

## The Door at the Top of the Stairs

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## Chapter One

The horse bunched against the back wall as the rope slashed across his flank. Joe stepped forward to whip him again, but before he had a chance, Morgan lifted him off his feet and threw him from the stall onto the cement floor of the barn. She followed him, jerked him to his feet, rammed him against the wall and wrapped her hand tight around his throat. "I'll kill you if you ever touch one of my animals again!" She threw him toward the door of the barn. "You're fired! Get out of my sight! *Now!*"

Joe pulled up his sleeve to show her a dark red welt on his forearm. "He bit me! What'd you expect me to do? 'Sides, you owe me money and I ain't leaving 'till I get my paycheck."

Morgan started for him, eyes on fire, fists ready.

Joe turned and hurried for the exit, a rat scurrying for his hole. Everyone knew Morgan's temper and he wanted no part of it. He looked over his shoulder as he pushed through the door. "Mail me my fuckin' check then! I quit!"

Morgan slowed and ran a hand through her salt and pepper hair. She watched the door slam shut, then returned to Rebel's stall. White lines striped his flank, and she brushed him with her hand, wiping away all evidence of Joe's brutality. She moved up to his neck and spoke quietly, gently stroking his muzzle and forehead.

Ryland, her partner for more than ten years, walked up and leaned against the stall gate. "So now what are you going to do? That's the second employee you've fired in the last two weeks. You can't take care of ten horses, thirty couple of hounds and run the farm with just two workers. You're fifty-seven years old."

Morgan had never been an easy employer. Over the last thirty years she'd exhausted the list of locals willing to work for her, and

itinerant workers tended to come in sporadic bursts. She continued to stroke Rebel and shrugged. "I'll do it if I have to until I can find somebody. The hunt staff'll help me if I get into a bind, and I've put out word I'm looking. Somebody'll come along."

Morgan rode as the Master of the Myrina Foxhunt Club and she had no doubt club members would pitch in if necessary. The tack room door was normally kept locked, but she pulled on the handle anyway as she and Ryland stepped past it out into the warm August evening and walked up the winding path that led to the main house. She slipped her arm around Ryland's shoulders. "How's the book coming?"

"It's coming. The publisher wants it done yesterday. I keep telling them they'll get it when it's finished." She grinned at Morgan. "You can imagine how well that goes over." Ryland had retired from psychotherapy five years earlier on her sixtieth birthday. With three controversial books on the New York Times Bestseller list, she couldn't finish them fast enough as far as her editor was concerned.

Dusk settled over the beechnut trees surrounding the farm, and as they neared their home, Morgan could barely make out the silhouette of a person leaning against the porch railing. As they walked closer, she realized she didn't recognize the woman, and hoped she wasn't there to sell horse equipment or magazines. "Can I help you?"

The woman pushed off the porch and crossed her arms. "Lady in town said you were hiring."

Morgan studied her. In her early to mid-twenties, she had short-cropped brown hair and a permanent scowl etched into her features. Morgan held out her hand. "I'm Morgan Davis."

The woman glanced at the hand, then back at Morgan. "Are you hiring or not?"

The color rose in Morgan's face. She lowered her hand and said in a quiet monotone, "If you think I'd—"

"Look Lady, it's a simple question: are you hiring or not?"

Morgan took a step closer. "You need a job?"

"It'd be stupid to ask if I didn't."

Morgan growled, "Then if you expect me to even *consider* hiring you, shake my goddamn hand and introduce yourself. Otherwise, take your surly ass off my property." She rested her hands on her hips and figured that'd be the end of it.

The woman surprised her by uncrossing one arm and holding out her hand, never breaking eye contact.

Morgan decided she'd be damned if she'd be the first to look away. She shook the woman's hand.

"Jesse."

"Jesse what?"

"Shaunessy."

"You ever work with horses before?"

The woman nodded.

"You have any references?"

She slowly shook her head.

"Look, I don't think—" Morgan stopped mid-sentence and frowned. Jesse had focused on Ryland who was standing nearby with an amused look on her face.

Ryland took Morgan's arm and propelled her toward the house. "Would you excuse us a minute, Jesse? We need to discuss something in private." The two women stepped into the house and Ryland closed the door behind them. She smiled at Morgan. "My dear, I think you have finally met your match."

"My match for what? I'm not hiring her. Are you crazy?" Morgan walked over to the window and looked out at the woman.

Ryland stepped up beside her. "In answer to your first question, she's the perfect match for your temperament. I have an idea she'll put up with your temper as long as you put up with hers. Besides, you really do need the help."

Morgan didn't deal well with problem employees. She'd always had a short fuse, and although Ryland had softened her over the last several years, she still expected her employees to at least exhibit a minimum amount of respect. "It wouldn't work, Ry. I think we'd end up killing each other."

Ryland shrugged. "The farm's your business and it's up to you, but I think you should give her a chance. She might surprise you."

"She wouldn't even shake my hand. That's just basic good manners."

Ryland grinned. "As long as the horses don't want to shake hands, I think you'll be all right."

Ryland's affectionate grin was contagious. Morgan smiled as she walked to the door, then hesitated. "All right, I'll give her a chance. But I reserve the right to say 'I told you so' when things go to hell in a hand basket, probably in the next five minutes." She pulled open the door, crossed the porch and headed for the barn, Jesse in her wake. Morgan didn't look back. "Minimum wage and you stay in a room we have set up in the barn for hired hands. You work six days a week. The workday starts at four-thirty in the morning and ends sometime in the evening."

When they reached the barn, Jesse's opinion of the farm rose several notches. The building looked turn of the century and had been fully restored to its original two-story design. The walls held a new coat of red paint with the trim a contrasting white. The four-sided hip roof sported new, brown shingles, and directly beneath the overhang, a double door opened onto a second-floor hay loft. Two large wagon doors took up most of the front of the lower half of the barn, but Morgan led her through a smaller service door directly to the left of the larger ones.

The inside impressed her even more. Twenty horse stalls flanked a center aisle, ten stalls on either side of the walkway. Cabinets hung on the front walls, and there wasn't a single tool out of place. Someone had painted the finished walls an eggshell white

with a trim of red along the bottom and around the doors. A ladder extended down from a trapdoor in the floor of the loft, and a railing of hand-turned newel posts protected careless employees from accidentally stepping over the edge.

Morgan took out a set of keys and opened the door into the one-person bunkhouse that took up most of the front left side of the barn. Jesse stepped inside and waited for Morgan to finish with her instructions. She had her doubts about working for this woman, but she needed the job and she preferred horses to humans any day of the week. The bunkhouse was small: one room with a single bed, a small bathroom and closet, a refrigerator, and a microwave. It was all she needed.

She sized up her new boss as she watched her remove a key from the ring. The woman was a strong 5'9", with sinewy arms and legs and a not-too-pretty face. Gray liberally sprinkled her dark, short-cut hair and the sun had done its work on her tanned, weatherworn face, an interesting contrast to the feminine silver studs in her ears. The calluses on her hands had obviously been built up through years of hard physical labor, but her nails were neatly trimmed with a coat of clear nail polish. Jesse tuned back in as Morgan handed her the key and continued with the rules.

"No smoking anywhere on the farm. You want to smoke, you go out in the road to do it. You'll be taking care of the horses, feeding 'em and cleaning the stalls twice a day. In between, you'll be grooming, oiling tack, cleaning the barn, and working in the fields as necessary. There are two other workers who work the farm and help with the hounds and the foxhunting. Any questions?"

Jesse turned away and walked over to the only window in the room. She didn't have any questions and wanted Morgan to leave so she could settle in.

Morgan waited for an answer. When none came, she reined in her temper. "Look Jesse, there are some basic things I expect from

my employees, and it's only fair to you that we go over them. First, if I ask you a question, I expect an answer."

Jesse turned and glared at Morgan. "I heard you. I don't have any questions."

The muscles in Morgan's jaws rippled at the girl's surly tone. She regretted hiring her already. "Second, when you speak to me or to Dr. Caldwell, you will refer to us as Ma'am. Yes Ma'am or no Ma'am."

"I reserve Ma'am for people I respect."

Morgan crossed the room in two steps. "You listen to me, and you listen good. You push one more time—just once—and you're out of here. You give me any excuse, and I'll throw you out on your butt so fast you won't know how you got there. Now let's try this again. Do you have any questions?"

Jesse broke eye contact and looked out the window. Her pulse pounded in her ears and she wanted to shove this woman against the wall and be done with her, but all the jobs she'd been fired from in the last year came to mind. She needed to stay in one place so she could get her head together. She snapped back, "No."

Morgan held her position longer than necessary, intending to make her point. When Jesse didn't move or say anything more, Morgan stalked out the door and back up to the house. Ryland was sitting in the living room when Morgan strode in and slammed the door. As Morgan headed for the kitchen, she said over her shoulder, "If I kill her, it'll be your fault!" She pushed through the swinging door and Ryland smiled as she continued with her evening reading.

At four-thirty the next morning, Jesse was waiting near the entrance to the barn. Morgan walked up and picked up a strand of bailing wire lying on the ground. "You see trash like this, you pick it up. I keep this place immaculate, and I expect my employees to do the same." She walked into the barn and threw the wire into a barrel next to the door.

*Good morning to you, too*, Jesse thought as she followed her into the barn.

Morgan turned to her, hands on her hips. "I'm glad to see you can get up on time. You'd be amazed at how many people want work but can't seem to be here by four-thirty." When Jesse didn't respond, Morgan sighed. "Look, we got off on the wrong foot yesterday. Just follow me around this morning and if you have any questions, ask."

Morgan showed her a book listing the feed portions for each horse, whether a horse needed medicine or veterinary care, and whether the stable hand noticed anything Morgan needed to check. She introduced her to each horse, describing their individual temperaments and warning about biters or kickers. "Now, I don't care if a horse bites you or kicks you. If you *ever* lose your temper with any of the animals on this farm, I'll take your head off, then I'll bodily throw you out into the middle of the road and drop kick your head out to you. Got it?" She smiled to soften her words, but she intended to get her point across.

Jesse remained silent.

Morgan nodded and stepped away. "All right then. I need to go work with the hounds. I expect you to groom each horse every day and check for injuries or sores. When you're finished with that, you can start oiling the tack." She walked over to the tack room and unlocked the door, then turned back around. "Oh, and at ten o'clock, you need to have two horses saddled—different horses every day." Jesse's continued silence irritated her. She ran a hand through her hair and left, happy to leave this surly woman to her job and move on to her hounds.

That suited Jesse just fine. Working alone was a panacea, a time to relax and be herself. She felt on edge around people, waiting for them to do or say something stupid, expecting her to react. A lot of the time lately, they seemed to actually want her to

react, baiting or pushing her too far until she lost it and took her anger out on them with her fists.

She didn't understand the changes in her life. People had always called her the life of the party. Bar hopping and barbecues had been standard weekend activities. Over the last year, she'd warped into someone she didn't recognize. Now, whenever someone spoke to her, anger boiled to the point where she had little or no control. She'd been fired from six farms in twelve months, each stay shorter than the last. Her emotional control slipped more and more each day, and she was desperately trying to hold on to the last bit of sanity she had left. She needed this job, and would put up with Morgan's temper long enough to figure things out.

Morgan returned at six that evening, and they repeated everything they'd done in the morning. Both of them worked in silence, neither having anything to say to the other. When they finished an hour and a half later, Morgan put away the last of the vitamins. "Tomorrow you'll start without me. Cody, Rico, and I will be working with the hounds. If you have any questions, ask me now."

Jesse didn't, so she waited silently, knowing it would irritate the woman.

Morgan raised her hands and walked out of the barn. "Fine, you're done for the day and I'm out of here."

Jesse smiled and went into her room. Over the next few days, she enjoyed working the long, lonely hours. She saw Morgan only sporadically throughout the week since Morgan spent most of her time working the hounds, exercising horses, tending crops or handling Hunt Club business. Toward the end of the week, after she'd finished measuring some oats and vitamins into a bucket, she heard someone come into the barn. She grabbed the bucket off the wooden feed table and headed for Kanab's stall, wanting to finish with the night's feeding and turn in.

Morgan's voice stopped her before she'd walked half way down the aisle. "John Steinland stopped me in the feed store today. He said you told him to piss off."

Jesse stood with her back to Morgan and waited impatiently. What she'd said to the asshole wasn't anybody's business but hers.

"Did you?"

Jesse looked halfway over her shoulder. "It's none of your damn business what I say to anybody."

Morgan growled, "Don't keep your back to me when I talk to you."

Jesse slowly turned and glared, barely holding her temper.

Morgan met her stare. She'd be damned if she'd let an employee challenge her. "I'm done playing games, Jesse. You have two choices: either you play by my rules, or you get out. Make up your mind. Now."

"You—" Jesse's eyes flashed as she stopped herself from biting Morgan's head off. How badly did she want this job? That was easy. She needed it, period. She spat out her words as though they were distasteful. "I'll stay."

Morgan waited for Jesse to break eye contact, and when she did, said, "You're still my employee when you go to town. You will treat everyone you meet with respect, I don't care what they say to you. If you can't do that, you need to pack and leave."

Jesse hesitated, then snarled through clenched teeth, "Fine."

Morgan didn't take her eyes from Jesse's, and Jesse stared at the floor. They stayed like that for a long time, Morgan wanting to fire her and Jesse hoping she wouldn't. After several long moments, Morgan turned and walked out.

Jesse watched her go, wondering again why she still had a job. She reached down and picked up the bucket and finished with her evening duties, thinking about Morgan's temper and trying to sort out her feelings about working for a woman with such a short fuse.

## Chapter Two

A few days later, Ryland walked down to the barn and perched on a stool while Jesse cleaned some tack. Jesse'd liked her from the first day she'd asked about the job. She methodically oiled a leather strap while she waited to find out what Ryland wanted.

To Jesse, Ryland was a handsome woman, with professionally styled blonde hair, manicured nails, and an air about her that exuded confidence and acceptance. She stood about 5'4", had some muscle tone, but obviously preferred working indoors to out. Jesse knew Ryland rode horses with Morgan every morning, and wondered whether she enjoyed any other types of outdoor activities. When Ryland didn't say anything, Jesse glanced up. "You need somethin'?"

Ryland leaned back on the stool and laced her fingers around one knee. Jesse wasn't angry with her, she knew that, but anger shot out of the woman involuntarily and her question had come out clipped and rude. "Not really. I'm just taking a break from the computer. I thought I'd come see how everything's going down here."

Jesse nodded and continued to oil the leather.

She intrigued Ryland, who'd spent a lifetime studying people. "So tell me Jesse, where does your family live? Where do you come from?"

Jesse flexed the muscles in her jaw and silently continued working on the saddle.

*Next topic*, Ryland thought. She sat forward and tried again. "What do you do for fun...when you're not working, I mean?"

Jesse dropped the piece of leather she'd been cleaning and reached for the can of Neatsfoot oil. "If you're trying to make polite conversation, you should probably find someone else, 'cause I'm not interested." Jesse looked up expecting an angry retort, and

was surprised to see an amused twinkle in the woman's sapphire-blue eyes.

Ryland leaned back again. "You know, you remind me of someone I once knew. The thought of actually having a friend or caring about someone else absolutely terrified her."

"You playing psychologist now?" Jesse immediately regretted her words. Why did she say things to drive people away? Annoyed with herself, she put the oil away and carried the saddle into the tack room. She felt the other woman's gaze on her as she grabbed the rake and headed for the stall farthest away from Ryland. By the time she'd finished, Ryland had gone back to the house. Jesse worked on the evening chores, then headed for bed.

### Chapter Three

"She's a good worker. I just wish she didn't have the personality of a nest of vipers." Morgan reached for another dish to dry and put away. Ryland stood at the sink, elbow deep in soapy water, scrubbing the remains of a baked chicken off a baking pan.

Morgan laughed. "Did I tell you she told John Steinland to piss off? I actually dread going into my own barn if she's there because she brings out the worst in me. She pushes me almost to the edge, then backs down. I don't know why you talked me into hiring her in the first place. She doesn't belong here."

"She belongs here more than that Cody kid. I don't trust that boy, Morg, and I hope you don't either." Morgan had hired Cody Maitland as a favor to his father after Cody dropped out of college in his third year. Ryland set the pan on the counter ready to be dried and used a hand towel to wipe her hands. "Have you tried talking to her? Maybe even being nice for a change?"

Morgan picked up the pan and ran the dish towel over it. "Sure I've tried. Either she doesn't answer or she snarls like a feral dog. I feel like if I give an inch, she'll run right over me."

Ryland put her hand on Morgan's arm. "She has a strong personality, Morgan, but you're stronger. I've been watching her. It seems to me she needs you to be stronger for some reason. She pushes you to reassure herself that you're in control because I get the feeling her life is totally out of control."

They finished the dishes and carried a bottle of Chenin Blanc into the living room. Ryland poured two glasses and handed one to Morgan as they settled on the couch.

Morgan took a sip. "I don't see how her life is out of control. I think she's too controlled; she needs to loosen up."

Ryland lightly ran her fingers up Morgan's arm. "I think if she loosens up without professional help, she'll come apart at the seams. She's barely holding it together, my love, and she's subconsciously using you as a way to do just that."

Morgan put her head on the back of the sofa. "Great, that's all I need is a nutcase attaching herself to me."

Ryland snuggled closer while she quietly thought about Jesse and sipped her wine. "She's not crazy, Morgan, she's damaged somehow. There's a difference."

Morgan sighed and started to get up to get a slice of apple pie from the kitchen. Ryland pulled her back down, playfully nibbling her ear. "Such a big sigh, Morg. I thought you only sighed when I did this." She ran her tongue around Morgan's ear, then slowly circled her way to the center.

Morgan closed her eyes and sighed again, waves of pleasure coursing through her body. She stood and picked up Ryland, carrying her to the bedroom and kicking the door shut behind them. "Apple pie can wait."

An hour later, all thoughts of Jesse had been wiped from Morgan's mind. She lay with Ryland's head pillowed on her chest, lightly dozing and enjoying the cool breeze wafting through their bedroom window. Nothing mattered more to her than the woman

lying in her arms. Easing farther down in the bed, she drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

It took about two weeks, but Jesse started to fall into a comfortable routine. She kept out of Morgan's way, and Morgan tended to keep out of hers. On this particular day, Jesse had finished her chores for the afternoon and was combing and braiding Kanab's tail. The work numbed her mind and she'd let her attention drift to what she needed to get done that evening.

Cody came into the barn and leaned against the door to the stall. "So, the dykes hired one of their own, huh?"

The voice had the distinctive Midwestern twang of one of the other two hired hands. She didn't jump to the bait. She'd heard Cody sucking up to Morgan, and knew exactly what type of asswipe he was. He watched her for a minute, then said, "How are the threesomes after work? I bet they're enjoying their fresh meat."

Jesse glared at him. His curly brown hair, haughty eyes, and girlish lips reminded her of statues she'd seen of Roman Emperors. She took a step forward, intending to knock the smirk off his pretty boy face.

Before she had a chance, Morgan walked into the barn. "Cody, we need to get Lucky out of her pen and re-bandage that cut on her left front leg. Can you do that for me?"

Cody walked away from the stall. "Sure thing, Ms. Davis. I'd planned to do that next. I was just taking a minute to welcome the new hired hand to the farm."

Morgan took down the barn notebook and leafed through the pages. "Jesse."

Jesse had returned to braiding and said irritably, "What?" When Morgan didn't answer, she stuck her head out the stall door.

Morgan was leaning against the supply table, arms crossed, eyes riveted on Jesse, who waited for her to say something. Morgan kept her voice neutral. "When I call you, either come to

where I am or tell me why you can't. An employee does not shout 'what' to her employer."

Jesse shook her head and shut the stall door behind her. She walked over and mirrored Morgan, arms crossed and waiting.

Morgan opened the notebook and pointed to an entry. "You said Comstock has an abscess on his chest. Show it to me, please."

They walked to Comstock's stall where the bay horse waited for them with his head draped over the gate. He stood patiently while Jesse put the halter on, then ran her hand along his chest between his muscular front legs. When she found the abscess, she nodded toward her hand with her chin.

Morgan reached down to feel the swelling. "That's not an abscess, it's actually something called a Seroma. Do you want to learn how to drain one of these?"

"I know how to drain one."

Morgan knelt down so she could see the swelling from a better angle. "If you know how to drain it, why didn't you?" When Jesse didn't answer, she stood up and looked at her.

Jesse waited by the stall door, her perpetual glare locked into place.

Morgan rested her hand on Comstock's neck. "Did you think I'd yell at you for mucking around with medical stuff?"

Jesse shifted, but never lowered her eyes.

Morgan bent down again and studied the wound. "Well, you're right, I probably would have. Next time, if you know how to do an easy medical procedure, just do it and note it in the book. But don't do anything if you don't know how. I'd rather you ask than make a mistake. Now go get a bucket of warm, soapy water, a cloth, some clippers and a syringe."

All the specialized equipment was kept in the medical closet. Jesse brought what Morgan wanted and some extras she thought might be needed. Morgan stepped away from Comstock and

motioned for her to work on the wound. "Go ahead. I want to see how much you know."

Jesse set down the bucket and dropped the washcloth into the soapy water. She took out some cordless clippers, shaved around the swelling and washed the fluid filled area thoroughly with the wet cloth. She picked up a 50cc syringe and attached a 10-gauge needle. Comstock stood quietly as she inserted the needle and drew out the infection. She removed the syringe, left the needle in the wound, and injected a saline solution from a second syringe.

When she finished, she cleaned the area again, then stood up and grabbed the bucket. "I'll do him again over the next few days and see how he does. It looks a little infected, but not too bad." She didn't wait for a reply, but turned and took all the equipment out of the stall.

Morgan pulled off Comstock's halter. She needed to go check Lucky, and she slapped Jesse on the back on her way out of the barn. "Good job."

Jesse stared after her as she set down the bucket, surprised at the compliment. Her mood lifted slightly as she took a minute to replace everything she'd brought out. Once she'd finished, she took the notebook down from the shelf and wrote a reminder to Morgan to pick up some more saline solution the next time she went to town.

The clock above the workbench yipped four times, and she glanced up and shook her head. Larger than a standard clock, it boasted a red fox standing on his hind legs, pointing to the numbers with his paws and yipping the hours. Morgan had ordered it from a catalogue. When she'd put it up a few days ago, she'd told Jesse that if she'd learn to listen to the foxes, they'd teach her all of their mysterious secrets. Jesse had rolled her eyes at the time, but as she looked at the clock now, she realized the little guy did make her feel better whenever she heard him announcing the time.

Four o'clock had snuck up on her. She'd worked steadily since four-thirty that morning and she decided a break might help her relax. A series of headaches had plagued her the last few days, each one progressively worse until last night she'd writhed on her bed in agony, expecting her head to explode. She reached up and massaged her neck, rolling her head around on tired shoulders. Fair weather always brightened her day, so she walked out to the front of the barn to sit on a bale of hay, hoping the sunshine would lift her mood.

Beautiful, one-hundred year old Beechnut trees hid the main house from the barn, their canopy of leaves wearing the characteristic bronze gold of late summer. Jesse liked the feeling of being walled in by the huge trees, and she preferred this side of the barn to the back, which opened up onto green, rolling pastures. A winding path led from the barn to the house, and benches had been placed in strategic locations where people could stop to enjoy the view.

Jesse's thoughts wandered to the two-story farmhouse where Morgan and Ryland lived. The farmer who'd built the barn had probably built the house during the same time period. The home could comfortably house a medium-sized farm family, yet it wasn't so big that building it and keeping it would overburden the family finances. The raised porch wrapped around all four sides, with hand-turned Newell posts giving the place a personal touch not often seen on more modern homes. As Jesse absently gazed up the pathway, Ryland walked around one of the bends and called hello when she saw her sitting out front. Jesse acknowledged the greeting with a slight nod of her head.

Ryland took a seat next to her and stretched out her legs. "So, are you getting a feel for the place?"

Jesse pulled out stalks of hay and absently broke them into smaller pieces. "Yeah."

"You have a day off coming up pretty soon. Do you have any plans?" Ryland knew Jesse had stayed in her room on her previous day off, and thought she'd encourage her to get out a little.

"No Ma'am."

*Ma'am?* A chip of the ice had just come off the iceberg. "Do you like to read?"

Jesse nodded.

"The town has a surprisingly good library. I'd be glad to drop you off sometime." Ryland picked up a hay stalk and began running it through her fingers while she listened to the wind rustling through the leaves in the trees. A raven pinched a beechnut and tossed it through the air, diving on it as it hit the ground, only to toss it away again.

Jesse watched the sleek bird play for a while, then shrugged. "Thanks, but if I go, I can get there myself."

Ryland turned so she could look directly at Jesse's face. Black half-circles colored the skin beneath her bloodshot eyes, and the sadness she saw brought back memories of patients she'd worked with over the years. "Jesse, is everything all right? You look exhausted."

Jesse shifted on the hay bale, wanting to tell her about the headaches, but hearing herself say instead, "I'm fine, just not sleeping very well."

"Well, if something's bothering you, I'm a very good listener."

Morgan came around the corner and saved Jesse from answering. She stopped a minute to talk to Ryland. "Hi there. What brings you down this way?"

Ryland stood up and gave her a peck on the cheek. "I just came to remind you of the town hall meeting at five-thirty. You have just enough time to shower and change." Morgan glanced at her watch as the two of them started toward the house, but before they'd gone very far, Ryland glanced back over her shoulder. "It was good talking to you, Jesse. And don't forget the library."

Jesse watched them go, then went back inside to finish her work. She'd forgotten she had a day off coming up. Maybe she should go into town, get a good meal for a change, possibly even grab a few books from the library to satisfy Ryland.

#### Chapter Four

When the day arrived, Jesse fed the horses their breakfast, then hitchhiked into town. A local café with a purple neon sign shouting *Smokey Joe's* in oversized letters caught her eye. The interior sported typical small-town décor with purple, backless stools in front of the counter and pink Naugahyde booths lined up against the front windows. Jesse sat in a booth and pulled the one-page menu from between the napkin holder and the salt and pepper shakers.

The waitress stood ready to take her order. The woman, who wasn't much older than Jesse, wore a nametag with *Frieda* written in bright purple letters. Her sunny smile radiated warmth and good cheer, and she greeted Jesse like she'd known her their entire lives. "Well, good mornin'! Welcome to Joe's. What can I get for you today?"

"BLT with fries and a Coke."

"You got it." Frieda yelled the order back to the cook who nodded and disappeared from the serving window. Frieda walked around talking to all her customers, filling coffee cups, then making a second round to fill water glasses. Two men sat at the counter, drinking coffee and soaking slices of bread in fried eggs. One glanced over his shoulder to stare at Jesse, then elbowed his buddy who turned to say something Jesse couldn't hear.

Frieda slapped him on the head as she passed and Jesse heard her tell them to mind their own business. She picked up a plate from the window and walked back to Jesse's table. "Don't you mind them. They've got no manners, like they was raised up in a

pigsty. You're new in town. You just visitin' or you plannin' to stay?"

Jesse took a bite of her sandwich. "Don't know yet."

"How's the sandwich?"

"Fine."

"Where you from?"

"Around."

Frieda lay the bill on the table. "You always talk so much?"

"I rarely talk this much."

The woman smiled, then left to help another customer while Jesse finished her meal in silence. When she paid the bill, she left a hefty tip before walking out onto the street.

The town centered around one main street, with businesses lining both sides and houses stretching out and away from the town proper. She'd started down the graying, cracked sidewalk to find the library when blinking signs in the window of the local bar caught her attention. A cold beer on a warm day always appealed to her, so she opened the door and stepped inside.

The lighting flickered a dim yellow and her eyes took a minute to adjust as she made her way to the back to find a seat. She took an empty table where she could sit with her back up against the wall and watch the other patrons drink their beer or play pool in the corner of the room. The bartender ambled over and took her order. The place could have been a saloon in any town Jesse had ever lived in. Most of the tables were small and crammed together in the middle of the room to make space for two pool tables at the back. The bartender dodged the scattered tables and returned with her beer while Jesse read the various beer advertisements hanging from the walls and ceiling and admired the nearly naked women gazing out from posters placed strategically around the room.

An argument at another table caught her attention. Two men shouted over a game of cards while a third watched hungrily, obviously hoping for a fight. The room quieted as the smaller of

the three stood up and threw his cards at the man he'd accused of cheating.

When the accused stood, Jesse sized him up. He was close to 6'5", easily weighing two hundred fifty pounds. Strange-shaped fish lips stuck out of a bushy beard that hung almost to his chest, and the tattoos covering his arms emphasized solid muscle as they rippled under his shirt.

She turned her attention to the smaller man, who stood maybe 5'4" if he stretched his neck as high as it would go. He was obviously a strong little guy, his shirt stretching tight across a barrel chest.

The short one looked around, then picked up his chair and rammed full force into the other. Both of them went sailing backward onto a nearby table, sending beer bottles flying and people scrambling to get out of their way. Jesse smiled at the little guy's bravado until the third man jumped in and held the short one in a head lock. Her philosophy had always been to let people fight their own battles, but the odds had just turned against the little guy, and that pissed her off.

She slugged down some beer and wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve. When the big man hauled back ready to ram his fist into the smaller one's face, Jesse ran forward, leapt onto a table and threw herself on him, grabbing his head in an arm lock and using her momentum to drag him down to the ground.

Morgan, meanwhile, was standing across the street talking with the sheriff about the fixture for the first hunt. She had no idea Jesse was even in town until she looked up and saw her flying through the plate glass window at Harley's Bar. She watched Jesse shake her head, jump onto the windowsill and throw herself back inside the bar.

"Shit! I'm gonna kill her." Morgan sprinted across the street, running into the bar just in time to see Jesse punch Jimbo Jenkins

while two other men grappled nearby. Men and women ringed the fighters and cheered loudly each time someone landed a good punch. One man collected quick bets while his girlfriend wrote shouted orders from the people around the circle.

Morgan yelled at the sheriff who had followed her into the bar, "I'll get the woman! The rest are yours." As Morgan pushed her way through the onlookers, Jesse took a punch in the eye that sent her staggering back. Morgan grabbed Jesse's shirt, slipped an arm around her neck and pulled her through the crowd toward the back of the room.

Jesse, thinking someone new had joined the fight, reached up with both hands and grabbed her assailant's hair intending to throw them over her back.

Morgan lowered her center of gravity, tightened the headlock and yelled in Jesse's ear, "Goddamn it, Jesse, let go of my hair!"

When she heard Morgan's voice, Jesse immediately let go and stopped fighting. Morgan kept her neck locked in the crook of her elbow, waiting for the sheriff to break up the other fighters. Once everyone separated, Morgan let go of the full arm lock but held on to the back of Jesse's shirt to keep her under control.

The sheriff picked his cowboy hat up off the floor and asked the general assembly, "Okay, who's gonna tell me what happened?" Everyone found something else to look at, so the sheriff scratched his balding head and pointed to the bartender. "Andy, suppose you tell me what started this whole mess."

Andy came out from behind the bar and righted a chair, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he spoke. "Well, Hank accused Tom of cheating so they got into a fight. Jimbo decided Tom couldn't handle Hank alone." The room broke into laughter since Tom was twice the size of Hank. "Once she saw the fight was unfair..." He looked around and then pointed toward Jesse. "That lady there jumped in to even things up. She did too." There were general nods of agreement around the room.

The sheriff settled his cowboy hat on his head. "All right then. Andy, do you want to press charges for disorderly conduct or criminal damage?"

Andy shook his head. "Hell no. I just want to know who's gonna pay for my window."

The sheriff looked over his shoulder at the broken glass. "Who threw her through it?"

Tom raised a beefy hand. "I did."

The sheriff nodded. "Then you'll pay for the window. Now, do any of you men want to press charges against anybody else?"

They all shook their heads. The sheriff looked at Jesse. "Ma'am, do you want to press charges against any of these men?"

Jesse shook her head.

The sheriff pointed to some men. "All right then, you boys get this place cleaned up. Morgan, my thanks, and the two of you are free to go."

Morgan seethed as she hauled Jesse out onto the sidewalk and shoved her toward the truck. "Get your ass in that truck and wait there until I'm done with my business."

Jesse caught her balance and stopped in the middle of street, glaring back at Morgan.

The low growl in Morgan's voice left no doubt about her intentions. "Don't push it, Jesse."

Jesse waited a few beats, pushing Morgan as far as she dared, then turned toward the truck.

Once Jesse climbed into the bed, Morgan went back to the feed store to pay her bill. Rows of vet supplies, dog bones, fly spray and worming medicine lined the center of the store. She walked up and down each aisle to give herself time to calm down. If Jesse hadn't started for the truck, Morgan had intended to flatten her right there in the street. When she'd sufficiently gotten her anger under control, she paid the cashier and walked back out to the truck. "Get in the cab."

Jesse hesitated, then jumped over the side of the truck and got in the passenger seat. She slumped down and stared out the passenger window. They drove to the farm in silence, Morgan angrily tapping her fingers against the steering wheel and Jesse wondering whether she still had a job. They pulled up to the house and Morgan shoved in the emergency brake. Without saying a word, she walked around to the passenger side to wait for Jesse to get out, then moved in so close that Jesse backed up against the truck to give herself room.

"When you work for this farm, everything you do reflects on my standing in the community. I've already warned you about that. Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes Ma'am." Jesse knew she was about to be fired, and held onto the smallest hope that she'd keep her job if she played by Morgan's rules. Her eyes focused on a spot on Morgan's right shoulder while she waited for the hammer to fall.

"Since you can't stay out of bars and fights, you can pack your things and get out of here. I've worked too long and too hard to build a solid reputation in this community without you coming along and destroying it." She stepped back, waiting for Jesse to leave.

Jesse stood there, hands at her sides, staring at the ground.

Morgan pointed toward the gate. "Go."

Jesse didn't move.

Ryland stood on the porch listening. She walked out to the truck, put her arm around Morgan's waist and said quietly, "Jesse, why don't you go on down to the apartment. We'll be down in a little while."

When Morgan opened her mouth to object, Ryland pinched her waist. Morgan pursed her lips and watched as Jesse walked toward the barn. She turned to Ryland and pointed back toward the path, her face red, her eyebrows pulled down so far it was a wonder she could still see. "I'll be damned if—"

Ryland held up her hand, guided Morgan into the house and shut the door. She walked over to an overstuffed chair and sat, waiting patiently while Morgan went to another chair and angrily lowered herself into it. They sat quietly until Morgan took a deep breath. "All right, I'm fine now. Say what you want to say."

Ryland waited. She hadn't lived with Morgan for ten years without learning patience.

Morgan started in. "I had to pull her out of the middle of a bar fight today. She pulled my hair and practically threw me over her shoulder, then challenged me when I told her to get in the truck. I've had it with your experiment, Ryland. I want her out of here!"

"Why was she in the fight?"

"Jimbo and Tom ganged up on Hank and she thought it was her job to even up the odds."

Ryland nodded, but didn't say anything. It was always better to let Morgan figure things out for herself. After a little while she asked, "Why did she almost throw you over her shoulder?"

"I grabbed her in a head lock to get her out of the fight."

"From behind?"

"Yes, from behind!" She glared at Ryland because she knew exactly what she was getting at. "Okay, she didn't know it was me, and when she heard my voice, she stopped fighting." Morgan tried to stay angry, but as she listened to herself she felt a little foolish. "Fine...okay, fine...she can stay, but you go tell her. I don't want to deal with her anymore today."

Ryland walked into the kitchen and opened the freezer. She took out an ice pack, returned, and handed it to Morgan. "It looked like she was starting a nice black eye. You might want to take this down with you."

Morgan grabbed the ice pack and headed out the door. Sometimes she wished Ryland didn't know her as well as she did. When she reached the barn, Jesse was sitting outside with her back

up against the wall. Morgan tossed the ice pack at her. "Here. Put this on your eye."

Jesse set the pack beside her. "I don't need it."

Morgan focused on the roof of the barn. "Why do you have to argue with everything I say?"

Dejection sounded in her voice as Jesse picked up the ice pack and held it to her eye. "I don't know."

Morgan studied her, then turned and sat on the ground with her back against the barn, legs drawn up, arms resting on her knees.

Jesse put her head against the barn and closed her eyes. "I don't know why I do a lot of things."

Morgan picked up a stone and flicked it toward some ants that were crawling around a dead bug. "I lost my temper today. I was wrong to fire you."

"No you weren't. You never should have hired me in the first place."

