

SANDHAIN publishing, llc.

THE BOYS *Next Door*

SIERRA DAFOE

Love takes courage. Loving two men takes twice as much.

At seventeen, Tommy Ambinder was Annie Parsons' first love, the center of her world. Almost. There was a secret spot reserved for Judah, Tommy's elder brother. On the day she discovered Judah wanted her, as well, the aftermath drove Annie out of town—and a wedge between the men she loved.

Now, haunted by guilt, Annie has returned to Melgrove, Montana, with one hope in her heart—that twenty years has overcome the rift between the Ambinder boys. If they've mended fences, maybe she can repair her own life too.

Tommy's missed Annie all these years, but he never realized how much until one glimpse reignites the passion that time hasn't quenched. Something else hasn't changed, either—half of her heart still belongs to Judah.

Now, with Annie poised to run again, history is threatening to repeat itself—unless one of them has the courage to break free of the pattern and blaze a new trail that's wide enough for all three.

Warning: this book contains all the volcanic intensity of first love, searing-hot sex scenes, and two brothers sharing the one woman they love!

**eBooks are *not* transferable.
They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

The Boys Next Door
Copyright © 2010 by Sierra Dafoe
ISBN: 978-1-60928-277-6
Edited by Linda Ingmanson
Cover by Angela Waters

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: December 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

The Boys Next Door

Sierra Dafoe

Dedication

For Marcy Arbitman, reader, reviewer, fan and friend. Your kindness and enthusiasm touched us all.
You are missed, lady.

Chapter One

Nothing ever changes, Annie thought wryly as she drove down Main Street. There was the old Woolworth's, now something called Paula's Consignment Emporium, but she could still see the chrome luncheon counter inside the door. Just down the block was the pool hall, with the same flickering Budweiser signs and battered felt tables it had had twenty years ago. Annie smiled briefly, remembering how they'd always schemed, her and Tommy, to get the one halfway-level table every time they'd snuck in there.

Good times, once.

Her smile faded.

Max's Hardware was where it always had been, with its assorted collection of lawn rakes and wheelbarrows leaning against the brick wall outside. Max himself was propped in the open doorway, his ancient face lined with wrinkles, a toothpick jutting from between his mail-order dentures. He'd popped them out for her once when she was six, making her shriek. Then curiosity had gotten the better of her and she'd reached out gingerly to poke the hard, shiny plastic.

Almost automatically, Annie raised her hand as she drove by—then dropped it as his gaze flicked over her Buick LeSabre with bored disinterest.

Another damned out-of-towner. She could read it in his gaze. *Nobody who's going to stop and drop a dollar in my till.*

Unexpected tears stung her eyes at his dismissal. That's all she was now—a damned out-of-towner, when once she'd known every inch of Melgrove like the back of her hand. Grief twisted inside her, a grief that had only sharpened with the years. *You don't realize at seventeen how much you're losing*, she thought. *You don't understand how much home matters.*

But even at seventeen, she'd known you pay for your mistakes in this life—and she had. She'd been paying for them for nearly two decades.

If she was lucky, she was the only one still paying.

She turned right onto Sycamore. Past the A & P. Past the bowling alley. Past the low cinderblock bulk of the "new" high school, now aging right along with the rest of the town.

In her mind, she could almost hear the faded cheers of a long-ago football game. The toots of the marching band. The crunch of young bodies.

She could almost feel the warmth of Judah beside her, his lips hot against hers in the chill autumn air.

“Oh Christ,” she muttered nervously. “What are you doing here, Annie?”

It had been twenty years—surely by now it was okay to sneak back just to take a quick peek? She wanted to know they were all right, that was all. Just one quick look, and she’d be on her way.

Nevertheless, her hands were trembling as she stopped at the junction of Sycamore and Route 32. Flipping on the signal, she turned north and headed up into the hills.

Out here, time seemed to roll back on itself, revealing a landscape that hadn’t changed significantly in a hundred years. The same isolated farmhouses dotted the countryside, tucked into folds between the Montana hills. The same washed-out gullies left fans of sandy scree along the roadside, collecting in the exact same places they had when she was a kid.

For an instant, Annie was half-tempted to close her eyes, see if she could trace the curves of the road by memory—she’d done exactly that once, at Tommy’s dare. But she’d been on her old bike then, a solid, bulky three-speed with a plastic basket on the handlebars, and when she’d run it into the ditch, the only damage had been a bruised behind and a scraped knee.

How old had she been then? Eleven? Twelve? Tommy, of course, had pedaled back to her immediately. Judah, three years older, had looked back in disgust, his long, tanned forearms draped over his handlebars as he waited for them to catch up.

Remembering that dark gaze, Annie felt her trembling worsen, and she clenched the steering wheel tighter, fighting an impulse to turn tail and run.

She *had* to see if they were okay. She needed to know that the damage she’d done hadn’t been permanent. Maybe then she could finally leave behind the guilt that had dogged her for twenty years.

Maybe then she could finally build a life for herself.

And if it was permanent, Annie? What then?

“Please God, no.” They’d just been kids, all of them. Surely Tommy and Judah had forgotten her long ago.

Even if she’d never managed to forget them.

But they didn’t know that—and they wouldn’t. She’d caused enough harm to the Ambinder boys. She wasn’t going to stay around long enough to risk doing more.

Then Annie laughed at herself—not a particularly happy laugh, but a laugh just the same. “Gee, Annie, getting a little full of yourself there? You’re thirty-seven, girl. You think anybody’s going to fight over you now?”

Not that she’d been a raging beauty at seventeen, either. If she had been, maybe she could have understood why they hadn’t both simply walked away from her in disgust. Instead it was she who had run away, unable to bear what she’d done to them, what they were doing to each other.

Now all she wanted was to know that they were all right.

Taking a deep breath, she turned onto a dirt track that followed the crest of the hill behind the Ambinder's ranch. Stones gritted under the tires as she eased the Buick along, wincing at the noise. It wasn't exactly the sneak approach she'd hoped for—but the thought of driving brazenly past the house and risking being seen was more than she could stomach.

Groups of cattle stood here and there, cropping the grass behind the rusty barbed-wire fencing. They lifted their heads as she drove past, staring at her curiously. Stopping just before the top of the rise, Annie edged the Buick over to the side of the dusty track and got out.

From here, looking east, she could see the roof of her old house, perched on a rise surrounded by cottonwoods. The air was so clear she could even make out traces of the old footpath, winding between boulders and up over the ridge. She knew that path even better than she knew the town, eight miles distant—after all, she'd worn it into the hillside herself.

Cheerful Black-eyed Susans dotted the long slope, nodding here and there amidst the long Montana grass. Annie stared at them, feeling tears prickle, remembering half-wilted flowers clenched in a boy's grubby fist.

The first bouquet Tommy had ever given her had been Black-eyed Susans.

The memory almost chased her back into her car. Almost. She stood, one hand on the door handle, trying to control the apprehension that shook her.

Christ, what was she doing here? She had no right to intrude back on their lives. They'd forgotten her, they *had* to have.

If she could have any wish in the world, it would be that none of it had happened.

"Please God, let it be okay." She whispered the words into the breeze, feeling it toss her hair lightly as she stood, torn by indecision. Feeling foolish, she crouched down like a commando, her heart hammering in her chest as she crept to the crest of the hill. Taking a deep breath, she finally looked over the valley below.

Her hands flew to her mouth, muffling her sudden sob. She stood slowly, staring down, no longer caring who might see her—there was no one to see her. No one but the cattle.

The house below her was abandoned, its windows blank and empty. Two of them were broken, letting the curtains Mrs. Ambinder had always bleached to a blinding whiteness flap like gray ghosts through the glassless frames.

The front porch sagged, its paint chipped and peeling. The picket fence slumped like an exhausted soldier. Over it all hung an air of desolation which convinced her even more than the broken windows that the Ambinder family was gone.

"No. Oh no!" Frantically, Annie skidded down the steep slope, sending a hail of stones and dirt spraying out around her. The cattle lowed their displeasure, stumbling into a heavy run. Annie ignored

them as she careened downward, fetching up hard against the picket fence. Gasping for breath, she pushed off it, ran up the porch steps and threw open the front door.

“Mrs. Ambinder? Tommy?” There was no answer. Stepping into the hall, she called again, hopelessly, “Judah? Mr. Ambinder? It’s me, Annie Parsons!”

Her voice seemed to die almost before it left her mouth, muffled by crumbling plaster and the ever-present dust.

They moved, that’s all, she told herself fiercely. *Sold off the ranch and moved into town. Mrs. Ambinder’s old now, she’d be more comfortable in town...*

Except her gut didn’t believe it. Judah, at least, would never have sold the ranch.

She moved through the house in a sort of numb shock, opening doors that squealed on their hinges, dropping a shower of dust into her sweaty hair. More dust coated the empty floor of the parlor. The old sofa was gone, along with the pictures.

Seeing the kitchen was even worse. She’d spent half her childhood in there, it seemed, sitting on a stool at the broad oak counter as she helped Mrs. Ambinder chop and slice. Annie walked into the room slowly, staring around at the big farmhouse windows, the slate sink, the empty space where the table had been. She trailed her fingers over the dusty counter as if trying to convince herself it was real.

Tommy and Judah’s mother had always been the person she’d gone to when she’d felt troubled, pouring out her adolescent fears and worries over this very counter—all except for the one fear, the one question she could never bring herself to ask.

Now there was no Mrs. Ambinder moving behind the counter. No Mr. Ambinder stomping through the kitchen door, shouting for the boys to come give him a hand.

The boys...

Quickly, Annie went back out into the hall and climbed the stairs.

The upstairs was as empty as the rest of the house. There was no trace of them—no old forgotten photographs. No discolored newspapers. They’d disappeared as completely as she had herself, leaving nothing behind.

Except memories. Standing in the middle of the upstairs hall, she bit the inside of her lip to keep from crying. *What did you expect, Annie? That they’d still be here, just like always? Staying put just to reassure you twenty years later that you didn’t ruin their entire lives?*

The tears came anyway, blurring her vision. Under their deceptive sheen the hall wavered, letting her imagine she saw the old green velvet wallpaper, the sunlight slanting across smooth, varnished floors. As if in a dream, she moved down the hallway to the third door on the right and pushed it open onto a room she knew as well as her own name.

Seventeen. She is seventeen, and Tommy Ambinder—Tommy who has been her best friend since before they could walk, Tommy who has just turned eighteen, flush with the triumph of taking second place in the junior roping only the weekend before at the Melgrove Rodeo—is touching her breasts, touching them in a way that makes her squirm and ache in places she can't even bring herself to name without blushing. She reaches down awkwardly, rubbing her hand over the hard, mysterious swell in his jeans, and he hisses, his eyes closing.

"Oh God, did I hurt you?"

"No... No." He looks at her, his familiar blue eyes full of humor and heat. "Hurt ain't exactly the word I'd use."

Warm afternoon sunlight slants across his bed and, emboldened, Annie curves her fingers around the unfamiliar shape of his hard-on. He groans, his mouth closing blindly over hers as he pulls her against him.

Her hand is trapped between them, cupping the hard, insistent length of him as his hips push against hers, and his hands move back beneath her shirt, kneading her breasts through her bra, tugging her tender nipples lightly through the scratchy white fabric.

She is melting. She is on fire, her blood singing in her ears. When he slides one hand downward, she doesn't protest. In fact, she rocks her body forward, urging him on as his fingers fumble at the snap of her jeans. He swears under his breath, his murmured frustration choked with such need that she laughs, rolling to her back, and shoves her jeans off by herself, pushing the heavy fabric down over thighs that will never again be this smooth, this toned. Tommy rises to his knees as she does so and freezes, staring down at her, his gaze following the line of her legs, tracing the creamy skin up to where it disappears beneath her white panties. His pupils are huge, his lips parted as if he is tasting her as well as seeing her, drinking her in.

She feels beautiful under his gaze, beautiful in a way she has never imagined. She has always thought of herself as plain, with her straight, ash-brown hair and features that are regular rather than eye-catching. But Tommy's expression makes her feel like a movie star.

She lies silent beneath him, letting him look at her. She trembles as he reaches out, his gentle fingers running caressing her skin, trailing a line of fire up the inside of her thigh. The sound that spills from her throat is half a moan, half a whimper as he brushes across the springy swell of her mound. She spreads her legs wider, panting slightly, and their eyes meet, heavy with hesitation, with hunger, with fear.

His fingers play between her legs, pressing and stroking and sending shockwaves coursing through her. Her panties are soaked, so much so that she almost wants to blush in embarrassment—but one look at Tommy's face, at the rapt intensity of his expression, and she knows he is every bit as aroused as she is. His eyebrows draw together slightly, his teeth unconsciously catching at his lip as he hooks one finger under the lacy edge of her panties and tugs them aside, exposing her.

She closes her eyes, letting her head drop back, feeling him caress her soft inner folds. His fingers tremble. His breath shortens.

“Annie...”

She opens her eyes, and whatever he sees in them makes his own darken further, full of a need that echoes and inflames her own. Holding her gaze, he reaches down to his jeans with his left hand, his right still stroking and probing and sliding slickly through her juices...

She couldn't take anymore. Turning, Annie stumbled from the room, fleeing blindly down the stairs and through the open front door—and straight into the hard, strong shape of Judah Ambinder.

Chapter Two

Judah froze in shock as Annie buried her face against his chest, her arms wrapped around him so tight he could feel her heart thudding. “Oh God, Judah!” Tears were streaming down her face as she babbled, “I thought you were gone, I didn’t know what happened, the house was all empty and I didn’t know where you were!”

She looked up at him finally, a frantic sort of happiness shining in her eyes. “How are you? How’s Tommy? Is he okay? God, I’ve missed you!”

He wanted to shake her. He wanted to hit her, almost. For twenty years she’d been gone, vanished off the face of the earth, and now here she was smiling at him, telling him she’d missed him?

How in twenty years could she have changed so little? She was still as impulsive, still as heedless of consequences, blissfully unaware of how her actions affected others.

He wanted to kiss her so badly he almost couldn’t breathe.

He held himself rigid, not returning her embrace. Uncertainty bloomed like a shadow in the hazel depths of her eyes, and she dropped her arms, looking away.

Judah felt his heart lurch back into motion as her gaze released him, the sudden rush of blood making his head spin.

Annie Parsons. If she’d changed at all in twenty years, he couldn’t see it. Oh sure, there were a few wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, and the lustrous brown hair which her mother had always kept neatly trimmed now hung in a careless shag cut he wasn’t sure he liked. Unthinkingly, he started to reach out and brush the dust from her hair—then Judah stopped himself, fisting his hand at his side.

What in hell did he think he was doing?

Gritting his jaw, he jerked his chin at the hillside. “Came over to see what spooked the livestock. What are you doing here, Annie?”

She gave him a quick, almost guilty sidelong glance, then shrugged, her gaze tracing the low, weathered hills. “I just...wanted to see how you were, I guess. I’m sorry I panicked. When I saw the house...”

He nodded to himself. He knew that panic. It had flared in his own gut the day she’d disappeared, making him push past her crying mother and storm up the stairs, determined to see for himself.

Her abandoned room, her empty closet, had hit him like a hard punch straight to the stomach. Even now, the memory could still rock him if he wasn’t careful.

“It just got to be too much to keep up, after Dad died.” His terse explanation didn’t begin to carry the weight of grief of those days, the way everything had seemed to fall apart all at once. Even her parents had moved away shortly thereafter.

But Annie must’ve caught an echo of his emotion anyway—she looked at him, soft concern showing in her hazel eyes. “When did it happen?”

It was his turn to shrug, looking out over the pastures. “Fifteen years ago.” *Five years after you left. Where did you go, Annie?* He kicked at a clump of dried leaves clotting the porch, making them rustle. “It’s amazing how quick things go to pieces out here.”

She was still watching him, her gaze seeming to cut straight through the wall he was trying so hard to keep between them. The warm compassion in her eyes stroked him in a way that both angered and soothed him.

Damn it, Annie, stop looking at me like that.

“I’m sorry, Judah.”

“Yeah, well...” He nodded briefly, pushing away her sympathy. “Ma’s doing all right. She’s sixty-three now, can you believe it? Sixty-three and still gets up at five a.m. to feed the chickens.”

“And Tommy? How is he?”

Judah froze at the question. Annie’s eyes were wide, direct, the concern shading their hazel depths not only for him now. Her voice was so gentle, damn it, asking about Tommy. As if she still loved him. As if she still cared.

Anger flared inside him, along with the old, twisted jealousy. If she’d ever truly loved Tommy, if she’d cared about him at all, she would never have let Judah kiss her beneath the bleachers. Never would have let him touch her as he’d dreamed of doing. Never would have run to his arms in the night...

Judah cleared his throat. Against his will, his gaze flicked downward, tracing the line of her thighs through her faded jeans. “He’s all right. He’s in Washington these days. Bought a farm there. He’s married now.” He watched Annie closely, wanting to see her reaction.

If his words surprised her, she hid it well. “That’s great. When was this?”

“Seven, eight years ago. Something like that. He’s got kids,” Judah elaborated. “Two boys and a girl.”

Something flickered briefly in her eyes, but she only smiled. “That makes you an uncle. Congratulations.”

“Yeah, I guess it does.” He cleared his throat again.

“And you?” she asked. “How about you?”

Her eyes were too soft. Too warm. Too lovely. Judah shifted uncomfortably and pushed back his Stetson. “Me? I’ll never leave Montana.” He snorted. “You know me.”

“Do I?”

Two words, one little question, and suddenly it seemed like there wasn't enough air for his lungs. Never mind the vast blue sky above them, or the miles of open, rolling hills all around. Judah moved closer, his voice dropping half an octave. "I'll always be here, Annie. You know that."

Her gaze rose to meet his, full of shadows. Maybe longing. Something thrummed in the air between them, and Judah stepped away quickly.

Christ, what was he *doing*?

"So, how long you in town for?" He leaned against the porch railing, absently noting the flaking paint. *Ought to do something about that*, he thought, then: *Why bother? It's not like it matters.*

But it still broke his heart.

Annie shrugged. "Just overnight, really. I booked a room at the boarding house."

