained quiet, waiting with pointed patience for him to speak.

“Last night I was a jackass to you.”

Duh. She said it without saying a word. Her eyes rolled, her brows lifted and even her lips twitched with just a subtle enough motion to speak volumes.

“I know you want to know why...” Should he take Knox down with him? Prepare her for the fatal blow he’d deliver in a moment with a first round volley? “You know I care a great deal about you, Amanda. In fact, I...you’re just really important to me, and I don’t want you to not be here.”

Why couldn’t he just say he loved her? Cody knew he did, but the words failed him, and he blundered on without them. “Sometimes, though, I feel like you care more about Knox and Jace, and it makes me a little jealous.”

Straightening up in her seat, Cody could sense he had her full attention. “I shouldn’t have taken it out on you last night, but I did.”

“Oh, Cody.” Amanda sighed and lifted off the chair. Before he knew what was going on, she was hugging him. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you or make you feel bad.”

Oh, crap.

This hadn’t gone the way he’d intended. He had wanted to rationalize his behavior without throwing Knox and his damn necklace under the bus. Instead, he’d thrown himself further under. Once she heard the rest of what he had to say, she’d look at this moment as an attempt to manipulate her into feeling responsible for his actions.

“I don’t mean to show favor to your older brothers.” Amanda stepped back to frame his face with her hands. The look in her eyes was so sad, so sincere, Cody felt the pain inside him twist to even more poignant depths.

“You know I care about you, don’t you Cody? No more or less than Knox or Jace. You’re all special to me, equally special.”

Fuck! He could have hit something, wished it could have been himself. Cody had screwed this conversation up in the worst possible way, but he had no choice but to go forward. This had to be done, and it had to be done now. With that renewed strength of will, Cody clasped her wrists and forced her back onto the stool. This time though he held her there, pinned into startled place.

“Listen to me, Amanda. I’m trying to tell you that I had too much to drink last night, and I said things I shouldn’t have said.”

Amanda scowled, cocking her head. “You said things? What do you mean?”

Cody swallowed. *This was it.* “I don’t really remember everything, but Sherri Dixon approached me and—”

“Sherri Dixon? That tramp?” Amanda snorted. “Please don’t tell me you flirted with her?”

“No,” Cody snapped, appalled that she would even think he would betray her in the slightest, drunk or not. “But she did ask...and according to Sherri, she asked about you.”

“About me?” Amanda frown didn’t lighten despite her smirk. “What did she ask about me for?”

“She asked where you were.” Cody gave her a pointed look. “You know, like where is your girlfriend right now? Do you have a moment to slip away?”

“Oh, I am so going—”

“According to the gossip, I told her you preferred to suck and fuck my brothers’ cocks.”

Cody just blurted it out, wanting to be free of the revelation, so he could just move onto the hurt. The very least Cody had expected was to be hit, but Amanda just stared at him. Backing into the stool, she lost her balance and sat.

“And is that really what you said?”

Cody sighed and rolled his shoulders. “I don’t know. I know I shouted a whole bunch of asshole things about women.”

“Derogatory things,” Amanda tacked on what he left off.

Cody nodded. “Bad, bad things and then I pledged my undying love to Sharon.”

Given the girth of his confession, Cody actually wondered if he should even tell her that. It might or not make it into the gossip, but really all it did was hurt Amanda. She just sat there staring at him with a sort of vacant look, and for what? Nothing. He’d just been drunk.

“Amanda, please say something.”

“You’re hurting my wrists.”

“What?” Cody’s head snapped down as his hands sprung free of her arms. He forgot he was holding onto her. The red chafe marks against her pale skin stood as a stark statement about his situation.

“Oh, baby. I’m so sorry. I—”

“I don’t want to talk to you.” She cut him off and held him silent with the sheer calmness in her tone.

This was not what he had been expecting at all. The one thing that had always attracted him to Amanda had been her passion. It had been reasonable to expect her to explode. Hell, that’s why his brothers had fled the house, because down to the last man they’d all imagined the fires of her rage leaping right out of her eyes to consume any idiot in the way.

That flame wasn’t there now. The glow in her eyes had dimmed. They’d taken on a dead, remote look. It matched the mechanical, controlled movements of her body as she stood and worked her way around him as if he were nothing more than a pillar or post in her way.

With cold dread unfurling through his body, he watched as she walked away. The even clacks of her footsteps hammered in a new stone in the wall he could feel her building around herself. Made of pure ice and capable of withstanding the fiery heat of her rage, Cody could feel her disconnecting from him completely.

“Amanda.” He had to try because very soon she’d finish erecting her wall, and there would be no more opportunities. “Please.”

She paused but didn’t even bother to look back at him. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

With that, she turned the corner and disappeared out of sight.

Chapter 47

Amanda tried to figure out what she was feeling but couldn't reason it through. So everybody knew she was having a three-way ménage with the Reese brothers, but her reputation had been weathered enough over the years for this not to cost her anything.

The worst she'd endure were the looks and the whispers, but Amanda wouldn't lose friends over it. Maybe if she had a nice job she would be concerned, but her little clerk's desk would be hers as long as she showed up on time and didn't get arrested for any violent offenses.

Nothing to lose, so why did she feel so horrified? It had been her last night challenging Knox to tell the world. What had changed? Something had because all Amanda could feel was numbness vibrating through her body.

It consumed any emotion trying to peek out and left her with no other guide than her brain. Cold reason helped her to start answering all the questions circling in her brain. Some were old, others new, but none were pleasant.

Even the solace of Jace's room couldn't fill her with comfort. Crawling up onto his bed, Amanda breathed in Jace's scent and kept on thinking. There was a reason she was so upset. It was clear as day.

The world knowing she loved three men and they loved her back didn't bother Amanda at all. The world knowing three men had used her for her body did. It was time to stop living in fantasy land and face the truth of what Cody said. *His undying love to Sharon.*

At least he had the honesty to say it and finally put an end to the subject that had haunted their entire relationship. Amanda was their second choice, and she didn't compare. Not even for Jace, who cried out to Sharon in his sleep.

They didn't love her.

That's why they bought her nice clothes and fancy jewelry and then took other women to the ball. That's why they kept a shrine to the dead fiancée and made Amanda live out of bags. Cody hadn't even been able to look at her last night.

Amanda might love them, but it would never be returned. Even if they married her, stayed loyal to her, protected and provided for her, they'd still be settling for her. That was the truth and now everybody in town knew it.

They'd pity her, no doubt, but it would be the life Amanda earned. She had a chance once, a long time ago, to have a real family, and she'd destroyed it. How fitting then that she should have the perfect shell of one offered to her now?

It would be perfect in all reasonable ways. She'd have men to tend to all the house work, so much money to live life without worry, and children, but she wouldn't have their love. Without it, everything else just felt hollow.

A loud crack of a drawer being snapped closed in the bedroom next door had Amanda's head lifting. *Knox*? It couldn't possibly be him. He wouldn't be hiding in the bedroom while Cody unloaded his shit pile on top of her.

No, Knox had a barbaric, confrontational nature, he'd be in the middle of any fight he got near. Which was probably good because when she got a hold of him...

Crash!

Amanda's head lifted off the pillow at the sound of something hard and heavy hitting the floor. Her body followed suit, rolling to the side and off the mattress as it followed the sounds of scavenging coming through the connected bathroom into the Knox's room.

The day she trashed Knox's room she hadn't made such a racket. Neither had she tore through his possession like Lydia was. In a shock greater than when Cody had dropped his bombshell, Amanda took in the mass destruction before her. Drawers had been pulled out and emptied. Piles of shoeboxes, belts and shirts lay scattered around the open closet.

There knelt Lydia, rooting through the large storage locker at the bottom of the closet. So intent on looking for whatever it was, Lydia didn't even appear to notice Amanda coming up behind her. She'd about positioned herself to scare the living crap out of the woman when she got distracted by the lockbox strewn across the floor.

She'd noticed it the other day when she'd been looking in Knox's mirror. The key had been sticking out of the lock, but she'd had no real interest in his personal papers. Apparently, Lydia did, and they weren't papers, but disks. DVD's or CD's, Amanda didn't know or care, she just stepped around them as she crept up on Lydia.

JB-JK... Amanda hesitated for a second noticing the large letters written on the discs. *CH-CJ?* Before Amanda could figure out what bothered her about the scrawled abbreviations, Lydia turned on her.

Almost banging right into Amanda, the older woman gave a startled shriek, rearing backward. Before Amanda could press the advantage, Lydia recovered. Obviously, the older woman had snapped her cap because she sprang to her feet like a woman possessed.

"Where is it?"

Fruit loop and in a kind of scary way. Amanda didn't have a clue as to what Lydia was talking about. It didn't matter. She knew enough to stumble backward as Lydia advanced on her.

"Where is it?"

"Where is what?" Amanda shot back, annoyed but still retreating. "Your medication?"

"The necklace," Lydia snarled.

"Necklace? Are you sure you don't need a little yellow pill right about now?"

"Don't fuck with me," Lydia snarled, shocking Amanda more with her tone than her unheard of use of profanity. "You know what fucking necklace I'm talking about."

Amanda reeled back in absolute horror as she did it again. Lydia cursing was like the Mona Lisa flashing her tits. It just didn't happen, but it was, and it kind of scared the crap out of Amanda. She'd always thought Lydia was a tight ass and, apparently, she was going into thermal nuclear meltdown mode.

"The necklace. Where. *Is. It?*"

"I don't know what you are talking about, you crazy old coot." Amanda planted her feet in the bathroom doorway and held her ground. "What necklace?"

"Sharon's necklace."

“Sharon?” Amanda repeated in absolute confusion. “You think I stole one of your daughter’s necklaces?”

“I know that heartless bastard, Knox, gave it to you, but it doesn’t belong to you. It belongs to Sharon.”

Amanda froze, feeling icy tendrils of doom snake down all around her. That necklace...*Sharon’s necklace*? Not even Knox would do something like that.

“You’re lying. Knox bought that necklace for me.”

“He bought it four years ago as a way of trying to bribe my daughter into marrying his damn brother. Trust me. I know. I picked it out. Now where is it?”

Numbly, Amanda stepped deeper into the bathroom to remove the necklace box from where she’d tucked it away with the rest of her toiletries. Turning, she held it out to Lydia, still doubting this nightmare was actually real. There could be no denying the twisted joy lighting up Lydia’s eyes when she snapped the box open.

“I still don’t believe you.” The unauthorized comment escaped her lips before her mind could stop them. “Knox wouldn’t give me a necklace you picked out for your daughter.”

Only the biggest kind of asshole would do something like that. Lydia’s smile provided no comfort. She snapped the lid to the jewelry box closed and gave Amanda a little condescending shake of the head.

“You’re such a fool. You really think any of my boys care about you? You’re just another whore on their list.”

Normally that kind of insult got a person smacked, but Lydia was older, and had such a toothy smile, Amanda feared she might actually get bit. The old bitch definitely had a nasty bark.

“Go and look if you don’t believe me. It’s all there in the office.” Lydia smirked and ran a disgusted eye down Amanda’s length. “You didn’t even make the first page. Hell, you barely made the second.”

Amanda had absolutely no idea what this list was, but she wanted to know. “What are you talking about? What list?”

“The list of women like you. Women the brothers are interviewing to replace my Sharon.” Total hatred overwhelmed the short woman’s pert features. “But it won’t be you. I saw what your precious Knox wrote about

you in the journal. Not at all like the glowing review he gave Julie Brown. Beautiful, intelligent, and sexy, ideal candidate.”

That woke up Amanda’s rage and this time she stepped into Lydia. “You’re lying.”

“Then go see for yourself. Top drawer, green spiral notebook. Makes for entertaining reading.”

With a growl, Amanda whipped around and stormed off for the office. Barely more than a minute later she stood over Knox’s desk, holding the very notebook that Lydia had sent her to find. She just stood there, shaking as she felt the very fragile thread of happiness she’d found these past weeks deflating into doom all around her.

I should have known it wasn’t real. Men like Knox and Jace just didn’t fall for women like her. They used women like her because she was dumb enough to let them. Tears filled her eyes as her strength drained from body. She collapsed into the big leather chair.

Bracing for the worst, Amanda opened the notebook. The first two pages were clear cut, a list of attributes a man might look for in a wife. Keeps a clean house, educated well enough to aid children with homework, present a proper appearance at all times in public, those were the three things topping Knox’s list. Cody’s not surprisingly consisted of a much less prudish list. It started with ‘must be sexually submissive’.

Really nothing about the pages shocked her. Knowing the brothers as she did, Amanda didn’t find a single request out of character for any of them. They’d built themselves a list to define their perfect woman. She didn’t pass the test.

That’s probably why her name didn’t appear for another page, second to last on the list of potential candidates. Her eyes read over it again as Jace’s voice floated through her head. *Are you going to deny this thing that is between us?* Jace had made her fantasy real that night, or at least she thought he had. Now she could see the darkness in it.

I’ve never been as instantly attracted to woman the way I am you. Not just your body, Amanda, but to you. Lies, beautiful, perfect lies he’d used to seduce her into feeling special, into feeling loved. Amanda should have listened to her own advice. *Never trust a man whose erection is poking you in the stomach.*

What a fool she was. These men didn't love her. They hadn't just used her, they'd bought her. Cody had paid off her dad and Knox had paid her off with his former lover's jewelry. Worse than them treating her like some kind of whore, Amanda had let them.

There came the numbness again, the rush of cold reason as questions rolled through her mind. What to do?

JB disqualified because of mutual hatred with C. Amanda stared at the line, seeing through it for several minutes before her eyes focused on the actual words. It was Knox's handwriting. A note listed on Julie Brown's page along with other relevant information about her.

Knox had written that Amanda was trouble. *Only he referred to me as AJ...JB...JB-JK...Julie Brown, Jace and Knox?* Amanda's heart about stopped. *It couldn't be.*

* * * *

Jace pulled back on the reigns, bringing Winston to a clapping stop alongside the open stall gate. "You hiding?"

Cody's head rolled across the wall. His younger brother was propped up against the solid, concrete wall, legs splayed out through the hay covering the cement floor. He looked like a broken down doll, not even capable of speech. His brows lifted, and with his eyes he said yes.

"So you told her?" That's just why Jace had come back. He'd followed Knox's lead and left Cody to handle his own mess, but couldn't resist the urge to be there for Amanda. She had to be hurting, and he couldn't leave her to do that alone.

"Yeah." Cody sighed, appearing to cave under the weight of his own breath. "I told her."

"Well," Jace eyed Cody. "You don't look any worse than you did last night."

"Surprised?"

"A little."

Cody smirked, his eyes rolling closed. "Me too. I thought for sure she'd take my head off."

Jace waited, but his brother didn't add anything on. "And?"

"It's worse. She totally disconnected. She just went...cold."

Cold wasn't a word Jace would ever use to describe Amanda, just the opposite. That went to prove just how bad the situation had gone.

"Time for you to work your charm on her." Cody sounded defeated and angry at the same time. It almost hurt to listen to him. "You're the smoothest when it comes to Amanda."

"And if I do fix this, what then?"

Cody popped an eye open. "What do you mean?"

"You gonna put me in this position again?"

His brother laughed, a bitter, hollow sound. "I'd do whatever takes, Jace. I want to, but..."

Jace scowled, not at all sure what Cody was yammering on about. Whatever it was, he could detect the disgust in his brother's tone and it worried him. "But what?"

"I tried to tell her I love her." Cody's other eye opened as he lifted his head off the wall. "I do love her, and I wanted to say it, but...the words just wouldn't come out."

"So you're just gonna give up?" Jace felt disgusted and terrified.

"No." Cody shook his head. "I just don't understand why I can't say it."

Jace didn't even know how to begin to respond to that bit of stupidity. He didn't intend on wasting any time on figuring it out, either. There would be enough time in his life to deal with his younger brother. Amanda, on the other hand, might not even still be in the house.

Slipping down Winston's sides, he tossed the reins in Cody's direction. "Get your lazy ass off the floor and make yourself useful."

With that, he headed for the house and a future that had only grown bleaker. He'd just reached for the back doorknob when the door itself flew outward and flattened his face. Amanda barreled into him like a train on crack. Not even bothering to speak, much less slow down for the steps, she'd made it into the yard before Jace even realized who had smacked into him.

His big legs against her little ones meant he caught her just under the edge of the carport. He might have size on his side, but she had a rage like he'd never seen in another person on hers. Cold and detached, his ass. When his hand clamped around her wrist, she about ripped his arm clear out of its socket whipping free of his grip.

"Amanda—"

“Don’t touch me!”

“Amanda, wait.”

“Leave me alone.”

She wrenched open her door with enough force it wouldn’t have surprised Jace if it fell off. He moved quickly to block her from getting in the car.

“I’m not going to let you go anywhere until we talk.”

She paused, meeting him head on and exposing him to the full force of her anguish. Jace cringed at what he saw. Anger and pain flared so hotly, blending together with the strength of her rage that he feared the flames might leap from her eyes and consume him whole.

“I’m only going to say this once. I don’t ever, ever want to see you, any of you, ever again.”

With that, she kicked him hard on the shin, making him dance enough out of her way to slide into the driver’s seat and slam the door closed. Jace backed up fast, not at all certain she wouldn’t run him over as she gunned the engine to life and spun out from under the carport. With another dig of the tires, she left ruts in the yard and peeled out.

He watched helplessly as a dust trail followed her flight down the drive. *Damnit.* Digging his phone out of his pocket, Jace hated to, but he had little choice but to call the sheriff. The clerk who answered the phone gave him some grief about putting him through to Tony until Jace told him it had to do with Amanda.

A second later the sheriff barked into the phone, “Who is this?”

“It’s Jace Reese, and I need a favor.”

“Really? Why should I care?”

Jace didn’t have time for Tony’s attitude. “Because Amanda is upset, and she just tore out of my driveway in her car. I just thought you might care about whether she makes it back to town alive or not.”

“Shit.” That’s all the sheriff spared for him before the line went dead. Jace swallowed, closing his own phone as he told himself Amanda wasn’t Sharon. She wouldn’t die today. She wouldn’t be crying so hard she veered into oncoming traffic and put an end to her life. No, Amanda would never be suicidal.

But she could commit murder and what he’d seen her eyes made Jace think all of them would be at the top of her list. Everything seemed to have

spun so out of control in the matter of only a day. Tired and defeated, Jace headed back for the house. When Knox got home, they'd mount a united front and go after Amanda. It could all be worked out. It had to be.

The second Jace cleared the back door, he felt it. Seeped in around the corners of the bright sunlight flooding through the windows, darkness lingered. Like a tense ghost, he could almost hear the angry whispers whirling around him. Something catastrophic had happened in this house. Something so bad the pain and anger still clung to the air.

Cold and detached. This wasn't the remnants of Cody's confession. No, Jace's mind picked up the scent of a mystery. Amanda wasn't one to hold anger in and snap later. If she'd gone cold on Cody, she'd have stayed frozen until somebody made her snap.