Morgan laughed. "Well, at least we agree on one thing." For the first time since she'd known her, Morgan actually saw Jesse smile. Not a big smile, but enough to grab onto. "Look, neither of us is perfect. I'll try to lighten up on you if you try to play by my rules. Deal?" She held out her hand to Jesse who looked at it but didn't take it right away. Playing by other people's rules had never been easy for her. She slowly raised her hand and clasped Morgan's in a strong handshake. It wouldn't kill her to try.

Morgan watched as Jesse leaned her head back against the barn and closed her eyes again. There would always be unhappy people in the world, and she'd had her share of surly employees, but she'd never kept one for more than a few days because their egos usually couldn't keep up with her temper. She pushed herself to her feet, brushing the dirt from the back of her pants.

"Tomorrow 's the first day of cubbing. That means we take the young hounds out and teach them to hunt. My hunt staff will be

here, and a couple of people from the club. I'll need Aristotle and Barney saddled by six-thirty. Then you'll need to help everyone else with their tack or whatever they need done."

Jesse didn't move.

Morgan shook her head as she turned to walk back to the house. She didn't know how long she could last, but she trusted Ryland and would give Jesse the benefit of the doubt for as long as possible.

## **Chapter Five**

The first day of cubbing arrived with hectic, last-minute details and frenzied questions from her hunt staff. Morgan loved every minute of it. Cubbing was a time to introduce the younger hounds and foxes to hunting, and it took several outings to iron out the details after a long summer break.

Once all the initial problems had been seen to and she was ready to call for the hounds, she looked up to see Jesse helping one of the club members into his saddle. Bear, one of the dogs who hung around the barn, stood next to Jesse, and Morgan realized she'd forgotten to tell her to kennel him. "Jesse, would you come here a minute, please?"

Jesse finished helping the man adjust his saddle before starting over. While she waited, Morgan tucked her hunting whip under her arm and ran her fingers through Aristotle's coarse mane. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jesse start her way, then stop abruptly. Morgan looked down to see what was wrong.

Jesse's face went from tan to pale to ghost white in a matter of seconds. She stared at Morgan's whip and backed up, finally turning as if to run. Directly behind her, Andy, one of the whippers-in, had just let down his whip and was recoiling it into a tighter loop. Jesse started back again, tripped over Bear and fell backward into the dirt. She scrambled up and pushed through the

horses before disappearing around the side of the barn. Morgan saw Ryland dismount and quickly followed suit, catching up to her just as she reached the corner of the barn.

Ryland stopped her before they went any further. "I don't know what happened, but leave your whip here. I think that's what set her off."

Morgan dropped the whip onto a bale of hay and climbed over the bale, Ryland close on her heels. They found Jesse squatting with her back up against the barn, her head on her knees. Ryland knelt beside her. "Hey, what's wrong?"

When Jesse looked up, Ryland was startled to see sweat beading her forehead. "Nothing. I...I just needed some fresh air, that's all. Too many people."

Ryland didn't buy that for a second. "Jesse, what happened back there? Why did you run away?"

"I didn't run away. Get the fuck away from me!" She pushed herself to a standing position, shoved past Morgan and hopped onto the bale of hay to get away. The second she saw the whip coiled between her feet, an electric shock surged from her head straight down through her heart and everything went black. Morgan grabbed her before she hit the ground. She'd fallen face first, and when Morgan moved to turn her over, she felt Ryland's hand on her shoulder.

"Wait." Ryland stared at the lower part of Jesse's back where her t-shirt had come un-tucked. Morgan followed her gaze and saw a strange pattern of scars crisscrossing the exposed skin on the girl's back. She lowered her the rest of the way to the ground and watched as Ryland checked to make sure she was still unconscious and that no one else was around. When Ryland reached over and gently lifted the shirt, Morgan felt her skin go cold. "Holy Mother of Jesus."

Deep scars and patterns of burn marks covered every inch of Jesse's back. Ryland softly traced one of the scars before lowering

the t-shirt. The two women stared at each other, too horrified at what they'd seen to speak. The sound of an excited hound jerked Morgan out of her trance and she called for Rico to come carry Jesse into her room.

Rico hopped the bale and stared at Jesse lying on the ground. He knelt beside her and looked up at Morgan. "She okay? Good?" He normally spoke Spanish, and his English often came out in halting, broken sentences. His gentle face betrayed his frustration at not knowing how to ask what had happened.

Some of the staff stuck their heads around the corner while Morgan ran her forearm under one of Jesse's shoulders. Rico did the same, and as they pulled her to her feet, Rico swept her legs onto his other arm. Morgan said, "I hope she's okay, Rico. We'll know more in a little while. Could you take her to her bed, please?"

Rico carried her past the curious onlookers and into her apartment, with Morgan and Ryland following close behind. Jesse kept the bed pushed into the corner of the little room. Rico walked over and gently laid her on top of the covers. Before he left, he pointed to himself. "You call, I help." He raised his eyebrows and Ryland nodded before pulling a chair close to the bed. Rico left the room as Jesse started to wake up.

Ryland sat back, her brows lowered into a thoughtful expression. She looked at Morgan, "You go on with the hunt. I'll stay here with her."

Morgan hesitated before realizing Ryland knew exactly what she was doing. She put her hand on Ryland's shoulder, giving it a small squeeze before she turned and headed out to call for the hounds.

When Jesse sat up, confusion and distrust tightened her muscles. She glanced around the room, looking for Morgan. "How did I get in here?"

Ryland remained quiet for a time. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"I was leaning up against the barn."

"Why were you behind the barn?"

Jesse thought a minute, red coloring her face as she realized Ryland knew she had no idea what had happened to her. "I don't know."

Ryland crossed her legs. "Jesse, I'm curious...have you always been an itinerant worker, or did you do something else?"

"I did something else."

"Do you mind telling me what you did?"

Jesse wasn't sure why Ryland wanted to know, and she answered, warily. "I was a cop. I'm a retired cop."

Ryland raised her eyebrows in surprise. "You're not old enough to have a retirement. How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"How many years did you work?"

"Five."

"They gave you a retirement after five years? Why?"

Jesse blushed even more because the answer confused her as much as the question. "I don't know why...they just did." She thought about the day she'd left the department. The chief had called her into his office, and the department psychologist had been there. They'd told her she wasn't fit for duty anymore, that she was too traumatized to be a cop. But there hadn't been any trauma. She'd argued with them for more than an hour before they told her the decision was final. Her eyes had lost focus as she remembered that day, and she jumped when Ryland asked, "Did anything happen where you had to retire? Maybe an injury or an illness?"

Jesse shook her head.

"What department did you retire from?" Ryland wanted to call and make a few inquiries to find out why they'd retired her after only five years.

That was out of bounds for Jesse, who wanted nothing to do with her old department and didn't want anyone from there knowing where she was. "I don't mean any disrespect Dr. Caldwell, but that's none of your business." As the sounds of the horses and hounds moved away, Jesse got up to leave.

"Jesse, just one more question. How did you get that scar on your back?"

Jesse reached over her shoulder and rubbed the upper part of her back. "I don't know...I didn't know I had a scar there. Look, I've got work to do." With that, she turned and headed out the door.

Ryland sat quietly, her professional curiosity aroused. She guessed Jesse was experiencing some form of dissociative amnesia, where a person doesn't recall certain traumatic events in their lives. The incidents are stored in their long-term memory, but can usually only be accessed with professional help. It explained Jesse's anger. Many of her previous patients had reported personality changes they had no control over, and anger was at the top of the list.

As she got up and left the apartment she wondered why Jesse had stumbled into their lives, and what, if anything, she could do to help.

## **Chapter Six**

Ryland was at the house when Morgan finished with the hunt. She sat on the couch, surrounded by books on post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative amnesia. Morgan walked through the door, pulled off her grey hunting jacket and reached into the hall closet to hang it up. "I saw Jesse after the hunt. She acts as though nothing happened."

Ryland put down the book and took off her glasses. She rubbed the bridge of her nose where the glasses had left an indentation. "As far as she knows, nothing did happen. The last

thing she remembers is leaning up against the barn. And she doesn't remember why she was behind the barn, either."

Morgan sat next to Ryland who took a sip of wine then offered her the glass. Morgan took it, turned sideways and rested her arm on the back of the couch. She reached down to pick up the book from Ryland's lap. "Obviously, whatever happened to her back has caused some major emotional issues, right?"

"Morgan, she's not even aware she *has* scars on her back."

Morgan studied her friend's face, took a sip of wine, and leaned back into the couch. "Wow."

Amusement tinged Ryland's voice. "Wow is right."

"If only we could find someone who knows something about post-traumatic stress disorder."

Ryland playfully hit Morgan on the head with a pillow. Morgan chuckled, then turned serious again. "So what are you going to do?"

"I've been thinking about that while you've been gone, and unfortunately, it's a little more complicated than 'what am I going to do.' I'm afraid because of some complicated bonding issues that have been happening between you two the last several weeks, it has to be more like 'what are *we* going to do' if we decide to be the ones who help her."

Morgan sat forward to set her glass on the table. "Oh no...I am *not* getting involved in that. I do animals, not people. You're on your own on this one."

Ryland reached over and rubbed Morgan's back.

"Unfortunately, it's not that simple. Do you remember our discussion several weeks ago about how Jesse needed your strength somehow? That she was pushing you to reassure herself that you were still in control? It's obvious to me now what's been going on. If I had understood it earlier, I might have been able to transfer that process to another object, maybe even to me, but I doubt it. It's your strength her subconscious is grabbing, Morg,

because I think she's probably pretty close to a psychotic break. Her fainting and memory loss point that way. She needs the control you provide her."

"Ryland, I'm not a psychologist; I'm a farmer."

"I know that. I'll do the psychology. You'll be more of a tool for me to use, a way to ground her when her subconscious begins to lose control." She leaned forward and took Morgan's hands in hers. "Let me explain it to you this way: if we decide to help her, and if she accepts our help, she and I are going to be walking along the edge of a cliff blindfolded, and sometimes we'll be running flat-out. You're going to be the one who keeps her from falling off the edge."

"Why can't *you* keep her from falling off the edge?"

Ryland sat back. "Because I'll be the one pushing her over."

## **Chapter Seven**

After Jesse finished the morning feeding, she helped Morgan unload fifty-pound bales of hay from the trailer. At first, they could each move the bales easily. By the time they were almost done, they were having to each grab one end and work it to the top of the stack. As they struggled with the last bale, Ryland came down to invite them to the house for lunch. Jesse declined, but Ryland wouldn't take no for an answer. She'd asked Morgan to do something to tire Jesse, and it seemed she'd almost killed both of them doing it.

As the three of them walked up the path toward the house, Ryland wondered whether she was going to have to carry the other two the last few yards. "You two look absolutely exhausted. Where were Cody and Rico?"

Morgan pointed toward the east pasture. "Several of the water lines sprouted leaks. I had to send them up to make repairs. I'll never do something that stupid again on delivery day. Next time, I

fix the water." They walked inside and Morgan headed for the couch while Ryland moved into the kitchen. Jesse stayed in the front hall, uncomfortable in the main house. When Ryland saw her, she came back and took her by the arm. "Come into the living room and make yourself comfortable. You worked hard this morning."

Jesse crossed her arms, gently trying to dislodge Ryland's hand. "I'm really too dirty for this house. I think I'll just go back to my place."

She took a step toward the door but Ryland pulled her back. "There's no such thing as too dirty in a farmer's house. I had to learn that the hard way when I moved in. Morgan comes in absolutely filthy and sprawls on the couch. Go sit in that chair over there while I put lunch on the table."

Jesse looked distinctly uncomfortable until Morgan sat up and pointed to one of two overstuffed chairs. "Sit."

Jesse glared at her and sat in a different chair. Morgan lay back down and closed her eyes.

Ryland had planned to put the food on the kitchen table, but she decided lunch would probably go better if she just set everything on the coffee table in the living room. While they ate, Morgan and Ryland talked about cubbing. Jesse ate in an uncomfortable silence as she looked around the room.

A large fireplace dominated one wall, with an oversized oil painting of a thoroughbred stallion hanging over the mantel. The room had a comfortable feeling with its maroon leather couch, a coffee table made from a slab of polished wood, and two wing chairs that took up the middle of the room. A small bar was set into the back wall, with bottles of various shapes and sizes lining the shelves. A second, smaller sitting area occupied a corner with a built-in floor-to-ceiling bookcase.

Morgan and Ryland stopped talking, and Jesse looked up to see why. Morgan set her plate on the coffee table before lying

down to take a nap. Jesse took that as her chance for escape. Ryland stopped her just as she stood to go. "Jesse wait. Please sit down a minute. I'd like to talk to you about something before you go."

Jesse stood by one of the antique chairs with her arms crossed, waiting for Ryland to talk so she could get out of there. Morgan opened one eye and pointed to the chair.

Jesse growled, "She wasn't talking to you."

Morgan sat up. "Excuse me?"

Ryland held up a hand. It was rare for her to get irritated, but the two of them were having a staring contest, and she snapped, "Morgan, lie down. Jesse, sit down, *now*." Her tone surprised both of them enough that, without thinking, they did what they were told. Ryland sat back in her chair. "I swear, you two are like children sometimes."

Morgan mumbled, "She started it."

Ryland rolled her eyes and leaned forward. "Jesse, do you know what type of doctor I am?"

Jesse shook her head.

"I'm a psychologist who worked with patients who experienced some type of trauma in their lives. I did a lot of work with veterans returning from Vietnam and the Gulf Wars. I'm retired now."

Jesse sat quietly and listened. Her muscles ached, and she just wanted to go home and rest for a while.

Ryland smiled. "And I can see you really couldn't care less, am I right?"

Jesse looked at the floor but didn't say anything. She wanted to avoid a confrontation with Morgan right now, and anything she could think to say sounded rude.

Ryland continued. "I want to tell you about a young man I worked with at the beginning of my career. He'd been a prisoner of war in Vietnam for three years. When he came back, he refused to

talk about his experiences because he was convinced nothing had happened to him over there."

Jesse sat back in her chair and shifted until she was comfortably engulfed in overstuffed cushions decorated with blue, brown and tan stripes. She leaned her head into one of the leather wings and watched Ryland as she spoke.

"I knew from other prisoners who'd been there with him that he'd been systematically tortured—*brutally* tortured—the entire three years he was there." She leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees, bringing herself a little closer to Jesse. "The first year he was back, I tried to contact him every week. He'd invite me to his apartment and we'd talk, but he would never talk about Vietnam. During that year, he became increasingly angry and lost all of his friends. He told me he didn't know why he was angry, he just was." Ryland watched Jesse who shifted a little in her chair. "Jesse, what do you think was happening to him?"

Jesse shrugged. "He probably didn't know why he did things. I bet sometimes things just—" She blinked, then quickly glanced at Morgan, who was asleep on the couch.

When she didn't continue, Ryland said, "Well, unfortunately, he never did talk about his experiences. I lost him."

Jesse's eyebrows lowered. "If he didn't know he had experiences, how could he talk about them? And how do you lose someone? He moved or what?"

"Well, that's a story for another time, but he wrote me a note before he left. He said his mind was working against him, that more and more it felt like it was going to explode. He said he knew he was going crazy, and he couldn't handle that." Ryland watched Jesse's breathing as she spoke. As she'd anticipated, the respirations increased.

Jesse crossed her arms and brought one of her legs up into the chair. She shook her head. "I think that must have been—" She stopped mid-sentence.

"Must have been what?"

"Nothing."

"Must have been what, Jesse?"

Jesse stood up and started for the door. "Look, I—"

Ryland surprised her by crossing to the door and standing in front of it. "It must have been what, Jesse?" Ryland focused her whole attention on Jesse, willing her to answer. She knew, from past experience, this would be the only chance she'd have to make some kind of connection. If she didn't, Jesse would be packed and gone by morning.

A cold sweat broke out on Jesse's forehead, and she reached up and wiped it with the back of her hand.

Ryland casually backed up and leaned against the door.

"Morgan, would you come here a minute, please?"

Jesse jerked involuntarily, her pulse quickening. She wouldn't shove her way through Ryland to get to the door, but it was an effort not to.

Morgan walked up and stood next to Ryland, her stomach in knots. She'd been listening to the whole conversation, and she was scared to death. She trusted Ryland, but she also knew herself. She wasn't a people person, and she definitely wasn't cut out for psychotherapy. Breathing deeply, she concentrated on nonchalance. Seeing the mutilation of Jesse's back had shaken her more than she'd realized, and if Ryland needed her to help this woman, she'd do whatever she asked.

Ryland took a step forward. "Will you try something for me, Jess?"

Jesse shifted her feet, casually trying to find another exit. She needed to leave, *now*, but she didn't want to hurt anyone doing it. Her head started to ache and she pushed her fingers into her temples.

"Jesse?" Ryland touched Jesse's arm and watched as the girl's eyes shifted to meet her own. Jesse was close to panic, and Ryland

knew she had to keep her here. "Jesse, you're all right. Think a minute. Why do you think you have an overwhelming urge to escape, when we haven't talked about anything threatening?"

Ryland saw a confused shift come into Jesse's eyes, and she breathed easier. At least she was listening, thinking. "Do me a favor, Jesse...look at Morgan, and try to slow your breathing and relax."

Morgan took a deep breath, shoved her hands in her pockets and waited for Jesse to look at her. This was it. She couldn't back out now. Her hands had bunched into fists, and she made a conscious effort to relax.

Jesse swallowed. Why couldn't she do this? Her head throbbed with every heart beat and she reached up and pulled her hair to try to ease the pain. "Why are you doing this to me? Don't you realize what you're doing?"

Ryland squeezed Jesse's arm. "Yes, I do. Your head is pounding. Your subconscious knows it has to keep memories locked up, but those memories are starting to slip out. And it must be...what, Jesse? What must it be? Tell me...please."

Jesse pulled her hair with both hands and covered her face with her elbows. "Stop it!"

Morgan took a shaky breath and decided if she was going to be any help, this would be as good a time as any to dive in. She reached up and inserted her hands between Jesse's elbows, placing her palms on either side of the young woman's face. "Look at me, Jesse."

Jesse shut her out, not wanting to listen or believe anyone could help.

"Jesse, I've got you. Look at me."

Her eyes opened and she yelled, "You *don't* have me. You can't do it!"

Morgan raised her eyebrows. She'd never liked people to tell her she couldn't do something, even though she had no idea what

Jesse thought she couldn't do. She was on familiar ground now. Her face became hard and they locked eyes.

Jesse blinked and looked confused again, but less panicked. She'd expected Morgan to be irritated, and seeing what she'd expected had somehow grounded her.

Morgan held Jesse's head steady. "Answer her question. What must it be like?"

Jesse knew exactly what had been going through the man's mind because she felt it every moment of every day. "It was terrifying. He was terrified."

Morgan continued to hold Jesse's eyes with her own. Terrifying. The word had come out barely a whisper, but it held an almost-visible stranglehold on the woman.

Ryland stepped up. "Come back to the couch, Jesse. We need to talk." Some of the tension left Jesse's shoulders, and she allowed Ryland to lead her to the sofa where she sat turned toward the wall, her forehead on her hand. Ryland motioned for Morgan to sit in a chair opposite Jesse.

Morgan caught her eye, and Ryland winked, letting her know she'd done perfectly. *Easy for you to say*, Morgan thought as she sank into the chair, already exhausted even though they'd only been at this for ten minutes.

"Jesse, when Morgan and I first walked up the path and I saw you leaning against the porch, I felt... almost a quickening inside. I know that's a strange way to put it, but I think some higher power, whatever higher power you may or may not believe in, sent you here because Morgan and I can help you."

"I don't need help."

"Like that young man didn't need help? That terrified young man? Tell me about your headaches. What's going on inside when you feel them coming on?"

"No."

"Right now, my guess is you're scared and confused, but there's also a tiny spark of hope. Am I right?"

Jesse hated people to know her, hated it when someone might guess she was falling apart. Ryland was too close and she wanted her gone. "Get the fuck out of my head!"

Ryland chuckled softly. "I'm not in your head, Jess. I just know it's how I would feel if I didn't know what was happening in my brain, and an expert came up and said, 'I can help you; let me in.' Now, tell us what's happening in your head when your headaches start. And if you don't feel like you can say certain things, I want you to ground yourself on Morgan. She'll give you what you need."

"That's a bunch of psycho-bullshit."

Ryland had to laugh. "You know, I had a lot of colleagues who said the same thing about my techniques. I'm not exactly universally accepted in the mental health community. But I do know what I'm doing, Jesse. You have to trust me on that."

Jesse studied Morgan closely, then looked at Ryland. "I don't think she can do it."

"Why? Because she's not strong enough?"

Jesse's brows came together. That wasn't it. Morgan was stronger than she was, she knew that. Why couldn't she do it, whatever *'it'* was? She turned to Ryland. Ryland had the answer, and Jesse wanted it enough to let go, just a little. "What does she need to be strong enough to do? I know she has to be strong enough, but strong enough for what?"

Ryland thought a minute. "As we work together over the next few months, at times, memories are going to want to push out all at once. Sometimes your mind will even shut down because it can't cope with everything at once. Morgan is strong enough to pull you back. You can trust her to pull you back."

Jesse couldn't believe the arrogance. "We're not working together. Now or ever. I don't need *anyone's* help, especially yours."

I came here for a job. I don't need you playing your psycho-bullshit games on me." She shifted forward on the couch, ready to get up and leave.

"The headaches are getting worse, aren't they? You wake up sweating in the middle of the night with your heart racing and you have no idea why or what you dreamed. There are times, like the other day, when you lose periods of your life. Sometimes you can't remember from one time to the next how you got somewhere. You *do* need our help, Jesse, because without it, you'll only get worse. Can you honestly tell me I'm wrong?"

"You *are* wrong! You don't know what's happening, up *here*!" She banged her head with her fist.

"Then *tell* me what's happening in your head. Tell me so I can understand and help you."

"You *can't* help me! You want to know what happens? You want to fuckin' know? 'Cause you *can't* help!" Despair gripped her as she turned furious eyes on Morgan. "And you...you think you're strong enough? I'm strong, and *I* can't stop what happens!"

Ryland repeated, "Jess, tell us what's happening so we can understand.

Jesse seethed, furious that they thought they could even begin to understand. She shouted at them, frantic now that they should believe her—that they needed to leave her alone. "You want to know what happens? This is what happens! Sometimes my brain feels like it's a balloon filled tight with hundreds of stones and something is squeezing the balloon and it hurts, *bad*! I can't stop whatever's squeezing it, and I know if there's even a small rip in the balloon, my brain will explode! I mean *literally* explode! And you're going to rip it if you don't stop! You need to *stop*!" Her control slipped as she spoke and tears spilled down onto her cheeks. She angrily wiped them away, then had to shove her fingers back into her temples to stop the spasms constricting her brain.

Ryland slid over so she could put her hand on the back of Jesse's head. "Easy, Jesse...you're all right. Let me explain what's happening, and I promise, I can help you if you let me." She ran strong fingers up under Jesse's hair and massaged the top of her neck. When she felt the tension ease beneath her hand, she began speaking softly, her words calculated to soothe Jesse's fears. "The stones are memories, Jess. And we, you and I, are going to reach into the balloon and take out one stone at a time and examine it, deal with it, and put it away where it belongs. As we do, the pressure on the balloon will sometimes increase, and Morgan will help you keep the rest of the stones in until we're ready for them. She'll help you close the rip each time we remove a stone."

They were quiet while Ryland continued the calming massage and Jesse processed what she was hearing. The pain gradually eased. She unconsciously leaned back into Ryland's hand and said with less intensity, "How do you know that? How can you say that? I don't have any memories. I don't remember anything. There's nothing there."

Ryland felt Jesse relaxing into her. She leaned in close and spoke even more softly than before. "I can say that because I've helped people just like you for the last forty years. I can say that because I've studied emotional trauma and I know how to help you. You need my help. You want my help, because without it, how much longer can you, as you say, keep your brain from exploding?"

Jesse desperately wanted to believe her, but she couldn't bring herself to admit that anyone could stop her sliding into whatever insanity was overtaking her. She pushed Ryland's hand off her neck and stood up. The pain immediately returned, the emotional pendulum reversed and she swung back into despair. "You think you can help? You can't help me. Nobody can help and I'll prove it. I'll try whatever you're selling one time, that's it. Once. And when you fail, we're done!"

She almost ran out the door and headed down the path to her apartment. The familiar spike of anger replaced the last vestige of calm Ryland had given her, and she picked up a branch lying on the ground and bashed it against the trunk of a tree over and over until there was nothing left but a shattered stick in her hand. Who were they to assume they could just walk in and fix her? The stick sailed through the air and splintered into pieces as it struck the tree one last time. Her blood was boiling by the time she walked into the barn. The last person she wanted to see was Cody, who was standing inside next to her apartment door.

He looked her up and down and sneered. "You're sweating. Some vigorous afternoon delight, huh? I guess that's one way to get in good with the boss."

Jesse took one step and landed a solid right cross. She was pleased to hear the crack as his nose broke and he sank to the floor, unconscious. She went into the tack room to get the bucket of medical supplies she'd put together for Comstock. On her way out, she stepped over Cody, grabbed a brush, and went to the stall to start doctoring. Just as she'd finished cleaning the wound, the barn door opened.

Morgan sounded surprised. "Cody, what happened?"

Jesse heard Cody reply, but she couldn't make out what he said. The barn door opened and closed again.

"Jesse?"

She inserted the needle into the wound and injected the saline solution.

"Jesse?" Morgan sounded a little closer to Comstock's stall.

The swelling was looking better, and she refilled the syringe to clean the wound one more time. She felt Morgan's eyes on the back of her head and slowly swiveled around.

Morgan stood in the door of the stall. "Did you happen to notice Cody lying on the floor when you walked through the barn?"

Still squatting on her heels, Jesse turned back to Comstock and wiped the wound with a clean cloth. "Yes Ma'am." She picked up the brush and started cleaning his front legs.

"I'm talking to you."

Jesse heard the warning in Morgan's voice and putting her hands on her knees, pushed herself to a standing position. She faced her boss, one hand casually draped over the horse's withers.

"What happened?"

Jesse studied the planking at the bottom of the stall, then walked over and tested the temperature in Comstock's water bowl with her finger. "I think he got tagged out sliding into third." She continued to look anywhere but at Morgan, who was quiet for a very long time.

Morgan finally said. "I don't like my employees playing baseball when they're supposed to be working."

Jesse's whole body shook with pent-up tension. She just wanted Morgan to leave. "Yes Ma'am."

The two of them stood quietly until Morgan added, "Ryland wants us up at the house tomorrow at one o'clock so we can have another talk."

Jesse watched quietly as Morgan stepped out of the stall to go work with the hounds.

## **Chapter Eight**

The next day at twelve forty-five, Ryland presented herself at the barn looking for Jesse. She didn't see her in any of the stalls, so she knocked on the apartment door. There was no answer so she knocked again. "Jesse?"

Morgan walked in and smiled. "Looks like we had the same idea." She put away a hoof pick she'd forgotten in her pocket from earlier in the day, then pounded on the apartment door. "Jesse, open up...now."

Jesse opened the door and glared at the two women. "Jesus, you told me to be at your house at one o'clock. You think I can't find my way there, or what?"

Morgan put her arm on Jesse's back and propelled her toward the door. "Something like that. Let's go."

Ryland watched Morgan's version of finesse and shook her head. "Your bedside manor leaves a little to be desired, my love."

Morgan just grinned back at her as she pushed Jesse through the barn door. Ryland caught up with them and the three of them walked up the path to the house. When they walked in, Ryland told Jesse to sit on the leather couch. Morgan sat in the wingback chair opposite her.

"Jesse, how about a soda or some water?" She looked at her partner who had just opened her mouth to complain about unfair treatment. "Morgan, I already know you want ice water." Morgan stretched her legs, pleased Ryland knew her so well.

Jesse mumbled, "Nothing, thanks."

"Water it is then." She brought out three glasses of ice water, set them on the coffee table, then sat next to Jesse on the couch. "Today we start the hard work. One very important rule I need to tell you, Jesse: once we start, we finish. I'm not willing to get partway through therapy and have you run out. Too much can happen. Are you willing to agree to that?"

"No. I told you, one time is all you get."

"Well, that's not how it works. Once we start, if I have to have you committed to a hospital in order to finish what we start, I will. Once we open the floodgates, you won't be able to close them without professional help."

Jesse turned her back on Ryland and crossed her arms and legs. Her head had almost ripped apart last night, the pain had been so bad. The only thought that kept her sane was that maybe, just maybe, Ryland and Morgan could do something to stop the pain.

Morgan crossed her arms too. She hadn't realized this was an all-or-nothing proposition, and for some reason her pulse quickened and the butterflies started in her stomach again.

Ryland sat back into the cushions. "Let's get started then. I'd like to get some background information. For example, how long has it been since were you a police officer?"

"About a year."

"What assignments did you have?"

Jesse uncrossed her arms and started playing with a thread on the arm of the couch. "Patrol, investigations, and narcotics."

"You worked narcotics? When?"

"Right before I retired. The last two years of my career."

"I'm not very familiar with narcotics. Tell me what you did...how you worked."

Jesse slouched down in the sofa and put her head back on the pillows. "I worked as an undercover narc. I'd buy drugs on the street or we'd set up controlled buys in hotel rooms, bars, wherever. I had a partner." She squinted, trying to remember something.

"Tell me about your partner."

Jesse reached over and picked up a cloth doily, running it through her fingers. "We worked together for two years. He was an older guy. He really didn't appreciate having a new cop as a partner. Especially a woman." Her fingers crumpled the cloth, then stretched it open again.

Ryland watched her body language. The way Jesse kept working the doily was interesting. She decided to try an experiment. "What was your sergeant like?"

Jesse put the doily in her lap and left it there. "She was great, really knew her stuff. She'd worked narcotics almost her whole career."

"How long had your partner worked narcotics?"

Jesse picked up the doily again and absently turned it in her hands. "Seven years. He was the senior officer in our squad."

"So you worked with your partner two years in undercover narcotics, then you retired. What was your partner's name?"

Jesse folded the cloth in half but didn't say anything.

"Jesse, what was your partner's name?"

She glanced up at Ryland and shrugged. "It's kinda' weird, but I don't remember."

"That's okay. I want you to think back to the very last assignment you worked with him. What did you two do?"

"I don't remember. Look, what does this have to do with anything?"

"How about I ask the questions right now and you just concentrate on trying to remember, because I need to know. What type of drug were you after?"

Jesse folded the cloth over a second time and went back and forth over the crease, thumb on one side, index finger on the other. "Cocaine."

"Were you buying it on the street or was it a controlled buy?"

Jesse looked up and to her left, trying to remember. "It was just Pete and me. That's weird...it was a controlled buy, but it was just the two of us." She stared off into space, her eyebrows lowered. "We never went anywhere without back up."

"So your partner's name was Pete?" Ryland wanted her to realize her memory had just kicked in.

"Yeah. We went to a dirty little motel to make a buy, and when we walked in—" She stopped in the middle of the sentence, reaching up to pressed stiff fingers into her temple, the cloth wadded tightly in her fist.

"You walked in..." Ryland motioned for Morgan to sit up and lean forward a little.

"Look, my head's killing me. Maybe we should do this tomorrow." Jesse pushed harder on her temple.

"Jesse, what happened when you walked in?"

She put both hands to her temples and pressed in. "Uh, there were people there. Three people." She started to get up and Ryland put her hand on her arm.

"Sit down, Jesse. Leaving is not an option. I know it hurts, but the more we work together, the less the memories will manifest themselves in the form of headaches. We have to work through them for now. Open your eyes and tell me what happened in the room."

Jesse shook her head.

"Open your eyes. It's very important for you to do what I tell you to do. You have to trust me. Open them."

When Jesse opened her eyes, Morgan was surprised to see how bloodshot they'd become. She'd never seen anyone's eyes turn blood red so quickly. Jesse opened the doily, smoothing it out on her leg with long strokes of her hand.

"One man handed Pete a wad of money. A lot of money. I remember Pete looking at me and apologizing. He said he had a huge debt and the money would keep him alive." She reached up a shaky hand and pushed her temple again. There was something important about Pete that brushed the edge of her memory, but she couldn't remember what it was. "Pete—" *What was it?*

"What about Pete?"

"I'm not sure...something important." She braced her elbows on her knees so she could push harder on her temples. All these questions were making her head hurt more than usual and she wanted them to stop.

"Why did Pete have a debt? Was he a gambler?"

"No! Look, I don't care about Pete! What the fuck does he have to do with anything?" Jesse glared at Ryland, barely able to keep from grabbing her to make her listen. "Who cares if he had a debt? Fuck him, and fuck you!" Jesse stood to leave and Ryland blocked her way.

"Sit down. We're not done." Ryland returned Jesse's stare until she threw herself back into the couch and turned to face the wall. Ryland sat as well. "What you need to realize, Jesse, is it doesn't matter if you think the information I'm asking for is important. If I ask a question, there's a reason for it, and you need to answer. Now, why did Pete have a debt?"

The pain in Jesse's head was almost unbearable. She tried to concentrate on what Ryland was saying. "Pete owed money, but —"

Ryland let her think. It was difficult at first for patients to allow memories to come. Jesse would get better at it the more they worked, but right now, they needed to give her subconscious time to dredge up what it had so carefully buried. "When something comes to mind, I want you to say it. Don't try to analyze it, just let it come out."

"He didn't gamble." Her eyebrows lowered as she remembered, "He'd started snorting cocaine. I remember I walked in on him a few weeks before we made that last buy."

"What did he do when you walked in?"

She shook her head. "He went crazy. He said if I ever told anyone, he'd kill me. I told him I'd get him help. We had to get him help."

"What did he say to that?" Ryland guessed selling her out had been a convenient way for him to get rid of a nasty complication.

Jesse groaned from the pain and put her head down onto her knees, "He said he'd think about it, but if I ratted on him, I'd be dead."

Ryland nodded and moved on. "Why did the man give him the money?"

"I don't know." She put her hand back to her temple and pushed so hard her knuckles went white.

"You do know, and I have to know." Ryland motioned for Morgan to touch Jesse's knee. When she did, Jesse jumped and her

eyes flew open, but it accomplished what Ryland had intended—Jesse was staring at Morgan's face. Ryland repeated. "So tell me why the man gave him the money."

Jesse looked down, then up into Morgan's eyes. "For me. He wanted me."

"Why?"

"Someone put a hood over my head and tied a rope around my neck to hold it in place." Jesse put her head in her hands. "I think they drugged me, because when I woke up, I was somewhere else."

She lowered her hands and started rubbing her right palm with her left thumb. She studied the lines, then flipped her hand over and rubbed the back. She did the same with her other hand, switching back and forth as though looking for something.

Ryland watched Jesse's hands. "Where were you?"

Jesse didn't answer.

"What's wrong with your hands, Jesse?"

Confusion. "Nothing...see?" She held out her hand to Ryland, who took it and turned it over the same way Jesse had. Jesse repeated, "There's nothing wrong with them." She pointed to the palm of her hand and put her index finger dead center in the middle. Slowly, she ran the finger down the palm, under her sleeve and stopped on her wrist. She turned her wrist over and put her thumb on the top.

When Jesse looked up, Ryland knew something was wrong. The blood had drained from Jesse's face until the skin had become a pasty white, but it was the quick glimpse of terror that warned her what would happen next.

Jesse bolted from the couch and raced out the front door, Ryland and Morgan seconds behind her. Instead of running toward the barn like Ryland expected, Jesse ran to the end of the porch, bent over the railing and threw up. Ryland and Morgan stood on either side, waiting for the retching to pass. When she stopped heaving, Jesse hung over the rail, gasping.

"Talk to me, Jess. What happened?"

Jesse began dry heaving and dropped down on all fours to stop her stomach from turning inside out. The cramping eased enough to allow her to put her head on her hands and rock forward.

"Sit up and breathe normally. You'll be all right. We're right here with you. Sit up and breathe." Ryland pulled on Jesse's shoulder, and Morgan reached in to help. They pulled her back until she was seated on the floor, her legs bent in front of her, her head resting on her knees. Ryland said. "Close your eyes a minute and breathe normally."

When Jesse closed her eyes, Ryland reached out and gently pushed back one of Jesse's sleeves. A round, white scar was centered perfectly in the middle of her wrist. Ryland turned the hand over and found a matching scar on the underside. She left the sleeve where it was and told Jesse to open her eyes. "When you woke up after you were kidnapped, what was the first thing you saw?"

"It was black. I still had the hood on." She just wanted to answer the questions so she could leave.

"What do you see when they take off the hood?"

"I don't think this is helping. We don't need to do this." Jesse started to get up, and Ryland stopped her.

"What do you see when they take off the hood?"

