



Second Chance

Greta Krafsig

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Chapter One

When the car pulled to a stop before the stables and the petite brunette stepped out Jess froze in place with hooks still nestled in the bale of hay he was unloading from his truck. He knew who she was, hell, how could he forget her? Somehow he wasn't surprised to see her, her unpredictability was like a swarm of locusts, occurring once every six to seven years.

Shaking himself from his daze, Jess jumped from his truck, the bale of hay in his arms. If she wanted to talk to him about something she'd have to work for it. Ambling into the stables he pretended as if he'd never even noticed her. Of course, notice her he had, for she was a hard one to miss. The spiral brunette curls tumbling down her back with a set of lovable blue eyes and her perky upturned nose were almost irresistible; at least they had always been for him.

Megan watched as Jess strode away into the barn, feigning he didn't see her. Pushing curls out of her face she went around to the back seat and helped her son out. Dennis was mad at her when she woke him, so rudely interrupting his long nap. Rubbing his eyes with a grubby six-year-old fist he took her hand when she offered it to him and allowed himself to be led into the stable.

At the sound of the horses, Dennis' eyes and ears perked up, forgetting his exhaustion for the moment. When one of the horses reached out to get a closer look at him he giggled and let the horse snuff his hair, messing it into disarray.

Megan noticed nothing at the moment other than the man who was striding towards them. As he stopped in front of them she was surprised at his physique, it was more developed than she remembered. His bare shoulders and chest were littered with bronze muscles and they only accented the attractiveness of his tall and slender frame. Dark strands of his thick, black hair protruded as wisps from under his tan cowboy hat, matching the intensity of his dark eyes.

"I need a place to stay?" she knew the question would throw him off-guard but she had no other choice. When he didn't answer her, she chewed at her bottom lip. "Just for a little while anyways."

He shook his head and muttered to himself. "You always were trouble."

Megan smiled; she did have that effect on men, though she wasn't proud to admit it. "So, can I stay with you for a while or should I go to that motel I saw a few miles back?"

Wiping a hand across his forehead he turned, answering her as he moved away. "The house is unlocked."

Letting out a sigh of relief Megan squeezed Dennis' hand and steered him out of the stables towards the three-story house in front, refusing to listen the boy's protest about staying with the horses.

"When are we going back home momma?" Megan slipped Dennis' backpack on his back and pulled her suitcases from the trunk of the car. She was surprised her son hadn't asked the question sooner.

"You know we can't go back, Dennis. This area is nice. Once I get a job, we'll get a house of our own with a big backyard and maybe even a dog."

"I liked it better back home," he pouted crossing his small arms and glaring at her.

Megan bent to kiss her son's disheveled head as she directed him towards the porch. "I'm sure you'll like it here just as much as you liked it back in Kansas. Nothing will be too much different."

Dennis opened the door to the house. "Wow, this place is big!"

Megan smiled at the pure joy in his voice. Of course the house was bigger than their two bedroom apartment. "Wait until you see the upstairs." She told him.

He grinned and clapped his hands. "There's an upstairs?"

Megan let her suitcases hit the floor; she'd bring them up later.

"Come on, let me show you." Taking her son's hand she made her way through the living room and to the stairwell, racing him to the top. When Dennis was done giggling uncontrollably she grabbed his hand again and took him from room to room.

"Wait momma, there's another staircase." Without warning Dennis sprinted up the stairs to the third and final floor. Rolling her eyes Megan ran up after him, not wanting him to get into any trouble.

The master bedroom was littered with dirty blue jeans and sweat streaked tee shirts. A saddle lay on a wooden rack in one corner of the room gathering dust, the bed was unmade and the sheets lay in a tangle on the floor. Unlike all the other rooms that were untouched, clean, and neat, the master bedroom was a wreck. Megan found Dennis sitting at the room's bay window seat, looking out of the grime covered window to the layout of the ranch below.

"Dennis, we shouldn't be up here. From now on this room is off limits, understood?" Dennis took his face and pressed it to the glass, smearing the dirt with his nose and hands.

"Awe momma, you gotta see this." Megan glanced out the window—there *was* a spectacular view, better than she remembered—then grabbed Dennis by the back of his shirt and dragged him out of the room.

"Off limits, do you understand?" Dennis nodded, jumping down the stairs one by one and grinning each time the impact echoed throughout the second floor.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Which room do you want?"

Thinking for a second Dennis finally decided on a small bedroom that looked out towards the stables. The view was nothing compared to that of the master bedroom. "The blue one with the big fish on the wall."

"Go put your backpack on the bed. Momma's going to take the green room down the hall beside the bathroom." Dennis nodded and ran off towards his new bedroom.

"Where to do you want these?" Megan whirled, finding Jess behind her holding her suitcases.

"You didn't have to do that." Megan tried to take them from him but he only backed away from her.

"That's okay. Now, where do you want these?" He cocked an eyebrow and looked at her quizzically.

"The green room." She followed him as he carried the suitcases into her new room and then set them down on the queen-sized bed. He'd put his shirt on before coming in. The neck and arms of it were soaked in sweat and bits of hay stuck to his jeans but Megan didn't mind. The smell of a hard-working man and horses was a familiar one.

"I'm sorry about all this. I didn't know where else to go."

Jess pulled his hat off to run a hand through his damp hair, sprinkling her lightly with sweat. "I never expected you to come back," he said sadly. His dark hair hung limply in his face and behind his ears, in definite need of a haircut. It had always been unruly, one of the reasons he liked his hat so much.

"If I had anywhere else to go I wouldn't have—" Dennis ran into the room, wrapping his hands around the back of Megan's one leg and startling her.

"Well, are you going to introduce us or should I do it myself?" Jess smiled at the little boy hiding behind his mother. He looked about five or six with dark, curly brown hair and dark blue eyes.

"Jess this is Dennis. Dennis, this is Jess." Dennis looked up at Jess and smiled, one of his front teeth was missing.

"Hey Dennis, nice to meet you." Jess held out a hand. The boy, finding the prospect of a handshake so tempting, forgot his fright and stepped forward to place his little hand in Jess's—huge by comparison.

"Hello. Can I see the horses now?"

Jess eyed Megan until she gave a hesitant nod of approval. "Sure. Your Mom will even make us lunch while we're gone. Won't you Mom?" Jess said with a grin.

Megan glanced at her watch. It was coming on twelve thirty. "All right. I guess that's the least I can do." Megan rolled her eyes and watched Dennis follow Jess down the stairs.

Chapter Two

"Wow! How many horses do you have?" Jess glanced down at the beaming boy skipping to keep up with his long strides.

"Let's see...I have Rusty, Tonka, Bronco, Sunny, Jim, and Dallas. That would make a total of six in all." Jess led Dennis down the double row of stalls, introducing him to each horse by name and lifting him up to see the ones he couldn't look into even while standing on tiptoe.

"I like that one." Dennis said pointing to a small sorrel gelding going into his mid teens just this year. The graying gelding was the oldest in the stables and the smallest, his withers standing at about Jess's chest. To the boy Tonka was most likely the least intimidating.

"This is Tonka. I bet you'd like to brush him." Dennis nodded his head and smiled before answering with an excited yes.

Jess put Tonka's halter on and took him out of his stall, leading him to a pair of cross-ties. After showing Dennis where the brushes were in the tack room and instructing him in the basics of grooming—watch your toes—Jess saddled up his favorite roan Quarter Horse and rode out of the stables to water his stock of cattle in the far pastures on the edge of his property.

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Megan found her son brushing a brown horse, what she considered to be an enormous animal for a small child to be around, and talking to him happily. And as for Jess, he was nowhere in sight. Stopping a few feet away from Dennis and the horse Megan called out, making him turn.

"Dennis, where'd Jess go?" Dennis shrugged and came to Megan, grabbing her hand and trying to tug her closer.

"Come meet Tonka Momma. He's really nice and he likes it when you scratch him behind the ears but I can't really reach him there." Megan gave her son a shaky smile but would come no closer.

"I'm sure he is sweetheart but Momma doesn't want to get dirty." Almost sure Dennis knew she was lying, Megan was relieved when the sound of hooves drew their attention to the far end of the barn.

Jess ducked atop his roan to clear the stable's doorframe, bringing his gelding to a stop a few feet in front of a petrified Megan.

"Good God, what is that thing?"

Jess swung out of the saddle, laughing even as he pulled the saddle from the roan's back. "This is Rusty. You have nothing to worry about, he's nothing but a big baby."

"Please tell me that's the biggest you have here." Jess smiled and traded the roan's bridle for its pale green halter.

"He sure is. He's my biggest boy."

Megan felt her heart calm down a notch as Jess released the roan into a pasture adjoining the stables.

"Promise me right now you won't let my son near any horse other than this one." Megan gestured to Tonka who was sniffing Dennis' hair as the young boy looked on.

"Fine."

Megan sighed, even as she felt the beginnings of a headache brewing. "Good. I came to tell you lunch is ready. I hope you like tuna salad sandwiches. It was all I could do to find a loaf of bread that wasn't moldy or green."

Jess released Tonka from his cross ties and threw the gelding's lead rope over its neck. "Sure, I'll be right there." Reaching down Jess caught Dennis under the arms and lifted him onto Tonka's back. "As soon as I've taken your kid for a short ride. For all that brushing he deserves it." Jess swung up behind Dennis. Seated bareback on the sorrel gelding his movements were fluid and confident.

"Jess!! Are you crazy?" Megan clenched her hands, trying to hide her fear. She couldn't believe she was letting Dennis on a horse.

"Thanks Mommy." Dennis beamed and held on to the horse's mane to steady himself.

"Jess if anything happens to him I'll have your head!" Megan watched Jess turn and smile at her. He tipped his cowboy hat in her direction before urging the horse forwards.

"Can we go faster?" Dennis asked as they started their second loop around the fair sized paddock converted into a near-professional riding ring. Before Jess had a chance to answer Tonka broke into a smooth trot, reading the young boy's mind and responding to his question with no urging.

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Dennis ran into the house excitedly. He waved his arms madly in the air and talked a steady stream of nonsense. Megan had to grab him by the arms and repeat his name several times before he stopped, took a deep breath, and started to talk normally.

"That was so much fun Momma! He says I can ride Tonka again after lunch but by myself this time. You should have seen us, we went really fast!" Jess came in the house then. With his hat in one hand he wiped sweat off his forehead with the other.

"How fast is fast?" Megan couldn't help herself she just had to know. Fear was already climbing from the pit of her stomach and spreading throughout the rest of her body.

Jess chuckled and plopped his hat back on top of his mop of thick hair. "A slow canter, nothing you should be worried about. It's not like I own a whole line of racehorses and plopped him on the fastest one. I run a cattle ranch...."

"If you let him on that horse again today I don't want a single hair missing from his head when he gets back." Megan said moving to set three plates on the table to hide her growing anxiety.

"You worry too much. Tonka knows what he's doing. He won't do anything the boy can't handle." Jess flipped a chair around backwards and took a seat at the kitchen table. Giggling, Dennis turned his chair around backwards and did the same, sitting on his knees to reach the table.

"No sir, that's not how we sit at the table." Megan shook her head and started to pull Dennis from his seat.

"He's doing it momma!" The child protested.

Letting out a sigh, Megan grabbed Jess's sandwich out of his hands before he could take a bite.

"What was that for?" Jess cried out in protest.

"Do you know what kind of an example you're setting?"

Jess shrugged when she motioned to the way he was sitting in his chair. "Yeah, so? This is my house. Or have you forgotten?"

Megan set the sandwich on the place and carried it towards the sink. "And I made this sandwich, or have *you* forgotten? If you want to eat anything you'll sit in your chair like you're supposed to and set a good example for my son." Caught in his own game Jess rolled his eyes and turned his chair around to sit in it properly.

"Thank you." Megan put Jess's plate back on the table.

"Gee kiddo, your Mom doesn't let you do anything fun." Jess directed the remark at Dennis who had reluctantly turned his chair back around.

"Tell me about it," he said before taking a big bite out of his sandwich and getting mayonnaise all over his mouth and cheek.

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"I have to fix some fences in the east pasture, so if you need us that's where we'll be."

Megan set the last dish in the sink and turned the water on to start rinsing them. "I'm serious about watching him Jess. He doesn't have any horse experience. If anything should happen to him..."

There came a heavy silence between the both of them. Dennis looked from one to another as he wondered what was going on that he was too young to understand.

Finally Jess shook his head and stood up. "He'll be fine. Tonka will teach him everything he needs to know." Jess opened the back door for Dennis and he started chattering to him happily.

"Jess!" Megan called before he could duck outside.

"What now?"

"Make sure he has a helmet."

Jess nodded and the screen door made a thwacking sound as it springs bounced back into place.

Finishing up the dishes Megan forced herself to go upstairs and unpack. If things worked out like she hoped they would she'd be back on her feet and in a house of her own in no time. After all her stuff was unpacked and all of Dennis' things put away Megan got herself a glass of cold water and plopped her big butt down on the living room couch.

Surveying the room she concluded it hadn't changed much since she'd last seen and decorated it. It was still masculine looking with a sprinkle of her feminine touch. The furniture was comfortable dark leather, the sofa and matching chairs a deep brown. The carpets were a light beige, the walls all a bright white with sheer white curtains, and the ceiling a dark red. The natural wood of the floor moldings tied it all together. Hints of color were thrown here and there around the room, a red pillow, a red lamp, and a beautiful red and beige throw rug completed the mood of the room. The purpose of the room was to be attractive, yet durable against the unwanted dirt that would track inside from a whole day out on the ranch.

Needing something to calm her nerves Megan jumped up and started to pace. Of course she'd have to tell him why she was really here later tonight. Until then she needed some sort of distraction before she pulled her hair out of her head. Opening a kitchen cabinet Megan was happy to find a bucket full of cleaning supplies as well as a mop and broom. This would provide exactly the type of distraction she needed. She rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

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"This is a saddle." Jess put the saddle on Tonka's back and quickly cinched it. The arrival of Megan and Dennis had set him back a few hours on his daily ranch chores. If he were lucky he'd have them all done before ten tonight.

"I didn't have one of those the last time I was on him." Jess adjusted the stirrups to fit the boy. If it weren't for Lauren he wouldn't even have a saddle small enough for Dennis.

"We'll I'd let you ride that way again but I think your Mom would have a heart attack." Trading Tonka's halter for a bridle Jess patted the friendly gelding on the shoulder before picking Dennis up and putting him on the horse's back.

"You put your feet in here: these are called stirrups. These are the reins. You always hold them with both hands like this." Jess put Dennis' hand on the reins, adjusting them slightly.

"How do I get him to go?"

"You touch him with the heels of your shoes. He'll follow beside Bronco and me. All you need to do is work on staying in that saddle and holding on to those reins, understand?"

Dennis nodded.

"Good." Jess went to Bronco who stood patiently waiting for him and mounted, turning the black horse around to face Dennis.

"Do I ask him to go now?"

Jess nodded and watched as Dennis strained to touch Tonka's sides with his heels.

"Buddy, if you can't reach just ask him to walk with your voice."

Dennis strained to reach again and brushed Tonka with the very tip of his toes. "Tonka, walk." The gelding gave a deep huff in both exasperation and mild annoyance but started forward, placing one foot placidly in front of the other.

"Now give him a pat and tell him he's a good boy."

Dennis leaned forward and rubbed Tonka's neck.

"Watch your reins, you don't wanna to drop 'um." Jess brought Bronco, a patient black gelding, up beside Tonka and matched the older horse's walk. Telling Dennis to sit up and push his feet further forward Jess coached Dennis on the basics of riding. Slowly but surely the boy caught on, riding with more confidence as they neared the east paddock.

"Can I try going a little faster?" Dennis gave Tonka a friendly pat on the neck then rubbed the horse behind the ears.

"Sit back a little and push your feet forward some."

Doing as he was instructed Dennis shifted a bit in his saddle.

Clicking his tongue Jess urged Bronco into a trot. "Ask him to trot now buddy."

"Tonka trot." The older sorrel gelding threw his head up and broke into a rough trot.

"Tonka ho!" Jess pushed Bronco forwards, trying to get to the boy in time. Dennis was so intent on trying to steer the horse he didn't even notice he was slipping until he actually hit the ground. Jess jumped from his horse and came to the little boy.

"What happened?" He asked, looking at his muddy pants and hands. He didn't even seem the least bit shocked after his fall.

"You fell off. Didn't expect that to happen, now did you?" Jess helped Dennis up out of the mud and put him back on the horse. "Keep it at a walk for the rest of the day bud. We'll work on going faster another time."

Dennis nodded and told Tonka to walk as Jess started off again on Bronco.

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"What the *hell* happened?" Megan ran her eyes over Dennis, standing covered in mud in the kitchen.

"He had a little fall. No harm done, he just needs a bath." Jess let his hat drop to the table. For some reason he couldn't find the hat hanger that was usually beside the door.

"Fell, he fell! I *knew* I shouldn't have let him go! What if it happened all over again? I don't want him on that thing ever again! Do you understand me?"

"Oh lighten up Megan. Everyone falls off at some point in time."

"Just because you don't value the safety of a child's life—"

“Screw you! It was your fault just as much as it was mine! After all these years you *still* think I’m the only one to blame?” Jess glared at the petite woman before him then grabbed his hat and was back out the front door.

“Momma, I’m scared.” Dennis squeaked as he wrapped his arms around her leg. “He’s just like daddy,” he whispered shaking in fright.

Megan let out a shaky breath and held back tears. “No baby, he’s nothing like daddy. Jess would never hurt us.” She rubbed at Dennis’s tangled hair and kissed his forehead lightly. “Let’s get you a bath, huh buddy?”

The little boy nodded and took her hand as she led him upstairs to the bathroom. As usual Dennis was thrilled to be in the bathtub. Megan pulled his boats out of his backpack and let him play with them as he splashed and squirted water about. Between his splashing Megan found a way to wash his hair and his back under his protest.

“It’s in my eyes!” He cried shutting his eyes tight as she poured the water down over his head.

Megan laughed at his antics as she took a towel and wiped the water from his face. “Okay bud, you’re all done.”

“Awww, can I play a little longer?”

Megan smiled, “Five more minutes.” Of course five minutes turned into fifteen as Megan sat on the toilet in the bathroom running thoughts through her head. It was Dennis, standing wet and cold in front of her that finally snapped her back into the real world.

“Burr, I’m cold now.” His teeth chattered as he let her wrap him in an oversized towel and dry him off. She led him back to his bedroom and pulled open his backpack to find him clean clothes.

“Okay, I’m gonna go make dinner. Remember, the third floor is off limits.” Megan drilled into the little boy as she pulled on his superman pajamas and saw him settled on the bed surrounded by the rest of his toys.

“Okay Momma,” he said already lost in his imagination as he picked up two of his action figures and started pounding them together in mock battle.

Dinner that night was as hard to whip up as lunch. Megan found herself exasperated at the emptiness of the refrigerator – a pack of beers, some ketchup and mayonnaise, a moldy onion – and the equally well-stocked pantry. It had to have been sheer luck that she’d found the canned tuna, under the sink of all places, and a few pieces of mold free bread. Now she found herself in the same predicament, what to make?

“Ugh,” she said frustrated. At last she found a box of noodles and some canned tomato juice, enough to make some semblance of a dinner. “I guess this means I get to go shopping tomorrow.”

When she called Dennis down to dinner the little boy was already yawning and half asleep. He hadn’t even had half of the pasta in his bowl before he fell asleep on the one elbow he had resting on the tabletop. Megan found herself grinning at the sight before she stood on weary legs and managed to carry him up to bed. The little boy smiled slightly as she kissed him goodnight and tucked him under the covers.

Back downstairs Megan cleaned up what she could, but left a bowl in the microwave for Jess. Once she couldn't find anything else to clean in the kitchen she wandered back into the living room and sat down on the couch, turning on the television to wait.

It was nearly midnight when she heard him come back in. The sound of his heavy boots on the kitchen floor woke her from her light doze and brought her head around to watch him.

"Creatures of habit all right," he said as he eyed the bowl in the microwave. Opening the fridge he took out a beer and kicked off his muddy boots at the same time.