He nodded. "You drive out here?"

"Yeah. I parked up on the ridge. I...I didn't want anyone to see me."

Which was probably smart, Judah admitted. Even thoughtful. Maybe Annie had changed, if only a little.

Suddenly, he wasn't so happy with the idea.

Then he pictured her sliding pell-mell down the slope, sending dirt flying and scaring the cattle half to pieces. He had to fight to suppress a smile. Yeah, that was the Annie he remembered, all right.

"Well, come on," he said, straightening. "I'll give you a lift."

She was silent as he drove down the long, dusty ranch road, hopping out without his asking to open the livestock gate at the far end. Her hair hung in her face, and in the afternoon light she looked as slim and nimble as she had at seventeen. She grinned at him as she climbed back into the truck. "Thought I forgot that, didn't you?"

Judah merely grunted and turned onto Route 32.

But as they rattled up the dirt track running up to the ridge, he heard himself saying, "If you're bored tonight, go on down to the pool hall. They put in a dance floor," he added awkwardly. *Shut up, Judah!*

"Are you going to be there?"

"Dunno. I doubt it."

Hell no, Judah, and what in hell are you thinking?

"Well, maybe I'll think about it, then," she answered. "Thanks for the lift. And say hi to your mom for me. I miss her." Opening the door, she hesitated. "It's good to see you, Judah."

He didn't answer, and after a moment she climbed out. He waited as she walked to what looked like a brand-new Buick, started it up and backed it around. Her eyes met his once through the windshield, and she waved as she drove past.

He didn't wave back.

Judah watched in the rearview mirror until the Buick was out of sight. He wasn't going to the pool hall. It had taken too many years for the hole in his chest to stop aching constantly. Too many sleepless nights wondering where she was, how she was. Wondering if she was all right.

She was fine, and that was enough. He didn't need to know more than that. He didn't *want* to know more.

And he sure as hell didn't want her getting anywhere near Tommy.

Putting the truck in gear, he turned it around, his hands tight on the wheel as he drove back past the old house. Already it seemed impossible to believe she'd actually been there, appearing suddenly out of the past like a ghost.

The open door was what had attracted his attention, making him go up onto the porch to see if someone was inside. He'd caught folks squatting there a few times, hitch-hikers and vagrants and such. He suspected the local teenagers sometimes used it as a hangout.

To have Annie run out the open door and into his arms had staggered him on a level he wasn't sure he could deal with. He probed gingerly, feeling for cracks in his armor, testing to see if his heart was still intact. He couldn't tell—he could no longer recall what it had felt like yesterday.

He wasn't certain, actually, when it had last felt a thing.

Time was like that, he mused—it kept creeping by you. The days piled up like boards in a lumber mill, each one hardly any different from the next, until something shocked you out of your routine, making you question who you were, what you wanted...

Remembering the feel of her body pressed against him, her arms clutching him with such fierce need his cock had hardened automatically, Judah clenched his jaw.

One thing for sure, he didn't want Annie Parsons.

And he was, by God, not—repeat not—going to the pool hall tonight.

He drove over the next hillock and down into the meadow, and pulled up beside the new ranch—a modern split-level in which everything worked, nothing needed fixing, no one screamed at each other or shoved or came to blows, ever. Parking his Silverado beside Tommy's white F-150, Judah took a deep breath and went into the house.

Ma was knitting on the old paisley sofa, which still looked out of place in the dull, beige-toned living room. Seeing him in the archway, she looked up and smiled. Judah hesitated a moment, then continued on down the hall.

Tommy looked over as he walked into the kitchen. "Everything all right out at the old place?"

"Fine," he answered, opening the fridge and taking out a beer. Tommy glanced at the clock in surprise. It was only one-thirty, but Judah didn't care. He needed a drink, damn it.

And damn Annie Parsons, he added as he started to open it and realized his hands were shaking.

Chapter Three

They really *had* put in a dance floor, Annie saw with some surprise. Not just a little ten-by-twelve Pergo square, either.

The front half of the pool hall had changed hardly at all—the billiard tables still listed like ships at sea, and the worn wooden counter running around the walls was scarred with ancient cigarette burns and randomly carved graffiti. The solid clack of pool balls punctuated the strains of Johnny Cash playing somewhere in the background, while men circled the tables in their blue jeans and Stetsons, sucking on beers and muttering in low voices.

It all looked the same. It looked exactly the same. Even the neon Budweiser signs could have been twenty years old.

But beyond the short, utilitarian bar the back wall had been knocked out, opening up a cavernous space which was once, she suspected, part of the old Woolworth's stockroom. A raised stage at the far end provided room for a band, although none was in evidence. Instead, a jukebox played in one corner, its colored lights reflecting in the large mirrored ball that rotated over the darkened dance floor. Around the edges, Formica tables with sturdy metal legs were clustered, most of them empty. One solitary couple swayed, hip-locked, to the music.

She hadn't seen the Silverado Judah had been driving this afternoon parked outside. Then again, she hadn't really expected to.

Why had he lied to her? She was almost certain he had. It was the throat-clearing, she mused—it always gave him away. Taciturn, inscrutable, so self-contained she'd wondered for years if he even liked her, Judah nevertheless royally sucked at lying.

It was obvious he hadn't been exactly thrilled to see her. Not that she blamed him, but he could have at least smiled. Even once would have done. But he hadn't. He'd been rigid as a fence post, even when she'd hugged him.

Annie flushed slightly, remembering. Hugged him? She'd practically thrown herself at him. God, what had she been thinking?

She'd just been so relieved to see him, was all. Relieved and overwrought and not thinking at all—not, at least, till his coldness had finally penetrated.

If he'd missed her at all, it sure hadn't shown.

Well, that was what she'd hoped for, wasn't it? Hadn't she wanted him to be over it? Over her?

But then why had he lied? The question had haunted her all afternoon as she'd wandered through Melgrove, revisiting old haunts. Was he still angry at her? Were he and Tommy still not talking, and he didn't want her to know?

She hoped it *was* true, damn it—she *wanted* Tommy to be married, happily raising kids somewhere in Washington state. Of all of them, he deserved it most.

Of all of them, he'd been the only one who hadn't done anything wrong.

Picturing Tommy's broad, easy grin, Annie sighed to herself. God, she'd give just about anything to know if he'd forgiven her, if he'd gotten over her betrayal and gone on with his life.

Well, she wasn't going to find out, apparently. Not, at least, if it depended on Judah.

But Judah was hardly the only person in town she could ask.

Straightening her shoulders, she skirted the pool tables, commandeered a stool at the bar and ordered a beer. The bartender glanced at her sidelong as he popped it open, his gaze lingering as if he was trying to trace a resemblance.

"You from around here?"

It was the opening she'd been hoping for. Annie smiled as she tilted the bottle. "Not anymore. I used to be, though."

"Thought so. You go to Melgrove High?"

"Sure did, Wally Harmon, and I'm insulted that you don't remember."

His eyes widened. "Annie? Annie Parsons?"

She grinned. "How've you been, Wally?"

She knocked back the whiskey he insisted on buying her, making chit-chat about his wife and two kids, slowly sipping her beer until enough time had passed for her to ask without pushing, "You know who I wonder about sometimes? Tommy Ambinder. Whatever happened to him, do you know?"

"Tommy? That's right—you two were a real item that last year of high school, weren't you? Least till you left all of a sudden like that." His gaze sharpened, becoming inquisitive, and Annie could almost see the gossip-gears turning.

To forestall the obvious question, she asked quickly, "So where's he at these days? Is he still around?"

"You might say that," Wally answered, grinning. Turning from her, he leaned over the back side of the bar. "Hey, Tommy! C'mere!"

Oh God. Annie froze, something skittering queasily in her stomach. Suddenly, the whiskey she'd slugged didn't seem like such a good idea.

In the back room, a lone figure unfolded from behind a table. Annie watched it, one hand going to her hair which she hadn't done more than rake a brush through after her shower at the boarding house—and why, for God's sake, hadn't she put on any make-up?

God oh God oh God.

Well, there was no help for it now. Nervous, uneasy, she shifted on the bar stool as that tall figure walked toward her, refractions from the mirrored ball catching briefly in his blond hair, leaving his face in shadows. Halfway to the bar he stopped short in surprise, and Annie braced herself for the coming rejection.

Instead, Tommy lengthened his stride, his eyes wide as he came around the bar. “Annie? Holy June bugs in July, is that really you?”

He was smiling—he *couldn't* be smiling—but he was, a grin so huge it seemed to stretch to his ears. With a whoop, he swept her off her stool, spinning her around and sloshing her beer, and suddenly Annie was smiling back, hugging him, forgetting all about her messy hair.

“I never—”

“Where have you—”

“It’s been so—”

“When did you get so *tall*?”

They finally stopped talking over each other for half a second and simply stood, looking. Then they both burst out laughing. “You first,” Tommy said gallantly. “Let me get you another beer.”

“Thanks.” Grinning, she let go of his hand and watched as he got two more beers from Wally. He *had* gotten tall, taller even than Judah. His shoulders had filled out and now rolled like a young bull’s, the muscles showing even through his soft flannel shirt. His hair was longer, not clipped into the crew cut she remembered, but still the same sandy, sun-tinted gold.

He glanced at her from under shaggy bangs as he paid for the beers. *Wow*, Annie thought, suddenly seeing him—really seeing him. His features had become firmer over the years, the underlying bones of his face settling under his boyish good looks into a quiet strength that reminded her of his brother.

“Damn, Annie, I can’t believe you’re here.”

Small wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened as he smiled, his eyes glowing with a familiar warmth that set her heart racing. His voice was so soft it stroked along her senses, shortening her breath as remembered feelings tumbled through her.

He is inside her, his hips flexing as he pushes gently against her opening. They’ve come close before, but never this close. Never with him actually inside her, the hard thickness of his cock entering her bit by bit. It’s exhilarating, but it’s scary too—she knows that what they are doing is irreversible, there is no going back, and Tommy knows it too. She can see it in his eyes, the thread of care and worry woven through his obvious desire, a care which has been there every day of their lives.

It’s why he is so gentle, despite his own raging hunger—like her, he has never done this before. Not like this. Not all the way.

This afternoon, she is determined to give him that. She’s even brought a condom.

He'd been nervous, putting it on, his fingers fumbling awkwardly with the slippery latex as he rolled it down over his jutting shaft. Annie hadn't been the only one who giggled.

Now she feels it sliding against her, slick and foreign-feeling against her tender flesh. She can't help but wonder what it would feel like without it, what it would be like to have just Tommy inside her, skin against skin, smooth and silky and...

Tommy groans, his head tossing back, his entire body going rigid above her. Staring up at him, she clenches her inner muscles again, feeling her own arousal leap as Tommy's groans turn desperate, his cock squeezed tight by her inexperienced efforts.

A wholly feminine satisfaction unfurls inside her and Annie repeats the experiment, gripping him so tightly his face goes slack and mindless, all his attention centered on the throbbing bliss in his groin. His muscles bunch reflexively, his ass flexing beneath her hands as he pushes in again harder, his movements jerky now, barely within his control. His cock swells inside her, stretching her uncomfortably, and Annie bites her lip. Then Tommy is surging forward, plunging in so deep it makes her gasp, his groans growing hoarser as his hips pump uncontrollably.

"Oh God, Annie. Jesus, I can't..."

He freezes above her, his groans choking off, and his face contorts as he peaks, pressing hard against her.

Just a little harder, she pleads silently, squirming against him, working her mons instinctively against the jut of his pubic bone. Just a little more, Tommy, please...

Her movements make him shudder, his whole body quivering as his cock throbs inside her. Sweaty, overwhelmed, he slumps against her, his head coming to rest on the pillow of her shoulder. His mouth searches blindly along the curve of her collarbone, and Annie strokes his sandy hair, fighting against her own unsated hunger, trying to find enjoyment in Tommy's obvious satisfaction.

When he finally lifts his head, his eyes shine with something very near to worship.

There was an echo of that look still in the way he gazed at her now. Annie felt her breath heaving in her chest as she stared back at him, cheeks heating with the memory.

Their very first time. The week after the Melgrove Rodeo. She remembered it like it was yesterday.

His expression changed as he watched her, a question forming in the depths of those clear blue eyes. Then he took her hand. "C'mon. Let's go snag a seat."

He settled her at a table in the back room near the stage, as far away from the jukebox as they could get. It was relatively quiet here, cozy in the semi-darkness. The lone couple still rocked slowly, hips glued to hips, despite the up-tempo beat of the Shania Twain song now playing. Annie glanced at them, and then glanced away.

“Now,” Tommy said, turning his chair around and folding his arms across the back, “tell me everything.”

She laughed nervously. “What’s to tell? I work for Missoula County. My job’s a mass of paperwork. I had a cat for a while. That pretty much covers it.”

He cocked an eyebrow mock-sternly, as if to say *Twenty years and that’s it? I don’t buy it*. “You ever marry?”

She shook her head.

“No kids?”

“Nope.” She smiled gamely, ignoring the sudden ache in her chest.

“Pity,” he said, matching her light tone. “You’d have made a great mom.”

“Hey, I’m not done yet, boy!” she protested. “Don’t count me out yet.”

He returned her smile with one of his own—and God, how she remembered that grin! It sent little tingles all the way to her toes, warming every inch of her. Then his gaze grew serious. “You were that close, all this time.”

His eyes reproached her, and she looked down at her beer. “I know. Big, dramatic exit and I never left the state. Crazy, huh?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Not crazy. But why didn’t you ever come back?”

“God, Tommy! How can you ask me that?”

“Yeah.” He sighed deeply. “I guess we didn’t make it very easy on you, huh?”

We? She glanced at him, startled. He caught her expression and grimaced. “Hell, I’ve known you since forever, Annie. I always knew you had a crush on Ju.” She stared at him, totally taken aback. He grinned again, self-deprecatingly. “Doesn’t mean I wasn’t jealous, though.”

Annie just looked at him. God, he amazed her. “Tommy Ambinder, you are just too good to be true.”

His grin turned wicked. “I ain’t *that* good.” The twinkle in his eyes attested to that, all right—it was downright evil. Pushing himself to his feet, he held out a hand. “Dance with me.”

“But...” she protested weakly as he pulled her from her seat and onto the dance floor. He shook his head again, pulling her into his arms.

“No buts. Just dance, Annie.”

Chapter Four

Grunting, Judah hefted the heavy sledgehammer, swinging it in an arc and bringing it down with a solid thud on the flat head of a fence post, driving it deeper. He stood a moment, his chest heaving, the muscles in his shoulders aching with weariness. Then he slowly drew the sledgehammer back up and swung it again.

This time, he could feel the impact all the way to his spine. Letting the head of the sledgehammer slide to the dirt, he reached out and gripped the post, testing it.

Not so much as an inch of wiggle. Satisfied, he slapped the new post once with his leather-encased hand and then leaned against it, folding his arms across the flat top as he tugged off his work gloves to let the sweat dry.

Sunset had long since faded, leaving only a band of ruddy purple low against the Montana hills. Overhead, stars were already coming out in the deep vault of the sky. But stringing fences wasn't the sort of job you left half-done—not when there had only been five more posts to go, and you would have just had to come all the way back out again tomorrow.

He couldn't begin to count how many fence posts he'd pounded today, high along the ridges surrounding their land, or how many lengths of new barbed wire he'd strung between them. It was a chore he'd been putting off for weeks, although it had needed doing—so had everything else, it always seemed.

But today... Today being alone up here had been exactly what he'd wanted. The mindless rhythm of the work, the satisfying thud of the sledgehammer, had given him the perfect outlet for his frustration.

Now he leaned against the fence post, sucking in deep draughts of the clear night air, feeling clean, emptied out of confusing emotions. His gaze swept across the landscape, tracing the rumpled hills. He loved it out here, he admitted. He loved the rugged wildness of eastern Montana, the weathered hills, the steep arroyos and sudden, unexpected patches of verdant green.

Far to the west, he could see the bulky thrust of mountains like a shadow against the horizon. To the south was a hazy glow of light.

Melgrove. Judah gazed steadily at the distant lights, feeling his heart thudding heavily in his chest as his pulse slowly eased.

He'd never begrudged Tommy anything before—not his easy-going good looks or his chance to play sports, a chance Judah, as the elder brother, had never had. Okay, so sometimes when they were younger he'd felt a twinge watching Tommy and Annie play, the two of them as easy together as puppies. But as

often as not Annie would look up at him, those big hazel eyes shining with welcome, and reach out to tug him into whatever goofy kid game they'd invented. He'd play for a while—just to appease her, or so he'd told himself—and then go back to simply watching.

Even now he could remember the feel of her tiny hand taking his.

What had made her come back? Now, after all these years? She'd wanted to see if they were all right, she'd said. But that seemed too easy, somehow. Too pat.

Well, why shouldn't he ask her? After all, what could it hurt? A quick beer with an old friend couldn't hurt anything, right?

If you want a beer, Judah, there's plenty in the fridge at home.

Slinging the sledgehammer into the back of the truck, he climbed into the truck and turned it around, leaving the engine running. Pulling his work gloves back on, he held the barbed wire firmly in place as he hammered the staple into the fence post by headlight. Finished, he gazed back along the line of fresh, gleaming wire.

He couldn't ignore the irony of stringing fences, today of all days.

The question was, was that really what he wanted? To shut her out, pretend that she'd never been there? This afternoon, he'd been certain of it. Now he wasn't so sure.

It had taken five years for Tommy to start speaking to him again. Till then they'd managed to live in one house like strangers, never saying a word more to each other than they'd had to—although Judah had tried a few times, that first year after Annie had disappeared, his heart aching every time he'd heard Tommy's muffled sobs from the next room.

Crying was an indulgence Judah hadn't allowed himself. Couldn't allow himself. There'd been too much to be done.

For five years he'd lived in a strange kind of limbo, watching his dad get paler and thinner, his Ma's worried gaze shifting from her husband to her two estranged boys.

It had taken the loss of their father to finally bridge the gulf Annie had created. Was he really willing to risk opening those wounds back up just to see her again?

He wouldn't necessarily have to, he realized. Tommy didn't know she was here. It would be easy as pie to sneak off into town, go have a beer with Annie at the pool hall with no one the wiser.