Jesse breathed deeply before answering. "I'm standing in a doorway looking out. I see a short hallway with some stairs at the end...going up." She shifted, ready to leave, and once more Ryland stopped her.

Jesse shoved Ryland's hand off her shoulder. "Leave me the fuck alone!" She pushed to her knees. Morgan moved in and pulled her back down. Jesse grabbed her fingers, struggling to pry them off her arm. Morgan just tightened her grip.

"Let go of my arm." The words came out low and guttural, a clear warning to Morgan to back off. She was ready to hurt anyone who stopped her from leaving, because she *was* leaving.

Morgan swung her leg over Jesse's legs and straddled them, never taking her eyes off her. "You're not going anywhere until Ryland says we're done, period." Morgan had no clue whether she was doing the right thing, but if Ryland said she needed to stay, then she'd try to make her stay and hope for the best.

Jesse growled and swung a fist at Morgan's face.

Morgan blocked it with her forearm and grabbed that arm too. She pushed her down and pinned both arms to the porch. Jesse glared pure hatred at Morgan, and Ryland took advantage of the connection. "What happened next, Jesse? Tell me and you can leave."

Jesse fought desperately to free her arms and legs, then abruptly stopped struggling and focused on Morgan's hand, which covered the wrist pinned closest to her face.

Ryland said quickly. "Let go of that wrist."

Morgan let go. Jesse closed her eyes and turned her head away. Ryland repeated. "Tell me what happened, and you can leave."

"Get off me."

Ryland nodded to Morgan who let go and moved off Jesse's legs. Jesse stood to lean over the railing again. Her knees buckled and she ended up squatting with her head leaning against the rails.

"They—" She stopped and her hands curled around the railing. "They put my hands on either side of the door frame." She looked around at Ryland, her dark brown eyes sunk deep into a grey, bloodless face. "Why do I have to say it? You know what they did."

Ryland reached up and stroked Jesse's cheek. "Yes, Jesse, I know what they did. You don't have to say it. We're done for today." Ryland felt she'd pushed enough for the first day, and that

forcing her to say they'd nailed her wrists to the door post would be a mistake at that point.

Jesse let herself lean sideways until she was tucked up into the corner of the porch. She brought her knees up to her chest, wrapped her arms around them and put her head down, exhausted.

Ryland took Morgan's arm and motioned for the two of them to go back into the house. When they were inside, Morgan leaned up against the door. "They nailed her wrists to the door post? Jesus Christ, Ry! How can we physically force her into therapy? If she wants to leave, shouldn't we let her leave?"

Ryland stepped to the window and looked out at Jesse, sitting in an almost textbook upright fetal position. "Morgan, she has one hope for a normal future. We're working outside the confines of a mental hospital, and I have to force her to face her terrors. She'll want to run at every turn, but if I allow that, she'll eventually destroy herself." She turned back to Morgan. "If we were holding her against her will, she wouldn't be sitting out there right now. She'd be gone. She knows we're trying to help, and deep down, she desperately needs you to keep her here despite her need to get away from me." She leaned into Morgan and wrapped her arms around her. "Trust me, my love, we can help her, but it's going to be a very bumpy ride."

Jesse was still there when Morgan came out to start on the late afternoon chores. "C'mon Jesse, we need to feed. I'll help you tonight."

"I'd rather do it myself." She got to her feet and walked down the path to the barn, Morgan at her side. The leaves completely shaded the walk, and Jesse concentrated on their colors to keep from arguing with Morgan about helping. When Morgan followed her into the barn, Jesse snapped, "I said I'd rather do it myself." She picked up a flake of hay and headed for the aisle between the stalls.

Morgan grabbed a coffee can and measured out some oats.  
"This is still my farm, and I tell you what to do, you don't tell me."

Jesse's temper flared. "Fine, *you* feed 'em then!" She threw down the hay and stalked toward her apartment.

"Get your butt back here, pick up the goddamn hay, and do your job! I'm not paying you to throw temper tantrums or feel sorry for yourself. I still have a farm to run and hounds to train."

Jesse whirled on Morgan. "Feel *sorry* for myself? Who the fuck do you think you are? I didn't ask for your help, I don't want your help and I don't goddamn *need* your help. I quit! You can have your fuckin' job! I quit!"

Morgan watched her stalk into the apartment and slam the door. She leaned against the feed table, not sure what to do. Life would sure be easier without taking time away from the farm and foxhunting to fix a screwed up ex-cop. In fact, everything had been moving along just fine before Jesse'd ended up on their doorstep. Well, she was Ryland's project, not hers. She picked up the barn phone and called the house.

Ryland picked up on the first ring. "Hi, what's up?"

"Just thought I'd let you know she's packing her things. She quit a minute ago."

"She quit or you pushed her?"

"Don't put this on me. I've got a business to run, and I don't need anybody thinking they can run roughshod over me just because they think I feel sorry for them. She's your experiment, Ryland, not mine."

Ryland spoke in a clipped, angry tone. "You pushed her! She's a complete emotional mess right now, and you're scared because this looks like more than you bargained for. You pushed her!"

Morgan responded in kind. "This is my farm, and no employee of mine is going to tell me what I can and cannot do. Damn it, Ryland, I've got a business to run." She knew Ryland was right, and it galled her to have to admit helping Jesse scared her, that it

put her on unfamiliar footing when she was used to being the one in control.

Jesse chose that moment to come out of her apartment carrying her few possessions. Morgan thought about what Ryland had said and knew what she had to do. Growling with frustration, she threw down the phone and stalked over to Jesse. "Put down that shit, pick up that hay, and feed the goddamn horses! I've had it with your bullshit! Get your ass moving. Now!" She stormed back to the table, picked up the coffee can and slammed it down. She measured out the portions, throwing the ingredients into the can while trying to contain her anger.

Jesse's emotions had cooled somewhat, and she realized she didn't know where she'd go if she left. She'd given Ryland her one chance, and she hadn't failed. There'd been a kidnapping. *She* had been kidnapped. She just didn't know why she hadn't she remembered it before and why she couldn't remember anything else.

She threw her bag back into her room and started carrying hay to the horses. The two of them glared at each other each time they passed in the aisle, and there was a lot of banging of stall doors and coffee cans while they finished their work.

## **Chapter Nine**

Morgan's anger hadn't cooled by the time one o'clock rolled around the next day. When she walked in the house, Ryland was sitting in her armchair reading a book.

Ryland set her glasses on the coffee table and moved to the couch. "Morgan, can we talk? You came in so angry last night....You just went in and went to bed, and you left today without having our morning coffee. Talk to me, please."

Morgan stepped into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of milk and came out to sit next to Ryland. Dust from the morning's

work covered her hair, and when she rubbed her head, some of it drifted down onto her clothes. She fell back into the couch with a sigh. "I don't know what's wrong. I guess I just liked the way things were before she came. Everything was perfect: the farm is in the black, the club and the hounds are doing great, I have a great hunt staff." She set the glass on the table and leaned back again. "I've been on edge since the first day she came. I want her gone and everything back to normal."

Ryland moved close enough for their knees to touch and put her hand on Morgan's leg. "You might be surprised by this, but I wouldn't mind if she left either. I want to help her, and I know how to help her, but I retired for a reason. I haven't done a minute's work on my book since that day Jesse fainted behind the barn. I've done nothing but pore over these books, trying to convince myself I'm doing the right thing." She leaned into Morgan, resting her head on her shoulder. "You know, I need to apologize to you. I never did ask whether you would help. I just threw you into the therapy because I knew you were what she needed."

"If we stop now, what happens?"

Ryland curled her arm around Morgan's, enjoying the familiar warmth she felt there. "You know I'm not about guilt trips, my love. If we stop, we stop. She goes on with her life, and she'll follow whatever path she can. We have our life, you and I, and that's more important to me than helping Jesse. If you want to stop, then I want to stop too." They sat quietly for a while, neither wanting to make the final decision.

"Ryland, if we stop, what happens to her? No guilt. I just want to know the facts from someone who's dealt with this before."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. What happens?"

"She'll continue to decompensate."

Morgan smiled. "Let's try the Psychology for Dummies explanation."

Ryland chuckled. "Okay. She won't be able to maintain the personal defense mechanisms she's built up. She'll become more and more angry. She might get into more and more fights, in which case she'll end up in jail—a lot. She's basically a sane person who's been pushed into a psychological imbalance, and that imbalance will only get worse. The headaches will increase to an intolerable level, and she'll get rid of them in whatever way she can."

"You mean she'll put a gun to her head."

"Possibly."

"Great." Morgan rubbed her face, then let her hands drop into her lap. "I couldn't live with myself knowing I could have helped her and didn't because she was an inconvenience to my perfect way of life. So at least tell me what we're in for if we help her."

Ryland shook her head. "I'm not sure. I don't know the extent of the abuse, so we're groping in the dark. She'll continue to have angry outbursts, that's a given. She'll continue to push you right to the edge, because she's reassuring herself that you're still in control. She'll start hating me, maybe even want to hurt me to get me out of her life."

"Whoa, stop right there." Morgan sat up and glared at Ryland. "Not gonna happen."

"You asked what *might* happen. I'm just giving you all the possibilities. We're dealing with panic, terror. Who knows what she'll do? I do know she doesn't *want* to hurt anyone—that's obvious to me—and I think if we can distract her if she starts to get violent, just enough to bring her back to the present, she'll stop. I never said this would be a walk in the park. It'll be hell for all three of us. And I guarantee, it won't take a week or a month for all this to start. It's already here and it will only get worse before it gets better."

Morgan reached over and turned Ryland's arm so she could read her watch. "Where is she anyway? It's already one-thirty. My vote is to do it, and if we're gonna do this, let's get it done so I can

get back to work." She smiled at Ryland, who took her hand and walked with her to the door.

It never ceased to amaze Ryland how quickly Morgan came to decisions and how quickly she wanted to get things done once she'd decided to do something. She put her hand on the door before Morgan could open it. "Morgan, I'll tell you what I told her. We have to see this to the end or we'll be doing more harm than good."

Morgan nodded and pulled open the door. "Let's go find our powder keg, shall we?" They walked to the barn together and found Jesse cleaning out one of the stalls. Morgan got right to the point. "Where have you been? You think we've got all day to just sit around and wait for you?"

"I'm done. I'm not coming anymore." Jesse walked out of the stall, grabbed some straw and carried it back to Barney's pen.

Ryland shot a glance at Morgan, then slowly followed Jesse down the aisle. "We've just begun, Kiddo. We're not even close to done."

Jesse pushed past her on the way to get another armload of straw to spread on the stall floor. "I said I'm done. I know I was kidnapped. That's enough; I don't want to know anymore."

"Jess, you're not done, and if you remember when we began, I told you once we start there's no turning back. We've opened Pandora's box, and we need to close it one way or the other. If you don't work on it here, I'll have to call Sheriff Carlson and have you involuntarily committed to St. Andrew's hospital where I can work with you there."

Jesse stopped dead in her tracks.

Morgan took down the notebook and started leafing through the pages, watching the two of them out of the corner of her eye. She concentrated on Ryland, trying to take her cue from her, not sure whether she was part of this battle. She reminded herself that her role was to allow Jesse to ground herself. Ryland's was playing

God. She turned her attention to Jesse, whose face had gone beet red, her muscles taut. *Oh shit*, she thought as she slowly put down the notebook. *Here we go*.

Ryland had her in a trap. Red appeared in front of Jesse's eyes and her pulse pounded in her head harder and harder until she growled and lunged, intending to get her out of her life once and for all.

"Hey!" Morgan grabbed the back of Jesse's shirt and pulled her back. "What the hell do you think you're doing? You think you can just throw that crap all over the barn and leave it like that?" She roughly turned Jesse around and pointed to the mess strewn across the otherwise spotless barn floor.

Jesse blinked and focused on Morgan's face. She was surprised at what she'd just done and shifted her gaze to the straw on the floor.

"Don't just stand there. Get the wheelbarrow and broom and clean that shit up. What's the matter with you?" Morgan pushed her toward the cleaning supplies and went back to the oat bins. She held Ryland's eyes a minute, needing to know Ryland was still sure about what she was doing. When Ryland nodded, Morgan said, "This is going to take a while. You go on up to the house. We'll be up when we're done."

Ryland calmly walked out of the barn, heading for the house. When she was out of earshot, she let out a shaky breath. "Why are we doing this, Morgan? What exactly have we gotten ourselves into?" The hardest part in dealing with repressed memories was that neither she nor Jesse knew exactly what had happened, so they were just groping in the dark. When she reached the house, she sat on the sofa and picked up the latest book she'd been studying.

This particular book dealt primarily with a patient releasing a traumatic memory and actually experiencing the pain of the torture during therapy. Ryland had a feeling Jesse's memories were buried so deep that once they surfaced the pain would be excruciating.

Other patients she'd treated had gone through similar experiences, and she wanted to brush up on techniques that would help Jesse remember what had caused the pain and relegate those memories to the past where they could do no further harm. She opened the book and leafed through it for the fifth time that day.

An hour later, Morgan and Jesse walked into the house. Jesse's face was set in an angry mask, and she refused to look at Ryland or even acknowledge she was in the room. Ryland sat in a chair facing the sofa. Morgan put her hand on Jesse's shoulder and pointed to where she wanted her to sit. Jesse sat on the sofa, still refusing to meet Ryland's eyes. Morgan made herself comfortable and forced herself to relax.

Ryland studied Jesse a second, taking in the crossed arms and the angry mask. "You know, you never did tell me yesterday why they paid money to kidnap you. What were you to them?"

Jesse shrugged. "I killed the man's younger brother. He tried to rip me on a drug deal. He pulled a gun on me and I shot him."

"Why just you? Why didn't they want Pete too?"

Jesse looked at Ryland as though the answer should have been obvious to her. She shook her head. "Pete wasn't there. He was in a different hotel room. He was one of the back-up officers."

"But if he was your partner, why wouldn't he have been in the room with you?" Ryland smiled at the comical expression on Jesse's face. Obviously she thought any fool would know why Pete hadn't been in the room. "You have to remember, Jess, I don't have a clue about how undercover officers work. Help me out here."

"Well—" Jesse looked around the room, trying to think of a way to explain. "You can't just walk into a drug deal and bring a friend along. They'd know you were a cop and know your friend was your back up. These guys are paranoid. They see two people, it's either a rip off or you're a cop. Either way, they clam up."

Ryland nodded. "So, you killed his brother. How did he find out it was you?"

Jesse shrugged. "It was in all the papers. The media doesn't care if they blow your cover. All they care about is their story."

Ryland decided to move on since that particular memory didn't seem to bother Jesse at all. "Yesterday you remembered being nailed to the door post by your wrists. How long did they leave you there?" Ryland saw the tell-tale glance up and to the left. At least Jesse was trying. They sat in silence, waiting.

Jesse flashed back, a quick picture of a dark hallway leading to stairs leading into the light.

Ryland was getting more adept at reading her and knew when she'd remembered something. "What are you seeing?"

"A dark hallway...and at the end of the hall, some stairs going up." Jesse quickly focused on Ryland, then immediately looked away. There was no way she was going to make a fool of herself again today. She'd answer questions and be done.

"Are you hanging in the doorway?"

"I'm standing."

"Where are your hands?"

Jesse looked at Ryland. "What?"

Ryland didn't answer, just raised her eyebrows. She watched as Jesse processed the question. When Jesse made eye contact with Morgan, Ryland was pleased Morgan mimicked her own response and simply raised her eyebrows. She'd never used a second person to help with therapy, but if she had, Morgan would have been the perfect partner; she was smart, quick, and tough, but more importantly, she was stubborn. More stubborn than Jesse, and luckily, Jesse believed in Morgan's strength.

Jesse held Morgan's eyes. "Are you sure you can do this?"

Ryland repeated her question. "Where are your hands, Jesse?" She watched Jesse close her eyes and do the abbreviated head shake Ryland now knew meant memories were trying to push out and Jesse was trying to push them back in. "Open your eyes, Jess."

Jesse opened them and growled, "Leave me alone."

Ryland leaned forward. "Look at Morgan, and tell me where your hands are."

Morgan sat at the end of the couch, angled against the padded arm, facing Jesse. She put her elbow on the armrest and leaned her head on her fingers while she calmly let Jesse focus on her eyes. Ryland had explained the need for a focal point, a place where Jesse could go to borrow strength she thought she didn't have, and Morgan concentrated on projecting her confidence onto Jesse.

"You know where they are... I—" She couldn't allow the picture to come, she wanted to see the picture in Morgan's eyes, not her own. She stole a quick look. There. A hammer struck and a spike slid through her wrist like butter, pinning her hand to the door post. Her eyes unfocused and she was back in the room. She'd been there a night, another day? How long? She couldn't breathe. Her lungs filled with water instead of air as lightning bolts shot down her arms and constricted her heart.

Morgan looked at Ryland, who motioned for her to touch Jesse. She reached out and gently took Jesse's arm and squeezed. Jesse eyes focused again and she struggled for air. "I can't breathe."

Ryland said again. "Tell me where your hands are."

Jesse looked down at the scars on her wrists, and said between breaths. "They're nailed to the posts."

"How long were you there?"

"A night, part of a day." She looked at Ryland, who nodded, and Jesse thought she saw approval, maybe a little. Maybe she'd done okay and they were done.

"Then what?"

Jesse's heart sank. "Goddamn you, I told you what you wanted and I'm done!"

"Then what happened?" Ryland watched Jesse squeeze her eyes shut, fighting to hold in the tears. She motioned for Morgan to

gently tap her knee because she needed those flood gates opened. Morgan did what Ryland asked, and Jesse opened her eyes.

Ryland repeated. "Then what happened?"

Jesse covered her eyes, ashamed as one by one tears began falling down her face. "I got down. My arms are down and everything is black."

"How did you get down?"

"He—" *He pounded the nail out from the other side. He pounded and laughed then pulled.* Jesse stood as she watched the thin spikes slide through her wrists. Her stomach turned sour and she was afraid she'd be sick again. She reached up and pulled her hair, trying to stop the memories, trying to stop hearing Ryland.

"Sit down Jesse, and tell us what you see. You have to remember, then tell me what happened so we can put the memories in their proper place. That's why I keep asking you to describe what you're seeing. Each time you talk about what happened, your headaches will begin to be less painful, and eventually they'll go away completely."

What Ryland said made sense. She needed to stop the pain one way or the other. "He hit the nail out with a hammer, then...then jerked it out the rest of the way." She looked down on Ryland, wanting to be done. Ryland didn't move, and Jesse felt panic welling up from somewhere deep inside her chest. *What's she waiting for?* The nausea increased and she ground her teeth to keep from throwing up.

Ryland sat patiently, knowing there was more, but unsure what direction to go in. She thought maybe she'd back off a little and then move on. "After you were down, then what?"

Jesse relaxed slightly and sat back on the couch, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. Memories edged their way into her mind, slowly at first, then picking up speed. They weren't clear and she was unsure how to bring them into focus. She sat in troubled silence, trying to see what was there.

Ryland watched her. "Tell me what's happening."

"They're not clear. I see movement, but I don't know what I'm seeing." She pointed to her forehead, then looked to Ryland for help. "Here — you know, in my mind." Ryland's confident smile reassured her, made her feel Ryland knew what was happening even if she didn't.

"Don't worry, Jesse. That's perfectly normal. The more we bring out the memories, the clearer they'll become. For right now, instead of trying to see the memories, talk to me about whatever comes to mind—what the men are doing, the feelings that come up—even if you don't know why you're feeling them."

"I think they filled something... a long sock...with sand.... They hit me with it." The vise around her chest eased somewhat, allowing her to breathe and her stomach to settle as her mind opened and she began to remember.

"Once? Twice?"

Jesse shook her head. "No, in shifts. I think one would hit me for a while, then another would take over. He'd told them to hit where it wouldn't do permanent damage...you know, not on my kidneys or my head. I was okay." Suddenly, the memories were so clear when they came, the faces in focus, the sounds exact. She watched as red splotches appeared on her skin and darkened as blood seeped into the tissues.

"Why are you rubbing your arms?"

The voice jerked her back to the present and she realized her arm wasn't really blood red, hadn't really swollen to twice its normal size. "I was afraid they were too swollen. I thought they'd explode if they hit them again."

Morgan listened and had to concentrate on not reacting. What else had been done to this woman? For the hundredth time, she wondered whether they were doing the right thing by forcing her to remember. Ryland projected the familiar aura of acceptance and confidence, so she sat back and kept her thoughts to herself.

"Did all of them enjoy hitting you?"

Morgan looked at Ryland again. *What kind of a question was that?*

"No."

"Tell me about the people who didn't enjoy it."

Jesse thought for a minute, then shook her head again. "No."

"Yes."

Jesse sat quietly, thinking. "Well, it wasn't people...it was one person, a man, but I don't remember him."

Ryland nodded. She knew Jesse wouldn't purposely lie to her, and that was critical in trying to work through repressed memories. "So there was a man who didn't like beating you. But he did it anyway?"

Jesse closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose trying to remember. "I don't know...he—" She stopped and shook her head.

Ryland was getting more and more comfortable with the cues. *There we go, Kiddo.* "Open your eyes and tell me what you just saw."

"No. I didn't see anything."

"I said open your eyes." Instinct told her they were edging up to another critical memory, and Jesse needed to listen.

Ryland glanced at Morgan, who said, "Jess, open your eyes and answer the question."

Her eyes opened and she glared at Morgan, who didn't bat an eye. Jesse looked away, her face red. "When people were there, he'd hit me. When they weren't, he'd pretend to hit me. That's all...no big deal."

Ryland thought a minute. *So what was the big deal? What couldn't you see? What didn't you want to see?* "So he was a friend?"

Jesse stared at Ryland and slowly shook her head.

"What happened to your friend?"

"Nothing."

"What happened to your friend? Did they ever find out what he was doing?" Ryland watched Jesse blink twice, three times, then disappear.

"Shit!" She leaned forward and grabbed Morgan's shoulder. "Her mind's shutting down. Grab her head. Make her look at you, Morg! Make her come out!"

Morgan heard the urgency in her friend's voice and quickly grabbed both sides of Jesse's face. "Jesse, look at me." When she didn't respond, she grabbed Jesse's hair and jarred her head. "Jesse, open your goddamn eyes and look at me!"

Jesse blinked and focused on Morgan's mouth. She knew she'd just heard something, but she wasn't sure what it was.

Ryland said, "Look in her eyes, Jess. Just look in her eyes and relax for a second." Ryland leaned on the arm of the chair and studied Jesse, who was staring desperately into Morgan's face. Morgan let go and Jesse sat back and closed her eyes. Ryland spoke quietly. "I'm sorry, Sweetheart, but we have to finish this one while Morgan and I are with you. I can't have it come out while you're alone. Tell me what you saw."

Morgan worked on slowing her pounding heart and trying not to look as panicked as she felt. *What almost happened?* She searched Ryland's face for an answer. Ryland caught her eye and smiled reassuringly. Morgan turned to Jesse and waited to see what else she'd need to do to keep her from falling into oblivion. Jesse's eyes were closed, and Morgan felt Ryland's hand on her knee. She looked up, and Ryland mouthed, "She's okay. It's okay." Morgan nodded and took in a long, slow breath. She heard Ryland say again, "Tell me what you saw."

Jesse covered her eyes with a shaking hand. "They came in and he didn't hear them. They saw what he was doing and—"

She stopped, as Ryland knew she would. "You're doing fine. Now one more time, Jess, look at Morgan and let's all see what happened to your friend. Then we're done for today, I promise."

Jesse lowered her hand and looked at Ryland.

Morgan reached over, took Jesse's hand between hers and covered it. "I've got you, Jesse, and I'm not gonna let you go. I promise. I've got you, and I can bring you back and keep you safe." When Jesse's gaze finally shifted from Ryland, Morgan waited as Jesse wiped sweat from her forehead and cheeks with her free hand.

"They...they pinned me down on the floor. They put a gun to his head, then forced—" Her throat hurt as she took in a strangled breath. "Then forced his head down onto my face and—" She squeezed her eyes shut to block the image exploding through her brain. "And they *pulled the trigger!*"

Morgan stared in horror as Jesse crumpled into a ball on the couch, sobbing. Her mind was absolutely blank as she reached down and pulled Jesse into her arms, holding her tightly, wondering whether she'd ever be able to let go.

## **Chapter Ten**

Ryland decided to give everyone a break for the next few days. It had been five years since she'd seen her last patient, and she remembered now how draining therapy could be for everyone involved. This was the first time in forty years of practice she'd ever lived on the same property as her patient, and she wanted to move slowly while she felt her way into Jesse's head. She'd avoided the barn except for her morning rides with Morgan, giving Jesse a complete break from anything to do with therapy.

Morgan was out with one of the landowners clearing trails, and Ryland was ready to get out of the house and stretch. She'd ridden Barney that morning and her pocket was overflowing with

carrots to thank him for a wonderful time. On the way down the path, she ran into Cody coming toward the house.

"Good Morning, Dr. Caldwell. I was just coming up to speak to you. Do you have a minute?"

Cody's angelic demeanor never fooled her. She knew a snake disguised as a wagging tail when she saw one. "Of course, Cody. Can we talk on the way to the barn?"

Cody shook his head. "Actually, here would be better. I have a kind of dilemma, and I could use some advice."

Ryland walked over to her favorite bench. She loved the artistry of the metal work along the back, a fox sitting quietly in a field. She patted the spot next to her, inviting Cody to sit. "So, what's this dilemma?"

Cody sat, and did a fair imitation of a concerned young man. "Well, it's about Jesse. She and I get along pretty well, and I don't want to get her in trouble or anything, but what she's doing is against Ms. Davis' rules and it's kind of dangerous."

Ryland wondered where he was going with this. His foot nervously tapped under the bench, and swirls of red dotted his face. "What exactly is she doing? And I think it would be more appropriate for you to talk to Ms. Davis about whatever concerns you might have."

He shifted on the bench, crossing his feet at the ankles. "Well, like I said, I know she's always in trouble with Ms. Davis, and I didn't want to get her in more trouble by ratting her out." He reached down, picked up a leaf and started tearing pieces off it, then dropping them back to the ground.

Ryland never had much patience with people trying to manipulate her. "Cody, stop dancing around what you want to say. What do you think she's doing?"

He sighed dramatically. "Well, over the last few days, I've been finding cigarette butts behind the barn. There's no smoking anywhere on the farm, that's the rule. Today, I caught her back

there smoking, and when she saw me, she asked me not to say anything, but I'm worried the barn might burn down or something."

There was no doubt in Ryland's mind he was lying, but if Morgan even thought Jesse might be smoking near the barn, she'd climb all over her first and ask questions later.

She rested her hand lightly on Cody's shoulder, giving the impression they were both on the same side. "You're right, that's definitely a problem. I think it would be a good idea if I spoke to Ms. Davis about it. That way we can keep you out of the middle."

Cody acted relieved. "I'd really appreciate that, Dr. Caldwell. Thanks." Ryland watched as he headed back down the path to finish his work. There was a swagger in his step as he kicked through the leaves without even a passing glance at the beauty surrounding him.

Ryland stayed where she was, anxious now for Morgan to get home but worried about her reaction to Cody's "news." The wind played with the leaves around her feet. She brought the bag of carrots out of her pocket and absently played with the plastic as she walked the rest of the way to the barn.

The outdoor stalls were beautiful: silver pipe, painted and polished to perfection. Where an observer might expect dirt or spider webs in the corners, there was nothing but clean metal. Ten stalls lined this side of the barn, and she walked along them, quietly speaking to the horses and feeding each one a single carrot. Barney, who occupied the stall closest to the front of the barn, paced in a circle waiting for her to return to feed him what was left in the bag. The carrots disappeared one by one, with Barney getting the lion's share and the rest of the horses straining to see whether he'd gotten more than they had. The empty bag went into her pocket and Barney snuffled around her jacket, searching for more. Ryland's watch beeped, and she started back for the house, thankful she had a little time to gather her thoughts before Morgan returned.

When Morgan did finally come in for dinner, sore muscles sent her straight for the couch to stretch out. Ryland bent down and kissed her forehead before handing her a glass of wine.

Morgan took a sip and grinned. "So, you want me to relax before you tell me something I'm not gonna want to hear. I can read you like a book too, you know."

Ryland laughed and lay down next to her with her hand resting on Morgan's stomach, her head pillowed on her shoulder. "Shhh...just drink your wine and I'll pour you another glass when you're done."

"Uh oh. That bad, huh?" Morgan took another sip and put the glass on the coffee table. She wrapped Ryland in her arms and they lay quietly, enjoying each other's warmth. Occasionally, Morgan sipped her wine, not really wanting to break the mood. When she'd finished the last little bit in her glass, she kissed the top of Ryland's head. "Okay, I'm very relaxed and I have the woman I love in my arms. I know I don't want to hear this, but go ahead."

"Before I tell you, would you promise not to storm out of here with assault in your eyes?"

Morgan smiled again. "I promise."

Ryland eased into the subject, anticipating Morgan's reaction. "Cody came to see me today. Morgan, I don't trust him; I've told you that before."

Morgan nodded.

"Well, he said he's been finding cigarette butts behind the barn, and this morning he caught Jesse smoking back there. I'm ninety-nine percent sure he's lying though." Morgan stiffened beneath her and her hands curled into fists, bunching up the shirt on Ryland's back in the process.

When Morgan took a deep breath and relaxed her hands, Ryland breathed easier. "I am so glad you always keep your promises; thank you."

"What if he's not lying? What if she's smoking to challenge me again? Ryland, that has to be a no second chance rule."

"Do you want me to go with you when you talk to her?" Ryland pushed up off Morgan and let her swing into a sitting position.

Morgan put her head in her hands, thinking. "I need to search her room first, see if I find anything in there. It'd probably be better to have you with me so she can't accuse me of taking something—not that she has anything to take."

Ryland nodded and they walked slowly to the barn together, neither of them anxious for a confrontation. The door to the barn was standing open, and they stepped inside. Morgan called out, "Jesse?"

Jesse shouted down from the loft. "Yeah?"

Morgan quietly asked Ryland. "Why does she always have to push the envelope? I've told her when I call, she needs to come find me. What kind of employee shouts yeah to her boss?" She climbed the ladder and stood over Jesse. "Yeah? I don't think yeah is what you really meant to say."

Jesse, who'd just finished sweeping a pile of dirt into a dust pan, stood up and wiped sweat off her face with her shoulder. "What? I'm trying to get this finished so I can feed. I don't have time to jump every time you call." She watched Morgan's face harden and realized now probably hadn't been a good time to push. She shifted nervously and waited for the explosion.

Morgan glared at her, silently counting to thirty to give herself time to calm down. The longer she was quiet, the more anxious Jesse became. Though she was unaware of the countdown, at twenty-two, Jesse said, "If you go down, I'll be right down after you."

Morgan didn't move, and neither did Jesse. Morgan finally broke the silence. "That's good, because at thirty, you were going down without the benefit of the ladder."

Jesse shifted. "Yeah, I figured that." She followed Morgan down and hesitated when she saw Ryland standing next to her apartment door, waiting.

Morgan pointed to her room. "Open the door; I need to look inside."

Jesse straightened up from wiping hay off her jeans. It was Morgan's farm, but the apartment belonged to her. "Why?"

Morgan's temper inched up another notch as she pulled out a set of keys, unlocked the door to the apartment and stepped inside.

Ryland watched the color rise in Jesse's cheeks as Morgan rummaged through her personal belongings. She stepped forward to forestall the disaster she knew was about to occur but before she could get to her, Jesse's temper flared red and she barged into the apartment, slamming the door open hard enough for the door knob to put a hole in the wall. "Get the fuck out of my room!"

Whatever control Morgan had managed to maintain over the last several weeks disintegrated as she turned and started for Jesse, who jammed her shoulder into Morgan's stomach and rammed her backward into the wall. Morgan had been in her share of fights, and she grabbed Jesse around the hips while she was still bent over, lifted her off her feet and slammed her to the floor face first, landing on top of her with all her weight. She put her knee in Jesse's back and pushed herself up while pushing down on the knee. She happened to glance up at Ryland, whose angry scowl was focused directly on her. "What?"

"This is *her* room, Morgan. A simple explanation wouldn't have killed you."

Morgan pushed herself to a standing position, pulled Jesse up by her shirt and wondered how she'd ever allowed Ryland to talk her into this mess. "I was searching your room because I heard you've been smoking near the barn. I'm looking for cigarettes."

Jesse blinked in confusion as Morgan began another circuit of the room, opening cupboards and drawers. When Morgan lifted the

mattress off the box springs, she sighed and rested her head on the upturned mattress. An open pack of cigarettes lay on top of the box springs.

Ryland said quietly. "Are those yours, Jesse?"

"I don't smoke."

Morgan lowered the mattress. "She asked if those were yours."

"No."

Morgan held Ryland's eyes a second before starting for the barn door. "Let's go."

Ryland put her arm around Jesse's shoulders and they followed Morgan out into the sunshine and around behind the barn. Cody and Rico were working at the kennels. When Morgan called them, Cody immediately leaned his shovel against the chain link and Rico stepped out of a pen. The two of them walked over together. Cody jumped a small culvert and said, "Yes Ma'am?"

Morgan ignored him and addressed Rico first. "Rico, have you ever seen Jesse smoke on the farm, or anywhere for that matter?"

Rico was an honest man whom Morgan had been lucky to find five years earlier. He'd been mending one of the outdoor kennels, and he pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his brow. "No, Señora. I never see her. She no smoke when I see her."

"Cody?"

Jesse's chin lifted and understanding dawned when she saw Cody's reaction. Ryland leaned in and whispered. "Let him dig his own hole."

Jesse hesitated, then nodded just a fraction of an inch. At least she knew Ryland believed her.

Cody scuffed some dirt under his feet as though he really didn't want to say anything.

Ryland felt tension in her own shoulders and she carefully relaxed her posture. She was watching an Academy Award winning performance and didn't want Cody to think for an instant she wasn't buying it.

Morgan rested her hands on her hips. "I asked you a question, Cody."

Cody reluctantly answered. "Yes Ma'am, I have. I saw her smoking behind the barn this morning, and I found cigarette butts back there this last week."

"What time did you see her this morning?"

"About 4:15. I got here a little early to get a head start on the kennels."

"Did you confront her?"

"Yes Ma'am. I felt awful about it, but I was worried she might start a fire."

"What did she say?"

He shook his head and looked apologetically at Jesse. "She begged me not to tell you. She said she wouldn't do it anymore if I would just keep it to myself."

Morgan glanced at Ryland who was relieved to see a spark of amusement in Morgan's eyes.

Morgan turned back to Cody again. "She begged you?"

"Yes Ma'am." He looked at Jesse. "I'm sorry."

"All right, thanks Cody. Rico." Morgan shook hands with Rico and headed back to the barn. Ryland and Jesse followed. When they got inside, Morgan grabbed a clean rag and looked at Jesse. "Do you mind if I go in and get the cigarettes?"

Jesse shook her head.

Morgan went into the apartment and came out with the cigarettes wrapped in the cloth. She stopped next to Jesse on her way out of the barn, looked sideways at her and raised an eyebrow. "You begged?"

Jesse looked away to hide the hint of a smile she couldn't keep off her face.

Morgan put her hand on Jesse's shoulder. "I don't want you two playing baseball until I get this all sorted out. You understand me?"

Jesse had plans for Cody, and since she couldn't answer Morgan honestly, she stayed silent.

"Jesse, look at me."

Jesse did.

"No baseball. Period. Do you understand me?"

Jesse scowled. "How about just one inning?"

"None."

"All right, but when you're done, he's mine."

As she walked out, Morgan mumbled, "There won't be anything left when I'm done."

## **Chapter Eleven**

The doorbell rang at two the following morning. Morgan untangled her legs from Ryland's and sat up as Ryland pulled the clock around so she could see it better. Morgan smiled and leaned over to kiss Ryland's nipple in the sudden, cool air. "Damn...a wasted cold snap." She slipped out of bed and reached for her robe. "Who do you think's ringing our bell at two in the morning?"

Ryland shrugged into her robe as well. "I have no idea."

They went to the living room and pushed back the curtain on the front window. Jesse was crouched down, leaning against the porch railing, grabbing her head between her hands. Morgan jumped for the door and Ryland pulled her back. "We need to make her believe this is no big deal. She needs to know we're both in control, and that we can handle what's happening. Believe it or not, this a good thing."

Ryland went out first and knelt next to Jesse. She rested her hand on her back and spoke softly. "I guess it's time for another session, huh? Come on in, and we'll get more comfortable."