Megan winced as the amount of mud that splattered the kitchen floor that she'd mopped and scrubbed so diligently. It was then that she saw him looking at her.

"You never did like me taking my boots off in the kitchen." He muttered as he came in to take a seat next to her on the couch.

"And now you're getting the couch all dirty," she frowned, wiping some of the dirt from the knee of his worn jeans.

"Is he mine?"

"No," Megan answered softly.

"Good." Jess replied, leaning back into the couch and draining his beer.

"I married Chris after I left." She fidgeted, trying to find the words to explain.

"You don't have to explain." He said breaking the silence and tension between them at the same time. "Just tell me why you're here."

"I—" She stopped, the sadness welling up inside her. "It started out okay between us. He was a lot like you; I guess that's what drew me to him. Dennis was three when the trouble started. Every night he'd come home drunk. When I finally approached him about it he only yelled and screamed at me, waving his arms in the air. But it got worse. I told him if he didn't stop I'd leave him...and he hit me. He threatened to hurt Dennis if I told anyone, if I did anything. I was too scared to go for help. Instead I let him beat me again, and again, and again.

"Dennis turned six three weeks ago. We had a big party and everything. Chris was better then he had been lately. He was actually sober for the party that morning, but he left right after I cut the cake. When he came back home Dennis was still hyper from the earlier excitement. He was doing what all little boys do, running around and playing with his new toys. There was some cake left over and he'd been begging me for another piece ever since the party was over. I guess Chris just had enough. He told Dennis to sit down and shut up. I was in the bedroom straightening up when I heard Dennis scream. I ran out and saw him holding his hand over his bloody nose. Chris was yelling at him and coming for him again when I jumped in the way..."

Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at Jess. "I didn't know where else to go. If I'd gone to a friend he'd have found me and dragged me back home. I didn't tell anyone where I was going, not even my mother. I'm sure he was furious when he came home last week and saw that we were gone."

"Who else knows about me besides your mother?"

“No one.”

“Then you should be safe here.”

“I promise I won’t stay long. I’ll start looking for a job and a place tomorrow—”

Jess sighed and stood. “This house is as much yours as it is mine. You’re welcome to stay as long as you need to.” He held out a hand and pulled Megan to her feet. “I’m going to bed, and so should you.”

She nodded and followed him upstairs. She checked in on Dennis before she returned to her room and changed into a pair of pajamas. As soon as she put her head on her pillow, she was fast asleep.

Chapter Three

Jess awoke to her screams, and for a terrible second he thought he was reliving the past all over again. He thundered down the stairs, nearly killing himself, and came into her room short of breath. Dennis sat crying beside her on the bed trying to wake her up as she continued to scream.

“Megan!” Jess called, taking hold of her shoulders and shaking her.

Her eyes snapped open wild in fright and she hit at his face, nearly taking his eye out. Jess grabbed at her flailing arms and held them while she continued to scream and fight him.

“Megan! Calm down, it’s Jess. Megan!”

Dennis’s small sobs punctured the air as he crawled closer to her and tried to touch her face. “Momma, momma its okay.”

Slowly Megan came around, tears filling her eyes as she realized where she was, and Jess released her. She pushed herself upright in bed and grabbed Dennis, hugging the small boy to her chest and kissing him on the head as she rocked him in her lap and tried to stop his tears.

“Hush baby, its okay. Momma’s okay.” She looked up at Jess and gave him a weak smile as she continued to rock her son back and forth in her arms.

“I take it you wake up like this a lot.” Jess frowned as he watched the two of them. They were truly a pitiful sight.

Megan gave a sudden laugh and wiped the tears from her son’s eyes. “It’s okay Dennis. See, momma’s all right.”

“I thought daddy was hurting you,” the little boy cried and hugged her tightly around the neck. “I don’t want daddy to hurt you.”

“Don’t worry honey. Daddy won’t hurt me – or you – ever again. I promise.”

Silently Jess slipped out of the room. Back upstairs he rummaged through a pile of his dirty jeans and picked out one of the cleanest in the bunch. Pulling them on over his boxers he repeated the same search for a shirt. He could still hear the two of them in her room as he went downstairs to make coffee.

He could still feel the adrenaline rushing through his body as he pulled his muddy boots on and waited for the coffee to finish brewing. The pot wasn’t even half done when he poured himself a cup and then was out the front door.

The horses looked up at him with groggy eyes as he appeared and made his way to the feed room. "I know I'm early guys, but I doubt you'll mind much." After feeding each of the six horses Jess finished his coffee before he let the horses out to pasture for the morning. They'd remain out until early afternoon when it was too chilly for them to comfortably stay outside. Then he'd pull them out one at a time as he worked around the ranch.

The patter of small feet came to his ears as he threw hay down from the loft. Looking down he saw little Dennis peering up at him. "Watch out." Jess called before he pushed another bale overboard. Climbing down the loft ladder he found the little boy sitting on one of the overturned bales.

"Momma said I'm supposed to stay with you while she goes to the store."

Jess smiled at the red-eyed boy and picked up one of the hay bales he'd tossed down. "You wanna help?"

"Yeah!" The boy jumped up and grabbed hold of the hay Jess was carrying. "Where do we put it?" He asked curiously.

"Right over here by the wall." Jess watched in amusement as the boy held on to the hay bale as he carried it over to the wall.

"I'll get the next one!" Dennis called, dropping hold of the hay and going for another bale in the aisle. "Hmm, its kinda heavy," he called as he strained to lift the weight but couldn't.

"Let me give you a hand." Jess smiled as he picked up the hay and carried it again to the wall with the boy's help.

"This is fun!" Dennis said as he raced to get another hay bale.

When all the hay was stacked along the wall Dennis wiped his hands on his jeans and looked up at Jess with expectant eyes. "Now what do we do next?"

"Now," Jess replied moving to get a wheelbarrow and shovel, "I get to clean out the stalls." He handed the boy a shovel that nearly toppled him over. "Let me show you."

Jess pulled the wheelbarrow before the first stall and showed Dennis how to pick up the poop and put it inside.

"It stinks!" Dennis said wrinkling up his nose.

"Well your poop stinks also." Jess said with a laugh and ruffled the boy's hair.

He giggled. "I guess so."

Once the stalls were done for the morning Jess showed Dennis how to put a flake of hay in each stall and refill the water bucket for each horse.

"Now what do we do?" Dennis asked.

"Now we get to clean tack."

"What's tack?"

“It’s the horse’s saddle and bridle.”

“Oh.”

Dennis skipped along behind Jess’s longer strides into the tack room where Jess showed him how to pour solution into a cloth and then wipe off the saddle.

“You do a lot of work!” Dennis said as he yawned and wiped at his eyes with the back of a hand.

“Why don’t you go lay down over there on the couch?” Jess pointed to the old leather couch on other end of the tack room. Of course it was one of the ones Megan had hated and wanted him to get rid of that he’d never found the heart to. And so it had ended up in here. “You know, just to rest for a while.”

The little boy nodded and scrambled up onto one big cushion. Within moments he lie fast asleep. Jess chuckled and finished cleaning the saddles and bridles he’d used the day before.

“I knew he’d fall asleep for you.” Megan said startling Jess who hadn’t heard her approach. “He never gets up this early.”

She watched the little boy as he lie sleeping and a sad expression crossed her face, one that he’d seen before. Slowly she sat down on the couch beside the boy and smoothed his hair back with her hand. “We were so young, the two of us.” She gave him a sad smile as he stood up to trade one saddle for another. “Maybe if we’d tried harder—”

“You left me. Remember?” Jess attacked the saddle with a harsh rubbing of the cloth along the dirty areas. “I *was* trying.”

Megan sighed and stood, scooping the little boy into her arms. “I’m going to go make breakfast. I’ll come get you when it’s ready.” She waited a second for a reply but when she didn’t receive one she left as silently as she’d come.

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Back inside Dennis awoke to the smell of breakfast being placed on the kitchen table. He stretched his little arms and legs before he jumped off the living room couch and took a seat at the kitchen table.

“Yum,” he whispered as he picked up his toast and took a bite.

“Dennis Norman, you put that down right now!”

“But I’m hungry!”

“No excuses. Go run out to the stables and tell Jess that breakfast is ready. Once he comes in then you can eat.”

Dennis grumbled as he left the kitchen and ran for the stables. “Jess!” he called as he patted one of the horses on the nose through a pasture fence. “Jess, are you in there?” When there was no reply Dennis turned to run back for the house only he collided right into a little girl.

“Ouch! That hurt!” The little girl snapped at him as she ran a hand over her sore forehead.

“Well you ran into me.” Dennis said rubbing his forehead as well.

“Is Uncle Jess in there?” The little girl asked peering past his shoulder and trying to make out the shadows in the barn.

“He didn’t answer when I called for him.”

“Ooh, then I know where he is. Come on!” The little girl grabbed Dennis’s hand and tugged him along. Because he was curious, and because he was only six years old, Dennis followed.

Together the two ducked under one of the pasture fences and raced along side by side. It was the girl who was the first to spot the horse and the figure stooped over the wire fence.

“There he is!” She called to Dennis as she sprinted past him. “Uncle Jesse!!” She called running up to him and throwing herself arms his neck.

“Oh my goodness!” Jess laughed, pulling the girl into a bear hug. “You’re getting way, way too big for that.” He pattered her nose with kisses until he caught sight of Dennis and winked at him.

“Where’s your mom Lauren?” The little girl held on to Jess as he stood and shifted her to his hip.

“She’s at the house. She brought you breakfast! Blueberry muffins just like you like them. They’re still hot from the oven even.”

“You guys got back early then. When did you get home?”

“No, we still got back last night. Mom got up extra early to make you muffins. She said you’d be sad if you didn’t get them.”

Jess chuckled as he sat the girl on the saddle of his horse.

“Did you two meet each other yet?” Jess’s eyes wandered from one child to the other.

“Nope. We were too busy looking for you.” Lauren said gathering the horse’s reins and then leaning down to pet it on the shoulder.

“Lauren, this is Dennis. Dennis, this is Lauren.”

Dennis gave a shy smile as he edged closer.

“How about I give you two a ride back to the house huh? Then we’ll see about those blueberry muffins.”

~*~

“Oh, hello.”

Megan spun at the sound of a woman’s voice. She was a large woman, not obese, but big boned. Her hair was as thick and curly as Megan’s own hair, but an auburn reddish color. A few faint freckles speckled her cheeks, and only enhanced the color of her large green eyes and long dark lashes. Although she was thick waisted, she was quite curvaceous and in no way unattractive.

“Hi,” Megan responded uncertainly.

“If I’d have known Jess had company I wouldn’t have just barged right in.” The woman smiled and set a basket down on the kitchen counter. Finally she turned and held out a hand.

“I’m Amber.”

Megan took her hand. “Megan. Pleased to meet you.”

Amber’s eyes went wide. “Megan? Megan Patrick, the one who left him?”

“I see he’s told everyone in the county.” Megan said with an irritated grumble. Slowly she took a seat at the kitchen table.

“A man as good as he is, he deserves better than what you did to him.” Amber leaned her bulk against the counter and looked at Megan disapprovingly.

“Look, I doubt you even really know what happened. Gossip in a small town tends to get blown out of proportion as it travels. Don’t judge me before—”

“I thought I heard your voice!” Jess said coming into the house with Dennis and an older girl in tow. He smiled at Amber and placed a kiss on her lips before reaching for the basket on the counter. “Yum, blueberry muffins, my favorite.”

“Uncle Jess says I can ride Rusty next year!” The little girl jumped up and down, her pigtails flying around her head. Her hair was the same amazing red of her mother’s and her eyes were just as green.

“Uncle Jess may reconsider when mom says no.” Amber smiled at Jess as he took another bite of a muffin to hide his grin. The little girl stopped jumping up and down and got a sad look on her face.

“But—”

“We’ll have to wait until next year comes, now won’t we?” Her mother replied sternly.

The little girl sighed and hung her head in a pout. She crossed her small arms across her chest and stomped out of the kitchen to fling herself onto the couch in the living room.

“Lauren, stop that.”

The little girl jumped up giggling and ran to Dennis. “Tag, you’re it!” she called before racing out the front door.

Dennis waited only a second before he followed after her yelling, “No fair! You had a head start!”

Chapter Four

“I can see you two have already met.” Jess said as he finished the muffin and reached for a glass of orange juice sitting on the kitchen table.

“Yes, we have.” Amber said with a frown. “You should have told me you were having company Jess, I would have brought your muffins a different day.”

“It’s, uh, unexpected company. Besides, you know how much I love your muffins.” He gave her his famous boyish grin and it was returned with her amused smile and a shake of the head.

“Well I better not stay long then, I have to get Lauren to school. She wants to know if you’re still going to let her ride in the fall parade this Saturday. I told her it was all right with me as long as it was all right with you.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. Besides, I’d break her little heart if I told her no after all the practice she’s been doing.” Jess chuckled as he glanced out the window at the two kids playing in the yard.

“Okay then, we’ll see you tomorrow night.” She took up the empty basket, pecked Jess on the lips, said a brief goodbye to Megan, and then was out the door calling for Lauren.

Both Jess and Megan watched her as she rounded up her hyper daughter and managed to get her into the car as the girl cried that she was having fun and didn’t want to leave. It took Amber several threatening attempts at making the girl clean her room before she could usher her into the car.

“You don’t even like blueberry muffins.” Megan said in a huff as she turned to call Dennis in for breakfast.

“So? She doesn’t have to know that. She’s a great lady.” Jess smiled at the thought as he sat down at the table.

“I’ll bet.” Megan answered as she told Dennis to wash his hands before he was to sit down and eat.

“You sound a little jealous there.” Jess laughed at the sour look she got on her face.

“Her hair even looks like mine.”

“Apparently we’re both trying to have what we couldn’t with each other.” Jess shrugged and dug into the plate of food before him.

“Lauren says I can be in the parade!” Dennis said in between mouthfuls of toast and eggs.

“Sure, if you want to.” Jess said with a smile.

“Can I ride Tonka?” He asked, hopping up and down in his seat.

“Yeah, sure—”

“No, absolutely not!” Megan countered, glaring at Jess. “Maybe when you’re older, okay buddy?”

“But Lauren gets to ride! I want to ride also! She says that it will be a really big parade, and everyone will be watching. She says only the losers don’t ride in the parade.”

“I don’t care what she says. The answer is no.”

“Come on Megan, he’s just a kid.”

“No! I won’t risk it do you understand me? How could you even suggest—”

“The chances of something happening—”

“I won’t that chance!” Megan stood up in anger and brought her plate to the sink. “The answer is no Dennis.”

The little boy hung his head and started to cry.

Jess sighed and stood. “Thanks for breakfast, but I have to get back to work.”

“I’m going into town to look for a job and another place to stay.” Megan called after him as he walked down the front steps and towards the barn.

“Suit yourself.” He called back.

~*~

In town Dennis dragged his feet and wouldn’t stop complaining as Megan went from bank to bank looking for work and filling out job applications. She was only sorry that she’d left in such a hurry, and couldn’t get proper references from her prior job as an accountant.

“Dennis! Stop it this instant! I don’t want to hear anymore complaining, do you understand?”

“But Jess said I could so I wanna!”

“I won’t argue with you about this. Now when we go inside I want you to sit down and behave nice while I talk with the people about a job. Okay?”

Dennis crossed his arms over his little chest and stuck out his bottom lip, but was otherwise silent as Megan went into the bank to apply for a job.

The day continued in much the same fashion as Megan drove around the small town and looked for both work and a place to stay. Several people in town remembered her and gave her a frigid hello, but otherwise the time she spent in town was uneventful.

“I’m hungry.” Dennis complained as they drove back towards Jess’s ranch in the fading light.

“I know, I know. I’ll make dinner as soon as we get home.”

“But I wanna eat now!”

“Dennis, I said—” Megan turned her head for just a second, but when she turned back she let out a scream and slammed the breaks. Her head hit the steering wheel with a good smack, but otherwise the long horned steer turned to look at her – unhurt – and then walked slowly the rest of the way across the street.

“Dennis, are you okay?” Megan spun around, head pounding, to look at her child.

He nodded with large frightened eyes but otherwise seemed okay. “Yeah.” He said in a near whisper. “I’m sorry mamma.”

Megan laughed but it sent such a pain through her head that she stopped and winced instead, bringing her hand up to touch the tender spot. When her fingers came away slick with blood she groaned and wiped them on her pants.

“Are you okay mamma?”

“Yeah baby, I’m fine.” Megan turned her eyes back to the road as she took her foot off the break pedal and drove slowly back home. Her head continued to throb as she drove, forcing her to go slower and slower so that she could concentrate on the stretch of dark road ahead of her. When she spotted the gravel road and sign that marked Jess’s ranch she sighed in relief and found herself driving a little faster the rest of the way towards the well-lit house.

By the time she put the car in park and turned off the engine her temple was throbbing, making her dizzy and nauseated.

“Momma?” Dennis asked in a worried voice as she pushed her car door open and struggled to get out.

Megan grabbed the doorframe for support as she tried to gather her legs under her. When she pushed herself upright her vision spun and her stomach heaved inside her.

“Momma are you okay?” Dennis unbuckled himself from his seat and with some difficulty got out of the car to come to where she stood on shaking legs.

Megan heard her son’s concern as she tried to focus the whirling of her vision and quiet the erratic heaving of her stomach. She could feel her legs going to jelly underneath her as she struggled to stay conscious of her surroundings.

“Momma!”

When her legs could hold her no longer she felt her knees hit the dusty, dry ground. Her shoulder hit hard against the inside of the doorframe as she lost her grip and whimpered in confusion and pain. She heard Dennis crying and running but then she could only focus on her unsettled stomach and heavy breathing. Her head pounded so fiercely against the inside of her skull she was afraid it would split at any moment.

A callused hand took hold of her behind the back of her neck and terror coursed through Megan’s entire body. She knew he would kill her this time, that he would be so furious there would be nothing to hinder his drunken rage. In desperation she gathered up what strength she had left and pushed herself away from him, driving her elbow back into his stomach.

He yelped in pain and cursed at her as she struggled to crawl away from him. She could feel him reaching down for her again and the terror was so complete she screamed. When his hand came in contact with her shoulder she turned and smacked at his face as hard as she could. Her hand came

away slick with his blood, but it did not deter him. He jerked at her shoulder and caught at her waist as he slowly pulled her to her feet. Screaming Megan brought her knee up to his groin and fell away from him as he released his hold on her with a shriek of pain.

Sobbing Megan pushed herself to her knees and then her feet. Finding strength she didn't know she had she ran towards the house, weaving in her dizziness. The door handle turned under her hand and she pushed it closed and locked it as her heart tumbled in her chest. Taking in shaky breaths she turned and hurried as quickly as she could for the back door, grabbing hold of furniture to steady her progress. She was several steps away from the door when it flew open and the shadowy frame of her husband entered angry and cussing.

Turning on her heel Megan raced for the stairs, taking them as fast as her feet could carry her. The only room in the house with a solid door was the master bedroom on the third floor. She could hear his heavy footsteps behind her as he followed her up the first and then second flight of stairs. Screaming Megan slammed the door to the master bedroom and was trying to lock it when he banged against it. The door flew open forcing her backwards to tumble onto the floor.

Panicking Megan crawled to the window seat and pulled the seat up, removing the double barrel shotgun from its rack underneath. Turning she leveled it at her husband's chest. She would kill him first.

"Don't you fucking come any closer!" She screamed between her hysterical sobs. "I'll kill you, you lousy son of a bitch!"

"It's not loaded." He responded with an angry growl. He took another step closer.

Megan squeezed her eyes shut and pulled the trigger. The empty sounding click brought a new flood of terror to her body.

"I told you," he said pulling the gun away from her shaking hands. He took another step towards her and Megan threw her hands over her face to protect herself from the oncoming blow. His foot only pushed her aside as he leaned over the window seat to put the gun back in its place.

"The next time you want to kill me," he growled pushing the top of the window seat back down and grabbing her by the arms to pull her to her feet until she was inches from his face. "Please tell me about it first."