He could feel his mind coming up with excuses—the same kinds of excuses he'd let himself use when he was younger. He needed to get gas anyway; the truck was running low. He wanted to see that action movie everyone had been talking about last summer, maybe he'd stop by the video store and rent it.

But he wasn't twenty anymore—he was almost forty-one. Too old for horniness to be a defense for his actions. And far too old to let himself act without thinking.

He slung the extra barbed wire into the back of the Silverado, hearing it rattle against the metal sides as he started back toward the house.

The night air was soft, coming through the open window. The buttery glow of a rising half-moon filled the truck cab with shadows. In them, he could almost picture Annie still sitting there, on the seat beside him, could almost catch the faint trace of her scent...

Swearing to himself, he pulled the truck over and shut it off. Damn, why couldn't he just get her out of his head? It had been twenty years, for chrissakes. How after twenty years could this woman still have so much hold on him?

She is sixteen and smiling as they jounce along the creek track, squeezed between him and Tommy on the narrow truck seat. Her breasts, which have filled out seemingly overnight, jiggle beneath her halter top at every bump. Distracted, Judah misses the gear and throws the farm truck into low, stalling the engine. Annie laughs and he shifts uncomfortably, trying to hide the straining bulge in his crotch.

That night, he knows, he will think about her. He tries not to—he knows it's wrong—but even the Playboys he's got hidden under his mattress can't compete with the fresh, vibrant sweetness of her.

"Hey, Ju, you want me to drive?" Tommy teases, grinning. Annie laughs again. Judah scowls and restarts the truck.

Annie's leg is pressed against his, teasing the hair which has started coating his thighs. They're both wearing shorts—they're going swimming—and the feel of her soft, tanned skin against his is almost more than he can bear.

Somewhere over the past two years she's gotten leggy, and he can't help a quick peek downward, following the line of her thighs up to where they disappear beneath her cutoffs.

His cock throbs eagerly, and Judah yanks his gaze away.

Tommy's arm is wrapped companionably around Annie's shoulders. She leans into him, seeming blissfully unaware of how this pushes her thigh even tighter against Judah's. She whispers something in Tommy's ear and for that one second Judah hates him, hates him with all the passion of Cain for Abel. It is too easy to imagine her whispering in his ear, her warm, sweet-scented breath making his head spin.

His imagination goes further, picturing her lips moving against his earlobe, her tongue flicking inside...

The gears grind as he downshifts viciously and jerks the truck to a halt.

"Whoa there, Captain. I dinna think she can take anymore."

Annie bursts into giggles at Tommy's lame-ass imitation. Gritting his jaw, Judah reaches over and unceremoniously opens the passenger door, dumping Tommy, who has been leaning against it, half onto the ground. "Hey!"

"Go on, you two. I'll catch up in a second."

Tommy dusts himself off and grabs the picnic basket from the back, but Annie hesitates a moment after she climbs out, leaning back in the open window of the door she's just closed. "Ju? You okay?" Her hazel eyes are flecked with worry.

For him.

Judah closes his eyes a moment, swallowing. "Yeah. I'm fine."

She watches him dubiously, as if she doesn't quite believe him. Why should she, after all? He's lying—and she knows it, the same way she somehow knew he felt left out when they were younger.

But unlike then, this isn't a game she can invite him into.

She lingers until he smiles and jerks his chin after Tommy, who is disappearing down the creek bank. "Go on. I'll catch up." Reluctantly, she leaves, looking back once over her shoulder.

A moment later, Judah hears a loud splash and the sound of two voices laughing. He closes his eyes again, his heart and his hard-on both aching.

Judah stared out the windshield at the glimmering surface of the creek. All around the truck, small night noises created a kind of rustling silence—the gentle burble of the water, a hush of breeze through the cottonwoods, the pinging of the engine. Even the moonlight, he fancied, created a kind of soft hum, just below the threshold of hearing. It vibrated in the air, in the darkness, in his blood...

The truck door thunked solidly shut behind him as Judah strode toward the creek, unbuttoning his denim work shirt as he went. At the edge he stopped and peeled his sweaty T-shirt over his head. He stood there a moment in his jeans and work boots, feeling the night breeze play through the dark hair dusting his chest.

Tilting his head back, he imagined soft fingers running over his skin, down his stomach...

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Judah dropped to his knees at the edge of the creek and shoved his arms in the water, splashing it over himself until the grime and dried sweat were washed away. Running a hand through his wet hair, he smoothed it back, grateful that he kept it short enough not to tangle. He used the T-shirt to towel off, then drew his work shirt back on.

For a while he simply sat on the creek bank, watching the moonlight shimmer atop the flowing water. The image of Annie haunted him. He could picture her sitting there in the pool hall, maybe with a beer propped in front of her, waiting, wondering if he'd come.

Why had he done that? Why had he suggested it, if he'd never meant to go?

He glanced at the crest of the hills to the south, where the wash of lights from Melgrove glowed like milk against the sky. He stared at that distant glow, something like an old bruise aching deep in his chest.

"It's good to see you, Judah."

Her voice seemed to whisper in his ear. Judah closed his eyes, scowling against the sudden hunger those five words provoked. He wanted to see her again, he finally admitted to himself. He wanted it so desperately he'd even told her where to meet him.

He wasn't going to go, though. Not this time. Not tonight.

Yanking his shirt back on, he headed back to the truck, starting it up with an angry roar. Dirt kicked beneath the tires as he gunned it, feeling beleaguered.

Even now, he could still see her in the truck cab with him, the afternoon sunlight sending gleams of honey-gold through her brown hair...

Ah, hell.

Tromping on the brakes, he sat there a moment. Then he spun the wheel, turning the truck southward, away from the house and toward the distant lights.

The jukebox had switched to a ballad, something slow and heartfelt. Tommy held her close, his body brushing lightly against hers. Annie rocked to the music, her pulse racing pleasantly. She couldn't help but be aware of all the small changes, the way his body, no longer adolescent-skinny, had filled out until his arms around her felt like solid oak. Walling her in. Keeping her safe. Unable to help herself, she leaned her head against his chest and closed her eyes.

The scent of him filled her nostrils—warm, familiar, totally male. She felt him feather a kiss across her hair. Annie smiled, hugging him closer. “So you're not married, I take it.”

His chest was so broad under her cheek, the solid muscles of his back shifting against her palms as he hugged her in return. “Nope.”

“No kids? No farm in Washington?”

“Washington?” He drew his head back, giving her a puzzled smile.

“I guess not, huh?”

“You guessed right. Why would you think that?”

“No particular reason.” The words were out of her mouth before she thought about them. Annie shifted uncomfortably, biting her lip.

Why was she protecting Judah? After all, he'd lied to her. The sudden certainty of it roused her anger for the first time. That he hadn't wanted her to see Tommy was one thing, and pretty damn obvious. But to deny her even news of him, to make up a whole wild goose story...

She still didn't know why. And really, it just didn't matter, she told herself sternly. She wasn't going to wreck this moment over Judah, damn it.

Tommy watched her another moment, then gathered her to him, tucking her head back under his chin as he held her close.

Her eyes fluttered shut and she sighed, letting go of her anger. God, how long had it been since she'd felt like this—this warm, this protected?

Twenty years, Annie.

She was drifting in a dream, she thought hazily. It had to be a dream—nothing in life ever really felt this good.

Did it?

She leaned her head against his shoulder and let her gaze play over the darkened room. The dance floor was empty now. She could see Wally watching them from the bar, a friendly smile on his face as he polished glasses.

Overhead, the mirrored ball glimmered in the darkness, small flecks of colored light dancing here and there across its surface.

"I've missed you, Tommy," she whispered.

"I missed you too." His arms tightened around her, pressing her closer. She could feel the warm, firm swell of his erection against her belly. Annie closed her eyes again.

God, it was like her insides were melting. Sweetness pooled inside her like liquid honey. Tommy's lips traced the line of her neck and Annie sighed into the sensation, feeling her entire body go boneless and limp.

He could do anything he wanted with her, she realized. Anything at all. She couldn't say no. She didn't even want to.

Tommy tilted her chin up and looked down at her. Annie thought she might melt entirely under the gentle heat of that gaze.

"Annie..."

Then she felt him stiffen, his gaze moving past her. The softness in his warm blue eyes hardened, growing colder. His arms tightened around her, pinning her against his chest so she couldn't see, but she knew.

She *knew*.

Oh God, how stupid could she be?

Chapter Five

Tommy is moving inside her, slow and easy. He's already peaked once and hardened again, and now is stroking her with a long, lazy rhythm he knows drives her crazy. Annie tosses below him, shoving her hips up impatiently.

Tommy's mouth quirks upward. "I thought you were the one who kept telling me to slow down."

"That was earlier, Tommy," she whispers, irritated. "C'mon, it's my turn now."

"Is that so?" he murmurs, but—thank you, God!—he presses into her harder, his hand closing over her breast as he tugs at her nipple. Biting her lip, Annie concentrates on the fierce fire building inside her, willing it higher, higher, wanting it to explode.

Behind them the door slams open, and Tommy jerks out of her, leaving her gasping.

"Tommy, you better get your ass out of—" Judah breaks off suddenly, seeing Annie. His eyes are huge, dark, seeming to fill her whole world as his gaze locks on hers.

She stares back, a blush heating her cheeks, unable to look away. Her ears are ringing, her body still throbbing around the sudden emptiness inside her. She is distantly aware that her T-shirt is pushed up past her breasts, her nipples hard and exposed.

Judah's gaze drops to them. His pupils dilate. Tommy scowls and covers her quickly.

"Jesus, Ju! Don't you ever knock?"

"Didn't think there was any reason to," he answers—but his eyes move back to meet Annie's. Something shifts in their depths, but she can't read it. Her heart is pounding too hard for her to think clearly.

Tommy's ears have gone red with embarrassment, or annoyance. "What do you want, Ju?"

Judah glances at his brother, and Annie gulps, grateful for the reprieve. "Ma and Dad are on their way home. I didn't think you wanted them catching you still in bed." His gaze swings back to her. "Especially not now."

Mortified, Annie wishes she could sink straight through the floor. The look in Judah's eyes is almost more than she can stand. His usual cool indifference has been replaced by something harder, something hot and judgmental.

And yet having him stare at her, naked under the sheet, makes her breath come short in a way she's only imagined. She's dreamed about him so many times, watching his long legs pump up and down as he bikes in front of her, or sneaking glimpses at his profile as he drives her and Tommy to town.

Now he's looking at her, really looking. And all she can do is stare back in silence.

Then he is gone, tugging the door shut behind him, and she slumps back against Tommy's pillow, so aroused and embarrassed she is nearly crying.

Tommy looks down at her, his forehead creased with suspicion. "What the hell was that all about?"

Annie whirled in Tommy's arms, her cheeks flaming. Judah stood there, his mouth twisted into a flat, grim smile, his dark gaze seeming to bore right through her. Not so much as a hint of amusement reached his cold eyes.

"I see you two found each other."

Tommy's hands gripped her arms, turning her to face him. "You knew he was coming?" he demanded. Annie shook her head violently.

"No! No, I..."

I came here to ask about you, Tommy! He said he wasn't coming. I didn't know!

But Tommy was already looking past her, his eyes narrowing dangerously as his gaze shifted to Judah. Under the force of his rage, the last traces of boyishness in his face disappeared. He tugged Annie back against him, his arms defiantly circling her waist.

Only this time, it didn't feel like protection. This time it felt like a cage.

Judah's denim work shirt was streaked with dirt, Annie noticed, his jeans coated with flecks of dry grass as if he'd come straight from the fields. His hair was damp, though, the wetness darkening it till it looked almost black. Broad, powerful, he stood there facing his brother, his face lined with careworn wrinkles she hadn't noticed before.

"What were you going to do, Ju? Just not mention she was here? Sneak off into town to see her without telling me? Was that it?" She could feel the tension running through Tommy's frame, the muscles coiling beneath his skin like snakes poised to strike. "You weren't even going to tell me she came back," he spat. "Were you?"

Judah's jaw bunched as the questions buffeted him. His eyes grew blacker with each one, his fists clenching at his sides. Annie could see the tautness in him building higher, like a rope about to snap.

It was happening again. It was all happening again! Despair and fury twisted together inside her. If only Judah had told her... If he hadn't made her come looking...

Yanking herself from Tommy's arms, she whispered hoarsely, "Why did you lie to me, Judah? *Why?*"

"Because I didn't trust you not to hurt him again!" The words bellowed out of him, and Annie froze, staring.

Oh God.

Guilt twisted through her, freezing her blood. The most obvious reason, and it hadn't even occurred to her.

Then Tommy laughed into the sudden silence, the sound harsh and mocking. "Well, isn't that noble of you, Ju. Swooping in to save your baby brother. I see you even bathed first." His gaze flicked mockingly over Judah's damp hair and dirty jeans.

Judah's head snapped back, one hand moving abortively toward his hair, then dropping. Tommy moved closer, his voice soft and insinuating. "It wouldn't have anything to do with wanting her to think I was unavailable, would it? Nah, it wouldn't have a thing to do with wanting her for yourself."

Judah merely watched him, his eyes glittering like onyx as they shifted. He might have been carved of granite.

"Well in case you hadn't noticed," Tommy sneered, "I don't need your protection. Come on, Annie. Let's get out of here."

His hand hard on her arm, he tugged her toward the door.

Judah stood unmoving as the two of them left, his gaze still fixed on the place where they'd been. He thought maybe Annie had looked back once. He couldn't be sure.

"I see you even bathed first."

Yes. That's what had stopped him. That, and the realization that everything his brother had accused him of was true.

He'd *wanted* Annie to believe Tommy was married. He'd wanted to see her again—he'd even told her where. And whatever deceptions he might try to kid himself into, Judah knew with a certain leaden heaviness that he never would have told Tommy she'd been there.

It was true. It was all true.

"I see you even bathed first."

He had, hadn't he? At least as much as possible without returning to the house. Because Tommy would have heard him, or so he'd thought. Tommy would have wanted to know why he was getting changed, where he was going.

Had he really managed to convince himself it had been about protecting Tommy? Judah's mouth twisted in self-disgust.

Except Tommy hadn't even been there. He'd already been in town, running into Annie by sheerest bad luck. Only that wasn't the truth either, was it? He'd met up with Annie because Judah had sent her here, to the pool hall. Sent her here so that he'd know where to find her.

Christ, how many self-deceptions could one man stomach?

God, I've missed you! Her laughing words, the way her eyes had shone through the tears, came back to torture him. Why hadn't he simply kissed her silly right then and to hell with the consequences? Why couldn't he just pull her onto a dance floor the way Tommy had done?

If it had been any other man, Judah would have flattened him. Mopped the damn floor with his low-down ass. But the expression on Annie's face...

Her eyes had been closed, savoring the feel of Tommy's lips on her neck, her whole body leaning into his, warm and trusting. Judah had frozen to the spot, buffeted by emotions he couldn't suppress.

He'd wanted to rip Tommy's hands off for daring to touch her. Wanted to grab her and pull her against him, savaging her mouth with kisses till she saw nothing, felt nothing, *thought* nothing but of him.

But Tommy with his easygoing smile, his naïve conviction that the world would be kind to him, had a sort of fool's courage Judah knew he lacked. Having had his heart shattered once, he'd sworn he would never risk it again—not until he saw Tommy blithely risking *his*, putting himself out there for one more chance with Annie.

All the time that Judah had been putting up fences, Tommy had been here dancing with Annie in his arms.

Which one of them did that make the fool?

Worse, though, was the fact that he loved his brother—and had been willing to stab him in the back anyway. As vicious as Tommy's words had sounded, they weren't half as hateful as the actions they'd described.

And whose fault is that, Judah? Whose dishonesty just caused that little scene?

A dull flush of shame coated his cheeks, and Judah turned to leave the pool hall. For a fleeting moment, the idea of getting blind, stinking drunk made him pause.

But no matter how drunk he got, he wouldn't forget, would he? Wouldn't forget what he'd just tried to do. Wouldn't forget the humiliating, inescapable knowledge that no matter how much he loved his brother, he wanted Annie more.

Chapter Six

Tommy didn't stop at the boarding house, as she'd half expected him to. Annie glanced over at him almost fearfully—he looked so grim, his sandy brows knotted low above his eyes as he scowled ahead through the windshield.

In profile, she could see the muscles in his jaw leaping.

"Tommy..."

Abruptly, he rammed on the brakes, pulling the truck over in front of the Melgrove Supermart. "Do you want me or not, Annie? Tell me now."

In the wash of orange light from the scattered streetlamps his expression looked fierce, even wild. "Tommy, I..."

"Yes or no, Annie." His gaze fixed her, piercing so sharply she could barely breathe.

She should lie, she thought frantically. It was too much, the way he was looking at her, the way the blood was surging through her veins...

He was Tommy Ambinder. He was her oldest friend. She couldn't lie to him, not even if she wanted to.

"Yes," she whispered.

And with that one tiny word the wild fury left his features, leaving only the fierceness behind. With something like a sob, he dragged her against him, his mouth closing over hers with a hunger that left her whole body shaking. She felt devoured, possessed utterly. She felt like a banquet spread out before a starving man.

Slowly, his kisses softened, growing longer, deeper. His chest heaved beneath her fingers as he held her close, his hands sliding over her arms, her hair, his tongue tracing tendrils of fire as it slid against hers. It felt so good, slick and sweet and warm, that Annie couldn't help it—she moaned.

Keeping his mouth locked to hers, Tommy started stripping off his flannel shirt. The sleeves tangled, trapping his arms between them. With a low oath, he stopped kissing her long enough to yank at the cuff buttons. Laughing, Annie helped him.

"You goof. There. You're free."

He flung himself back against the driver's door in his white T-shirt, panting, his eyes drinking in the sight of her as if he couldn't get enough. He was hard, she knew—she could tell by the bulge outlined against his jeans.

Slowly, his mouth curved in a dazed half-smile, his expression compounded equally of wonder and lust. Reaching out, he played with her tousled hair, then drew her to him, breathing her name into her open mouth. "Oh Annie..."