Jesse pushed to her feet and stumbled through the door. She started to go down on one knee but Morgan took her arm and led her to the couch. "C'mon, kid; I'm too old to sit on the floor."

The two of them sat on the couch while Ryland detoured into the kitchen. Jesse had her head between her knees, her hands wrapped in her hair. In a raspy voice she whispered, "My head's exploding."

Morgan glanced at the kitchen door, hoping Ryland was on her way out. "No it's not, Jess. I know it hurts, but it won't explode. I promise. Maybe you should slow your breathing down or something...try to relax a little."

Jesse rocked back and forth. "It hurts, and I can't stop it. I can usually stop it."

Ryland walked back into the room with a glass of water. "That's because we're letting some memories come out now. It's harder for you to keep them in on your own. You did exactly the right thing coming here." She touched Jesse, and when she didn't move, Ryland knelt in front of her and put her hand on her shoulder. "Here, drink some of this and we'll talk about what's happening, okay?" She turned to Morgan. "I put some coffee on. When it's ready, would you get us each a cup?"

Morgan was sitting sideways on the couch, her elbow resting on the back cushion, her head on her hand. "Coffee at two in the morning?"

Ryland moved around and sat in her chair. "This is going to take a little while, and you might want to be awake for it."

She smiled when Morgan raised sleepy eyebrows and said, "Good point."

Ryland turned her attention to Jesse, who still had her head on her knees. "Jesse, try to sit up and tell me what started the headache. Were you asleep?"

Jesse shook her head.

"Do you remember what you were thinking about when it started?"

Jesse nodded, then slowly sank sideways on the couch, pushing her hands into her head. "Make it stop...please, make it stop."

Ryland didn't ask any more questions. She sat back and laced her fingers together over one knee.

To Morgan's surprise, Jesse pushed herself into a sitting position, turned to face her and leaned back into the couch, still jamming her hands around her head. Sweat glistened on her face and neck. When she breathed, the air came out in quick, pain-filled gasps. "What do you see?"

Morgan glanced at Ryland, who stayed quiet. She looked back at Jesse and shrugged. "I guess I see...I...I don't know. What do you mean?"

Jesse spoke in a ragged whisper. "Tell me what you see on my face." Her eyes were watering from the pain.

"Jesse, I don't see anything. I don't know what you're asking."

Ryland leaned over and put her hand on Jesse's knee. "There's nothing on your face, Honey. That was a long time ago. It's all gone."

Jesse buried her face farther into the pillows. Ryland had to strain to hear her when she said, "It's there. I couldn't get it off. They left it there." She rubbed at her face with the sleeve of her shirt. "Why can't you see anything?"

Ryland put her hand between Jesse's face and sleeve to stop her. "It's not there physically, Little One, but it's still there up here." She tapped Jesse's forehead. "It's still in your subconscious. We're going to bring it out and wash it off and let it go."

Ryland sat back in the chair again. "Morgan, will you go get my hand mirror out of the bathroom please?"

Morgan was relieved to have something concrete to do. She walked through their bedroom and picked up Ryland's mirror. It was a beautiful, antique looking-glass with a silver patina she'd

given Ryland on her sixty-third birthday. She held it a minute, thinking about how lucky she'd been the day Ryland had walked into her life and what a truly amazing woman she was. She walked back into the living room and handed Ryland the mirror.

Ryland held it up to Jesse. "I want you to look at yourself in this mirror and tell me what you see."

Jesse turned her head away. "No."

Ryland continued to hold the mirror. "Why won't you look? You know there's nothing there."

Jesse punched her head. "I see it in here! If I see it in there, it will explode in here!" She punched her head again.

"Oh, I see. You're afraid your present reality is going to collide with memory, and that will be the end of Jesse...am I right?" Jesse didn't answer, and Ryland asked. "Have you ever looked in the mirror and seen blood and brains on your face?"

Morgan blanched as Jesse pushed in on her temples. After a few seconds, Jesse nodded.

"When?"

Jesse leaned forward to put her elbows on her knees, her head in her hands. "Can you make it stop hurting? I just want it to stop. I see black and it hurts."

"As we talk, the pressure in your head will go away, I promise. Now tell me, when have you seen blood and gore on your face?"

Jesse had to believe Ryland was right. She wouldn't survive much more pain, so she started to talk. "I wake up at night and remember seeing it. I...I can't get it off me."

"Like tonight?"

Jesse nodded.

"Do you think Morgan would ever lie to you?"

"No."

"Morgan, is there blood and gore on Jesse's face right now?"

Morgan put her hand on Jesse's back and pulled her upright by the shirt, taking Jesse's hands and holding them away from her face. She stared into Jesse's eyes, trying to communicate with more than just words. "I would tell you if there was anything there. Anything. There is nothing there."

Without taking her eyes off Jesse, she reached out for the mirror and Ryland put it in her hand. She held the mirror up in front of Jesse's face. "Look at your face. I promise on my mother's soul, there is nothing there."

Jesse slowly raised her eyes, fully expecting to see blood and gore clinging to her. A hollow-eyed woman stared back at her, but there was nothing on her face except exhaustion and fear. Her breathing slowed and she took the mirror from Morgan, wiping the tears with the sleeve of her shirt.

Once Jesse had the mirror, Ryland calmly said, "Tell me what it was like when his head exploded."

Morgan sat back and stared at Ryland, her mouth dropping open, her hands limp in her lap.

Jesse didn't take her eyes off the mirror. "While they were forcing his head down, he was screaming something in Spanish. I tried to turn my head, but someone held it so I couldn't. They were laughing, the other three."

"Did you scream?"

Jesse shook her head. She put down the mirror and leaned her head back on the couch. "He was so terrified...I wanted to help him." She closed her eyes and turned her head to the side.

"Did you?"

She nodded.

"How?"

"When his face was close enough to mine, I head butted him, really, really hard. I heard his nose crack, and I think he passed out."

"And what did you see?"

"I heard the explosion."

"You heard the explosion. What did you see?"

Jesse felt her forehead. "My head's not pounding anymore."

Ryland nodded. "Good. So tell me, what did you see?"

Jesse raised the mirror again and held it to her face. "There's nothing there."

Ryland reached over and gently took the mirror from Jesse's hand. "No, there's nothing there. What did you see?"

Jesse looked past Ryland, then over at Morgan. "They left."

"That's not what I asked."

The anger began to simmer now that she could think again. "I *couldn't* see."

"Why not?"

Jesse growled, and Morgan jumped when she reached over and grabbed the collar of her robe. "Make her shut up! She keeps asking the wrong questions!"

Ryland moved forward and sat on the coffee table so she could pry Jesse's hands off Morgan's robe. "Let go." When Jesse let go, Ryland sat back. "Morgan's here, and she's not going anywhere. Now look at her and tell me what you saw."

Jesse turned on Ryland. "I told you, Goddamn it, I couldn't see anything!"

"And I asked you why you couldn't see. Why couldn't you see anything?"

"I just can't see! What don't you understand?" She leaned over and put the side of her head on the back of the sofa close to Morgan's shoulder.

Morgan reached up and laid her hand on Jesse's cheek. "Relax, Jesse. She's just trying to help you. Answer her question."

Ryland shifted a little on the coffee table. "Morgan has you. I'm here. You survived whatever happened in that room. I wasn't there with you, Jesse. I can't help if you don't describe what

happened. Let's try it another way. Can you describe sounds? What things felt like? Taste...anything like that?"

"I couldn't breathe."

"Why not?"

Jesse reached up and rubbed her temple. "His head—" She pressed harder. "What was left of his head," She put her other hand up and pressed both sides, then buried her forehead in Morgan's shoulder. "His head was covering my nose and mouth. They left his exploded head on me, and I couldn't breathe."

"How did you finally breathe?"

Jesse didn't move for a long time, and Ryland let her remember what she had to remember. She finally turned her face toward Ryland, her head still on Morgan's shoulder. All the tension left her face, leaving her tired and drawn. "I just pushed him off. They didn't tie me up. They just left us there." She pushed herself up and walked to the door. "We're done, aren't we?"

Ryland heard abject defeat in the statement. She followed her to the door. "Yes, we're done for this morning. I'm very proud of you."

Exhaustion was etched into every line of Jesse's face as she rested her head against the door. "Why, Ryland? I don't want to remember anymore. Why can't I just never remember any of it? It makes me sick, and I'm not sure I can live with what I do remember. What if the rest—" She leaned on her forehead and tears fell from her cheeks to the floor.

Ryland pulled her close and held her. "The rest may very well be worse—it probably *is* worse—but you can live with it because Morgan and I can live with it. I give you my solemn word, no matter what we find, you will not be diminished in our eyes. You are strong. You survived, and you'll continue to survive."

Jesse pushed away from Ryland, tears streaming down her face. "What if I don't want to survive anymore? What if I'm tired?"

Morgan came over and gently took Jesse's shoulders. She turned her so they were facing each other. "We'll do this together, you and I. Ryland will show us where to go, but I promise you won't be going alone. I know we fight a lot, but you need to know I won't leave you. I give you my word on that." She surprised Ryland by putting her forehead against Jesse's. "You have to survive because I need you to survive." She stayed like that a second, wiping away Jesse's tears with her thumbs, then she straightened and opened the door. "C'mon... Ryland and I'll walk you back to the barn."

The two of them helped Jesse back to her room, then waited until the light went out under the door. Morgan put her arm around Ryland's shoulders, Ryland slipped an arm around Morgan's waist, and they slowly walked back up the path toward home. Ryland stopped halfway home and turned to face her friend. "Morgan, do you remember that young man I told Jesse about? The one who was tortured in Vietnam?"

Morgan nodded.

"What I didn't tell her was that he hung himself. In his note, he said he was too tired to go on. That happens sometimes in my business, and you need to know that. We play God and try to help, but ultimately, sometimes, we lose."

Morgan had known suicide was a dim possibility, but hearing Ryland bring it into the open sickened her. She pulled Ryland closer and continued up the path toward the house, keeping her thoughts to herself.

Ryland tucked herself under Morgan's arm, worried about what would happen if Jesse gave up, and hoping she'd be able to work the miracle she was beginning to think they'd need.

## **Chapter Twelve**

The next morning, Jesse awoke to the sun streaming through her window. She jerked around and grabbed her clock. Seven-

thirty. "Shit." She jumped out of bed, threw on her jeans, grabbed a t-shirt and ran out the door. The t-shirt stuck on her head and she pulled it on the rest of the way as she headed for the hay.

Morgan was leaning over the feed table studying the feed book. "They're all fed and doctored, Sleeping Beauty. I don't like doing work I'm paying you to do, so don't make this a habit." She glanced up at Jesse. "I checked Cabo's hooves since you put in here you thought he might have thrush. I didn't see anything, but keep an eye on it anyway."

Jesse nodded and headed toward her apartment.

"I need you with me today out at the Johnson's place. We tore up part of his fence during cubbing the other day, and a couple jumps need work. Get some breakfast and we'll head out."

Jesse reached for her doorknob. "I'm not hungry." She went in to get her boots on.

Morgan turned a page in the book and muttered, "Of course you're not. If I said we didn't have time to eat, you'd be famished."

Jesse came out and walked outside. She jumped in the bed of the truck and made herself comfortable with her back up against the cab. Morgan opened the driver's door. "You can ride inside, you know."

"I'm fine."

Morgan got in and tuned the radio to her favorite classical station. If she didn't have conversation, she'd at least have music. There were several stops they needed to make before they headed to the hunt fixture to repair the fences; she made a quick list in her mind. They'd need to stop in town for a few supplies, and she had to stop at Jake Tate's place to pick up the come-along he'd borrowed from her to tighten some of his fences.

They pulled into a parking space on Main Street. Jesse stayed in the truck while Morgan went to the bank, then to the hardware store to pick up a few fencing supplies. When she was finished, she ran into the market and bought a few things. Jesse had her head up

against the back window, her eyes closed and her arms resting on her knees when Morgan walked back to the truck and tossed a carton of milk and some pastries at her. "Here, you anti-social little shit, eat something."

As Morgan climbed behind the wheel and started the truck, Jesse smiled as she grabbed the pastry and milk. Hunger pangs had tugged at her on the way into town, but she wasn't about to admit that to Morgan. The last of the pastry disappeared as they turned down the dirt road leading to Tate's farm.

Jesse surprised Morgan when she jumped out of the truck and followed her to the pens where some cowboys were branding cattle. The owner, Jake Tate, straddled the top of a cattle chute, pushing some steers forward with a cattle prod. Jesse leaned against the corral fence as Morgan walked over to Jake.

"Jake, looks like you're hard at work."

Jake jumped down off the chute, took off his glove, and shook hands with Morgan. "Good to see you. How's Ryland doing?"

"Better than ever, thanks. How's Julie?"

"She's in the house. Come on in and say hello." He started for the ranch house, but Morgan stopped him.

"I wish I could, but I can't stay long today. I just needed to pick up that come-along I lent you the other day."

Jake nodded. "No problem. It's over here." He started toward the fence but stopped when he saw Jesse. His hands curled around the cattle prod as he stormed over to where she was standing. "What the fuck are you doing on my land? Get off my property, now!" His face turned an angry shade of reddish-purple as he pointed the cattle prod at Jesse, who cocked her head to the side and smiled slightly.

Morgan came up behind him. "Jake, what's the matter? She's with me. She works for me."

Jake ignored her. "I said get off my property!" Without warning, he shoved the cattle prod up against Jesse's stomach and pushed the button, sending a shock of electricity into her.

Jesse didn't jump. She didn't even flinch. She looked down at the cattle prod, then back up at Jake with a deadly set to her eyes. All animation left her face as she said very quietly, "They don't hurt as much as you think, Jake, but you're sure as hell gonna be hurting when I'm—"

Morgan pushed herself between the two of them and grabbed the cattle prod out of Jake's hand. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Jake?" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jesse push off the fence and lunge toward them. She dropped the cattle prod, rammed her elbow into Jesse's chest and pushed her back into the fence.

"Get in the truck, Jesse! *Now!*"

Jake reached over Morgan's shoulder to grab Jesse, and Morgan shoved him in the other direction. Jesse tried to push her aside to get at Jake, so Morgan turned around, grabbed her by the arm and the back of her pants, and threw her toward the truck. Morgan immediately turned back to Jake and put her hand on his chest. "Just give me the come-along and we'll leave. I'll stop back later and we can talk."

Jake glanced over her shoulder and she quickly looked behind her to see Jesse coming back toward them.

When Jesse registered the storm in Morgan's face, she slowed, then stopped and backed a few steps toward the truck.

Too little, too late as far as Morgan was concerned. She headed for Jesse, who sped up and reached the truck just ahead of her. Morgan ripped open the passenger door and shoved Jesse into the seat before she slammed the door and stalked back toward Jake. "What's all this about? What did she do?" She stood in front of him, her hands on her hips, waiting to hear what he had to say.

Jake walked over, grabbed the come-along and handed it to her. "Don't ever bring her back here, Morgan, or that'll be the end of our friendship." He reached down and picked up the cattle prod before heading to his house.

Morgan hefted the come-along over her shoulder and watched him until he'd gone inside. She turned toward the cowboys who'd been standing next to the cattle chute, watching. Almost all of them had come under Morgan's wrath at one time or another, and none of them wanted any part of it now. They hustled back to work as soon as she looked their way.

Morgan walked to the truck and threw the come-along in the back. She jerked open the passenger door, ordered Jesse out and slammed it shut again. "Get in the back, now!"

Jesse climbed onto the rear tire and swung her leg over the side of the truck. She sat with her back up against the cab and refused to look at Morgan when she opened the driver's side door and got in. Morgan shoved the truck into gear and spun out toward the main road. Jesse had to brace herself against the side to keep from being thrown around inside the bed.

Morgan picked up the truck phone and called Ryland. "Would you mind very much if I kill her?"

Ryland was quiet. Normally she'd think Morgan was joking, but something in her tone told her she was really upset. "What happened?"

"I have no clue, but I'm gonna kill her when we get to Johnson's." Morgan held the phone between her shoulder and ear while she downshifted and slowed to check for traffic as she turned onto the main road.

"Morgan, Honey, I need a little more than that if you want me to help sort things out."

Morgan accelerated onto the main road. When she came up to another car faster than she'd anticipated, she looked down at her speedometer and saw that she was going eighty in a fifty-five mile

an hour zone. "Shit." She braked to sixty and tried to calm down. "I don't know what just happened. I stopped at Jake's to get the come-along. Jesse got out of the truck with me. Jake saw her, went ballistic and ordered her off his property. When she didn't move, he zapped her with the cattle prod."

"He *what*?"

"She didn't even move when he zapped her, but I had a hell of a time keeping the two of them apart until I could get Jesse corralled in the truck. She totally ignored me when I ordered her to get to the truck! I'm gonna kill her!"

"Wait a minute, Morgan. He used a *cattle prod* on her? And she didn't jump or move or anything?"

Morgan processed that a minute. "Well, no. She just stood there and kind of smiled...kind of. Then I thought she'd tear him limb from limb, she looked that pissed off."

Ryland paused. "I'm not sure Jesse was dealing with a full deck of cards right at the moment you told her to get to the truck, Morg. I'd bet a lot of money they used a cattle prod on her down in that room, wouldn't you? Actually, I'm relieved she didn't tear *you* limb from limb when you kept her away from him. She really didn't do too bad, considering."

Morgan slowed and downshifted again as she came up to the turn onto Johnson's land. She turned onto the dirt road, all the while considering what Ryland had said. "I see what you mean. All right, I won't kill her. I'll just throw her out of the truck and run her over a few times."

Ryland laughed. "Okay, Honey. I'll see you when you get home."

Morgan sighed heavily. "I love you, Ry."

"I love you too."

"We'll get through this together if you can just keep me sane."

"Yes we will, and yes I can."

Morgan smiled a little as she pulled the truck as close to the pasture as possible. They'd have to walk a mile or so, but that was probably a good thing. She stepped to the back of the truck and opened the tailgate. She pointed to the gate and said, "Get your ass over here."

Jesse considered her options, completely aware that Morgan had wanted to tear her head off at Tate's. She slid to the end of the bed and hung her legs over the edge, keeping a little distance between her and Morgan.

Morgan put her foot on the part of the bumper that extended past the side of the tailgate and rested her arms on her knee. They sat there while Morgan studied Jesse and Jessie studied her boots. Morgan said, "What was that all about? And don't give me any bullshit...I'm not in the mood."

Jesse looked over at Morgan's boot and shrugged. "I went to his farm a few days before I came to work for you. I asked him about a job, and he laughed. I started to leave, and he said he'd pay me to service his cowboys." She angrily brushed some dirt off her pants. "I made a few choice comments about the size of his dick." She shrugged again. "I might have mentioned that with a dick that small he's probably been in some pretty tight spots with his cowboys and he probably gave them all the service they needed."

Morgan dropped her chin to her chest and rubbed her face with her hands. She shook her head, then looked up at Jesse again.

"He came after me and we got into a fight." Jesse shifted her gaze up to Morgan's knee. "Well, he's not that big, and I got him in a fireman's carry and threw him into a water trough." She finally met Morgan's eyes. "I guess I kinda' held his head under the water for a while until he'd almost stopped struggling. Then I left—well, I pulled his head out of the water first—then I left."

Morgan stood there, clearly nonplussed. "And you're telling me that after all that, he didn't report you to the sheriff?"

Jesse squinted at her. "And tell him what? That a 135 pound woman beat him up and held him under the water?"

Morgan stood up and ran her fingers through her hair. "Jesus H. Christ." She reached into the bed and got the come-along. "Grab that other shit and let's go."

Jesse picked up the bag of supplies and followed about ten paces behind Morgan. They walked for a while in silence before Morgan stopped and abruptly turned.

Jesse stopped and backed up a step.

Morgan walked back and Jesse backed up some more. "Stay."

Jesse stopped and crossed her arms. She studied the ground as Morgan came back to her. "You got out of the truck on purpose, didn't you? You meant to antagonize him."

Jesse continued to stare at the ground.

"Didn't you?"

Jesse raised her eyebrows and met Morgan's eyes. "Well, you think maybe I could take the fifth on that one?"

Morgan nodded, sighed and started walking again. "That's a very good idea."

Jesse caught up to her and Morgan put her arm around her shoulders as they walked. "You little shit."

### **Chapter Thirteen**

The following day, they were sitting in the living room getting ready to start another session. Jesse was standing by the window, staring out, her hands in her pockets, wishing she could be anywhere but in this room.

Ryland said for the third time, "Jesse, come over here and sit down." Morgan started to get up to make her come to the sofa, but Ryland held up her hand to stop her. She put an index finger to her lips and shook her head.

Morgan was getting irritated, so she got up and went out to the kitchen to get something to drink. She pushed through the swinging door, and as she was reaching into the refrigerator for the orange juice she heard the front door open and close. Still holding the juice in one hand and a glass in the other, she pushed the kitchen door open to see who'd come in. Ryland was the only one left in the room. Morgan looked from her to the front door. "What happened?"

Ryland shrugged, then walked to the front door and locked it. "Jesse left."

"And you're okay with that?"

"No, I'm not okay with it, but I understand it." She looked at her watch, then raised her eyebrows. "We seem to have some unexpected, unscheduled time on our hands. I don't think Jesse will be back on her own today." She returned to the armchair and patted a small portion of the cushion next to her. Morgan set the glass and the juice container on the coffee table and wedged herself in. Ryland edged around so she was sitting sideways on Morgan's lap, her back on one armrest, her legs hanging over the other. Morgan put her arm around Ryland's shoulder and Ryland rested her head on Morgan's chest, playfully feathering Morgan's breasts with her thumb. "This is better than therapy any day."

Morgan knew a hint when she heard one. She lifted Ryland's face and met her lips with her own. She brushed her tongue over Ryland's mouth, savoring the faint taste of cherry blush as her fingers lightly stroked Ryland's breast and she felt the nipple respond. Ryland groaned softly, and Morgan's own body ached with pleasure. As Ryland relaxed into Morgan's arms, she whispered, "*Much* better than therapy...."

They rested in the chair a while, enjoying each other's bodies and talking quietly until Ryland stood and pulled Morgan to her feet. "Maybe we should let Jesse leave more often." Her lips found Morgan's one more time; then she stepped away. "Let's get you

that drink so you can go back to work and I can finish reading my book." She led Morgan into the kitchen where she poured two glasses of orange juice. She set them at the counter and they pulled out two stools and sat.

Morgan caught Ryland's eyes over the lip of her glass. "I love making love to you."

Ryland caressed Morgan's face. "I have to admit, I've had a lot of patients miss appointments, but I've never enjoyed myself quite this much because of it."

Talking about appointments made Morgan think about the afternoon schedule and she reluctantly changed the subject. "So, what do we do about Jesse?"

Ryland swiveled her seat so she was facing Morgan, who did the same so that her legs were on either side of Ryland's. Ryland said, "You know, she honestly doesn't remember what happened to her. Think about the few things we've been able to bring out so far. Any one of those would be enough to destroy some people. She lived through those and, I think, a lot more. It may look to you like she's getting better, but I see her falling apart, and she's terrified."

Morgan played with her glass, swirling the juice around until a whirlpool formed. "I did think maybe she was getting better. She doesn't seem as angry anymore, and she's remembering things."

"Yes, but it's precisely the lack of anger that concerns me. Her anger's kept her alive this last year. Is she getting better or just giving up?"

Morgan set the glass down. "I forgot to ask you something yesterday. Why did you say her experiences wouldn't diminish her in our eyes? Why would you even need to say that? I'd never look down on her for what those assholes did."

Ryland reached over and picked up Morgan's hand, rubbing her thumb over the wedding band she'd given her ten years earlier. "I know it's not one of your strengths, but I'd like you to try to recognize the range of emotions Jesse experiences when we're

working with her. You see a lot, but you miss a lot too. She's ashamed Morg. We saw her with blood and brains and gore all over her face, and she's ashamed. What else does she have to let us see? And, in her mind at least, how much more can we take before we turn away from her in disgust? I was letting her know that no matter what happened to her, she won't be diminished, that we won't be disgusted and we won't turn away."

Morgan listened, but she really didn't understand. What she did understand was that she had work she needed to get to. "So, since she's gone, should I just go back to work and forget about today?"

Ryland ran her thumb over Morgan's chin. "Oh, I don't think I'd forget about the *whole* day." The love she saw in Morgan's eyes overwhelmed her. No one deserved to be as happy as she was when they were together. The two of them walked out to the living room together. The book she'd been reading had fallen to the floor, and she bent down and picked it up before putting on her reading glasses. "Anyway, at this point, memories won't stop coming just because she tells them to. She'll be back, and when she is, we'll be here."

"All right, then. I'm headed back down to the kennels. See you at dinner time." Morgan grabbed a light jacket out of the hall closet and walked down to the barn, expecting Jesse to be working on the bridles she'd told her to mend. When she didn't find her, she checked around the kennels and then around the entire perimeter of the buildings. Rico was changing the oil in one of the tractors, a 1953 Ford Jubilee she'd learned to drive when she was twelve years old and helping her father on their farm. She walked over and asked whether he'd seen Jesse anywhere.

"Si, Señora...there." He pointed toward the forest that edged the eastern part of her farmland.

The forest was large enough that she'd need a horse if she had any hope of finding Jesse before nightfall. She went into the barn

and saddled Kanab. He needed some extra exercise, so she decided to use the time to take him through his paces. They rode out past the tractors and turned East, tacking back and forth through the forest for over an hour, checking all the places she thought Jesse might be. The leaves on the trees were still wet, and as she rode through them, tiny drops came off and slid down her jacket, eventually soaking into the legs of her jeans. The smells and sounds of the forest lulled her into a peaceful frame of mind until she began to reflect on what they'd talked about this afternoon.

She enjoyed watching Ryland in her element, but some of the time she had no idea what her friend was talking about. She'd mentioned shame, terror, anger, and disgust. All Morgan had been aware of was the anger. Now, thinking back, she recognized the shame, and understood the terror, but the disgust bothered her. *Does Jesse honestly believe I could be disgusted enough to walk away? How many times do I have to tell her I'm not going anywhere?* She also wondered whether Jesse would really just give up because of what she'd been through. The idea of suicide was so totally out of Morgan's realm of thinking that she hadn't really given the idea a second thought.

Turning south, she eventually rode out into a clearing where she used to come when she needed to be alone. Jesse stood at the edge of a cliff, overlooking a two hundred foot drop to a creek bed below. The forest ended about a hundred yards from the cliff, and a field of Kentucky Bluegrass blanketed the gentle incline to where Jesse stood. Morgan reined Kanab to a halt and watched her, wondering exactly what was going through her mind as she looked out over the valley. Jesse hadn't brought a jacket, and she was standing absolutely still, her arms crossed in front of her chest, her legs slightly apart. Morgan dismounted and tied Kanab to a tree. She walked through the knee-high grass until she was close enough for her voice to carry up to where Jesse was standing. "Mind if I join you?"

Jesse didn't say anything, so Morgan climbed up and stood next to her. As she shoved her hands into her back pockets, she breathed deeply. "It's beautiful, isn't it? I used to come here a lot. I'd sit here and solve all the problems in my pathetic little world."

Jesse turned her head slightly and said softly, "Morgan, are you ever afraid?"

Morgan nodded. "Sometimes."

They stood quietly until Jesse pulled her arms in tighter to her body. "I'm more afraid than I've ever been in my life. What if I can't do this? What if—" She stopped and turned away. "What would happen to you and Ryland if I weren't here? If...if I left...would you be okay?"

Morgan watched the creek wind its way through the valley. She realized Jesse wasn't simply asking whether they could run the farm without her, and she framed her answer carefully. "Jesse, you and I are a lot alike: stubborn, impetuous, strong-willed, strong. I want to ask you something before I answer your question. Today, Ryland told me you might think that if what happened to you was too horrible, we'd be too disgusted to be around you or to want you around us. Is that true?"

Jesse's face turned a bright red, and she covered her eyes with a trembling hand.

Morgan put her hands on Jesse's shoulders and turned her around so they were facing each other. She reached up and gently pulled Jesse's hand down. "I have another question. If someone had raped Ryland, really brutalized her, and she worked up the courage to tell you about it, to completely describe the details because she needed to talk about it to someone, would you be too disgusted to ever want to spend time with her again?"

Jesse wiped some tears away from her cheeks with the back of her hand. "Of course not."

Morgan put her hand on Jesse's chin and made her meet her eyes. "Are you so much better than Ryland and me that you really think *we'd* be disgusted with *you* because of what happened?"

Jesse slowly leaned into Morgan, who wrapped her arms around her and held her against her chest. Jesse stared out over the valley, thinking about the memories that had surfaced in the last few weeks. "It's a long way down, isn't it?"

Morgan didn't know what to say, so she kept quiet.

Jesse hadn't expected an answer, and when she'd gathered her thoughts, she said, "I guess we've climbed a little way up, and for some reason, we're roped together. If we just keep climbing maybe we'll reach the top." She pushed back from Morgan and held her eyes for a moment. "Morgan, do you think it's possible, or am I just too fucked up to make it?"

Morgan looked at the dark circles surrounding Jesse's eyes and put her hands on the younger woman's shoulders. "I think the only way we can make it is if we trust Ryland to show us where to go. She's good, Jesse, and if we have any chance of making it, it'll be because of her."

The breeze picked up, and Jesse shivered from the cold autumn air. Morgan had on thermals and a wool shirt, so she took off her jacket and held it out. Jesse started to refuse but Morgan stepped behind her and held it open for her to put her arms through. "Put it on and don't argue with me. All I need is for my stable hand to get sick and leave me with all the feeding."

Jesse reluctantly shrugged into the jacket as they walked through the field to where Kanab was tethered. They gathered his reins and walked quietly through the forest with the soft sounds of nature surrounding them. Jesse walked carefully so she wouldn't startle the wildlife into an unnatural silence.

There was a lot going on in Morgan's mind as the two of them walked back to the farm. She marveled at how much this irritating,

rude, exasperating young woman had managed to change her—deep down change her—in the last six weeks.

They reached the barn and Morgan started inside. Jesse took Kanab's reins and pushed her back. "If you go back to the house, I'll take care of Kanab and meet you guys there when I'm done."

Morgan pursed her lips and regarded Jesse a minute. "No, I think we'll both take care of Kanab, then head to the house together."

Jesse didn't move. "Why do you always have to argue with everything I say?"

Morgan smiled. "Because I'm the boss, and I get to."

Jesse smiled a little too. "Oh yeah, I forgot about that." She led Kanab into the barn and they dried him off, brushed him, put a blanket on him, and buckled it into place.

When they'd finished, they walked into the house and found Ryland in the kitchen, sticking cloves in a ham she was about to put in the oven. She pointed to some potatoes as though she'd fully expected the two women to walk in. "Jesse, wash and chop those potatoes for me, will you? Morgan, I need two onions cut into slices."

The women looked at each other, then rolled up their sleeves. Jesse scrubbed the potatoes with a brush shaped like an ear of corn and chopped them into quarters. Morgan sliced the onions and set them on the counter next to the ham.

Ryland pointed to the sink. "Jesse, would you mind cleaning those pans and dishes while Morgan sets a fire in the fireplace?"

Jesse pointed at Morgan. "Why can't she do the dishes?"

Morgan stopped on her way out the door. "Because I'm getting the firewood—now get out the damn dish soap and stop whining."

Jesse mumbled something under her breath as she bent down to look under the sink for the soap. Morgan glanced at Ryland, who was listening to the two of them with affectionate amusement.

The side of Morgan's mouth quirked up a fraction before she went outside to grab some wood.

Once the ham was in, the kitchen clean and the fire started, Ryland poured three glasses of Manzanilla Sherry and set a bowl of almonds out on the coffee table. "Okay, shall we begin?"

The change in routine put Jesse off balance. She'd gotten used to coming in and immediately going to the couch, and she liked knowing what was about to happen. This new twist, wine and almonds, made her wary as she moved to the couch and sat.

Ryland picked up a glass and handed it to her. "This is a wonderful sherry. Morgan and I bought a few bottles the last time we were in Sanlucar, a little community of Andalucia in southern Spain."

Jesse carefully accepted the glass at the same time she turned her head and met Morgan's eyes. Her eyebrows rose in a question mark, and Morgan answered with a shrug as she accepted a glass from Ryland.

Ryland picked up a glass and held it out in a toast. "To us." The other two gently met her glass with their own and everyone sat back and sipped the sherry. Ryland grabbed a few almonds and popped them into her mouth. She motioned for Jesse to take some as well. "You'd better have some or I'm pretty sure you'll be under the table rather quickly. My guess is you didn't eat lunch—am I right?"

Jesse leaned forward to grab a handful of almonds. She kept her head down as she was reaching for them and looked up at Ryland with suspicion in her eyes. "Should I be worried about anything? 'Cause you're making me really nervous."

Ryland took a sip, smiling at her over the rim of her glass. "Enjoy your sherry, Jess, because I've decided we're not pussy footing around anymore. Life is going to get a hell of a lot harder from here on out."

Jesse threw the handful of almonds into her mouth, then knocked back her sherry, wondering what Ryland thought was harder than what she'd already been through.

The butterflies that had all but disappeared for Morgan in the last few weeks suddenly reappeared. She grabbed a few almonds herself, so nervous she felt like she was the one in counseling instead of Jesse. She crossed one leg over her knee and her arms over her chest, unconsciously curling up into a tight ball.

Ryland snuck a quick glance at her. She chuckled at Morgan's reaction as she took another sip of sherry and set the glass on the coffee table. "So, Jesse, let's get started. I want you to describe the room you were in: the furniture, the walls, decorations, everything."

Jesse leaned forward to grab the bottle of sherry but Ryland snatched it off the table. "Whoa there." She got up and took the bottle into the kitchen and brought out some bread and olive oil. "Here, you can tear into this if you want. Now tell me about the room. First of all, do know where you were?"

Jesse decided against the bread. She didn't want to heave it up before the afternoon was through. "I don't know." Her shoulders lifted in apology. "And I'm not saying that 'cause I don't want to tell you. All I remember is the room, and the hallway, and the stairs leading up."

"I believe you, don't worry. So let's start with the room, shall we?"

Jesse's eyes shifted up and right while she tried to remember. "The walls were dirt...like they'd carved it out of dirt."

Jesse's head slowly turned farther to the right as she studied the walls of the room. "There's nothing on the walls...no furniture...mostly just dirt and—" She stopped and shook her head.

"And?"

"And brains and blood. And a body." She rubbed her arms as a chill spread through her body. Her gaze dropped down and to the right as she stared intently at something.

"What are you seeing?"

No answer.

"Where are you in the room?"

"I'm up against the back wall."

"Where's the body?"

Her eyes shifted down and to the right again.

"Tell me about the body."

Jesse shook her head, then closed her eyes and turned completely to her left so her shoulder was up against the couch and her legs were pulled up slightly onto the cushion.

"Turn around and face me—*now*." Ryland bit off the words, leaving no doubt who was in control.

Surprised, Jesse turned to face her, but still refused to meet her eyes.

"Now, look at the body and tell me what you see."

If Ryland hadn't been watching for it, she wouldn't have seen Jesse's head turn imperceptibly to the right. She sat up when Jesse leaned forward, a green tint rising in her face. The bread and oil were still on the table and Ryland picked them up and handed them to Morgan. "Take these into the kitchen, would you please, Morgan?"

Morgan took the food into the kitchen. When she returned, Ryland was headed toward the back door. "Let's go sit outside for a while, shall we?"

Jesse didn't move, and Morgan walked over and pulled her up off the sofa. Jesse tried to pull away. "I don't want to. I think I'm gonna be sick."

Morgan nodded. "I think that's why we're headed outside."

"I won't be sick if we don't go out with her."

Morgan hauled her around the low table, pushing her gently toward the back door. "I'll try not to be sick either, but no guarantees, okay?"

Jesse nodded and followed Ryland out the door. "No guarantees."

Morgan downed a glassful of sherry and went out after them. Ryland sat in the grass waiting. Jesse sat down a little ways from her with her legs crossed and Morgan finished the circle.

Several times in the last few weeks, Ryland had let Jesse dictate the tone of the sessions, but today she wanted to push. She let a caustic edge slip into her voice. "Okay, Jess, you can throw up to your heart's content out here. We're not playing games anymore. Now tell me what you saw."

Jesse glared at her, anger and irritation returning to her face. She wasn't sure she liked this new side of Ryland. "Fuck you!"

Ryland leaned forward. "Not now, and not ever. Now cut the crap and tell me what you saw."

Morgan's eyes nearly shot out of her head. She quickly composed herself so Jesse wouldn't see her reaction, but she'd never seen this side of Ryland.