Somebody or something. All his brothers were out of the house and Lydia took Saturdays off. So what set her off? Stepping into the living room, his eyes swept over everything coming to lock in on the door at the very end of the hall. Sharon's door was open. Dread made the air go cold around him as it sucked him into its web and lured him mesmerized down the hall.

Did Amanda go in there? Even as he approached, he could hear the gentle humming coming from inside and it made his skin crawl. So did the sight that stalled him out as he passed Knox's room. Jace stared at wreckage. Amanda had tossed Knox's room once before, but nothing like this.

The rays of sunlight caught and glinted on tiny shards littered over the mess like confetti. Shattered pieces of DVD's were everywhere along with the fragments of a wooden box. Jace knew just what box that was and what images had been recorded onto those disks. The hard knot in his stomach froze over, dropping under the weight of ice.

All those discs happened before Amanda. That justification rang hollow when he knew it must have hurt her just the same. *And why the hell had Knox kept them?*

"Oh, Jace." Lydia's bright and cheery tone seemed out of place in the moment, and he turned to find her grinning. "I didn't realize you would be home today."

"What happened?"

"Pardon me?" Lydia bustled into the hall, closing the door to Sharon's room behind her.

“With Amanda? What happened here?”

“Amanda?” Lydia looked quite shocked by his question even though he knew she could clearly see into Knox’s room. “I don’t know what you are referring to. I just came to return something to Sharon’s room. I didn’t see Amanda. I mean I heard her moving about in the office, but...”

The office...the lists! Jace turned and ran for them and there they were, laid out across the desk. Dumped like they had been discarded in a rush except there was a post-it note laying on top. Jace picked it up staring at the words scrawled in aggressive script across the pink paper.

Don’t ever contact me again. Amanda didn’t mean it, Jace told himself.

* * * *

Tony didn’t waste time heading for the door. Over his shoulder he ordered the deputy at the main desk to tell the boys on patrol to be on the lookout for Amanda’s car. He wanted her pulled over and neutralized because the last thing Tony would do today would be clean up a wreck his friend got hurt in.

He tried her on his cell as he lumbered into his Bronco, intending to intercept her coming down the highway. It shocked him when she actually answered and calmly.

“Tony?”

He didn’t bother with the small talk but started issuing orders. “I want you to pull over right now, Mandy.”

“What?” Not the least bit of surprise rang in her tone. She’d gone flat, and Tony had only seen her go there once before.

“I want you to listen to me.” Tony kept his tone soothing and his motions hurried as he roared out of the parking lot and headed down main to pick up the highway running toward the Reese Ranch. “I know you’re upset. I can hear it in your tone. You shouldn’t be driving like this. I want you to pull over. Tell me where you are, and I’ll come get you.”

“They used me, Tony.”

It made him want to go shoot all three brothers. Tony just might, but right now he had to deal with Amanda. “I know, honey.”

“They bought and paid for me like I was a whore.”

Definitely would be shooting them, and now Tony knew just where.
“No, Amanda, no man can make you into a whore.”

“But they did.”

“No.” He wouldn’t let them do this to his friend. “Never, Amanda. Now I want you to pull over. Will you do that for me?”

“Okay.” Tony could breathe again with her silent agreement. Giving her a moment, he waited for her to confirm she’d done as he asked. “Okay, I’m off the road, but I was driving just fine.”

“I’m sure.” Tony smiled at the bit of heat seeping back into her tone. It was a good sign those jackasses hadn’t done too much damage to Amanda. “Thank you for humoring me, Amanda. Now if you’ll just tell me where you—”

“What’s that?”

“What?” Tony scowled. From the fading sound of her voice, she knew she wasn’t talking to him anymore, but he could hear her clearly.

“*Mother fucker!*” He heard the roar of something sounding it like it moved too fast, sending wind almost right through the phone. It crashed into a loud grumble of grinding metal and crunching. Over it a female scream cut short and Tony felt his heart stop.

“*Amanda!*”

Chapter 48

“Is there anything else you can remember?”

Amanda stared at Tony, not even trying. Everywhere around her things beeped and chirped. Rubber wheels squeaked over linoleum while IV tubes ratted every time something shifted. As if the chaos and confusion of waking up in an emergency room didn’t disorient a person enough, the full on battle going on in the hall didn’t help.

“Let me go! Stupid mother fucker!”

That was Jace, and from the sound of it, somebody threw him right into the wall. Probably one of the four deputies who had been gawking around her bed while Tony interviewed her. Apparently Tony had left a couple more in the hall to greet the Reese brothers, but they hadn’t been enough.

“Amanda?”

She blinked, taking in Tony’s pointed look. “I told you everything I remember.”

“Please, just one more time.”

What were they doing there? Amanda didn’t understand. Knox, Jace and Cody couldn’t possibly think their appearance could make this day any better. Amanda knew the truth now, and it couldn’t be unlearned.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Maybe you should just let them in.” Her suggestion came out a hoarse whisper, the loudest she could talk.

The paramedics had treated her like she’d been about to die, shoving tubes down her throat and up her arms before wrapping her like a damn mummy to a board and then banging her all about. Now five hours later she just ached. From the tip of her head to the edge of her toenails and all the way down to her soul, Amanda just ached, nowhere near the bliss of death.

Tony sighed heavily, shaking his head. “Just ignore them.”

When they were destroying the hall outside? “How?”

"Give it a minute, Mandy."

Cindy squeezed her hand, drawing Amanda's gaze to the other side of the bed. Like a mother worrying over her child, Cindy sat in the stiff-backed chair, clutching Amanda's hand and looking bravely determined.

"The deputies will get everything under control." Something heavy and hard hit the wall hard enough to shake it. Tony didn't even blink. "Now, you left the ranch..."

"I was upset. I sped down the drive." Amanda had given up on elongated sentences. She'd told this story three times already. "I turned onto the highway. I was going to go see Cindy."

The quick squeeze from Cindy's hand offered her support even as Knox roared out his objection for everybody to hear.

"Get the hell out of my way!"

"Somebody is going to get hurt." Amanda placed her concern at Tony's feet, but he just shrugged.

"It won't be my guys. Now, you driving..."

Amanda didn't want anybody getting hurt, especially not her guys. *Her* guys. They weren't hers, and she wasn't theirs. It had ended. In a way, it had never really started. They'd been looking to buy a wife, and she'd been looking for...well, Amanda didn't know.

"You were driving..." Tony prompted her again even as Cody called out.

"Amanda!"

It was too much. Everything was too much. Amanda didn't want to be here anymore, but she couldn't escape. Not from anything. Even closing her eyes to shut the world out. The blackness only released her from the moment. All the problems and all the pain still existed in the darkness.

"Amanda?"

Cindy gave her a shake, but Amanda didn't respond. What would be the point? Everything she did remember hurt and none of it helped Tony. Hell, he remembered more than her. If Tony hadn't told her he'd called her, Amanda would have been completely clueless. Her last real memory was looking up into Jace's eyes and feeling like she was dying inside. Now she just felt dead. Except death was supposed to be peaceful.

At least the commotion outside died down, but it came at a cost. Knox, Jace and Cody didn't go easily, and she had no doubt where they were

going—jail. It might have made her life quieter, but it didn't make it any more relaxing. Not as Tony and Cindy started talking.

"You think Davey did this?"

Cindy's question almost tempted Amanda to open her eyes. Of all the confusing mass of emotions Amanda had to deal with, she had no problems knowing what she felt about Davey.

"No," Tony sighed, echoing Amanda's silent disappointment. "He's been sitting in jail down in Dodge City for the past two nights. They got him on some petty shit, so he'll be out soon enough, but not in time to take the rap for Amanda's accident."

"It wasn't an accident," Cindy snapped. "And I'm still wondering when exactly you're planning on telling Amanda that."

Not an accident? Suddenly Amanda found herself capable of feeling something—tension and fear.

"I told you," Tony growled. "I'll get to it soon enough, but now isn't the time."

"Oh? And when is? After Davey kills her?"

Go, Cindy! Amanda voted for killing Davey first.

Damn him, Tony just wouldn't give up his point. "This isn't Davey."

"So he hired somebody to do it, so what? We both know there is only one person who would benefit from Amanda's death and that's Davey. You said it yourself last night when you found that policy he just took out."

"And I'm building a case on it too," Tony snapped back, possibly cutting off a Cindy-tirade before it sailed into full swing. "But Davey isn't the only one who benefits."

What?

"What?" Cindy laughed, but Amanda didn't have the luxury. Not if she wanted to find out what Tony was keeping from her. Her best friend, it didn't shock her in the least Tony would be trying to do what was good for her.

So was Cindy, she just had to get over her moment of shock. "What are you talking about? Who else would try to drive a Hummer over Amanda's jeep?"

Somebody had tried to drive over her car? That didn't exactly match the 'she got rear-ended while parked on the side of the highway' story Tony had been telling her earlier, but it did explain why she felt like crap.

"I'm not talking about who else, but what else," Tony answered way too rationally.

"What else?" Amanda could hear the snicker in Cindy's voice. "What was it? A ghost?"

"A solider."

A *what*? It took Cindy almost too long to respond, making the scream in her head almost painful to hold back.

"What are you talking here? Army?"

"Drugs." The deep breath being sucked in came from Tony's side of the bed and Amanda could imagine him bracing himself to spill his load. "I got to ask you something, Cindy, and then I'll answer any of your questions, but this all stays here, between just you and me."

It should have been among the three of them, Amanda, Cindy and Tony, but it never would be. Cindy and Tony were cut from the same cloth and they viewed Amanda in identical ways. Weak, frail, damaged, they'd been there with her when her brother had killed her mother and himself.

They'd seen her then and the memory would never wash away. She would always be the victim needing their protection, never strong enough to stand up for herself. They didn't know the truth. Only Will knew and that's what made him family.

In those seconds, Amanda ached so hard to have Will there. Silently, she cursed him for not being with her. He would have called her a fool and told her to get over herself. "Somebody somewhere had it worse." That's what Will would have said. It would have worked too. Even thinking of it helped. Anything and everything could be survived.

"Okay, ask your question."

"Do you know where Will is?"

If Cindy did and Will wasn't within a foot of her bed in the next hour, Amanda would hurt somebody.

"Will?" She could hear it in Cindy's voice. The answer was no, like it would be anything else. "Not specifically. I mean, I know he split town a few weeks back, but you'd have to ask Amanda—"

"She already told me what she knew, but I'm asking you if she said anything else."

There came Cindy's disbelieving laugh again. "Me? Why? You think she lied to you?"

When Tony didn't answer 'no' immediately, Amanda got offended. "I don't know, so I'm asking you."

"All right." Cindy hesitated, probably thinking. "Well, she didn't say much. My memory is he left about a month back, right when Amanda started taking up with Cody. As for the where, I don't think he even told Amanda."

"You don't find that odd?"

Well, now I do. Now they were talking about Will after saying somebody had tried to compact her car on top of her, Amanda had to admit Will's reasons for leaving really started to worry her.

"I don't know." This time Cindy sighed, her voice losing its hard edge as it softened toward sadness. "I mean, you know about Will and his problems. We all know, but, you know..."

"I think Amanda thought he was headed off for rehab. That's what she wants to think because she's always looking for the hope when it comes to Will. Honestly though, I figured he hit rock bottom, his habit drained his money and he folded out, just didn't want to break her heart."

No shock there. Cindy didn't say anything Amanda hadn't silently considered and dismissed. That was the thing about family. It just didn't matter.

"Why? What do you think? Or maybe I should ask, what do you know?"

"Know?" There came Tony's breath again. She could hear it, which meant what followed would be bad. "Well, I know about a month back some men got shot up over at the Shade Tree Motel and a whole bunch of money got stolen which has ignited a drug war that's now spanning all the way down through Texas."

"You've told me this story before."

Cindy's interruption annoyed Amanda because she hadn't been dating the sheriff and hadn't heard all these pesky details before.

"Then you remember the feds think it's a local boy."

Suddenly details didn't matter. A local boy and Tony asking about Will, Amanda could do the math. So could Cindy, apparently, but, like Amanda, she didn't accept it without question.

"You're saying Will stole the money?"

Tony wouldn't say. He wouldn't answer a question so simply. "You know I've been turning this town upside down looking for anybody who has even a faint habit, particularly anybody who split town. I—"

"And you didn't think of Will until when?" Cindy sounded pissed, matching Amanda's mood, but probably not for the same reasons.

"It's Amanda," Tony retorted. "And Will, he's always been into pills. This money is coming from heroin. No, I just—"

"Are you saying Will is into heroin now?" There was disbelief, bordering on laughter, in Cindy's tone. Amanda wished she could have that kind of doubt.

"That's what I asked myself yesterday when Amanda told me Will had skipped town. The feds and my people have been whipping through the information and, it's not heroin."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"Because I don't know how to say what I got to say," Tony snapped, putting a bolt of cold terror into Amanda's stomach. Tony, the blunt, straight-talker, couldn't figure out how to say something? What the hell had Will done?

"What are you doing?"

"Okay this is better."

"*Tony.*"

"I just can't look at you when I say this, so jut let me say it to the wall and, then by God have some mercy and don't make me answer too many questions."

"Oh, for God's sake, fine."

Another deep breath and Tony started saying things Amanda didn't want to hear. "Will was a prostitute. We found the safe box with his ledgers in the old root cellar out back of his place. It's got a lot of notations and thanks to Amanda telling me she caught Will with the mayor's wife, we can already start to decode his bookkeeping—"

"Will you just get to the short of it?" Cindy growled.

"Most of his clients were men, appear to be on the lines of very wealthy business men throughout the state as well as some politicians and other affiliated public officials."

Nobody said anything for several minutes, giving Amanda the time to absorb what Tony had said. It wasn't so bad. She didn't honestly care if Will

was gay. It didn't suit her that he sold himself, but she had little room to cast a stone. Besides it was his affair and—

“Ultimately the feds are looking at a local idiot who managed to kill a money runner and his two bodyguards who also happens to be sleeping with a ‘who’s-who’ list of the West and they want to talk to Will.”

Tony’s voice flowed from one side of the bed to the other, matching the shuffling sounds of his feet. “If this just coincidence or somebody hired Will or something has gone wrong, it doesn’t matter to the feds. All they want, all anybody wants is to get to Will and there is only one person in the world Will has any real connection to.”

Me.

“Amanda.”

“Now you want to tell me who you think tried to drive over Amanda today?” Tony asked.

A solidier.

“You think that’s what happened to her home? Drug dealers looking for information?” Cindy sounded just as appalled as Amanda felt.

“No,” Tony snorted. “That reads more like Davey, but the bastard’s just complicating a nightmare. The accident, though...” Tony heaved a big sigh. “Somebody’s figured it out. Will’s connection to the money, Amanda’s connection to Will, we don’t even have solid proof, but somebody doesn’t care. They’re trying to make a connection and they got a little tired of waiting.”

“I don’t know what the hell that means,” Cindy snapped. “You’re saying this accident is—”

“A warning?” Tony cut in. “Yeah. The only problem is I don’t know who is trying to make contact.”

“What are we going to do?” Cindy whispered and Amanda could almost feel their gazes on her.

“I’m going to take Amanda home and sit on her.” Tony’s response almost made her laugh because she bet he would literally sit on her if it came to it. “And you are leaving town.”

* * * *

"I can't do this again." Jace finally gave voice to the thought circling his head. His words broke the heavy silence filling the cell. Since being pretty much shoved into the little cement box, none of them had spoken.

Knox had paced. Cody had sulked in the corner, but Jace had thought and thought hard. It was like history repeating itself, but this time they were being given a chance.

"What do you mean?" Knox stopped in the center of the room, glaring at Jace and looking ready to go another round.

Licking his lips, Jace pinned Cody with a hard gaze, knowing what he was about to say would hurt his younger brother. "I'm not going to help destroy another woman."

On cue, Cody came off the wall. His arms dropping from across his chest as fingers curled into fists. "Why don't you just say it like you mean it, Jace? You think Amanda tried to commit suicide today just like Sharon killed herself three years ago."

"That isn't what he said," Knox snapped to Jace's defense, blocking Cody's forward progression. "And we're all sore enough, so why don't you go back to your corner."

"This is stupid," Cody spat, but still he turned to sulk into his side of the cell. "You're going to look me in the eye, Knox, and tell me you think Amanda is even capable of conceiving of the idea to kill herself?"

Both brothers waited for the oldest who shrugged. "I don't know. I do know Sharon got behind the wheel when she was upset, and she died because of it. Amanda got behind the wheel for the same reason and came close to the same fate. She's not strong enough."

"What?" Cody shook his head. "You're not saying what I think you're saying. You can't be."

"I'm not going to be the reason Amanda dies," Knox stated softly, echoing Jace's own conclusion. Amanda told them to stay away, and away they should stay. Loving her didn't give them the right to own her.

"No."

"Cody—"

"I don't want to hear it, Knox. More than half of this is all your fucking fault." Cody came back out of his corner and this time Jace got his ass off the cot. "Are you happy now? You always wanted to chase Amanda away, and look what you did."

“Me? I’m not the ass who told the whole town our personal secrets and humiliated her in the process.”

“You never cared about her.”

“I love her!”

“You almost killed her!”

Jace couldn’t get between them in time. It took five minutes and three deputies to break them apart. Knox being the biggest got the worst of the cops’ annoyance and ended up shoved into his own cell. Jace got Cody’s bleeding ass and as things calmed down, he stared at his brother, wondering, “maybe you’re the one trying to kill himself.”

With his left eye already swollen closed, Cody could only glare out of his right one, blinking around the blood dripping down his brow. “I resent that.”

“You going to beat me up too?”

“If I had the energy.”

“You know, being mad and tearing into everything isn’t going to help.”

“And what is?” Cody snorted. “Giving up? I mean seriously, Jace, you of all people are walking away from Amanda?”

Jace sighed and looked up the gray wall over Cody’s shoulder. “I love her. I don’t want to be the thing that hurts her.”

“And you can live without her?” Cody asked. “Because that’s a lot harder than it sounds, trust me.”

That had Jace’s gaze snapping back to his brother. “Trust you? Why? Because you loved Sharon more than the rest of us, so now you suffer more?”

It was Cody’s turn to look away, not wanting to say whatever Jace already knew. For three years, they’d left everything go unsaid and now Jace could see how it had torn them apart. It had to stop. He couldn’t lose everything.

“I guess you’re right,” Jace relented. “I mean, she loved you and only you enough to want only you to move to New York City with her and build the life she wanted. She loved you so much, she wanted you to abandon your life in favor of hers.”

“What are you saying, Jace?” Cody didn’t have the give to follow through on the threat in his tone, but Jace could see the tension of violence

tightening in Cody none the same. “Are you saying she didn’t love me more?”

Jace didn’t dare answer Cody’s question. It didn’t matter anyway. “I’m saying you would have never survived in the world she wanted to go live in. She would have changed you to suit her or you would have grown to hate her. Either way, it wouldn’t be healthy. You made the right call, Cody.”

“Did I? Hardly seems it what with Sharon being dead and all.”

“And if she hadn’t died?” Jace gave Cody the minute, but other than slumping deeper into his own cot, Cody didn’t say a word. Figuring it would be best to leave it there, Jace gave over the argument and tried instead to give his brother some assurance.