"Jess?"

"Who the fuck do you think it is?"

Megan let out a sob of relief and threw her arms around his neck, nearly knocking him off balance.

"Oh god Jess, I'm sorry! I thought it was him. I could have sworn it was him!" Suddenly her legs went weak and Megan felt him picking her up into his arms before she could fall. He carried her down the stairs until they were back on the first floor where he promptly set her down on the couch in the living room.

"What the hell did you do to your head?" He asked as he wet a towel and came back to press it on the cut.

Megan gave a shaky laugh. "I should have been wearing a seatbelt. I nearly hit a long horn steer." She watched as he lifted the towel and inspected the cut.

“Damn Freehill, his bull is always running loose because he won’t properly fix his corral. You should probably go to the hospital. It’s pretty deep.”

“No! I won’t go back there.”

“Megan, don’t be ridiculous—”

“I said no!” Her voice shook and fresh tears streamed down her face.

“Fine.” Jess pulled the towel from her forehead and went back to the sink. “Even my damn cattle aren’t as stubborn as you are.”

“Where’s Dennis?” Megan winced as he pressed the hot towel back to her forehead. When Jess didn’t answer Megan tried to stand. “Jess?”

Jess sighed and pushed her back down into the couch. “You stay here. I’ll go find him.”

Chapter Five

“Dennis?”

The little boy looked up from where he sat on the couch in the tack room. His eyes were red again and his hands were shaking.

“Are you going to hurt me next?” The little boy asked with a sob as Jess came closer.

Jess sank to his haunches and reached to touch the little boy on the head. Dennis shrank away from him and covered his face with his hands. Jess caught the little boy in his arms and pulled him into his chest. “No Dennis, no one is going to hurt you ever again.”

“But you hurt momma,” the little boy sobbed into his chest. “He always hurts me after he hurts momma.”

Jess ran his hand through the little boy’s silky brown hair and then kissed the top of it. In a way he was sad that he couldn’t call this innocent child his own. “I didn’t hurt your momma buddy. I swear I didn’t. I just scared her, that’s all. She’s inside right now, worried about you. Come back inside with me?”

Jess felt the little boy nod his head against his chest and winced when it grazed the place Megan had elbowed him. For such a slight woman she sure did pack a punch. With a smile he picked Dennis up and carried him back into the house.

Megan let out a sob of relief when Jess set Dennis down and the little boy ran into her outstretched arms. The two cuddled up next to each other as their tears mingled and Megan tried to set her son’s fears aside.

“He only scared me buddy. Its okay, everything will be fine. We’re safe here, you know that.” Megan felt her son’s tears subside and soon he was fast asleep in her arms.

She was only going to rest her eyes for a second, but when she opened them sunlight streamed through the living room windows and a thick wool blanket covered both her and Dennis who lay curled up beside her.

Slowly Megan sat up and winced at the dull ache in her head. When she reached up to touch the cut she found a bandage that hadn’t been there last night. She managed to get off the couch without disturbing Dennis and glanced at the clock on the mantel above the fireplace. It was too early for him to be out and about yet she decided.

On weary legs she climbed the stairs to the master bedroom. She found the door wide-open and peeked inside to see him sprawled across the bed. The sheets lay tangled around his legs. She

grimaced at the dark bluish purple bruise she saw spreading across his lower muscled abdomen. One of his eyes was already swollen and black underneath. There was cut, already starting to scab over, by his nose

As Megan took a step into the room his eyes flew open. He always was a light sleeper. He gave her a lopsided grin before he stretched and winced at the aches and pains he'd forgotten he had. Megan smiled as she walked across the room and took a seat on the edge of the bed.

"I just want to apologize for last night." She bit at her lower lip as she got a closer look on the bruise across his stomach.

"You sure as hell put up a fight." Jess said with a chuckle.

Megan folded her hands in her lap and looked down at them. "I was so scared." She paused, gathering her courage. "I'm only sorry that I put up with it. Never once did I fight back. Now I wonder if I'd have fought back then maybe he'd never have come after Dennis. Maybe he would have left me alone also." She shuddered. "Or maybe it would have gotten worse. He's so much stronger than I am. Maybe if I talked to him, tried to work things out—"

"Don't you even think about going back to him Megan. He'll do it again, you know he will."

Megan was silent as she wrung her hands together. She bit at her bottom lip with her teeth and stared at the floor.

"Have you gone back to him before?" Jess swore when the silence continued. He sat up in bed and took a good long look at her. They'd both changed since they'd last seen each other. "How long has he been beating you? This time I want the truth."

"It doesn't really matter—"

"The hell it doesn't! Megan, it's not going to get any better. Especially if you keep going back to the lousy bastard."

"But he's always better when I come back. He really is. He tries so hard to be better Jess, he really does."

Jess caught her chin in his hand and turned her head so he could look her in the face. He could see the tears welling in the corners of her eyes. "How long has he been beating you Megan?"

She took a shaky breath and let it out slowly. "I told him I was pregnant. I thought he'd be happy. Instead he smacked me across the face and told me I was a whore. The next morning he showed up at my front door with a ring. I married him that afternoon."

"Why the hell—"

"All I could think of at the time was what would happen if we weren't married. That'd I change my mind again and end up single with a newborn baby. That I'd end up living with my mother for the rest of my life, and that every single day she'd tell me what a disappointment I was – not once, but twice."

"You would have been okay. You're a stronger person than you think you are."

“You think I don’t regret it? The first time I left him I went to a friend’s house. When he got me back home he broke my nose. I told everyone I ran into the wall because I hadn’t been paying attention to where I was going. The second time I left him I went to stay with my mother. After he dragged me back home he broke my arm in three places and fractured my skull. I was in the hospital for three weeks. He told everyone that I was carrying laundry down to the basement of our building and slipped on the stairs. It was nearly the truth. When they released me from the hospital I saw fresh bruises on Dennis. He told me he’d kill me if I tried to run again, that he’d kill us both.” She gulped. “And here I am.”

The silence was so drawn out she thought he wasn’t going to continue the conversation, until finally he spoke.

“You never should have left Megan.”

“I couldn’t stay, you know that.” Tears streamed down her cheeks and pattered the bed beneath them.

“No, I don’t know. Maybe you should explain it to me.”

Megan stood abruptly and turned to leave.

“Megan, you walked out on me once, but I swear to God if you do it again I’ll drag you back into this room and get an answer out of you.”

She froze at the doorway and spun to face him. “Because Jess, every time I looked at you, all I could see was her.” Megan spun again and hurried down the stairs.

“Momma?”

“I’m here baby.” Megan called from in the kitchen as she wiped at her eyes.

“I’m hungry.” Dennis said coming into the kitchen and grabbing hold of one of her legs.

“I bet you are. You never got dinner last night.” Megan reached for a box of cereal and pulled the milk out of the refrigerator. When she set the bowl down on the kitchen table Dennis finally let go of her leg and clambered up onto a chair to eat.

The ring of the phone startled Megan, and she nearly spilled the milk all over the floor. She laughed in embarrassment and picked it up off the hook.

“Hello?”

“Is Mrs. Norman available?”

“Yes, this is she.”

“Good morning Mrs. Norman. This is Pete Clark from Bank of America. I’m calling about your job application. I’d like you to come in and talk to me about a potential job.”

“Yes, yes of course. I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“Good, I look forwards to speaking with you.”

“Bye.” Megan hung up the phone with a sigh of relief. A job would mean one less obstacle to tackle today. She still had to get Dennis into a school and find a place for them to live.

“Dennis, I’m going to go take a shower then go into town. You stay here and be a good boy for Jess. Okay?”

Dennis nodded as he put another spoonful of cereal into his mouth. Megan smiled then hurried upstairs to take a shower.

~*~

Jess found Dennis slurping at the milk in his cereal bowl when he took a seat next to the little boy.

“Can I have some more?” He asked as he put his spoon in his mouth and licked it clean.

“A little bit, that’s it.” Jess refilled his bowl before he poured some cereal for himself.

“Is Lauren coming back over today?” Dennis asked between mouthfuls of cereal.

Jess chuckled. “Yeah she is. She’ll be here this afternoon after she gets home from school. I bet you’ll want to help her get Tonka ready for the parade.”

“Yeah!” The little boy’s smile turned to a frown as he remembered, “But momma won’t let me ride in the parade with her.”

“Well I think I can fix that. You won’t get to ride, but what about driving a wagon?”

“A wagon? Like an old cowboy?”

“Yep, that’s right. Then you’ll still be in the parade with the horses. Does that sound good?”

“Yeah! Momma can’t say no to that also, can she?”

“I doubt she will.” Jess ruffled the little boy’s hair and then took their plates to the sink.

“Momma says I’m supposed to stay with you while she goes into town.”

“She’s leaving me to baby sit again huh?”

“I’m not a baby!” He put his hands on his hips and lifted his chin a notch.

“Of course not.” Jess chuckled. “Come on kiddo, you can ride with me to the feed store.”

“Can I drive?”

“Not until you’re older.” Jess said as he held the front door open and ushered the boy down the steps.

Dennis jumped up and down in excitement as Jess led him over to his old pickup truck. As they started down the gravel road Dennis grabbed the hat off of Jess’s head and put it on his own.

“I want a cowboy hat. I wanna be a real cowboy just like you!”

“Then I guess you better take this one.” Jess pulled the hat down over the boy’s eyes. “Although it is a little big.”

Dennis laughed and pulled the hat back up. He looked up at Jess’s hair and giggled. “Your hair is all messy.”

“That’s because someone took my hat.” Jess gave a mock growl and tried to snatch the hat away.

“Can I turn the radio on?” Dennis clamped his hand down on the top of the hat and fiddled with the radio.

“Sure.” Jess regretted the decision the rest of the drive. Dennis flipped from station to station until he found a country one. Then he turned the volume up as loud as he could stand and tried to sing along.

“Momma never lets me listen to the radio!” He screamed over the blare of the county singer’s twanging voice.

“I wonder why?” Jess said but Dennis didn’t hear him. He was too busy trying to sing along again.

At the feed store, the man at the counter, Greg, grinned at Jess as Dennis followed in behind him trying to copy the cowboy swagger of Jess’s stride. When Dennis realized his imitation was going to leave him straggling behind he ran a few steps to catch up and then tried to swagger after Jess again.

“Well now, I thought the only one who could get you to take that hat of was Lauren. I guess I was wrong.”

Greg watched the boy stop beside Jess and try to copy his relaxed pose as he stood before the counter.

“This is Dennis. Dennis, this is my friend Greg.”

The little boy looked up at Greg and smiled revealing the hole from his missing front tooth. “Jess says I can be in the parade. Are you going to the parade Mr. Greg?”

“Well I can’t say I was going to, but if you’re going to be in it then I just might have to make an exception.”

Greg winked at Jess before he opened a jar on the counter and pulled a piece of licorice out. He handed the candy down to the boy who thanked him in delight.

“What happened to your face?” Greg asked, motioning to bruising on Jess’s face.

“I ran into a fist. It’s really not that bad.”

“Well it sure looks it.” He chuckled. “What can I get you today?”

“Same as usual.”

Greg nodded as he started to ring up the order on the cash register. “Where’d you come by this little tyke?”

“He’s the son of...a friend.” Jess finished quickly trying to cover his uncertainty.

“For a second I thought he was yours and that you’ve been hiding him away all these years. He sure does look like you.”

“Naw, not mine. Although Amber keeps telling me she’d like to give me one of my own.” Jess grinned as he handed over his credit card.

“You ever gonna make an honest woman out of that lady? You two sure do well together.” Greg gave Jess his card back and then came around the counter to help him gather the bags of feed they would load into the back of his truck.

“I was thinking about this winter... but you know the timing is never right. Last winter Lauren broke her arm and it just didn’t seem right with her so worried, and the winter before that I still couldn’t make up my mind. You know how it is.”

“Well I doubt that little lady will wait for you forever. Better do something right quick this winter. I know if I weren’t married I’d have snatched her up in a second. That little girl of hers is the cutest little thing in three counties. All my boys love her to pieces and invite her over every chance they get. You should have seen, last week she came to the fall barbeque—which you should have come to,” he glared at Jess for a second before continuing. “And Brian called her chubby. You should have seen the way she decked him one. Gave him a bloody nose and a renewed sense of respect for a girl’s feelings.”

“What can I say, she takes after her mom.” Jess grinned as he picked up two more bags of grain and followed Greg out to his truck. Dennis was sitting on the front steps of the store chewing on his licorice and he jumped up when they came out. He offered to help but this time Jess turned him down.

“Not this time bud, next time.”

“Aw.”

“Yeah yeah, I know. You can help me with the horses when we get back to the ranch.”

“Okay.” The little boy replied with a sullen expression.

“Oh Greg, I forgot to ask.” Jess tossed the feed into the back of his truck and turned to his friend. “Are you gonna have Connie and your boys driving the wagon again in the parade tomorrow?”

“Sure will.”

“You wouldn’t mind if Dennis rode along, would you?”

“Course not! My boys would be delighted to have him. That gives them one more excuse to hitch up both horses. They’ve been begging me to let them drive both horses this year. I was already going to say yes, but it’s nice to hold it over their heads.” He chuckled and turned back to his store. “I’ll see you boys tomorrow then.”

“Tomorrow.” Jess said with a smile and a wave as he ushered Dennis back into the truck. To Jess’s great misfortune, the first thing Dennis did was turn the radio back on.

Chapter Six

Dennis and Jess looked up at the sound of Lauren's voice. The little girl came flying into the stables, her arms full of ribbons and bows and other assortments of decorations. She smiled when she saw them and set her armload down on a bale of hay.

"I made Mom get lots of stuff so that we can make Tonka look pretty." She said with pride. "And look, we got a red bow to go right between his ears."

"He's gonna be the prettiest horse at the parade tomorrow, now isn't he?" Jess said with a grin as he grabbed a halter and handed it to her. "You'll be okay bringing him in?"

"Yep. I'll have Dennis help me. Come on Dennis!" She stuck her tongue out at him and raced out of the barn with childish abandon. Dennis struggled after her.

"She's driving me nuts." Amber said as the two kids nearly ran into her on their way out. "All I hear morning, noon and night is the parade this, the parade that. I'll be happy when it's over." She walked up to Jess and then started in surprise when she saw his black eye.

"What the hell happened?" She asked, gently touching him on the cheek and running her fingers over the tender skin by his nose.

"It's nothing. Call it a case of mistaken identity." Jess smiled and kissed Amber on the lips once, twice, and then three times, reluctant to pull away.

"I hope the bastard looks as bad as you do." She wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled away quickly when he winced. "Goodness gracious. What'd you do, go ten rounds?"

"I'm just a little sore, that's all."

"How long is she staying?" Amber asked, suddenly changing the topic to the one that was worrying her most.

"As long as she needs to—"

"Jess!"

"It's not like I can tell her to get lost."

"Why not? The motel is dirt cheap, she'd be just as well off staying there."

"She's got other reasons for wanting to stay with me for a while Amber, that's all. She's already looking for a place of her own."

“He’s yours, isn’t he?” Amber gave him an angry glare as she walked away from him, arms across her chest, and then spun to face him. “I knew something like this would happen. I knew it! How could I have been so stupid?”

“No Amber, he’s not mine.”

“Well he sure as hell looks like you. I mean hell, can you imagine my surprise when I show up and she’s there in your kitchen making you breakfast like she’d never left? Like nothing ever happened between you two? Then this little boy runs in with Lauren and he’s your splitting image and about the right age. What am I supposed to think?”

Jess sighed and crossed the few steps to Amber and pulled her into his arms. “He’s not mine. Her being here isn’t going to change anything between us.” He lowered his head to capture her lips and let his one hand slip under her dress until he was touching her butt. He could feel her melting into his embrace and his body responded in its excitement.

“I got him Uncle Jesse!” Lauren called out as she neared the barn holding on to the horse’s halter as she urged Tonka onwards.

Amber jerked away from him abruptly and pulled at her dress to try and straighten it. “I hope not Jess. I really do.”

“Put him on the cross ties.” Jess called to the kids as he tried to calm himself. “Is she still going to your parent’s house after the parade?”

“Yes, thank god. I could use the break.” Amber smiled at her daughter as the eight-year-old ordered Dennis around and told him what to do with the same authority she used with anyone near her age.

“Then maybe I could come over tomorrow night…” Jess whispered in her ear, letting his hand grab at her ass again as the children were too caught up in the horse to notice. He kissed her on the neck, the cheek, and finally caught her mouth again.

Amber pulled away flushed and then responded. “Tomorrow night sounds fine.”

Jess grinned. “Good.”

“Uncle Jesse! We need your help now. He won’t pick up his foot.” Lauren looked at Tonka and gave him a scolding. “Now listen here Tonka. You know better. Pick up your foot!” She reached down and touched his leg. The horse gave a groan before lifting the leg for the young girl.

“I thought you said you needed my help.” Jess called with a smile as he leaned against a stall door.

“Once his feet are all clean then I put his tack on and then I ride him. I have to practice some more before the parade. After that he’s gonna get a bath. Tomorrow morning, really early, we’re gonna come over and load him into the trailer and then take him to the parade.” Lauren instructed Dennis as the younger boy brushed at the horse’s coat.

“They grow up so quickly.” Amber said with a sigh as she watched her daughter.

“Do you ever wish Fred was still around to see her?” Jess asked as he came out of the tack room with the Tonka’s saddle and bridle, setting them down near the children.

“Thank you Uncle Jess,” Lauren said with a smile.

“Welcome kiddo.” Jess inspected Tonka’s feet before he returned to stand by Amber.

“I used to.” She started, watching her daughter lift the saddle to the horse’s back. “But now I know better. I know he’ll always be around to watch her grow up, even if only in spirit.” Amber threaded her arm through Jess’s and leaned her head against his shoulder.

Jess chuckled remembering what Greg told him. “I heard she gave Brian a good whack at the barbeque.”

Amber laughed and wiped at the sudden tears that came to her eyes. “You should have seen the poor boy’s face! He was in such shock he didn’t even realize his nose was bleeding until a few minutes later. I thought Greg would be furious, but he only burst out laughing and told Brian that Laura was just giving him a lesson on how to treat a lady.”

“That’s what he told me earlier today. Connie and the boys are going to driving the wagon tomorrow. I convinced him to let Dennis ride along.”

“Laura said he was going to ride with her.” Amber watched Lauren scold Tonka for not lowering his head down far enough for her to get his bridle on. The older gelding groaned before lowering his head to her and accepting the bit in his mouth.

“Yeah well his mom wasn’t too agreeable to that.” Jess grimaced as he remembered the look on her face when he’d mentioned it. “She won’t even come near a horse anymore.”

“Everyone finds their own path to healing. You should know that well by now.”

Jess helped Lauren tighten Tonka’s saddle and checked the gelding’s bridle before he lifted her up onto the horse’s back and handed her the reins.

“Now stand back Dennis.” Lauren commanded of the younger boy as she kicked her heels into Tonka’s side and got the horse outside into the riding ring.

Dennis watched in awe as Lauren went from a brisk walk, to a trot, and then finally urged the gelding into a canter.

“Look Ma! No hands!” Lauren dropped the reins on Tonka’s neck and threw her head and arms back to look up at the sky.

“Lauren! You remember what happened last time you did that?” Amber called in a huff to cover her fright. “Do you want another broken arm young lady?”

The warning seemed to hit home, for the little girl snatched at the reins and turned her attention back to the way before her. Amber let out a relieved sigh and smiled up at Jess who returned the gesture.

“Nothing ever seems dangerous to them.” Amber said squinting off into the distance as Lauren reached the far end of the pasture.

“Watch Mom!” Lauren took the first and second fences with the grace of a seasoned rider. On the third fence Tonka stumbled a bit, throwing her slightly forwards, but she recovered and turned back for the jumps again.

“Wow! That’s neat!” Dennis said as he watched Lauren take the jumps again. “Is she gonna do that at the parade?”

“Naw, she’s just showing off. She’ll only be walking him in the parade.” Jess said glancing down at Dennis who couldn’t take his eyes from Lauren.