Jesse growled, "Fine, you want to know what I saw? I saw rats! Lots of fucking rats, eating his fucking brains out, okay? Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Morgan leaned back on her hands, swiveling her head between the two women, waiting for the next volley.

"It's a start. Okay, so there are rats. Did they ever come after you?"

"I don't—" Jesse's head involuntarily jerked left and her eyebrows plunged. She stood up and Ryland saw the pulse quickening in her neck.

Ryland stood up, and Morgan followed. Ryland said, "I'll allow you to stand if you don't leave. You start to leave and

Morgan is going to stop you, one way or the other. Do you understand?"

Jesse blinked, surprised to see Ryland standing there. "What?"

"I said I will allow you to stand if you don't leave. If you start to leave, Morgan will stop you one way or the other. Do you understand?"

Jesse slowly sank back down, followed by Ryland and Morgan.

Ryland said, "I'm too damn old to be jumping up and down with you, so make up your mind and stick with it."

Jesse stared at Ryland, not sure what to do or say.

"So answer me—did the rats ever come after you?"

Jesse continued to stare at Ryland. "What do *you* see, Ryland? What do you see that I don't?"

"I see a brutal sadist who wants to inflict the most physical and emotional pain he can before he kills the woman who shot his brother. Now, I answered your question, you answer mine because I'm getting tired of asking it. Did the rats ever come after you?"

Jesse rubbed her leg, trying to remember. "I'm not sure. I see quick pictures in my mind, me in the room with the rats. Then nothing."

"Why are you rubbing your calf?"

Jesse looked down at her hand, then back at Ryland. "I don't know." She pulled up the cuff of her jeans and looked at the back of her leg where pitted scars disfigured the skin. That wasn't her leg. She'd never seen the scars before. The dirt room blurred around her as blood drained from her head and she fell forward onto the grass, unconscious.

Morgan slid over and pushed her onto her back. She watched as Ryland reached into her pocket and pulled out a capsule of smelling salts.

"Here, I thought we'd be needing these pretty soon. Break it and wave it under her nose." Ryland continued to hold it out until

Morgan reached over and took it from her, disquiet in her eyes as she studied her friend.

Ryland took a second to reassure her. "Morgan, I told you it was going to get harder. That means I get harder too. I love you, and you're seeing a side of me I'd rather you'd never have to see." She sighed. "A big part of being a psychologist is being able to morph into whatever the patient needs. That's what separates mediocre therapy from the exceptional."

Morgan relaxed a little and nodded. "I love you too, Ry, and nothing—" She looked at Jesse. "*Absolutely* nothing will ever change that." She broke the capsule and held it under Jesse's nose.

It took a few seconds before the capsule took effect. Jesse coughed, grabbed Morgan's wrist and pushed it away from her face before rolling onto her stomach with her head facing away from the other two. She made her mind an absolute blank, not wanting to remember anymore about the rats or the room or the scars that had suddenly appeared on the back of her leg.

Ryland waited, letting Jesse lie quietly a while before she moved over next to her leg. She pulled up the cuff of the pants and rubbed the area with her thumb, trying to picture what had happened so she could help Jesse remember. The picture gradually came into focus. She said, "Where are your hands, Jesse?"

Nothing.

"He did it again, didn't he? Are you in the door?"

A shake of the head.

"So where are your hands?"

"Just leave me alone, Ryland."

"Jesse, we're done when I tell you we're done. I asked you a question—where are your hands?"

Silence.

Ryland had no intention of letting Jesse dictate this session. "Okay, Morgan, you can go on back down to the kennels. I'm not going to waste your time waiting around for her. She and I will sit

here all night if we have to, and we'll get through the rest of this session without you."

When Morgan got up and started walking toward the path, Jesse raised up onto her elbows. "Hey, you can't just leave!" She kept walking, and Jesse turned to Ryland. "She can't just leave!" When Ryland didn't say anything, Jesse stood up. She needed Morgan in case something happened. "Fine! Okay! You win!"

The edge crept back into Ryland's voice. "Sit down. Now."

Jesse watched Morgan as she walked around a corner of the path and disappeared. She turned back to Ryland and sat down with a worried look on her face. The two of them sat without saying a word. Five minutes passed, then ten. Still Ryland stared at Jesse, who kept looking back down the path. She just wanted Ryland to say something so they could get Morgan back in case something happened. "What do you want, Ryland? I said I'd do what you want!"

"It's not what I want. It's what's going to happen from here on out. You'll do what I say, when I say it. I told you, things are going to get a lot harder from here on out, and you *will* listen to me, period."

Jesse's face flushed as she stared at the ground. Ryland reached into her pocket and flipped open her phone. "Hi, it's me. Do you have time to come back up?" Five more minutes passed before Morgan walked back up the path and sat down again. Ryland pointed to the ground. "Jessie, lie down like you were." She waited for Jesse to lie on her stomach again. "Now, we'll start again. Where are your hands?"

Jesse thought a second. "On the board."

"What board? There's nothing in the room."

Even though her head was on her hands, she involuntarily moved it slightly to the left. "He brought in a board...a 2x4."

"And he nailed your wrists down again. What about your legs?"

"Nothing."

"They were free? Then how could the rats get to them?"

Jesse shook her head. "I don't remember." Her heart sped up as she pictured the rats in the room.

Ryland watched as Jesse's hands clenched into fists. "All right, were you on your stomach with your hands nailed to the 2x4?"

A nod.

"With your mind's eye, I want you to follow what I say, okay?"

Adrenaline surged as panic gripped her and she pushed up to face Ryland. "Ryland... I don't want to know! They're filthy fucking rats! Please, I don't *want* to know!"

Ryland raised one eyebrow and leaned forward to emphasize her point. "We just discussed this, Jesse. What you want and what's going to happen are two different things. You have no choice. You *have* to remember."

Jesse's jaw hurt as she clenched it to control the sobs that were threatening to erupt from deep inside her. She pushed to her knees, searching for a way to get away from Ryland.

Morgan moved over beside her. She touched Jesse's shoulder and waited until she focused on her. When Jesse looked at her, Morgan put the palm of her hand on the younger woman's cheek. "You're afraid, aren't you?"

Jesse couldn't answer; she just stared into Morgan's eyes.

Morgan lowered her chin as she held Jesse's gaze. "I'm not."

Morgan's calm reassurance helped ease her panic. Jesse felt her stomach loosen and her breathing ease somewhat. When she'd gotten herself back under control, she took a deep breath, lay back onto her stomach and waited for Ryland with her head face-down on her hands.

Ryland reached up and ran her hand through her friend's hair, amazed at how Morgan could come up with exactly what Jesse

needed to pull herself together. Morgan shrugged, and Ryland had to smile at how pleased she looked with herself. Morgan moved back to where she'd previously been sitting, and Ryland turned to Jesse. "We're going to start again Jesse. With your mind's eye, I want you to follow what I say, okay?"

Jesse didn't move, so Ryland continued. "Look at your hands, then move down to your shoulders. When you're there, I need you to nod to let me know you've gotten to that part of your body."

Jesse nodded.

"Now move down to your back."

Another nod.

"Now down to your calves. Can you still move your legs?"

Jesse nodded and waited.

Ryland was missing something, and she studied Jesse as she lay on the grass. "Okay, Jess, go back up to your hands again and let me know when you're there."

Jesse thought about her hands and nodded slightly.

Ryland pictured Jesse's hands on the board. *What am I missing?* "Is anything happening with your head?" When Jesse's thoughts moved from her hands to her head, her breathing became labored and Ryland moved up and put her hand on her back. "Talk, Jesse...what's happening?"

Jesse shook her head and pushed into a sitting position. Her throat constricted and she gagged, her lips gradually turning purple, her lungs straining for breath. Ryland watched for a few seconds. "You can breathe...open your airway and breathe."

A few seconds turned into a minute, and when Ryland was sure Jesse was about to pass out, she slapped her hard across the face. Jesse was so shocked she stared at Ryland's hand, her breathing forgotten. Ryland moved back and looked at Morgan. "Come over here." Morgan immediately slid closer to Jesse. Ryland gave Jesse a moment to catch her breath. "Okay, Jesse, we're going to try this again, and I need you to talk to me. We're in

my back yard, not in the room. You can breathe just fine. Tell me why you can move your legs but the rats are still able to get to them."

Jesse put her hand to her cheek. "That hurt."

"Did it work?"

Jesse didn't answer.

"All right, now, tell me why you can move your legs but the rats can still get to them."

Jesse thought back to the room, then sank back into the grass. Her breathing became labored as she struggled to bring in enough air.

Ryland looked at Morgan. "Sit her up."

Morgan moved around behind Jesse and pushed her into a sitting position, holding her up by sitting behind her with her leg up against her back.

Ryland said, "You can talk."

Every time she thought of the room, her throat closed and she couldn't breathe. She held her throat and shook her head, panic in her eyes.

Ryland sat back on the grass, brought her knees up and casually wrapped her arms around them, her hands hanging relaxed and unconcerned. She breathed deeply and spoke calmly, perfect control in her voice. "Listen to my voice, Jesse. Slow your breathing. You can breathe. We're in the back yard, and Morgan is helping you. Slow your breathing."

Jesse closed her eyes and concentrated on relaxing her throat. Gradually, her breathing became less labored and her throat opened up. She nodded. "I know what he did."

"Tell me."

Jesse reached back and pushed Morgan's knee out of the middle of her back, then slid backward until she was between Morgan's legs and was able to lean up against her chest. Morgan

sat with her hands in the grass behind her, supporting the two of them.

Jesse's throat closed again, but she focused on Ryland's relaxed posture and forced herself to relax along with her.

"Whenever I start to think about it, my throat closes up."

"Your subconscious is trying to push too much out at once and it gets confused between memory and reality. Tell me one step at a time. What happened?"

Jesse filled her lungs, then slowly let the air out. "He had a wet rag." Her eyebrows came down and she looked left.

"What did you just remember?"

"That it was wet."

"Wet with water?"

Jesse shook her head. "Gasoline. He...he forced my mouth open. And if I moved any part of my body, he shoved the rag in a little." Her breathing became labored again and she began choking.

Morgan put her hand on Jesse's forehead and made her lean her head back into her shoulder. "Easy, Jess. I've got you, not him. I've got you and you can breathe. Breathe slowly...open your airways."

Her breathing slowed again. "He smeared food on my leg and...if I moved when they bit me, he'd laugh and...push the rag in farther...with a stick. If I didn't move, he pulled it out again."

She stopped again, grabbing her temples as she tried to piece together the fragments of memory that kept firing painfully across her brain. She spoke between breaths, forcing the words out, trying to stop the escalating pain as her voice grew steadily louder. "I'd pass out and...every time I woke up...every time, he'd laugh...and ask me how I enjoyed the fumes." She pushed harder into her temples, needing to concentrate on her breathing instead of the pounding in her head. "This is why I don't want to do this Ryland! My head—"

"Just keep talking, Jess. The pain will go away."

She raised her voice, trying to hear her own words over the roaring in her brain. "I don't know how many times I passed out. But one time, I woke up...they were gone and I kicked the rats off." She yelled at Ryland then, hating her for making her remember. "I *killed* them! I crushed them against the wall with the heel of my foot! I *crushed* them!" She turned and buried her head against Morgan, crying as Morgan pulled her close. "I killed them! I *killed* them!" She screamed the words over and over until nothing came out except her ragged breathing.

Morgan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked at Ryland, cold fury burning a swath down her throat into the pit of her stomach.

Ryland held Morgan's eyes a minute. "We're done for today, Jesse. We're all done." She reached over and began to slowly massage Jesse's shoulders. "I'm sorry you have to relive these nightmares, Hon, but it's the only way we can give you back control of your life, your mind. We'll get through it together, I promise." Several minutes passed before Jesse's breathing slowed and she gradually relaxed into Morgan's arms. Ryland wished there were an easier way to accomplish what they needed to do, and she was extremely thankful to have Morgan there to support Jesse and, in Jesse's eyes, to protect her.

They remained on the grass until Jesse wiped her face with her hands, pushed away from Morgan, and walked down the path toward the barn.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

A week later, Morgan walked into the barn after Jesse had finished the morning feeding. She grabbed a halter from a hook right outside the tack room door. "Can you ride?"

Jesse nodded and went into the tack room to get Ryland's saddle.

Morgan stood in the doorway of the little room. "How well can you ride?"

"As good as you."

"Oh, you think so?"

"I know so." She pushed past Morgan and set the saddle on the rack.

"I want to start exercising three horses in the mornings to make sure all of them are ready to hunt. From now on, you'll need to saddle three instead of two. You'll be riding out with Ryland and me."

Jesse nodded and pulled another saddle from the tack room. She heard the telltale creak of the hinges on the barn door as Cody and Rico walked into the barn looking for Morgan. When Cody saw her standing next to Jesse, he walked over and handed her a leather leash that had been chewed in half.

"We found this in Amanda's kennel today, Ma'am. I'm not sure who left it in there, but it looks like she made short work of it." He turned to Jesse. "Good morning, Jesse. Good to see you're still with us."

Jesse grabbed a halter to bring out one of the morning's horses. Cody stepped in front of her and held out his hand to shake. "Hey, no hard feelings I hope."

Jesse didn't break stride. She leaned forward, spit on his hand and continued on to the stalls.

Morgan saw a flash of hatred run across Cody's features before he composed himself and wiped his hand on his jeans. He turned to Morgan. "Well, I'll keep trying. I think she'll come to realize I only had the good of the farm in mind."

Morgan nodded. "How did this get into Amanda's kennels?" She looked from Rico to Cody, waiting for an answer.

Rico held up his hands and shook his head, and Cody shrugged. "Neither of us left it there, and if you didn't..." He looked pointedly at Jesse as she walked back toward them with

Barney in tow. He turned back to Morgan. "I don't know, Ms. Davis. I'm sure it won't happen again."

Morgan watched him closely. She wanted to get the results from the fingerprints the sheriff had lifted from the pack of cigarettes before she dealt with him, but it was getting harder and harder to keep her temper in check. She angrily tossed the remains of the leash onto the work table. "See that it doesn't."

"Yes Ma'am. I'll personally double check the kennels at night before Rico and I leave to make sure there's nothing in them that shouldn't be there." He glanced at Jesse as he and Rico went back outside.

Morgan stopped Jesse as she was reaching for another halter. "I don't want you around him without a third person present. If he comes near you, either leave and look for Rico or me or go up to the house to find Ryland."

Jesse grabbed the halter. "I don't think so." It had been a week since their last session because Ryland wanted her to relax before they pulled out another memory. Her control had been slipping the last few days, her headaches were worse and her patience was shot. It had taken all she had not to beat the fake smile off Cody's face, and she didn't feel like playing nice right at the moment.

Morgan put her hand up to Jesse's chest to stop her. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Jesse shoved Morgan's arm away and walked past her down the aisle to get Aristotle out of his stall.

Morgan grabbed the back of Jesse's shirt and pulled her up short. She put her head close to Jesse's and said quietly, "Don't confuse your two lives here on the farm, Jess. When you're working with Ryland and when you're an employee working for me—they're two different things, and I'll put you through a wall if you ever answer me like that again. Do I make myself clear?"

"Let go."

Morgan let go with a shove and walked back to start saddling Barney. As Jesse reached up and rubbed the front of her neck, she saw Ryland standing in the doorway watching her. She muttered a slew of invectives and continued on to Aristotle's stall. She went in and angrily slammed the stall door behind her. It took a minute to fasten the halter and adjust the length so it rested comfortably on the big horse's head. When she turned, Morgan was standing behind her in the stall.

"Do you remember what I said I'd do if you ever take your anger out on one of my animals?"

Morgan's words were the last little push Jesse needed. She stepped toward her boss, hands clenched into fists. "Fuck you, Morgan! I'd never do anything to any of your goddamn animals!" She spit out the words, furious that Morgan would even bring up something like that.

Livid didn't begin to describe Morgan's reaction. It was all she could do not to knock Jesse across the stall and be done with it. "You look like you want to fight. You want to throw the first punch, go ahead."

Jesse almost let her fist fly, but at the last minute she clenched her jaw in frustration and lowered her hands.

Morgan put her hands on her hips to keep from throttling her and leaned closer. "Now you listen to me, and you listen good. The *only* reason I don't fire you right this second is because I gave you my word I wouldn't give up on you, but you're welcome to quit anytime." She stopped and gave Jesse a chance to do just that.

Jesse swallowed her anger and remained silent.

"I will *not* allow you to disrespect me on my own farm." The two of them locked eyes until Jesse looked away. "You will never swear at me again, you will not ignore me, and you will not slam around the barn like a five year old child. *Look* at me when I'm talking to you!"

Jesse raised angry eyes. Morgan stepped even closer until their faces were within inches of each other. "Don't push me, Jesse, because I'll always come out on top. I'll say it again, if you want to quit, do it. Otherwise, curb your foul mouth and live by my rules."

Jesse didn't trust herself to be civil, so she pushed back from Morgan and reached around to grab Aristotle's lead rope. Morgan turned on her heel and strode out. Jesse waited a few beats, then followed.

Ryland finished saddling Barney, took the lead rope from Jesse and tied Aristotle to a ring bolted into the wall. She picked up two brushes and held one out. When Jesse took the brush, Ryland stepped up to the big horse and started brushing his neck. Jesse moved around to the other side and brushed his flank.

Morgan brought Somerset up and saddled him herself. When they were ready, the three of them rode out into the pastures. Jesse, still fuming, kept about twenty paces behind the other two. She'd known her temper was out of control, and she was angry with herself for deliberately pushing Morgan farther than she'd ever pushed her before.

She thought about Cody. She hated him, that was a given, and she wanted to pound him into his grave, but Morgan had ordered her to leave him alone. The thought of destroying his face was looking better every day.

They picked up their pace and began cantering up hills and jumping logs and fences. Jesse had been up on horses since before she could walk, and riding was second nature. She hadn't noticed Morgan and Ryland watching her over the last jump. When she saw them, she reined Aristotle to a stop, waiting to see what they wanted.

Morgan shifted in her saddle. "Come over here."

Jesse moved her horse closer to theirs.

"Where did you learn to ride?"

"I grew up riding horses on my family's farm."

"Where?"

Jesse had no intention of telling them where. She sat quietly and waited.

Morgan lowered her head. "I asked you a question."

Jesse smoothed her horse's mane. "I'm not trying to get you mad. I just don't want to tell you where, that's all. That's my business, not yours."

Morgan sat a minute, then reined Somerset around and cantered away.

Ryland said. "She'll listen when you talk to her like that, Jesse. It works a whole lot better than anger."

Jesse fidgeted with the reins. "Yes Ma'am."

"You'll get control of your anger again. Unfortunately, you can expect to become angrier before you start to get better. It's one of the by-products of what you're going through. Morgan knows that. It just takes her a little longer to remember it sometimes."

Ryland pulled Barney around and headed after Morgan. Aristotle pranced in circles, wanting to follow, but Jesse kept him in place until he settled. "I'll be damned if you're gonna start telling me what I can and can't do too, you ornery piece of horse flesh. Now settle." When he stopped fidgeting, she turned him in the direction the others had gone and made him walk slowly across the field.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

At one, Morgan stood at the window and watched Jesse walk up the path to the house. The fall leaves covering the path were heavy with rain and the clouds blanketing the sky mirrored her mood. She was still upset by the confrontation that morning, and she wasn't ready to deal with whatever they were in for today. She sighed and walked over to the couch, mentally girding her loins for battle.

Jesse still knocked at the front door even though they'd told her to just come in when she was at the house. Ryland made her way from the kitchen to the door, wiping her hands on a towel as she welcomed Jesse inside.

Morgan smiled inwardly as Jesse walked into the living room. *She looks about as enthusiastic coming into this session as I am.* Jesse wouldn't meet Morgan's eyes, and she sat as far away from her on the couch as she could get.

Ryland took the armchair closest to Morgan. "I can see we need to talk about the morning's events." She waited patiently, hoping someone would break the ice. When neither did, she asked, "So which of you wants to start?"

Morgan turned toward Jesse and put her arm on the back of the couch. "I think we said pretty much everything that needed to be said." She looked at Jesse. "We understand each other perfectly, don't we?"

Jesse had her back to Morgan and didn't answer. Ryland waited to give her a chance to respond, though she was sure Jesse wouldn't say anything without being prompted.

"When we're here, Jess, you can say whatever you want to Morgan, as long as you're respectful. Just don't call her names and keep your profanity to yourself."

Jesse stood up and walked to the window. She leaned against the frame looking out at the trees, her arms crossed. There was something she wanted to say, and she was trying to figure out the best way to say it. "You can fire me if you want, but I won't quit."

Morgan relaxed back into the cushions. "You mean I'm stuck with you even if I do end up throwing you through the barn wall one of these days?"

Jesse pulled her arms into a tighter hold across her chest. "I don't know why I pushed you like I did. I just did, that's all."

Morgan recognized Jesse's version of an apology and the last vestige of her anger disappeared. "Yeah...well, get over here and

let's get started so we can get back to work. The farm doesn't run itself, you know."

Jesse turned from the window and moved back over to the couch. Her customary scowl was firmly anchored in place, and she sat as far away from Morgan and Ryland as possible.

Once Jesse settled in, Ryland put her feet up on the coffee table. "All right, now that we're settled, today I want to talk about the man who kidnapped you. What can you tell us about him?"

"What do you want to know?"

"What does he look like, sound like? Nationality, demeanor, anything you can tell us."

Jesse didn't need help remembering him. She'd recalled everything about him the first time Ryland had asked about the people in the hotel room. "His name was Richard Montenegro. He was a Mexican, about five foot eight, short, black hair, built like a long-distance runner, with skinny legs and no fat on his body. He had a scar that ran from the inside of his eyebrow up to his hairline. He went to some Ivy League school, but he never told me which one. He was well educated and well spoken, and he was insane."

"You talk about him in the past tense."

Jesse thought about that a second and shrugged.

Ryland didn't want to get ahead of herself, so she returned to the description. "What was his demeanor?"

"He was arrogant and condescending, and he had an absolute need to be in control of everything that happened."

"That's why he wouldn't let you react to the rats. He even controlled the way you moved when they bit you."

Jesse nodded.

"Tell me about the cattle prod. He controlled how you reacted to that too, didn't he?"

Jesse looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

"When Jake Tate shocked you with the cattle prod, you didn't react. My guess is you were conditioned not to react."

She shook her head apologetically. "I don't remember him using one."

"That's okay. Let's go back into the room. How did he take the nails from your wrists the second time?"

Jesse closed her eyes and watched the scene play out in her head. "He had two of his men pick up the board and ram it into the floor until the nails pushed back...then he pulled them out." She rubbed the scar on the back of her wrist. "I couldn't move my hands after that. They're still mostly numb. I guess that's why sometimes I can't close them all the way or move certain fingers like I used to be able to."

Morgan wondered why Jesse wasn't reacting the way she normally did when she described what happened to her. She seemed calm, as though she were describing her day at work.

Ryland held her hand out. "Let me see."

Jesse extended her arm, and Ryland pushed up the sleeve covering the scar and rubbed the white circle with her thumb. "Actually, I'm amazed you can use them at all." She let the hand drop. "So tell me about the cattle prod."

Jesse pulled her sleeve down over her wrist. "I wish I could help you, but I don't remember a cattle prod."

"All right then, what would you like to talk about?"

"Nothing. No headache, I'm not sick to my stomach, I can breathe. I don't want to talk about anything."

Ryland raised her eyebrows, reached between the seat cushion and the arm of the chair she was sitting in and pulled out Morgan's hunting whip. Jesse stiffened as though electrocuted, then went unconscious.

Morgan lowered her head and stared at Ryland, unsure whether she should laugh or be horrified. "Well, I wondered how you were going to get her in the mood. I guess that answers that."

Ryland got up to put the whip back in the hall closet where it was normally kept. "I think we've gone through the memories that were fairly easy to dig up. The others are buried so deep that even her subconscious is having a hard time finding them." She brought her hand out of her pocket and tossed Morgan a capsule of smelling salts.

Morgan turned it over in her fingers while she thought about what had just happened. "This psychology stuff is way beyond me. Give me a knot-headed horse or hound any day of the week." She broke the capsule and held it under Jesse's nose.

Jesse opened her eyes and saw Morgan holding another obscene-smelling capsule under her nose. She grabbed Morgan's hand, pushed it away, and mumbled, "Would you stop holding that shit up to my nose?" She pushed her fingers against her temple.

Ryland held out a glass of water. "Here, Jesse, drink something."

Jesse took a drink, then set the glass on the coffee table. "I'd be fine if she'd just stop with that shit."

"Why do you think she's using it?"

"It's smelling salts, like we used on drunks to wake them up."

Ryland wanted to know whether Jesse remembered the whip this time. "So why is she using it on you?"

"How should I know?"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"My heart stopped." *No, that isn't right.*

That was a new one for Ryland. "Can you explain that to me? What do you mean your heart stopped?"

"That's not what I meant...I don't think...it's just what popped into my head. I don't think I'm saying it right."

"Did you remember something that made you say it, or did you feel something physically that made you say it?"

"My heart jerked, kind of...or jumped or something."

"Do you know what made it do that?"

Jesse looked left, trying to remember. She shook her head. "Everything was fine, and then..." She looked left again, then up, her eyebrows pulled down in concentration.

"And then?"

"Like a short circuit. You know—zap, then nothing." Jesse reached up and rubbed her temple again. "My head's starting to pound, but I don't remember anything." She turned sideways and leaned back into the couch, pushing her head into the pillows with her hand. "How can you stop the headache if I don't remember?"

"You are remembering. This short circuit, have you ever felt that before?"

Jesse nodded, sweat beading on her forehead. "At the barn."

Ryland and Morgan exchanged glances. "How about before that? I want you to mentally put yourself in the dirt room. Do you remember anything related to the feeling of your heart stopping?"

Jesse did as she was told. Instantly the pounding punched against the inside of her head hard enough to momentarily blind her. She crashed to the floor, writhing in agony, pushing her head into the tile with both hands trying to keep the pounding from cracking her skull and splitting it wide open. She had to stop the pain. She slammed her head into the floor, needing to disrupt the steady pulsing of the hammer slamming down on her brain.

Morgan followed her down, shoving one hand between the tile and Jesse's head and grabbing her shoulder with the other. She pulled her tight into her own chest and pinned her there with both arms wrapped tightly around her body.

Jesse screamed and Ryland put her hands on either side of Jesse's head. She spoke calmly, but loud enough for it to register. "Jesse, you're not in the dirt room. You're here with Morgan and me. You're not there. Listen to me. Who am I? Tell me who I am."

Jesse could barely hear over the roaring in her brain. "I don't know! Please, make it stop! I don't know!" Tears streamed down as she writhed against Morgan's embrace.

Ryland repeated what she'd just told her. "You're with Morgan and Ryland. Who am I?"

Jesse screamed, "Ryland!"

"You are in our house on the farm. Where are you?"

The pain eased just a fraction and Jesse grabbed onto Ryland's voice. "I'm with—" *What was the question?* The pain returned stronger than before.

"You are in our house on the farm. Where are you?"

"The farm! I'm with you on the farm!" The hammering slowed with each word, and Jesse repeated desperately, "The farm...I'm with Morgan and Ryland on the farm!" She became conscious of Morgan's arms around her and she grabbed onto them as the pain steadily eased back.

Morgan didn't realize how tightly she'd been holding her until her hands began to cramp. She loosened her hold, keeping her arms protectively around Jesse's body.

Ryland continued to talk very close to Jesse's ear. "You're with us in our home. We're going to sit here for as long as you need us to. Now, I want you to feel my hands on your shoulders, and where you feel my hands, I want you to relax those specific muscles." After a few moments, Ryland felt Jesse's shoulders loosen under her hands. She gradually worked her way down Jesse's arms and back until she was quiet and relaxed.

Jesse concentrated on Ryland's hands and forced each muscle to relax. Her lungs jumped with a quick, involuntary breath, and she sagged into Morgan, totally and absolutely exhausted. She closed her eyes and fell into a bone-weary sleep.

Ryland exhaled slowly. "Let's get her into the guest bed. I don't want to leave her down at the barn alone the rest of the afternoon."

Morgan lifted Jesse and carried her into the guest bedroom. Ryland pulled down the covers and Morgan slid her onto the bed.

Jesse rolled over and Ryland covered her with a patchwork quilt, then motioned for Morgan to follow her and quietly left the room.

Ryland leaned up against the wall in the hallway. "Good, at least some of the deep memory is trying to force its way out."

"Good? That was good?" Morgan made her way to the kitchen and took a cold beer from the refrigerator. She pulled a barstool from under the counter and sat. Ryland came in and Morgan said, "That was *not* good."

Ryland moved behind Morgan and began massaging her shoulders, using her thumbs to work out the knots she always had when she was under a lot of stress. Morgan put her arms on the counter and rested her head on them, concentrating on relaxing the muscles so Ryland could work the stiffness out.

"You did fine, you know. You did exactly what she needed." Ryland found one particularly stubborn knot and pushed down hard.

Morgan slowly moved away from the thumb, groaning because Ryland was determined to break the knot. "All I did was keep her from banging her head into the floor and—Ow, Ry! That hurts!"

Ryland kept digging. "Sit still, you big baby. You'll be impossible to live with until I get your shoulders relaxed. And no, you did a lot more than that. She physically felt you, and she was able to focus on the physical sensation and bring herself around. Tomorrow, we'll break movements down into tiny steps so she can process them a little at a time." She finished with the last knot and put her head next to Morgan's. "Trust me, Morgan...I do know what I'm doing."

Morgan sat up. "I know, but I'm usually the one who's in control, and this ride is terrifying me."

Ryland playfully bit Morgan's ear. "I've never heard you admit that before."

Morgan swiveled around so she could put her arms around Ryland and rest her head on her chest. "Don't you dare tell her I said that."

"I wouldn't think of it."

At six-thirty, Jesse found Ryland in the kitchen washing dishes. She sat on one of the barstools and watched her a minute. "Where's Morgan?"

"She's down doing the evening feeding. How are you feeling?"

"Like an idiot."

Ryland looked over her shoulder. "Only to yourself. I expected your headaches to get worse when we started digging. Tomorrow we'll take it one step at a time so that doesn't happen again."

"I want to do it right now. I want to remember everything and get it over with. Right now."

The sink was full of soapy dishwater, and Ryland reached down and pulled the stopper. She rinsed her hands and went to the refrigerator. "Are you hungry? We had chicken and stuffing for dinner. I can put some in the microwave for you."

Jesse raised her voice. "Now, Ryland—just do it! I don't care if it kills me. I just want it done and over with. Tell me what I need to do!"

Ryland walked over and leaned on the counter. "And if we don't do it right now?"

"Then I'll do it myself."

Ryland stepped around the counter and pulled out another barstool. She sat next to Jesse and leaned on her elbow, her head on her hand. The two women looked at each other, one angry and determined, the other quiet and listening.

"Why can't we just do it all at once? Fuck this daily drama! I hate it!" Jesse punched the countertop with her fist hard enough to make the salt and pepper shakers jump. When Ryland didn't move,

Jesse angrily pushed away from the bar and walked over to a free-standing tower of shelves holding several sizes and varieties of pots and pans. She pushed the tower over and sent the pans crashing onto the tile floor. "Now, Ryland! Goddamn it, tell me how to finish it! *Now!*"

Ryland swiveled her barstool around to face Jesse. When she didn't say anything, Jesse pounded two fists on the countertop right in front her face. "Answer me, goddamn it!"

"That's enough, Jesse." Morgan came into the kitchen. She calmly walked across the room, stood between the two women and said quietly, "C'mon, I'll help you pick up the pans."

Jesse ignored her. "Ryland, please."

Ryland pushed Morgan aside so she could see. "We do it my way, Jess. There's no other way to do it. I can't stop you from trying something on your own, and I'll be here to pick up the pieces if you do. You'll be staying up here tonight in the guest bedroom."

Morgan stood the tower upright and placed it back in the corner where it belonged. She started picking up the pans and placing them on the shelves. Ryland reached down and picked up a saucepan that had fallen close to her stool. She held it out to Jesse who ignored it and walked out of the room. They heard the front door open and slam as Morgan put another pan into place.

Ryland took a dishtowel and wiped the pan she was holding. "Are you okay?" She handed Morgan the pan and bent to pick up another.

Morgan put it back on the shelf, but didn't say anything.

Ryland handed her the next one. "I'm just curious. Is there some reason you didn't react like you normally do?" Ryland picked up a saucepan and put it on the shelf with the others.

"Yes."

"Do you want to share?"

Morgan glared at her. "I came into the house just as the pans went flying, and when I walked into the kitchen and saw her pound the countertop next to you I was afraid if I let my emotions go, I might have killed her. I mean *literally* killed her!"

"She wouldn't have hurt me. You know that, right?"

Morgan shook her head as she walked out of the kitchen. "I don't know anything right now. I'll be out in the back yard getting some wood for the fire."

## Chapter Sixteen

Jesse walked into her apartment and threw herself onto the bed. Thoughts raced through her mind until the walls began closing in. The horses were making more noise than usual so she went out to check on them. Morgan had already fed everyone and doctored Comstock, so there was nothing left for her to do. She figured she was off work, and for some reason she was craving a beer and a good fight. She grabbed her apartment keys, headed out to the road and stuck out her thumb, hoping for a ride.

The truck driver who picked her up dropped her about a mile from the center of town because he needed to gas up at the local truck stop. She walked the rest of the way, thoughts tumbling through her brain like a clothes dryer on maximum spin. After about forty minutes she walked into Harley's and sat at the same table she'd been at the last time she'd come in. Andy came over and wiped his wet hands on his dirty white shirt. "What'll ya have?"

"Beer and a whiskey chaser, and just keep 'em comin'. In fact, just leave the goddamn whiskey on the table."

Andy crossed his arms. "Need to see yer money first."

Jesse reached into her pocket, pulled out two fifties and threw them on the table. "Let me know when that runs out."

The crumpled bills landed on the edge of the tabletop. Andy scooped them up and left to get the drinks. There weren't many

people in the bar. Jesse sat back and watched a man and a woman light up a joint. The woman was about twenty with hair spiked straight out from her head. The man, a forty-something hippie wanna-be, held the joint up and made her climb on his lap before he'd let her take a drag. Jesse lost interest when the girl started an awkward lap dance and the man's eyes rolled back in his head.

Andy set the drinks on the table. In five minutes the beer bottle was three-quarters empty and the Jack Daniels had a good sized dent in it. For the next several hours, she watched people come and go, her thoughts slowing to a gentle whir instead of the dizzying cyclone she'd had before she came in. The whiskey bottle lay empty, and beer bottles littered the table and floor around her feet. Her vision had blurred hours ago and she'd lost interest in trying to re-focus. Shadows moved across the table, several shapes circling in a dizzying pattern.

One blur reached in and grabbed a half-empty bottle off the table. "Well, well, if it ain't Baby Dyke! What's the matter, Baby Dyke? Your mamas wanted to fuck without you tonight?" Cody put the bottle to his lips and finished it off, then threw the empty into Jesse's chest.

There wasn't much rational thought left in her alcohol-soaked brain. As she tried to stand, she forgot where she was going and what she'd planned to do when she got there. The ground rippled beneath her feet. The room spun in circles, dumped her onto the table, then onto the floor with the table resting on top of her.

As she struggled to move, someone jumped on her to the laughter of the other people in the bar. Andy shouted something and Jesse felt herself being unceremoniously dragged to her feet and thrown out onto the street. In the far-off recesses of her mind, a man yelled "Dropkick!" and slammed his boot into her stomach. The blow rolled her onto her back and another boot landed on her thigh. She heard a siren whelp, saw red and blue flashing lights, then rolled onto her stomach and threw up.

Ryland awoke at one-forty in the morning to an empty bed. She'd tried to wait up for Morgan, who'd been in the den reading late into the night, but she'd apparently dozed off and Morgan had never come in. Her robe lay draped across the end of the bed, and she pulled it on as she padded barefoot down the hall. When she pushed open the door, she saw Morgan asleep on the couch, fully clothed with a decorative throw pulled up to her chin. Her boots lay across the room where she'd thrown them.

Ryland returned to their bedroom and took a down-filled blanket and pillow from the closet. She retraced her steps and curled up at the opposite end of the couch, spreading the blanket over both of them. Doubts that she'd pushed aside began to resurface as she leaned her head against the back of the sofa and watched her best friend, whose face was pinched and stressed even in sleep. Had she been wrong to get them involved in Jesse's nightmare? Tonight was the first time in ten years she'd awoken without Morgan by her side.