Her heart flipped over. Warm heat filled her groin. Her whole body went limp in his arms as he kissed her, long and deep. When her eyelids finally fluttered back open, she found Tommy gazing down at her, grinning in contentment.

"You liked that, huh?"

"Mmmm," she murmured, still slumped against him. She could feel the throb of his erection against her hip. She wondered if she had the courage to just reach down and stroke it.

With a wicked twinkle in his eyes, Tommy nudged her back upright, started the truck back up and pulled away from the curb.

"Where are we going, Tommy?"

"You'll see," he said, winking.

She nestled against him, her head pillowed on his shoulder. He turned down Sycamore, then onto the school drive. Circling behind the high school, he parked deep in the shadows and got out of the truck. "C'mon, Annie."

She didn't question. She simply followed him out, letting him lift her from the bench seat as if she were a princess. Setting her on her feet, he kissed her forehead, then hugged her close a minute before taking her hand.

"Tommy?"

"Shhh." Leading her between the buildings, they skirted the football field. The slatted shadows of bleachers loomed over her head.

Oh God. She knew these shadows. Knew the intimate darkness beneath them...

Annie paused, hesitating. "Tommy..."

"Almost there." Tugging her between the stands, he led her across the field to the long, low brick building that served as both the half-time locker room and equipment storage. He let go of her hand and moved ahead of her in the darkness. After a second, she heard a small snick.

"Come on," he said, beckoning her closer. "Up you go."

Looking up, she saw a small utility window set into the wall of the field house, just about even with Tommy's eyes. "Isn't this kind of like breaking and entering?"

"Nah." He grinned. "It's never locked. Come on, I'll boost you."

"Never, huh?" Planting her hands on her hips, she gave him a stern glance. "And exactly how many of your girlfriends have you hoisted through there?"

"Not a one," he said, deadpan. "They're all too chubby."

"Tommy Ambinder!"

He chuckled. "Hey, that's what you get for asking."

She'd forgotten what a colossal tease he could be. Cocking one eyebrow, she forced back a grin, glaring at him steadily till he dropped his eyes.

"C'mon, Annie. It *was* twenty years. And I swear on my ma's dumplings, I never brought any of 'em here."

Feigning haughtiness, she condescended to let him lift her high enough to scramble through the window. It was so short she had to slither in head-first, on her belly. She tumbled over the lip, terrified of the drop, and landed with a *whoof* on something both firm and springy.

"Annie?" Tommy's worried whisper followed her into the blackness. "Annie, you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Your turn. Come on."

She could see the outline of his body blocking the meager light from the window. "Uh...I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?"

"My shoulders won't fit."

Well, great. "Now what?"

"Feel along the wall to your left."

Her hand encountered a light switch, flicked it on. Tommy's bright blue eyes peered at her out of a beet-red face, and she laughed. She couldn't help it. He'd worked his head and one shoulder through the window and was wedged there, looking rather like how she felt when putting on her *reeeally* tight jeans.

"Are you going to help or just laugh like a loon?" he growled. Immediately, she shaped her expression into one of contrition and started shoving. "Ow! Not so hard!" He dropped back to the ground outside. "Well, *that* was a great idea."

"Told you you got bigger," she said, standing on tiptoe to peer out the window.

"Guess I did," he said ruefully, rubbing one shoulder. "So you'll just have to unlock the door for me."

"Say please."

He scowled. "Please."

"Say pretty please."

"Annie..."

"Say pretty please." She pouted.

Tommy closed his eyes. "All right, pretty please." Before he could open them, she ducked out of sight.

"Annie? Annie!"

Keeping low, she scurried out the open doorway of the room, stifling her giggles. Outside was a utilitarian cinderblock hall, with another door set into the wall a few feet away, this one painted green. She pushed on it, peered into what was obviously the locker room, let it drop shut and went to the third door at the end. She leaned her ear against it, listening. "Tommy?"

“Little pig, little pig, let me in.” His voice was muted by the metal door, but she could hear him grinning.

“Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin.”

“You don’t have hair on your chin, doofus. Now, open up.”

Pushing against the safety bar, she opened the door. Slipping in fast, he caught her in his arms. She squealed as he tickled her, then pinned her to the wall, taking advantage of her breathlessness to kiss her silly.

Her arms—which had been beating uselessly against his broad shoulders—went slack, draping around his neck as she let him kiss her. Their breaths echoed in the narrow hallway, growing shorter, more broken. His hands were moving over her as eagerly as if it were still high school, sliding up to her breasts, working down between her thighs...

Turning his palm flat against her crotch, Tommy cupped it, pressing firmly against her clit through her jeans as he made circles with his hand. Annie moaned, dropping her head back, gazing up at the light streaking the ceiling from the open doorway.

“Tommy...”

“Hmmm?” His mouth was busy at her neck, kissing it, nuzzling it. Annie closed her eyes a moment, felt his free hand slide to her breast.

“Tommy, the light. Someone’ll see it.”

“Let them,” he murmured, his tongue licking her ear.

Oh Jesus. “Tommy!”

“All right, all right,” he muttered. “Keep your shirt on.” Then he grinned at her. “Or better yet, don’t.”

“You first,” she retorted—then fell silent as he released her, his gaze holding hers as he pulled his T-shirt over his head.

Muscles rippled along his abdomen. His pectorals were hard and pronounced, flexing as he tugged the T-shirt upward. Wide-eyed, she traced every inch of him with her gaze, from the strong, solid hipbones just above his leather belt to the tendons in his neck as he tilted his head back. Soft golden stubble coated the line of his jaw, and Annie swallowed. Her focus dropped back down to the dip of his navel, the luscious trail of golden curls just below...

Saliva flooded her mouth as heat flared inside her. Drawn on a level so deep it was almost primal, Annie went to her knees. She flicked her tongue along that golden trail, then licked a slow line over the flat of his belly.

Smooth, warm skin, slightly salty, delighted her senses. Tommy groaned, freezing as she traced the waistband of his jeans with her tongue.

He was watching her, she realized, his arms resting behind his neck as he gazed down, his blue eyes shading darker as her tongue trailed over him. She could see the broad curve of his ribcage, the hard,

luscious points of his nipples. Running her hands up his thighs, she reveled in their firmness, the way they quivered like a horse's flank under her soft caress.

"Annie... Jesus, Annie." Tommy's voice was a hoarse groan, grating in his throat. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing, his eyes glued to her motions as she unbuckled his belt. She toyed with the button, tugging it with her teeth, and smiled to herself as his face drained of color.

Keeping one hand on his hip, she stroked him with the other, palming and caressing the hard, straining length in his jeans till he moaned and pushed himself harder against her hand.

God, she couldn't wait to feel him inside her again! Her fingers slid to his zipper. Tommy's hands caught hers urgently. "What about the lights?"

"*Fuck* the lights," she mumbled, struggling against his grip. His hands tightened, and she saw a flash of white teeth as he grinned above her.

"Oh, no you don't, Annie. Not after making *me* stop. Besides, this floor is concrete. I know something better." Holding out a hand, he tugged her to her feet. Pausing only to steal one last deep, wet kiss, he turned up the hallway, pulling her along behind him.

Not that he needed to pull, Annie admitted, watching the play of muscles in his broad, tanned back. God, his arms were as big around as her thighs, practically! And the hard curves of his ass, flexing under his jeans, made her want to cup them, squeeze them, run her hands down between them to feel his balls...

Her knees went rubbery at the thought. Her breath came a little faster. She could barely keep her hands off him as he led her back into the equipment room. "There."

"There what?"

He nodded at the far wall. Reluctantly, she tore her gaze from his body long enough to look.

A pile of blue vinyl-coated wrestling mats were stacked under the window. That's what she'd fallen on, she realized. Hard, yet springy. Yeah. *Way* better than concrete.

Flicking off the overhead lights, Tommy crossed to the pile, an indistinct shape against the dim illumination of the window. He dragged two of the mats onto the floor, making a bed.

At first, Annie resented not being able to see him clearly—but when he stooped, kicking off his boots and shoving down his jeans, she decided suddenly that she plumb didn't care.

Heat throbbed low in her belly as he turned toward her, naked. The silvery glow from the window gleamed along his rippling shoulders, gave the barest suggestion of the curve of his chest. Like a shadow he moved toward her, his features hidden by darkness. It was like being kissed by a cipher. Like being possessed by the night itself.

But there was nothing insubstantial about his body against her. Solid, rock-hard muscle pressed against her breasts, her thighs. His hands cupped her ass, pulling her tight against the throbbing ridge of his erection.

In the cool night, his body heat radiated against her. The contrast made her shiver, and Tommy whispered in her ear, "Are you warm enough? I can get a blanket from the locker room."

Shaking her head, she wrapped her arms around him, burying her fingers in the soft mass of his hair as she found his lips in the darkness, kissing him deeply. His cock jerked between them, flexing against her, and he groaned, tugging her closer, his hips working against hers.

She was already so wet it felt like her panties were melting. Shifting, she wrapped one leg around his strong thighs, positioning herself so that his jutting hard-on rubbed against her crotch. Kissing him, feeling his hands tighten around her, she rocked against it, teasing her clit.

Tommy groaned again, his hands squeezing her ass as he ground his cock against her. His tongue darted deep into her mouth. Tasting her. Claiming her. She pressed closer, flattening her breasts against his chest, her heart racing faster as her clit throbbed and ached.

"Christ, Annie, if we don't get you out of those jeans soon..."

The hoarse hunger in his words made her smile. "Then what?"

"Then I swear to God I'm gonna fuck you right through them."

She closed her eyes, a wave of longing sweeping through her. His cock nudged at her, the head pressing against her blue jeans, so hard it gave Tommy's playful threat weight.

"Not yet," she whispered into his ear, accompanying the words with a quick flick of her tongue. Tommy reached for her blindly as she danced back out of his arms, letting the cool air flow between them. Grinning into the darkness, she dropped to her knees and raised her hands to his shaft. Tommy moaned harshly as she wrapped her fingers around it.

Thick. Solid. Pulsing with hunger. Slowly, she pumped her hands up and down his erection, feeling the slide of soft skin over an iron-hard core. She studied it as she did so, noting the engorged veins, the way the head was so swollen the skin across it seemed stretched. A first pearl of liquid glimmered, sliding from the small slit.

Leaning forward, Annie caught it with her tongue, lightly teasing the opening. Tommy shuddered, his breath rasping in his throat above her. Unable to resist, she slid her tongue over his cockhead, tracing the curves of it as she fisted his shaft, squeezing harder. A harsh gasp escaped Tommy, but the hands that rose to cup her head were inexpressibly gentle, stroking her hair as if almost afraid to touch her.

Letting her lips go soft, she wrapped them around his cock, guiding it into the warm wetness of her mouth.

His whole body trembled, his spine relaxing even as other muscles tightened in barely-controlled bliss. Tilting her head back, Annie could see the glitter of his eyes as he gazed down at her from under half-closed lids. His hand stroked her cheek and she took him deeper, letting him feel the bulge of his cockhead as it moved inside her.

“Oh Jesus,” Tommy whispered breathlessly, his hand tracing her jaw line as she worked her head up and down. His thumb found her lips, glided through the moisture there, then pushed between them along with his thick shaft.

The sensation was indescribable. Annie closed her eyes, lashing her tongue over his thumb, his cock, feeling them both press into her deeper. Tommy’s panting was harsher now, his hips flexing as he dragged his cock back and forth through her fists, the bulging head and first few inches of his shaft pistoning in and out of her hot, wet mouth. His other hand slid up to the crown of her head, holding her gently.

Wrapped in a hunger she couldn’t explain, Annie pushed back against his hold. When he grabbed her harder, liquid heat exploded through her, swelling the ache between her thighs into a deliciously painful throbbing.

Sliding his thumb from her mouth, Tommy brought both hands to her head and then paused. Slanting her gaze upward, Annie caught the question in his eyes.

God yes, Tommy. She moaned, sucking harder.

His face went lax, lust flaring in his eyes. With a hard, controlled tug, he pressed her head closer, his hips flexing as he drove his cock deep into her mouth.

Annie watched his ab muscles ripple as he stroked between her lips. His gaze was clouded, his focus turned inward, all his attention consumed by the hot sweetness of her mouth.

Slick, salty wetness flooded her tongue—the first pulse of pre-come. Tommy froze above her, shuddering. His jaw clamped hard as he fought to hold back his climax. She whimpered hungrily as he slowly drew his cock from her mouth.

“Oh no you don’t, Annie,” he said, shaking his head. “When I come, it’s going to be buried deep inside you.” Her pulse leapt at his words, the clotted heat in her crotch throbbing with longing. Lifting her to her feet, he swung her up into his arms, carrying her to the waiting mats.

She was floating again, this time for real, her body weightless, boneless in Tommy’s strong arms. As he knelt, still holding her, to lower her to the mats, he bent his head to her ear and whispered, “But first, you’re going to scream my name aloud as I eat you.”

Chapter Seven

Oh Christ. Annie quivered, practically peaking from the sensual promise in his voice alone. Fire raced along her nerve endings, and her passage clenched tight around the aching emptiness inside her. Her head spun as he set her down gently, his hands sliding from under her, grazing her breasts in the process.

Annie moaned, her back arching reflexively. She could see the white flash of teeth as he grinned. “Still not the patient type, I see.”

No, she wasn’t. Not now, with her whole body burning for his touch. He trailed his hands down her front, his nimble fingers unbuttoning her blouse, spreading it aside. Then he looked down at her.

In the shadows, she saw him swallow, saw the glitter of his eyes as he gazed at her breasts, still contained within her white demi-bra. He was kneeling between her thighs, his erection jutting above the inseam of her jeans as he raised first her right leg, then her left, untying her white sneakers and pulling them off.

His hand shook as he reached for the snap of her jeans, and he laughed. “Jesus, Annie, I feel like I’m back in high school.”

“In high school you would’ve lost it back when I was sucking your cock.”

At her words, Tommy closed his eyes. His erection flexed, straining against his belly. “I’m gonna come right now if you keep talking about it.” Quickly, he unsnapped her jeans and dragged them off.

“Oh yeah, now this looks familiar.” Kneeling between her legs with her thighs splayed around him, he stared down at the cotton-covered mound of her crotch. Outside the window, the moon had risen higher, and was now peeking through the narrow opening, dropping a bar of watery light across her belly and thighs.

Slowly, teasing her, Tommy trailed a finger along the edge of her panties, lifting them slightly away from her flesh. Annie felt her breath shorten. Pushing herself up on her elbows, she tilted her head to watch.

“Touch yourself, Tommy.”

“What?” He looked at her, startled.

“I want to watch you. I want to see how you looked, all the nights you thought about me.”

His eyes were hollow in the moonlight, filled with hunger and a trace of remembered pain. He swallowed, holding her gaze, then closed his eyes a moment as he reached for his shaft.

Annie couldn’t tear her gaze from his fingers wrapping around it, squeezing it lightly as he stroked it. For her.

God, the sight made her hornier than anything she'd ever imagined.

He let go of the shaft briefly to run his hand down to his balls, rubbing them for a second before moving back to his cock. He opened his eyes again, focusing on her crotch as he stroked himself faster. He yanked her panties aside, baring her pussy, and then froze, squeezing his shaft hard.

A pulse of wetness welled from his swollen cockhead, trickling over his fingers as Annie watched, spellbound. His jaw was gritted, his gaze devouring her, his fist clenching his cock harder than she'd ever have dared. His breath rasped in his throat, and for a long minute he didn't move.

Then he shifted between her thighs, spreading them wider, fitting his cockhead against her with his other hand. Gliding it back and forth through her juices, he guided it over her swollen clit, stroking against it until she writhed with need.

"Oh Christ, Tommy. Come on, stop playing."

"You're the one who wanted to watch me touching myself."

At her scowl, he pressed lightly between her thighs, his engorged tip spreading her sopping folds. Her panties tugged at her mons, teasing her clit, and Annie bit her lip, trying to hold back her orgasm.

He grinned at her. "Yeah, not yet, huh?" Disappointment filled her as his shaft withdrew—then faded utterly as he moved down on the mat, dipping his head down to the vee of her groin.

He sucked her mons through her panties, making her squirm, then pulled them back aside to thrust his tongue deep inside her. Moaning in pleasure, he buried his face against her, his tongue flicking, probing, curling up to lash her clit...

He let her go long enough to strip off her panties, then with a groan he lowered his mouth back down. Lifting her thighs wide, he spread her open, feasting on her till she thought she'd go mad with sensation. Just when she knew, absolutely knew she couldn't take any more, he closed his mouth over her clit, sucking it hard.

White light burst behind Annie's eyelids. Her entire body jerked, lightning spearing through it. Her pulse roared in her ears as the spasms hit her—but Tommy didn't let up, didn't release the pressure. His tongue lashed her clit even as he suckled it, sending the fire in her blazing higher, higher...

She was moaning, she realized distantly. Broken, begging words tumbled from her mouth. "Christ Tommy, please no, it's too much, oh God. Oh please!" Her hands slid through his hair, clenching, pushing his mouth harder against her. Inside her, something that felt like a hard, tangled knot twisted tighter. It seemed to expand as it did so, swelling until it filled her groin, her belly, her whole universe. Tommy's tongue laved her, stroking her over and over till she was crying out mindlessly, calling his name as she pleaded.

Closing his mouth over her mons, he suckled her clit. His groans vibrated against her, spilling her over the edge as the knot unraveled into white-hot waves of bliss.

"Tommy!"

At her scream, he surged up between her thighs, entering her in one deep, hard, fast thrust. His cock stretched her open, filling her completely, and she gasped as her pussy clamped down around him. He thrust deeper, pushing himself into her until his balls pressed against her ass.

Bracing himself on his arms, he worked himself against her, his public bone grinding against her mons.

“Come for me again, Annie. Come for me now.” Circling his hips, he corkscrewed inside her, his golden curls mashed against her chestnut ones.

The pressure on her clit sent her over again. Hot, searing bands of fire burst through her belly, making her moan deep in her throat. His thrusts grew more urgent and she spread her thighs wider, her whole body throbbing bonelessly beneath him.