“Dennis? Are you out here?” Megan’s voice called.

Dennis turned and sprinted towards his approaching mother, pulling her into the barn and towards the paddock. “Momma, you have to see this! It’s cool! I wanna do this too!”

Megan allowed her son to tug her along as she picked her way around the mud near the stables. Her high heels were dangerously close to sinking in when she reached the cement floor of the barn and let out an involuntary sigh of relief.

“Now what is it you want to show me?”

“Come on, come on! This way!”

He dropped her hand and ran the rest of the way, leaving Megan to make her way across the barn to the paddock fence where Jess and Amber stood. Jess with a very noticeable black eye. He gave her an approving look, taking in her white blouse, short black skirt and matching black shoes, then turned back to the ring. Amber also caught Jess’s appreciative look and eyed her with loathing. Megan gave Amber a brittle smile, which the other woman did not return, and then looked out to where Dennis was pointing.

“Can I do that?” Dennis pleaded, watching Lauren take one jump and then another.

“Can you put the jumps up Uncle Jess?” Lauren called as she slowed Tonka before them.

“Next year.” Jess determined by catching a glance at the look that crossed Amber’s face. “Maybe even the year after that.”

“Aw! But Tonka likes jumping! Don’t you Tonka?” She leaned down the horse’s sweaty neck and gave him a hearty pat.

“Can you do that again?” Dennis asked, hopping up and down in his excitement.

“Okay, a few more times. Come on Tonka.” Lauren turned the gelding and trotted him back down to the other end of the pasture.

“See momma! I wanna do that!”

Lauren took the jumps without hesitation on either her part or the geldings. There was a grace to her movements and rhythm on the horse that was part learned and part natural skill.

“Can I momma?” Dennis asked, glancing up once at her and then looking back towards Lauren and the gelding.

“No, absolutely not.” Megan said, bile rising in the base of her throat.

“But—!”

“I said no Dennis. Why don’t you come inside and help me make dinner.”

“But—”

“Now Dennis.”

The tone of her voice was enough to make the little boy grimace. He dropped his head to look at the ground as he followed her out of the barn and back up to the house.

“I just want—”

“Dennis, drop it. I won’t ask you again.” Megan felt the cold tendrils of fear spreading throughout her stomach. In her mind she could see herself taking those same jumps with the same faultless ease as the little girl, and her stomach clenched in terror.

“Can I at least go to the parade tomorrow? Jess said I could ride in a wagon like a real cowboy.” Dennis looked up at her with a longing face, his blue eyes near to tears.

Megan rubbed at her throbbing temple. “Okay. You can go to the parade and you can ride in the wagon.” She wondered if staying here was such a good idea as she watched Dennis shout in excitement and sprint back out the front door towards the stables.

The stables she had once loved so much she now detested. Watching her son disappear inside each time brought a pang of anxiety to her mind. What if something happened to him? Megan rung her hands together as she climbed the stairs to change. The only good thing about this day so far was the fact that she’d got the job at the bank in town.

She had just started making dinner when the phone rang. Thinking nothing of it, she reached for the cordless phone and said hello as she rooted under the sink for a pot she’d seen the day before.

“Megan?”

“Mom?”

“Oh honey, I’m so glad you’re okay. I’ve called Janet and Gale and Kim and none of them knew where you were. I didn’t think you’d be there either. I was so worried about you.”

“How did you get this number?” Megan asked in a voice that sounded loud and angry to her own ears.

“If you think I’d forget his last name and how to use a phone book then you’re sorely mistaken young lady. Are you okay?”

“Let me talk to her—”

Megan froze as she heard Chris’s voice in the background.

“One second, one second.” Her mother replied in annoyance.

“Mom,” Megan whispered, afraid to speak any louder. “What is he doing there? Have you told him where I am?”

“Looking for you just like I am, what else do you think? We’ve had the cops looking everywhere for you. We’re worried about you Megan. I’m glad you’re safe, but now we want you to come home.”

“Promise me you won’t tell him where I am.” She plead with a desperation from deep within her heart.

“All right, all right. But I think this is all so silly.” Her mother sighed and cleared her throat. However, before she could answer Megan caught the sound of the phone being picked up from another line.

“Megan, what the hell do you think you’re doing? Get your ass back home right now. By God I’ll drag you back home again if I have to!”

“Calm down Chris, she’s already frightened enough as it is.” Her mother scolded. “Now honey, we both want you to come home. We’ll work this out, all three of us. But you have to come home.”

“I—” a sob caught in her throat. “I can’t.”

“Megan, Megan sweetheart. Come home baby. I miss you, I miss both you and my little boy.” Chris begged; he was near to tears himself. “God Megan, you know I’m sorry. You know how much I love you two. I’d never hurt you on purpose. I’ll get help, I swear I will. Please come home baby.” And then he did cry, loud racking sobs that tore at Megan’s heart.

“Honey,” her mother said with a sigh. “Please come home. Let’s work this out. Can’t you see what this is doing to Chris? To your family?”

“Megan, Megan please!” Chris sobbed. “I’m going crazy without you two. I was so worried. I want you both back home, back safe with me.”

Megan shook inside and out as tears slid down her cheeks and fell soundlessly to the tile of the kitchen floor.

“Megan?”

She spun at Jess’s voice and her eyes went wide with guilt. She’d left him once, and now she would do it again. His hand came up and wiped a tear from her cheek.

“Megan, what’s wrong?”

“You filthy whore! Is that who I think it is?” Chris’s angry scream made her wince and she jerked her ear away from the phone.

His voice was loud enough for Jess to catch the stream of obscenities that followed. He took the phone from her hand and pressed it to his ear.

“If you ever lay a fucking finger on her again I’ll rip you open and leave you out in the open to rot, do you understand me?” Jess’s voice was cold and angry as he spoke the words.

“Don’t you fucking touch my wife you lousy son of a bitch! She’s coming back to me and I’ll do whatever the hell I want to with her!”

“Over my dead body.” Jess clicked off the phone with a press of a button. His eyes met Megan’s and he understood what he saw there. “You’re not going back to him.”

“Jess, I...” she couldn’t find the right words. “He’s my husband.” It was all she could come up with.

The phone rang in his hand, and Megan reached to take it from him. He jerked it away from her and then threw it hard across the room. It shattered as it hit the wall in the living room and fell silent. The dent it left in the wall was emphasized in the fading daylight.

“You came to me for help. I intend to see that you get it.” He held out his hand. “Give me your car keys.”

“Jess, this is stupid. You know I have to go back, or he’ll come for me. He knows where I am now. I have to go back or else—”

“You’re not going anywhere.”

“Jess—”

“Give me your fucking car keys Megan!”

“No.”

Jess crossed the few steps to her and shoved his hand down her pocket. She smacked at him with one hand, but he caught it and jerked it down. Her other hand closed around his fingers groping in her pocket and tried to pull them away.

He jerked away from her when her foot came down hard atop one of his boots and then his groin. The minute he released her she scrambled away from him, and for the back door. He caught the door and pushed it shut as she tried to jerk it open. With one arm he caught her around the waist and lifted her off her feet. He carried her kicking and screaming back into the living room where he deposited her on the couch and used his body to pin her down.

Her screams grew louder and more frustrated as Jess put his hand back into her pocket and withdrew the keys with a satisfied gleam to his eyes.

“Jesse Michael Whitman you give those back right this instance!” She screamed in fury as she continued to struggle under where he had her pinned. His knee was pressed almost too comfortably between her legs and she could feel the rapid beating of her own pulse where his chest grazed hers.

“No.” He put her keys in his pocket and looked down at her with his dark eyes. “You’re not going back to that bastard. Not if I can stop you.”

Megan screamed and placed both hands on his chest and pushed as hard as she could. She heard his sharp intake of breath as she ground the heel of her palm into the bruise on his chest and tried to sit up. While the momentary pain distracted him she shoved her hand down his pocket in search of her keys. She pulled her hand away just as quickly as she came in contact with his growing hardness.

She found herself reaching for him before she could register what she was doing. Her tongue forced his lips open as she kissed him, and he her, with a passion not forgotten. Her hands slid underneath his shirt and her fingers traced the well-defined dips and ridges of his hard chest muscles. She heard his sharp intake of breath as she jerked up his shirt and caught one of his nipples in her mouth, teasing it with her lips, teeth, and tongue until it was as hard as he was.

He cursed a blue streak and scrambled off the couch when her fingers reached for the zipper on his jeans and let it down. His breathing was hard and unsteady as he zipped his pants, pulled down his shirt, and disappeared out the front door.

Megan groaned and put her hands back up to her head to rub at the ache of her throbbing temples.

Chapter Seven

“Did you find them?” Amber asked as she watched Jess come back into the barn, his hands shoved deep into his pockets.

“Oh...no, I didn't. I know I have scissors around here somewhere.” He glanced down at the floor before he disappeared into the tack room. As he open one tack box and then another, shifting through the contents inside, he heard Amber's footsteps behind him.

“Its okay Jess, Lauren decided to use that thingy you cut the strings off of the hay with.” Amber watched Jess close his eyes and lean against the tack box. “Jess, are you okay?”

“I'm fine.” He straightened instantly and gave her a lopsided smile. “Let's help your little stinker get Tonka finished. I still have to feed the cattle for the night.”

“Oh, well we'll be okay without you. I didn't mean to keep you from getting things done.” Amber wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. The light stubble on his jaw felt rough against her mouth, but delightful at the same time.

“You sure?” He asked.

“I'm positive. After she's finished braiding his mane and tail we'll put the blanket back on him and put him back in his stall.”

“Okay. Have Lauren give him a flake of hay also. Something to keep him busy.” Jess gave her a pat on the cheek, grabbed a saddle and bridle, and left the tack room without a backwards glance.

Amber looked worriedly after him before she went back to where Lauren and Dennis were braiding the horse's mane and tail. Tonka gave a soft nicker and looked at Amber with his large brown eyes. She gave the horse a rub on the nose as he stood so patiently with the two children.

“Are you almost done Lauren?”

“Yeah. We just have to get the last part of his mane. Can you tie these ribbons in it for me? I tried but they keep coming out.” Lauren jumped down from the stepping stool she'd been standing on and handed the ribbon to her mother.

“Can't we do this in the morning? They'll probably come out tonight.”

“Oh well, we can put them back in again if they do.” The little girl turned to Dennis. “Right Dennis?”

The little boy looked up at Amber and smiled. His unruly hair and dark eyes reminded her so much of Jess it took her a second to return the smile, and it was only half hearted at most. However, the little boy had already turned his attention back to her daughter and hadn't noticed.

Amber threaded a ribbon through the gelding's mane and tied it with a quick jerk. She tried to fight the anger rising within her using the relaxation techniques she taught her clients. To her disappointment it didn't work. One ribbon after another she gave an angry jerk to tie them until she was out of the shiny material and Tonka was eying her with annoyance.

"Sorry boy." She patted the horse's neck and ran her hand along the soft fur of his coat.

"All done momma! Look how pretty he is Dennis. We're going to look great tomorrow."

"He does look neat." Dennis giggled. "But I wouldn't want to ride a horse that has pink bows in its hair."

Lauren gave him a childish shove, almost knocking him to the ground. "Hey! That's because you're a boy. Boy's aren't supposed to like pretty things."

Dennis stuck his tongue out at her and ran screaming and laughing from the barn when Lauren took off after him. Amber and the gelding exchanged a glance before she pulled his blanket on and brought him to his stall.

"Lauren! Come give Tonka some hay before we go."

"Aw, do we have to go?" Lauren and Dennis reappeared, both short of breath and still giggling.

"Yes, we do. You have to get up early tomorrow for the parade and you still have to clean your room. Remember what I said, if you don't clean it you don't go."

"Ugh!" Lauren stamped her foot.

"Don't get mad at me. Feed Tonka so we can go, check his water also."

When Amber saw to it that Lauren had fed and watered Tonka to her satisfaction she watched her daughter say a teary good bye to Dennis before she could get her into their car and started for home.

"I didn't get a chance to say good bye to Uncle Jess." Lauren complained as they pulled away from the dirt drive and headed for home.

"He had other things to do. You'll see him first thing tomorrow anyways."

"What time will we see granny and gramps tomorrow? I can't wait till they see me on Tonka. I'm a lot better at riding this year then I was last year. They'll be super impressed."

"I'm sure they will. They said they'd be there as soon as the parade started. They're going to be by the big pavilion near the lake. We'll have lunch there and then you're going to spend the weekend at their house."

"Will Jenny be there? She was so mean to me last time..."

Amber patted her daughter on the arm. "No, Jenny won't be there. She was only mean to you because you took her doll. That wasn't very nice of you."

“Well she’s stupid anyways. I hate her most of all my cousins.”

“Lauren!”

“Well I do.” She crossed her arms and peered out the window the rest of the drive home, refusing to answer any more of Amber’s questions.

When they pulled up to the front of their small house she hurried out of the car and disappeared up to her room as soon as Amber unlocked the front door.

“Clean that room!” Amber called up after her. When her daughter refused to answer her Amber sighed and went to start dinner.

Her mind wandered to Jess as she rinsed and chopped carrots for stew. Since Megan’s arrival she’d been extremely worried for him. Although he was a client no longer, she remembered what he’d gone through after her disappearance.

Even though her office was at the far end of town, she heard the first gunshot along with everyone else. The two other people in her clinic exchanged a look between each other before the gun went off again.

“Stay away from the windows!” Amber called to them as she hurried to the door of the building and peeked out at the street. As the owner of the clinic she sure as hell wasn’t going to let anything happen to the two people who worked for her.

She saw him far down the street. The horse lay on the ground at his feet, kicking and screaming in pain. When the animal tried desperately to rise he kicked it hard in the head, bringing it back down to its side. Blood and dirt covered its once bright gray coat. Slowly he reloaded the double barrel shot gun as the horse continued to struggle before him.

When the first police officer approached him the man shouted something she couldn’t make out. The officer said something back as he kept his gun pointed at his chest.

In a sudden motion the horse gained its feet. Amber turned her head away just as he pulled the trigger at the animal’s head. It didn’t move again. Her heart went out for the beast that lay in a spreading pool of blood.

“Put the gun down Jess! Put it down now!” The police officer demanded.

Amber watched in horror as he turned the shotgun on himself. Her hands came up to cover her eyes as she awaited the loud retort to go off when he pulled the trigger.

She was too far away to hear the click of the empty barrel. The police officer, now joined by a second and third man, forced him down to the ground and put him in handcuffs. The man’s sobbing filled the air.

“Amber? Is everything okay out there?”

“Yes Brenda. It’s safe for you two to come out now.” Amber turned to the young secretary and gave her a reassuring smile.

“What happened?”

“A man killed a horse in the middle of the street.” Amber said half astonished at her own words. Back in Chicago if she’d said the same thing to one of her co-workers they would have checked her into a mental institution. Here in Nevada things were much, much different.

She was relieved, however, when Brenda, a woman who’d been born and raised in town, said “Weird,” before going back to work.

That afternoon she’d been getting ready to go home, closing up the clinic, when the officer approached her.

“Hello Ms. Clark, my name’s Mark Sherwin. I’m a police officer over at the station.” He motioned down the street. “I know you’re new in town and you’re still trying to get settled in, but we, the guys at the station that is, have someone we’d like you to talk to if you have some free time.”

“Actually I was just leaving. Tomorrow maybe?”

“Of course, I’m sorry to have disturbed you. Tomorrow won’t work, so we’ll just forget the whole idea.” He nodded and started away.

“Officer?”

“Call me Mark.”

“Mark,” she smiled at him. He wasn’t an unhandsome man. A little short for her tastes and going bald at his temple, but he had a pleasant face and nice manners. “Is it the man who shot the horse?”

Mark winced. “Awfully sorry you had to see that. We cleaned everything up as soon as we could...” He paused. “We can’t keep him longer than tonight. See, it’s not illegal for a man to put down his own horse, how he chooses to do it is his business. We could charge him with breaking the peace, or endangering other citizens but Jess is a good man. He just hasn’t been himself since, well, I’ve said too much as it is. Just sorry you can’t see him tonight.”

“I have to pick up my daughter from day care. If you don’t mind me bringing her I guess I could come.”

“Mind? Why would I mind? Of course you can bring her. Me or one of the other boys will be waiting for you.” He nodded, gave her a brief smile, and continued on back down the street.

A man at the station greeted her and waved her towards the back of the building when she arrived later that night. She watched Mark stand up from behind a desk and come forwards as soon as he noticed her.

“What a cutie!” He said as the little girl watched him with wide green eyes.

“Thank you.”

“Yes, right this way.” He led Amber to the back of the jail where three cells stood in a row, the first two empty. At the farthest cell a folding chair had been set, well away from harms way should he approach the bars. Amber took a seat and arranged Lauren in her lap before she glanced at the man inside.

His clothes were covered in dried blood, and dirt matted his hair. He sat in the farthest corner of the cell with his knees drawn up to his chest with his head resting atop. From the look of his boots, well worn with age, he was someone used to a hard day's work.

When Amber heard Mark leave the room she cleared her throat. "Hello. My name's Amber Clark." She watched him for a reaction and wasn't surprised when she didn't get one.

"I saw you out there today. I thought you might want to talk about it." Amber shifted Lauren in her arms as she started to fuss. When she looked back up he was looking at her.

His dark eyes were bloodshot and red rimmed. Dried blood and tears streaked his face. The pain she saw in his expression made her heart swell with compassion for this young man who sat huddled before her.

"What's her name?" He asked, nodding towards her daughter who was falling asleep on her shoulder.

"Lauren."

He nodded but said nothing more as he watched the two of them.

"And you are?" She asked him, although she was already knew his first name.

"Jesse Whitman. Most people 'round here call me Jess."

"Your friends are worried for you Mr. Whitman. I call them friends because they asked me to come talk to you." He watched her for a second more before he put his forehead back on his knees. His sobs tore at her heart.

"Sometimes it helps to talk about things that are bothering you." Amber continued, her voice thick with emotion. When he didn't answer but continued to sob she went on.

"I lost my husband last year. He worked almost two hours away. It was a long drive, but we couldn't afford the place we were in otherwise. He had long hours on top of the long commute. He fell asleep at the wheel one night. It was a head on collision with the truck. Even now I pray he didn't feel anything." Amber wiped tears from her eyes. Her voice shook as she continued.

"When he died I thought I would die with him. That one event altered my entire future. But you see I had my daughter to think of. I had myself to think of. I had to go on with my life. Talking about it helped me cope with what happened; it helped me realize that there's a purpose to everything that happens in our lives.

"And here I am talking to you. I only moved in last week. My parents moved down here a few years back and they always have great things to say about this place. I figured it would be better for me if I moved closer to my family. What about you? How long have you lived here?"

Although he didn't respond he'd stopped crying and was watching her again. Amber glanced at her watch and then back up at him. It was getting late and she hated driving at night.

"If you don't want to talk I might as well be going. If you change your mind you'll find me at the new clinic up the street." She started to rise and Lauren protested as Amber's movements woke her. He never said a word as she left him there, to be alone again in his cell.

Mark met her as she came back into the main part of the police station. “Any luck?” he questioned as he walked her out to her car.

“I did what I could. The rest is up to him.”

“Thank you Ms. Clark. We all appreciate it. He’s so young, and such a great guy. We’d hate to see anything happen to him.”

“How old is he?”

“He’ll be twenty-one in September.”

“Really young...” Amber muttered as she thought of the pain she’d seen in his eyes.

“Well, thanks again.”

“Of course.”

Amber was even more surprised to see him the very next morning sitting on the steps up to the clinic as she came to open it for the day.

“I, uh. I thought we could talk.” He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans. In clean clothes he cut quite a figure with his tousled hair, lean muscular frame, and expressive dark eyes. He looked down at the ground, scuffed the dirt with a boot and then looked back up at her.

Amber smiled at him. “Come on in.”

Chapter Eight

Jess cursed under his breath as she looked up at him. She was on the couch again, a blanket draped around her shoulders. He turned his face away from her as he pulled off his dirty boots and let them hit the clean kitchen floor. Like the last time he spied a plate of food in the microwave.