Morgan stirred, and when she opened her eyes, she saw Ryland at the end of the couch, a sleepy, worried expression on her face. Morgan sat up so she faced Ryland, her back leaning on the overstuffed leather arm of the sofa.

Ryland reached her hand down the length of the sofa, her fingers stretching out toward Morgan, who moved her hand as well. Their fingers just barely reached far enough to brush against each other, and Morgan let her hand drop to the cushion.

Ryland looked away, fighting back tears as she struggled to know what to say. Tonight, for the first time, she didn't understand her partner, and she was afraid to ask why she hadn't come to bed.

Morgan slid down into the couch, laying with her head on the arm of the sofa while she studied the patterns on the ceiling. "At what point, Ryland, do we say enough is enough? That we tried and failed?"

Ryland couldn't speak without opening herself up to more tears, so she shook her head slightly and said nothing.

"Do you know what occurred to me tonight?"

Another shake of the head.

Morgan continued to follow the swirls and lines etched into the plaster above her head. "This isn't about Jesse. It's about that young man, that Vietnam vet who dared kill himself on your watch. You couldn't save him, and here's a chance to make up for that young life you couldn't save."

A dark mass started in the pit of Ryland's stomach and hurled itself up at her, unbidden and unexpected. She pushed herself forward, crawled on top of Morgan and let the tears flow freely onto her friend's chest. Morgan held her close and let her cry, unsure how to handle the strongest woman she'd ever known falling apart in her arms.

Ryland let the tears cleanse her mind, and she inched her arms down and around Morgan's back until there wasn't a separation of space between them. "Please don't ever make me wake up in the middle of the night without you there. I can take almost anything except the thought that you and I aren't together forever."

Morgan stroked Ryland's hair and rested her cheek on her head. "I'm sorry. It was just...I don't know. I was incensed, enraged, that Jesse would come into our house and threaten you, and—" She fought back tears herself, not knowing how to explain her feelings. "And if she had touched you, I would have killed her."

Ryland lay quietly, listening, thinking. She wiped her eyes on Morgan's shirt and lay her head back down. "Can I try to explain something about me to you?"

"Always."

"What you said about Steven, that young man, was partially true, but not totally. Over the last forty years, there were six men and women who committed suicide while in my care." She listened

to Morgan's heartbeat as she spoke. "That's a terrible truth when dealing with critically, emotionally traumatized patients. They often survive the physical torture only to succumb to the emotional refuse that comes after."

Morgan shifted down farther into the couch, and Ryland squeezed her tightly again, feeling their connection. She continued, wanting Morgan to understand why she needed to help someone like Jesse. "A part of me, a part of my self-confidence, died with each one. What you don't understand is that I know—I really *know*—that we might fail with Jesse because I've failed before. But I also know we might succeed."

She pushed up so she could look into Morgan's eyes. "It's what I'm good at, Morgan. Knowing how to heal people like Jesse is a gift, and I believe, very strongly, that there was a reason she came to us."

Morgan looked up at the ceiling again and shook her head, not really understanding.

A thought popped into Ryland's mind, and she smiled and lay her head back down. "Okay, try this out for size. If a dog or a hound had been tortured as badly as Jesse was, and that animal landed on our doorstep, would you turn your back on it just because it threatened to bite us? Because, you do realize, Jesse has never actually bitten either one of us."

Morgan returned Ryland's smile. "That's hitting below the belt."

"Well, would you?"

"Of course not, but—" She couldn't come up with what the "but" might be, so she sighed and pulled Ryland close again. "Good grief. Okay, I get it...but if I do kill her, will you still love me?"

"I will love you forever and always."

"And do you think we could buy her a muzzle?"

The two of them quieted when they heard the metal gate leading onto their property scrape against the ground as someone pulled it open. They got off the couch and went to see who'd come onto their property at two-fifteen in the morning. Morgan opened the door. "It's a sheriff's SUV. What does he want?"

They waited on the porch as Deputy Meier pulled up in front of the house. "I've got a delivery for you. She was getting the heck kicked out of her in town." He walked to the passenger side and pulled Jesse out onto her feet. She started to fall over as she leaned against him, so he propped her up on the hood of his vehicle, face first.

Morgan turned and banged her head against the door post as Ryland sighed and started out to the car. Morgan reluctantly followed. When she reached the SUV, she wrapped Jesse's arm around her shoulders. "She's filthy, and she's filthy drunk. What happened?"

Deputy Meier stepped to the passenger door and brushed the seat off with his hand. "Well, I was driving down Main Street and saw Andy throw her out of the bar. Then three men came out and hauled off and kicked her. I turned on my siren, and when they saw me, they all took off running."

Ryland put Jesse's other arm over her shoulder. "Who were they?"

"I couldn't tell, and Andy won't say. He says a bartender who knows too much is bad for business." The deputy smiled and climbed into the driver's seat. "Well, ladies, have a wonderful morning." He drove out onto the road and stopped to pull the gate closed.

The two women half-walked, half-carried Jesse into the house. Morgan grabbed on a little tighter. "I've got her—can you get her some clean clothes?"

Ryland ducked out from under Jesse's arm as Morgan dragged her to the bathroom. She dropped her into the shower stall, clothes

and all. Jesse tried to roll onto her hands and knees to stand, but Morgan pushed her down onto her back, grabbed the hand-held shower head and turned on the cold water. She held the water on Jesse's head, then moved it down to clean the rest of her body.

Jesse struggled to get out, but she was so drunk the only thing she accomplished was to get Morgan totally soaked. She managed to gag out, "Tha's fuckin' freezin'! Lemme go!"

Morgan flipped her over to spray the dirt off her back. "I wish I could add huge chunks of ice to it if it'd make you more miserable."

Ryland came in and laughed. "Morgan."

Morgan reached over and turned off the water. "Help me get her out of these and into something dry." When they had her dry and dressed, they half-carried her into the guest bedroom and dropped her into the bed. Morgan threw the cover over her. "You'd better sleep well the next two hours, because four-thirty is gonna roll around awful early and I'll be damned if I'll feed for you because you went out and got yourself shit faced."

Jesse had already passed out and didn't hear a word she said. Morgan changed into dry pajamas and turned on her alarm. She didn't normally need it but this time she wanted to make absolutely sure she was awake to pull Jesse out of bed at a god-awful hour.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

Four-thirty arrived way too early even for Morgan. The button on the alarm clock had broken off, and she struggled to silence it before she rolled out of bed and got dressed. She stumbled into the guest room and pulled the covers off Jesse. "Get up. You've got work to do."

Jesse opened one bleary eye, then rolled over to go back to sleep.

Morgan grabbed an arm and a leg and pulled her off the bed. "I said, get up. The horses need to be fed."

Jesse sat up and leaned against the box springs, still drunk and not really sure where she was. Trying to focus brought on waves of nausea and she rolled over onto her stomach.

Morgan pulled her up by the back of her pajama top. "You throw up in my house and I'll make you sorry you were ever born." She propelled her out onto the porch and down the path to the barn. When they reached the apartment, Morgan unlocked the door and propped her up just inside. "You have five minutes to get dressed and have your butt out here ready for work." She stepped out, pulling the door shut behind her.

A truck drove by, and she went out to talk to Cody and Rico who were just arriving to feed the hounds. Both men got out of the truck and came over to say good morning. Cody's eyes were red and his hair shot out at different angles from his head. "Good Morning, Ms. Davis." He scratched his head. "Sometimes four-thirty comes way too early for a decent night's sleep."

"I hope it's a good morning. Would you get the first year hounds ready as quickly as possible? The hunt staff will be here at six-thirty to walk them out." She turned and started back to the barn.

"Yes Ma'am, we'll make sure to check them first so they're ready for you."

Morgan had her back to Cody, and she allowed her disgust to show where he couldn't see it. She hated brownnosers, and he was the worst of the worst. She faced the two men again. "I didn't mean to ignore you, Rico. Good morning."

"Buenos días, Señora. Beautiful day."

Morgan wondered just how beautiful a day they were in for as she stepped into the barn and saw Jesse sitting in the middle of the aisle struggling to pull on her boots. Morgan rubbed her eyes and walked over just as Jesse's hands slipped off the top of the boot.

She went down onto her back and lay there blinking up at her boss. She struggled back into a sitting position and tried to grab her boot again. Every time she reached forward, the boot moved just out of reach.

"Oh, for Christ's sake." Morgan grabbed the boot and pulled it on. She snatched the other boot from Jesse's hands, jammed it onto the other foot, jerked Jesse to her feet and shoved her toward the hay.

Jesse walked unsteadily forward, raising her hand in thanks to Morgan as she went. Morgan pulled up a stool next to the work table and watched to make sure Jesse didn't accidentally poison a horse or overfeed.

It took over an hour, but Jesse finished the feeding and stood in front of Morgan, swaying slightly. Morgan headed for the door. "Let's go, I need to get some food into you before the hunt staff gets here. We're walking out the young ones this morning and I'm taking you with us."

Jesse groaned and followed Morgan up the path to the house. She was pretty sure she wouldn't be able to keep any food down, but her head was clearing enough to know now would not be a good time to argue. They walked into the kitchen and Morgan poured Jesse a bowl of cereal and set it in front of her. "Eat."

Jesse looked at the food and closed her eyes to keep from being sick.

Morgan leaned over the table. "Do *not*...throw *up*...in my house!"

Jesse pushed away from the table and barely made it to the back porch before the rest of the beer and whiskey came sailing out. The hose was coiled next to the porch, and she turned it on to rinse out her mouth before raising it above her head and letting the water stream down through her hair. The water cascaded off in tiny rivulets, flowing down onto the porch and into the back yard, where it pooled next to the steps. She turned the water off and sat

on the back step, thoroughly sick and sure she'd never eat a bowl of cereal again. The porch became her refuge as she lay back to wait for Morgan to finish eating.

After a short while, Morgan stuck her head out the back door. "They're here. Let's go." She didn't wait to see whether Jesse followed. The hunt staff needed to be briefed about the morning's training, so she left her to find her way to the kennels on her own.

Jesse followed at a slower pace, stumbling down the path and pausing every few steps to take her bearings. When she finally arrived, the hunt staff was breaking up after listening to Morgan's instructions. Rico brought the hounds from the kennels just as Jesse walked around the corner of the barn. Excitement made the hounds giddy as they circled Morgan, vying for her attention. They were a beautiful mixture of whites and browns, some with brown spots, some white with brown speckles, some all brown and some all white. As Jesse approached the kennels, Cody walked past her on his way to get some water from the barn. "Good Morning, Jesse. Are you helping out today?"

Realization gradually made its way from the depths of Jesse's brain to full consciousness. Turning slowly, she watched as Cody stepped around her and smiled. There was a good-sized stick on the ground near her feet. She reached down and grabbed it, then swung it like a baseball bat toward Cody's head.

Morgan listened as Cody greeted Jesse. She recognized the thinly disguised taunting in his voice, and realized, almost too late, what Jesse was about to do. She lunged just as Jesse swung the club toward Cody's head, hooked Jesse under the arms and swung her around and away from her target. She grabbed the club out of Jesse's hands and threw it out into the horse pasture.

Jesse landed hard on her ass and started to get up to go after Cody again.

Morgan knelt and pushed her back down. She spoke quietly so that only Jesse could hear. "I told you I'd take care of him, not you."

Jesse met Morgan's eyes. "When?"

Understanding dawned, and Morgan put her hand on Jesse's arm. "Cody was one of men last night, wasn't he?"

Jesse didn't answer, and Morgan nodded. "Soon, I promise." She stood and held out her hand. When Jesse took it, she pulled her to her feet and steadied her. "Cody, get that water, then you take the right point position." As he nodded and went into the barn, Morgan put her arm around Jesse's shoulders and directed her to the left. "You stay with me."

Her inhibitions dulled by alcohol, Jesse leaned into Morgan. "I hate him, Morgan. I wish you'd just fire him. What are you waiting for?"

"He won't get away with it, Jess. I promise. Just trust me, okay?" Morgan let go and began orchestrating the training, making sure she kept Jesse in her peripheral vision. All she needed was Cody in the hospital with a bashed-in head and Jesse in jail for putting him there.

They worked with the hounds for nearly two hours, Morgan barking orders and the staff hustling to obey. Jesse walked behind everyone, working off the alcohol and drilling hatred into the back of Cody's head. The tired hounds wiggled with pleasure when Morgan praised them before leading them back to the kennels.

Once they finished sorting the hounds into their proper enclosures, it would be time for the morning exercise ride. Jesse left the commotion of the kennels and went into the barn to saddle three horses. Her stomach still hadn't settled, and the thought of cantering and jumping over logs made her even more sick than she'd been earlier in the day. Her face felt clammy as she stepped through the door and found Ryland brushing Rebel, the sorrel

gelding whose claim to fame was nipping people if given the chance.

"Good Morning, Jesse. Feeling better?"

Jesse shook her head and lifted Cabo's halter off its hook. Cabo's stall was at the end of the aisle, and he stood with his beautiful white head over his gate, hoping he'd be the one picked today. Jesse rubbed his nose and slipped on the halter. He followed her excitedly down the aisle, ears forward, a light prance to his step.

Ryland saddled Rebel, then took the brush from Jesse to start working on Cabo. "Why don't you go get Smokey so we can be sure to have everyone saddled by the time Morgan's ready to go?"

"Smokey?" He was Jesse's favorite, a stocky black quarter horse with endless stamina who could turn on a dime. Unfortunately, he also had the bumpiest trot and canter of all ten horses.

Ryland nodded sympathetically as the green tint intensified on Jesse's face, and she tried to hide her amusement from the younger woman. "Morgan said she wanted Cabo, Rebel and Smokey today. Sorry, Kiddo."

Jesse swallowed hard and took Smokey's halter from Ryland. "She's decided it'd just be easier to kill me than cure me."

Ryland chuckled under her breath, "Boy, have you got that right."

They had all three horses ready when Morgan finished with the hounds and came into the barn. After she hugged Ryland, she took Rebel's reins and growled low in her throat when he tried to nip her shoulder. He raised his head in innocence, peering down at her out of the corner of his eye. "Today would not be the day to mess with me, young man." She reached up and smoothed his black forelock, then motioned for Jesse to take Smokey and for Ryland to get Cabo.

They rode out into the pastures, slowly warming the horses before beginning to canter and jump. It took exactly thirty seconds of trotting before Jesse reined Smokey to a stop and puked. Morgan pinched the bridge of her nose, her shoulders bouncing as she laughed.

Ryland shook her head and hid a smile of her own. "You are pure evil, my love."

Morgan continued to chuckle as she kicked Rebel and started into the morning's routine. They lost count of how many times Jesse threw up, and after one particularly violent episode, she dismounted and sat with her back up against a fallen tree.

Morgan rode back, crossed her arms over the pommel of her saddle and waited. Jesse raised her head and wiped the sweat off her brow. "I hate you."

"Good. Now mount up so we can get back to the house for lunch." She walked Rebel up close to Cabo and took Ryland's hand. The two of them rode toward the house with Smokey staring after them. He tried to pull away as Jesse grabbed one of the branches to pull herself to her feet. She climbed up onto the tree trunk she was leaning against and swung her leg over the saddle, careful not to over balance and fall off the other side. She decided that if she lived, she would never, ever drink whiskey again.

Morgan and Ryland were waiting for her as Smokey slowly walked up to the barn with Jesse lying over his neck. He stopped and stood patiently while she fell to the side, still holding his neck for support. Her legs swung down under his chest and she let go and landed sprawled in front of him. He looked to Morgan as though asking for instructions, and she walked over and knelt beside Jesse.

"You all right?"

"No."

Morgan grinned and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, we'll help you unsaddle. Then we'll all go eat some lunch." As they

worked, Jesse tried to talk her way out of doing therapy. She just wanted to go into her apartment where she could pull the covers over her head and go back to sleep.

Ryland pulled her saddle from Cabo and started for the tack room. She said over her shoulder. "I wouldn't dream of denying you the therapy since you were so adamant about having it last night. We'll have some lunch and start at one as usual." When Ryland finished putting her tack away, she came out and saw Jesse sitting on a bale of hay with her head in her hands. She patted her on the back, then finished with Cabo and led him to his stall.

It took Jesse a few minutes to realize the barn was quiet and that Morgan and Ryland had left to go back to the house. Quiet was exactly what she needed, and she lay down on the hay for a short, half-hour rest.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

At one, she shuffled up to their front door and knocked. Morgan opened the door and waved her inside. "How many times do I have to tell you? When you come up at one, you don't need to knock."

Jesse headed straight for the couch and lay down, cushioning her head on the arm. Morgan walked over and pushed her feet off. "Take your boots off the couch. Where do you live, in a barn?"

Jesse held up her foot, eyebrows raised.

Morgan grabbed the heel, pulled the first boot off and dropped it to the floor. She motioned with her hand for Jesse to give her the other foot. "Give it here. I put 'em on, I might as well take 'em off." Jesse lifted her other foot and Morgan pulled that one off as well and muttered, "How did I ever get stuck with you anyway?"

"I think it was Ryland's fault." Jesse put her feet back up on the cushions and closed her eyes.

Morgan smiled and headed for the kitchen to help clean up from lunch. "Yeah, and I've been meaning to talk to her about that."

When the two women came in, Morgan sat on Jesse's legs and made herself comfortable. Jesse kicked her feet out from under her and sat, hitting her in the arm on the way up. Morgan punched Jesse's arm in return, and Ryland sat down in her chair and begged, "Would you two knock it off?"

Jesse muttered, "She started it."

Ryland lowered her chin and raised her eyes at the two of them, waiting not so patiently for them to settle down. Morgan crossed her arms, innocent eyes smiling at Ryland while Jesse leaned back into the couch.

Ryland sat back herself. "Now, if you two are through, let's get started. What we're going to do today, Jesse, is very slowly take you back into that room." She put up her hand. "Don't do it right now. We're going to take you back in very slowly. When you feel even the slightest headache coming on, I want you to stop and focus your entire attention on Morgan."

Jesse nodded and glanced sideways, reassuring herself that Morgan was right there. Morgan noticed the glance, turned toward Jesse and nodded. "I'm not going anywhere. I wish I were, but I'm not."

"You and me both."

Ryland continued. "I think you can go into the room without a headache, right?"

Jesse nodded. "What part should I think about?"

"Let's start with after you killed the rats."

The dark room closed in around her. The dirt on the floor dug into her flesh as she lay on her stomach, her wrists still pinned to the board.

"Now let's move forward...just a little, to when the men pounded the nails out of your wrists."

Jesse nodded.

"Now move forward—just a little bit, Jesse, not a lot—and tell me what happens."

"They left. It was dark. They went up the stairs."

"When did they return?"

"The next morning." A pain stabbed through her head and she reached up and grabbed her temple.

"Look at Morgan and come back into this room."

She focused on Morgan. The dirt room faded, reformed, then faded again.

"Tell me when the headache goes away." They waited almost a full five minutes before Jesse could say the headache was gone.

Ryland began again. "Okay, back up a little. I want you to look at the stairs and tell me what you see."

"It's dark. Then, when they open the door at the top of the stairs, I see light, and shadows coming down. I hear them laughing. One of them is carrying—" Pain engulfed her again. She opened her eyes.

Morgan reached over and put her hand on Jesse's shoulder.

"I've got you. You're here in the living room with me."

The room faded, but not as quickly this time. "Okay. Let's get this over with."

"You still have the headache?" Ryland sat back and crossed her arms.

"Just a little."

"Then we'll wait."

"We can't wait every time my head hurts. We'll be here all day."

"We'll wait." Ryland got up and walked toward the kitchen.

"Anybody want something to drink?"

Morgan rubbed her eyes. "Coffee for me, please."

Ryland disappeared into the kitchen and returned a short time later with three coffees on a tray. "Is it gone yet?"

Jesse nodded.

"Good. Now, I don't want you to tell me what he's carrying. I want you to describe it to me without naming the object."

Jesse looked off, trying to concentrate on seeing what the man was carrying well enough to describe it. "It has a short handle...there's a thin oval rod at one end and...an electric cord coming out of the handle."

"Good. No headache?"

"No."

"Now, look back down the hall to the stairwell. Look at the next man coming in."

Jesse looked, and her head exploded. She opened her eyes and gasped, slamming her head back into the cushion to stop the pain.

Morgan grabbed her head. "Look at me, Jesse. Slow your breathing and listen to me. What did we do this morning?"

Jesse slid down into the couch, her hands pressed into either side of her head.

Morgan moved her fingers behind Jesse's neck, but kept her thumbs up on her cheeks. She shook Jesse's head once. "Answer me, *now*. What did we do this morning?"

Jesse took a quick breath. "Walked the hounds. Rode the horses." The pain backed off a little. "I almost got to club Cody to death." The pain went away, quicker than ever before.

Morgan smiled and let go. "Even I'm getting to read you now. It's gone isn't it?"

Jesse let out a shaky breath and nodded.

Ryland sat forward. "All right, let's start again. Don't name any object, but describe to me why seeing that man frightened you."

"Clips, and wires, and a box... and another box with posts on it."

"Are there any more people coming?"

She looked again and saw Richard come down the steps. She concentrated on him, trying to see what he had in his hands.

"Tell me what you're seeing."

Excitement rose in her voice. "There it is! He has it! Richard has it!" Her head involuntarily twitched to the right and her eyes squeezed shut.

"Don't name it, Jesse. Just describe it to me." Ryland had a pretty good idea what he was carrying, but she didn't want to put ideas into her head.

"It's what Tate had."

"Bring the three of them into the room with you."

Jesse nodded and her eyebrows came down low over her eyes. She was watching something, and Ryland let her watch. Jesse raised her eyes and met Morgan's. "Did you see that?"

Morgan turned to Ryland for guidance, and Ryland touched Jesse's arm. "Jesse, where is Morgan right now?"

Jesse continued to stare at Morgan, and Ryland repeated. "Jesse, where do you see Morgan?"

Confusion and suspicion colored Jesse's face. "She's in the dirt room with me. Why is she here?"

Ryland reached over and touched Morgan's arm without taking her eyes from Jesse. "Leave the room, please. Now."

Morgan didn't like leaving Ryland alone at this point, but she did as Ryland asked and walked into the kitchen, staying close by the door so she could hear what was being said in the other room.

Jesse stared after her, the suspicion warring with the confusion. When the door shut, she re-focused on Ryland.

"Where are you right now, Jesse?"

"In the dirt room."

"Tell me who's there with you."

Jesse concentrated. "Three men...the dead guy...the dead rats."

Ryland thought a minute. "Jesse, what happened to you already happened. There is no one who can come into your

memories to stop what you're going to see. Morgan was not there, and she cannot stop what's going to happen to you." Ryland shifted in her chair, unsure whether she should move forward and leave her in the dirt room or bring Jesse back into the living room and start again tomorrow. "What do you see?"

"The metal rod is orange. Richard's behind me holding the rod."

"Where is he holding it?"

Jesse looked over her shoulder. "Where's Morgan?"

"She's in the kitchen. Where are you?"

"In the dirt room." Jesse's voice raised in panic. "Where's Morgan?" She swiveled her head as though searching the dirt room.

Ryland made a decision. "Jesse, you're in our living room on the farm. Describe what's here in the living room."

Jesse studied the walls. "Dirt."

Moving very slowly, Ryland shifted over to sit next to her on the couch.

Morgan pushed the kitchen door partially open and watched through the crack. Jesse's answers were making her extremely uncomfortable.

Ryland softly said, "Close your eyes, Jesse." When Jesse did, Ryland said, "I'm going to touch your arm. When you feel my hand, I want you to describe to me what you're feeling."

When Jesse nodded, Ryland carefully put her hand on Jesse's forearm. When Jesse felt a hand on her arm, she stiffened and screamed, "No!"

Ryland let go immediately. "It's Ryland, Jesse, you're back in my living room. Can Morgan come back in the living room?"

Jesse was confused again and looked around the room.

Ryland said, "Morgan is not in the dirt room. She was never in the dirt room. You are not in the dirt room right now. Tell me where you are."

"I'm—" She was about to say she was in the dirt room, but someone had just said she wasn't. She blinked several times, then rubbed her eyes with her thumb and forefinger. No one was where they were supposed to be. Ryland was sitting next to her, and Morgan wasn't with them. "Where'd she go? She said she wouldn't leave."

Ryland relaxed. "She's in the kitchen. Morgan, would you come back in here, please?"

Morgan let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding and walked back into the living room. She moved to her place on the couch and sat down.

Jesse watched as Morgan stepped into the room and came over to the couch. She looked at Ryland. "Okay, would you mind telling me what just happened?" Her voice cracked on the last word.

Ryland moved back to her chair and calmly sat down. "Well, you just self-hypnotized, my dear, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't do that again." She smiled warmly and picked up one of the cups of coffee. "Anyone else need some caffeine?"

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Three days later, Sheriff Carlson drove his patrol car down to the barn. Morgan was at the kennels, and Jesse met him at the barn door. The sheriff held out his hand. "Jesse, I heard you were in another altercation the other night. I hope you weren't hurt too bad."

Jesse looked at the hand, then grudgingly shook it. Morgan would have her hide if she was rude to the man. "No. You want me to get Morgan?"

"If you don't mind." The sheriff didn't understand why Morgan and Ryland kept this one on the payroll. He'd talked to people she'd come into contact with. She was fractious, ill-mannered, and sullen, everything the two women weren't. He especially didn't

understand how Morgan put up with her. Morgan was a decent, difficult taskmaster with a fuse about as short as a DNA molecule.

As though thinking about her made her appear, Morgan came around the barn and walked up to shake hands. "Michael, I was hoping I'd see you sometime this week. How's Clarisse?"

"Ornery as ever. My wife could melt the polar ice caps if she was angry enough at 'em. Ryland doing well?"

"Ryland's always doing well. Her latest book seems to be coming along. She was talking about having the two of you over for dinner in the next few weeks."

Jesse listened for a few seconds, then disappeared into the barn. There was nothing that bored her more than polite pleasantries. Mud tracked in from the previous day's rain had dried enough for her to grab the push broom and sweep it out of the barn. Morgan didn't like to see any dirt or hay or oats on the floor and Jesse liked the slow monotony of pushing the broom back and forth across the cement.

Outside, Morgan stepped to the side of the barn and yelled, "Cody, could you come here a minute please?"

Jesse overheard and immediately put down the broom and headed outside. When she opened the barn door, Morgan glanced over her shoulder and pointed at her. "You stay right there."

Jesse stopped and leaned up against the barn wall, arms crossed. She watched as Cody ran around the side of the barn, stopping short when he saw the sheriff's car.

"Yes Ma'am?" Cody walked to where Morgan was standing.

Morgan motioned him over to the patrol car. "Sheriff Carlson has some things he needs to ask you about." As she spoke, a Sheriff's Identification Van pulled up and a young, blonde I.D. tech get out.

"Sorry I'm late, Sheriff. Photographing the break-in out at the Olsen's took longer than I expected." She went to the back of the

van and took out an ink pad and roller and a ten-print fingerprint card.

The sheriff opened the passenger door of his car and pulled out a baggie containing a pack of cigarettes. He held them up to Cody. "This look familiar to you, Son?"

Cody stepped over and reached up to bring the bottom of the baggie toward him for a closer look. He shook his head. "No Sir. I don't smoke."

The sheriff nodded. "Good, good. Then you won't mind Carrie taking your fingerprints so we can rule out your prints as being the ones on this pack."

Cody backed up a step. "Well Sir, I do mind. I'm not a criminal, and I have no intention of letting the government have my prints in any of their files."

Ryland walked down the path from the house and stood next to Morgan. The sheriff nodded to her and touched his finger to his Stetson. "Ryland."

Ryland nodded. "Michael." She realized this wasn't the time for polite chit chat, so she contented herself with waiting to see how things were going to play out. She watched Cody, who rubbed his elbow and glanced around nervously. The barn was to their back, but as she'd walked down the path she'd seen Jesse leaning against the wall, looking about as casual as a bull elephant about to trample a mouse.

Sheriff Carlson reached into the inside pocket of his uniform jacket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I thought that might be the case. Unfortunately, Morgan and some of the other land owners hereabouts have noticed an unusual increase in burglaries around the county since you came back from college, and since we've been able to lift some prints from a few of them, Judge Aldrich agreed that it might be a good idea if we took your prints...you know, just to eliminate you as a possible suspect."

When Cody took off running, Jesse pushed off the barn and sprinted after him with Morgan yelling for her to stop. There was no question in anyone's mind Jesse wouldn't listen, and when she didn't, Morgan growled and started after her. Ryland belly laughed behind her, and Morgan turned, her hands on her hips.

Ryland put her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry, Honey, but sometimes the two of you just make me laugh." She continued to chuckle as Morgan took in the sheriff's wide grin. "You too?"

"Don't worry, Morgan. I've got a couple deputies out there who'll pull her off him."

When the deputies returned with Cody in tow, his face bloody and covered in dirt, Jesse followed right behind them, dirty, but looking extremely pleased. She stood and watched as the I.D. tech rolled Cody's fingers in black ink. Morgan walked up behind Jesse and rapped her on the head with her knuckles.

"Ow!" Jesse stepped forward and rubbed her head as she glared at Morgan.

"Did you hear me tell you to stop?"

Jesse moved around behind Ryland. "What the fuck?"

Morgan circled Ryland as well. "I asked you a question."

"Well no shit. I heard ya." She glared at Morgan and continued moving.

"Stop circling Ryland."

"No."

Morgan lunged for Jesse, who danced backward, a hint of mischief in her eyes. Morgan stopped and studied her. Without taking her eyes off Jesse, she asked Ryland. "She's playing me, isn't she?"

Ryland nodded. "Like a fiddle."

Morgan squinted, unsure how to react to a side of Jesse she'd never seen before. Hell, she didn't even know it existed.

Jesse turned her back to Morgan and headed to the barn. She kept an eye on her boss out of the corner of her eye because she

was pretty sure she'd need a good head start to be able to outrun her if she had to.

Morgan scratched her head as she watched her go. "Well, I'll be damned." When Jesse went into the barn and closed the door, Morgan walked up to Ryland and put her arm around her. "Maybe you do know what you're doing after all."

"Well, thanks for that vote of confidence." She leaned into Morgan and they watched as Carrie finished rubbing Cody's fingers in the black ink and rolling his fingerprints onto the ten-print card. He was sullen as she closed the ink pad, put away the roller and set the card on the hood to dry.

The sheriff spoke none too kindly. "You're free to go now, Cody, but don't go too far. I might want to talk to you some more once we get these print comparisons back."

Cody turned to Morgan, who motioned toward the house. "Come up to the house and I'll write your termination paycheck." She shook hands with the sheriff, then walked back up the path, Ryland next to her and Cody walking about ten paces behind. She made him wait outside while she added up what she owed him and wrote out a check.

When she handed it to him, he grabbed it and snarled, "You perverted dykes are all alike. You and that baby dyke better watch your backs!" He walked to the gate, climbed over and headed toward town, unaware of the rage he'd left simmering behind him.

Ryland put her arm through Morgan's and leaned against her. "He's not worth it, Morgan. Let it go."

Morgan nodded and started back toward the barn.

"Morgan?"

Morgan stopped and waited, too angry to speak right then.

Ryland waited as well. "Morgan, look at me, please."

Morgan let out a breath and turned, innate courtesy the only thing keeping her from rudely walking away.

"Don't take your anger at Cody out on Jesse or Rico. Go for a ride, or we can go for a walk, but give yourself time to calm down."

Morgan knew she was right. She recognized when she was about to blow, and just now, she'd been as close to being arrested for assault as she'd ever been in her life.

The sheriff pulled his car up to the house. He walked over to the gate, opened it for the I.D. van, then closed it after Carrie drove through.

Ryland smiled graciously. "Michael, do you have time to stop in for a cup of coffee? I put on a fresh pot when I saw you driving down to the barn."

He took off his hat and followed her up to the door, turning to see whether Morgan was coming in as well. Morgan had already started to the barn, so he shrugged and went in to visit and enjoy some of Ryland's wonderful coffee.

Morgan walked into the barn and grabbed Somerset's halter. She stalked past Jesse, who was finishing up with her sweeping.

Jesse swept the last of the dirt into the dustpan and dumped it into the trash barrel. The broom and pan hung on pegs next to the halters, and after she put them away, she reached up and grabbed Barney's halter. Jesse passed Morgan as her boss brought Somerset out and tied him to a ring. She sensed the tension in the air, and wasn't sure whether it was directed at her or at something else. When she brought Barney out and tied him next to Somerset, Barney turned his hindquarters to the big bay and pushed him into Morgan, who was brushing him on the other side.

Morgan angrily walked in front of Somerset, untied Barney and moved him three rings away. She retied the rope and went back to brushing Somerset without a word to Jesse.

Jesse leaned on Barney's hindquarters and studied Morgan, wondering what exactly was going on.

Morgan glared at her. "Don't you have work to do, or do I pay you to stand around and do nothing?" She continued brushing as she spoke, working her way around the horse, checking for any sores or cuts as she went.

Jesse reached for a brush and started on Barney. "In town the other day, I talked to a guy I used to work with at a farm in Georgia. He's lookin' for work, and he's worked hounds before."

Morgan put her brush away and walked into the tack room to get her blanket and saddle. She came back out and saddled Somerset.

Jesse moved to Barney's neck as she brushed. "You'd probably like him. He's into that 'Yes Ma'am, no Ma'am' shit. But he's not like Cody; he really means it."

Morgan went in and brought out Somerset's bridle. She undid his halter, slipped it off his head and re-buckled it around his neck. She put the bridle on and un-hooked the halter again.

Jesse bent over and picked up Barney's front hoof. "Nobody'd told him yet what a mean S.O.B. you are to work for. You might be able to get him."

Morgan stopped, walked up behind Jesse and leaned over her, one hand on Barney's withers, the other on her hip. Jesse had to tilt her head upside down to see Morgan's face. She shrugged. "You want me to tell him to come see you?" Jesse let Barney's hoof down, moved out from under Morgan and stood up.

Morgan growled. "Does he have your smart mouth?"

Jesse shook her head. "Nope."

"Then tell him he's hired." With that, she led Somerset out of the barn and went for a two-hour ride.

## **Chapter Twenty**

The next morning, a tall, good looking African American was waiting in front of the barn as Morgan walked down at four-thirty

to help Rico feed the hounds. The man, who looked to be in his mid-thirties, came over to meet her, took off his baseball cap and held out his hand. "Ms. Davis? I'm Anthony Cawfield. Jesse told me you might have a job for me?"

Morgan took his hand and was impressed with his dry, firm grip and the calluses on his palm. "Good Morning, and yes, I'm Morgan Davis. Jesse said you'd worked with hounds before?"

"Yes Ma'am. I was a K-9 handler in the military for nine years, then went to work on my uncle's farm in Georgia, helping with his hounds. Maybe you knew him—James Cawfield?"

Morgan nodded. "I know of him, I've never met him. He's strictly a breeder, right?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Why aren't you working for him anymore?"

"He passed on six months ago. My aunt had to sell everything."

"I'm sorry for your loss." She paused, sizing up the man who held his six-foot frame straight and proud. "Minimum wage, work starts at four-thirty, ends when I say so. You have a problem with that?"

He smiled, flashing a set of straight, white teeth. "No Ma'am. Um..." He scratched his head, looking a little sheepish. "I know she recommended me for this job, but exactly how close do I have to work with Jesse?"

Morgan returned his smile and glanced at the barn. "She works the barn. You, Rico and I work the farm, the kennels and the hounds."

Anthony tried not to look too relieved. "That'll be fine, then."

The two of them walked behind the barn to the kennels and Morgan introduced Anthony to Rico. The men shook hands, and Anthony started speaking fluent Spanish, which delighted Rico no end.

"I'm going to leave Rico to train you for a short time this morning. I've got a few errands I need to run in town. Where'd you learn to speak Spanish like that?"

"My father was in the military, and we were stationed in Spain for several years. My parents believed in full immersion wherever we lived, so I also speak fluent German and some Japanese, although I had a harder time with that."

"You're an educated man. Why would you want to work on a farm for minimum wage?"

"It's in my blood. My grandfather farmed and then, of course there was my uncle. It's what I've wanted to do since I was a little boy, and now I have the chance to do it."

That was something Morgan understood. She'd never wanted to do anything except farm and foxhunt for as long as she could remember. Rico, who'd waited patiently while the two of them talked, dipped his head and touched the brim of his hat when she turned and headed to the barn.

Jesse stood at the feed table measuring oats and vitamins, planning out her day which included trying to go into town that evening to find Cody. When she heard Morgan come in, she finished Aristotle's measure, grabbed an armful of hay and went to deliver his breakfast. When she returned, Morgan was reading through the horse notebook.