“We’ll just give Amanda a couple of weeks and then maybe...”

* * * *

Amanda stared at the ceiling, her eyes getting lost in the cottage cheese like surface. Tony and Cindy had retreated over an hour ago. They’d argued it out right over her as if she were dead and not just laying there with her eyes closed. In the end, Cindy had gone off to pack, and Tony went to get Amanda’s stuff from the ranch.

Of course they’d both decided not to tell her the truth. The story would be her daddy tried to kill her and Cindy’s mom broke a leg, so she had to fly off to be with her. All real nice and convenient lies because they didn’t think Amanda could ‘handle’ the truth.

Well, she figured she had a pretty good handle on it. Amanda was screwed. In every which direction possible. It just didn’t matter what she did, so Amanda could pretty much do whatever she wanted. It was strangely liberating because there was no way in hell she’d let the feds or Tony use her against Will.

Her decision didn’t have to be reasonable or logical. Even if Will had become a drug-addicted, murdering whore, it didn’t matter. For the right or the wrong of it, Will had been a brother to her for too many years to count, and she wouldn’t betray him.

Amanda would warn him. It took a lot more energy and hurt more than she’d imagined just to reach for the phone. Making the actual call didn’t go

quickly, but soon enough the automated voice was issuing instructions on how to leave a message.

At the beep, Amanda started talking. "Will, it's me. I know...about it all. It's not safe anymore. Whatever you need...I love you."

She stretched the receiver back to the end, pausing half way. In a rush, with the need just to tell him everything, Amanda lifted it back to her ear. "I'm pregnant. I was in an accident. They say it won't survive. Don't come."

Chapter 49

Friday, August 8th

Amanda sat by the window, watching the afternoon pass slowly away. It had been two whole weeks of this very same day repeated. Wake up, have breakfast with Tony, spend all day with either Braden or Gavin babysitting her, eat dinner with the deputies, and then watch a movie. She was trapped in some Hitchcockian hell.

Monday, I am going back to work. She'd had enough. Death would be more lively than this. For all of Tony's gloom and doom over her hospital bed, nobody had called or mailed a bomb or riddled the house with bullets. So what was she still doing in Tony's house?

Recovering, in every sense of the word, Amanda had entered the rehab phase. She'd begun to acclimate herself to sleeping alone, bathing alone, to being alone. Except she wasn't, Amanda's hand slid over her stomach as her nerves tightened.

The doctors had said the baby would be lost in days, was probably not much more than a couple weeks. They'd warned her that she'd have a sudden, heavy period and that would be it. No more baby.

It had been two weeks and nothing. The time had probably come to go back to the doctor's office, the right doctor this time instead of some hospital physician. Doing so though would mean revealing her last, best kept secret.

Of course, if Knox, Jace and Cody found out about the kid, there would be no discussion on where she'd be heading. Back to the ranch, but Amanda didn't know if she could do it. The child meant marrying men who didn't love her, living a life that was a lie.

That couldn't be the right decision, but Knox wouldn't offer her any choice. If she fought him, it wouldn't be long before he found out her secret. There wouldn't be a judge or jury who would give her custody of her own child after they heard she she'd done to her brother and mother.

Worse than marrying men who didn't love her, the idea of her child being raised without her, with Lydia or some other woman as a mother was impossible to bear. She had to have a plan, a good one, before she said a word. The problem is Amanda hadn't come up with any plan, good or bad.

"You're brooding again," Braden stated as he slid a plate piled high with fries and an overstuffed sandwich.

"And you're thinking I have two stomachs again," Amanda retorted as she shook her head. "What, are you trying to make me so fat I can't fit through the door to escape this house?"

"Busted." Braden smiled as he swiped a fry from her plate. The man really did have a million dollar smile. "Actually I was thinking you're just a little too skinny. We need to put some curves on that body."

He said that every day when he presented her a plate of food better prepared for a Berserker than a woman who sat on her ass all day. Every day she rolled her eyes and responded the same way. "Curves I have."

Braden's head dipped to the side as he studied the length of her body. "I don't know, darling. I guess I'd have to see you wearing a whole lot less to be convinced."

"Pervert." Despite the fry she winged at him, Amanda wasn't honestly upset.

More like a compliment, she accepted Braden's flirting as almost a peace offering for being locked up for the past week. Both her babysitters, Braden and Gavin were like fresh air after being with the Reese brothers.

Relaxed and easy going, they made it easy for her to forget her troubles if not for longer than a few minutes. Sometimes they even made her smile. Her injured ego bloated up under their more than shy compliments.

"Can't blame a man for trying." Braden shrugged and popped a fry into his mouth. "So what evil demise have you dreamt up today for the Reese brothers?"

Amanda smirked. Braden understood and played along with her mental revenge. "I was thinking of hiring a prostitute to give them all some STD."

"Hmm." Braden considered that. "Lethal?"

"No, I was thinking of going for something itchy." Amanda sighed. "Actually I was just thinking I'd like to take two steps out of the house. Maybe you'd actually let me walk to the mailbox today?"

"No can do." Braden shook his head before stealing another fry. "You know the rules."

"But they're stupid," Amanda retorted. "Besides, my father isn't going to jump out of the shrubs."

"But he might attack you with them." Braden paused to mimic the dirty look she shot him. "What? Some of those bushes are damn prickly."

"Oh, spare me."

"Seriously," Braden smirked. "I get stabbed every time I try to sneak a peek through your bedroom window late at night."

Amanda refused to laugh, even if she wanted to. "You know what that is?"

Braden blinked. "What what is?"

"Your behavior, it's called sexual harassment," Amanda informed him primly.

"Sexual harassment? This ain't a place of work."

"But you are working."

Before Braden could respond, a sharp knock at the front door had them both freezing. Amanda started, but Braden tensed. She didn't miss the meaning behind the hard look he gave her but thought his soft command to stay was a little too much. It didn't impress Amanda enough to obey, and she silently followed several feet in his wake.

Coming to the edge of the doorway leading into the living room and the front door, Amanda hesitated. Peeking around the edge she scowled as she watched Braden's hand go for a gun tucked into the back of his slacks. *Man is a little jumpy, isn't he?*

* * * *

Knox rolled the brim of his hat through his hand, feeling completely uncomfortable and cursing his own insecurities. Everybody from the sheriff to his own brothers made it clear he should stay away from Amanda. Jace and Cody thought whatever idea Knox came up with would be a disaster.

They were probably right. Letting them take the lead on trying to smooth things over with Amanda would be the wiser thing to do. Hell, Jace had it all figured out. There was just one problem with his brother's plan. It took too damn long. Knox just couldn't sit back and wait. It wasn't in his nature.

Amanda belonged at home with them. He'd been patient for two weeks now and for what? Amanda wasn't home and Knox wasn't waiting another day. He'd be bringing her home this evening.

Right now. Just as soon as he got out of his truck. Across the street, the square box of Sheriff Black's little plank house waited with his woman inside. All he had to do was go get her.

Well, that wasn't completely true. First he had to get through the door. Not an easy feat according to the rumor mill. The gossip around Amanda had become vicious in the past two weeks.

What with everybody knowing about her relationship with all three Reese brothers and then her so-called suicide attempt and now living boarded up in the sheriff's house, speculation had been rampant about Amanda. If the rumors were true, she hadn't stepped outside once in two weeks and nobody had been allowed in.

Knox didn't put much stock in rumors, but he didn't doubt their existence would make getting through Tony Black's front door very difficult. Sucking in a deep breath, Knox shoved open his door and braced himself for the coming battle.

Instinctively his hand palmed the jewelry box in his pocket. Like a gunslinger stepping up to the draw, he had placed all his confidence in what lay inside to save his ass. Desperate times called for desperate measures, so, hat in hand, Knox squared his shoulders and crossed the street.

Anticipating any and all reactions, he knocked on Sheriff Black's front door and waited. When it felt as if more than a minute had passed, Knox raised his hand and opened his mouth. Ready to add a shout to his knock, he got caught completely off guard when the door opened and a giant of a man filled the space.

Knox recognized him instantly as one of the deputies from their scuffle at the hospital. It seemed odd given their past consisted of that one violent moment, but the deputy actually appeared to relax at the sight of Knox. The

hand he'd held behind his back fell to his side as he leaned into the door and studied Knox.

"You know I should arrest you right now," the man drawled, appearing only mildly interested in following through with his threat. "That's the sheriff's standing orders."

"So why ain't I in cuffs?"

The deputy shrugged. "Maybe I'm hoping you have enough sense to turn around and leave, so as not to spoil my dinner."

Knox didn't even blink. "Maybe I stand right here and you go eat your dinner while I talk to Amanda."

"Nope." The deputy shook his head. "That's not going to happen."

Knox studied the man in his way. The deputy wasn't in uniform and looked way too casual to be on duty. Then what exactly was he doing here?

"Then I guess we have a problem because I'm not leaving until I talk to Amanda."

Nodding in acceptance, the deputy started to step back, closing the door. "Oh, well then, I'll call the station and tell them to send a patrol car."

He slammed the door, and Knox had no doubt he intended to make the phone call. From the sound of it, though, somebody else objected and it didn't surprise Knox at all when the door whipped back open and Amanda glared out at him.

What shocked him was just how much the sight of her affected him. She looked tired, thinner, suddenly delicate and frail. It made him want to sweep her up into his arms and spirit her off to keep her safe and protected.

"Tony's going to have your ass when he gets home," the deputy growled, drawing Knox's eyes up and over Amanda's shoulder.

"Why don't you go finish my fries and let me handle this?"

"Why don't I stand right here and make sure you don't do anything stupid?"

Knox saw it clearly then, the look in the deputy's eyes. He hadn't arrested Knox because he didn't want to upset Amanda. The man cared, and not in a professional way. Every muscle in Knox's body tightened, but he kept himself leashed, knowing in his heart Amanda hadn't moved onto the deputy.

"Fine," Amanda snapped. Before the deputy could respond, she stepped right out onto the porch and slammed the door behind her. Holding onto the

handle, she braced herself as the other man cursed and tried to wrench the door back open.

“Why did God make all men so annoying?”

She might have been asking herself, but Knox responded. “Revenge for women being so very evil.”

That brought her focus on him. Despite his flippant remark, Knox cringed at the pain shadowing her gaze. With a look so heated there were no need for words, she just watched him with the cautious patience of a wounded animal.

All the practiced words Knox had spent the past week composing into the perfect apology stumbled and tripped into each other, fluttering away into dust as they crashed over his tongue. Instead of sounding as cool and articulate as he’d planned, he stuttered out his apology with the ill-ease of a negligent child.

“I just...wanted you to know...I never meant to hurt you.” Knox blinked and waited, but she didn’t say anything, just stood there staring at him until he shifted uncomfortably and rambled on. “I know I really screwed everything up...it’s just...I wanted you to know...I love you.”

There, he said it, the very thing he swore never to say to any woman ever. Knox held himself tense and awaited her reaction. As she stood there staring blankly at him, Knox began to realize how much he’d banked on her being overwhelmed by his admission.

“You’re a real asshole, you know that?”

The cold-cutting retort lanced right through all his insecurities to pierce the bubble of anger beginning to bloom inside him. Knox’s eyes narrowed and jaw tensed as Amanda’s head tilted. Her lips parted and he prepared for the next wave of assault.

“I only stepped out here to tell you one thing, Knox Reese. You ain’t half as good of a fuck as you need to be to afford me.”

“Amanda, damnit!” The deputy appeared at the side of the house. Grasping on to the porch railing, he jumped and came charging at them, not fast enough though. Amanda lips twisted upward as she whispered.

“Besides, you’ve already been replaced.”

“Get back in the damn house!” The deputy wasn’t asking. He shoved himself right between Knox and Amanda. Reaching around to jiggle the

handle, the large man forced Amanda to obey before turning Knox. "Get the hell out of here, or I really will arrest you."

The door slammed in his face and Knox was left standing alone on the porch, grinding his teeth. *He'd already been replaced?*

Knox knew better than anybody just how much Amanda liked to be pushed around by a man. Hadn't the deputy just done that?

* * * *

Jace upended the hundred and twenty pound bag of dog food into its bin and all but melted into a wooden post, letting all his strained and stiff muscles relax. The dark colored pellets tumbled out of the big bag and rumbled rapidly down through the tubes and into the waiting pales.

All around him dogs panted with excited anticipation. The large pack of dogs that worked the ranch just as hard as any of the men drooled over their plates, well accustomed to this ritual.

It had been a long, tiring day. Another one to add to the pile. Hopefully, it would be the last. It was Friday and this weekend, his plan would unfold in all its brilliance. Amanda would be awed, amazed, and then, finally, she'd come back home.

That is if its brothers didn't screw it up. Just the thought of what Knox had been up to all day had Jace straightening off the post. Cody and Knox had both agreed that Jace should handle corralling Amanda.

For the life of him, Jace didn't trust either one of his brothers' words. It would have been best to give everything a few more days, but Jace feared if he didn't produce Amanda within the next day, Cody and Knox might do something stupid.

Actually, he was kind of afraid it already was too late, given how Knox had taken off for the day. Something to do with business and he had to go to Dodge City, which was more vague than Knox tended to be.

Stuffing the empty dog food bag into the garbage bin, Jace waded through the pack sprawled out across the barn floor. The concerns Jace had been suppressing all day surfaced as he stepped through the double barn doors. Knox's truck had not returned.

Fearing the worst, Jace reached for his cell phone in the hopes this time his older brother would actually answer. He gave up hope as he stormed into

the kitchen. Cody instantly caught Jace's eye and redirected his concern in all new direction.

"Why you dressed like that?" Jace dropped his hat onto its peg but didn't bother with his boots. Tracking dirt across the kitchen floor, he closed in on his younger brother. "You going somewhere?"

"Well, duh." Cody laughed as he swiped his keys off the counter. "It's Friday night, I feel the need for a beer."

Two months ago, Jace wouldn't have thought anything of his brother's response. After the past two weeks, where Cody had done little else but mope, Jace didn't believe him for a second.

"Cody—"

"Now don't get all 'big brother' on me, Jace." Cody straightened up. "I'm not going to screw up your plans. I'm just going to have a beer."

"We have to work together," Jace started in on his well-worn speech. Apparently, Cody had tired of hearing it.

"Yeah, I got that," Cody cut in impatiently. "By the way, you heard from Knox yet?"

"No," Jace growled, feeling the situation unwinding all around him. He swore, if his brothers fouled everything up, Jace would just go snatch Amanda up and disappear with her. He wasn't losing his woman a second time.

"Well, how about I go look for him?" Cody offered.

"And where you going to look?"

Cody pondered his answer for all of a second. "At the bar. I'll give you a call if I find him."

"Cody," Jace shouted at his brother's back as Cody sauntered off.

"Night, Jace."

"Well, shit." Jace sighed, so much for his plans. They would have worked too.

Chapter 50

The long walk from Studs & Spurs across town to Sheriff Black's house really wore through Knox's buzz. So had Sherri Dixon, the damn woman annoyed him for several miles before he managed to be a sufficient enough ass to send her storming off back to the bar.

That was fine by him. Knox didn't know why she came along anyway. At least he hadn't until he found himself lost in a town he knew by heart. It had taken probably twice the amount of time, but eventually he found what he was looking for—the sheriff's house.

Pausing at the end of the drive, Knox glared at the house in front of him. It wasn't right. Amanda didn't belong here. He'd tried to be polite, do things the proper and gentlemanly way, but no. Amanda wouldn't have it.

Well, this time he wouldn't be asking. Knox would be taking. *Replaced me has she?* Not in this lifetime. Knox wouldn't stand for it. That's just what he intended to explain to the little darling right after the world stopped spinning.

Down the street, a truck cut onto the road, taking a hard, fast turn. Light splashed over his legs as the truck came speeding down the road. All the noise and commotion triggered some reflex of Knox's and he leapt for the bushes.

Tripping over his own legs, he actually more fell into the bushes. The prickly shrubs broke his fall and bounced him into the grassy alley between the sheriff's house and his neighbor's. Knox lay in the grass staring up at the night sky as he heard the whine of a car's brakes.

Hopefully it wasn't the sheriff because Knox didn't want to get arrested like this.

* * * *

Cody stared down at his brother in amazement. Laid out on the hard ground, Knox grinned back up at him. Happy for no apparent reason, which could only mean one thing. “You’re drunk.”

“I thought you were the sheriff,” Knox replied as if that had anything to do with why Knox was laying on the ground outside Tony’s house. Cody didn’t really care for the why, he was still stuck on the how.

Feeling a little honor bound to find Knox, Cody had located his truck back at the Studs & Spurs. Instead of finding Knox in the pack bar, Cody had found the rumor mill running wild with the tale of how Knox had gotten plastered and stumbled out the door with Sherri Dixon under his arm.

Well, at least she’d disappeared. Latching onto Knox’s arm, he tugged his brother back to his unsteady feet as Knox rambled on.

“Yep. I gotta see the sheriff.”

“Why?” Cody asked. “So he can kick your ass?”

“Well, as to that, yeah.”

Cody snorted at his brother’s idiotic answer. “Well, you want me to stand-in and kick it for ya?”

Knox’s head had started to bob with a “yes” when he suddenly scowled. “Huh?”

Sighing, Cody used his hold like a leash to start dragging Knox toward his truck. Objecting, but not fighting, Knox stumbled in Cody’s wake.

“Hey, we’re going the wrong way. Amanda’s that way.”

“Yes. I am aware,” Cody snapped. Shoving Knox into the side of the truck, Cody fumbled with the door. “But I don’t think you’re in any condition to see her.”

“I already saw her.”

Knox’s simple drawl froze Cody with the door in his hand. “What? Tonight?”

“Earlier.” Knox pouted, looking across the road at the sheriff’s house. “I come here. I tell her I’m sorry, and I love her and you know what Amanda says to me?”

Knox almost fell over sideways when he cocked his head at Cody. Catching his brother, Cody started maneuvering him into the truck. “Probably ‘go to hell’.”

“She said we’d been replaced.” For a second, Knox’s gaze cleared with hard intent as Cody tucked his legs inside. “So now I got to go paddle her ‘cause she can’t be saying things like that. They ain’t true.”

No, it couldn’t be and certainly explained why Knox had gotten his drink on. Planting a hand on Knox’s chest, Cody shoved his brother over. “Stay. I’ll handle the paddling.”

“Well that’s no fun,” Knox complained into the bench seat.

“Maybe not for you. Now, stay.” Slamming the truck door on his order, Cody grouched to himself about the idiocy of drunks as he jogged across the street.

Still, he should probably thank Knox. Surely his brother’s sins would outweigh Cody’s when it came time to face Jace. Not that Cody could worry over Jace when he had the more immediate concern of finding Amanda and confronting her.

Peering through the side window, Cody saw one of the deputies from the hospital stretched out on the couch. He had a bowl of chips resting on his stomach, a beer dangling from his hands and both eyes glued on the TV. Making his way down the thin alley between house and prickly shrub, Cody checked one window after another until he paused in front of a narrow one. Obviously bathroom, the light shined through the steam fogging it up.