“Why don’t you go to bed Megan? Don’t bother waiting up for me. I told you that last time.” Jess jerked open the refrigerator looking for a beer. Instead he found milk, juice, and bottled water. Things a family would keep in the refrigerator. He swore out loud and leaned against the sink counter.

“What do you want from me Megan?” He whispered as he felt her hand touch his back. Her other hand found its way up the front of his shirt.

“Dennis is a sound sleeper.” She whispered into the back of his neck as she pulled the cowboy hat off his head and let it drop to the kitchen floor. She wound her fingers through his tousled hair. With her teeth she caught his earlobe and tugged. The hand up the front of his shirt found one of his nipples and squeezed before doing the same to the other one.

Jess shut his eyes and tried to steady his breathing. He could feel her unbuttoning the front of his jeans, and the firmness of her breasts pressing against his back. He spun and wrapped his hands around her waist pulling her closer. When their mouths met her tongue pushed his lips open and explored him like a familiar friend.

“Not down here.” She said with a gasp, as they broke apart. She took hold of his hand and dragged him up to the third floor. “I always loved this room.” She said with a smile as he jerked her shirt up and trailed kisses from her navel to bra.

“Why are you doing this to me?” He groaned as she pulled his shirt off and started pulling his jeans down his hips.

“Shhh.” Megan said against his mouth before she kissed him again. Her clothes were quick to join his on the floor.

Jess stood before her while she explored his body with her eyes and hands, mouth and tongue. He saw her eyes alight with glee as she traced the muscles of his stomach and chest, arms and shoulders. Her fingers grazed over his skin leaving it on fire where it passed. She looked up at him and smiled.

“You’re so beautiful.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. They lingered there for several seconds before Jess found himself exploring her in his own turn.

His hands traced the delicate line of her neck and shoulders. He cupped her breasts in both hands and ran his fingers over her nipples while he kissed the top of her breasts and the hollow at her throat.

Then he ran his hands down her arms and the slight swell of her stomach. His eyes caught on the faint stretch marks across her belly and he jerked away. She was married. She had a son. She had an entire life, which he was no longer a part of.

“What, what’s wrong?” Megan asked as he pulled away and reached for his pants. “Jess?”

“Get out.”

“What?” her voice trembled.

“I said get out of my room.” He gathered up her clothes and shoved them into her arms. “Get out!”

“At least give me my keys—”

“You want your keys? Here,” he shoved his hand down his pocket and handed them roughly to her. “Take your damn keys. Just get the fuck out of my room!”

He could see her holding back tears as she turned and hurried down the stairs buck-naked. Jess swore and sank down on his bed.

~*~

“Dennis, Dennis wake up. We’re leaving.” Megan pushed her shirt the rest of the way into her jeans and brushed her hair out of her face. “Dennis, get up!”

“What, what’s wrong?” He jerked awake and rubbed at his eyes. “Is it time for the parade yet?”
“We have to go. Come on, get up.”

“Leave? I don’t want to go!” Dennis crossed both his arms and looked up at her with angry eyes. “I like it here! I wanna stay!”

“I know sweetheart but we have to go.” Megan sighed and pushed away from his bed. Quickly she went to the dresser and started putting his clothes back into his backpack. Her suitcases were already packed and outside.

“No! I don’t want to go!” Dennis stood up on the bed and screamed. “I don’t want to go! I don’t want to go!”

“Dennis you stop that right now. Get down.”

“No!” He crossed his arms and glared at her with as angry a look as he could muster.

“Don’t you talk back to me. You’ll do what I say. We’re leaving right now.”

Dennis broke into sobs as Megan pulled him off the bed and put his shoes on. As soon as she had a jacket on him she took his hand and started for the car.

“No! I don’t want to leave!” Dennis screamed and tried to jerk his hand out of her grip.

“Dennis, knock it off!” Her sharp tone of voice ended his protests but only made his sobbing louder. He cried even harder when Megan buckled him into the back seat and shut the door.

“Megan, what are you doing?”

Megan spun as he called the question. He stood on the front steps in only his jeans and his cowboy hat. The light from inside the house cast a yellow glow behind him, highlighting the tone of his body and the intensity of his eyes.

“I’m leaving.”

She grabbed one suitcase and then another and shoved it into the trunk of her car. From inside the car she could still hear Dennis screaming and crying.

“The motel is awful.”

“Who said I was going to the motel?” She snapped as she slammed the trunk closed. With an angry huff she opened the driver’s side door and got in. As she pulled the door shut and started the engine Jess crossed the distance and stood directly in front of her car.

Annoyed Megan rolled down her window. “What are you doing? Get out of the way.” She snapped.

“You’re not going back to him.”

“Jess, get out of the way or I swear I’ll run you over.” Her eyes flashed fire and she put the car into gear.

“You’re not gonna run me over.”

“Wanna bet?” She could feel her foot itching to hit the gas pedal.

“You came to me for help.” His voice was soft yet pleading.

“I…don’t—don’t wanna go!” Dennis sobbed from the back seat. He pulled at his seatbelt and cried harder. “I—w—wa—anna stay here!”

“He’ll do it again, you know he will. That’s why you came in the first place. Don’t try to fool yourself. I know how much he scares you. You would have blown my head off if the shotgun was loaded.”

Megan drew in a shaky breath. She could feel the tears welling in her eyes. The cold sense of terror she’d felt that night was again spreading throughout her stomach. When the tears started to stream down her face she put the car in park and turned it off.

As she got out of the car Jess was suddenly before her. He took her face in his hands and wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs. Finally he pressed a kiss to her forehead before he pulled away. “Thank you.”

Megan could only nod as she wiped at her face with her hands. She watched as Jess pulled open the back seat and took Dennis into his arms.

“Shhh, its okay buddy. How about we go inside and get some hot chocolate? You like hot chocolate don’t you?” Jess asked as he shifted the boy to his hip and followed Megan back inside.

Dennis nodded as his sobs subsided into drawn apart hiccups and then a watery smile.

“Good.”

In the kitchen Jess bent to set Dennis down in a chair but he immediately started screaming and held tighter to Jess's neck.

"Okay, okay. It's all right. You're not going anywhere." Jess soothed the boy as he sat down on a chair and held him closer. With a hand he wiped away the tears streaming down his face.

"I guess I'll make the hot chocolate then." Megan said with a sniff and went to rummage around the kitchen. Within minutes she was handing the steaming cup to her son and warning him that it was hot as she took a seat at the table across from the two of them.

Dennis took a few sips of the drink before he let Jess set it down on the table and curled closer to his chest. His crying continued to slow until it stopped. Within minutes he was asleep, his head pressed against Jess's shoulder.

Megan sighed at the picture the two of them made. Sadly she stood up and took Dennis's cup to the sink. When she'd washed and dried it she turned to look at the two of them again. Jess was watching her.

"He should have been yours." She said in a near whisper. It was true that Dennis looked a lot like Jess. They both had the same dark hair and intense eyes. Watching the little boy sleeping in his arms only made her heart ache harder.

"Look Megan. About upstairs—"

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again." She said quickly cutting him off mid sentence.

"Let me finish." Jess continued, looking down at the little boy in his lap and then back up at her. "You have a life Megan. You have a husband, even though he's filthy as scum, and you have a great son. You have a whole life without me. It has to stay that way."

"I shouldn't have come here. This was a mistake." She fretted, wringing her hands together and then pressing them to her forehead.

"No. You needed to come. I think we both needed it." Jess sighed. Megan could see the warring emotions in his eyes. He was silent for several minutes before he spoke again.

"I'm going to propose to Amber soon. I think its best that you know that after what happened tonight." He watched her face closely for a reaction.

"How soon?" It was all she could bring herself to say.

"Very soon. I've been planning on asking her for the last two years. The first year I wasn't sure. Then last year Lauren broke her arm and the timing was shot all to hell."

Megan turned away from him and leaned on the sink counter. She could hear his steady breathing behind her, and then his movements as he stood up with Dennis still in his arms.

"I'll tuck him in before I go to bed." He said and she could hear him walking away.

"Jess." Megan spun and watched him turn to face her. "What if... what if I wanted a second chance? Another chance for the two of us?"

His face was stony as he replied, "You had your chance." He turned and went up the stairs without a backwards glance.

Chapter Nine

The fall parade was one of the biggest events in the county. Clubs and shops and sponsors from most of the state arrived early in the morning to set up their booths along the sides of the route the parade would follow. It was such a big event that the police had to section off parts of the town to re-direct the sparse traffic and settle any brawls that cropped up.

Local 4-h clubs had spent most of the week christening the route with fall decorations. Haystacks with pumpkins, popcorn strings, and candy apples were displayed for sale at every intersection. Scarecrows stood grinning and lopsided beside streetlights that the children had wrapped with strings of dried fall leaves.

The parade ended at a rather large park where pavilions and tents had already been raised the day before. Steam from vender's carts and barbeque grills lifted to the early morning dawn as they prepared for the stream of people to come later that day. Other vendors prepared games and worked on the arrangement of the prizes hanging from the walls of their booths. Excited children already ran through the dew-laden grass of the park, left unattended as they were by their parents.

All this Amber saw as Lauren pointed it out to her in her excitement. They drove behind Jess and Dennis towards the start of the parade, an elementary school parking lot. As they came closer and closer to the school Lauren became more and more excited. She bounced in her seat and finally pressed her face to the glass of the window talking in a stream of non-stop nonsense.

"Are we there yet?" She asked, kicking repeatedly at the passenger seat in front of her. "I have to check Tonka again before we go. I'm glad none of his bows fell out but I want to check them again. He looks so pretty doesn't he mom? All the other girls will be so jealous when they see us. I bet they'll all start crying because he looks so much prettier than the horses they're riding." She stopped to look out the window. "Ew! Harmony's horse looks stupid! Her horse looks like it's gonna throw up. Isn't that funny Mom? Do you think I'll win a prize at the end of the parade? I hope so! I want lots of them this year."

Amber sighed and then chuckled at her daughter's antics. She was relieved when they finally pulled to a stop in the parking lot and Lauren jumped out of the car and ran to help Jess and Dennis unload Tonka from the trailer.

The older gelding stood patiently for them after he was out of the trailer and allowed Jess to put his saddle and bridle on without problems. Amber watched Lauren check the bows in his tail and then get Dennis's help to check the bows in his mane. The little boy struggled to lift her up but did all the same as she commanded him to. Once the gelding was all set to go Amber took Lauren into the school to help her change into her dress.

Jess whistled at Lauren when she came back out. "Look at my little princess! You'll win for sure this year."

Lauren smiled and ran to hug him. “You like it Uncle Jess? Mom and me picked it out special just for the parade. Look, she even got me a tiara and earrings!” Lauren turned her head left and right to show off the sparkly magnetic earrings on either earlobe.

“You look perfect!” Jess kissed her on the cheek and then helped her up onto Tonka. “Remember no funny business today. No showing off either. Tonka will be good for you as long as you’re good for him.”

“I know, I know.” She said with a smile as she took up his reins and walked him towards the other girls who stood waiting on their horses.

“There you are!” Greg walked up to them on his horse and then followed their gaze to where the girls sat all decked up on their horses. “Don’t they look pretty!” He chuckled and stopped beside Jess before dismounting.

“Hey there Greg! Been looking for you. They do look good don’t they?” Jess nodded towards the girls who were being lined up and numbers pinned to their horse’s bridles.

“Connie is back there with the wagon.” He motioned behind him and off to the right. “I tell you my boys were so excited to be bringing both horses. They went nuts when I told them okay this morning. I’m just glad I’m riding with the girls and not back there with them. The girls are always easier to handle than the boys.” He chuckled. “Of course the lord had to bless me with three of them.”

“Let me get Rusty.” Jess said then turned to Amber. “You sure you want to ride in the wagon with Connie?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Now go watch over my girl.” She kissed him on the cheek then called to Dennis.

The little boy finally pulled away from where he stood watching Lauren and followed Amber as they wove their way through the other parade participants. When they found the wagon Connie looked down at them and smiled.

“Hey Amber! Glad you decided to keep this old gal company again. This must be Dennis.” She smiled down at the little boy who was suddenly shy and stood a step behind her. “Well come on up here. We’ll be heading out soon.” Connie put a hand down to help Amber up and Dennis clambered up into the wagon on his own.

“Hi Dennis.” Brian smiled at him from where he sat at the front of the wagon and motioned him forwards.

“My name’s Brian.” He pointed to the two younger boys beside him. “That’s Jack and Charlie. Don’t bother trying to tell them apart.” He grinned at his younger twin brothers but they were too busy fighting for the reins between themselves to notice.

“Go ahead on up there Dennis.” Amber told him giving him a gentle push in the right direction as she settled down on a hay bale across from Connie. It only took a second before Dennis climbed over the edge of the wagon and took a seat next to Brian.

“Well, I’m glad this is almost over. I swear every year it gets more and more hectic.” Connie pulled a piece of straw from her jeans and smiled at Amber. “I bet Lauren was just as wound up as these three were.” The wagon gave a lurch as the boys snapped at the reins and moved the horses into position in the parade line.

“Probably more so. She looks adorable in her dress. We braided Tonka’s mane and tail to match. Then I found this tiara and magnetic earrings that go with the dress. She’s been so excited to go show off.”

They jerked along as the parade started off. From time to time they glanced up at the four boys at the head of the wagon and settled a minute dispute between them. Otherwise they rode along pleasantly as they made their way to the start of the parade.

“He’s a cutie.” Connie said as she listened to Brian and the twins talking to Dennis. “Greg told me he’s was the son of Jess’s friend. Is he staying with him for a while?”

“Yeah, so to speak. Listen Connie, you’ve known Jess since you were little—”

“There they are.” Jess and Greg rode up to them. Jess tipped his cowboy hat to the boys and winked at Amber.

“We just wanted to make sure you guys were okay before we started out.” Greg said to them.

“We’re fine. If they start anything I’ll take a crop to their butts and they know it.” Connie said with a grin and her three boys groaned. Dennis only looked confused.

“You guys be good. Make sure you take good care of Dennis for me, okay?” Jess asked of the boys. They nodded and Brian put his arm around Dennis’s shoulder.

“We’ll take good care of him Uncle Jess. Don’t you worry.” Brian patted Dennis on the shoulder and grinned up at Jess.

“Good. We’ll see you at the end of the parade then.” Jess said, tipped his hat again, and he and Greg rode off back down the parade line.

“That man has his heart set on you. Give him another month or two and he’s yours.” Connie said returning her attention to Amber with a smile. “Now. You were saying?”

“Oh nothing.” Amber returned her smile. “I’ll just be glad when this parade is over and done with, that’s all.”

“You can say that again.” Connie said with a roll of her eyes. “Debbie wants me to help her organize a winter dance for kids at the end of next month.”

“But they’re only in elementary school.”

“I know, I know.” Connie sighed and blew her short brown hair out of her mouth. “Supposedly it’s the in thing for all the eastern schools right now. She read some article online from some school in Boston that raised a fortune through their dance. You know Debbie, she’s always scheming for ways to raise money.”

“Well give her some credit. She’s done wonders for the school.” Amber turned and started to wave to the crowd as the boys drove the wagon past the beginning of the onlookers.

“Oh I know. I wouldn’t discredit her there. But they’re kids. Maybe she should be working on her marriage instead of wasting her time on something that isn’t even really appropriate for kids so young.”

“There was a scene again huh?”

“It was awful.”

“I’ve tried convincing them to come spend some time at the clinic.” Amber offered; concerned about the worried look she saw in Connie’s eyes. “But they have to want the help first.”

“I’m just so worried about her. How can I not help worrying about my sister? I hate to say this, but I think she should leave him. Charlie! Stop that!” Connie gave one of the twins a glare and he slowly lowered his arm instead of hitting his brother again.

“I don’t agree. Any marriage can work, no matter how ill matched it is. They’re not having any problems beyond normal. If they knew how to cope with them they’d be as happy as you and Greg are with each other.”

Connie wiped a tear from her eye and gave Amber a watery smile. “Listen to me rambling on about myself. You’ll start to think I’m trying to get free therapy out of you.” Connie laughed and waved with renewed vigor to the crowd. “I just want to see them both happy.”

“Mom! Hey Mom, look!” Lauren called as she pulled Tonka down to a walk to match stride with the slower wagon. “I got second place! See?” She handed her ribbon over to Amber who took it with a smile.

“I’m sorry honey. I know you wanted first.”

Lauren stuck her tongue out. “Oh well. The judge told me I was as pretty as a rose! You know what he told Harmony? He told her that I was the only thing that looked pretty as she did!” Lauren laughed and hugged Tonka around the neck.

“Then who got first?” Amber wondered watching her daughter’s delight with amusement.

“Harmony of course! Don’t you listen Mom? Gosh! Oh, I have to go tell Uncle Jess.” She kicked Tonka into a trot and started back down the parade line shouting, “Uncle Jess, look!”

“Brian and Lauren K-I-S-S-I-N-G!” One of the twins called to Brian who punched him in the shoulder. Dennis giggled and fell along with the twin’s antics as they continued to tease Brian.

“Knock it off you two!” Connie scolded them as the wagon came to a halt at the end of the parade. Brian jumped from the wagon and the twins took off after him. Only Dennis remained seated with the reins in his hands, watching the three boys as they tackled each other and rolled in grass laughing.

“Here Dennis, let me show you what we do with the team while we’re enjoying the rest of our time out here.” Connie and Amber climbed to the front of the wagon bed and took up the reins on either side of the little boy.

Amber and Connie continued to chat over Dennis’s head as they drove the wagon further from the commotion and over to a line where they could unhitch.

“Momma! Did you see me?” Dennis cried as they pulled to a stop and Megan approached. “Brian let me drive the wagon all the way at the end. It was neat!” He jumped from the wagon and threw himself into her arms until she finally picked him up.

“You are way too big to be doing that.” She said with a laugh.

“Megs?”

Megan spun at the sound of Connie’s voice and a smile spread across her delicate features. “Connie? Connie Russell?” She approached straining to hold Dennis who was still in her arms. “I never thought I’d see you again. What a surprise!”

“You know the saying, birds of a feather flock together. I never thought I’d see you again either. You lit outta here like a bat outta hell after—”

The silence surrounded the four of them. Amber looked from one woman to another and then at the anxious child between them. This was not going to be a pretty reunion.

“Dennis come play!” Brian ran up and shattered the thick silence. Dennis slid from his mother’s arms and ran off after Brian.

“Be careful!” Megan called after him. “And don’t talk to strangers!” But the kids were already out of earshot. Megan turned back to Connie. “Don’t tell me that was little Brian.”

Connie laughed and caught Megan’s arm in her own. “Yes. Not so little anymore, huh?” She motioned to Amber. “You’ve met Amber haven’t you? She works at the family psychological health clinic in town.”

“Yeah, we met a few days ago.” Megan responded before she gave Amber a forced smile.

Amber couldn’t bring herself to return the gesture. Connie continued talking as if nothing had happened as she threaded her arm through Amber’s and dragged the two back towards the continuing parade festivities.

It wasn’t long before they were immersed in the crowd of laughing people and children. Enormous stuffed animals already filled the arms of overzealous boyfriends and proud fathers. The smells of grilling hamburgers and hotdogs, fresh popped popcorn, cooling pumpkin pies, and warm funnel cakes flavored the air.

“Dennis!” Megan called after her son who ran helter skelter along with Lauren and Connie’s twins. “Excuse me.” She gave Connie an apologetic smile then hurried off to pull her son out of the maelstrom.

“You didn’t tell me he was hers. Better yet, that Dennis was his.” Connie said glancing worriedly at Amber as she took her arm and guided her away where they could talk without interruption.

“He swore to me that Dennis isn’t his. They’re only staying for a while. It doesn’t change anything.”

“But it changes everything.” Connie took her arm and gave it a squeeze. “I’m sorry Amber. If I’d have known I wouldn’t have ever suggested you and Jess getting together.”