It felt like being lifted by a tidal wave. His strokes came deeper, faster, pounding into her with a greedy desperation that left her breathless. His shoulders quivered under her hands as she reached up, caressing them, feeling the rigid tension in his muscles as he rammed himself home.

His head snapped back, his entire body straining. His cock swelled even larger, pulsating as his orgasm ripped through him. She could feel his balls clench with each ejaculation, flooding her over and over as he panted and groaned.

“Oh Jesus, Annie.” Tommy sagged above her, his head drooping as he gasped in exhaustion. “Woman, you’re going to kill me.” Leaning down, he nuzzled her cheek, dropping gentle kisses just below her earlobe.

“Tommy?”

“Mmm-hmm?” he murmured, his mouth caressing her neck. His hands slid behind her, unhooking her bra.

“You know those fat girlfriends of yours?” She felt him pause warily. “Tell them thank you.”

He lifted his head, grinning down at her. “That was twenty years of waiting you just wrung out of me, sugar.”

“Twenty years, huh?” She cocked an eyebrow, pretending annoyance. “Tommy, Ambinder, does that mean I have to wait till I’m fifty-seven before we do this again?”

The growl that came from him dismissed that idea rapidly. He dipped his head to capture her mouth, savaging it so thoroughly she felt her pulse leap.

Not already!

“You’d have to get away from me first, woman,” he muttered, flexing his hips, his still-engorged cock gliding slickly inside her. Tugging her bra down her arms, he lowered his mouth to her nipples, sucking hard on first one, then the other.

Annie gasped, pushing her breasts higher. He lifted his head, his eyes glittering darkly. “And this time, Annie, I’m not letting you go.”

She must have fallen asleep, Annie thought muzzily. She could feel Tommy's weight above her in the darkness, his slow, even breathing tickling her ear.

Languidly, she raised a hand to stroke his hair, then let it slide over the smooth, strong breadth of his back. Her fingers encountered fabric, and she paused a moment, puzzled.

A blanket. There was a blanket over them, the sort of thin, felt-like throw used by paramedics. He must have gotten it after she fell asleep, she realized. Gone into the locker room, gotten it, brought it back...

But his cock was still inside her, thick and soft and warm. Which meant he must have slid himself back inside her after he'd gotten the blanket.

The idea of him doing that, entering her in her sleep, was curiously arousing. Intimate in a way she couldn't quite put her finger on. She wondered how much more he could have done without waking her, if he'd wanted to.

Then she wondered how much she could do without waking *him*.

Experimentally, she squeezed her inner muscles. His cock, half-tumescent, twitched in response.

She squeezed again, harder. His cock jerked, starting to stiffen. Tommy sighed softly in his sleep, his head shifting to resetttle against her neck. His mouth worked unconsciously, his jaw moving slightly.

Fascinated, Annie shifted just a little, rearranging his head till it rested against her breast. She stroked his cheek with one finger, and his face turned toward it, mouth open and seeking. Lifting her ribcage, she brushed her nipple across his lips. They closed around it automatically, his tongue working lightly.

His cock hardened further, swelling inside her. Still asleep, he suckled her nipple till Annie was panting in the darkness. Carefully, she nudged her hips upward, working them up and down around Tommy's erection.

You know, this is kind of perverse, Annie.

Sure, if it had been anyone but Tommy. Somehow, though, Annie suspected he wouldn't mind one bit.

Tilting her hipbones, she rocked them back and forth until his muscles tightened in response, shoving him deeper inside her. His mouth sucked her more firmly. His breathing quickened.

Annie's eyes fluttered shut as she savored the sensations, feeling the warm, sleepy weight of him moving against her. His cock moved inside her in short, uncontrolled thrusts. His hand, lax and heavy, slid over her belly. Wrapping her fingers around it, she guided it to her other breast. His fingers twitched, then began kneading.

A moan vibrated, deep in his chest. His mouth moved against her, suckling hungrily. His hand on her breast squeezed harder, his hips jerking as he pistoned.

Oh Christ, Annie thought. He's going to make me come in his sleep!

Then she felt his weight shift above her as he slotted his hips between her thighs. His strokes grew more intent, hard and demanding. He wasn't quite awake yet, not fully, but he was definitely *aware*.

Cradling his head against her, she urged his mouth to her other nipple and moaned as he drew on it, sucking it hard. She could feel his orgasm building in the heaviness of his balls, the way they tightened up against him as they dragged against her ass.

He shoved into her with an abandon unlike anything she'd felt before, his entire body acting on instinct and reflex. Short, hard strokes ground his pubic bone against her mons, and Annie wrapped her legs around him, increasing the contact. Her breasts felt full, swollen, aching for his mouth. He obliged her by sucking harder, switching his attention back and forth between her nipples as his cock plundered her slit.

She wasn't going to last. She could feel it. Heat throbbed through her belly. His groin massaged her clit. Letting her head fall back as her peak rippled through her, Annie held him tight against her, reveling in the hard, fast thrusts of his cock as he groaned around her nipple, his teeth biting it lightly as he found his own release.

They lay together, unmoving. Then Tommy chuckled, his face buried against her breastbone.

"What?" she asked.

"That's a hell of a way to wake up, Annie." He lifted his head. His eyes gleamed down at her, sparkling wickedly. "If I go back to sleep, will you do it again?"

"Only if I can be on top this time," she said, shoving at him. "You're heavy."

Reluctantly, he rolled off her, sliding an arm around her waist to pull her with him. She ended up snuggled against his side, her head pillowed on his shoulder, her arm draped across his chest.

It was so peaceful, lying there with Tommy's arms around her, listening to the slow, even beating of his heart. The moon had risen higher now, passing above the window, and the room was filled with a faint silver glow. Tommy's hand stroked gently along her arm, up her shoulder. He turned his head once to press a kiss to her hair.

It was such a perfect moment. Annie closed her eyes, savoring it. Life hadn't exactly provided her with a lot of them, and she wanted to enjoy this one to the fullest.

For some reason, a memory of Judah intruded. Judah at nine or ten, watching her and Tommy play.

"Annie?"

"Hmm?" She forced the memory away and caressed his chest lightly.

"Marry me, Annie."

Oh shit. Her hand halted on his chest.

She lay there unmoving, in a kind of frozen panic, until she felt Tommy's heart beating beneath his ribs, his pulse a fraction faster than it had been before. There was a subtle tension in his body, a tautness that made her think of a hunting dog on point.

He was listening. Wondering.

Waiting for her answer.

Annie took a deep breath. “I can’t.”

His muscles clenched, then eased into a semblance of relaxation. “Why not?”

She closed her eyes a moment, wishing she could lie. “Because of Judah.”

He rolled onto his side, looking down at her as his hand stroked her belly. “Honey, I’ve never blamed you for Judah.”

She studied him disbelievingly. His gaze was steady, his eyes seemingly calm—but something lurked behind that calmness, she could see it. Something dark. Something angry. Directed not at her, but elsewhere.

At Judah. Annie’s heart sank.

“Tommy...” Pulling away from him, she rolled to a seat on the mat. “You can’t just blame Judah. It wasn’t like he raped me.”

“He took advantage of you.”

She shook her head, almost hating herself. *Why* couldn’t she let it go? *Why* couldn’t she just accept what Tommy was so clearly offering?

But she couldn’t. Despite herself, she kept remembering the way Judah had looked at the pool hall—dark and surly, like an exhausted bull at bay. He hadn’t looked at her as she’d left with Tommy. He hadn’t looked at anything. He’d simply stood, his shoulders slumped, staring at nothing in the middle of an empty dance floor.

He’d looked defeated, dammit. Broken in some fundamental way that nothing would ever fix.

She couldn’t take what Tommy was offering her. Not at Judah’s expense.

And she couldn’t let Tommy keep blaming him, either.

“I *wanted* him, Tommy. It wasn’t just a crush.” She glanced away, unable to bear the look in his eyes, the cold watchfulness, the anger she knew her next words would provoke.

“I loved him.”

The house stood pale in the moonlight, its chalky white paint peeling in leprous patches. It looked like a skeleton, Judah thought distantly, nothing but bones with all the life sucked out of them. Bleached and dry.

A fifth of Jim Beam was nestled between his thighs. Without taking his gaze from the house, he unscrewed the lid, hefted it, took a long swallow.

Damn her. Damn her for ever having come back into their lives.

In his mind's eye he could see the two of them laughing, springing down the front steps like colts turned out to pasture. Holding hands. Running through the fields together while he, Judah, followed silently behind.

"Mind your brother, Judah!"

And he had, all those years. Watching over both Tommy and Annie as they grew together, laughed together, played together... Even when Annie had dragged him into their games, he'd still been the outsider, basking like some misplaced night creature in the friendly warmth of her sun.

He wanted her. Christ, he wanted her so badly it felt like being torn in two.

The abandoned house wavered in his vision, and for the first time in twenty years Judah found himself crying. It wasn't just want, he admitted. He loved her. Loved her in a way he knew he'd never get over.

And she loved Tommy.

He'd always known it deep inside himself, no matter how hard he'd tried to hide from the truth. But seeing them together tonight, he couldn't push it away any longer. It had been there in every line of her body, in the way she'd leaned into Tommy, trusting him completely...

She loved him, and there was nothing Judah could do about it.

Wearily, he hefted the half-empty bottle again, then looked at it in sudden disgust. Unrolling his truck window, he chucked it into the darkness, hearing it thud against the hard-packed dirt.

Liquor wasn't going to cure what ailed him. He doubted anything ever would.

It had been so easy to blame her all these years, lying in his bed listening to Tommy cry and feeling his own heart crack with anger and grief. And how had he handled it? By casting her as some heartless *femme fatale* who'd used them both and left them broken-hearted. Even this afternoon he'd still been clinging to that conviction—clinging to it so tightly he couldn't let go long enough to grab at the one chance she'd offered.

"It's good to see you, Judah."

Those gentle words haunted him.

His gaze swept back over the house, noting the sagging porch, the missing shingles on the roof. The house seemed to glow in the thin moonlight, translucent as an empty shell.

A shell, he thought miserably. Just like me.

Part of him had been watching for headlights to come up behind him, Tommy's truck turning off Route 32 as he drove home.

After the second hour, Judah had finally admitted Tommy wasn't coming home.

It didn't matter, he told himself heavily, reaching for the truck's ignition. She'd be happy with Tommy. She always had been.

And this time he wasn't going to get in their way.

Tommy's head jerked back, his eyes growing colder. "No, you didn't."

Annie sighed. "Yeah, Tommy, I did."

How could she explain? Judah had always been so self-contained, not like Tommy who'd been there for her every day of her life, as open and generous as... *As a Black-eyed Susan*, she thought, feeling the sting of tears. She swallowed them back, searching for the words to say what she had to.

"You and me, Tommy, we always had each other. It was different for Judah."

"I know that." His eyes glittered like ice in the darkness.

"Do you? There were no kids his age out where we were. And even later, when he *did* start making friends, half the time he was saddled with us. Not exactly the baggage a teenage boy wants to be carrying."

Tommy folded his arms behind his head, staring at the ceiling. She could see the muscles leap as he clenched his jaw. "So?"

"So Judah didn't get to be on the football team the way you did. He didn't get to take a girl to the Fourth of July fireworks. He got to take us."

Tommy was scowling now, but Annie kept going. "And when we were old enough to look after ourselves, he was already working with your dad out on the ranch. How much room do you think that left him for making friends?"

Tommy shoved to his feet, hunting for his jeans. His back to her, he started pulling them on.

"He was *lonely*, Tommy. He's always been lonely. And have you ever heard him complain? Even once?"

"No." His mutter was low, surly. He yanked on a boot.

She was ripping him apart inside all over again. She was doing exactly what she'd sworn to herself she wouldn't do. But damn it, she wasn't going to let him put the blame on Judah. "Judah never took anything that I didn't freely offer."

Tommy's back went rigid. His jaw clamped like a vise. Reaching down, he found his other boot and stomped it on.

She wanted to go to him so badly. Slide her arms around his waist, rest her cheek against his broad shoulder blades, hold him until the tension ran out of his body and he softened again and kissed her.

Damn it, why couldn't she just have kept her mouth shut?

Because it wouldn't have been right, and you know it.

Yes, she did. And for the first time she faced the fact that it was *never* going to be right. There was never going to be a happy ending here.

If she went to him now, she'd be betraying Judah every bit as much as she'd once betrayed Tommy. Whatever happiness she and Tommy might find would be based on a lie—that Judah had been the one at fault.

But it had been her. It had been her all along.

Annie flinched, remembering Judah's harsh bellow. "*Because I didn't trust you not to hurt him again!*" He'd been right, she admitted, feeling her stomach knot with guilt. God, he'd been so totally right.

Tommy stood rigid in the shadows, his back still to her. "So you love him." The words were flat, almost toneless. "You should have told me, Annie."

"I did," she whispered. "You wouldn't listen."

He nodded slowly. "Yeah, well..." He glanced over his shoulder at her, then looked away. "I guess I just didn't want to admit you didn't love me."

But I do! Tears burned her eyes as he turned and walked out the doorway. She fought them, biting her lips on the words she wanted to call after him. *I do love you, Tommy!*

Except that wasn't how it worked, was it? Everybody knew—you found the one man you loved, and you married him. You were faithful to him. You bore his children.

You didn't sleep with his big brother and fall in love with them both.

From the hallway came a harsh clang as the outer door fell shut.

Oh, fuck it, Annie thought, and let the tears fall.

Chapter Eight

Tommy drove like a wild man, gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were aching. His chest was tight. His throat felt squeezed by an iron fist. He knotted his brow, clenching his jaw. He wouldn't cry, damn it—he wouldn't!

How could a man do that to his own brother? He didn't *care* what Annie said—Judah was still to blame. Even if she'd started it, even if she'd stripped herself naked and laid down before him...

His jaw locked like a pit bull's, and he pressed the gas pedal harder. The air roaring through the open windows set his denim shirt flapping—he hadn't bothered to retrieve the T-shirt he'd left in the field house. He wished Judah were here right now, standing in front of him as he had at the pool hall—it'd be a lot more than words he'd hurl at the bastard.

And Annie loved him. She loved that lying, backstabbing prick.

She can damn well have him, then. Tommy drove faster, eager to be out of there. He was damned if he'd stick around to watch Judah gloat.

I hope you're happy, Ju. Congratulations. You got the girl, you double-crossing fuck.

Roaring up Route 32, he slewed into the ranch. His tires spit gravel as he zoomed past the old house. *Nothing ever changes, does it, Ju? You just had to have her. Even though you knew exactly how much I love her, you just had to take her away from me again.*

He should have left that first time. He'd tried to. Only his mother's insistence had kept him here all these years.

This time, nothing was going to stop him.

He topped the next rise, went around a long curve. The creek ran beside it, gray and sullen in the pre-dawn darkness, following the drive for a while before it wandered off through the bushes. Coming into the meadow, he squealed the truck to a stop and parked by the new house. It wasn't until he got out that he noticed Judah's truck wasn't there.

That was fine—he didn't want to see the bastard anyway. Slamming the truck door behind him, he stomped up the steps and into the house. Going straight to his bedroom, he started jerking open drawers, blindly shoving handfuls of clothes into a duffel.

"God a'mighty, Tommy! What do you think you're doing?"

Mrs. Ambinder stood near the open door in her nightgown, watching his movements. Her face was puffy with sleep, but her eyes were sharp and aware.

"Don't try to stop me, Ma." Tommy glanced at his mother. "I'm leaving."

"Horse pukeys." Folding her arms, she closed the door behind her, gazing at her son with a flinty stare. "At least tell me what's gotten into you this time."

He laughed harshly. "What do you think?"

Her eyes widened. "Annie's back?" Tommy scowled and looked away. "So that's why Ju seemed so troubled yesterday."

He didn't want to talk about Judah. He didn't want to talk about any of it. Shouldering the duffel, he made to move past her, but Mrs. Ambinder planted herself in his path like a stout, gray-haired battleship. "Now you just stop making a fool of yourself this instant, young man."

"I'm not, Ma. I'm leaving."

"Why?"

"Because she loves him!" he shouted. "Okay? She loves him, and she doesn't love me!"

He glared at his mother, expecting her to try and comfort him. As if she could. Instead, Mrs. Ambinder snapped, "Don't be stupid. Of course Annie loves you. That girl's loved you since you were both still in diapers."

"That's not what I mean, Ma."

"I know what you meant." His mother stood unmoving, her fists planted firmly on her ample hips. "Thomas Andrew Ambinder, do you have any idea how selfish you're acting?"

He opened his mouth to protest, and she snapped, "Shut your mouth and sit down. There's things I should've said to you twenty years ago, and you're going to hear them. I said sit down, boy!"

Shocked into obedience, he did so, the strap of the duffel sliding from his fingers. His breath shuddered in his throat, and immediately his mother softened. She sat next to him on the bed, taking his hands. "I love you. You know that. But Tommy, you're spoiled. Ain't your fault, maybe, but still, there it is. You're thirty-seven years old, Tommy, and you're acting like a child throwing a tantrum over a toy."

His head snapped back, color burning high on his cheekbones.

"Spare me," she said dryly. "Don't even start about how much you love her. I've watched you both fretting over that girl since she first grew titties. Did you ever once stop to think about her feelings? Either of you?" Her gaze pierced him, lashing him to the bone. "I swear, it's a wonder you boys haven't pulled her to pieces between you."

Tommy looked away, flushing, then turned pale as he remembered. "I left her there, Ma," he whispered hoarsely.

"Left her where?"

"At the field house."

She shot to her feet, shocked almost speechless. "You mean you... And then you left her there? Tommy Ambinder!"

He started to get up, but she pushed him back down. “Now you wait a minute! I’m not done yet. Let me speak my piece before you go charging off to her rescue.” She waited till he subsided, eyeing him sternly. “I don’t know exactly what all happened last time, but I think I’ve got a pretty good idea. And before you go blaming Judah again, you think about this—what if it had been Judah who kissed Annie first?”

Fury clenched his gut at the very idea.

“What if it had been *him* she was going out with, while you had to watch? Wanting her, being near her, never able to say anything. What if she’d offered you one crumb of kindness? Would you have said no?”

“Yes, damn it, I would’ve!”

Her gaze held his. “Are you sure?”