"Ryland says to tell you your mini-vacation is over and she wants us there at one today. I have to go into town this morning to pick up some things. You're going with me, so don't disappear when you're done feeding and cleaning that mess of hay you drop every time you feed one of the horses."

Jesse went to the feeding table and mumbled. "Well if you'd buy a decent wheel barrow maybe I wouldn't have to hand carry every fuckin' flake of hay."

Morgan glanced up from the book. "Yes Ma'am was all you had to say. I don't need to hear your excuses."

"It wasn't an excuse."

Morgan set the book on the table. "Do you remember that 'yes Ma'am, no Ma'am shit' Anthony is so good at?"

Jesse nodded.

"You'd better start being good at it, right now."

The headaches had been coming more frequently the last few days, and they'd put Jesse in a foul mood. Once the oat can was ready, she picked it up and went to get a flake of hay. She purposely dropped hay onto the floor as she walked down the aisle, and kicked it on her way back up, sending it flying in various directions.

Morgan started to bite, then backed off. When Jesse returned to the table, Morgan put her hand behind Jesse's head and made her look at her. "Okay, what's wrong? You've been churlish the last three days, more so than usual if that's possible, and I'm getting tired of it. What's going on?"

"Churlish?"

"Bitchy, boorish, impolite, cantankerous, rude, ill-tempered—need I go on?"

Jesse backed away from Morgan, banged the can on the table and started measuring. "Nothing's going on. I'm fine."

"There'd better be something going on, or you and I are gonna lock horns the next time you push. Now what is it?"

"My head's been pounding the last couple of days, all day and all night. I'm just tired of it, that's all."

"Did you tell Ryland?"

Jesse finished measuring the next mixture and went to grab another flake of hay. As she walked down the aisle, she said something Morgan couldn't quite make out. Morgan leaned against the table and waited for her to finish delivering Rebel's breakfast.

"What did you just say? I couldn't hear you." Morgan decided to give her the benefit of the doubt and assume she wasn't muttering something rude under her breath again.

"I said, I think something bad's gonna happen today."

She considered that a second. "Listen, finish up with the feeding and cleaning, then come up to the house for breakfast and we'll ask Ryland about your headaches." Morgan closed the notebook and shelved it along with some equine reference books she kept on hand. "By the way, if you find anyone else like Anthony, let me know."

Jesse nodded and Morgan left the barn and walked up the path toward the house. The leaves had completely fallen from the trees a few weeks earlier, and the carpet of brown under her feet felt soft beneath her leather riding boots. It was five-thirty when she walked in the house, and Ryland was up making coffee and cinnamon rolls for breakfast.

Morgan walked over to the counter and pulled out a stool. "Jesse says she's had one solid headache the last two days."

Ryland set the timer for the rolls and shut the oven door. "I know, I've been watching her. To be honest, I'm really not looking forward to today's session. I need your help to steady her, but if she starts to see you in the dirt room, I'll have to have you leave again. It's kind of a catch-22."

Morgan reached over and took down two coffee cups from a cup tree next to the coffee pot. She poured the coffee, then added cream and sugar to Ryland's and left hers black. "So, explain again why she's seeing me in that room?"

Ryland took a sip of her coffee, and swallowed slowly, savoring the warmth. "Something mind wrenching happened at this juncture of her captivity, and her subconscious is doing everything it can to prevent her from having to remember or relive it again. You are Jesse's protector—her strength, if you will—and her subconscious has convinced itself that if you're there, you can stop whatever happened."

"How can it be worse than being nailed to a board, bitten by rats, and having a dead man's bloody head on your face? What could possibly be worse than that?"

Ryland opened the sugar bowl and scooped two more teaspoons into her coffee. "One thing I learned over the years is that, to a certain type of personality—you and Jesse, for example—some kinds of emotional abuse or control are more debilitating than physical abuse. We'll just have to see what comes up."

"I was going to take her to town with me today to help load the grain bags into the truck, but as nasty as she's been lately, maybe I should leave her here."

"You're the one who pointed out that she has to function as an employee while she's going through this. Don't start slacking off and letting her get away with murder. If you do, it'll come back to bite us in her therapy."

They heard knocking on the front door, and Morgan grumbled. "Why can't she just come in like we've told her to?"

Ryland covered Morgan's hand on the counter with her own. "Because she knows it bothers you. Wait here; I'll go get her."

After a few minutes, Ryland returned, trailed by Jesse who pulled out a chair at the table and sat. Ryland poured her a cup of coffee and took the two cups to the table to join her. "So, how are you this morning?"

"Churlish."

Ryland sat back in her chair and Morgan snorted into her coffee cup. Ryland said. "Well, I can see you two have been at it already this morning and it's only six o'clock. I understand your headaches have returned."

The timer for the rolls dinged. Morgan picked up an oven mitt and pulled them out. She slid six onto a plate with a plastic spatula and liberally doused them with some of Ryland's homemade sugar sauce. She took three plates from the cupboard and brought

everything over to the table. She reached back for her coffee cup, then sat at the end nearest Ryland.

Jesse followed each step of the process, not that it interested her; she simply didn't want to talk about her headaches. Morgan put a cinnamon roll on Ryland's plate as well as her own, then shoved the rest toward Jesse at the other end of the table.

She didn't make a move to serve herself, and Ryland reached over and began to lift a roll onto her plate. Jesse put up a hand. "I'm not hungry."

Ryland scooped up the roll anyway and placed it on the plate. "You've been losing weight these last few weeks, Jess. When was the last real meal you ate?"

Jesse put her head on her hand and rubbed her forehead, eyes closed. "I don't know. I'm just not hungry, that's all. It's no big deal."

Ryland stood up. "How about I fix some eggs and toast? You might be getting headaches because you're not eating."

Jesse pushed away from the table and headed for the back door. "I said I'm not hungry."

Morgan got to the back door first. "Sit down. And when someone offers you food, the polite way to decline is to say 'No thank you.' I have a hard time believing you were never taught manners."

Jesse reached behind Morgan, grabbed the doorknob and touched it for precisely one second. Morgan grabbed her arm and escorted her back to her seat and made her sit. She pointed to the cinnamon roll. "Eat."

Jesse scowled at Morgan, then broke a piece off the roll and stuffed it into her mouth. Her hunger surprised her once she actually tasted some food, and the homemade cinnamon roll with fresh sugar sauce made her feel a little better somehow.

It took about five minutes for Ryland to cook the eggs and toast and put them front of Jesse, who picked up her fork.

"Thanks." She ate slowly, not sure whether the food was going to upset her stomach since she really hadn't eaten anything in days.

Morgan sat at the end of the table, arms crossed, waiting for Jesse to disrespect Ryland again. When she heard 'thanks', she raised her eyebrows and muttered. "Well, the gods be praised."

Both Jesse and Ryland glared at her while she stared back at them. Once everyone was finished, Morgan gathered the dishes and put them in the sink. "Jesse, you wash while I get everything I need for town. Ryland, thank you for a wonderful treat." She kissed Ryland's cheek, then went out into the living room.

Jesse walked over and began rinsing dishes and pans. Ryland came up behind her and laid her hand on Jesse's shoulders. "It'll be all right, Jesse. We'll get through it together."

Jesse shook her head. "Something bad's gonna happen, Ryland. I don't know what; I just feel it." She put a clean plate on the countertop and Ryland opened the dishwasher and started loading.

"We'll get through it together, Jess. Bad things happen, and people survive. You've already survived what actually happened. We just need to bring the memory out, examine it, and take its power away."

Morgan yelled through the house as she opened the front door, "Jesse, let's go."

Jesse held the last dish under the tap and let the water wash away the soap. "What if—" She blushed a deep shade of red. "Never mind." She set down the plate and started for the door.

Ryland reached for her arm and pulled her around. "Jesse, without thinking, what's the first word that comes to your mind, right now?"

"Humiliation." Although it didn't seem possible, the red intensified.

Morgan had pushed open the kitchen door, ready to grab Jesse and go, but when she heard how Jesse answered Ryland's question, she quietly came in and stood next to them.

Ryland reached up and pushed some of Jesse's short hair behind an ear. "You'd better go now. Remember, what happened is in the past, and nothing you remember and tell us will push us away from you."

Jesse fought back tears. "What if it pushes me away from you?"

Ryland pulled her close and wrapped her arms around her. She rubbed her back and said softly, "Don't ever give that man that kind of control over you. If you push away from us, he wins." Jesse buried her head on Ryland's shoulder. They didn't move until Jesse pulled in a deep breath.

Ryland pushed her back and handed her a paper towel. "Here, wash your face, and stop worrying about today. Have you ever heard the saying, Tomorrow, Today will be Yesterday?"

Jesse walked to the sink and held the paper towel under the water. She washed her face and stared out at the beauty of the backyard covered with yellow and gold leaves. The scene had a calming affect on her, and after a second she turned back to Morgan. "You ready?"

Morgan nodded, kissed Ryland on the forehead, and held her arm out for Jesse, who, after a second's hesitation, walked over. Morgan draped her arm around Jesse's shoulder and the two of them walked out together.

Ryland poured herself another cup of coffee and went out onto the porch to sit in one of the hanging chairs. She sipped her coffee and watched two squirrels arguing over a nut while she planned out that afternoon's session. There was no doubt in her mind it was going to be a hellish experience for everyone involved.

## Chapter Twenty-One

When they reached the truck, Jesse climbed on the back bumper to get into the bed. Morgan grabbed the back of her shirt and pulled her down. "Would you just get in the front, for Christ's sake? I don't bite."

Jesse flashed unbelieving eyes at Morgan. "Yeah, you keep telling yourself that."

Morgan grinned and pushed her toward the passenger door. "Get in, you little shit."

They were almost to town when the truck phone rang. Jesse only heard one side of the conversation, but when Morgan glanced over at her, she started to get nervous. When Morgan said she had one of her employees with her, Jesse sank down into the seat. Morgan hung up and began tapping on the steering wheel as she drove.

They bypassed town and, after a mile or so, pulled onto the driveway of an elegant, manicured estate. Before they reached what could only be called a mansion, Morgan pulled off to the side of the road and shifted into neutral.

She turned to Jesse and put her arm on the back of the bench seat. "Look, these people are the new owners of this place, and I've been trying to arrange a time to meet with them to discuss the possibility of foxhunting on their land. I've never met them before, and they just called and invited us over for coffee."

Jesse pushed down farther in the seat and put her knees up on the dashboard. "I'll stay in the truck."

Morgan regarded her a minute. "Well, that's not possible since that would be rude and I have no intention of allowing your bad manners to influence this meeting."

Jesse crossed her arms and dug in. "Then drop me off at the road and pick me up when you're done."

Morgan grimaced and rubbed her forehead. "They already know you're with me."

"Fine."

Morgan leaned toward Jesse, suspicion coloring her voice. "Fine what? What does 'fine' mean?"

"It means I'll pretend to be polite. Let's just get this fuckin' meeting over with." She waved toward the residence. "Go."

Morgan sighed. "Just try to be nice, okay? And polite?" She put the truck in gear and drove the rest of the way to the house. As they walked from the truck toward the front porch, a well-built man in his mid-sixties opened the door and stepped out. His hair was the high and tight cut of the hard-core retired military man. His clothes were perfectly pressed and had obviously been tailored to exact specifications. He stood ramrod straight and waited for them to approach.

Jesse muttered under her breath. "Oh, Jesus, just what I need."

Morgan muttered back without moving her lips. "Shut up." She smiled and stepped forward, extending her hand in greeting. "Mr. Adams, I'm Morgan Davis. This is one of my employees, Jesse Shaunessy."

The man took Morgan's hand and shook it with three fingers and a thumb. "Ms. Davis, thank you for coming on such short notice. I'm Colonel James Adams. My wife is inside. Won't you come in?"

Morgan stepped through the door. "Thank you, and please call me Morgan."

The colonel followed her in and left Jesse standing on the porch, which was just fine with her. She backed around and headed down the steps until she felt a hand grab her shirt. Without missing a step, she turned and walked into the house, Morgan right behind her.

Colonel Adams held the door open, then directed them into the living room. He spoke to Jesse's chest. "Jesse, I apologize for not

inviting you in. Usually the hired help goes around to the kitchen. It seems I have a few things to learn about the local culture."

Jesse wanted to tell him that her eyes weren't on her breasts, but when she glanced over at Morgan, she decided to stay quiet.

A striking woman entered the room and walked over to the colonel. In most circles, she'd be described as arm candy—blonde, tan, and younger than he was. He put his arm around her waist and introduced them. "This is my wife, Sandra. Sandra, may I introduce you to Morgan Davis and one of her employees, Jesse."

Morgan held out her hand and Sandra greeted her with a firm handshake and a smile. "Ms. Davis, I'm very excited to hear all about your hunt club. We belonged to a wonderful club in England."

"Please, call me Morgan, and I hope you'll ride as my guests once the season starts. We're a little different here than England in that we don't kill the foxes; they just lead us on a merry chase."

Jesse's irritation at Colonel Adams grew as his eyes slowly undressed her, so she focused on Mrs. Adams to try to distract herself. Twenty years younger than her husband with a body twenty years younger than that, she made a very attractive distraction. Her breasts looked natural enough, easily a D or double-D cup, her waist, trim and her hips barely contained in tight, black leather pants.

Mrs. Adams held out her hand to Jesse. "Welcome to our new home, Jesse. And I would appreciate it if you would call me Sandra as well. What do you do for Ms. Davis on her farm?"

Jesse took the woman's hand and felt a finger caress her palm. She smiled. "I shovel—"

Morgan interrupted her. "She works with the horses, Sandra. I couldn't help notice when we drove up that you're restoring the wonderful old barn behind the house. I'd like to see it some time."

Sandra let go of Jesse's hand and motioned them farther into the living room. "I'd love to give you a tour when it's finished."

Please, won't you make yourselves comfortable? Morgan and James, why don't you sit over here?" She stood between two wing chairs and caressed their upholstery, reminiscent of Vanna as she turned the letters on *Wheel of Fortune*. Sandra walked over to the couch and patted the cushion. "Jesse why don't you and I sit on the couch? The coffee should be ready soon. Does everyone drink coffee?"

Morgan sat in the chair and nodded. "Coffee's fine, thank you." She and Colonel Adams began the endless small talk so common to these types of meetings, and Jesse tuned out until she felt a finger tickle the side of her leg. She glanced up at Morgan and the colonel, who seemed to be deep into their discussion.

Sandra stood up. "Jesse, while they're busy talking about business, would you mind helping me prepare the coffee and bring it in?"

Jesse felt Morgan's eyes on her as she followed Sandra through a swinging door into the fanciest kitchen she'd ever seen. The flooring was a light hardwood, with the marble on the countertops the exact shade of the hardwood. The cabinets were built from natural pine and the swirls and whorls of the wood added to the overall elegance.

Sandra pointed to a cupboard by the side of the triple sink. "Could you take four cups down for me out of that cupboard, please?"

"Sure." Jesse opened the cupboard door and reached up for the cups. As she stretched, she felt hands crisscross around her body and cup her breasts as Sandra leaned into her from behind.

Morgan hadn't gone over this particular set of circumstances, and Jesse wasn't sure exactly how to react. She brought the cups down as Sandra nibbled her ear. A flutter rippled through her and she closed her eyes a second, trying to figure out the best way to handle Mrs. Adams without hurting Morgan's chances for the hunt club.

When Sandra turned her around and delicately kissed her chin, Jesse glanced up at the door to the living room, then mentally shrugged. *What the heck. Morgan told me to be nice.* She reached around and put her hands on the woman's very tight leather backside and pulled her closer.

Sandra raised her lips to Jesse's, and when Jesse responded, she felt a tongue begin a slow caress. Eyes closed, Jesse opened her mouth and was rewarded by a gentle probing. The flutter moved lower, and she pulled Sandra in very close. The kitchen door opened and, after a second, Jesse opened one eye just enough to see Morgan leaning her forehead against the door jamb. She closed her eye again while she caressed Sandra's tongue with her own. The next time she came up for air, Morgan was gone.

From the living room, the colonel called out, "Sandra, how's the coffee coming?"

Sandra lazily pushed back from Jesse. "Almost done, Honey."

She leaned in again and ran her hands up and down Jesse's arms. Sandra's whisper tickled her ear. "I think your hunt club might be just what the doctor ordered." Sandra slowly peeled herself off, took a tray from a lower cupboard and handed it to Jesse. After she filled the tray, she winked and motioned for Jesse to precede her into the living room.

Jesse refused to look at Morgan as she set the tray on the coffee table.

Colonel Adams said, "There you are. I was beginning to think you got lost."

Sandra poured the coffee and served the cake. "Jesse and I just took a minute to get acquainted, that's all, Dear." She turned to Morgan. "Do you take cream and sugar?"

Eyebrows raised, Morgan said, "No, black is fine, thank you."

Sandra handed Morgan her coffee.

Jesse sat on the couch and, as she accepted a plate, held Sandra's eyes and inclined her head. "Thank you."

"My pleasure."

Jesse glanced at Morgan, who had her head in her hand rubbing her eyes. There was more small talk about the renovation of the farm and where the Adams might purchase some excellent thoroughbred crosses for hunting. Toward the end of the meeting, Sandra moved to the arm of her husband's chair and ran her hand over his chest. "You know, James, I have a good feeling about this hunt club. I'm looking forward to riding with them sometime soon."

Jesse felt Morgan's eyes on her, and she pointedly stared at the ceiling, biting her lip to keep from smiling. When they walked out to the truck and the Adams had gone back into the house, Jesse tried to jump in the back. Morgan grabbed her by the belt and pulled her down. "Inside." It wasn't an offer or a request.

Jesse got in and pulled the door shut. Morgan pushed the gear shift into first and headed out the long driveway. She started tapping her fingers on the wheel again, and Jesse sank down in the seat. "You said to be nice."

Morgan burst out laughing and playfully slapped Jesse on the head. "Next time I tell you to be nice, tone it down a little, will ya?"

Jesse grinned and at least had the decency to blush. They drove back into town, and Jesse waited in the truck while Morgan went into the bank. When she returned, she backed the truck up to the feed store ramp and told Jesse to start loading sacks of high performance feed.

The employee who came over to help seemed somewhat familiar to Jesse, and when he started talking, she thought she recognized his voice from the night she'd gotten so drunk.

He grabbed a bag and threw it into the bed of the truck. "I hear Cody got fired. He's pretty pissed off."

Jesse continued to load the truck, not bothering to answer.

The man stopped to wipe his brow with the back of his sleeve. "Listen, I'm sorry about the other night. I like Ms. Davis and Dr. Caldwell. I used to ride with their hunt until my parents sold my horse. They need to know to keep their eyes open for a while. You too. I don't think Cody'll just slink away into his hole."

Jesse stopped loading while she took a breather. "Why don't you tell them yourself?"

Morgan walked up behind them and counted the bags already in the truck. "Tell who what?" She finished counting and leaned her arm on the side of the bed, waiting for an answer. Jesse and the man started piling sacks on again, and Morgan said, "Kai? Do you need to tell me something?"

Kai shoved another bag up on the pile. "No Ma'am."

Morgan watched them for a second, then said, "Three more bags and that'll do it."

They finished loading the bags on the truck around eleven-thirty, and Morgan told Jesse to come with her. They went out to the main street where Morgan had to talk to everyone they happened to pass. After the fifth person stopped them, Jesse's impatience started to show. "Do you have to talk to every single person who lives in this town?"

Morgan kept walking. "I've lived here forty years. This is a small town and these are all my friends. Get used to it."

"You mean you know every move I make here before I make it?"

Morgan smiled. "Pretty much."

A woman called to Morgan from across the street. Morgan turned, and Jesse growled behind her. Morgan reached back, opened the door to Smokey Joe's, and pushed her inside. "Here, go in and order lunch. Order me a hamburger and I'll be in when I'm finished talking."

Jesse wandered in and found a table. The same woman who'd served her the first time came up to the table. "Well, I saw Ms.

Davis push you in here. She cares enough to shove you, you must be all right." The woman smiled and took out her order pad. "Now, I know she'll want a hamburger and a soda. How 'bout you?"

Jesse noticed the clock, and her stomach turned when she saw how close it was to one. "Just...um, just some iced tea."

"Now you gotta eat, Honey. You look like a scarecrow on a stick. How about some fried catfish?"

Jesse closed her eyes and tried not to visualize greasy fried fish. She put her head back on the bench seat. "Just some iced tea."

"Now here comes Ms. Davis." The waitress turned to Morgan. "Ms. Davis, you need to feed this woman. She says she don't want no food, just some iced tea. You gonna let that stand?"

Morgan sat in the bench opposite Jesse and took in the green pallor around her eyes. "Iced tea'll be fine for now, Frieda, thanks."

"All right then, I'll be back with your burger and soda pretty soon. I'll bet Jack already has your burger waitin' for you without me even havin' to order it." She smiled at Morgan and started back into the kitchen.

Morgan called after her. "Frieda, could you ask Jack to make the burger to go, and we'll just have our drinks right now, please?"

"Yes Ma'am. I'll bring them right out." Frieda grabbed two glasses, filled them, and brought them over to the table. "I heard you fired Cody. I'm glad. I've never heard anyone have as foul a mouth as that boy." She stepped over to another table and greeted a new customer.

Morgan peeled the wrapper off a straw and stuck it in Jesse's iced tea. "Seems like everyone's happy I fired Cody."

Jesse brought her head forward and rubbed her temple. "That guy at the feed place said you and Ryland need to watch your backs. He said Cody's really pissed off."

Morgan sat back in her seat. "He's really spreading it around town. I've had four people warn me about him today. Oh well, I've been threatened before, and I'm sure I'll be threatened again."

Jesse pushed her fingers into her temple, harder this time, and Morgan tried to distract her. "Did you notice Smokey favoring his right front foot the other day?"

Jesse thought a minute. "No, did you?"

"I thought he might have been. Keep an eye on it. Have you seen anything else that might be thrush on Cabo?"

"I've been lookin' every day. I'm not sure what I saw, but I guess he's all right 'cause I haven't seen it since." She brought her hand down and played with her straw. "You don't think Cody would hurt any of the animals, do you? I've been thinking maybe I should sleep out in the aisle between the horses just to make sure he doesn't try anything with them."

Morgan nodded. "To be honest, I've been patrolling at night, watching for him myself. I'll be glad if the sheriff can lock him up for a while. Maybe I'll get a decent night's sleep."

Morgan signaled for the check, and Frieda brought it over with the hamburger in a brown paper bag. "You have a wonderful day, Ms. Davis. And make sure you feed this woman or she's gonna dry up and blow away."

Morgan thanked her, and the two of them walked back to the truck and drove back to the farm.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

It was almost one o'clock when they pulled in the gate, so Morgan parked up next to the house. She'd gotten out and started up the steps when she realized Jesse was still sitting in the truck. There was a bush directly behind the tailgate blocking her way, so she walked around the front and opened the passenger door.

Jesse had her head back with her eyes closed.

Morgan reached around and undid the seat belt. "C'mon, we're not gonna let that bastard win. The three of us are ten times stronger than he ever was."

"I can't do this. I cannot do this."

Morgan felt Ryland behind her, and she backed out to let her in. Ryland reached in and practically pulled Jesse out of the truck. "Let's go." Jesse had to put her feet on the ground or end up sitting in the dirt. "Morgan and I'll drag you in if we have to, but we're moving forward today, period."

Jesse's stomach heaved and she detoured to the side of the porch to bend over the railing. Nothing came up, but she took a deep breath and stayed bent over anyway, waiting for her stomach to settle.

Ryland looked at Morgan. "All right then, we'll do it out here. Would you mind bringing three of the Adirondack chairs up for us?"

Morgan went out onto the lawn and, one at a time, carried three of their wooden lawn chairs up onto the porch. Ryland set one with its back to the railing for Jesse and put the other two facing it so they blocked any exit Jesse might decide to take.

Ryland sat, and Morgan walked to the railing and leaned on her arms next to Jesse. Ryland plunged right in. "Jesse, the last time we tried this, you self-hypnotized. In case that happens again, I want to set up a word I can use as a cue for you to snap back into the present."

Jesse turned to face Ryland.

"If you hear the word *Cody* I want you to get so pissed off it brings you right back here. Do you understand?"

"I think so. I'll try."

"Then let's get started. I want you to think about the dirt room and the men coming down the stairs carrying their tools."

Jesse just stared at Ryland.

"Are you there?"

A shake of the head.

"What are you thinking about?"

Jesse leaned back against the railing. "Nothing, there's nothing there. I'm just blank."

Ryland rested her chin on her fingers. She knew what was happening, and she wanted to move slowly. "What do you remember of our sessions?"

Jesse tried to remember something—*anything*—they'd ever talked about. "Nothing. What's wrong with me?"

Morgan turned from the railing and raised her eyebrows at Ryland, obviously confused.

Ryland smiled at Jesse. "Don't worry, Hon. We just need to go back far enough where the memories aren't so threatening to your subconscious. Do you remember your partner, Pete?"

A face flashed across her vision. "Yeah."

"Good. Can you hold him in your mind, or are you just getting a quick glimpse?"

"A quick glimpse."

"We'll wait until you can slow the movie reel down and pause it on his face."

Jesse closed her eyes and realized it *was* like a movie reel. She concentrated on slowing the flipping pictures until it stopped on Pete's face. "Okay, I see him."

"Move the movie forward and tell me what happens. Wait, Jess—why don't you grab a seat?"

Morgan took Jesse's arm and she pulled it away. "I can seat myself." She stepped around to the front of the chair and sat.

"All right, close your eyes and move the movie forward."

Jesse closed her eyes, then fainted in the chair. Morgan grabbed her before she slid onto the floor and eased her back into the chair. "You knew that was gonna happen. How do you know these things?"

"The same way you know the second a hound loses the scent." Ryland sighed. "This might happen a lot today. Morgan, I didn't get a chance to talk to you before we started. Whatever happens

today, whatever she says or does, you absolutely have to keep your cool. Today it is imperative."

Morgan glanced down at Jesse and nodded.

Ryland continued. "I don't think you've noticed, but during the earlier sessions, each time we got into a critical memory, her subconscious provided a different defense mechanism, headaches, nausea, fainting, anger—anything to try to stop us from learning what happened. Today, in the first few minutes, we've seen them all except anger, and I'm willing to bet that'll be next."

Jesse groaned, and Morgan pulled her chair close and sat. Jesse pushed up from where she was draped over the arm of the chair and rubbed her temples. "The headache's starting again."

"Tell me what you saw when you moved the movie forward."

"What do you think I saw? How many times do I have to say it?" Her head hurt, and lately it was Ryland who made it hurt.

"I'm just trying to help you remember, Jess. What did you see?"

"Blood...a lot of blood."

"Whose blood?"

"Goddamn it, Ryland, whose blood do you think? The man without the head! His blood!" Jesse was getting tired of Ryland's games and her stupid questions had just made the pain increase tenfold.

"So your movie fast forwarded on you. No wonder you passed out." Ryland chuckled and smiled at Jesse, who stopped rubbing her temples and lunged.

Morgan had just enough time to throw her arm between them as Jesse shouted at Ryland. "You fucking bitch! You think it's *funny*? You're fuckin' playing with my mind! You're fuckin' *playing*!"

Ryland hadn't moved an inch. She calmly put her chin on her hand and waited. When Jesse stopped yelling, she said. "It's your

own mind that's playing the games Jesse, and I think after today, you'll have some control back."

Jesse grabbed her temples again. "Fuck you!"

Ryland reached up and touched Morgan's back. Morgan let go and sat back in her chair, more alert than she'd been a minute ago. Ryland crossed her legs. "Jesse, put yourself in the dirt room, look up at the stairs, and see the shadows coming down the stairs."

Jesse continued holding her head.

"Are you there?"

A nod.

"Good. Now, watch each man come in with his tools."

Jesse's breathing escalated as she watched them set up their equipment. One man carefully hooked the cord with the clamps onto the positive and negative posts on a battery. At the end of the cord was an inverter. He walked to the stairs where he'd left the fire starter, unwound the electric cord as he came back and plugged it into the inverter. She saw it perfectly, and understood exactly what was happening.

"Jesse?" Morgan was shaking her. Jesse opened her eyes and stared vacantly. Morgan turned Jesse's face so she was looking directly at her. "Jesse, focus on my eyes. Come on, Kid, stay with us. Focus."

Jesse blinked a few times, then realized Morgan was talking to her. She closed her eyes, then opened them wide and blinked again. "I'm here. I'm okay, Morgan. Stop shaking me."

Morgan let go and leaned on the arm of her chair.

Ryland said, "All right, Jesse. One step at a time, tell me what you saw. If you hear me say stop, open your eyes and look at Morgan."

Jesse took a shaky breath and closed her eyes. "I know exactly what the tools were."

"All right, then let's name them."

"A battery, an inverter with clamps, a—" Her throat clamped completely shut.

"Stop Jesse. Stop and look at Morgan."

Jesse's eyes locked onto Morgan's.

"Good, now breathe. You're on our front porch in one of my favorite Adirondack chairs, and there's no reason you can't breathe."

Jesse blinked at the absurdity of not being able to breathe while sitting in an Adirondack chair on Ryland's porch. She forced herself to smile, which immediately opened up her throat. "Okay, the other thing was a fire starter." She spat out the words before her throat could close again.

"Good. What happened next?"

"One man...." Her hand unconsciously rubbed her arm from her shoulder down to her elbow, then back to her shoulder again. "Guillermo, hooked the clamps to the battery, and plugged the fire starter into the inverter."

Ryland watched the hand movements. "And you were able to see him connect everything. Did you understand what he was doing?"

Jesse shook her head. Her shoulders had bunched into knots, and she forced them to relax, still rubbing her hand up and down her arm. "Not at first... I had an idea, but not exactly."

Morgan listened to the easy cadence of Jesse's voice. It seemed as though she was having an easier time remembering without reacting. She sat back in her chair and relaxed, relieved that things were going so well.

Ryland saw the shift in Morgan's posture, and said, "Morgan." When she met her eyes, Ryland shook her head ever so slightly.

Morgan tried to understand what Ryland was telling her. She looked at Jesse, who was sitting quietly in the chair watching them, then looked back at Ryland and raised her shoulders slightly to let her know she didn't know what she was supposed to do.

Ryland thought a minute. "Do you remember what color ribbon you had Michael tie to his horse's tail last year?"

Morgan understood immediately. She'd had him tie a red ribbon to the tail because his horse had developed a nasty habit of kicking anyone who dared walk behind him. She sat forward and rested her elbows on her knees, trying to appear casual and unconcerned. It didn't work, but she thought she'd try anyway.

Jesse watched the exchange. She had no clue what Ryland was talking about, and she didn't care as long as no one was asking her questions. She put her head on the back of the chair and rested a minute. When her eyes closed, Guillermo took the red cable and attached it to the battery post....

Richard had brought a chair into the room and he was sitting with one leg crossed over the other, waiting. He spoke to her. "So, Little Sheep, you're wondering what he's doing, am I right?"

Jesse couldn't take her eyes off of the cable attached to the battery.

Richard pointed to the fire starter. "*That* is one of my training devices." He held up a cattle prod. "And *this* is my other. I will be in total, absolute control of you when we're done today."

Jesse watched the fire starter turn from red to light orange. She backed up farther into the wall, trying to find, for the hundredth time, another avenue of escape.

Richard nodded to Miguel. "Bring her."

Miguel grabbed her arm and she fought him off with every ounce of strength she had. She jerked away from him and he grabbed her again. It took all her strength, but she managed to lunge hard enough so that both of them fell onto the dirt floor. She kicked and pushed to her knees, trying to get away. He pulled her arms out from under her and they collapsed once more onto the dirt.

"Cody!"

*That isn't right. It's Miguel.* She kicked out again, desperate to get away.

"Cody!"

Jesse opened her eyes and, to her surprise, she was lying on her stomach in the grass on the other side of the porch railing and Morgan was holding her down with her entire body. Jesse put her cheek down on the grass and listened to herself pulling in strangled breaths.

Ryland, who was apparently the reason she couldn't move her legs and feet, spoke with reassuring confidence. "All right, Jesse, we're going to let you up now. Tell me where you are first."

Jesse focused on the voice, wanting to know Ryland was in control, could handle whatever had just happened. "I don't know. I'm in the yard...I'm in your yard."

Ryland released Jesse's legs and Morgan climbed off to the side. Jesse brought her hands to her eyes and lay with her face in the grass, exhausted....

Richard pointed to Miguel. "Take her clothes off." Miguel grabbed Jesse's shirt and tore it off....

"Cody!" Jesse was on her back now, and Morgan was holding her down again. Jesse opened her eyes and focused, confusion and distrust making her head hurt. She reached up to rub her head and Ryland quickly said, "Don't close your eyes. Keep your eyes on Morgan."

Jesse opened them. She felt like she was moving between two parallel worlds. "I'm fucked up."

Ryland's calm expression helped Jesse cope with what was happening. "No, you're not, but you are taking us for a ride today." She came around and sat near Jesse's head. "I need you to sit up

and stop being so relaxed, would you, please? Every time you close your eyes, you're self-hypnotizing."

Morgan took her cue from Ryland and projected calmness and control at the same time she was trying to catch her breath. She sat back on her legs, and when Jesse's eyes flicked to her, Morgan raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

Jesse sat up, already worn out. "Ryland, I can't do this today. I'm just fucked up."

"Tell me, without closing your eyes, what you saw."

Jesse looked up at the tree line, wanting to get this over with so Ryland would leave her alone. "Richard was sitting in a chair, and the fire starter went from red to orange."

"Did anything else happen?" Ryland had already realized that, for Jesse's back to be so burned and scarred, she had to have been naked, or at least naked on the top of her body.

Jesse shook her head.

"Yes it did. Tell me what happened."

"Nothing happened." Jesse's eyes flashed, warning Ryland to stop.

Ryland casually glanced at Morgan's legs. Morgan was on the opposite side of Jesse from her, and she needed her on the same side in case Jesse came after her, which was a strong possibility. She waited a minute, trying to work out how to accomplish what she wanted without giving Jesse any ideas.

Morgan watched her and waited for some type of clue as to what Ryland needed. Ryland caught her eye, then casually backed away from Jesse. She lowered her eyes to the spot where she'd been sitting. Morgan immediately stretched her legs and moved to that spot.

Jesse wasn't paying attention. Her emotions were simmering. She had no intention of telling them about anything. Fuck them.

Ryland moved up beside Jesse again, but she made sure to stay farther back than Morgan. "What happened next?"

Jesse focused angry eyes on Ryland and growled.  
"I...told...you. *Nothing* happened."

Ryland decided to push, but before she did, she rested her hand on Morgan's back. She felt Morgan shift slightly into a more balanced position.

"Where are your clothes, Jesse?"

Jesse's brain exploded. She threw herself at Ryland, damning her for knowing, hating her with every fiber of her being. She reached for Ryland's throat, but Morgan was too fast for her. She had her pinned down again, but this time she'd get away. She *had* to get away. She *had* to stop Ryland from knowing.

Ryland was relieved Morgan was able to hold Jesse down without her help this time. Jesse needed to see that she was unconcerned and in control. She sat and waited while they struggled, knowing Jesse wouldn't have enough energy to struggle for long. When the struggling stopped, Jesse put her head back and closed her eyes....

Miguel was standing over her, holding her torn shirt....

Ryland sighed. "Damn it, Jesse, I wish you'd stop doing that. You can get off her now, Morgan. She's gone."

Morgan was trying to catch her breath. "Ry, I'm getting too damn old for this. How much longer is this gonna take?"

Ryland raised her eyebrows. "I wish I knew."

Miguel pulled her to a standing position, and she realized they'd stripped her. She was totally naked. Richard came up behind her and whispered in her ear while Miguel stood in front of her with the cattle prod. She couldn't see Guillermo.

"Now, my little sheep, listen carefully."

"Cody."

Jesse opened her eyes and saw Ryland and Morgan sitting next to her again. She rubbed her face with her hands. "Jesus, am I here or there? Both fuckin' places are real."

Ryland said. "This is the real world, Jesse; the other is just a memory. I'd prefer you'd bring your experiences out in words, and not relive them. Would you please keep your eyes open and on Morgan. Please?"

Jesse remembered Ryland asking about her clothes, and her face burned red.

Ryland noticed the blush. "So you were naked—what happened next?"

She'd said it so casually, Jesse didn't have time to react.

Morgan watched as Jesse started to put her head down on her knees and close her eyes. She reached out and swatted Jesse on the head. "Eyes open—we're not going through that again."