“You said yourself earlier today that he was as good as mine. Give him a month or two, you said. I was so sure he was going to propose last winter, and then Lauren hurt her arm and he...it was just bad timing I guess.” Amber could feel her emotions welling up in her chest. Jess was such a good man. He was passionate and caring, dedicated and hard working, and more than what any woman could ask for. He’d come to replace Fred if she let him.

Connie gave her a sad, sad smile. “And we both know where his heart is.”

Chapter Ten

Jess pulled his hat off his head as he followed Amber into the small building. She led him past a small reception area and back into one of three rooms at the far end of the building.

“Have a seat. Would you like some coffee, tea maybe?” She questioned as she took off her coat and shut her purse into a desk drawer.

“Naw, I’m fine. Thanks.” He took a seat in one of the chairs before her desk.

“Okay, I’ll be right back then.” She smiled at him before her footsteps faded down the hall.

Jess studied the office. Two impressive degrees were hung in silver frames behind the desk on the wall. Several pictures scattered her desktop, most pictures of her little girl, but a few showed the smiling face of a young man with a bushy mustache. Her former husband he guessed. To the other side of the room there were a collection of chairs and a couch surrounding an inviting antique coffee table. Filing cabinets and well-stocked bookshelves covered the rest of the far wall and the back of the room. A basket of children’s toys overflowed beside the couch. The overall decoration was both tasteful and inviting.

When she came back in she held a cup of steaming coffee and motioned him over to the chairs and couch. As he seated himself across from her she took a sip of coffee and set it down on the end table beside her.

“I’m not sure how this all works. Or what you cost or anything.”

“Don’t worry about that. Today I just want you to talk.” She folded her hands in her lap and looked across at him.

“Okay... about yesterday—”

“Where you born here in Nevada?” She interrupted.

“Yeah, yeah I was. One of my great grandfather’s came out this way during the gold rush. He never made it to California. From what I’ve been told, he met a saloon girl in town and she was more gold than he ever wanted. My family has been out here ever since.”

“So you inherited your property from him?”

“My spread? Naw, that was my own doing. I worked for the guy who used to run the place. Jack Lawrence. He got sick two years back and left the spread for us when he died. He knew how much we loved it there. He was a great old guy.”

“So your parent’s are still around then?”

“My dad died when I was pretty young. My mom passed away a few months before Mr. Lawrence did. They’d had a thing going between the two of them for years. One of the reasons I was always over at his place. He was like a father to me, Mr. Lawrence was. When my mom got breast cancer he was devastated. He got sick soon after she died.” Jess paused and took in a shaky breath. “He didn’t have anything else to live for.” He glanced at Amber and then quickly dropped his eyes to the floor. He could feel the swell of his emotions as they threatened to crest and wash over him.

“They couldn’t find any cause for his sickness?” She asked with genuine concern.

“No.” Jess swallowed and forced himself to hold back tears. “I think he died of a broken heart.” He stood up abruptly and pushed his cowboy hat down on his head. “Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.”

Amber stood up with him and moved from his way so he could get past her.

“You can just send me a bill.” Jess said as she followed him down the hall and back to the front of the clinic. She held open the door for him as he stepped outside and squinted at the rising sun.

“Thank you Mr. Whitman.” Amber called after him as he started quickly down the street.

Jess turned and squinted back at her. “For what?” He asked, honestly bewildered.

“For coming to talk.” She smiled at him and slipped back inside before he could say anything else. Jess wiped at his eyes before he climbed into his truck and sped out of town.

When he pulled down the driveway of the ranch he put his truck into park and sat there. He couldn’t bring himself to go inside the house. Everything about it reminded him of her. He sure as hell couldn’t bring himself to go into the stables. So instead he sat in his truck and rested his forehead against his arms on the steering wheel.

The day passed him as he sat there. It was the call of nature that finally forced him outside to take a piss. The nicker of the horses in the stables pulled at his heart and his breath caught in his throat. He knew he had to sell them, every single one of them. They couldn’t stay.

The house was an entirely different matter. He couldn’t bring himself to sell it, and yet he couldn’t bring himself to continue living in it. Everyone in town knew about what had happened. Word spread fast in a place this little. Thoughts of his unsuccessful suicide filled the far reaches of his mind. He felt embarrassed as he pulled his truck to a stop in front of Greg Russell’s house.

Connie opened the door with little Brian on her hip. He was starting to teethe and fussed in her arms. She held out a hand to him and drew him inside when he stood looking uncertainly at his feet at the doorstep. Inside she didn’t ask any questions or give him any sympathetic looks, only handed Brian over saying, “Hold him while I check on dinner.”

“I went to that new clinic this morning.” Jess said coming up behind her in the kitchen with Brian in his arms. “I thought it might help...”

“Did it?” Connie asked as she stirred the spaghetti and hummed a little tune under her breath.

“I don’t know. I left before really giving it a shot.” He shifted his weight from one foot to another in his impatience.

Connie dipped a spoon into the spaghetti sauce and fed it to Jess. “Good?” When he nodded she added a dash of salt and turned off the burner. “I take it you’re staying for dinner?” She raised an eyebrow in his direction.

“Yeah, if you’ll have me.”

“You’re not the kind of person who’s likely to turn things down without giving them a try first.” She said circumspectly as she set out an extra plate for dinner.

“Yeah well this is different.” He answered, pulling Brian’s curious fingers off of his hat.

“Is it?” Connie took Brian from his arms and put him into his high chair. The little boy giggled and stuffed his entire fist into his mouth where he sucked on it greedily.

“I know you’re hungry baby. Dinner’s coming.” She cooed at the infant before moving back around to the kitchen.

“Hey honey!” Greg came in the side door and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Connie smiled up at him before brushing at the stain on his shirt.

“This is a brand new shirt.” She said with a sigh thinking of how tight their budget was lately with Greg trying to setup his own store.

“And your lunch looks so nice on it, now doesn’t it?” Greg said with a chuckle. His face went solemn when he saw Jess.

“Jess.” Greg said nodding at him and then he turned quickly away.

“Connie says I can stay for dinner.” Jess said reluctantly pulling his hat off his head and raking his hands through his unruly hair. “You don’t mind do you?”

“Of course not. You’re welcome here anytime.” Greg smiled at his distraught best friend and gestured for him to take a seat at the kitchen table. “Connie makes the best spaghetti. Isn’t that right honey?”

“You eat enough to feed all the starving children in Africa.” She said with a smile as she served both men large plates of the steaming pasta before she joined them with her own.

“I was wondering. Uh, do you mind selling the horses?” Jess directed the question at Greg before he dropped his eyes back to stare down at the plate. He picked at the food before him.

“No, not at all.” Greg slurped up a forkful of spaghetti. “I’ll come pick them up tomorrow morning if that’s okay with you.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. The sooner the better.” Jess said finally taking a bite of food under Connie’s watchful eyes. “Thanks.”

“Jess told me he went to the new clinic this morning.” Connie said as she opened a jar of baby food and started spooning the green pea goo into little Brian’s mouth.

“Oh yeah? How did that go?” Greg asked as he got up to refill his plate.

“I didn’t stay that long.” Jess muttered, suddenly feeling ashamed of himself.

“That’s too bad.” Greg said as he sat back down at the table and started to dig in again. “Mark said she was a really nice woman. She just moved here from Chicago; something about wanting to be closer to her family now that she’s a widow.”

“Yeah well, I better go.” Jess stood up and brought his plate to the sink under the concerned eyes of the young couple. “You’ll come get ‘um early right?”

Greg nodded in understanding. “Before I go to open the store.”

“Thanks. Greg. Connie.” He nodded at both and shoved his hat back on his head. With his back turned he didn’t see the worried expression that passed between them. He slipped out the front door and was gone.

The drive back home in the dark seemed even lonelier to him than the drive to Greg and Connie’s earlier that evening. When he pulled up to the house he had to use his force of will to get out of the truck and walk the few steps to the door.

A wave of sadness overwhelmed him as he stepped over the threshold into the kitchen. He could smell her favorite shampoo lingering in the air. As always the kitchen floor was spotless. When he pulled off his boots and let the mud splatter across the clean surface he felt as if he was slowly losing a part of himself. From the refrigerator he pulled out a six-pack of beers and carried them up the three flights of stairs to their—his—room.

He let the beer cans fall to the floor one by one as he emptied them sitting on the bed. It dulled the pain when his mind was too blurry to focus, too confused to feel. When the last empty can hit the floor it sounded like a gunshot to his intoxicated ears. Slowly he stood up and went to the window seat, lifting up the wooden top that covered the rack beneath.

When he removed the spare shotgun her words echoed through his head. “Sometimes it helps to talk about things that are bothering you.” As he pumped the handle he heard the unmistakable sound of the cartridge entering the chamber. This time he wouldn’t be out of bullets. He turned it to his head and squeezed the trigger. Complete darkness.

Jess sat up abruptly in bed. He was covered in sweat and his heart was racing. His hands went to his head and chest. He let out a relieved trembling sigh when he found he was all in one piece. The dream was so real it scared him. Only, when he’d taken the shotgun out of the gun rack those years ago, he’d removed the bullets. The gun never went loaded anymore. The two cartridges he’d removed from the chamber were still sitting on the dresser in his room. He didn’t dare tempt fate again.

“Jess? Are you okay?” Amber sat up beside him and laid a hand on his arm. He didn’t realize he was shaking until he felt her fingers tighten to steady him.

He nodded. “I’m fine. Just a bad dream.” He closed his eyes and buried his head into her soft shoulder. Her skin felt smooth and the press of her naked flesh had a soothing effect on his nerves. His arm wandered to one of her large breasts and he took it into his hand. He could feel her entire body melting into his as he lowered his head and sucked her nipple hard. Her moan stirred him to erection and he found himself slipping inside her once again.

Their movements were fluid in their union as they made love to each other. They were not unfamiliar lovers and knew how to satisfy each other to the fullest. When Amber came Jess wasn’t far behind her. He fell breathlessly on top of her and allowed her to feel the weight of his body for

a few moments before he managed to pull himself away. She snuggled up next to him and laid her head on his chest. Her hair tickled his nose and he brushed it away as he'd done many times before.

"We can't keep going like this." Amber muttered into the muscular ridges of his chest.

"What?" Jess pushed her hair away from his nose again and then put his arm around her shoulder.

Amber turned her face up to look at him. "Like this. Me sending Lauren off to my parents every time you and I want to be alone together. It's not right to her and what does it say about us? That one night of passion is more important than an eight year old?" Amber pulled away from him and sat up.

"You don't have to send her to your parents' house. We could just be more careful." Jess ran his hand across her thigh and then up between her legs.

"And teach my daughter that it's okay to go sleeping around when she isn't married? I don't think so."

Jess sighed and withdrew his hand. He pushed himself up so that he was sitting up also. "What do you want from me Amber?"

She turned to look him in the eyes. With her hands she took hold of his face and kissed him passionately on the lips before she broke away. "You know what I want Jess."

"I—um—I should go." Jess pulled away and started to gather his clothing. When he had his pants on he turned back to look at her. Tears ran down her face and she made no attempt to stop them.

"Amber...oh Amber don't cry." Jess sighed and sat down on the bed beside her, wrapping his arms around her.

"I won't wait for you forever Jess. I won't torment myself by living for a dream that will never happen."

Jess wiped the tears from her eyes. "I just need more time to think things through. You understand don't you?"

"Jess, I hate to tell you this. I know you don't want to hear it, but you have to choose. She has a life Jess, and so do you. Every person has their own path. I have to take mine and you have to take yours. It's up to you to decide if you want to go down the same path I've chosen or if you want to take your chances on a different one."

"Can I still stay a little longer?" Jess asked into her hair. His arms were wet where her tears had fallen. Even if he wanted to he couldn't bring himself to leave her tonight. Not now. Not like this.

"Of course you can," she whispered and she turned to undress him once again.

Chapter Eleven

The first thing Jess noticed as he drove up the driveway to the house was the fact that Megan's car was gone. He swore to himself as he parked the truck and then let his forehead rest against the steering wheel. She'd gone back to him like he knew she would. Where was the strong vibrant woman he once knew?

Slowly Jess climbed from the car and walked up the steps to the door. As he stepped inside he felt a flood of loneliness sweep over him. In his mind he could hear Dennis pleading for breakfast and see the boy's beaming smile and sleep-ruffled hair as he sat down to the kitchen table. Megan brought him a plate and ran her hands through his tangled mop of hair before she bent to kiss him on the cheek. When she sat next to him she smiled and they talked back and forth over little things; the scrape on his knee, the ducks he'd seen in the fields, and the calf that called forlornly looking for its mother.

Jess pulled his cowboy hat from his head and his muddy boots followed shortly thereafter. The splatters on the clean floor made him wince. He trudged up the two flights of stairs and shed his clothes as he walked the short distance to the bed. He dropped down on the mattress so hard the bed springs creaked and groaned in protest. He'd had little sleep over at Amber's house and it was quickly catching up to him. The clock on his dresser drawer said it was close to four thirty in the morning. That gave him three hours to get some sleep before the cattle and horses started to complain. He shut his eyes and drifted off into blackness.

Outside a single cow cried out until her calf settled back down beside her. The horses slept soundly in the paddocks serenaded by the chirping of crickets. Down the gravel drive of Jess's ranch a cat stood before the mailbox watching a mouse sneak from a small hole at the base of the wooden post. The cat's strong jaws snapped shut over the animal's head as it dashed from its hiding place. The cat, proud of its kill, carried the animal several miles down the road and to the doorstep of its owner back in town. With a mew the cat clawed at their master's door and then finally crept away in search of more prey when its request went unanswered.

Megan let out a sigh and stopped trying to pretend that she was going to get any sleep as she heard the cat's protest. She'd tossed and turned for hours now wondering if she was doing the right thing. Her mind played over the various scenarios running through her thoughts and each came up with the same outcome: "You had your chance."

She pressed her eyes tightly closed and ran her fingers roughly across them. She was so tired; she knew she needed to go to sleep. In the morning she had to drop Dennis off at school before she could head in to her office at the bank. Things would get better for her as she made a new life for herself. Everything would be okay.

Megan awoke with a start as her alarm clock went off. Dennis was already awake and playing with the cat on the floor in the living room. She watched him for a few minutes, regretting she'd fed the poor stray the evening before and allowed it into the house, then hurried off to take a shower.

"Why can't we stay with Jess, momma?" Dennis asked as she pulled his clothes on and ran a brush through his hair. She licked the palm of her hand and tried to get it to lay flat but it was no use.

"Because, we need a house of our own. You know that. That's why we came down here in the first place. Remember?" She pulled his jacket on and again brushed at his unruly hair. It was a futile action but each time her brain subconsciously hoped that the next attempt would succeed.

"But I liked the horses!"

Megan sighed and threw her hands up in the air. "Look Dennis, I'm doing the best that I can. I'm sorry if my best isn't good enough for you, but it's all I have. Now come on, I don't want you late for school. You've missed enough as it is." She dragged him along by the hood of his coat as he continued to complain and protest. It was only when she agreed that he could keep the cat that he stopped pestering her and left the radio alone.

At work Megan was slowly growing accustomed to the lazy flow of people and somewhat familiar faces that passed into and out of her day. She remembered several of the men and women who sat down at her desk at the bank, but far more remembered her. She and Jess had been well liked and well known in the small town before everything went downhill.

"I heard you'd taken up a job here." Connie said as she sat down at the desk and arranged her purse and coat in her lap. "I didn't get a proper chance to talk to you yesterday." Connie smiled at her. "The parade always leaves the town exhausted afterwards. But I think the benefits outweigh the fuss and confusion."

"This really isn't the best time," Megan glanced at her boss and then back at her old friend. "Maybe you could come over for dinner tonight?"

"No, no, dinner won't do. I have a herd of my own to feed tonight."

"Maybe another time then." Megan gave her an apologetic smile, yet she was relieved she could put off the coming conversation for a few days more.

"Pete, mind if I have a word with Megan?" Connie called over to the short bearded man at the desk not far from hers.

Pete smiled at her and shook his head no. He was a really decent guy from what Megan could tell. "Consider it an early lunch break and I won't mind."

"Good," Connie turned back to her. "Why don't we go get lunch? Might as well if it's going to be your lunch break." Connie slipped back into her coat and ushered Megan out the door before she could so much as protest. Megan noted with annoyance that Connie was better at getting what she wanted now than she had been years ago.

"The little restaurant down here is good. They moved in a while after you left. Boy do they have the best Italian food." Connie slipped her arm into Megan's and together they walked the few blocks down the small town.

“This place is a lot bigger.” Megan noted trying to reposition herself in relation to the other stores and streets she had once been so familiar with. “Mrs. Jane’s place is gone I see, so is old David’s candy store.”

“Lots of new places have gone up also. The parade has brought in a lot more traffic over the years. Although I have to say that it’s about time we got some decent shopping.” Connie held open the door of the small restaurant for Megan.

The smell of garlic, hot bread and rich tomato sauce welcomed them, as did the slender lady behind the counter. Once they had ordered Connie found them a seat near the window and shed her coat again.

“You still love Italian huh?” Megan said with a smile. “Does Greg ever get tired of it?”

“Of course he does, so do the boys. I just threaten that I’ll make them cook dinner and then they always stop complaining.” Connie laughed but it wasn’t wholeheartedly.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’ve always known me too well. I swear you can read my every thought.”

“Yeah well, you’re like a sister to me. I mean, until you met Greg we were inseparable. Debbie was so jealous, like little sisters always are. How’s she doing by the way?” Megan thanked the cook as she set down plates of spaghetti before them and two glasses of ice-cold water.

“Not so good. Her marriage is in pieces. But that’s not why I’m here.” Connie sighed. “I wanted to talk to you because I’m concerned about Jess.”

Megan dropped her fork to her plate and started to stand up before Connie caught her arm.

“Megan, wait. Please. This is important.” Connie didn’t release her arm until she returned to her seat.

“I really don’t want to talk about Jess right now, okay?” She toyed with her food for a bit but couldn’t bring herself to take a bite.

“I know this isn’t what you want to hear right now, but its something you need to know.” Connie took Megan’s free hand in hers and gave it a squeeze. “After you left there was an incident. Jess drove Mercury into town in the middle of the day and unloaded him near the police station. He shot him in the middle of the street.”

“Why are you telling me this? Don’t you think I’ve had enough torment in my life? What, do you think you can just bring this all back up and I’ll be fine and dandy? That I don’t still cry myself to sleep at night thinking about what happened?” Megan could feel the tears welling in her eyes as her anger grew and she tried as hard as she could to contain both.

“I swear to you that if you didn’t need to know this I wouldn’t be talking to you right now.” Connie squeezed her hand tightly. “I know how much she meant to him...” Connie paused as Megan wiped at her eyes.

“After he shot Mercury he turned the gun on himself. All the people in town who saw what happened that day were positive he had one more round in the barrel of that shotgun. When he pulled the trigger it was empty.”

Megan drew in a shaky breath and let it out as slowly as she possibly could. She could hear each beat of her heart inside her chest as it maintained its slow rhythmic thumping. Her throat seemed to close up, and her tongue stuck to her mouth. She couldn't bring herself to respond, only stare blankly at Connie's worried face.

"Amber was new in town. She runs a family-counseling clinic just down the street from the police office. She saw everything. Mark Sherwin and the boys at the station arrested him. From what Amber's told me, Mark asked her to come talk to him later that same evening. Jess showed up at her clinic the next morning, and every morning after that for nearly a year. They started seeing each other after she stopped counseling him." Connie dropped hold of Megan's hand and reached for her coat.

"Oh god, Connie. I didn't know. I never would have left if I'd have known." Tears were pouring freely down her face now.

"I know you wouldn't have. Everyone in town, who knew you well, knows you wouldn't have. Only now you're back and you brought his son with you. I'm afraid for him Megan. I'm afraid of what will happen if you decide to leave again. I'm afraid that now he won't propose to Amber like he's been meaning to. And I'm afraid that I don't know what's going to come out of this, but you had to know." She pulled her coat on, paid the woman at the counter with a nod of thanks and left Megan to their cooling plates of food without another word.

Chapter Twelve

Jess swung off of Rusty, let his reins drop to the ground, and raced for the phone in the barn.

“Hello?”