Tommy opened his mouth, then shut it again.

She nodded, satisfied. “I thought not.”

“But, Ma...”

He looked at her in consternation, and she raised an eyebrow. “Why aren’t I mad at *her*? Is that what you’re asking?”

He nodded mutely. Mrs. Ambinder sat back down beside him, her face thoughtful. “To tell the truth, I was. At least for a while. But I know that girl, Tommy. Heck, I practically raised her. Annie hasn’t got a mean bone in her body. And she’s no tramp—she wasn’t just messing with you, or with Judah either. I’ve got a few words of my own for that boy too, believe me.” Her gaze snapped to the closed door, then came back to Tommy.

“So what do I do?” he asked hoarsely.

She sat for a while in silence, thinking. Once or twice, she shook her head. When she finally spoke, her voice was low, almost regretful. “I don’t know. I don’t know.” Sighing, she rose to her feet and went to Tommy’s window, gazing out at the soft wash of pink lighting the eastern horizon. Her back to him, she continued, “All I know is love’s a rare and precious thing. A gift that’s always taken away from us too soon.”

There was a catch in her voice, a hint of old tears. Tommy stood and put his arms around his mother, hugging her tight. She turned and gave him a quick squeeze back, then headed for the door, surreptitiously wiping a tear from her cheek.

“One thing more.” She stopped at the door, looking back. “Your brother gave up his entire childhood for you. He built this house for the both of us, to get us away from our grief. There is nothing on this earth he wouldn’t do for you, except stop loving Annie. And that’s something I doubt you could do, either. You think about that before you go charging off.”

She closed the door gently behind her. Slowly, Tommy sank back down on the foot of his bed. The instinctive urge to rush back to Annie had faded—she wouldn't be at the field house anymore, he was certain. It was only eight blocks from there to the boarding house. Undoubtedly, she'd have walked back by now.

He was mortified that he'd left her there. It was inexcusable, no matter how angry he'd been.

"Thomas Andrew Ambinder, do you have any idea how selfish you're acting?"

He flushed. It was true. All these years, all he'd thought about was his own hurt—he'd never once stopped to think that Judah might be hurting just as badly.

Yeah, well, she wasn't *his* girl, was she? What right did Judah have to be so damn hurt?

His mother's voice answered him. *"What if it had been him she was going out with, while you had to watch? Wanting her, being near her, never able to say anything..."*

Tommy scowled.

Annie's voice chimed in. *"He was lonely, Tommy. He's always been lonely. And have you ever heard him complain? Even once?"*

No. Instead, he'd picked up the reins from their father, running the ranch, shouldering the responsibilities. Sure, Tommy worked right alongside him—but who was it stayed up late worrying when the bills needed to be paid?

"I love you. You know that. But, Tommy, you're spoiled."

He *was* spoiled, Tommy realized. He'd grown up never once knowing what it was like to be lonely. Annie had always been right there, beside him. Now for the first time, he tried to imagine it—having no one to talk to. No one to play with. No one to tell his fears and worries to.

How much strength had Judah had to develop, growing up that way?

"There is nothing on this earth he wouldn't do for you, except stop loving Annie. And that's something I doubt you could do, either."

No, he couldn't. He'd loved Annie since forever—and she *did* love him back, a love so steady and constant he'd assumed it would always be there for him.

Him, and only him.

Tommy writhed, his mother's words ringing again in his ears.

"Thomas Andrew Ambinder, do you have any idea how selfish you're acting?"

Try as he might, he couldn't imagine what it had been like for Judah. Couldn't imagine how his brother had felt, having Annie come to him, offering him love and affection. Offering everything he'd hungered for every day of his childhood.

His mother's question was unanswerable, he realized. He didn't know—he *couldn't* know—what he would have done.

But he did know one thing. He knew he owed his brother an apology.

The rising sun stung Judah's eyes, and he blinked, rubbing them. He was tired—tired all the way to his forty-year-old bones. The hills around him blushed pink with the dawn, and he gazed at them wearily as he drove back toward the ranch.

He'd driven for hours, it seemed like, accomplishing nothing but burning half the gas he'd put in the truck when he'd bought the Jim Beam. He'd been nearly to the North Dakota border before he'd turned around.

Where had he thought he was going?

Someplace where I wouldn't have to miss Annie, I guess.

Judah grimaced. There was no such place.

Besides, he was needed here—by Ma, if not by Tommy. He had no right to walk away from his responsibilities just because things got hard.

It would be hard, he admitted, seeing Annie with Tommy—as hard as it had been when they were just kids. Maybe even harder.

That don't make it undoable.

He sighed, turning into the ranch drive. As with so many things, his father had been right. And if what he needed to do was be happy for Tommy, then God damn it, that's what he'd do.

He was startled to see Annie's car parked by the old house, pulled up near the porch as if she were inside. What was she doing there? Had she come here with Tommy? But he didn't see Tommy's white F-150 anywhere.

Pulling over, Judah got out of the Silverado. Every muscle in his body seemed to protest as he walked up the porch steps. Christ, he was tired. He didn't know how much longer he could keep going.

"Annie?" He opened the front door and walked through the downstairs. There was no sign of her. But then why was her car here? "Annie?" he called again, louder.

Only silence answered him.

Heading up the stairs, he was struck by the odd juxtaposition of strangeness and familiarity—the smooth oak banister, steps that his feet knew so well he could've run up them blindfold... But the house echoed emptily around him, leaving him feeling like an intruder in his own home.

It's not home. Not anymore.

Except the new house wouldn't ever be home, either. It was a house, that was all. A roof over their heads. One that wasn't haunted by ghosts and memories.

The door to Tommy's old room was ajar. Pushing it open, Judah saw Annie standing near the window. Her back was to him. She didn't move as he entered. For one split second, he thought she was a mirage, a phantom born of his exhaustion and longing.

Then he saw her shoulders quivering.

“Annie?” He started toward her, but she shook her head, stopping him where he was. There was something so forlorn about the way she simply stood there, refusing to look at him, hugging herself. “Annie, what’s wrong?”

She shook her head again. “Don’t ask.”

So he didn’t. He waited. He saw her take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Tommy asked me to marry him.”

Judah swallowed hard, twice. “Well, that’s good,” he said awkwardly. “I’m sure you’ll both…”

She turned, her gaze dark and unreadable. “I told him no.”

Judah closed his eyes, hating himself for the relief washing through him. He was better than this, damn it! At least he wanted to be. Moving closer, he said softly, “Tommy’s a good man, Annie. Maybe you should think about it.”

“No.” Just the one flat word as she turned away.

“Why?”

“God, don’t ask me that, Judah!”

He could hear the tears in her voice, but this time he wasn’t stopping. “Annie, tell me.”

“Fine.” She flicked an angry glance over her shoulder. “I said no because of you.”

Judah tilted his head back, fighting sudden tears. *Oh, Christ.* “Annie…”

She cut him off brusquely. “Don’t worry. I just came to say goodbye, that’s all.”

“To me?”

She laughed through her tears. “Maybe. To the house, really.” She glanced at him again, her face pale. “It was like home to me too once, you know.”

He nodded. It had been—it seemed like there’d never been a day of their childhood when Annie hadn’t been there. Having lunch with Tommy. Helping Ma with the dinner. After she’d left, the house hadn’t been the same.

It was more than the stiff silence between him and Tommy. It was as if, when she’d left, she’d taken the heart of this house with her.

And was about to do so again, he realized as she turned toward the door.

“Annie, don’t go.” The words left his mouth before he could stop them.

When she looked at him this time, there was a hint of fire behind her tears. “Why? You could hardly wait to get shut of me yesterday. You barely even looked at me! Why should you care if I leave or not?”

Because I miss you, damn it! I’ve missed you for twenty years! But he couldn’t say that. He had no right to. She was right—he’d been so cold to her yesterday it was a wonder she’d even gone to the pool hall.

"I know you...care for Tommy," he said. He couldn't bring himself to say the word. Damn it, yes he could. "And he loves you too."

"I know."

"Then marry him, Annie. Don't worry about me." There was an admission in his words, and he knew it. "Don't you think I'd rather see the two of you happy than..."

Than all three of us be miserable? Judah broke off, flushing, and looked away.

"Judah..." She turned to him, facing him squarely. "It's not that simple. You're right—I do care for Tommy. The only problem is I care for you too."

Judah's head snapped around, his eyes widening. Her blunt words seemed to tear through him, stripping away his defenses.

"That's why I have to leave, Ju, don't you see?" Her eyes were pleading with him, begging for understanding. "I love you, Judah. But I love Tommy too."

Judah closed his eyes, feeling shame wash through him. How had he ever convinced himself this woman was some kind of *femme fatale*? She was just Annie—sweet, warm-hearted Annie. The only thing she'd ever done wrong was to try and give them both what they'd needed from her.

And in return for her generosity, they'd done their best to rip her in two. He could see it in her eyes, in her torn, frantic expression. The agony in her hazel eyes was too much for him. Reaching out, he slid his arms around her.

"Annie, I'm sorry. Christ, I'm so sorry."

She laughed slightly, her face buried against her chest. "Don't be. If I hadn't—"

"Don't." Judah shook his head sharply, cutting her off. It was bad enough, carrying the guilt he had for betraying Tommy. To know that she regretted that night...

He tilted her chin up, forcing her to look at him. "Don't say that, Annie. Don't ever say that. What you gave me... Oh Christ, Annie!"

He was gazing down at her, his dark eyes blazing. The passion in them seemed to burn through his defenses, laying bare the forlorn, hopeless hunger beneath.

He still loved her. Understanding hit her like a tsunami. Despite his coldness yesterday, despite his harsh words to her in the pool hall—Judah still loved her.

Annie sagged against him, feeling a weakness in her knees that had nothing to do with her exhaustion and everything to do with the feel of him against her, his rock-hard arms cradling her, his work-callused hands gently stroking her hair.

It was the gentleness that undid her, the silent admission of all the things he'd never said. She'd known, she realized suddenly. On some level, she'd known the second he'd walked into the pool hall.

He was trembling in her arms, his powerful body shaking even as he held her. Turning her head, she kissed his neck, then his cheek. He sighed and turned his face toward her, his eyes closed, his mouth seeking blindly. Their lips grazed jawlines, cheekbones, temples...

When their mouths finally met, it felt like coming home.

His breath hitched in his lungs, and she could feel tears on his cheeks, dampening her fingers. Crying. He was crying.

Oh, Judah.

She kissed him harder, burying her hands in his hair, wanting to chase away his sadness and exhaustion, wanting to express all the love she had for him in this one kiss.

She would have to, she thought despairingly. There would never be more.

Their tongues brushed together, and Judah gave a hoarse sob, the sound seeming to well up from the very depths of his soul. Holding her tighter, he kissed her with such hunger, such passion, such need it made her heart ache even as it set her pulse racing.

God, why did it have to be this way? Why couldn't she simply have loved one or the other? It felt like a cruel, colossal joke, a cosmic prank—one that left all three of them broken.

Crying herself now, she kissed him deeply, twining her tongue with his, wanting to make the pain stop for one single second. Wanting to lose herself so far in Judah that she forgot everything else; her loneliness, her grief...

He held her tightly, as if he, too, was determined to give her everything—all the years of wanting, all the unspoken passions—in one fierce, fiery kiss. His mouth moved over hers, consuming, demanding—but even his demands were a surrender, a giving in to his own long-buried needs.

It was the same kiss they'd shared under the bleachers, twenty years ago. Only riper now, richer, less hesitant, more forceful. They weren't kids anymore, and it showed in the confidence with which Judah touched her, his hands caressing her bottom, sliding up her arms to cup her face...

He pulled back slightly, his eyes watching her, dark and questioning. Slowly, he reached for the top button of her blouse.

Oh, Jesus. Yes. Anything you want, Ju. Annie closed her eyes, letting her head drop back as she felt his fingers against her breastbone. Her heart was pounding underneath, so hard she was sure he could hear it. His fingers trembled, sliding down to the next button. His breath rasped in his throat.

Then she felt him hesitate, his hand pausing against her. Annie whimpered slightly, opening her eyes.

He wasn't looking at her. He was gazing beyond her, his jaw muscles clenching.

Whipping her head around, she saw Tommy standing in the open door.

Chapter Nine

It's October, and Tommy is sweaty and elated. They've just won the third game of the season against the Richie High Royals. Tugging off his helmet, he scans the bleachers, grinning, wanting Annie to share in his excitement.

He can't spot her. It shouldn't be hard; the crowd's not that big. Puzzled, Tommy goes through the customary ritual of shaking hands with the Royals. He looks for her again as he jogs to the field house.

He changes quickly, knowing she'll be waiting for him outside—she always does, despite the fact that she's been moody recently. Distracted. It bothers him that she won't tell him what's wrong.

It bothers him more when she's not outside, leaning against the cyclone fence in her usual spot. She must be at the truck, then, with Judah.

For some reason the thought makes him scowl.

He strides along the sidelines, waving absently to his teammates. Girls stop to congratulate him, giggling and preening. He smiles politely, glancing around. The second he gets free of them, he ducks behind the bleachers and walks quickly toward the parking lot.

He is so intent on his goal he almost doesn't see the two figures under the bleachers, their bodies yearning toward each other as if pulled by gravity. With a sickening jolt, he recognizes Judah's jacket—and the hands tangled deep in Judah's dark hair.

A sickly sense of betrayal floods his gut. No. It's not possible. It's not...

"Annie?"

She gasps, pulling away from Judah, her face draining of color as she whirls toward him.

Later, he will scream at her. Drive her, crying, into the night. For now, though, he can't speak. Can't think. Can't seem to breathe, hardly, through the hot, heavy rage flooding through him, blurring his sight as he launches himself at Judah, his fists already flying.

The same mindless fury was still there, Tommy realized. It had curled his hands into fists as he'd watched them from the doorway, so wrapped up in each other they hadn't even heard him come up the stairs.

There'd been such hunger in their kiss, such ravenous intensity, as if they'd been starving for each other for years...

He'd forgotten that, hadn't he? The passion. The yearning. He'd made himself forget, Tommy admitted. Almost the second he'd seen them under the bleachers all those years ago, he'd started rewriting the scene in his head, making it Judah who had kissed *her*, Judah who was at fault...

But the look on Annie's face now had held Tommy frozen. There'd been so much longing in it, so much grief, so much need. He'd watched as Judah had raised his hand to her shirt, noting the way her eyes had fallen shut and her face had flushed in arousal.

It was that arousal which had stopped him, holding him spellbound as he'd watched Judah undo the top button on her blouse. His hand had been shaking as he slid it down to the second.

"Thomas Andrew Ambinder, do you have any idea how selfish you're acting?"

Yes. Yes, he did. For the first time, he understood exactly how much he'd taken from them.

It was heartbreaking. Undeniable.

It was the most erotic thing Tommy had ever seen.

He'd stood transfixed, his heart racing, his cock throbbing in his jeans at the sight of Annie's flushed cheeks, the way her arched neck forced her breasts up, her erect nipples pressing against the fabric of her blouse just inches away from Judah's hand...

Now they stared at him, their faces pale with guilt, as frozen as he was in a moment that seemed to stretch out forever. He saw Judah's jaw clench, his hand still poised above Annie's blouse, his muscles tightening as he braced himself for his brother's outburst.

Yes. Yes, that's what he'd done before, wasn't it? He'd thrown himself at Judah, ignoring Annie's screams, ignoring everything but the thick, heavy rage surging through his blood...

It was still there. He could feel it. A demanding pressure in the back of his mind, urging him to attack Judah, pummel him into non-existence.

"There is nothing on this earth he wouldn't do for you, except stop loving Annie."

Tommy pushed back against his rage, trying to think. That was one more thing he'd forgotten, wasn't it? That Judah did love him. Loved him enough that he'd fought against his desire for Annie for years.

And without ever even guessing at Judah's long, silent struggle, he'd blamed his brother unequivocally for something that it was obvious neither of them could help.

"I know that girl, Tommy. Heck, I practically raised her. Annie hasn't got a mean bone in her body."

Annie's hazel eyes stared into his. Her face was ashen, her expression almost frantic. She seemed poised like a bird on the edge of flight—and this time, Tommy knew instinctively, she'd never come back.

"I swear, it's a wonder you boys haven't pulled her to pieces between you."

It was true, Tommy admitted. They'd tugged her back and forth between them like dogs fighting over a bone. Ripping her heart apart until she couldn't stand anymore.

Oh, Christ. They'd done that to her. *He'd* done that to her, Tommy amended privately—and had Annie stopped loving him, even though he'd abandoned her at the field house? Had he felt deprived

somehow while they'd been making love? Was the memory of those moments with Annie any less special just because she loved Judah too?

"I love you. You know that. But, Tommy, you're spoiled."

And like the rotten apple in the barrel, he'd spoiled the love between them as well. Poisoning it with his jealousy, his possessiveness, his insistence that Annie had to love only *him*...

She couldn't, Tommy realized. She couldn't stop loving Judah—any more than either of them could stop loving her. Even now, seeing Annie in Judah's arms, he wanted her so badly his whole body ached with it.

"All I know is love's a rare and precious thing, Tommy. A gift that's always taken away from us too soon."

And if he couldn't let go of his jealousy, Tommy knew, they were both going to lose her. Only this time, it would be forever.

Annie stared at Tommy, her heart beating wildly. His denim shirt was unbuttoned, his T-shirt missing. She could see his hard chest, his clenched fists, the tight readiness of his stance.

God, *why* hadn't she left the way she'd meant to? Walking home from the field house, she'd faced the bitter truth—that nothing would ever change, could ever change. That the only thing left to do was leave, as quickly as possible.

Why oh why had she ever given in to the urge to come back to the house?

She felt Judah tense beside her, bracing himself for Tommy's onslaught.

"Don't stop, Ju." Tommy's voice was hoarse, almost a whisper. "Jesus, don't stop."

What? Annie froze, staring. Beside her, Judah stiffened in shock.

Tommy's eyes were wide, his pupils enormous. The clear azure of his irises had darkened to a deep, smoky blue. Flicking her gaze downward, Annie jerked in surprise.

He was hard. So hard she could see his erection straining against his jeans.