Only a few feet over, more light spilled out of another window along with the sounds of drawers being snapped shut. With the blinds down, he couldn’t be sure it was Amanda, but Cody didn’t have much choice than to take a leap of faith.

More accurately, a knock. Tapping on the window, Cody held his breath as the blinds split open and sure enough Amanda’s gaze narrowed on him. When they snapped back, he wondered if perhaps she wouldn’t perform as he expected.

His worry disappeared a second later when the blinds snapped straight up and he could see Amanda glaring down at him like some angel of vengeance. He could cope with that because Cody had nothing but dirty thoughts of corrupting Amanda right out of the nightshirt she was wearing.

The silky, pink material stuck to her body, outlining her wet curves as water dripped down from her hair to pucker her nipples to hard points. As Cody stared at her glaring at him, all he could think was it had been two

long weeks. Amanda better not give him too much attitude because honestly, he didn't have too much patience.

As if she'd ever concern herself with worry over upsetting him. Amanda didn't even appear concerned over her state of undress when she started yanking on the window's lock. True to her hot-blooded nature, she shoved it open with a bang and leaned out to start yelling at him.

"What in the world are you doing out there?"

Coming in, but Cody didn't say it. Instead he showed her, gripping the window sill and starting to pull himself in. Typical Amanda, she started smacking his shoulders, cussing at him.

"Hey! Get out! You dumb, son of a bitch, I didn't open the window for you."

"Then you shouldn't have opened the window in the first place," Cody shot back, keeping his voice in a whisper despite the TV blaring in the other room.

Amanda's eyes narrowed on him and with a huffy sniff, she turned her back to him. "I'm going to get the deputy."

"Then he's going to have to shoot me." This time Cody didn't bother to keep his voice down, calling Amanda's bluff. "I ain't going nowhere until I've had my say. I'm due that, at least."

"You're due?" Amanda whirled around with her gasp. "And what scorecard are you reading because the only thing you're due, Cody, is a daily beating."

"Even a guilty man is allowed to have his say before he's sentenced, Amanda."

"Fine." Snorting, she rolled her eyes at him as she moved over to the bed. All prim and proper like she wore a suit instead of a flimsy nightshirt, Amanda sat down on the edge of the bed and glared at him. "Go on, have your say."

"Well." Cody blinked, thinking about it for a second. "I guess I really don't have anything to say."

Amanda laughed at him as if he'd told a joke, but just for a second. Then her smile hardened and her ass started to lift off the mattress. "I'm going to get the deputy now."

“No!” Cody all but slid onto his knees right at her feet. Catching both her wrists in his hands, he managed to keep her from escaping. “I mean to say, I came here to answer your questions.”

“My questions?” Amanda’s brow lifted. “What questions?”

“The ones that have been running through your head for these past two weeks and don’t bother to deny it,” Cody rushed out as she looked to object. “You wouldn’t be human if you didn’t have questions. So just ask.”

Amanda’s chin tilted up and she studied him for a tense moment. “And I could believe your answers?”

“I never lied to you.”

Amanda smirked instantly as his pledge. “That’s rich.”

“I haven’t,” Cody growled. He could take being called a lot of things, but not a liar.

“No.” Amanda nodded. “I guess technically storing discs of you fucking other women, giving me hand-me-down jewelry, and putting me second to last on some stupid list doesn’t really count as lying. Funny, then that I just fail to trust you.”

“Amanda—”

“What?” she snapped. “What can you possibly have to say?”

“First, those were Knox’s discs, and he’s the asshole who gave you the necklace.”

“You’re just going to put this all on Knox then, Mr. Big Mouth?”

“Knox is an idiot.” It pained Cody to add, “So am I. Look the discs should have been destroyed, but you know that it isn’t like Knox was sneaking into his room to watch them. I don’t think he ever did but with the women who—”

“Not helping,” Amanda growled out.

“They’re all destroyed now,” Cody offered quick as he could. “And Knox never gave the necklace to Sharon. I know that doesn’t mean much to you, but we go back to the idiot part, and he honestly didn’t see anything wrong with what he did.”

“Are you done?”

“Damn it, Amanda!” She drove him nuts with her dismissive attitude. Cody probably should have just left this to Jace because he didn’t know what the hell to say. “What is it you want?”

“What do I want?”

“Whatever it is, just tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

Amanda drew herself up and visibly braced herself before asking, “I want to know why I was second to last.”

“What?” The question threw Cody for a moment.

“I can get over the disc thing. I can certainly get behind the Knox is an idiot defense. I can even understand how the three of you came up with that stupid list.”

Amanda paused, her jaw clenching as pain flashed in her gaze. When she spoke again, Cody could hear the tremor in her voice. “That doesn’t explain why I was second to last. Not after Jace’s bullshit about falling in love with me so many years ago.”

“Jace had his reason.” Cody just didn’t know if he should be the one to tell her.

“Really?” Amanda didn’t appear to care if she insulted him, much less pissed him off. “What? He wanted to sow his wild oats or something?”

“No, but Jace knew Knox would be difficult. He always is. If he had put you at the top of the list and you hadn’t managed to wrap him around your finger, Knox would’ve found an excuse to dismiss you.”

Cody could tell he was getting through to her. Amanda didn’t look thoughtful, but she did look more disgusted. Actually taking her sour expression as a good sign, Cody pressed on quickly. “See, it only takes one brother’s ‘no’ to dismiss a girl. Jace couldn’t risk it, but with you on the bottom, Knox would be worn down, more ready to accept—”

“Me,” Amanda cut him off. “Because I wouldn’t have been more acceptable at the top of the list. I get it.”

Score one for Amanda, because she managed to twist his point all around. “It wasn’t like that. I just—”

“Save your breath. You think I can’t do the math?” Amanda demanded. Rising up from the bed, she toppled him backward. “Let’s see, you’re paying off my dad, Knox is giving me extravagant gifts, you guys have a list of women with a grading system to ascertain which one would be the suitable wife and guess what? Little old Amanda Johnson’s ripe for the buying.”

Her tirade carried her around the room with sweeping arms as she played out her drama. “Maybe not the top of the line, but really, any woman of class or dignity wouldn’t fall for your bullshit.

“No, of course not.” Amanda shook her head, coming to a stop to glare down at him. “You need some plain, old Jane whose most exciting moment in life is waiting for the new season of *House* to begin. That’s somebody you can wow with cheap poetry and expensive gifts. What is it, Cody? All those women give you such a headache, you figure you’d buy yourself one on the cheap and just fix me up to your liking?”

Cody could feel every single cell in his body go red-hot with rage at her words. The force of his indignation shot him to his feet. All his guilt and compassion smoldered to ash under the heat of hurt. *How dare she suggest such a thing.*

“We made some mistakes. I grant you that, Amanda,” Cody snarled as he advanced on her. Amanda had no retreat but two steps back into the wall. “That doesn’t give you the right to accuse us of trying to buy you. Trust me, Amanda, if the three of us didn’t actually love you, we wouldn’t put up with half your shit.”

Chapter 51

Cody didn't give Amanda a chance to rebut his harsh growls. He barely gave her the half a second to comprehend them before his lips brushed against her. Instinctively she tried to jerk backward but had no room to escape. Despite his words and the tension in the muscles, she could feel pressed all along her body, Cody seduced instead of assaulted.

Slow and soft, he whispered butterfly kisses over her mouth, sparking each pass with a little nibble, a hint of aggressive demand. Her resistance melted away as feelings she had no control over guided her forward. With a quiver, her lower lip dipped. Cody took immediate advantage of the slight weakening, mounting a full on assault as he went from seducer to ravager in an instant.

Amanda didn't have the power to deny the need he inspired in her. Her body collapsed under its own weight, and she fell deeper into Cody's embrace. Her hands twined around his neck as she anchored herself and went to her tippy toes to return Cody's kiss with her own demand.

They dueled for control of the kiss, Cody weighing down the scales in his favor as he sent his hands to torment her. Large, heated palms spanned her back, pressing her into his hardened strength. Even as he held her to him, he stepped forward, forcing her back until the smooth, cool wall held her pinned in place.

It clicked reality back in for a moment. Always so attuned to her, Cody must have read her sudden hesitation. His head lifted and despite the moment, she could see the concern darkening his gaze.

"You're going to hate me in the morning for this, aren't you?"

Probably, but Amanda didn't want to worry about that now. It had been two weeks, and she was so lonely. She needed this, just this one time. It would help hold her defenses when they found out about the baby. Amanda would need strength then but didn't have it now.

With a gentle tug on his neck, she arched her own body in a silent statement of just what she wanted right then. She needed this, needed him. Her heart bloomed to life, coming out of its cold, darkened shell, as the reality of having her love in her arms again warmed her from the inside out.

Despite any concerns he might have had, Cody didn't resist the invitation she issued. He didn't even hesitate as his hand roamed over and under the lip of her nightshirt. Tracing a heated path down her spine, his calloused fingertips dipped beneath the edge of her night shirt and swooped upward to brand her ass with his heated touch.

With a rough grip, he parted her cheeks to let his hand slide right down between her crevice and forcing her leg up his thigh as he opened her for the caress to come. She knew it was coming. Her heart rate slowed to the motion of his touch as it glided down through her divide and followed the trail to the heated center of her being.

She moaned out her welcome as his fingers skipped through her slick folds, parting them as he delved deeper. Reflexively her teeth came down, biting into Cody's lower lip as his finger caught on the opening of her pussy, pausing before pushing into her heated depths.

Her muscles clamped down on his forging digit, trying to suck it in deeper with its desperate need to be filled. He answered her body's silent call, pushing another and then another finger into her, teasing her with a sense of the fullness to come.

His thumb flicked outward to swirl over her clit and send a cluster bomb of pleasure rocketing through her body. Her head snapped back, smacking into the wall as she gasped out her need in words that could not convey the depths of her longing.

"Oh, God...Cody...please."

"This will never change," he whispered against her neck as his head dropped to taste the sensitive skin there. He licked, nipped and sucked his way down toward her chest as his fingers continued their slow, maddening assault between her legs.

It was too much and not enough. "Please, Cody..."

"Hmm," Cody lifted his head, pausing for just a moment to warn her. "It might be a long time before you let me do this again, so I intend to enjoy my treat."

"Cody, I—"

He muffled her words by pulling her nightshirt straight up. Up, but not off. With a simple twist of the fabric he locked her arms and muted her mouth within the folds of the soft fabric, leaving her bound and at his mercy.

It added the dark element to the moment, spicing the pleasure raking through her to new levels. She was naked and vulnerable to him. Amanda knew he would not show her any mercy. His words, husky and sexually threatening, did nothing to soothe and everything to inspire her overwrought need.

“How many orgasms should I give you tonight?” Cody nibbled around the edge of her breast, slowly closing in on the tender peak already puckered and aching for the feel of his mouth. “How many orgasms will it take to convince you this is where you belong?”

His tongue licked up, right over the crest of her nipple. The sudden caress had her bucking upward with the bolt of pure electricity then squirming in disappointment as his finger retreated to leave her cunt aching, gasping on nothing more than air.

“We’ll start with this one.”

The warning breathed against her nipple was all the warning Amanda got before his tongue snaked around her tight tip to twirl and roll it in an increasing caress. Further below, his thumb repeated the motions of his mouth on her clit, sending pulsing waves of rapture crashing through her, washing her into ecstasy’s embrace.

* * * *

Cody smiled as Amanda gasped, cried and bucked against him, telling him just how far he had driven her. It wasn’t enough. Not for his starved senses. It wouldn’t be enough until he was sheathed fully inside her, feeling the strength of her inner muscles clamping down around him, sucking his seed right from his balls.

His cock pulsed and thumped against the hard confines of his jeans. Cody ground his teeth together and fought against the desires of his own flesh. Tonight was not about him. It was about Amanda. He wanted to drive her insane with pleasure, weaken her every defense and leave her helpless in the face of her own desire.

He lifted his head and looked over at her other breast. Beautifully round, plush, flushed with desire and straining for his attention. He smiled. He'd like to sample that one too. As he lowered his head toward his new target, he strummed his fingers over her clit. Amanda murmured and squirmed away from his touch. Cody knew she was sensitive there, possibly almost painfully so after the climax she'd just endured.

That fact did not dissuade him from his intent and his hand followed her movements, forcing another explosion on her. It was a short trip this time. With her body already primed from her first climax, it took only minutes before she was writhing against him, the beautiful sounds of her climax cascading over him, making him groan with his own needs.

As noble as his intentions might have been, in the end he only had so much will power. All the ideas and fantasies swirling in his mind condensed into one solid statement of need. If he waited any longer, he'd run the risk of humiliating himself like some overeager teenage boy and explode in his pants.

He didn't have the patience or the elegance left for smooth moves. Pinning Amanda to the wall with his chest, he leaned hard into her as he angled his hips backward. Stuck and still a prisoner of her own nightshirt, Amanda wiggled as he fought his own zipper. Her shirt smacked into his arm and slid with a plop onto the floor just as he managed to free his pulsing dick from its cage.

For a second their eyes met and Cody could see her need matched his own. Her honeyed eyes had darkened with desire. The flush of her arousal spread up from where her breasts heaved with every panting breath. Wild and wanton, she belonged to him.

"God, I do love you, Amanda Johnson."

With that he covered her lips, sealing in any protest she might have made for the rough way he gripped her thighs. Jerking them up to hook over his hips, he brought his cock home.

* * * *

Amanda tore her lips free of Cody's to gasp for air. The ragged breaths burned as he tried to pound them back out of her with a hard, deep thrust. Cody didn't give her a chance to adjust before he was pulling out, dragging

his thick, heated cock over every dancing nerve in her sheath. A painful delight, it made her whole body clench tighter around his width.

The slow withdraw made her womb burn with a need that had her hands dropping to his hips. Digging in her nails, she tried to force his return. Even as her hips lifted to emphasize her demand, he gave in, pounding her back against the wall with another brutal thrust.

From then on the hits came too fast for her to distinguish the individual blows. Sweat gathered and dripped down her spine, lending a squeak to the rhythmic slap of her back into the wall. Faster and faster the beat sped as her body began to expand and explode with the liquid heat of her release.

Cody's twisted endearments chased her into the madness. Grunted against her neck, they filled her heart and tinged the savage release breaking over her with wisps of tenderness.

"Oh, God...so damn tight...so damn *tight*...heaven...oh...love you...love you...Amanda!"

His release filled her body even as reality broke apart around her. Even as Amanda gave over to the chaos, her heart closed around his pledge. She wanted to live there in the moment forever, but reality condensed all around her, becoming cold as Cody sighed and stumbled backward.

He held her tight as he weaved across the floor to take them both crashing into the mattress. Only then did Cody's arms loosen as he slid to her side. For minutes they remained like that, half-entwined and silent until reason slowly started to reappear.

Just as Amanda's mind began churning up reasons for why this had been wrong, Cody shifted, lifting his head slightly to pin her with the intensity of his gaze.

"Come home, Amanda." He broke her heart with his plea. "You don't belong here."

Taking in a deep breath, Amanda reminded herself she had to be strong. "I can't."

Cody groaned at her answer and flopped completely on his back. "God! You are the most stubborn woman on this planet. You know that?"

Amanda didn't think he really expected an answer, so she didn't bother with one. Instead, she slid from the bed in search of clothes, something to provide any kind of barrier between her and Cody.

"I know we fucked up, Amanda. We all know it," Cody argued from behind her. "But you can't really be thinking to throw away our entire future over some admittedly stupid behavior. We can work this out."

Tightening down the belt on her robe, Amanda felt safer with the distance of the whole room between them. With a turn, she confronted him with the truth she'd been hiding from for days.

"You're right, we probably could work this out, because I do love you." Amanda smiled. "It kind of gives you three an unfair advantage, but eventually I'd grow to hate you. That's what happens to love when it isn't returned and—"

"Damnit, Amanda!"

Cody reared up to a sit, letting the sheet puddle down around his waist. The sight of him was a temptation that Amanda couldn't resist. Averting her eyes before she made another weak decision, she barely paid any attentions to Cody's words.

"I love you, and you damn well know it."

"It doesn't matter now." That's what made it hurt so much more. Even if they did, it didn't change who she was or what she was. "Knox was right. I am trouble."

The last bit had him staring at her in confusion. Amanda knew what she had to tell him would have him coming out of the bed, so she started to make her way to the main door.

"Is this about your dad?" Cody scowled. "Because Knox and Jace knew what I did, we were in on it. We already had an investigator check him out and came to a decision on how to handle him. You don't have to worry about your dad."

"Is that right?" Amanda smirked. Cody didn't even understand how insulting his words were. It would probably be a waste of breath to try and explain it. "Yeah, well. I'm not talking about Davey."

"What is it then? Lydia?" Cody appeared even more desperate and confused. "Because you know we don't expect you to live with her. Not that we're going to fire her," Cody rushed out almost immediately. "I mean we are, but we're going to help her find a new job first. You have to understand, she's—"

"It's not Lydia," Amanda cut him off. She had the doorknob in her hand and for the first time Cody appeared to become aware of where Amanda had

stalled out. Rising out of the bed, he held himself tense as he slowly started toward her. The only thing Amanda had to stop Cody were words.

“It’s Will.”

Her plan worked and Cody stalled out as he scowled. “Will? Will McKinney?”

Amanda had never really gone into detail about her relationship with Will. Given his absence, it hadn’t been necessary, but she could hardly tell a story about her past without mentioning him, so Cody knew they were friends.

“It’s not like I have all the answers.” Amanda shrugged. “You know, everybody is always handling everything for me, so nobody likes to bother me with the pesky details, but I still got a good idea of what is going on.”

Cody didn’t miss the insult in her words. They straightened him up and hardened his features from confusion to annoyance. “Enlighten me.”

“Well, the short story is Will killed some drug dealers and ran off with their money. Now they want their money back and he’s nowhere to be found, so it falls on me.”

“On you?” Cody waited a second, but she didn’t offer him an answer. “Why?”

“Because he doesn’t care about anybody else, and he doesn’t have any family left.”

Again she left it there and, strangely enough, Cody accepted her answer. He’d already moved onto another thought. “Your car accident?”

“Wasn’t an accident,” Amanda sighed. “It’s not safe for anybody to be standing next to me anymore, so I can’t go back to the ranch. I won’t be the thing that gets you all killed.”

“Amanda—”

“No.” Amanda opened the door. “I’ll give you ten minutes, but then I’m sending the deputy in.”

Chapter 52

Saturday, August 2nd

Amanda showered and made herself a sandwich, choosing to sit in her room and eat quietly. It seemed the thing to do, to seek solace, even though the silence made the weight of the coming darkness all that much heavier to bear.

The fact that the Reese brothers hadn't shown yet, should have brought her some ease. It didn't. They'd appear soon enough. Amanda knew her men well enough to know they wouldn't be staying a safe distance away. Not if she was in danger.

It would take a while before Cody realized she hadn't been asking for help last night, but saying goodbye. Of course, it would take Tony and Cindy a while to accept the same message even though Amanda had taken the time to write them actual letters. They waited on the dresser for Tony to find when he came home tonight.