There was no answer.

Jess swore and hung up the phone with a huff. He needed to finally give into temptation and buy a cell phone. Rusty was pulling at the grass when he turned back to collect its reins. The huge gelding gave Jess an annoyed huff as he pulled his head up and led him back into the barn and out of the warming sunlight.

“I know, I know.” Jess chuckled despite his exhaustion as he untacked the horse and rubbed him down. Of all his horses Rusty was the one he rode the most and he deserved the extra attention after a days worth of hard riding.

With the onset of colder weather Jess had decided to drive all the cattle closer in. The older cows had been ornery as ever and tried to give him the slip more then a few times. Rusty had had his work cut out for him today.

After Rusty was brushed down and fed Jess turned him out with the other horses and went back to work. Even as the sun started to set Jess still had his work cut out for him. He put out fresh bails of hay and water for both the cattle and horses and fixed a loose board in one of the horse’s stalls.

This time when the phone rang he picked it up by the third ring. “Hello?”

There was no answer.

“Hello? Anyone there?”

Jess finally shrugged and put the phone back on the hook. This wasn’t the first time the phones hadn’t been cooperative. Whoever was calling would get through eventually.

It was starting to get dark as Jess took a head count of the cattle and scribbled the number down on a book in the tack room. The number was a little lower then normal, but nothing he was concerned about. It had been a long summer and it wouldn’t surprise him if he’d missed a cow or two as he’d driven them in. He made a mental note to himself to check the upper part of his spread the next morning to see if he could find them.

The approaching darkness still couldn’t entice him inside. Jess spent the better part of an hour cleaning stalls and checking tack and going over how much feed and hay he had left to last him for the week. The temperature was dropping outside and he was considering pulling the horses in for the

night when the phone rang for the third time.

With a bridle in one hand, Jess grabbed the phone with the other and pressed it to his ear as he continued to rub the leather conditioner into the noseband. "Hello?"

Over the murmur of the cattle, the chirping crickets, and nearby stamping hooves, he could hear the sound of someone breathing on the other end of the line.

"Who is this?"

No answer.

"Look, whoever this is, I can hear you breathing."

The breathing continued slow and steady. Jess rolled his eyes and hung up. Most likely it was one of Greg's boys playing a prank. Although he liked Greg's kids they were prone to trouble.

It was pitch black outside when Jess got all the horses into the barn and blanketed. He was dressed in only a long sleeved t-shirt and tattered jeans and could feel his teeth chattering as he hurried towards the house. The first frost would be setting in soon; winter was coming.

It was nearly as dark in the house as it was outside when Jess got in and pulled his boots off. He hit the kitchen light with one hand while he hung his hat up with the other. Nothing happened. He hit the switch down and back up again. The power was out.

"Man!" Jess felt around in the dark for the wall and then the refrigerator handle. Slowly he worked his way around the kitchen until he could move into the living room and down the hall. In the hall he smacked into the utility door before he found the knob with his hand. "Of all the times..." He cursed as he pulled the door open and felt around for the breaker box. When he flipped the main breaker switch he heard the hum of electricity and the house came back to life. The light from the kitchen illuminated the hall enough for him to shut the door and flip on lights as he walked back to get something to eat.

When he came into the kitchen he stopped. The kitchen door was wide open and he could see nothing but the empty darkness of the night beyond. Jess spun around in a full circle. He'd shut the door when he'd come inside. With confident strides he walked towards the door and shut it and locked it. Suddenly he no longer felt hungry.

The telephone made him jump. He let it ring and ring before he finally put aside his foolishness and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

The breathing was there. Faintly, but there.

"Who the fuck is this?" Jess said, gripping the phone hard and struggling to control his temper.

The breathing continued, slow and steady.

Jess slammed the phone down on the hook. The door hadn't opened itself. He was starting to go upstairs when the phone rang again. This time Jess let it ring. It could ring all night for all he cared. As he came up the third floor stairs he heard the creak as weight shifted across the floorboards below him. Instead of turning he continued to climb purposefully up the stairs. When he got to his room he

grabbed the shotgun shells off his dresser and pulled out his shotgun in the same fluid movement. As he turned around and aimed, he loaded shells into the barrel and cocked it just as quickly.

He nearly blew the cat's head off. He lowered the barrel of the gun with a curse as he watched the animal spring up onto his bed and curl up on his pillow. When the phone rang he grabbed it off the hook in a fury.

"What the fuck do you want!"

"Jess?"

"Connie?"

"Yeah. It's me, Connie. I've been trying to call you forever but I keep getting a busy signal. I don't think our phone is working. I finally gave up and switched to my cell. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah I'm fine." Jess rolled his eyes to himself and removed the shell from the gun. The cat followed his movements with its big, yellow eyes. How in the hell had it gotten inside?

"Jess...what are you doing with your shotgun?" Connie's voice was a little less than a whisper. She'd lived in the country long enough to know that sound when she heard it.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Jess maybe you should come spend the night over here for a few days. Greg and I are worried about you."

"There's nothing to worry about Connie. I'm fine. Now that Megan's gone things will get back to normal."

"Gone? What do you mean?"

"She left yesterday. She went back to her husband."

There was a silence on the other end of the line.

"Connie?" Jess asked, watching the cat close its eyes and start to doze on his pillow. "Connie, are you there?"

"Yes, yes, I'm here."

"Who's freaking out who, huh?" Jess said with a grin as he put the shotgun away and took a seat on his bed next to the cat. It didn't even object when he pushed it aside and off the pillow.

She gave a half-hearted chuckle. "Jess, I saw Megan today working at the bank."

"She was at the bank?" Jess's mind wandered. Maybe there was something left of the woman he remembered after all.

"Yeah. She was at the bank."

"Oh. Well she's not staying here anymore then. That should make everyone happy." He grumbled not even realizing that he had. Amber, on the other hand, would be ecstatic.

“Why don’t you come stay with us tonight Jess?” Connie held the phone away from her ear for a moment to tell the twins to stop harassing each other then spoke again. “Please?”

“No. No, I’m fine. Really.”

“But the gu—”

“It’s not what you think. Okay?” Jess pressed a hand to his forehead and glared down at the cat. How the hell had it gotten inside anyways?

“All right, if you say so. But remember we’re here if you need us...” Connie’s voice trailed off. “You could talk to Amber also. Professionally, you know?”

“Connie, stop it. I’m fine. And I’m going to bed. Night.” Jess hung up the phone before she could protest. He looked down at the cat sleeping beside his pillow and let out a sigh that was half in relief and half in annoyance. After all, it was just a cat.

Jess shook his head in disbelief, shed his dirty clothes, and lay down on the bed looking up at the ceiling. The cat woke up briefly to crawl closer to him before it fell back asleep. It was several hours later before Jess got any sleep that night.

It was five thirty in the morning when his alarm clock when off and jarred him awake. He’d forgotten about the cat and the animal hissed and scratched at him when he put his hand down on it. As he jerked away it hissed again and then jumped down from the bed, ran across the floor, and disappeared down the stairs.

“Damn cat,” Jess swore at it as he stumbled out of bed and into the shower. It wasn’t often he saw the animal he’d found nearly dead in his barn almost two years ago. The cat still hadn’t decided if it was tame or feral yet. In the meantime he’d never given it a name, so cat was as close to a name as it would likely ever get. Since he’d taken it in, it had come and gone as it liked, sometimes even finding its way into other people’s homes and hearts. It was an unusual animal, this cat of his.

Jess turned the water on as hot as he could stand it before he stepped under the prickling spray. His hand ached where the cat had scratched him and he noticed a few bruises on his legs that he he’d acquired from the day before without noticing it. He stayed in the shower longer than normal, letting the warmth of the spray relax his muscles and wash away his convoluted thoughts. When he finally turned the water off it was starting to get cold.

His room was just as cold. From outside his window he could see the fine white-green crystals of the first frost on the grass outside. He dressed quickly and put on a double layer of clothing before he trudged down the stairs.

When he reached the kitchen his heart skipped in his chest. The door was open. Wide open. His cat sat there, licking its paws and then rubbing them over its face and ears. There was only one thought that crossed Jess’s mind: there was no way his cat could open a locked door.

Jess shooed the cat out the door with his foot and pulled his boots on. There was no sense in dwelling on the issue. He brewed a cup of strong black coffee, drank it quickly, then grabbed his hat and headed for the stables – pulling the door shut behind him.

“Hey Greg.” Jess leaned against the counter of the feed store and watched his friend turn with a smile to greet him.

“Jess. Good to know you made it through the night—” He stopped mid-sentence. “Oh God, Jess I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

“I know you didn’t mean it.” Jess grinned at his friend until he returned the gesture.

“You’re here for your usual I take it?”

“I am.”

“It’s right around back.” Greg motioned him around to the back of the store where the feedbags were piled to the ceiling.

“Hey Greg, can I ask you something?”

“You know you can ask me anything.”

Jess took the bag of feed Greg handed him and followed him out to his truck. “You ever have a door come open on you?”

“A door?”

“Yeah, like your front door.”

“Maybe if it’s really windy outside and the kids are running in and out.” Greg deposited the bag into the back of Jess’s truck and turned to meet his friend. “Why do you ask?”

“Something weird happened last night.”

“Connie told me you sounded strange on the phone.”

“Yeah. I came in from feeding the horses and I closed the door behind me, you know like I always do. When I went to turn on the lights nothing happened. You know how my power is when it gets colder, what with the pipes freezing and everything else. So I didn’t think anything of it. I found my way down the hall to the breaker box and turned everything back on. The lights came back on just as I expected. So I went back to the kitchen, only the door was open.”

“That’s funny.”

“Yeah. I know I closed it behind me.”

“Maybe you weren’t paying attention. I do that sometimes, like when I put my newspaper down to tell the twins to knock it off. Then I go back out to the mailbox to get it and realize it’s already inside. You’d be surprised how often I find myself doing things like that.” Greg chuckled as they went back into the store and swiped Jess’s credit card.

The chimes of the door rang as another man walked into the store and started to look around. Greg smiled at him in acknowledgement then turned back to Jess.

“You haven’t heard the best part yet. So I locked the door, double-checked it to make sure it was really closed and started up to bed. Then I hear this noise behind me. Of course I get freaked, and

I load my shotgun and turn around expecting something to jump out at me. The damn cat of mine walks in like he owns the place and plops down on my bed on my pillow. Damn thing. It scared the hell outta me.”

Greg chuckled. “So that’s why Connie heard the shotgun.”

“Yeah. She was flipping out. I never keep that thing loaded but she asked me to come stay with you guys for the night anyways.”

“Well you know how much we care about you Jess. No one in town would want anything to happen to you.” Greg gave him the credit card back and lounged against the store counter.

“Get this though. I go to bed, wake up the next morning and go downstairs to get some coffee before I go back out on the spread. Only the cats in the kitchen, sitting in front of kitchen door. The open kitchen door.” Jess raised an eyebrow, hoping his friend could solve the mystery in his place.

“The door was open again?”

“Yeah. It totally freaked me out.” Jess strummed his fingers on the countertop and shifted aside as the other man approached the counter.

Greg turned to the man with a smile and rang up his purchase of black leather gloves and handgun shells before bidding him a good day. Bells twinkled as he left.

“I just don’t get it. How did the door open itself a second time? I know I locked it after I found it open the first time.” Jess’s brow furrowed with concern. “The only thing connecting it all is that damn cat.”

“Well then I guess it was the cat.” Greg replied shrugging his shoulders in an expression of his bewilderment.

“One things for sure. Cat’s can’t open locked doors.” Jess sighed and shuffled his feet. He was reluctant to leave.

“I dunno what to say. Never heard of something like that before. Gives new meaning to locking your doors, huh?”

“I guess.” Jess laughed as he started for the door.

“Want to come to dinner tonight?” Greg called to him as he turned to say good-bye.

“Sure, I’d like that.” Jess smiled and the door closed with a jingle of bells behind him.

~*~

“I don’t know what to say.” Amber looked down at the ring and back at Jess.

“Say yes.” Jess smiled up at her. “That’s all you have to say.”

Amber frowned at him. “This is the same ring you gave her, isn’t it?”

“Ring’s are expensive.” Jess sighed. “It shouldn’t make any difference Amber. All you have to do is say yes.” Jess took the ring from the box and slipped it on her finger.

“See, it fits.” He smiled at her.

Amber looked down at the ring on her finger. He’d finally chosen his path and so had she.

“Amber?”

She smiled.

Chapter Thirteen

Megan ushered Dennis in the door with her foot as she tried to maneuver the grocery bags above his head. In the three weeks since she'd left her husband things were finally starting to stabilize. Dennis had made new friends at school and Megan had settled into a routine at work. The cat that Dennis had acquired two weeks before came and went as it pleased leaving Megan with a clean litter box and a tired Dennis to cook dinner for before bedtime.

"Dennis, turn the television down." Megan called as she set the groceries down on the counter and went back outside to get the last few bags in the trunk.

When Megan got back outside to the car she realized she'd accidentally closed the trunk. She patted her pockets for her keys then called to Dennis, "Honey, what did you do with the keys?"

Dennis popped his head out the front door pointed to the driver's side. "I left them in the car," and disappeared back inside just as quickly not wanting to miss whatever show was on television that had him so mesmerized.

Megan reached for the driver's side door and pulled the handle. It was locked. She peered inside the car and could see the car keys sitting on the passengers side seat. All four doors of the car were locked.

"Dennis!" She yelled, angry now. "Why did you lock the keys in the car!"

"He didn't." A voiced answered from behind her.

Megan spun and her breath caught in her throat.

"Chris I—"

"You what, you bitch?" He growled catching her by the arm and jerking her so close that her face was inches away from his own. "You decided you'd leave me for that cowboy huh?"

She could smell the booze on his breath as she turned her head away from him and tried to free her wrist from his grip. "Chris let go, you're hurting me."

"You don't have to worry about your cowboy anymore. I'll take care of him for you." He sneered and his spittle hit her in the face.

Megan's stomach dropped. She tried to claw his face with her free hand but he only caught it and dragged her inside the house kicking and screaming.

The front door slammed as he kicked it shut with his booted foot. Dennis watched with wide frightened eyes as Megan tried to get away from Chris's blows to her head. In desperation the little boy tried to pull him away from her. Chris growled and backhanded him in the face. The little boy screamed as his nose gushed blood, streaming down his face in torrents.

"You bastard! Don't you touch him!" Megan screamed at Chris between his blows. She kicked at him but he was holding her beyond the reach of her arms and legs.

"You like it rough huh?" Chris screamed, forcing her down to the ground. "You like to be mounted by your cowboy like the slut you are?" He tore at her shirt and ripped it down the shoulder. "I'll mount you, all right!" He smacked her across the face and then jerked her jeans off her legs.

Dennis continued screaming where he sat huddled in the corner holding his nose. Megan, knowing she couldn't prevent what was to come, ordered him to go to his room and lock the door between her sobs. The little boy finally ran for his room and shut the door as Chris flipped her over so she was lying on her stomach and pulled her jeans and panties down to her knees.

Megan screamed and continued to fight him as he raped her from behind. When he was done he allowed her to break free of his iron grip and crawl away from him, sobbing and bleeding. She pulled her jeans on as she stumbled to her feet and raced for Dennis's room.

Dennis pulled the door open when she called out and Megan locked it behind her. She pulled Dennis into her arms and sobbed into his hair as she listened to Chris slowly collecting himself and coming down the hall towards the locked door.

"Megan open this door!" He screamed, pounding on the flimsy wood with his fist. Megan could hear the wood splintering under his thundering blows. "I'm not done with you yet you bitch!"

"You have to go to the neighbors for help. Do you understand me?" She said to Dennis, wiping his tears from his face with her hand.

He nodded.

Megan gathered him into her arms and carried him over to the window. She opened it with one arm and helped him drop the foot or so down into the bushes. "Go to the house next door. Hurry!"

He ran.

"Megan! Open this door!"

Megan shut the window and locked it. She composed herself as she walked to the door and opened it. When she met his eyes he glared at her and raised his hand to hit her.

"The police are coming." She told him in a steely voice.

"That wasn't smart." He said, taking her throat in his hand. "When they get here you're going to tell them nothing happened. Do you understand me?"

Megan shook her head. "No Chris. I'm going to tell them the truth."

"You lousy fuck!" He smacked her so hard she spun on her feet and fell to the ground. "You think you're too good for me don't you?"

Megan's stomach heaved as he kicked her in the ribs once and then twice. His breath was hot against her neck as he leaned down and took a handful of long her hair. "You tell them nothing happened or I'll kill that bastard son of yours, do you hear me?"

Megan felt tears welling in her eyes at the pain in her side and across the back of her scalp. "Dennis is your son, Chris." She whispered.

"I'll kill him and make it look like it was a fit of a mother's jealous rage. Do you understand me?" He jerked hard on her hair until she nodded. "Good."

The sound of police sirens grew to a wail outside. Chris grabbed her arm and jerked her to her feet. He wiped the tears from her face in a tender motion and gently kissed her bruised lips. "That's a good girl. Now go tell the police what they want to hear." He pushed her towards the door with a gentle pat on the butt.

Megan winced and bit at her bottom lip against the pain as she walked on shaky legs to the police who were now knocking on the door. She pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear as she pulled the door open and put on a straight face.

"Ms. Norman?" The police officer asked.

He looked vaguely familiar to her as she replied, "Yes, this is she. How can I help you guys?" She nodded at both of them.

"We got a call from the neighbor that there was a problem. Can we come in?"

"Yes, yes of course." She held the door open and motioned for them to come in. Chris was in the kitchen calmly putting the groceries away as if it was the most routine thing in the world.

"What's going on honey?" He asked with a concerned frown as he paused with a head of lettuce in his hand.

Megan drew in a shaky breath. "These men said the neighbor called them." She replied in a whisper as her body shook with fear. Chris arched an eyebrow at her in warning then turned and gave the police officers a smile.

"Why don't you come with us, sir." One of the officers said, the unfamiliar one, and he beckoned Chris forwards.

"Sure officer." Chris set the lettuce down, crossed the room to where Megan stood and kissed her on the cheek. "I'll be back soon honey." He told her then turned back to the officer. "Lead the way."

Megan and the familiar police officer watched as his partner led Chris out of the house and towards their car. When he was out of sight the man turned back to her. "You're a brave woman Mrs. Larson. We can't keep him for more than a night if you don't press charges." He motioned the bruise forming on her cheekbone.

Megan pressed her hand over her cheek and shook her head no. "I can't press charges. You don't understand."

The officer nodded. "Then I strongly suggest you go to a friend's house for a while." He exchanged a hard look with her until she nodded in return.

“Your son is out in the car. Why don’t you pack a few things and I’ll take you where you need to go.”

Megan nodded and wandered off in a daze to get her stuff.

“Where should I drop you off?” The officer’s voice broke her out of her dazed state and she found herself sitting in his car with Dennis in her arms and a stuffed suitcase beside her.

“Mark.” She said suddenly, recognizing the face of the man in the driver’s seat who was turned to look at her and Dennis. “Mark Sherwin.”

“That’s right.”

She cleared her throat. “I have no where to go.” She hugged Dennis closer to her chest and looked back at him.

Mark nodded his head. “I know where to take you. You just sit back, relax, and let me take care of you.”

Chapter Fourteen

Jess looked up when the police car started down the driveway. He gave Tonka his head and let the gelding set his own pace towards the approaching visitor. When the car pulled to a stop and Mark Sherwin stepped out Jess's first fretful thought was that something bad had happened to Amber or Lauren.

He dismounted and walked the few steps forwards in obvious distress. "Is everything okay?" He questioned.

Mark nodded and glanced back at the car. Jess followed his gaze and saw what he'd missed before. Megan sat in the back seat with Dennis in her lap.

"There was an incident at her place." Mark coughed, and shuffled his feet in the dirt. "There's no easy way to say this to you Jess. We got a call from her neighbor. Apparently she helped Dennis out the window so he could go get help. Her husband will spend the night in jail but that's all we can hold him for if she won't press charges. I'm counting on you to change her mind." He turned back to the car and motioned for Megan to get out. "You're not gonna like what you see. Just forewarning you."