"What?" She heard her own voice, breathless and weak. "Tommy..."

But he wasn't looking at her. His gaze was locked on his brother. Something flickered in his eyes—a flare of anger, maybe. His voice hardened. "Do it, Ju. You owe me."

Wildly, she looked up at Judah, who was gazing at his brother with sudden understanding. "Tommy..."

"You see any other way?"

Judah shook his head slowly. "You sure about this?" he asked.

Sure about what? she wanted to demand. But the tension between them felt stretched to the breaking point, and she didn't dare.

Tommy laughed harshly. "No. But I know we're gonna lose her if we don't."

Don't what?

Judah looked back down at her. "Annie..." His dark eyes were haunted. His fingers quivered against her collarbone. She was gasping, Annie realized, her heart thudding so hard she thought she might faint. "He's right, Annie. I owe him."

Oh, God. "What are you talking about?"

"I think you know, Annie." His deep murmur thrilled along her nerve endings, making them tingle.

"I don't know what you're—" Her words were cut short as Judah's mouth closed over hers, hard and demanding, his lips moving against hers until her head spun with desire. His tongue lashed out, tangling with her own until she was panting into his mouth, pressing herself against him. Her whole body thrummed like a harp string, vibrating with his kiss.

"Touch her, Ju."

Was this supposed to be some sort of punishment? Was Tommy trying to humiliate them with their own desires? If so, it wasn't working, Annie thought hazily—then gasped as Judah's hand covered her breast.

She arched into his touch, feeling her arousal spike as he started to knead it. Reaching up, she drew his head down tighter against hers, burying her hands in his dark hair.

His hand slid downward slightly, cupping the weight of her breast. Trapping her hard nipple between forefinger and thumb, he teased it unmercifully, tugging it through her bra until Annie moaned into his mouth, squirming with need.

Please, Judah, please! she thought frantically. Breaking their kiss, he drew his head back, his black eyes studying her, burning with desire.

"Do it, Ju!" She wasn't sure if that low, intent whisper had been hers or Tommy's. She saw the muscles in Judah's jaw clench, felt his shoulders tighten. Then some last thread of control inside him snapped and, grabbing her blouse with both hands, he ripped it open.

Tommy almost fell to his knees as Judah tore Annie's shirt open, spilling her breasts out as he shoved her bra down. The bunched material of her bra forced her breasts upward, and Judah bent his head down, seizing one dark, hard nipple between his lips.

Oh Christ, Tommy thought faintly, his cock throbbing like a wild thing. He was so hard it hurt, his erection straining against his jeans.

Could he do this? Could he watch Judah make love to Annie, setting aside his own jealousy? Because he *was* jealous, he admitted—jealous of Judah's mouth tugging at her nipple, jealous of his hands moving over her...

And yet he wasn't. He knew the hunger Judah was feeling. He'd felt it himself, more times than he could count. He knew—who better?—what it was like to want Annie. To need her. To love her.

And Judah loved her too. It showed in everything about him. The way he touched her. The look on his face. His hands, both gentle and demanding, closed on her hips as he sank to his knees, pulling her to him as he suckled her breast.

With a moan, Annie tilted her head back, cradling Judah's head in her arms.

Oh God, Tommy thought as Judah switched his mouth to her other breast, tugging on her nipple with ravenous intensity. Unable to help himself, he slid his hand to his groin, pressing against the hard ridge of his erection.

How could he have denied them this for so long? The yearning between them was palpable, searing the very air like wildfire. Tommy felt his shaft buck as Judah cupped her breasts, his tongue swirling slowly around one nipple, then the other. Annie's moans grew higher, her hips pressing forward, and Judah responded by pinching her nipples hard.

Oh Christ. He couldn't take it. Stroking his cock through his jeans, Tommy moved closer.

For too many years, he'd ignored the needs of the two people he loved most in this world. Now, there was only one way to fix it. Because he wasn't letting her go this time.

And neither was Judah.

Annie stiffened as she felt Tommy behind her. She tried to turn, but his arms slid around her. Holding her tightly against his chest, he stared down over her shoulder.

"What... Tommy..."

"Shh," he whispered. "It's okay, Annie."

How could this be okay? Her cheeks flamed as she realized she'd almost forgotten Tommy was there. How could she have let herself kiss Judah in front of him, let alone let him touch her?

She'd hurt them both so much. So deeply. She'd sworn she wouldn't do it again. Gasping, she tore herself from Judah's embrace, wriggling against Tommy's suddenly-tight grip. "No! Let me go, damn it!"

"I can't do that, Annie," Tommy said, holding her firmly. Judah, on his knees before her, looked up, his dark eyes watching her steadily. "Tell her, Ju."

Judah's gaze slid back to her breasts. They were heaving slightly with the force of her pants, their tips hard and shiny with his saliva. "You tell her," he murmured, bringing his hands up to cup them. Annie stared at him, both appalled and aroused as he fondled them avidly.

The feel of his hands moving over them kept sending distracting jolts through her. It was hard to concentrate on Tommy's words. "I'm sorry, Annie. I was selfish. I wasn't thinking about you or Judah." He bent his head to her neck, kissing it, nibbling it.

God, what were they *doing* to her? She hung between them, barely able to breathe, as Judah released her breasts to slide his hands down to the snap of her jeans. She stared down at his bent head as Tommy breathed in her ear, "We can't let you go, Annie. Not again. Not ever."

His hands slid around her, rubbing her breasts. Moaning, she leaned back against him, unable to help herself. Judah slid off her sneakers and tugged her jeans downward, baring the soft chestnut curls of her mound.

Oh Christ, he wasn't going to... Not with Tommy right behind her...

Judah leaned forward, parting her curls with his tongue. Tommy squeezed her breasts harder, his breathing hoarse in her ear. She could feel his erection nestled close against her bare bottom, and Annie whimpered as he rocked his hips, grinding it against her.

The pressure pushed her hips forward, pressing her mons harder against Judah's open mouth. He lapped her clit eagerly, his face lax with desire.

Oh God. Oh Jesus. Annie's pulse throbbed in her ears. Tommy's nimble fingers tugged at her nipples, pinching them lightly as Judah suckled her clit. "You see," Tommy whispered, "there's only one answer. We're just going to have to share you, Annie. Can you live with that?"

She couldn't think through the roaring in her head, the pounding of her heartbeat. Surely he hadn't just said...hadn't meant...

Judah tilted his head back, his gaze fixed on her breasts, watching Tommy fondle them as he tongued her clit. The dark, mindless heat in his eyes held her captive. She stared downward, watching his tongue dance between her curls, feeling the fire inside her blaze into delirium.

Whatever they wanted, she thought dizzily. Anything they wanted...

Crying out, she let her head drop back as her orgasm lanced through her. Tommy's fingers savaged her nipples. Judah's tongue lashed her, making her hips buck. Turning her head, she found Tommy's mouth, sucking his tongue as she peaked again and again, trapped between them, her body blazing, until her knees gave way and they caught her just before she crumpled.

Gentle hands held her, lowering her to the floor. She lay on her back with Judah on his side next to her, propped up on one arm. He stroked her hair, then kissed her tenderly, holding his unsated hunger in check.

His mouth felt so good against hers, firm and dependable. She smiled as she kissed him, running her hand up his chest. He smelled of hard work and sunshine, the rancher's stock-in-trade. Responsible, reliable, hard-working Judah.

Then something turned her head away, and another mouth closed over hers. This kiss was softer, more playful, but equally heartfelt. She kissed back, her eyes closed, as he teased her lips open, and the sweet, familiar taste of Tommy's mouth filled hers.

Hands were caressing her, stroking her belly, her thighs. Fingers trailed through her lower curls, making her mound tingle. Tommy slid lower, his mouth finding her right nipple, and Annie turned her head back to Judah, kissing him deeply.

Judah's hand slid down to her other breast, kneading it as his tongue slowly explored her mouth. Then, lifting his head, he winked at her—and slid his hand to her right breast, cupping it as Tommy's lips tugged at the tip.

The sensation was dizzying, almost indescribable. She was panting again, Annie realized, writhing between them. Their bodies pressed against her, and she almost groaned in arousal. They were both naked, erect, their cocks rubbing against her.

Surely they weren't going to... They didn't mean...

Judah's dark gaze bored into hers, seeming to fill her entire world. "Remember that day I walked in on you, Annie? Right here in this room?"

Memories tumbled through her, and she nodded, her heart pounding.

"Seeing Tommy inside you was the most arousing thing I'd ever seen."

Oh God. She swallowed, staring up at Judah. Tommy was touching her now, his fingers parting her outer lips even as his mouth worked at her breast. One finger slid into her, spreading her wetness. She didn't dare look down.

"Will you do that again for me, Annie? Will you let him inside you?"

Strong, warm hands stroked her thighs, easing them open. She could feel Judah's erection throbbing against her hip as Tommy moved, settling himself between her spread legs. His finger withdrew from her slit, and was replaced by the hard, velvety fullness of his cockhead. It nudged against her, barely entering, gliding back and forth through her free-flowing juices.

Judah watched her face closely, waiting for her answer. Closing her eyes, she nodded—and then moaned aloud as Tommy pushed into her, his thickness spreading her open.

He was so hard, so ready. She could feel it in his strokes—short, steady, rigidly controlled. He was braced on his arms above her, his ass tightening beneath her hands as he pistoned smoothly. She could hear Judah's hoarse breathing in her ear.

Opening her eyes, she saw Judah staring downward, his gaze glued to her crotch, his eyes nearly black with arousal. His cock jerked against her hip, eager and straining. Annie dropped one hand from Tommy's ass and curled her fingers around Judah's thick shaft.

Judah groaned, and Tommy froze above her, his balls clenching against her as he fought back his orgasm. "Jesus. I'm not gonna last, Ju." His blue eyes found hers, wide with wonder. "I love you, Annie. You're amazing."

Her heart purred with contentment even as her pussy throbbed.

Then a teasing glint lit his eyes, and he grinned. "Now do something for me, Annie. Do what you did in the field house."

What... she started to ask, but Tommy slid his hands beneath her ass, pressing her hips tight against his as he rolled onto his back. She gasped as his cock speared her, her weight settling down on it, pushing it so deep she felt herself tremble, already on the edge.

“Sit up,” he whispered hoarsely. Pressing her hands on his broad shoulders, she levered herself erect.

Judah had risen to his knees, his gaze fixed on her body, greedily tracing the curves of her ass, the way her breasts thrust out before her. “Closer, Ju,” Tommy murmured. Judah’s eyes widened.

Annie smiled at his hesitation and reached out, closing her hand around his jutting cock. It was so engorged the head was almost purple, the shaft so hard it strained straight up against his belly. Judah’s eyes sagged shut at her touch, his head dropping back. She stroked it a moment, but that wasn’t what she wanted.

“Stand up, Ju,” she whispered. Swallowing, he did so.

He towered over her, looking down on them, his heavy shaft only inches from her waiting mouth. Tommy raised his hands to her breasts, kneading them as he watched. Smiling, Annie turned her head, looking up at Judah—then closed her mouth around the thick, throbbing bulge of his cockhead.

Judah groaned, his hands clenching at his sides. Smiling to herself, Annie reached out and twined her fingers through his, raising his hands to her tangled hair. She heard Tommy whisper harshly, “Jesus, Ju...” as he thrust his hips upward, filling her to the brink. His hands squeezed her breasts convulsively, and Annie felt heat spiral through her. *Tommy’s not the only one who isn’t going to last*, she admitted.

The feel of Judah poised above her, his fingers trembling in her hair... Tommy stretched out beneath her, his hips pressing upward... It was too much. She couldn’t take it. Pushing her head forward, she took Judah deep into her mouth.

He groaned again, the sound vibrating deep in his chest. Sliding one hand up his thigh, Annie cupped his balls, reveling in their size, their distended fullness. They were taut, snugged tight against the base of his shaft, and he quivered as she ran her fingers lightly over them.

A first spurt of pre-cum slicked her tongue, warm and salty. Annie swallowed it, sucking harder as Judah’s breathing grew faster. He was trembling, every muscle straining for self-control.

Not today, Ju, she thought fiercely. *Today you don’t get to pretend you don’t care.*

She understood perfectly why he’d been so cold yesterday. Why he’d pretended her reappearance hadn’t affected him.

It had, all right—it showed in every quiver of his muscles, every harsh, rasping breath. For too many years he’d had to fight the attraction between them. But today, Annie swore, he would surrender.

Drawing her head back, she teased him, suckling lightly on the tip, then sliding her mouth down his shaft only an inch before pulling back. Judah’s abs clenched tighter, fighting the desire to thrust. She did it again, feeling his trembling worsen.

“Do it, Ju!” Annie couldn’t see Tommy, but she could imagine his expression—his face lax with lust, his blue eyes drinking in the sight of her sucking Judah’s cock. His strokes grew more urgent as he shoved up into her, sliding slickly between her furred, swollen lips. His fingers tugged at her nipples, sending searing fire through her. Whimpering, Annie grabbed Judah’s ass and pulled him to her, forcing his shaft deeper into her mouth.

Judah’s eyes flew wide open, their black depths blazing. She saw his jaw sag in ecstasy as sensations coursed through him. This time when she drew back, she felt his fingers tighten, tangling in her hair as he held her head.

She could practically see the struggle going on inside him, knew the second the rigid control in him broke—it showed in the sudden tightening of his muscles, the frenzy that filled his night-black eyes. Groaning, he gave into the pressure, rocking his hips forward as he shoved himself into her mouth.

Tommy arched below her, his own groans growing deeper, slamming up into her with an urgency that made her own need flare higher. She whimpered, arching her back, pressing her aching breasts into his hands. He rubbed them roughly, squeezing their weight, his erection swelling even further inside her passage.

Judah’s cock filled her mouth, hard, almost bruising. Cupping her head firmly, he pistoned between her lips. His eyes were half-closed, the lust in them unmistakable. His chest heaved as he watched her mouth on his shaft, Tommy’s hands squeezing her breasts...

She was on fire, her body blazing, trapped between them as they pounded into her, desperate and hungry. Her own need coiled higher as Tommy’s hips worked against hers, corkscrewing his cock inside her as he started to come. His cries pierced her ears, tilting her over the edge, and everything inside her seemed to shatter in bliss as Judah arched his back, straining, flooding her mouth with his come.

Tommy’s cock pulsed inside her as he pistoned, giving her every drop. Her passage spasmed around him, needing him deeper, deeper... She swallowed hungrily, hearing Judah’s harsh groans, hearing her own pulse thudding as fire lanced through her again and again.

Judah dropped to his knees as she sagged above Tommy, cupping her head as he kissed her, panting. Tommy’s hands fondled her breasts, playing gently with her nipples. She shuddered and gasped, feeling aftershocks shake her.

Jesus. Oh Jesus, she thought incoherently, her clit still pulsing with the strength of her orgasm.

Judah stroked her hair as Tommy reached up to kiss her. She slumped against him, her whole body trembling. Judah’s hands moved to her back, rubbing it gently. Tommy’s arms slid around her waist, holding her till she slept.

They were talking, she realized distantly, their voices low and intent. Annie tried to listen, but it was so nice just to lie here, her body limp in relaxation.

“...can’t just take her back to the house. Ma’d flip, Tommy.”

“I think she already knows. But you’re right.”

She was lying on something soft. It felt lovely. Familiar. A mattress? She thought so—but...

Annie opened her eyes. She was still in Tommy’s room, the mid-morning sunlight pouring through the window. It slanted across Tommy’s old iron bedstead, pooling beside her on the wide mattress.

“We can’t let you go, Annie. Not again. Not ever.”

Oh jeepers! Annie felt herself blushing and shut her eyes again quickly. *Did they just do what I think they did?*

Opening her lids a slit, she peered around the room. Tommy and Judah stood near the door, speaking in low tones, their heads bent together.

“Yeah, but what about a wedding? I mean, there’s gonna be talk enough, Tommy.” Judah was dressed in nothing but his jeans, his broad back facing her. Tommy, she noted abruptly, was completely naked.

Oh God, they really *had* done that. Heat rushed to her cheeks as the recollection flowed through her mind. They’d made her come so hard she’d passed out, practically, tumbling into a sleep so deep she hadn’t woken even while they’d set up the bed.

Tommy shrugged after a moment. “You ask her. She already turned me down.”

“Ask me what? And where did the bed come from?”

They spun to face her, looking almost guilty. Tommy cleared his throat. “From the attic. I didn’t want to take it with me when we moved.”

“Moved to where, anyway?” She smiled, sitting up, only realizing she was naked as the sheet over her slid downward, baring her breasts. Both Tommy and Judah followed the motion, the expression in their eyes growing suddenly intent.

“There’s only one answer. We’re just going to have to share you, Annie.”

She stared back at them, finally grasping the full depth of what they were offering. Finally understanding that for once, she didn’t have to choose.

Didn’t have to feel torn in two.

Didn’t have to leave them.

A relief so great it felt like agony flooded through her. Burying her face in her hands, Annie burst into tears.

Immediately, they were beside her, Tommy sitting on the mattress with his arms around her while Judah stood awkwardly at the foot of the bed. “Shh, Annie. Don’t cry. Please don’t cry. We’ll figure it out, I promise.”

“You don’t understand,” she sobbed. “I’m happy. I’m happy.”

Through her tears, she caught the perplexed glances they gave each other. It made her laugh even as she was crying.

Great, Annie. Two men can't figure you out any more than one can.

Except they had. Both of them. They'd finally realized what she'd never been able to make them see—that she *couldn't* choose between them. She loved them both too much.

“Just hold me,” she whispered. Tommy held her closer, pillowing her head on his shoulder. She looked up at Judah. “Both of you, Ju.”

Tommy stiffened momentarily, then made himself relax. It would take time, Annie realized, for them both to get comfortable—but it'd be okay.

She'd make damn sure of it.

Turning her head, she reached an arm out to Judah, drawing him down onto the bed with Tommy and her. He lay on his side and Annie rolled toward him, feeling Tommy shift with her until he was curled against her back. Tommy's arm was looped around her waist, his hand caressing her ribcage. Smiling, she led Judah's hand to her ass as she kissed him, slow and wet and deep.