That's all she'd left unpacked. Now she just had to wait for Braden to eat his chili. Guilt might still lingered over feeding the deputy chili packed full of sleeping pills, but she didn't have a choice. God's honest truth, Amanda didn't want to be doping anybody.

She never would have thought the day she would do something this low. Even if she didn't want to be this person, Amanda's wants had ceased to matter. If they'd ever held any value at all, she'd be out at the ranch being pampered by the Reese brothers. Yeah, she was that weak.

In the end, it didn't matter to Amanda all the wrongs they'd done. For all the pain and hurt they'd caused her, it still didn't compare to the misery of waking up every day alone, much less going to bed the same way. She loved them and that made her weak.

It had been a long time since she let anybody in so close. Since she lost her mother and brother, Amanda had kept her heart boarded up, fearing that she was the evil one in the story. It didn't matter if she wanted to be good. Love screwed everything up. Just look at her situation.

Amanda loved Will, but because of him, she might die. Knox, Jace and Cody each claimed a chunk of her heart, but if she went to them, they might die. If she just stayed at Tony's, he might die. Of course if she did anything stupid, she might die. Worse, the baby inside her would leave the world with her.

So be it. Amanda sighed. From a list of all bad choices, she really only had one prayer to hope on. Escaping, fleeing for her life and just disappearing. Of course it wasn't like she had spy connections and just how to go about disappearing presented itself as a difficult task.

It had taken her all night thinking about it and still her plan felt half-assed, but what choice did she have? It was the only option where she wouldn't end up being the one left grieving. Cowardly and sick as it might be, Amanda couldn't conceive of waking up everyday knowing she'd been the reason somebody she loved got hurt. It wouldn't be her fault.

Consulting the list of actions she'd made up last night, Amanda checked off the chili. Now she'd wait a half hour for the food to do its trick. During the time she had herself scheduled for more waiting.

Itchy and nervous, she watched the clock tick around toward seven thirty. Wherever she ended up, Amanda better end up in a safe enough spot not have to do this kind of thing twice. Someplace quiet, like Alaska, where nobody would look for her. Or maybe North Dakota. They didn't have drug wars that far north, *did they?*

Amanda really didn't know. She didn't want to have to either. It made the waiting easier if she didn't focus on the negative, but strived for the positive. With a child on the way, she'd need to make more money. The best thing would be to go to college and get an actual career.

She'd always wanted to go to school, but for what? Maybe for something like graphic design. Amanda loved to draw, but computers always advanced so fast, she'd been left behind in the pen and paper age.

Of course the thing she loved about the idea of graphic design was the marketing. Amanda could see herself in a suit, presenting some storyboard with the next greatest gimmick since the Geico gecko. The image faded

before her eyes, and Amanda admitted she'd never be good in corporate America.

With a kid on the way, she'd love to work from home. *A kid?* She still didn't feel pregnant. Amanda kept waiting for the moment when it would hit and she'd feel herself change into a mother, but all she felt was nervous and slightly sick. The nausea probably had more to do with nerves than the baby.

Actually, right now there is no baby, just a bunch of cells multiplying. No eyes, no ears, no baby, but it would grow into one. How weird was that? Amanda had never actually figured on having children. None of her friends had them, so she honestly knew very little about pregnancy or babies, but now she found herself silently obsessed with wondering how it all worked.

Seven thirty. Letting out a deep breath, Amanda nodded to the clock. It was time and she stood up from the bed to march down the hall and find Braden passed out on the couch. Feet up on the coffee table, his bowl of chili still sat on his stomach, the spoon dangling from his hands.

For all the world he looked dead, and it jarred Amanda into rushing over to his side. Braden had a strong pulse and more obvious lift to his chest. Not dead, but definitely not waking up anytime soon. Phase one could be called a success. Time for phase two.

It started with making sure Braden didn't wake up with a kink in his neck or chili covering his lap. Setting the bowl on the coffee table, she straightened him out over the couch. Amanda took the moment to make sure he would be comfortable before liberating the keys to his truck from his pocket.

Then came the gun. No old-school revolver like hers, Braden's black 9 mm looked heavy and dangerous. It looked more like a weapon of death than her pearl-handled gun. Amanda's gun was actually kind of cute. *Braden's is probably a better gun to take into battle.* Amanda lifted it up, recognizing what line she was crossing taking a sheriff's deputy's gun—one better not debated for too long.

Grabbing her bags, she double checked her list before hustling it out the door. By seven forty she'd stopped by the drug store and bought a prepaid phone. Amanda actually didn't know why she had this step on her list, but she'd seen every criminal in every TV show do it, so she figured it must be a kind of 'duh' thing.

Five minutes ahead of schedule she left her message for Will. "I'm in trouble. I'm afraid for my life, Will. I need you to call me. At this number. Within an hour."

Clicking the phone closed, Amanda decided somebody really needed to write a book on how to be a good criminal. It was a lot harder than it appeared. Though, of course, somebody probably had written one. The problem was by the time a person needed it, they didn't have the time to go read a damn book.

Either way, she figured it must be good to be ahead of schedule. Except now came phase three, requiring a lot more guts than Amanda had. The first part was easy. With Braden's truck backed into a corner spot, nobody would notice its license tag had gone missing.

The hard part came into walking right into the hornets' nest by heading for the fire department. Right next to the police station, Amanda could see Tanner Briggs' truck parked in the shared lot. He owned the identical Chevy as Braden, right down to the chrome package. Now all she had to do was wiggle through the bushes, creep along the edges and swap the plates.

This is absolute insanity, and didn't she know it. Oh, well, if God didn't like her plan then He'd get her caught. As if to challenge her for daring Him, the little cell Amanda had bought started belting out a horrid ring. The high pitched wail cut through the still, evening air, making Amanda about jump out of her skin.

In a mad rush to stop the noise, she fumbled with the phone as she shrank back into the deep shadows of the alley way. "What?"

"Amanda?"

"Will, oh thank God." Panting out her relief, Amanda slouched against the wall of the bank. "Thank you so much for calling me back."

A strange silence greeted her comment. Not the normal Will snootiness, making fun of her drama queen like behavior. The striking change really rammed home how much of life was coming to an end. Straightening up with her sobering thought, Amanda spoke into the void.

"We don't have time to talk and really none is needed, but I do need money."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?" Amanda snapped. "To get the hell out of Kansas, to not be Amanda Johnson anymore."

"I don't think—"

"It's not your call," she cut him off. "Just like having somebody run over my car with me in it wasn't mine. I know you have the money. I just need enough to escape."

Silence again, but this time Amanda didn't press Will. She knew he'd fall her way, and with a sigh, he did. "Okay. Where are you?"

"Don't worry about where I am and don't tell me where you are. Just tell me how long it will take you to leave a package at the old fort."

"I can meet you—"

"No," Amanda cut in panicked by his very suggestion. "I can't assure you nobody is following me. Just leave the money there and get as far away as you can."

Again Will hesitated, but finally gave her a, "Give me two hours."

"Will?" Amanda could sense him about to hang up.

"Yeah."

She swallowed, not knowing what these final words should really be. They might be her last to Will. "I'm not mad."

"But I am sorry."

The line went dead after that and Amanda stared down at the phone. One of them would die, perhaps both. *Oh, well, never really saw myself as old and wrinkled anyway.* At least phase four had been a success.

Now she just had to finish phase three. The call had bought her a few more minutes and just as many more inches of shadows. Bucking up her nerve, Amanda told herself twelve year-olds did this all the time, so she should be able to.

Still, five nerve wracking minutes later with Tanner's license plate in her hands and Braden's secured to his truck, Amanda couldn't believe she'd done it. Now all she had to was get away with it. So obsessed with keeping her eyes pinned on the station house, Amanda didn't even notice the man waiting in the alley as she slid back through the thin line of shrubs and around its corner.

"Well, look at you." The sound of Davey's voice had her jumping, turning, the license plate clanking to the ground. Sitting on his Hog, her daddy shook his head at her. "Not so innocent after all."

* * * *

Jace stared down the road and couldn't believe he'd let Cody talk him into this. Of all the stupid stunts they'd ever pulled, nothing compared to the hair-brained scheme Cody came up with to get past the deputy stationed inside Tony's house.

It had been an insane day. Having a hung-over Knox and a sexed-up Cody with equal voting rights had turned into a disaster when they'd gathered around the kitchen table. Jace had tried all he could to bring reason into the discussion.

He'd failed. In the next minute, they would cause such a scene it eclipsed the gossip swirling around Humble. The only reason they hadn't come to this moment earlier is because Knox and Cody had gotten sidetracked in arguing over the details.

Knox had finally convinced Cody there would be no way the sheriff would let them stay at his place, working together to stand guard with the sheriff's deputies. Unfortunately, Cody had convinced Knox they could snatch Amanda out of Tony's house. Yeah, it would land them all in jail, but Knox and Cody were both convinced it would give the time alone they needed with Amanda to convince her to come home and let them take care of her.

Jace didn't agree. He'd expected his brothers to be difficult, but they'd gone well beyond that stage. It came down to two against one, and he'd been out voted. Sighing over his fate, Jace turned and caught Knox's grin.

"I can't believe you're smiling now."

"Relax, Jace." Knox shot him an unearned smug look. "Look at it this way, Amanda can't possibly get more pissed at us than she already is."

"Wanna bet?"

"Trust me," Knox assured him. "This is just the kind of romantic gesture she'll appreciate."

With that, Knox popped the break and hit the gas. Jace barely had time to duck down into the floorboard as the street roared past. The breaks squealed and he felt the tires lift up as Knox cranked the truck to a hard right and banged into Amanda's drive. Jace smacked his head into the dashboard as Knox kicked down the hand break and flew out the door.

"Amanda!"

Jace listened to Knox roaring for the door, waiting for the second the deputy's voice added itself to the mix. That would have been his cue to slip from the door Knox had left open. Knox would lure the deputy into the yard, letting Jace dart around and go through the front door.

A well laid plan according to Knox and Cody. It had sounded more like a cartoon plot to Jace, but still of all the failures he'd seen, Jace hadn't anticipated no response from the deputy. For all his shouting and pounding that's just what Knox was getting.

Maybe he caught Cody out back, Jace wondered as he peeked up to chance a glance out the window. He saw Knox doing the same thing through the sheriff's front window.

Whatever he saw, it caused Knox to wig out instantly. Hollering for Jace, Knox had the gall to actually start kicking at the sheriff's front door. The sight of which had Jace throwing open his door and rushing off to find out what had made Knox lose his ever-loving mind.

Jace hadn't even made the front steps when Knox battered in the door on his second kick. By the time the first wooden step creaked beneath Jace's boot, Knox had disappeared into the house, yelling for Jace to call 911.

The very words left Jace incapable of obeying. They struck fear so far into his heart, Jace almost tripped over the last step. Stumbling through the door he found his ability to breathe restored when he saw Knox kneeling by the deputy, feeling for his pulse and not Amanda's.

"Call 911!" Knox barked. "He's not waking up."

Jace heard and ignored. Instead he tore off in a mad rush, screaming, "Amanda!"

Whoever called 911 for Knox, Jace didn't know. It took him only five minutes to tear through Tony's entire house. From basement all the way to the attic, he didn't find a sign of Amanda. It only added to his panic when the sirens started to wail into hearing. The sound of disaster, it brought home that this was no overreaction.

Jace could hear the same desperation he felt in Cody's voice as he collided with his brother at the base of the attic steps. "Did you find her?"

"No."

Not sparing more breath than that for Cody, Jace shoved past him and stormed off toward the living room. Knox lifted worried eyes from the deputy to Jace, but all he could give his brother was a shake of his head.

Shifting his gaze back to the big man laid out like the dead on the couch, Knox matched Jace's head shake. "I didn't believe you."

Whispered out, Jace almost didn't hear Knox's words over the piercing wail of the sirens sliding into the drive. "I didn't either."

Not until Tony charged in and got slammed back against the wall by their baby brother. Roaring up at the sheriff, Cody held him pinned there. "Where the hell is she?"

Tony's answer came in the form of a shove, sending Cody reeling back to crash into one of the end tables. "Get your hands off me, boy, unless you want to spend more than a night in jail."

"You aren't going to be putting us in jail, Tony." Knox rose up from beside the couch as deputies and paramedics swarmed in. Not paying the horde any mind, Knox closed in on the sheriff. "But I will be putting you in the ground if I have to lay Amanda there."

"You threatening me?" Tony didn't retreat from Knox, but stepped up to meet his challenge.

"Yes."

"What gives you the right?"

"I do."

"We do." Jace flanked Tony, knowing Cody took up the other side. "You might not like us, sheriff, but Amanda loves us and we love her. That gives us all the rights in the world."

"You hurt her." Tony's hard gaze cut to Jace's. "And she's my friend. That gives me some rights."

"You want to stand here picking this fight instead of finding Amanda, I'd say you're not much of a friend."

Cody drew Tony's gaze to him with that, but Jace saw the sheriff's chin lift a slight bit, his body stiffening. Tilting his head to glance in the same direction, Jace watched as an all black SUV pulled to a stop.

"Are those federal agents?" Jace had never seen an FBI agent in real life, but these guys had the look of power as they stepped out of their vehicle.

"Worse, DEA." Sighing, Tony tossed Jace an annoyed look. "Same authority, but a hell of a lot worse attitude. You guys might want to step back right about now."

"We're not leaving," Knox retorted as Tony brushed past Cody.

“No. I didn’t think you were.”

Watching Tony trudge off to intercept the agents, all three brothers scooted to the side to watch as the paramedics and deputies went to work. It didn’t take a minute to catch up on the chaos ascending over the house. Somebody had poisoned the deputy with sleeping pills, Amanda’s pills.

“This isn’t right.” Turning his back to the mess, Jace leaned into whisper to Knox.

“Don’t I know it,” Knox muttered. “She should have been at home with us.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What are you two murmuring about?” Cody squeezed around Knox to worm his way into the conversation.

“I’m just saying, I don’t know much about drug dealers, but poisoning a deputy? Leaving him alive? I thought those boys just shot everything in their path.” At least they did in every movie Jace had seen.

“What are you thinking?” Knox scowled. “Amanda did this?”

“Or her daddy.” Cody’s soft comment drew both older brothers’ gazes to him, as they all shared a moment.

Jace hadn’t lied to Amanda. They’d had her daddy investigated, knew just what kind of man he was. Amanda’s fate wouldn’t be any better with her daddy than the drug dealers.

“If he took her, he won’t take her to the motel.” The tremor in Knox’s voice betrayed the fear his oldest brother barely managed to hold in check.

“Thomas said he still owned a piece of land toward the north.”

* * * *

Amanda gazed up at the old house as Davey brought his bike to a stop in front of it. Her father had offered her only two choices, go with him or get knocked out and he’d just take her. Being a believer in avoiding pain, she’d opted for option one.

Now, though, as she stared at the weathered and abandoned structure, Amanda wondered if she just shouldn’t have run when she had the chance. Then her daddy could have shot her in the back. It felt more poetic than being killed out here in this dump.

“Go on in, girl.” Davey nodded toward the house. “I got to make a call.”

He spoke like she was a willing guest instead of a hostage, but then again Davey didn't know she had Braden's nine millimeter tucked into her purse. It gave her a sense of power, letting her indulge the time to find out just how much her father actually hated her.

Stepping onto the old porch, Amanda moved cautiously through the opening where the front door once hung. With each step, the wood beneath her feet groaned, warning it might give way under her weight. Amanda took the threat seriously as she felt her way into the single room structure.

There used to be interior walls, but now only some of the old studs remained. Weeds grew up between the walls, winding out busted out windows and toward the roof where sunken patches had fallen to holes at some point. The gaps let the moon's pale light shine into the house, illuminating not much more than decay and shadows.

Two things that kept Amanda's head pointed down as she looked for rodents and bugs. Even as she gravitated to the darkest shadows, Amanda pulled Braden's gun from her purse and clicked off the safety before tucking it into the waistband of her jeans.

She would use it. She'd kill her dad. Then why hadn't she? Given everything she'd already done, taking Davey out should have been easy. Despite what Amanda knew of Davey, this was about her.

Foolish as she might be, Amanda had held onto her childhood dreams of the father she'd always wanted. Dreams of having the type of father who danced at weddings and held court over the Christmas dinner table, of a father who showed up every day to ask her how school was and tuck her into bed at night, all of it had become too costly to believe in now.

"They're on their way."

Those times had passed and the hope with them. Amanda turned to face her father standing in the door and the reality she would have to pull the trigger and kill the last shred of hope in her heart.

"Who?"

"Ah, your buddy, Will's friends." She could see Davey's smirk in the moonlight. A cold, cynical twist, her father never truly smiled. "They're quite interested in meeting you."

"I bet."

"Though I really got to ask." Davey shoved off the doorframe to stroll deeper into the house. He did not look down. "What made you bolt today?"

I've been sitting on the sheriff's house for near two weeks, waiting for you to recover enough to take. Never expected you to run on your own, so why?"

Amanda tracked Davey's movement, making sure he stayed a good ways from her, more than enough room to give her the time to pull her gun. "Because you would have shot Braden."

"Braden?" Davey cast her a strange look. "The deputy?"

"Yeah."

Considering it for a moment, Davey shrugged. "Probably would have, though I'd have liked to shoot Tony instead."

"Nobody's dying for me."

"Well isn't that just too noble of you, girl. Nobel and stupid." Davey snorted. "Never did figure out why so called intelligent people don't realize what a handicap honor actually is because you might not want anybody to die for you, but you will be dying for somebody else."

Amanda's chin lifted. "That's my choice."

"Not really," Davey disagreed. "Will made that choice for you and you'd do well to remember that."

Amanda stared at Davey in disbelief. "Was that fatherly advice?"

Davey shot her a dirty look for even the suggestion. "Not hardly, but you are my kid. These boys coming, they're going to kill you no matter what. The only question is how long it takes and how bad it hurts."

"That's not what you want?" Amanda asked.

"Nah." Davey shook his head. "I just want you dead."

"Then why..." Amanda gestured toward the door.

"This?" There came Davey's smirk again. "Well, it's a double bang, really. They pay me for you, then when your body's found I get a second payment from the life insurance. All told, I'm walking out 200 large on this deal."

"That's what I'm worth to you?"

"Don't wet yourself, girl. You ain't worth even that to me, but on the market, you're not doing too bad."

"On the market?" Amanda laughed, her head dipping with the motion. Why had she even waited? What had she ever expected of her father?

“Hell, my biggest worry right now is after them boys break you in, they might decide to resell you themselves to some whore house down south and screw me out of my insurance.”

Davey snorted as he rubbed his gut, his thoughtful gesture. Amanda watched him from lowered lashes as he continued on, talking more to himself than her.

“Shit, with your pig-ass face and that mountain of a butt you got it shouldn’t really be an issue, but then again you got them Reese brothers all wrapped around your finger so I figure you must fuck pretty good. Got some of your mom in you after all. Now there was a pussy who—”

The deafening blast of Braden’s gun ripped through Davey’s words a millisecond before the bullet tore through his chest. Amanda hadn’t thought it would be so easy. Just press down on the trigger and...*bang, bang, bang*, a bullet for each step.