Jess watched as Megan slowly got out of the car, wincing as she shifted Dennis and finally put him down on the ground. When she walked up to them, Dennis in one hand and the suitcase in the other, he could clearly see the bruises forming across her jaw and cheek and arms. Her bottom lip was cut and her left eye was already dark purple underneath.

"That fucking bastard, I'm going to rip his head off." Jess clenched his hands into fists as she stopped in front of him and tried to hold back tears.

"That's enough Jess." Mark warned him. "You let us take care of this, you hear?" He gave Jess a wary look. "You just get her to change her mind and me and the boys will take care of the rest." He finally nodded, got into the car and left the three of them standing there looking at each other.

"Don't say I told you so." Megan said although she had difficulty forming the words with her lips so swollen.

"You have to press charges." Jess said angrily as he bent and picked Dennis up into his arms.

"I can't." Megan said in a near whisper. Tears came to her eyes. "I can't Jess. You don't understand."

"Then make me understand Megan."

Megan took in a heavy breath then turned towards the house. Dennis squirmed in Jess's arms until he set him down. The little boy ran after his mom and grabbed her hand before they disappeared inside.

Jess turned towards Tonka who stood patiently a ways off grazing what was left of the yellowing grass. Jess found himself torn in two directions. He swore and went to put Tonka out to pasture. He promised himself he'd pick a direction, and soon.

~*~

"Ouch!" Megan pulled away from his ministrations and wrapped her hand over her sore ribs.

"Sit still or I'll never be able to get this stuff on." Jess said as he tried again to rub the pain medication on the scratches on her cheek.

"I can't sit still. I'm sore everywhere." She signed and stood up with some discomfort.

Jess eyed her. "Everywhere? He didn't—"

"It's not like it's never happened before. I'll be fine." Megan brushed his hand away when he reached for her.

"You've got to be kidding me." He reached for her again and this time she was too exhausted to resist when he pulled her towards him. "You have to press charges."

"What does that buy me Jess? A week? Two? He'll be back. He always comes back. You think I've never pressed charges before? It doesn't work! Nothing works!" She started to cry but it hurt too much to cry. Instead she found herself with her arms around his neck and her head resting against his shoulder.

"We'll make it work this time Megan. I swear he won't hurt you again if you press charges."

Slowly Megan pulled away from him and sadly she shook her head. "Before or after you propose to Amber?" At the look in his eyes her heart sank. "You've already proposed to her."

"I was going to tell you Megan. I didn't want you to find out like this.

Megan kissed him on the cheek. "Good night, Jess."

Jess found himself pulled back, remembering. It was the night before her twentieth birthday. They'd been out all day, shopping and going to dinner and made love all night. She'd pressed herself up against him and whispered good night.

The next morning he got up early to make her breakfast in bed. He fed her himself and she finally looked at him suspiciously.

"I've never seen you this sincere." She said with a glance from lowered lashes as he buttered her toast and fed it to her.

"You deserve the best." He said with a twinkle in his eye. When she was done they took a shower together until the water turned cold and his body heat could no longer keep her warm.

They dried each other off and dressed when he said, "I have a surprise for you."

“Another one?” She arched an eyebrow.

“You think I’m cheap? That breakfast was your present? I’ve made you breakfast before.” He grinned.

“Sure you have.” She laughed at his antics as he pulled her down the stairs and outside into the crisp spring air. The horses called from the barn as he tried to hurry her along.

“Slow down Jess!” She laughed as he tugged her along. Whatever it is, it’s not going to walk away before I get there.”

“It might,” he teased stopping her outside the barn. “Close your eyes.”

“Jess.” She shook her head in surprise at his excitement. “I’m not going to close my eyes.”

“Close your eyes or I’ll take it back.” He teased.

“It’s that saddle I wanted isn’t it?” She said, her eyes going wide in delight.

“Close you eyes and you’ll find out in a second.” Jess winked at her and finally she gave in.

“Okay, okay. You win. See, look, I’m closing my eyes.” She closed her eyes and allowed him to lead her into the barn.

“Don’t open them yet.” He said turning back every few steps to make sure she wasn’t peeking. “No peeking.”

“They’re closed, they’re closed.” She smiled and continued to follow the tug of his hand. Finally he stopped her and stepped around behind her, putting both his hands on her shoulders.

“Okay, open them.”

Megan gasped as she opened her eyes. “Jesse Michael Whitman! We can’t afford this!”

“We already have.” He kissed her neck and pushed her forwards. “Go ahead, say hello.”

Megan looked at him in disbelief.

“Go on.” He smiled at the look on her face.

Megan approached the horse slowly. He was a beautiful gray with a silky flaxen mane and tail. His expressive eyes followed her movements as she lowered her hand for him to smell. The empty stall now had a plaque with his name engraved upon it. The saddle rack beside it was up and in the morning light the new saddle and bridle were gleaming black leather.

“He’ll jump six foot. I saw it myself.”

“Jess we can’t afford this.”

“Stop worrying about that. I’ve already paid for him.”

Megan ran her hand up the gelding's neck and down across his shoulder. He sniffed at her and shifted in place. "What's his name?"

"Mercury Silver," Jess said with a smile.

"He's beautiful." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the lips.

"Now you can show in the A circuit, like you should be."

"What about Dixie? She's going to be so jealous."

"Connie already said she'd come down and ride her with you when she has time. The baby's not going to be a baby forever." Jess smiled down at her as Megan continued to run her hands over the horse's back and withers.

"He's so beautiful. I don't deserve this." She glared at Jess.

"You deserve the moon and the stars. If I could reach those I'd give you those also."

"Jesse Whitman what made you so sweet?"

"You." He kissed her. When they parted they were both flushed and grinning.

"Now if only I could ride him. I hate to stick him out to pasture for three months." She took the currycomb he handed her and started to rub it over the horse's smooth silver-gray coat.

"You're the one who's so set about not riding. You could ride him right now for all I care. After all, he's your birthday present, you should be able to enjoy him on your birthday."

"Really? You wouldn't mind if I rode him?"

"Of course not!" He picked up the saddle and brought it to her. "I'd love to see how you two look together."

Together they saddled the gray gelding as he stood patiently for them. When he was saddled and his feet clean Jess gave Megan a leg up into the hunter saddle and held the gelding while she strapped the helmet on her head.

"I promise I'll take it easy."

"It's your birthday, you do what you want. Enjoy it." Jess gave the horse a pat on the rump as she walked him out of the barn and led him into the jumping ring she'd constructed for herself over the year.

"Come on now, put him through his paces." Jess called from where he leaned against the rail. He watched as Megan pushed her heels down and asked for a trot.

"Oh, he's wonderful Jess! He has the smoothest trot..." Megan called in delight. She took him around the ring several times.

"Let's see how you look at the canter," Jess called to her. She smiled at him as she leaned forwards and the horse lengthened his stride and transitioned into a well-collected canter, not too long and not too short. His breeding was impeccable. For the forty thousand dollars Jess had spent on him, he

better damn well be.

“Take him over a jump or two, just to get a feel of him.” Jess said as she slowed Mercury down until he was stopped in front of him.

“Don’t you think that’s a little too risky?”

“You want to jump him don’t you?” Jess asked raising a quizzical eyebrow.

“Of course!”

“Then why are you still standing here?”

Megan laughed as she urged the horse off again. The first jump looked as effortless as it was for both horse and rider. The second and the third were the same.

“Put it up Jess.” Megan called. “Let’s see what he can do.”

Jess ducked under the fence and went to the jump, raising it up to a good four foot that she was used to jumping on her smaller mare, Dixie. As soon as he was out of the way Megan cantered him around and then turned him for the jump. He took the fourth jump as effortlessly as the prior three.

“I told you he was a winner.” Jess said with a grin as she came around to jump again. Jess leaned his elbow against the fence and watched as she took the jump again and again.

“One more time.” She said as she saw Jess starting to get bored. She turned for the jump.

Jess nodded and shifted. The fence board under his elbow gave a crack and fell from the rail. Jess saw it all happen as if in slow motion. The horse spooked mid take-off. Mercury twisted and fell on the jump, tried to get up and spooked again as its own momentum and the impact its legs emitted a crack against jump poles and standard. All he could hear was Megan’s screams as the horse thrashed on top of her.

Jess didn’t even remember leaving his place along the rail, only that he was grabbing the horse’s reins and pulling it off of Megan with strength he never knew he had.

“Megan!” He shouldered the horse away from the destroyed jump and knelt as Megan continued to scream in terror.

“Megan! Megan are you all right?” There was blood everywhere, all over her pants and shirt.

“Oh god Jess! Help me!”

“Are you okay? Where are you bleeding?”

Megan’s screams broke into sobs. “The baby Jess! I’m loosing the baby!”

It took an eternity for the ambulance to arrive. The doctors said later it was too late from the moment the horse spooked and fell on top of her.

She was in the hospital all that week and several weeks after. She broke three ribs and her thighbone, but in the end it was the baby that saved her life.

“If you hadn’t been pregnant you wouldn’t have made it. The baby was all that protected your ribs from piercing your organs.” The doctor told her as he came to sign her release forms so she could go home that rainy fall day. Jess squeezed her hand where he sat beside her hospital bed. She’d been eerily quiet since the baby’s death and only talked when directly spoken to. She wouldn’t even look at the doctor; instead she turned her head away from both of them.

“Will she be able to have children again?” Jess asked and his voice cracked against his will. He swallowed to try and get rid of the thick feeling caught in the back of his throat.

“You’re both young and strong. The uterus wasn’t severely damaged. You shouldn’t have a problem having more children. Although, I suggest you wait a year or two before you consider trying again.”

“We weren’t trying the first time.” Jess muttered. “It just happened.” He felt young, far too young to have his own house and a fiancé who’d lost their first child.

“Yes, well I suggest you make a concerted effort that it doesn’t happen again until she’s fully recovered.” The doctor signed the release form and handed it to Jess. “You take good care of her, you hear?” The doctor ordered.

“Yeah, yeah I will.” Jess said.

The entire ride home she cried looking out her window. Jess let her cry; it was the first time she’d cried since they’d told her she’d lost the baby. Even when Connie and Greg, her mother, and their other friends came to visit her in the hospital she hadn’t shed a tear. Now she cried for all they’d lost. It was good that she was crying.

When they pulled up to the house she sat in the car, not ready to get out.

“Come on Megan, I’ll make you something to eat.” Jess hopped out of the car and came around to help her out.

“I’m not hungry.” She told him as he helped her out. She wouldn’t even look at him.

“You have to eat somethi—”

“What is he still doing here?” Her voice shook as she spotted the gray gelding grazing in the paddock across from the barn.

“He’s your horse Megan.”

“Get rid of him.”

“Wait a minute. Get rid of him? Are you serious?” Jess caught hold of her arm as she tried to move away from him.

“Didn’t you hear me? Get rid of him!” She spun and walked purposefully towards the house.

“Who in the *hell* in cattle country is going to buy a forty thousand dollar show jumping horse, Megan?” Jess screamed after her. The front door slammed in response. He was wasting his breath for his words were falling on deaf ears.

“Megan!” He called as he walked into the house. She stood slowly from the couch and headed for the stairs.

“Don’t you dare walk away from me Megan!” He followed her as she got to the second floor and then started for the third.

“You have to snap out of this. The baby is gone Megan. Getting rid of the horse isn’t going to bring our daughter back.” Jess caught the bedroom door as she tried to slam it in his face.

“It’s all your fault!” She screamed at him. “It’s all your fault you bastard!” She tried to hit at him but he caught her arm and held it still.

“That’s not fair. It was no one’s fault. If you want to blame it on anyone blame it on the God dammed horse!” Jess felt a splinter in his heart at her words. She blamed him for the accident and that cut deeper than any physical wound.

“Get away from me. I don’t want to look at you!” She screamed jerking her arm out of his hold and turning her back on him.

“We’re not getting rid of the horse Megan. You’re going to get better and you’re going to ride that damn animal! Do you hear me?”

Megan’s sobs filled the air. “I didn’t love her enough Jess. I didn’t love her enough. I’m never going near that animal ever again! I’d kill him myself before I ever touched him again!”

Jess swore and caught her in his arms as she cried. “I know you loved her Megan. Nothing you say will ever make me think any different. We’ll have other children. We’ll get a second chance. I swear to you we will.” Jess kissed her and she responded to his body. As they made love their tears mixed for the loss of their child.

Megan woke early the next morning. Her heart ached for the absence of life she’d felt in her stomach since that sunny afternoon on her birthday. She looked at Jess, sleeping so peacefully beside her, and her heart ached all over again.

In her mind she knew it was her fault, not his. That it would always be her fault. She hadn’t wanted this child like he had. She’d just turned twenty and was soon to be a mother and that scared her. It scared her like nothing ever had before. In her mind she knew she’d killed her own child. She hadn’t wanted it. She hadn’t wanted it when she got on Mercury’s back and the guilt she felt now that she’d lost it was worse then not wanting it.

But Jess, Jess had wanted this child. Jess had wanted it as much as she didn’t. Now it was gone. Megan turned away from him. She closed her eyes tight as the tears threatened to come. She could never live with herself knowing she’d killed their child, that she’d allowed herself to fall under the horse when he’d spooked. Slowly she got up and dressed. Her tears spilled down her cheeks as she placed her engagement ring on his dresser where he would see it.

When the cab arrived she got in and told herself she’d never come back. She could only imagine Jess’s reaction when he woke up and she was gone. Her heart broke at the look she knew would cross his face when he found her clothes and suitcase missing and her ring sitting on his dresser. She loved him enough to leave him for a better woman. A woman who would come along and pick up the pieces she’d never be able to mend—a woman who could give him a child.

Chapter Fifteen

“Mommy?” Dennis shook Megan by the shoulder. She winced and then slowly opened her eyes.

“Dennis? What’s wrong honey?”

“I thought I heard daddy.” He sat in her lap shaking.

Megan wrapped her arms around the little boy and held him close. “It’s okay Dennis, daddy isn’t here.” She paused. He wouldn’t think to look here would he? Her heart beat rapidly in her chest as she set Dennis aside and quickly got up.

“Stay here baby, okay? I’m gonna go talk to Jess.” She ruffled his hair and kissed his forehead. “When I get back I’ll make you breakfast. What do you think about that?”

Dennis nodded and curled up under her blankets where he started to doze off.

Megan padded down the stairs and into the kitchen. Jess stood in front of the coffee pot, drinking a cup of coffee and looking out the window. He already had his gloves on and sweat plastered the back of his shirt. Working always helped him think things through.

Megan stopped a few feet away from him and was surprised he hadn’t heard her come down. He only did that when he was lost in thought.

“Jess, I wanted to tell you—”

Jess turned, only it wasn’t Jess. Megan took a step backwards and bumped into the kitchen table.

“Hello honey.” Chris raised his coffee cup to her. “Like my hat? I rather like it myself.” He pulled at Jess’s cowboy hat with one hand. “I thought I might as well look the part when I came back to take you home.”

“What are you doing here Chris?” Megan asked, her voice shaking. Her face was still a mass of colored bruises and she ached all over from his assault the day before. There was no way in hell she was going back to him.

“You have the nerve to ask me that? After you left me... again. People at work are starting to wonder about your sanity darling. I may take their suggestions and admit you to a loony hospital. Then I’d be able to raise Dennis like a real man.”

“You’re never going to lay a hand on my son again.” Megan hissed, stepping back behind the kitchen table when he came forwards. That’s when she saw the gun and her eyes went wide in fear.

“We’ll see about that.” He tapped the gun to his temple. “I brought along insurance this time.” He smiled and his black eyes twinkled. “You’ll do what I tell you to from now on. You wouldn’t want that little bastard kid of yours to have an unfortunate accident one day now would you? You know how kids are with guns... they get curious; accidentally shoot themselves in the head when they’re looking down the barrel.” Chris grinned and took another step towards her as she took a step back.

“Chris, Dennis is your son.” Megan said as her whole body shook with fear.

“You never were good at lying, Megan.” Chris lunged for her.

Megan screamed and raced for the stairs. She took them two at a time as she heard Chris laughing down the steps behind her.

“Megan!” he called up after her. “I’ve already scoped this house out from top to bottom. I know the only way out is the first floor. These country bumpkins don’t even lock their doors when they leave the house. It’s really convenient.” His footsteps sounded as he came up the stairs behind her. They came faster and faster as she raced for the third floor.

Megan ran straight to the window seat. She pulled up the bottom of the seat, took the shotgun from its place and cocked it with a cuck-chick. When he pushed open the bedroom door he laughed at her and the double barrel shotgun leveled at his chest.

“Now, now honey. That won’t do you any good. It’s not loaded. Besides, last time he used that I was in his closet and he took the shells out after he nearly killed his cat.” He shook his gun at her.

“Stay away from me you bastard!” Megan cried as he took another step closer. “I swear to God I’ll shoot you!”

“You didn’t hear anything I said did you? Maybe I can knock some sense into you,” his eyes flashed with anger and he lunged for her.

The blast of the shotgun rattled her teeth and knocked her backwards. She sat down hard on the window seat and the windowpanes rattled behind her. Chris’s eyes went wide and his gun fell to the floor. He looked down at the bloody stain spreading across the front of his shirt in horror.

“You shot me you bitch!” He screamed and blood flew from his mouth as he lunged for her.

Megan screamed as he caught her throat and bashed her head into the window. Her vision went dark as he hit her head again and again and strangling her.

“You fucking bitch! I’ll kill you!” His screams sounded faint to her ears as her vision swam black and she clawed at his hands around her throat in effort to breathe.

And then she was pulling in air, gulping gasping breaths of air as his hands fell and her lungs struggled to replenish her oxygen supply before she completely fainted.

“Lousy son of a bitch.” Jess grumbled, letting the handgun fall back to the floor. “Good thing he’s got awful aim.” His eyes met Megan’s and glazed in pain.

“Took my goddamn hat also. What a creep.” Jess pulled the hat from his corpse and put it back on his head with a groan. His one hand was red where he had it pressed to his side.

“You okay?” He asked Megan who sat still dazed and trying to recover her breath.

She nodded.

“He even looks like me. No wonder everyone thinks Dennis is mine.” Jess winced as he came over beside Megan and took a seat.

Megan’s breath caught in her throat. She couldn’t tell him even if she wanted to, unless... Instead she painfully cleared her throat and said, “I guess we should call for an ambulance.”

Jess nodded. “As long as they get here before I bleed to death, sounds good to me.”

“Momma?!” Dennis’s voice shook with worry.

“I’m coming Dennis.” Megan stood and hurried downstairs to their son.

Epilogue

“We should get married some day.” Dennis said to Lauren as they sat on the pew together kicking their legs back and forth.

“Eww! No, that’s gross!” Lauren hit him on the shoulder and he rubbed at the spot until it stopped stinging.

“We’re gonna be like cousin’s now. We can’t get married.” Lauren said matter of factly.

“Cousins?”

“Yeah cousins. You know, where your mom is my mom’s sister. That would make us related.”

“Huh?” Dennis looked confused.

“Boys! They never understand!” Lauren crossed her arms over her chest and kicked her feet all the harder.

“Besides, I’m gonna marry Brian. He already asked me.” Lauren giggled and leaned forwards to wave at Brian. Brian blushed where he sat and his twin brothers started to tease him until their mother and father gave them all a stern glare.

“Shhh! Here they come!” Lauren said to Dennis. “Doesn’t she look pretty? I’m gonna wear a dress like that some day.”

“Why are their dresses different colors?”

“Because silly, one is the bride and one is a brides maid! Duh! They always wear different colored dresses.”

“Oh.” Dennis yawned. “I’m tired. Can we go riding when this is over?”

“Sure, but I get to ride Tonka!”

“Awe, you rode Tonka last time. It’s my turn.”

“All right, fine. I’ll ride Rusty. Ooh look, here comes the mushy part.” Lauren turned her attention back to the service and Dennis followed suit.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.” Jess smiled at the woman who stood in front of him. The crowd cheered when Jess lifted her veil and kissed her long and passionately on the lips.