His hand tightened, kneading her bottom. Tommy lifted his hand to stroke her hair back, baring her neck so he could nuzzle it softly.

Annie smiled at the feel of them surrounding her, cocooning her in the fierce, protective warmth of their love.

Oh yeah, they'll get comfortable with this quick.

Epilogue

She could hear the sound of sawing from outside on the porch. Tommy's voice drifted down the hallway from the open door.

"Damn it, Ju. No, the *other* end."

Annie smiled, lifting the tea kettle from the gas stove. Warm sunlight fell through the big kitchen windows, pooling on the counter and making the petals of the Black-eyed Susans Tommy had picked her glow.

Mrs. Ambinder looked around as Annie filled her tea cup. "I must say, it's nice seeing the old place set right."

It still felt strange to Annie, standing on this side of the counter, with Mrs. Ambinder perched before her on her old stool. She smiled, though, and nodded. "It is, isn't it? But I still wish you'd move in with us—it's not right without you here."

Mrs. Ambinder surprised her by blushing furiously. Her hands flapped in the air before her as if chasing off flies. "Gracious no, child! I don't even want to *think* about what the three of you do at night, let alone hear it!"

Suddenly, it was Annie who was blushing, looking anywhere but at the pink-faced old woman.

Then Mrs. Ambinder reached over, patting her hand comfortingly. "Never you mind, Annie. I'm better off where I am, what with all the conveniences Judah put in the new house. I was fifty-eight before I ever owned a dishwasher, can you imagine?"

Her eyes twinkled, although the tips of her ears were still pink, Annie noted. "You just bring that baby down to visit his grandmother often," she added, nodding at Annie's swelling belly.

"What makes you so sure it's a boy?" Annie teased.

Mrs. Ambinder smiled inscrutably. "Nothing. But I'm right. You'll see."

Yes, Annie thought, she probably would.

Standing, Mrs. Ambinder gathered together her things, pausing to hug Annie before she left the kitchen. "I'm glad you changed your mind about marrying Tommy," she whispered. "You had to marry one of them, and Judah's always been the stronger."

Remembering all the years Judah had watched them, silent and protective, Annie had to agree. It was hard now to remember the grim, guarded expression he'd had for so long—especially now, she thought as she and Mrs. Ambinder walked out to the porch, seeing both brothers look up at her with broad, open grins.

Things *did* change, Annie realized suddenly. Even if sometimes it seemed to take forever. Gazing out at the pastures and the rumped, rolling hills, she took a deep breath, smelling new paint and sawdust and the deep, vibrant richness of the Montana air.

About the Author

To learn more about Sierra's books, please visit www.sierradafoe.com. Send an email to Sierra at sierra@sierradafoe.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Sierra_Dafoe

Look for these titles by Sierra Dafoe

Now Available:

The Boys Back Home

She could never choose between them. Until they both chose her...

The Boys Back Home

© 2008 Sierra Dafoe

Even as a young girl, Cassie Jordan knew the rules: one man, one woman. Especially in rural Idaho. But how can she choose between blond, kind-hearted Kyle Watson and dark, sensuous Alan Caine?

She can't. Not even when she discovers the two handsome cowboys in bed together and is convinced that neither of them cares for her at all. That discovery sends her running all the way to Chicago and into the arms of another man. Now, with her wedding fast approaching, it's time to return to Preacher's Bend to sort out her tangled emotions.

Now that Cassie's back in town, Kyle and Alan are determined to do whatever it takes to keep her there. As far as they're concerned, there's only one place on earth Cassie belongs—in their arms.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Boys Back Home:

How could he hold her like this, damn him? How could he touch her so gently when she *hated* him? He'd broken her heart, he and Alan—they'd torn it between them like two puppies with a sock, leaving her with nothing but ripped, tangled shreds.

Why wouldn't he let her *go*?

Kyle was saying something, but she was shrieking too loud to hear him, her fists flailing at his chest, his shoulders, struggling to break his grip on her. She screamed as he swung her upward, scooping her unceremoniously into arms that felt suddenly like steel bands, pinning her to him.

He carried her into the parlor and lowered her onto to the sofa. Immediately Cassie sprang back off it, trying to get past him.

"Cassie!" Grabbing her arm, he shoved her back down, pinning her bodily to the cushions. She arched below him, screaming, fighting against the hands claspings her shoulders, the legs wrapped tight around her own.

"Cass! Damn it, Cass, breathe!"

She glared up at him wildly...and saw him staring down at her, panting, his eyes wide and shocked. Like a cord snapping, her rage broke, running out of her like water through sand. She sobbed, feeling all the grief and hurt she'd kept so long at bay wash over her, seizing her as ruthlessly as a tidal wave.

Nothing was safe. Nothing held its shape—not Kyle, not Alan, not the world. Nothing.

Ten days after that night at Big Blue's, Meredith Jordan had suffered a fatal heart attack. Cassie, who had moved through those ten days wrapped in a numbness so deep she'd honestly believed she wasn't

really that hurt, had found the last tenuous strands of her childhood torn away, leaving her with nothing but a hollowness she knew she'd never be able to fill.

Now she cried, feeling the warm weight of Kyle's body over her like a blanket, his arms shifting around her to hold her close. It wasn't his fault that he wanted Alan. And he *did* love her. He did. He'd even been there for her at her mother's funeral, if she'd wanted him, if she'd even so much as lifted a hand...

The parking lot hadn't, in fact, been the last time she'd seen them. She'd spotted them at the cemetery, standing together far back in the crowd, their faces pale and somber. But by then she'd been too far gone to even care. As the first shovelful of half-frozen dirt had thudded down onto the casket, she'd turned on her heel and left. Before the sun rose again on Preacher's Bend she'd been a hundred miles east, heading for Chicago.

Sliding an arm around his neck, she hugged Kyle apologetically as her tears finally slowed. His chest heaved with sharp, rasping breaths. Realizing only then how badly she'd frightened him, Cassie turned her head to whisper "I'm sorry" in his ear...and froze as his mouth, hot and demanding, closed on hers.

For a moment, her mind went terrifyingly blank. This couldn't be happening. It *couldn't*. He didn't want her. He'd *never* wanted her...

Then she was kissing him back with a frenzy that stunned her, pulling him to her with a desperation she'd never *once* felt with Richard. Kyle's hands stroked her face, her arms, her back as their lips locked together, tongues darting hungrily into each other's mouths, their bodies straining together as if starved for the contact.

Kyle pulled back abruptly, staring down at her in shock, his chest rising and falling rapidly. His silvery blue eyes seemed to burn into her, wide with questions, doubts and—unmistakably—desire. Groaning, he bent his neck to seize her mouth again, his tongue diving deep between her lips to taste her, devour her. She arched up against him as his hips pressed down, rubbing his cock right against the place that ached for him—that had always ached for him.

How many nights, how many *years* had she dreamed of this? Practically whimpering with impatience, Cassie tugged Kyle's shirt from his jeans, sliding her hands under it to feel the hard, solid ripple of his abs. He kept his mouth tight against hers as he unzipped her jacket and unbuttoned her blouse, his fingers shaking, his eyes closed as if he, too, could barely believe what was happening. Hesitantly, he brushed his hand over the lace of her bra and she cried out, moaning into his mouth, holding him tighter as he squeezed first one breast, then the other with growing assurance.

Like teenagers, they rubbed against each other, legs intertwining, hips pistoning fiercely as they fought to press their bodies even closer together. The bulge of his erection strained against her clit, and he panted in her ear, his fingers finding the taut nub of her nipple and squeezing it over and over until she was

writhing beneath him, her thighs wrapped around his hips, her hands scrabbling madly at his heavy sheepskin jacket. She dragged it off him, hungry for the feel of his body against hers, and felt him stiffen in sudden doubt or fear.

He couldn't stop now—he *couldn't*! With wanton desperation, Cassie buried her hands in his hair, dragging his mouth back down to hers, kissing him until something inside of him, some last hesitation, crumbled like sand. With a harsh, wild sob, he thrust his tongue deep into her open mouth and dragged her tight against him.

Fumbling, eager, they tore at each other's clothes. Kyle hugged her to his chest with one arm as he worked her coat off with the other. Cassie didn't even bother with the buttons of his shirt as she yanked it over his head, taking the white T-shirt beneath with it, and tugged his belt loose. Then she dropped her head against the arm of the couch, panting.

Bracing himself on his arms, Kyle looked down at her, his pale, piercing eyes drinking in the sight of her. Her blouse hung open; her breasts, cupped in her white lace bra, heaved with each breath. His gaze traced them, his pupils widening, and Cassie studied him just as avidly.

She hadn't seen him shirtless since he was thirteen, his lengthening body still all sharp angles and seeming half-finished. Now she stared wonderingly, transfixed by the width of his burly shoulders, the solid curve of his collarbones, the firm swell of his chest flecked now with soft blond hairs. His nipples, small and tight, brushed against her palms as she slid her hand over his pecs, following the smooth rise and fall of his ribcage down to the taut muscles of his abs.

Groaning, Kyle bent his head, kissing the curve of her breasts above her bra, then raked his teeth lightly over one lace-clad nipple. Her pussy, already soaked with arousal, throbbed hungrily, and she pressed against him, sliding her hands up his back, feeling the heavy muscles beneath the velvety skin. Burying his face between her breasts, he murmured, "Cass... Oh, Cass."

Can their love give her the strength to overcome the tragedy in her past?

Colters' Lady

© 2010 Maya Banks

Colters' Legacy, Book 2

When police officer Seth Colter sees the delicate, shabbily dressed beauty in line at the soup kitchen where he's serving, he's gut shot over the idea of her being on the streets cold and alone. More baffling is the dark, possessive instinct that tells him she belongs to him.

For Lily Weston, home is a secluded nook in a back alley—until Seth offers her a place to stay. She's wary of his offer, but even one night out of the cold is too much temptation to resist.

Seth is convinced Lily is his. The problem is, when his brothers lay eyes on her, the same primitive instinct comes roaring to the surface. The Colters never imagined they'd follow the unconventional path of their fathers, but they can't ignore their mutual need to offer Lily their protection—and their love. But before Lily and the brothers can forge a future together, they must heal the deep wounds of her past.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, multiple partners, ménage à quatre, violence.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Colters' Lady:

Michael's gaze was drawn to the kitchen entrance where he was astonished to see a woman standing in the doorway. She was dressed in what looked like a pair of Callie's old pajamas. Her eyes were wide with...fear? She looked anxious, and she stared at Michael like she was afraid he was going to jump up and pounce.

An eerie sensation niggled his nape and snaked down his spine, spreading like wildfire. What the hell? He couldn't take his eyes off her. She had the most stunning blue eyes he'd ever seen on a woman. Her hair fell over her ears and to her chin in soft curls. She looked...enchanted, like some delicate fairy come to life.

And what the fuck was he doing sitting here mooning on about goddamn fairies? Jesus on an eggshell but he was losing his ever-loving mind.

He was starting to think stupid things, like he'd do anything at all to remove the fear from her gaze. He wanted to protect her.

And she was coming out of his brother's bedroom. Or at least from that general vicinity.

"S-Seth?" she asked in a wavery voice. But before Seth could respond, she said, "I should go. I need to go."

Her voice was whisper soft, and before he could catch himself, Michael was on his feet—to do what? Keep her from going?

He forced himself to stand there while Seth hurried toward the woman.

"Lily, no," Seth said in a soft, urgent voice as he took her shoulders in his hands.

So Lily was her name. Michael watched as Lily skittered away from Seth's grasp, her eyes darting toward Michael as she did.

"Honey, it's only Michael. My brother Michael. Remember, I told you all about him last night?"

"The vet," she said in a husky voice.

"Yes, that's right. He just started his practice back home."

"I should go," she said again, and Michael saw her edge toward the hallway that led to the bedroom.

"Stay and eat breakfast. I made you a cup of hot chocolate. It's probably cold by now, but I can pop it into the microwave for you."

She hesitated, her gaze going between the two brothers.

"I need to get dressed," she said faintly.

"Okay. I'll be here in the kitchen. I'll make breakfast so you can eat when you get out."

She was gone before Seth could say another word. When he turned back to Michael, there was something decidedly desperate in his older brother's eyes. A desperation that for some reason, Michael felt in equal measure.

"Who is she?" Michael rasped out. Hell, he couldn't even talk right. He had a knot in his throat the size of a boulder.

Seth cut an impatient glance at his brother. "Lily," he bit out. "Just Lily."

"Who is she to *you*?"

Seth swung around, his eyes blazing. "Why the hell do you want to know that?"

"I want to know," Michael said. "I need to know, because damn it, I just had the most powerful reaction to a woman I've had in my entire life, and I damn well need to know if I'm poaching on my brother's territory."

Seth's mouth gaped open. "You stay the hell away from her."

"So it's like that," Michael said grimly. "You've staked a claim."

"Are you out of your mind? You just met the woman. What are you planning to do, haul her off over your shoulder?"

"Maybe," Michael said calmly. "Probably."

"Over my dead body."

"When did you meet her?" Michael asked. Seth hadn't mentioned a woman. Not to anyone. He would have known. The dads wouldn't have kept something like that quiet. They would have been too busy giving him hell.

"Yesterday," Seth said in a gruff, pissed-off voice.

“Yesterday? *Yesterday*? And you’re going off on me for having just met her?” Michael laughed. “You fucking hypocrite.”

And then the thought came. Stuck in his head like someone had hit him with a hammer. He’d walked into his brother’s house and met a woman he instantly and absolutely had to have. It wasn’t just sexual. No, his reaction to her hadn’t even been sexual. It was *emotional*. On a level he couldn’t even explain.

The same woman his brother was having some psychotic caveman episode over.

“Oh no,” he whispered. “Oh *hell* no.”

“What are you talking about?” Seth demanded.

“Goddamn it, I thought it was bullshit. I thought it was some hokey bullshit that the dads made up to make Mom feel all soft and mushy.”

Seth got into his face, breathing fire he was so pissed off. “What. The. Fuck. Are. You. Talking. About.”

Michael closed his eyes and let out a helpless laugh. “It’s some fucked-up Colter gene. It has to be. There’s no other explanation.”

Seth threw up his hands. “I swear to God if you don’t start making some fucking sense, I’m going to knock the shit out of you.”

“Think about it, Seth. How many times have we heard the story over the years? The dads met Mom and they knew immediately and with absolute certainty that she was the one. *The one*. They said it was instant and so powerful they didn’t have a prayer of fighting. They wanted to love and protect her, wrap her in cotton and lock her away for about a hundred years. Now you tell me. Is that what you’re feeling when you look at Lily? Because I sure as hell am, and it’s worse for me because I don’t even know the goddamn woman.”

Seth looked like someone hit him square between the eyes with a bat. For a moment, Michael thought Seth was going to hit *him*.

“That’s crazy,” Seth finally said. “She’s a beautiful woman. Of course you’d have a strong reaction to her. You probably haven’t been laid in a year.”

“No need to get insulting,” Michael drawled. “I’ve probably gotten lucky at least twice since the last time you shed the monk robes. And sure, she’s beautiful, but step back a moment, Seth. Really look at her objectively. She’s not the most gorgeous woman you or I have ever seen.”

Seth’s lip turned up into a snarl and Michael held up his hand. “Let me finish. We’ve seen any number of women who were heart-stoppingly gorgeous, but tell me this. Were you tripping over yourself like this with them? You look at her and you see something beyond beauty. I know because I saw the same damn thing.”

Seth shook his head. “I’m not listening to this. This is insane. Our dads may have fallen for the same woman, but you can’t tell me we’ll do the same.”

“You’re forgetting the granddads. Explain that one, Seth. If there isn’t some hinkey shit going on in the gene pool then why are you and I about to go to fist city because we’re both determined to get close to Lily?”

Seth’s eyes looked haunted as it all sank in. “Damn it, Michael, this isn’t what I wanted. It can’t be possible. It has to be some stupid coincidence.”

“Yeah, well, believe me, sharing a woman with my two bonehead brothers doesn’t exactly appeal to me either, but unless one of us suffers a fast change of heart, we’re either going to have to do some serious compromising or one of us is going to go home to Mom in a pine box.”

“I’m not having this conversation with you right now,” Seth bit out. “There are things you don’t know about Lily. I can’t even convince her to let her guard down around me. She walked in here, saw you and now she’s ready to bolt.”

“What the hell’s going on?” Michael asked, now dead serious.

Seth glanced down at the mug of hot chocolate, swore and then stuck it in the microwave. Then, as if realizing how much time had passed since Lily had gone to get dressed, he glanced at his watch and frowned.

“She’s been gone too long,” he muttered.

Michael watched as Seth stomped off down the hall. A few seconds later he heard “Son of a bitch!” And then the unmistakable sound of a fist hitting the wall.

Michael surged to his feet, adrenaline spiking sharp through his veins. Seth came barreling out of the hallway and then ducked into the dining room. He came back out, face set in stone.

“What the hell is wrong?” Michael demanded.

“While you and I were out here discussing Lily, she took off.”

Michael’s eyebrow went up at the urgency in Seth’s voice. “Won’t she be back?”

“No, goddamn it. She’s homeless, Michael. She doesn’t have a place to stay. I found her between two cardboard boxes on the fucking street. She’s scared and alone, and she has no place to go. It took me forever to convince her to come here, and now she’s run scared.”

Michael’s stomach bottomed out with a thud. “Homeless? What the *fuck*?”

Seth whirled around like he couldn’t figure out what he needed to do first. He grabbed up his keys and then shoved his feet into his shoes.

“Yeah, homeless. I served her in the soup kitchen yesterday. I volunteer there once a month. She came in and bam. I mean I still don’t know what happened. When she left I followed her because I couldn’t stand the thought of her having no place to go. I found her in an alley, cold and alone.”

“Son of a bitch,” Michael muttered.

Seth pointed a finger at him. “Right now I don’t give a damn about what you feel for her or think you feel. I don’t give a shit about some fucking Colter gene that you think we got from the dads. All I care

about is getting her back. Here. Where she belongs. Get your ass out to your Jeep so you can help me look. Everything else is just going to have to goddamn wait.”



SAMHAIN[™]
P U B L I S H I N G