It wasn’t like on the TV though. The air thickened with the foul stench of the burned gunpowder. Her arm burned where a hot casing had skipped across her skin. Clinking to the floor, it fell as Amanda lowered her gun and stared at her father.

Death didn’t come easy or in an instant for him, despite the three massive holes blooming with blood over his chest. His hands went there, covering them as if he could save himself. There would be no salvation for Davey Johnson, not tonight. His eyes widened with the knowledge as he stumbled backward.

Gurgling with the sound of blood in his throat, his last words went with him as he fell to the floor. Amanda crossed the room watching his body twitch as it pointlessly fought for life. Hunching down beside him, Amanda came closer to her father than she’d felt safe in doing for years.

Finally all the fear and terror evaporated as she stared into his face. She had his eyes, his chin and his coldness buried deep inside.

“You know, I once watched a show where they said people don’t just die. Even after the heart stop, they lived on for minutes, hearing, feeling, clinging to the only world they knew.

“So look at me now, Father, and hear this. I killed you.”

Chapter 53

Cody cracked his knuckles. He couldn't seem to stop the small motion. A nervous habit that had become a compulsion through the long drive toward Davey's old house. Jace tore down the highway as fast as the truck could, but they'd had a hell of a time convincing Tony to let them go.

The sheriff believed, rightly, they were lying when they'd all agreed to go home and wait. Fortunately for them, Tony had his hands full with a deputy down, Amanda missing and the DEA lingering at the scene. He'd been called off to wherever Braden's truck had been found.

Cody assumed her daddy had changed vehicles, probably had Amanda held up at the old house. If the asshole had planned on ransom then he'd made a major miscalculation because the only payment he'd be getting was a beat down.

"Probably should have brought more than a gun."

Cody voiced the thought that had been circling around his head. Knox kept a gun in his truck, but just a little one. Nothing that would probably influence Davey Johnson into being reasonable.

"We didn't have time to go back to the ranch," Knox shot back, pressing into Cody as Jace turned off the highway and down the long drive that led into the plains. A mile away and over the hill, that's where Amanda waited. They were close now.

"Well maybe you should let me out so I can get the drop on him," Cody grunted, needing to do something.

"And what?" Knox snorted. "Wait a half hour while you jog the distance?"

"I can run it in five."

"Bullshit."

Their conversation got cut off by the squeal of the wheels as the brakes clamped down hard on them. Light suddenly flooded in front of them,

blinding any sight beyond the painful white. Blocking his eyes with his hand, Cody banged around into Knox as the truck skidded over the dirt, the rear kicking out as the massive vehicle came to a stop.

In a blink, before Cody could even lower his hand, the truck door flew open and somebody latched on, jerking him out without worry of banging his head on the doorframe.

“Down! Get down!” The shouts echoed from all around him, but they seemed completely pointless to Cody. Being shoved face first into the dirt with a knee in his back holding him there, really didn’t require obedience on Cody’s part.

He gave it anyway, not daring to defy the cool circle of a gun tip pressing right into skull. If these were drug dealers they were dead, but Cody didn’t worry over the possibility too much. Not with his wrist being twisted together with a strip of hard plastic while new shouts, *“Clear!”*, started to fill the night.

In less than thirty seconds, Cody was felt up and robbed of everything in his pockets. Not particularly a pleasant experience, it left Cody feeling somewhat violated. Still, with a gun pressed to his head, Cody accepted the mauling, keeping his anger repressed, for the moment.

When he got flipped over it didn’t shock Cody at all to be looking up at man outfitted in military gear and wearing a sign over his chest, DEA. Tony was right. They had worse attitudes.

The very reality of these men and their meaning here, blocking the road to Davey’s house, had Cody’s mind spinning. Amanda must be up the road and if he had any hope of seeing her, he’d be keeping his thoughts to himself. Pissing off these men wouldn’t be as fruitful or satisfying as ticking off Tony. Especially not when they might have Amanda with them, safe and sound.

The very hope kept Cody compliant as the man above him jerked him right up to his feet. Shoving him around the truck, he all but tripped Cody to get him back to the ground, ordering him to sit.

Cody managed to save the ungraceful downward fall and land on his ass with only mild discomfort. Pushing himself into line with his older brothers along the side of the truck, Cody joined Jace and Knox in glaring at the men as they tore through Knox’s truck. Another round of “clears” and the crowd started to thin, giving way to a large man who pinned a flashlight on them.

Going from brother to the next, he identified them each. "So you must be Knox Reese and you would be Jace, so that makes you, Cody."

Since he landed on Cody, he felt compelled to ask for them all, "Where's Amanda?"

"Well that's a good question." The man pulled the light off Cody and crouched down in front of them.

"She's not up there," Jace nodded toward the hill.

"Why would you think she is?"

"Would you stop with the fucking questions and just answer!" Cody would have cussed the man out if Knox hadn't beaten him to it. For all the good it did them. All the DEA agent did was smirk.

"I heard about your temper, Knox. Of course, I ain't like your putzy little sheriff. I arrest you, it's not for a night to cool off in a cell, but it's for conspiring to commit murder just to start. Why—"

"Murder?" Cody didn't like that word. The very sound of it made him forget all about the guns and the authority as he tried to rear up. "Is Amanda dead? Did that son of a bitch murder her?"

The agent shot to his feet, lifting one up to plant on Cody's chest and push him back down. Holding him there while Cody struggled, the other man just studied him.

"Stop it, Cody," Jace snapped. "I get a feeling we ain't going to get our answers until this man gets his."

"Stupid son of a bitch," Cody grunted, giving up the fight, but hating to do it. It took the agent a moment to believe Cody's stillness, and they shared a hard look as the man released him to step back.

Turning his gaze on Jace, the man smiled. "I heard about you too. They like to say you're the thinker of the group."

"Not hardly," Cody muttered, irritated by the age old reputation Jace had for being the smart one. Hell, Cody had gone to college too.

"Well it's nice that you know me." Jace ignored Cody, naturally assuming the role as their spokesman. "But I don't know you."

The agent considered it for a second before nodding. "I'm Agent Tagger and that's the last question I'm answering until you answer mine."

"All right." Jace accepted Tagger's statement as if it had been an offer. "What do you want to know?"

“You,” Tagger’s gaze turned back on Cody, “broke into the sheriff’s house last night.”

“I didn’t break in,” Cody corrected him instantly. “Amanda let me in through the window.”

“And just why did she do that, given your recent estrangement?”

“Who said we were estranged?” Tagger stiffened up at Jace’s question, holding silent in a clear statement. It took Jace a second to sigh and back off. Cody filled in the void by finally answering Tagger, knowing the man wouldn’t move on until he had his answer.

“If you’re asking why Amanda let me in then you obviously don’t know her.”

“No, actually I don’t.” Tagger hunched back down. “Learning anything about Amanda Johnson other than the trivial facts of her life has been next to impossible.”

“You ain’t asked the sheriff?” Knox grunted. “He’s her buddy.”

Tagger’s head snapped in Knox’s direction. “There isn’t anybody closer than the three men who have been sharing her bed, so,” Tagger swung his gaze back on Cody. “What did you talk about last night?”

“I tried to convince her to come home.”

“And she wouldn’t go?”

“She’s afraid whoever is standing next to her will get killed.”

“Well that explains why she went with her dad,” Tagger muttered, smirking slightly.

Cody latched onto the comment, hoping it meant the agent would spill now. “She went with him? So he did that back at the sheriff’s house?”

Tagger’s pale eyes narrowed in annoyance. “You didn’t plan on meeting Amanda out here?”

“No.”

“Then why you here?” Tagger gestured to the field. “How do you even know to be here?”

“When Davey Johnson showed up in town, it upset Amanda. We don’t care for her to be upset, so we had the man investigated.”

“And then paid him off? Or was it paying him to kill Amanda?”

“Are you out of your ever loving mind?” Jace roared while Cody got stuck on shocked.

“What am I supposed to think?” Tagger retorted, calm as ever.

“You’re supposed to think her daddy kidnapped her right out of the sheriff’s house,” Knox snapped. “Given you were watching, weren’t you? You let the bastard take her and did nothing to stop it. If she dies, I’ll—”

“Davey Johnson is dead,” Tagger cut off Knox. “And if you really care about this woman, you’ll tell me where she might have run off to.”

“Amanda killed her father?” Cody repeated, wondering if at any point in this night reality would reset itself to normal.

“Somebody killed him. Only her and him up there in the cabin. Who do you think did it?”

“It’s justified,” Jace jumped in.

“You know that?” Tagger retorted.

“You’ll never get a conviction.”

“And your money will see to it.”

“Damn straight,” Knox grunted.

Cody ignored the by-play between the agent and his brother. His head spun with what Tagger had said about Amanda. It made him sick to his gut, but he had to know. “So you don’t know where Amanda is?”

Tagger stared at Cody for a minute, giving him that silent dare, but Cody didn’t back down. He could understand what the agent didn’t say. “You’re tracking her, but you don’t know where she’s headed.”

“It’d help to know,” Tagger agreed indirectly, his gaze hardening. “That way we might be able to control those bastards in the pick-up following her.”

“You know somebody is following her?” And obviously not the good guys, which meant, “You’re letting them follow her. Why? Why don’t you pull them over now?”

“Because,” Jace answered when the agent failed to. “All they’d be able to get them on is maybe some weapons charges. Not enough to hold and flip them. Isn’t that right, Agent Tagger? You got to wait for them to actually try and kill Amanda.”

“Or Will,” Cody figured it out fast with Jace’s prod. “That’s what this really is all about. You’re hoping she leads you to Will McKinney.”

Tagger didn’t say a word, just smirked and swaggered off, disappearing into the blinding lights of the vehicles surrounding Knox’s truck. Cody watched him go, wishing like hell the two of them were on an even keel.

"I'm going to put that man in the ground," Cody whispered, "if we have to put Amanda there."

* * * *

"They don't know anything," Tagger sighed, glancing back at the three cowboys muttering between themselves. "We're going to be late."

"That we are," Jack agreed grimly. The sick feeling in his gut never lied. This would be a bloody night.

Lingering deep in the shadows, Jack knew how to be completely invisible despite being one of the largest men on the team. That skill came in handy tonight, letting him get a close-in view of the Reese brothers. What he saw, Jack didn't like.

"I'm not liking the way things are unfolding."

"I wanted to be in the lead team," Tagger muttered to himself. "Even those boys are running behind the clock. Apparently, Miss Johnson knows how to handle a Hog quite well."

Jack snorted. "Miss Johnson is becoming a looser cannon than anticipated."

"Who would have figured her for a bolter?"

"Me." Jack grunted. "I warned Camp that any daughter of Davey Johnson's should not be trusted. I don't care if she is a county clerk and goes to church every Sunday, the woman's trouble. Just look at them men, Tagger."

Tagger obeyed as Jack muttered on. "We got three intelligent, rich men who could have their pick in life, but instead of living it up like kings, they're all whipped little boys. Somebody has to get control of this situation, of Amanda Johnson, if she lives through the night."

It so often disgusted him to see men go down under the wiles of women. *Damn evil creatures*, but soft and sweet. A man just had to make sure he was in charge.

"You'll think she'll make it?"

"Yeah." If Amanda Johnson was that easy to kill, Jack would be somewhat disappointed. "Given Davey's body, I think our girl knows how to assure herself a long life. Those Reese boys, though, they're winding down a short clock as long as they're stuck on this girl."

“Well,” Tagger shrugged. “At least they got the sense to ask for help. I heard they’re bringing in Amos Calhan’s team, supposed to arrive tomorrow.”

“Is that a fact?” Jack smiled. That sounded like an opening to him.

* * * *

Amanda knew she was being followed. With the long, flat highways, it was easy to track the headlights making all the same turns as her, even if they stayed well over a mile back. The long gap gave her hope they were cops of some form and not Davey’s friends.

After saying her final goodbye to her father, Amanda had liberated him of his keys and taken off on his bike. The pick-up trucks had been coming down the highway when she’d turned back off his drive. They’d been too far away to get any real look, and she hadn’t waited.

It didn’t matter. This would be less than a five minute stop. If they were cops they’d keep following her, probably hoping she planned to meet up with Will. On the other hand, they could be much more unpleasant fellows. Either way, it behooved Amanda to keep the throttle wide open, letting the bike add to the distance between her and whomever.

The moon helped, being bright enough for her to kill her headlight though it left her feeling even more tense. By the time she cut off the road to bump down a long forgotten path, Amanda had no choice but to give her location away with the running lights. The pitted, dirt road was just too dangerous to travel by moonlight alone.

Nothing marked the spot Amanda looked for, but memories that hadn’t faded with time. The small tree had gotten no bigger over the years and somewhere along the line the pile of rocks her brother had used as a marker had tumbled over, but the stones remained.

The marker lay nearly a mile off the path. It worried Amanda to take the Harley through the untended field, with the headlights making the turn onto the path way back, she didn’t have a choice. *This would have gone a lot better with Braden’s truck.*

Praying the whole distance, Amanda killed all the lights just because she had to drop her speed. Those boys wouldn’t have to. They’d gain time, but she could steal it back by confusing them...hopefully.

Hope, Amanda had a lot of it, not much else. Except maybe in a minute a few million to escape on. Bringing the bike to a stop with the front wheel kissing the first stone, Amanda left it to idle as she tore into the rocks, looking for her package.

“Come on, *come on!*” Her chant gained in speed along with her panic as her fingers dug into dirt without any sign of an envelope or bag. Stuck on an inability to accept what her eyes showed, Amanda didn’t hear anybody come up behind her, but the second a hand hit her shoulder she twirled. Cracking her back over the rocks, she had the nine millimeter out and was staring right up the barrel at Will.

“Will?” Breathing out his name with a relieved gasp, she could feel her muscles trembling at the sudden bolt of relief flooding her system. “God, you scared the hell out of me.”

“Yeah? Well, that gun’s got me a little unnerved,” Will grunted. “You want to, maybe, point that thing somewhere else?”

Amanda blinked, looking at the gun in surprise. The sight of it, the sudden feel of its heavy weight snapped her back to the reality of the moment. Doing as he asked, she lowered the gun as she shot to her feet, demanding to know, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I—”

“Never mind that.” They didn’t time for a conversation. “We got to go. Now. Company is coming.”

Amanda matched her words to actions, taking the few steps to the bike. She swung her leg over before looking up to find Will just staring at her.

“I’m not going.”

“What? Are you insane?”

No jokes, no smart comebacks, not this time. This time Will just shook his head at her. “I can’t get to the money. Not in time to save you.”

“So?” Not about to leave him here, Amanda swung off the bike, intending to drag Will’s ass on to it at gun point if need be. “We’ll run now. We’ll get it later.”

“No.” Taking a deep breath, he stiffened up. “I’ve done a lot of bad in one lifetime, Mandy, but I won’t do this. I won’t be the reason you die.”

“You son of a bitch,” Amanda whispered.

All the pain, fear and anger clenched into a fist, she threw right into this face. Bending down to grip his jaw, Will grimaced as he absorbed the hit,

but Amanda felt no remorse. The engine sounds were closing in on them and there wasn't time. No time to flee, not with Will playing the martyr.

"You want to die?" Pulling the nine millimeter from her waistband, Amanda aimed it right at Will's head. "I can give you death, if that's what you're so anxious to have."

Not bothering to straighten up, Will didn't blink as he stared back at her. "Do it."

A part of Amanda wanted to, wanted to give into the rage, but she couldn't pull the trigger. Venting her anger with a growl, she lifted the gun to her own head. "Fine. How about this? You want to get on the bike now?"

"You won't do it." Will straightened up. His gaze cut over her shoulder to the trucks coming head-on before switching back to Amanda's. "What you are going to do is get in the tunnel before those trucks get here and let me end the mess I made."

He referred to the tunnels he and her brother had discovered out here long ago. Davey had told the boys about them and they'd turned it into an informal party spot. The sudden memory of all the times she'd lost held Amanda in position, unconcerned as the light grew from behind her.

"Why?" Her arm dropped as her whole body started to go limp. Before her, Will's image wavered under the fresh onslaught of tears painning her eyes. "Why are you doing this to me? You're the only family I have left."

"No," Will drew the word out his gaze dropping to her stomach. "You got that baby inside you, and I imagine a man who's pretty pissed at you right now back somewhere in Humble. I'm just hoping it's Cody Reese and not Nick."

She couldn't believe he'd joke at a time like this. Actually Amanda could and it made her all the sadder to know he'd be gone in a matter of seconds. "Will."

His gaze cut over her shoulder again, his features hardening. "It's time."

"No!" Amanda screamed as if by the power of her command alone she could stop the nightmare unfolding around her, but Will just kept coming. Charging her, he took her down with a tackle, sending the gun skidding from her hand as bullets started sinking into the ground just ahead of him.

Amanda's eyes locked with his for barely a second before Will released the latch. Years ago her brother had changed the hinges, finding some humor in a drop down trap door. Amanda had always feared it would give

under her weight and drop her to her death. This time it became a panic as the dirt gave way beneath her.

The wood slats fell back and her head suddenly dipped into cool darkness. Will twitched, roaring as the bullets began to rain around them. With one final push he lifted up enough to shove her right through the hole.

“N—!”

Amanda barely started her scream when pain splintered up her face. Her legs flipped over her body, smacking her nose first into the hard ground. The intense sensation blinded her for a moment, capturing her full attention until little red droplets started to spatter across the dirt.

In a rush, the roar of gunfire flooded through her mind and she shoved herself up, kneeling back onto her knees. Above her, Will twitched and groaned as his face became distorted with blood. The light had gone from his eyes already, but Amanda knew he still lingered.

Paying little attention to the noise and commotion erupting above her, Amanda curled her fingers around the wooden ladder mounted to the wall. Two steps is all it took her to reach out and brush the blood back from his cheek.

“I love you, Will.” Silently she asked God for his mercy to save Will in whatever life came next. Clenching her jaw to hold back the tears, Amanda knew the moment he left her.

One second later a bullet cut through the opening and sliced right through her arm, redefining her definition of pain. Wheeling back with a scream, she fell off the ladder in a step that nearly took her back to her ass. They were coming for her, the shouts, the bullets walking down the wall, Amanda didn’t even think before she started running.

Fleeing down the blackened hall of the tunnel, she had only memory to guide her as it split wide into the one room that had once been used for storage. Two more tunnels branched off and by some blessing Amanda found one to huddle into. It didn’t lead but fifteen feet away, too close to escape through the hatch and into the chaos above.

There in the pitch dark, she waited for her turn, biting down hard on her lower lip to hold back the screams. Part of Amanda didn’t care anymore. She hurt from the inside out and from the outside in. Wrapping her arm up in the hem of her shirt, Amanda hunkered down and listened as voices started to float down the tunnel.

Chapter 54

Knox knew the moment Amanda's life came into danger. It wasn't ESP or anything spiritual. The DEA agents gave it away when, in a matter of seconds, they cleared out. All of them, except for two annoying guys who held them up for nearly a half hour.

It pained him in a way Knox had never experienced pain to sit there and know Amanda needed him. Even if he didn't know what it is he'd have done, Knox would have died for her if life would have only given him the chance. Instead, by the time the DEA agents cut the twist cuffs free from his wrists and let them pile back into the truck, Knox didn't know which way to turn when he came to the end of the drive.

"What are you doing?" Jace snapped when Knox stopped dead at the end of the drive.

Knox blinked staring out at the field straight across, feeling completely lost. "I don't know."

"What the fuck?" Cody roared across the cab. "Turn..."

"Which way?" Knox shot back as Cody turned his head, looking from one side of the road to the other.

"Left." Jace sounded so confident it creeped Knox out.

Not Cody who just scrunched his nose at their middle brother. "Why?"

"Because if anything bad happened, they'll be taking her Dodge City." Jace lifted his head to pin Knox with a hard look. "And the hospital."

Knox may hate it, but he couldn't argue Jace's logic. Cracking the wheel to the left, Knox had the truck up to a hundred miles per hour within a minute. Just the fact he had to obey had Knox doing the only thing he knew to do. Digging out his cell phone from the pocket he'd tucked it into not minutes ago, Knox swerved all over the road as he dialed in the numbers.

"Who are you calling?"

Knox ignored Cody's annoying question, waiting for Andrew to pick up. He didn't the first time Knox called or the second, but by the time Cody asked his question for the fifth time Andrew's annoyed voice demanded to know, "What do you want?"

"To know where Amanda Johnson is," Knox answered without hesitation.

"Knox?" Anger gave over to confusion in Andrew's voice as he complained, "Who the hell is Amanda Johnson?"

"She's my future wife," Knox snapped. "So I'm sorry to interrupt whatever games you were playing with whatever playmate it is tonight, but I need to know where she is."

"Well my playmate is all tied up right now, so she'll keep long enough for you to take a breath and tell me again who this Amanda Johnson is and why it is you think I know where she is."

"I don't have time for the who, and so here is the why. All I know is that she's got some drug dealers chasing her, her daddy kidnapped her and now the DEA is all over the place, but they won't say shit, so I'm asking you to find out the what and why for me."

Andrew hesitated for a second before sighing. "This is the favor, you're asking?"

Knox knew just what Andrew meant. It had been over a decade ago when Knox had saved Andrew's life and he'd sworn a debt to Knox. For as true as the story was, Knox would never recognize the favored owed him, believing it his duty to save a life when he could. Tonight, though, his heart bent the rule, uncaring of all the reason and logic in the world.

"It is."

"All right then," Andrew agreed instantly. "I'll find this Amanda Johnson for you, but you're going to have to introduce me to this woman, Knox. I want to meet the woman who has brought you to your knees."

Normally he'd have some choice words for Andrew, but tonight Knox ignored his friend's ribbing. "How long is it going to take?"

"I'll call as soon as I know something."

The line went dead and Knox tossed the phone unseeingly into Jace's lap.

"So?" Jace prodded. "You going to answer Cody's question now?"

"It was Andrew, couldn't you tell?" Cody snorted, saving Knox from having to ignore Jace. It hurt to talk. Talking meant relaxing his jaw and that threatened to let out something that terrified him, something he had no memory of ever doing.

Jace just wouldn't be appeased. "Knox."

Risking the tears, he managed to growl at Jace. "Who else would it be?"

"Is he going to—"

"Yes!" Knox shouted at Jace, wishing he'd just shut up.

Thankfully both brothers got the message and left Knox to the quiet. There in the silence, he waged a battle between fear, rage and grief. Amanda just couldn't be taken from him. The last couple of weeks had been sheer hell. A depression beyond measure crowded his soul at the very idea of enduring that pain for the rest of his life.

It simply couldn't be.

That single thought echoed through him as he tried every prayer he knew to make it real and not just a dream. Time suspended itself, aided by the endless view of gray asphalt chugging under the hood of the car. The yellow dashes blipped past as outside the window the seamless moonlit plains appeared almost as a still image so little changed over the miles.

Knox felt as if he had lived forever, trapped in some dimension where all he did was go endlessly forward to never reach any destination. The altered reality broke around him, snapping time forward nearly an hour as they looped around Humble. The lights, the buildings, they were all there then gone as the highway stretched back out into darkness.

The road didn't have a chance to trap him under its spell this time. Not with the shrill ring of the phone bringing Knox to the moment he dreaded. Fear didn't make his reflexes slow, but Knox still didn't beat Cody to the phone sitting in Jace's hand. He'd been holding it out to Knox, but Cody swooped in and snapped it up.

"Hey!"

"I want to hear this," Cody snapped back as he flipped open the phone.

"Hear what?" Andrew asked, catching the comment. His voice came out distorted by the speaker. Knox still heard him and he still wasn't in any mood to chat.

“Did you find Amanda?” Yelling his question out, the truck swerved anew as he leaned over Jace to grab at the phone. Cody held it high, letting Andrew’s answer wash over the three of them.

“Yeah, I found your girl. I’ll save you the earful for later and get to the part you want to hear, Knox. She’s being taken to the hospital down in Dodge City—”

“Score one for Jace.”

“Shut up, Cody!” Knox could have killed his younger brother right then. The son of a bitch didn’t seem to understand Amanda could die tonight.

“Hey, I’m just trying to relax a little, Knox. I feel sick enough to throw up my actual stomach,” Cody defended himself.

“Shut up or I’ll shut you up.”

“Do any of you want to know why she’s being taken to the hospital?” Andrew asked dryly, sounding too amused for Knox’s peace of mind.

“Well if the two assholes in this truck would shut up, I’d like to know,” Jace retorted, showing a little of this temper.

“It’s a bullet wound.”

None of them said a word to that. God still had a chance to be merciful, but inside, Knox’s heart sank. It went right to his foot, weighing it down until the truck rattled at nearly a hundred and thirty miles per hour.

“I can’t tell you where she took it or even how many,” Andrew finally filled in the silence. “But they didn’t airlift her, so it can’t be that bad.”

That bad, Knox guessed it all depended on how much you loved a person to determine just what ‘bad’ actually was.

“I also got a sense when you get to the hospital it’s going to be a party,” Andrew warned. “I know you, Knox. Don’t be getting yourself arrested. These boys don’t play.”

“We hear you, Andrew,” Jace answered for Knox after a long pause. Those tears Knox had been fighting before had returned. “We’ll play nice.”

Maybe Jace would.

“Yeah, right,” Andrew retorted. “Just to let you know, I know a really good defense lawyer, Albert Swine. You might want to take his number down now.”

Knox didn’t need a number, he needed to see Amanda—now. The urgency drove him to press harder on the gas, pushing the pedal further down until pain shot straight up his leg.

“Ah!” Instantly his knee bent back, nearly catching Jace’s hand as he withdrew it. “Son of a bitch!”

The motion pulled his foot back from the gas pedal and the truck slowed down as Knox tried to shake off the pain. “What the fuck?”

“We’re not going to do Amanda any good dead. Now stop driving like an insane person or get out of the driver’s seat.”

Snarling over Jace’s harsh command, Knox slammed back on the gas. As much as he might hate it, this time he kept the needle on the speedometer only at one hundred. He even had the sanity to slow down through the city streets, recognizing being pulled over would only delay his getting to Amanda...so would parking.

Knox really didn’t care if the truck got towed, so he left it right at the curb along the red line, double parked along a deputy’s car in front of the emergency room doors. If Jace or Cody wanted to waste time, they could park the truck. Knox only had one thing in mind.

All his thoughts centered on Sheriff Anthony Black the second he saw Tony standing in the waiting room. Not bothering to take note of the uniformed officers clustered around the sheriff, much less the DEA agent Tony was talking to, Knox walked right up and shoved the large man out of his circle of friends. With both hands planted on Tony’s chest, Knox pinned him to the wall.

“It’s all right!” Tony yelled out, probably to the men who started in shouting at Knox. The hands that had instantly gripped onto Knox’s shoulders as he tore through the cops lessened but didn’t release.

Knox didn’t care if they all beat him down. Nothing could hurt worse than what he felt then. “Where is she?”

Tony met his gaze and Knox could see the disgust in his. “Look, I’m only telling you this because none of us have the time to deal with your shit. Amanda got hit, but it’s only her arm. They got her in surgery now.”

There, Knox could breathe again. With his first breath he backed off slightly, giving the sheriff room to shove Knox completely off him. Straightening his shirt, Tony glared at him.

“Now, I did you a favor. You do me one. Sit down and stay out of the way.”

Knox would, but he wanted one thing clear. “You’re not keeping me from seeing her this time.”

"I think you better take his advice, Mr. Reese."

Agent Tagger's comment drew Knox's attention. Knowing Amanda wouldn't be leaving him by dying, a new worry took its place.

"Jace?" He turned to find his brother right at his back. "You got that number from Andrew?"

* * * *

The flickering glare of the overhead fluorescents gave Amanda a headache, so did the men pestering her with endless questions. Every time she opened her eyes a new slew of some type of cop lurked to ask her the same question five times. The same questions their friends had asked five times the last time she opened her eyes.

This is why people hated cops. It was mind numbing. Especially given she didn't answer very many of their questions. Amanda wasn't allowed, not with her lawyer standing sentry. Albert Swine was a very interesting fellow and Amanda had no doubt who had sent him to her.

Knox, Jace and Cody lingered somewhere out there in the chaos beyond her room. She wished they were there with her. Maybe then she could feel something. It was frightening how little she actually felt. It seemed as if she'd lost all her emotions, had left them cowering back in the darken tunnel.

Silently detached, Amanda reviewed the night over and over again in her mind, playing it back in full 3D animation. She could feel the gun in her hand, hear the deafening blast and watch her father's eyes as she took his life from him. That should make her feel something, horror, guilt, relief, anything, but not even the image of the blood dripping down Will's cheek touched her.

Finally, after all these years, her worst nightmare had been realized. She was alone, completely alone. *You got that baby inside you and I imagine a man who's pretty pissed at you right now back somewhere in Humble...maybe.* Pregnancies got lost and men left women.

Two truths Amanda wouldn't worry so much over if she could just see Knox, Jace and Cody. Will had probably been right about the pissed part, but Amanda would give them the right to be angry. She would be at them, if the roles were reversed.

Certainly, her great plans had turned into an overwhelming failure, so she didn't have a lot of cover when it came to what she'd say. No doubt, everything would get worse once they found out about the baby. At least they wouldn't know Amanda knew about the baby before she almost got them both killed.

The hell Knox would rain down on her head made Amanda cringe just to imagine. Yeah, her life was about to do a one eighty turn, but she still felt alone and very much lost. All she needed was one of her men, just to hold her for a moment. Amanda knew that would make it all right.

Like anything could. Tony was trying. Davey had died outside his jurisdiction, giving him almost no authority except the respect of Tony's position as a sheriff. Thankfully the county sheriff's department had already assured Mr. Swine they were ruling it as self-defense. Even if the federal agents liked to make threats, Mr. Swine has assured her, they didn't have jurisdiction and, without it, no power.

Between Tony and Mr. Swine, the one thing Amanda was guilty of was being pretty damn dumb. The feds could get behind that verdict. They could also get behind the "she was in cahoots with Will and knew where the money was" theory. From the FBI to the ATF, it seemed like the only people who hadn't shown up to ask her where the cash was the IRS.

Mr. Swine had assured her eventually they'd show up. With Will dead and no money in the tunnels, the federal government really had nobody left but her to harass.

Despite his intentions, Will's death hadn't saved her. He'd condemned Amanda. It almost made her laugh. It was just so Will. Nothing ever turned out right for him. Will had tried for nobility and ended up an ass, somehow that seemed a fitting epitaph for him. The real question was what would hers be?

It didn't have to be answered today. Even hiding behind closed eyelids, Amanda could feel the heat and brilliance of the sun cresting over her. She'd survived the night for all its horrors, and now she had no choice but to go on.

At least Cindy would be back today. Amanda would be released from the hospital, but where she'd go, she had no idea. She wanted to go home, but didn't know where that was anymore. Even her house felt like an empty shell.

Being trapped in those walls would probably drive her insane, but so would being trapped in Tony's house or Cindy's. Will's place had always had the welcoming feeling of a home she belonged to. Amanda doubted those feelings would linger anymore. Like her house, the memory of Will's place made her feel even more alone.

The only place that didn't sound like a misery to bear would be going back to the ranch, but nobody had shown up to make the offer. Not reading too much into it, Amanda still didn't feel right about assuming or asking. For all the sins Amanda might have laid at Knox, Jace and Cody's feet, it didn't compare to her own.

She had no right to demand anything from them. In fact, if she had a shred of decency left, Amanda would never bother them again. Unfortunately, Amanda wasn't as noble as Davey had lamented. Walking away from the Reese brothers would only ever be possible if she gave them their baby first.

For all the detachment she felt for the notion of being pregnant, Amanda still knew she'd never give up her baby for somebody else to raise. The kid tied her to the Reese brothers and knowing how Knox felt about being trapped didn't give Amanda much hope.

Sighing over her choices, Amanda finally gave over to the sunlight. Greeting the fresh day with weary eyes, Amanda found her room strikingly uncluttered. Till then every time she opened her eyes a cluster of men waited to catch her awake. With the absolute silence filling her room, this time Amanda honestly expected to have a moment alone.

Apparently not. If waking up to a strange man looming over the foot of her bed didn't unnerve most women, add the fact that he towered well over six feet and had to be at least three feet wide, filled in with solid muscles stretching every piece of black fabric covering his massive body. Mix in a glare out of frozen blue eyes and Amanda felt every right in asking, "Are you here to kill me?"

"You don't seem too concerned that I might be."

Not from Kansas. Not with that accent. Amanda would have said military, but she couldn't believe this fiasco had warped that far out of hand. He hadn't asked her any stupid questions and Mr. Swine wasn't standing guard, so he didn't come from the government.

"I guess I'm supposed to take that as a yes."

"I'm not allowed to answer any questions without my lawyer." Amanda couldn't help but smirk when her smart comment drew the large man off the wall.

Straightening up, his crystal blue gaze narrowed on her. "Is that right? And you are ever obedient, right?"

Just on principle Amanda didn't like this guy. "When it suits me."

"I see." Again he considered her response with an unnecessary pause. "So tell me, does it suit you to live or are you one of those death wish people?"

Amanda refused to answer that. This man didn't deserve one. She'd give him points for stubbornness because he really gave her a long moment. Even when he had to concede defeat, he did so only with a threat.

"I'm asking, you see, because my job is to keep you alive. That's what I was hired to do and it's what I will do." As he spoke, he circled the bed to use his intimidating bulk to shadow out the sun. "From this moment on, you do what I say, and I don't give two shits what suits you."

"Bugger off." Amanda pointedly yawned. After her night, this dick didn't understand. She couldn't be scared anymore. "You're annoying me."

"And you're not listening." He leaned down real close to make sure he had her attention. "I'm here to keep you alive. You do want to live, don't you?"

Amanda rolled her eyes, knowing there would be nothing to back him up but to answer. "Yeah, but I still don't like you."

He smirked, straightening up. "That's not really required. My name is Jack Daniels, and I don't want to hear no grief over it."

"I guess you're a straight up kind of guy, huh?" It might have been lame, but it made Amanda snicker.

Not Daniels who turned on her with a hard look. "Tell me something, what's it like to kill your own father?"

Touché, Amanda lost her smile at his question. It would have been giving him some kind of victory not to answer, so Amanda did. With a shrug, she played it off. "Not like anything really."

"Huh?" Daniel's really had a way about him. It just irritated the crap out of her. "I just wondered. You know on the books you look like a pretty easy girl to mind after, but then knowing you killed your own father..." Daniel's shook his head. "Makes me think you're a little rabid, prone to cold-blooded

violence, and I don't need you poisoning or shooting any of my men. Understand?"

"What about knifing them?" Amanda shot back, insulted to her core even if Daniels had reason to worry. "I always like a good back for a target."

"Is she giving you any trouble?"

And just like that Amanda felt something—relief. Cody stepped into the room sounding as annoyed as ever, but he smiled when their gazes locked. It didn't matter how much pain it caused her aching body, Amanda sprang up and landed right in Cody's arm, because he moved that fast to catch her.

Half hanging off the bed, she clung to him as his familiar warmth and strength took her back to the feeling of being home she'd been wishing for. Despite the bandage encasing half of her arm, Amanda managed to hold him close with her good one. She burrowed her face deep into his neck and inhaled his comforting scent.

"You came."

"Of course I did, darlin'," Cody whispered back.

"Of course we all did."

Knox's annoyed voice corrected Cody a second before his thick arm shoved the youngest back, so he could take his place in Amanda's embrace. Crushing her in his oversized arms, Knox smothered her in a sense of total security. It weakened the defenses keeping everything inside of her numb. His words only provoked the beginning sniffles.

"I swear, baby girl, if you ever scare me like you did last night again, it will take a whole month of you being tied to my bed before I finish punishing you."

"Don't be threatening her," Jace snapped and just like that Amanda got dragged across her bed to be tucked into Jace's arms. Her knight, Jace minded her injury as he adjusted her to fit snugly into his arms. Sighing, Amanda's eyes drifted closed as she wished she could just live in this moment.

Unfortunately Daniels still lurked in the room. He just couldn't leave without saying goodbye. "Well, I can see this is a private thing."

The way he said it had Amanda lifting off Jace's chest to glare at him. "Did you hire this asshole?"

"Now Amanda—"

"Because I want him fired, as in yesterday."

“We’ll be checking out in about an hour.” Daniels paused at the door, completely unconcerned by her comments. “I hope by then you can provide the compliant client you said we’d be looking after.”

Amanda’s jaw about unhinged. “Compliant?”

Chapter 55

Cody grimaced at Amanda's shriek. He'd known the minute he'd met Jack Daniels it would be water and oil when it came to the security agent and Amanda. Of course, Cody didn't think any man trained as well as Daniels would get along with Amanda. They needed somebody with Daniels' skills to keep Amanda alive, so she was sort of stuck with the asshole.

Not that Amanda would ever be cornered quietly. Glaring at all three of them, Amanda retreated to the center of the bed. "I don't like him."

"Listen Amanda," Jace took the lead as they'd all agreed he should. Taking her hand, using his soothing voice, Jace tried to work some magic on the very grumpy woman pouting in the middle of the hospital bed.

Cody lost track of Jace's spiel as he gazed at Amanda. She was truly safe, grumpy and contrary as ever. He'd missed her so much these past few weeks. Without her, his days had converted back to the drudgery of mind-numbing routine.

It was strange just how much joy could be drained out of everything given Cody loved his work, but that was the power of a woman. They could just twist a man all in knots, like Amanda was doing now as she pouted up at them.

"I don't care," Amanda responded to whatever reasonable argument Jace made. "I don't like him and I'm not taking orders from him."

Her petulant attitude pierced Cody's warmth with the fear he'd borne all night. He would not go back there. The hard lash of emotion prodded him right into the argument he hadn't been paying any attention to a moment ago. Stepping up to clasp her cheeks in his hands, Cody forced Amanda's chin up.

"You listen to me, Amanda, and you listen good. You put us through hell last night and that isn't going to happen again. We need you alive,

darlin', and that's how Jack Daniels is going to keep you. There ain't going to be no argument on this."

Amanda swallowed, her features going soft with sadness as her lashes dipped to cover her gaze. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"What the hell did you think we were going to feel?" Knox grunted. "You know we love you. You know all you had to do was ask for help and there wouldn't be nothing we wouldn't do for you, but instead you run out to get yourself caught by your daddy. Why would you do that?"

Instantly Amanda turned from Knox's question, acting as if he'd actually hit her. It angered Cody to feel her withdraw from his touch, and he unleashed the emotion on his brother, the only safe target.

"Shut up, Knox! It doesn't matter why, it only matters that she's safe now, and she's going to stay that way." Turning back to Amanda, Cody softened his tone, trying not to upset her anymore. "It's going to be all right now, Amanda. You are going to come home with us and everything is going to be all right."

Cody hated sounding like he was pleading. Especially in front of his brothers, but the desperation bled into his voice, increasing as she lifted tear-filled eyes to him. The sight panicked him for all the sorrow he could sense in her and the fear she'd actually try to reject him. Cody wouldn't allow it, not this time.

"What?" Cody whispered, brushing away the tears starting to slip down her cheeks. "What is it, baby?"

"You don't understand," Amanda breathed out, making his heart twist. Shifting her gaze to Knox, she shook her head. "You were right. I am trouble."

With that conclusion her head sunk, but Knox's hand lifted right back up. "Amanda, what happened last night isn't your fault."

"Yes, it is."

Despite the tears, her voice hardened with a calmness. Swallowing back whatever emotion threatened her, Amanda stiffened up with old defenses. It made Cody want to pull his hair out. They should have gotten past this by now.

"It isn't, Amanda," Knox insisted. "You might not have made the best decisions, but—"

"You don't understand."

“Then make us.” Cody drew her gaze back to him with his demand. “Please, Amanda, whatever it is, tell us.”

“You’ll hate me.”

“Never.” Jace beat Cody to the punch. Leaning down, he pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, making her chin dip even lower. “We love you, Amanda.”

“Won’t you trust that enough to tell us the truth?” Cody prayed the answer would be yes.

Amanda wobbled, chewing her lip and staring blankly down at the bed. Finally, though, she started talking. “You know, Brandon was a typical older brother—annoying, bossy, just as irritating as anybody could be on a daily basis.”

Her head lifted slightly, revealing a momentary smile as some memory captured her for a moment. “Of course I was the typical younger sister. I worked at making sure Brandon was annoyed on a daily basis.

“We never really got along.” Amanda shrugged. “The age gap was just too much or maybe it was personality. It’s hard to say how things would be now, but back then it was one battle after another.”

Again Amanda paused, appearing to consider the past. None of them pressed her, letting her have the time she needed to sort through her words. “I won most of them. Mom always sort of sided with me, but Brandon helped that by being a screw up.

“The last thing a female deputy needed was to constantly be arresting her own son for an endless litany of charges. Possession, DUI, assault, Brandon humiliated her and didn’t even care. At home it meant I could pretty much get away with murder and Brandon couldn’t sneeze in the wrong direction.

“Back then, I thought that was pretty damn cool.” Amanda gave a hollow laugh. “I guess I was drunk on the power, so when Mom called one night to tell me to tell Brandon he had to cook dinner for me, I enjoyed giving him the message.

“Brandon cooking was kind of a joy to me back then. He couldn’t cook, so I could complain to Mom when she got home and he’d get bitched at for not being able to offer her the smallest bit of help around the house.

“Only thing was Brandon didn’t want to play that game.” Amanda sucked in a deep breath and stiffened right up. “We had some words and

then he stormed out of the house saying he'd get his meal at the bar. I knew that meant he was meeting up with Will McKinney."

Cody straightened himself at hearing Will's name. He'd always wondered what it was that bound Amanda to Will. After last night's events, the question had become more bothersome.

"Mom hated Will because he had the fake ID that helped Brandon get liquored up. Also his daddy was their weed connection, so Will was pretty much unwelcome in our house. That meant when Mom showed up tired from a late shift, hungry with no dinner on the table, she was ready to whip Brandon."

Amanda paused again. A shudder ran through her as her breath took on a choppy pattern. Now the words rushed out in a way that told Cody she'd never spoken them before.

"I made sure she was pissed enough to head out to take the argument to Brandon. Then I called the bar to gloat at him that Mom was on the way." The emotions broke through on a cry as Amanda bent over. "I did it."

Wretchedly sobbing into the sheets, the grief poured out of her. "I put them both on the road that night. I killed my mother and my brother and I broke one hundred and thirteen of Will's bones. I'm the reason he got addicted to pills. The addiction that lead him to kill three people and set off a war that ended with him dead."

Amanda lifted her watery eyes to Cody, capturing him in her pain. "I killed them all, every single person I loved."

Cody couldn't stand the sight and sound of Amanda's anguish anymore. Sliding onto the bed, he folded her into his arms, having to share the moment with Jace who pressed into her other side. Cody, though, got Amanda's head buried in his chest and her arms clinging to him because she loved him and trusted him.

Sighing, Cody closed his eyes and rested his cheek against his foolish woman's head. All these years, Amanda had blamed herself and Cody understood that. He'd been there, but he'd had his brother to finally point out some sense to him.

Not that Amanda would listen to reason now. She had a few years of torment to pour over Cody's shirt. There wasn't anything any of them could do until Amanda cried herself out. Finally, though, she wound herself down

to a gasping, sniffling, hiccupping mess with barely enough strength left to cling to Cody with her good arm.

As her grip weakened and her hand slid down to his thigh, Amanda gave Cody the room to reach back to the rolling hospital table. Snatching up the cardboard box of tissues, he turned back to Amanda to nudge her chin up.

Her big eyes locked on his and Cody could see the fear in them. She was waiting to be accused, to be attacked and rejected. Cupping her chin in his hand, Cody started talking as he cleaned her face.

"I want you to listen to me, Amanda, because I've been down this road before. Three years ago I would have done just about anything for Sharon, and I ain't going to lie to you about that." Cody paused to rub a thumb over Amanda's damp cheek.

"Just about anything," Cody repeated to himself because he realized he would do anything for Amanda. Not because he loved more, but because she fit better. Amanda belonged with them.

"Anything, but the one thing she asked." Cody shook himself out of the moment and lifted a clean tissue to her other cheek. "See, Sharon, she'd always wanted to be a chef, loved to cook. She wanted to go off to New York City and experience food."

Cody couldn't help but laugh as he always did. "I thought it was just a thing. We all did, but she had the bug and so we helped send her to school out there. The thing is when she came back, it wasn't to stay. Sharon came back to convince me to move to the city with her, build a life there, just the two of us."

Jace spoke into the pause Cody left, it didn't feel right saying things he'd know would hurt the others. "You have to understand, Amanda, Sharon always loved Cody more.

"Don't," Jace shook his head at her when she turned those wide, sorrowful eyes on him. "Don't worry, baby, it was all right. I did love Sharon, and I never would have hurt her by saying anything, but she knew."

"What?" Amanda whispered.

"That Jace loved another woman more." Knox grunted. "You."

"You," Jace nodded, smiling slightly. "Since I first laid eyes on you, darlin' and long before it was right."

"But..." Amanda swallowed, her head dipping as she tried to reject what Jace and Knox were saying. "You call her name when you sleep."

“Nightmares.” Jace lifted her chin up to force her to meet his gaze. “Nightmares because of the guilt.”

Cody bet Amanda understood. She didn’t question him anymore but turned her gaze on Knox. Standing at a distance, near the foot of the bed, Knox scowled back. Cody knew what his brother would say if he hadn’t been there, so he said it for Knox.

“Knox never really loved Sharon.”

“That’s not true,” Knox snapped instantly. “Sharon was a good woman and would have made any man a good wife.”

“But you didn’t love her,” Cody pressed.

Giving him a dirty look, Knox’s gaze slunk back to Amanda’s. It hesitated there for a long moment before Knox sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Look, Amanda, I ain’t never going to be good at these things and Sharon needed them. It’s real hard to feel close to a person you are always afraid of breaking.”

Mr. Sensitive, Cody could have hit Knox when Amanda sniffed. “You’re not worried I might break?”

Knox scowled. “No, darlin’, I’m worried you’re going to break me. God damn, you had me driving all over the damn county, having guns pointed at me, everybody threatening all sorts of things and not giving any shits about it because I can’t seem to breathe thanks to fear of worrying over your ass. You almost made me cry, and I don’t know how much more broken a man could get.”

“You cried?” Amanda smiled. “Over me?”

“No!” Knox spat.

Before Knox could ruin the moment with his surly attitude, Cody commanded Amanda’s attention by turning her chin back to him. Her smile faded under his look and Cody could see the guilt returning to her gaze. Cody understood.

“The point is, Sharon didn’t love Knox or Jace or even me enough to stay. She hoped I would love her enough to leave with her...”

“But you didn’t,” Amanda whispered the words Cody still couldn’t find it in himself to speak aloud to her. “Then she died.”

“No. Then I got mad at her, told her she didn’t really love me, accused her of all sorts of stuff and finally told her to leave. I put her on the road, driving all upset to get killed.”

Amanda frowned, considering what he said for a moment. “You blame yourself?”

“I did.” Cody nodded. “Probably always will in some part of my heart, but I think Jace is right on this one.”

“I am?” Jace sounded shocked, but Cody didn’t release Amanda’s face to turn toward his brother.

“The world doesn’t revolve around you, Amanda. Your brother’s decision to get behind the wheel drunk was his, just as it was Will’s choice to shoot those people and Sharon’s decision to leave me. We can’t control what other people do and maybe we share some of the blame, but it isn’t all on us.”

“It isn’t on you at all,” Knox grunted. “Sharon made her choice, Cody. She was upset and you told her to get out, but she didn’t have to leave. You like to forget Jace and I tried to stop her.”

“I don’t forget,” Cody snapped. “It doesn’t help remembering the two of you tried to right my wrong.”

“It wasn’t a wrong,” Knox snarled. “Sharon already had her bags packed and in the car. She was leaving no matter whether you went with her or not. I thank God every day you didn’t, otherwise I might have had to bury you after that tire popped.”

“It wouldn’t have ended the same.”

“You don’t know that,” Jace shook his head. “Neither does Amanda. None of it matters in the end anyway. Part of living is accepting dying and for my money, I want to enjoy my life.”

Jace tugged Amanda across the bed to settle her back into his chest. “I can’t do that without you, baby. Now I want you tell us what you told Cody last night.”

Amanda snuggled her face into Jace’s shoulder and murmured very softly, “I love you.”

“Just me?” Jace prodded.

Cody smirked when her head shook. It was still a little too soon for Amanda, but she’d get there.

“Now I want you to promise me you’re going to let us take care of you.” Jace pulled back slightly, giving Amanda a hard, straight look. “That you’ll do what Mr. Daniels says.”

Amanda's nose wrinkled and Cody braced for some vigorous disagreement. Amanda might have been through hell, even been shot in the process, but her spirit remained untamed. It was one of the many things Cody would always love about her.

Thankfully, though, he didn't have to bear her stubborn nature right then because Cody was more than worn out by all the recent events. His savior came in the form of a doctor, pushing into the room with his nose buried in a chart. He started talking before he realized he'd interrupted.

"Well, Miss Johnson, can't say I'm glad to see you again. My condolences on graduating from car accidents to bullet wounds. What should I expect next, fire?"

The doctor almost walked right into Knox, who stepped out of his path, drawing the man's gaze up. "Oh, pardon me. Didn't realize you had company."

Amanda straightened off Jace's chest to smirk at the older man. "Knox, Jace and Cody, let me introduce you to Dr. Little."

The doctor shot Amanda a smile as he extended his hand in Cody's direction. "It's nice to meet you."

"I can't say likewise," Cody grunted. "Not unless you have good news."

"Oh, just the best," the doctor assured him before turning to shake Jace and Knox's hands.

Knox held on, probably squeezing a little. "What was that good news, doctor?"

"Well," the little red-headed man tugged his hand free. "Just that Miss Johnson here is set to be released with no anticipated complications. You'll need to schedule a visit with your regular doctor to have the stitches removed in about eight or ten days, but other than that, we have a very healthy patient."

"Well then I think it is pleasure, doctor." Cody nodded at him.

"That's just the news, the good part came as kind of surprise," Dr. Little turned his gaze right on Amanda, beaming his biggest smile. "You're still pregnant. We checked the heart rate last night, and it was strong as ever and the blood work came back...."

The doctor's voice faded out as Cody's mind locked on the word—*pregnant?* Amanda was pregnant with a baby and it had a heart they could hear...*a real heart, a real baby, a real pregnancy...* Cody's gaze fell to

Amanda who was slinking back in the bed, looking scared again. It gave him pause from the joy filling his soul, enough of a second for his mind to slip a thought in.

Still pregnant, the doctor had said 'still'.

* * * *

Amanda didn't have time for an explanation and she knew one was needed. Before Dr. Little could finish prattling on about how she needed to go see a gynecologist, Daniels returned, holding the door for a nurse to wheel in her cart.

The intrusion had Dr. Little retreating and leaving Amanda no time to defend herself against the three dark looks leveling her way. The consequences she'd soon have to face made her see the wisdom in at least temporarily submitting to Jack Daniels' obnoxious authority.

He'd obviously read the book on how to be a criminal. It probably would have been too tedious and boring for Amanda. As it went, she became quickly frustrated with all his orders. Swapping clothes with a nurse who apparently was part of the 'team', he then led her on a maze-like journey just to get out of the hospital.

No wheel chair and helpful hands getting in the car. This time she got shoved in and pressed down. Worse, Knox, Jace and Cody went their own way, leaving her completely at Daniels' mercy. Of which, Amanda learned he had none.

By the time she got hustled into the house at the ranch, her temper had flared enough for her to be ready for the Reese brothers. Expecting a full on battle, she all but dismissed Daniels at the door and went storming off to find her men. She found men, none of whom she knew, all of which she assumed worked for Daniels' 'team'.

Ignoring them, Amanda methodically searched the house for the brothers. She knew they were there. She'd seen all three trucks parked in the carport. They might have escaped out onto the ranch or... Amanda paused in front of the last door she'd yet to look behind.

They wouldn't. Then again, she'd never thought Knox would cry over her. Biting down on her lower lip and calling herself every kind of stupid,

Amanda opened the door to Sharon's room. Instantly she bit back a sob at the sight that greeted her.

It wasn't Sharon's room anymore, but hers. They'd redone the whole room. Now her furniture sat along the freshly painted walls. Amanda could see Jace's hand in the colors. He knew her well enough to know what would lure her right in, welcoming her home.

Knox was there too. His handiwork showed in the new bed, large enough to accommodate more than a couple of bodies. Running her hand over the graceful curves of the canopy's posts, Amanda's eyes skipped over the bed linens to get caught on the slatted side of a crib.

The sight drew her to it with no memory of taking a step. Knox had made it with his own hands, but he couldn't have known about her pregnancy. It had been a message.

"I'm gonna love you forever, Amanda Johnson."

She whirled around at the sound of his voice, her hand clutching at the crib as she took in the sight of her three men striding into the room. Knox led the pack, talking as he walked.

"Jace had this whole lovey-dovey moment planned, but Cody and I voted to skip that, given recent revelations."

Amanda swallowed, her eyes darting to Cody as he kicked the door closed. Looking across the bed, Knox's comment had her noticing Cody's contribution to her new room. Rings on the posts and velvet ties strapped to the boards, Amanda bet the new armoire next to the bed didn't house any clothes.

"You see," Knox drew to a stop right at her toes, liking to loom over her. "We were going to pledge our love and go down on our knees and do whatever dumbass thing you demanded to make up for the mess we made of everything the night of the ball."

Amanda knew what came next. It was there not only in Knox's gaze, but Jace's and Cody's as well. They flanked Knox on either side, caging her in with a surrounding wall of muscle.

"Now, though, we know you didn't just risk your life, but our child's as well, and that..." Knox shook his head.

"That can't be allowed, darlin'," Cody finished.

"So, you're going to have to be punished," Jace concluded, getting that sexy snarl in his voice. Her sweet man still had a wild side.

Amanda lifted her chin and met Knox's heated look. "You can't punish what doesn't belong to you, Knox Reese, and I don't see anything on these fingers," she waved her left hand in front of his nose, "laying any kind of claim."

"I got your ring right here." Knox smirked as he patted his pocket. "But before we get to that, you're going to have to giddy up, darlin'."

They stepped back, clearing a path to the bed and leaving her no doubt of what they expected her to do to earn their ring. For the moment, it suited Amanda to give in. Bowing her head, she passed under the three Reese brothers' noses fully confident for the rest of her life this would be her home.

"And better have them clothes off before you crawl onto that bed."

Epilogue

Jack Daniels grunted, stretching out his arms as he flipped off the headset. The sounds coming through the bugs in Amanda's bedroom didn't do him any good. Actually, it did a little harm, making it awfully uncomfortable to sit.

From what Jack gathered, they'd be at it for a while. Rising up out of his seat, he nodded at Jackson, who took over manning the surveillance station.

It had taken no small amount of effort to convince Amos to let him lead the team. Amos had his grudge against the agency, and for sure he didn't like crossing his clients. Only Jack's personal relationship with the old man had bought him a ticket onto the Reese Ranch.

That and promising Amanda Johnson wouldn't be prosecuted for anything. Getting that assurance from Jack's bosses hadn't been hard. They didn't care about Amanda beyond getting to the money. Wherever Will McKinney had stashed it, Amanda had to know.

Soon enough, Jack would know. Stepping out of the little trailer the Reese brothers had let them set up shop in, Jack gazed up at the ranch. Whatever it took, he'd find the money. Amanda Johnson wouldn't be standing in his way.

THE END

<http://www.jennypenn.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I live near Charleston, SC with my two biggies, my dogs. I have had a slightly unconventional life. Moving almost every three years, I've had a range of day jobs that included everything from working for one of the world's largest banks as an auditor to turning wrenches as an outboard repair mechanic. I've always regretted that we only get one life and have tried to cram as much as I can into this one.

Throughout it all, I've always read books, feeding my need to dream and fantasize about what could be. An avid reader since childhood, and as a latchkey kid, I'd spend hours at the library earning those shiny stars the librarian would paste up on the board after my name.

I credit my grandmother's yearly visits as the beginning of my obsession with romances. When she'd come, she'd bring stacks of romance books, the old fashion kind that didn't have sex in them. Imagine my shock when I went to the used bookstore and found out what really could be in a romance novel.

I've worked on my own stories for years and have found a particular love of erotic romances. In this genre, women are no longer confined to a stereotype and plots are no longer constrained to the rational. I love the 'anything goes' mentality and letting my imagination run wild.

I hope you enjoyed running with me and will consider picking up another book and coming along for another adventure.

Also by Jenny Penn

Cattleman's Club 1: *Patton's Way*

Cattleman's Club 2: *Hailey's Game*

Cattleman's Club: Tasty Treats Volume 1: *Rachel's Seduction*

Cowboy's Curse: *Sweet Dreams*

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