She opened her eyes and twisted her head around to try to relieve the pain in her neck as her shoulder muscles constricted into tight knots. "Richard stood behind me with the fire starter. Miguel was in front with the cattle prod. He held the fire starter an inch from my back and told me not to move." Jesse stood up and crossed her arms. Her heart was pounding so hard it hurt.

Morgan and Ryland stood as well.

Jesse felt the pulse in her neck with her fingers, wondering whether it was her heart that was supposed to explode instead of her head.

Ryland stepped up and pulled Jesse's hand down. She replaced it with her own and felt Jesse's heart racing. "You won't die, Jesse. You've got a strong, good heart. What happened next?"

Breathing hurt too. Every time she took a breath, her chest constricted and forced the air back out. She managed to pull in enough air to speak. "Miguel put the prod to my chest and shocked me, and I'd jump back into the red-hot starter. I'd jump forward to get away, and when I did that, I got shocked." She grabbed her

arms and squeezed. "When I jumped back, I got burned, and they'd laugh and Richard would tell me not to move." Jesse clutched her chest and bent over, frantic that her heart would have to stop altogether to keep from exploding. She smelled her flesh burning around her.

"Did you learn not to move?"

"What?" Ryland's voice sounded far away.

"Did you learn not to move?"

Her hand was tearing into her chest to slow the pounding. She went to her knees and put her head in the grass. "Yes." She took in a lungful of air. "The prod...hurt less."

"So when Richard told you not to move, you learned how not to move?"

Jesse nodded.

"And my guess is, that wasn't fun anymore for Richard, right?"

Jesse slowly raised her eyes, stood up and backed away. She shook her head, willing Ryland to stop. Morgan stepped behind Jesse and she backed into her.

Ryland ignored Jesse's panicked expression as she walked closer. "What did Richard do to make it fun again?"

Jesse turned abruptly and buried her head in Morgan's chest. Tears she'd fought so hard to keep in let loose in a torrent of pain. "Stop, Ryland! Goddamn you, why can't you just stop?"

"Jesse, this is important. What did Richard do to make it fun again?"

"Nothing, he did nothing! No one did anything to me! Just leave me alone! I don't want to know! Just leave me alone!" She sobbed into Morgan's shoulders, pulling herself into them, trying to get away from Ryland's voice.

"You have to say it, Jesse. We can't stop until you say it. What did he do?"

Morgan's heart was pounding just as hard as Jesse's. She didn't want to know what happened next. She wrapped her arms protectively around Jesse. "It's enough, Ry; we're done."

Ryland shook her head sadly. "We're not done. Jesse, what did Richard do?"

Jesse turned and screamed at Ryland, sobbing between each word. "He fuckin' told Miguel to put the cattle prod up inside me! But you know what?" She wanted to hurt Ryland, but Morgan held her back. "I kicked it away! And when I'd kick it away, he'd burn me!" She tried to escape from Morgan, who held on tight. Fury raged inside of her, and she screamed, "The only way I could get away was to push back into the fire starter until it burned me so bad I'd pass out, and I did that and did that, over and over, but I kept waking up!" She dropped to her knees and held her head in her hands, unable to control the wracking sobs that shook her body. "He put it inside me, Ryland. He put it inside and shocked me until I didn't move anymore."

In a daze, Morgan sat down on the grass. She pulled Jesse into her lap and held her, her own tears falling into Jesse's hair. Ryland got down on her knees and held both of them together, quieting Jesse until she had nothing left inside but emptiness.

### **Chapter Twenty-Three**

Jesse didn't get out of bed the following morning, and Morgan didn't have the heart to pull her out. She and Ryland had stayed up most of the night talking about Jesse, about what had happened, and about how she was going to react. Morgan moved around the barn, feeding the horses, talking to them, checking for problems or injuries.

When Jesse didn't come out for the evening feeding, Morgan began to get worried. She stared at the apartment door, wondering

whether she should go in. The barn phone rang with the distinctive sound for the main house. She picked it up. "Hi."

"Is she out yet?"

"No, I wasn't sure if I should check on her. Can you come down?"

Ryland didn't answer right away. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea right now, Morg. In her eyes, I humiliated her. I'm the enemy. I think maybe you should go in and try to talk to her."

"And what do I say? What do you say to someone who was totally and completely destroyed by another human being?"

"Totally and completely destroyed? Morgan, you and Jesse are too much alike, do you even realize that? You see the utter humiliation and degradation. I see the triumph and the strength that brought her this far. You cannot let her even *begin* to know you think she's completely destroyed, because that's exactly how she sees herself right now."

Morgan put her head in her hand and fought back tears. "It's how I would feel if he'd made me surrender like she had to surrender. He forced her to obey him in the most humiliating, degrading way possible. I would be dead inside. Please, can you come down? I can't do this."

"Now I don't *think* you have to do it; I *know* you have to do it. The two of you have to bring each other to see that she's not dead, she's not destroyed, because if you can't see it, and you're her strength, Morgan, she will be dead. I absolutely guarantee it."

Morgan looked over at the apartment door. "Damn it!" She threw a pen up against the wall. "All right. I'll be up in a little while. I love you, Ry."

"You know I love you. Morgan, I have one more question for you. How many times did we tell her that no matter what happened, she wouldn't be any less of a person in our eyes? Were you lying to her when you said that?"

Morgan knew the answer was no, but she didn't understand what was going on in her own head. "No, I wasn't."

"It didn't happen to you, Morgan."

"I know that."

"Do you?"

They were both silent for a very long time until Morgan gently set the phone back on its cradle. She walked to the stacks of hay, climbed up on a bale facing the apartment and sat with her back up against another bale.

The barn was unusually quiet. It was close to feeding time, and on a normal day, the horses would be pacing and letting their humans know it was time for their evening meal. Tonight, they were quiet, and Morgan wondered whether they knew something was different. She stared at the apartment door, willing the angry, sullen Jesse to stalk out.

But Jesse was probably still in her bed. Morgan doubted she'd gotten up all day. As she stared at the door, she thought of the reasons Jesse wasn't coming out. She was in her room, humiliated and feeling sorry for herself, and Morgan was out here, feeling sorry for her too. Nothing had changed, so why had they? Why had she?

She'd originally planned to quietly knock on the door and ask permission to come in. To Hell with that. She pushed off the bale and stalked over to the apartment. She pounded on the door so hard that her fist actually hurt. "Jesse, get your ass out here and feed these horses. Now!" She counted to five, then pulled out her keys, unlocked the door and stormed in. Jesse was lying on her stomach under some blankets with pillows covering her head. Morgan pulled off the blankets, but Jesse held the pillows tight.

"I said get up and feed! Now!" When Jesse didn't move, Morgan picked up the side of the bed and dumped her onto the floor.

Jesse came up ready for a fight, her fists clenched and cocked.

Morgan grabbed her collar and jerked her close. "I've told you before, you want a fight, then do it!"

Jesse slugged Morgan in the stomach so hard she had a hard time catching her breath. Morgan hauled back and punched Jesse in the face at the same time Jesse came up with an uppercut to Morgan's jaw. Morgan's punch landed solid, and Jesse's slammed Morgan's mouth shut. Jesse swung again, but Morgan blocked it and landed a heavy blow to Jesse's midsection, then followed up with another solid left to the head. Jesse's knees buckled and she went down.

Morgan grabbed her by the collar and pulled her up again. Jesse's lip was bleeding and her eye was beginning to swell shut. Morgan jerked her to within inches of her face. "I warned you, Jesse, I'll always come out on top!"

Jesse refused to look away, and Morgan growled, "You want some more?" Jesse glared a little longer, then looked over Morgan's shoulder. Morgan pulled the collar tighter. "Are you ready to get out there and feed the damn horses?"

"Yeah."

"Yes Ma'am!"

Jesse turned her head sideways, looked down at the floor and growled, "Yes Ma'am."

Morgan grabbed her by the back of the shirt and shoved her out into the barn. Jesse shrugged her shirt back where it belonged and stalked over toward the hay. Morgan watched her go, then headed for the door. "And make sure you clean up your goddamn mess before you climb back into that bed!"

As Jesse walked away, she lifted her right hand and flipped her the bird. Morgan smiled and nodded, then headed up to the house.

Ryland was in the living room when Morgan walked in. Morgan was massaging her jaw and Ryland followed her into the

bathroom. Ryland turned on the light and stared at the bruise forming under Morgan's chin. "Morgan, what happened?"

Morgan tried to see inside her mouth. "I think she chipped my tooth."

"She hit you?"

"We had a discussion." Morgan pulled up her shirt to check out the bruise on her stomach. A dark circle had formed directly under her diaphragm.

"Morgan!"

"Can you see if my tooth is chipped?" Morgan held her lip down so Ryland could see in her mouth.

"What does Jesse look like?"

Morgan turned back to the mirror and looked at her teeth again. "I won."

"Morgan!"

"Why do you keep saying that? Jesse's fine. We had our discussion and now she's feeding the horses. Don't you even care that I might have a chipped tooth?"

All Ryland could think to do was turn around and go back into the living room. She picked up the book she'd been reading on post-traumatic stress disorder, looked at it a minute, then walked over and tossed it on the fire.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

The next morning, Morgan came in and told Jesse to saddle Pride, Rebel, and Kanab. Jesse grabbed Kanab's halter and started down the aisle. "I'm not going out. I don't want to ride."

"I don't remember asking you." Morgan was paging through the notebook at the feed table. "You wrote that Aristotle hasn't been eating well lately. I like the way you're recording the amounts he's leaving. I'll call Dr. Elimena and see if he can come check him."

Jesse halted Kanab, who was famous for walking close behind whoever led him. As they walked down the aisle, he accidentally hit the back of Jesse's boot with his front hoof. She turned and shouldered him in the chest to back him up a little. "Will you stop that? Back up, you moron."

Morgan checked over her shoulder to see what was going on. When they started walking again, Kanab inched his way closer to Jesse until he was right up on her back. Jesse stopped quickly, and Kanab had to mince his steps to keep from walking right over her. He lay his ears back, and Jesse started forward again. He moved up close again, ears back, watching what she'd do. Jesse immediately started walking backward into him, backing him up all the way to his stall. She put him in and took off the halter. "Fine...you wanna fuck with me, you can stay here."

Morgan put the notebook back on the shelf and headed out the door. "Ryland and I will be back soon. Make sure all three of them are ready to go."

Jesse had returned to the line of halters hung on the wall, and since Pride's halter was up pretty high, she stood on her toes to reach it. "I told you, I'm not coming."

Stopping where she was, Morgan said over her shoulder, "And I told you to have the three horses ready."

"Great, one can stand here saddled until the two of you get back." Jesse went to Pride's stall and started to open the gate.

"Come here." Morgan still hadn't turned around. She was pointing to the ground in front of her feet.

Jesse mumbled under her breath, hung the halter over the gate and closed it again. She moved to the spot Morgan indicated and stood sideways to her, arms crossed, eyes set on the barn door.

Morgan's glare bored a hole into the side of Jesse's head. Neither of them spoke or moved. Jesse shifted and looked sideways at Morgan, who stood with her hands on her hips, still as a statue.

Jesse uncrossed her arms, then crossed them again, finally turning to face Morgan head on. "Fine, I'll ride." She went back to Pride's stall and brought her out to tie her to a ring. Morgan was no longer standing where Jesse had left her, and she let out a sigh.

She didn't want to ride with Ryland. Ryland was all jumbled up in her mind. She hated her, but she couldn't imagine life without her right now. Ryland knew too much, and now Morgan knew it too, but Morgan was okay with what she knew. Jesse was too ashamed to face Ryland, and she wasn't sure how to act.

She brushed and saddled Pride, then went back for Kanab, who watched her over the top of his gate. "You gonna behave?" He put his ears back, so she got Rebel out instead. Kanab paced around his stall and stuck his head out when she walked by with Rebel.

She brushed and saddled Rebel, then went back a third time for Kanab. She stood in front of his stall. He kept his ears forward while she stood there, so she opened the gate, stepped in and put the halter on. She led him out into the aisle, and when he inched up to her, she turned him around and put him back in the stall. "You wanna stay here?" She waited a few seconds, then led him out into the aisle again. He kept a respectful distance behind her. Her pocket was always full of baby carrots, and as she walked, she reached back and held one out for him. He gently took it from her hand and munched on it while she tied him to a ring.

All three horses were ready when Morgan returned with Ryland at her side. Jesse stood behind Kanab and refused to get close to Ryland. She led him outside and mounted. The other two mounted as well, and as they left the barn area, Jesse stayed behind with Morgan's horse between her and Ryland. They began a slow trot around one of the pastures, gradually warming the horses before they began taking the jumps. Jesse didn't like posting, and she sat the saddle as though riding western.

Morgan called out to her. "I've told you, when you're in that saddle, you post."

"Posting's stupid." She figured if your butt stayed in the saddle, why bounce on purpose?

"I said, post."

"It looks stupid. I ride just fine without having to look stupid."

Morgan rode over to Kanab. "Take your feet out of the stirrups."

"What?"

When Morgan didn't answer, Jesse kicked her feet out. Morgan grabbed her by the back of the shirt and pulled her off Kanab. "We're riding several miles today, and you can walk until you're ready to post."

Morgan squeezed Rebel with her boots and trotted off. Jesse felt Ryland behind her and pulled Kanab's reins over his head and followed Morgan. Ryland rode up beside her. Jesse felt her face go red, and she moved to the other side of Kanab.

They walked in silence for a half-mile or so, Morgan cantering and taking the jumps and Ryland and Jesse bringing up the rear. Ryland dismounted and walked on the other side of Kanab's head. Jesse put up with that for about a minute before she remounted Kanab and rode off. Morgan rode Rebel up to Kanab and grabbed the reins near his chin. "You ready to post?"

"Yeah."

"Yes Ma'am."

"What is it with you and this 'yes Ma'am' shit? How many times do I have to say it before you're satisfied?"

"Get off." Morgan raised her eyebrows, warning Jesse not to push.

"Damn it, Morgan, what is it with you today?" The words came out as she dismounted, and she didn't see Morgan smile and wink at Ryland, who was coming up behind them leading Pride.

Morgan let go of Kanab's reins. "You get on when I tell you to get on." She rode off to practice some jumps with Rebel, who was new to the sport and needed more work on his timing.

Jesse looked back and down at Ryland's feet, her face burning. She pulled the reins over Kanab's head again and started to walk, the horse between her and Ryland.

"You don't have to hide from me, you know."

Jesse didn't answer. Her stomach knotted because she didn't want to face Ryland.

Ryland reached up and stopped Kanab. She stepped around in front of Jesse and put her hand to Jesse's black eye. "The good news is, if we get into a fight, you'll wipe the floor up with me."

Jesse met Ryland's eyes, then dropped her gaze back to the ground. Ryland reached around Jesse's neck and pulled her into an embrace. She brought Jesse's head down onto her shoulder and held it there. "We're winning, Jesse. We're winning, and we're almost done. Hang in there with me just a little longer." Ryland gently kissed her hair. "You don't hate me, you know, but you think I'm embarrassed about what you told me. I'm not. I love you a hundred times more for your strength because you trusted me enough to be part of your nightmare. Together, we'll destroy that nightmare. I promise."

Jesse rested her head on Ryland's shoulder, listening. As Ryland spoke, Jesse slowly returned the embrace. They stayed like that until Kanab pushed Jesse with his muzzle. She stepped back and reached around to settle her horse. She held Ryland's eyes, then nodded slightly.

Ryland gathered Pride's reins and mounted the beautiful, all white mare. "I think I'd better give her some exercise or she won't be ready the next time I use her to hunt." She rode off down the sloping meadow, and Jesse followed on foot for another half-mile or so until Morgan came back and told her to mount.

"Warm him up again, then take him over some low jumps.  
And when you trot—"

"Look stupid."

"Exactly."

She took Kanab through his paces, making sure he never actually trotted so she wouldn't have to post. He was good with his jumps. Some horses never get the timing right, but all of Morgan's horses were excellent. She'd bought them specifically with foxhunting in mind, and she'd spent years perfecting their skills.

On the way back to the barn, Morgan asked Jesse. "So, you ready to start riding with the second flight?" People new to the sport of foxhunting stay with the second flight or with the hilltoppers, and generally stay behind the members of the first flight.

"Never."

"Your enthusiasm is overwhelming. Start thinking about it. I want you to learn the sport."

"I'm a stable hand. I work in the stable. I don't foxhunt."

"Scared?"

"Of what?"

"You might have to socialize?"

"You do enough of that for both of us." She was quiet a minute. "Of course, I might have to make an exception when Sandra rides. Well, that's not true either, since she won't actually have to leave the barn to do her riding."

The wind carried away Morgan's laughter as easily as it blew the leaves around the base of the trees. Jesse hunched down in her saddle to keep what little warmth she had from leeching away. For some reason, being cold reminded her of the dirt room, and she let her mind wander back to the cold nights spent lying on the floor while waiting for the door at the top of the stairs to open and praying that it wouldn't. "The dirt room was cold. Freezing some

nights. It was pitch black, always, unless the door at the top of the stairs was open."

"How did you stay warm?" Morgan tucked her free hand up under her armpit to warm it up.

"I'd walk around the edge of the walls, do push ups if I could...sometimes I'd spend hours walking up and down the steps just to keep my blood flowing. I'd walk up, touch the door, walk back down." She reached down and rested her hand on Kanab's neck. They finished the ride in silence, and once inside the barn, they unsaddled the horses and Jesse was left to brush them and return them to their stalls, then sweep up. Morgan went to check on the hounds in sickbay, and Ryland went back to the house to do some writing on her book.

While Jesse worked, her mind wandered back to the solitude of the room that had been her prison for so long. She wasn't sure how long she'd been held there, and she didn't remember how she'd gotten away. She remembered the room was round, not square like you would expect. She could walk ten steps across the center in any direction, and if she jumped, her hand touched the ceiling. It was wood and mud, and sometimes she'd jump and scrape the ceiling just so the dirt would fall down on her and she could feel something, anything, that touched her without hurting.

"Hey, you okay?" Morgan had come in quietly while Jesse was leaning on the broom handle, lost in thought.

Jesse started. "Yeah." She moved slowly across the floor again, rhythmically pushing what little dirt there was into a pile in the middle of the floor. She remembered one time, the door at the top of the stairs opened, and no one came down. The light streamed into the room, and though the room was still darker than a moonlit night, it almost blinded her. She saw herself sitting, watching the stairs, waiting for someone to come down. Her heart raced because she knew eventually someone would come and the pain would begin over again. Her fingers found her neck, and the

pulse pounded through her veins, trying to push its way through faster than was supposed to be possible.

"Jesse?"

She was sitting in the dirt, eyes focused on Morgan, who was kneeling in front of her, one hand resting on Jesse's knee. *Why is Morgan in the room?* "Is that light too bright for you?"

Morgan glanced to where Jesse pointed. A few minutes ago, she'd watched Jesse sit down in the middle of the floor, staring vacantly. "What light?"

"Doesn't that light hurt your eyes?"

"Jesse, there's no light. Are you okay? Where are we right now?" Morgan became nervous when Jesse's expression went from inquiry to suspicion. It was definitely time to call the house. When Ryland answered, Morgan quietly said. "You need to get down here, now."

Jesse shifted. "Who are you talking to? I don't want them down here."

"I just asked Ryland to come down for a little bit." Morgan walked back over and knelt in front of her again.

Jesse watched her warily, not sure whether she could trust Morgan here in the dirt room. "Why did you leave the door open?"

"Jess, we're in the barn, and the door's closed."

The light caught her eye again, and she focused on it. A silhouette appeared on the stairs, and Jesse stood up and backed away. Morgan stood up as well and let Jesse do whatever she needed to do.

Ryland came the rest of the way through the door. She hadn't wanted to barge in quickly, not knowing exactly what the problem was. She shut the door behind her, blocking out the noonday light that was streaming through it into the barn. "It's me Jesse. It's Ryland and you're in the barn with Morgan and me." Ryland casually walked over and stood next to Morgan.

Jesse watched Ryland come into the barn, then turned her head slightly and saw Morgan back in the dirt room. She rubbed her eyes with her fingers, trying to sort things out.

"Tell me what's happening, Jess. I always fix it, don't I? Talk to me."

Jesse closed her eyes one last time and covered them with her hand. If she didn't look, maybe she wouldn't be in either place.

"Why are you covering your eyes?"

"If I don't look, I'm not there."

"Where?"

"In both places."

"What places?"

"The room with Morgan, and the barn with you."

Ryland quietly pulled Morgan back so Jesse couldn't hear. "It would be best if you left, but I don't feel safe right now with you gone. Just go stand out of her sight, but close enough to help if I need you."

Morgan walked to the stack of hay and stood behind it where she could see Jesse, but she didn't think Jesse could see her. She watched Ryland move toward Jesse again.

"Not a problem, Jess. It's just you and me in the barn now. When I say the word we discussed before, I want you to open your eyes and we'll both be in the barn."

"All right."

"Cody."

Jesse carefully opened her eyes. She was standing in the barn. She reached down and picked up the broom and swept some dirt toward her pile. "I'm going crazy, aren't I? We can't fix me, can we?"

"Just a minute, Hon."

Jesse stopped and leaned on the broom, blinking her eyes to hold back the tears that had suddenly appeared.

Ryland said, "Morgan, would you come over here please?"

Morgan stepped from behind the hay and watched Jesse's reaction.

"Where is Morgan right now, Jess?"

"In the barn." Jesse sounded disgusted with herself. "Ryland, how fucked up am I, really?"

Ryland laughed. "Fucked up enough that I want you staying at the house at night until we finish with your therapy." She smiled and put her hand on Jesse's shoulder. "You know, when you spontaneously started remembering non-threatening events while we were riding, I thought this might happen."

"What, that I'd go completely insane?"

"No. Don't you realize it means your healing is moving forward on its own now? You just had memories without pain, without fainting, without throwing up. We still have some painful sessions to go through, but you're going to be fine."

Ryland's calm reassurance helped Jesse regain her composure. Jesse shrugged and pointed to Morgan. "*She* looks a little pale, though, don't you think?"

Morgan shook her head. "You scared the bejeezus out of me. Don't do that." She draped her arms over Jesse's shoulders. "I am not in the dirt room, I have never been in the dirt room, and I will never go to the dirt room." She rubbed Jesse's head with her knuckles. "How do we get that into your little pea brain, you little shit?"

Ryland watched them. "Well, I'm not always around when you two are together so we need to fix something. Morgan stand over here."

Morgan walked over and stood next to Ryland.

"All right, Jess, when I tell you, I want you to close your eyes and put yourself into the dirt room. When you hear Morgan say *Cody*, you'll come back into the present."

Jesse closed her eyes.

"Put yourself in the room." Ryland took Morgan's arm and moved her directly in Jesse's line of sight, then stepped to the side. "Now, open your eyes."

Jesse blinked. It was dark in the room again, but she was able to make out Morgan standing in front of her.

"Cody."

The barn came back into focus. Jesse smiled at Morgan, who smiled back.

Ryland walked out from behind Jesse. "Tada! You're cured."

Jesse picked up the broom again. "I wish it was that easy."

Ryland nodded. "Me too. For right now, I'd rather you'd do your remembering when I'm with you. If you start to remember, think of something else and come find me. And tonight, you're eating dinner with us and sleeping at the house."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Cody's father slammed his fist onto the dinner table. "You're not in school, and you're not looking for a new job! You're laying around *my* house, doing nothing! You never did explain how the hell you managed to get yourself fired! I told you, you lose this job, you're not laying around my house playing your damn video games all day!"

Cody slumped down in his chair. "It wasn't *my* fault, Dad. Morgan just decided to side with her baby dyke, that's all. It was me or her. All dykes hate men, Dad. It's just the way she is."

"I've known Morgan Davis for more than twenty five years, and I'm telling you, you won't find anyone as honest or as fair as she is. She's the only friend I have who was willing to take a chance on you and give you a job. And dyke is a filthy word—I won't have you referring to her that way in my home. She's a good woman and I don't care who she chooses to live with."

Cody's mother set a bowl of mashed potatoes on the table and stirred some butter in with a long-handled spoon. "It's unnatural is what it is, Everett, and I'm glad Cody's out of there. We should never have let her kind into the county. Her way's evil. She belongs with the devil." She angrily dumped a spoonful of potatoes onto her husband's plate before pulling out her chair and heaving her three hundred fifty pounds onto the seat. "She hasn't set foot in God's house in at least fifteen years."

Everett scoffed at his wife's comments as he stabbed a piece of ham with his fork. "She's lived in this county longer than either of us, Lana. And can you blame her for not coming to church, the way you and your friends shun her and Ryland at every social event they've ever attended?"

Lana carefully cut her ham into tiny pieces while she spoke. "That new hired hand has an evil look about her, too. She's the reason Morgan fired Cody." She looked at her son. "Tell him, Cody. Tell him about the sheriff's accusation, all because of that —" She pursed her lips, causing her nostrils to flair and the color in her face to rise while she tried to come up with just the right epithet for Jesse. "That *lesbian!*"

Cody turned to his father, a fork full of mashed potatoes halfway to his mouth. "You should see it, Dad. She's up at the house every day at one o'clock havin' sex with—"

Everett stood up so quickly his chair tumbled backwards onto the linoleum. "*Enough!*"

Cody and Lana sat in shocked silence. Neither of them had ever seen this side of Everett.

Everett towered over Cody, pointing one meaty finger at him. "Tomorrow, either you find a job or you'll come home to find everything you own out on the lawn." He threw his napkin onto his plate and stalked out of the room.

Lana picked up a bowl of tossed salad and passed it to Cody. "No you won't, Dear. I'm glad you're away from there. I'll talk to

my friends and see if any of their husbands has a job you can do. You're a bright boy, Cody. Anyone would be lucky to get you." The two of them ate in silence for a short time, each wondering how to discuss exactly what was on their minds.

Cody finally made a stab at it. "Why's he siding with Morgan, Mom? I'm his son. What is she to him?"

Fire sparked in Lana's eyes as she answered. "I believe Satan tempts everyone, including your father. Who knows what form that temptation takes?" She secretly felt the rolls of fat on her legs as she pretended to smooth the wrinkles out of her skirt. She'd gained two hundred pounds since her wedding day, and her husband hadn't touched her in more years than she cared to count.

"You think Dad and Morgan..." Cody's voice trailed off as he thought about what his mother had just said.

Lana daintily brought a spoonful of mashed potatoes to her lips as she glanced up at her son. "Not necessarily Morgan." She put the spoon in her mouth and pulled it out slowly as she held her son's gaze.

"*Ryland?*" Cody had never even thought of that possibility. His stomach churned as he listened to his mother talk about what his father might have done with the women who'd made a fool of him.

"She's beautiful, feminine, and intelligent—everything your father admires in a woman. Don't be naïve, Cody. Evil can be very tempting at times, and it can take many different guises."

Cody pushed away from the table. "I don't know about Satan and all that other religious crap, but I do know one thing: they won't get away with what they did to me." He held his mother's eyes. "Or with what they're doing to you." He stormed out through the kitchen door and down the steps to the back of the house.

A smile played across Lana's lips as she watched the door swing shut behind him.

Cody thought back to all the times he'd seen his father with Morgan and Ryland, and his blood boiled. All those times he thought his father had come to the farm to see him work, bring him lunch or just stop in to say hi when he was driving by, he was really there to see them.

He jumped into his old Chevy pick-up, slammed the door and shoved the key into the ignition. The starter clicked once, then stopped. He hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. "Fuck!" The starter had always been temperamental so he re-clutched, turned the steering wheel a quarter turn to the right and tried again. The engine jumped to life and the tires spun out as he threw the truck into gear and gunned the engine, heading toward town.

He figured his friends would be in Harley's, and when he pulled into the parking lot, he was relieved to see their cars parked in their usual places. When he walked into the bar, Kai and Jason were shooting pool. Kai saw him and lifted his chin in greeting. "What's up, Cody?"

"Fuck you, Asshole." Cody ordered a longneck from Andy and took it back to the pool table.

Jason grinned at Kai, who shrugged. Jason leaned over the table and sighted down his stick. "Six off the two, side pocket." The cue ball nicked the six, sending it into the left side of the two ball, where it ricocheted off and rolled into the side pocket. Jason picked up the chalk and centered it on the end of his stick. "So, what's eating you? You're dad buggin' you 'bout gettin' fired again?"

Cody put the longneck to his lips and guzzled half the bottle. "Fuckin' bitches won't get away with it."

Jason lined up another shot and pointed to the corner pocket with his stick. "Two into the corner." He leaned over the table to sight his angle. "My dad says you're old man's siding with Morgan. That sucks." He stepped to his left to get a different line.

Cody threw the bottle, grabbed a pool cue from the wall rack and swung it at Jason's head. Jason blocked the blow with his stick, then rammed the end of his cue into Cody's stomach. Cody doubled over, but brought his stick up hard between Jason's legs. Jason dropped like a stone.

Kai grabbed Cody by the hair and threw him up against the wall. "What the fuck, Cody? He didn't do nothin' to you!"

Cody let out a strangled roar and swung his cue at Kai's head. Kai, who was three inches taller and weighed a good thirty pounds more than Cody, ripped the pool stick out of his hands, lifted Cody off his feet and threw him onto the pool table. He'd just drawn back his fist to knock some sense into his friend when he caught sight of a small baggie sticking out of Cody's pocket. "Well, well, well.... What do we have here? You holdin' out on us, Code?"

Cody tried to roll away, but Kai put his fingers around Cody's throat and held him down. He reached down with his free hand and tugged at the corner of the baggie. "Let's see what you got—weed or blow?" Cody tried to kick Kai between the legs, but Kai turned sideways, pushed down harder on his throat, and pressed his elbow hard against Cody's chest. "Uh uh uh, that don't work twice."

Jason gradually rolled to his knees, then reached up to the edge of the pool table and pulled himself to his feet. Kai grinned at him. "Shit Jason, your face is white as a chunk of fish flesh. You gonna live?"

Jason motioned to the baggie in Cody's pocket. "What's he got?"

Cody grabbed Kai's lower arm and tried to hyper-extend the elbow with his other hand. "Let go of me, you fuckin' asshole!"

Jason tugged Cody's hands off of Kai's arm and held them down on the table while Kai pulled the baggie all the way out. The bag was half-full of a fine white powder. Kai rolled the outside of the bag with his fingers. "What's this? Looks like some fine blow to me."

Jason let go of Cody's arms, grabbed the bag and turned his back to the bar so he could hide the baggie from the rest of the drinking crowd. "Shit, Cody! Where'd you get this much coke? You get caught with this, your ass'll be sittin' in Blackburn State Prison until you're an old man!"

Kai let go of Cody and whistled. "No shit, Cody! I didn't think of that. Where'd you get so much blow?"

Cody sat up, snatching the baggie away from Jason and pushing it back down into his pocket. "It's not coke, you idiots." He glanced nervously around the room to make sure no one else had seen the bag. "I'm makin' sure those bitches pay for what they did, and this shit's helpin' me do it." He reached down, flipped two balls out of one of the pockets in the pool table and rolled them to the other end. "Rack 'em up again. I'll beat you two assholes first; then we'll go have some real fun out at Morgan's farm."

Kai shrugged as he grabbed the triangle off the wall and racked the balls. He carefully pushed them tight against the apex, then lifted the wood off the felt and returned it to the wall. The three men played five more games before finally hanging up their sticks. Cody finished the last of his fourth beer and set the bottle down on a nearby table. "Well boys, follow me and learn how the master works."

Kai crossed his arms while he studied Cody's face. "What are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna finish somethin' I already started out at Morgan's place." Cody turned and started for the door. When Kai didn't follow, Cody glanced back over his shoulder. "You comin' or not?"

Kai walked over to Cody so the rest of the people in the bar wouldn't hear him. "What are you doin' at Morgan's place? Why don't you just leave 'em alone and forget about it? You're just pissed 'cause they figured out you planted those cig's. Just leave 'em alone, Cody."

Cody stepped closer to Kai and poked him in the chest with his finger. “Why’re you standin’ up for those dykes? Whose side’re you on, anyway?”

Kai felt his face go red. He looked at Jason, then back to Cody. “We’ve been friends since grade school, Cody. You know I’m on your side. It’s just that...well....” He crossed his arms while he thought about how he could explain himself without his two friends thinking he was some kind of coward. “Look, you know I used to ride in Morgan’s hunt club. My family never had as much money as everybody else, and I never really fit in. Morgan was always good to me, even when I screwed up. She never embarrassed me or nothin’ in front of the fuckin’ rich kids. She never treated my family any different than anybody else’s.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. I just don’t want to be part of anything against her, that’s all.”

Cody’s lips curled back in a sneer. “You’re just like my old man. You fuckin’ her too?”

Kai’s eyebrows shot up. “What’re you talkin’ about?” He grabbed Cody’s elbow and propelled him out the door and onto the sidewalk. He lowered his voice and hissed into Cody’s face. “Are you crazy? Morgan’s not fuckin’ your old man!” He stopped talking as two women walked past them on the sidewalk.

Jason, who’d followed his two friends outside, stepped out of the women’s way and smiled. “Evenin’ Ms. Rupel, Ms. Hanson.”

The two women nodded at the young men and continued on their way. Cody jerked his arm out of Kai’s grasp and shoved him in the chest. “Oh yeah? What if I told you he’s fuckin’ both Morgan *and* Ryland. What would you think of your fuckin’ fox huntin’ master then, huh?”

Kai reached up to run both hands through his thick shock of brown hair. “Cody, you have gone completely around the bend.” He shook his head before walking around the side of the bar on his way to the back parking lot. “I’m outta here.”

Cody turned to face Jason, who had a huge grin plastered across his face. Cody brought both hands up and pushed Jason hard in the chest. “What’s so fuckin’ funny to you, Asshole?”

“You’re an idiot, you know that? You’re old man’s got the wrong equipment for those two dykes. It’s more likely they’re doin’ your mom than your dad.” He burst out laughing and danced backward as Cody swung his fist as hard as he could at Jason’s face. The fist went flying through empty air and Jason grinned again. “Whoa, boy. I’m just tellin’ it like it is. And I’m outta here too. You’re on your own on this one.” He walked around the side of the building and yelled to Kai. “Hey, wait up! I’m comin’ with you.”

Cody watched them go, then spit on the sidewalk. “To Hell with both of ya.” He checked his watch as he climbed behind the wheel of his truck. *Ten o’clock*. He knew everyone on the farm went to bed by nine. Unfortunately, Morgan had started taking unscheduled walks around the barn and kennels at night. He’d been going every night, trying to find a pattern to when she came out, but she varied the times too much and he couldn’t plan on her being in bed when he snuck into the barn. He reached down and turned the key. The ignition caught on the first try, and he took that as a good-luck omen. He’d get in and out again tonight without anyone the wiser.

The drive to the farm took nearly twenty minutes. When he was about a half-mile away he killed his lights, reduced his speed and drove as slowly as he dared to a pullout just beyond Morgan’s barn. After shutting off the engine, he got out of the truck, quietly pushing the door shut behind him. As he climbed over the fence surrounding the property, his pants caught on a piece of barbed wire. He cursed to himself before pulling his leg free and stepping over to the other side.

The forest was unusually quiet as he moved between trees. On other nights, he’d noticed that when Morgan walked around the

property, all the night creatures quieted until she'd passed, then resumed their nighttime chatter once she was gone. He moved slowly, all the while keeping a sharp eye out for any movement. When he came to the edge of the forest, he knelt down and waited.

He heard her before he saw her coming down the path from the main house. She'd stepped on a branch, and the sharp crack sounded like a rifle shot in the quiet night. She carried a flashlight in her right hand, but kept it off while she made her way out into the open area in front of the barn. *You think you're so smart*, Cody thought. He waited until she'd disappeared into the barn, then sat, leaning his back against the trunk of a tree to wait. He watched as she came out of the barn, then smirked when she turned and headed around the side to the kennels. *It's not your hounds yet, Bitch, but it soon will be.*

All in all, it took Morgan about twenty minutes to check the buildings and return to the front of the barn. Cody froze when she stopped and carefully surveyed the forest surrounding her farm. Her gaze seemed to stop on the tree he was leaning against and he breathed a sigh of relief when she finally turned and headed back to the house.

He waited another fifteen minutes, then pushed himself up and headed for the barn. The side door had an obnoxious squeak, so he took his time, pulling it open just far enough to slip inside. It took a second for his eyes to adjust to the darkness without the benefit of the moon to light his way. When he could make out various objects, he carefully made his way to Aristotle's stall, relying on memory more than sight to avoid bumping into anything.

Aristotle stood to the rear of his stall with his head down. *Got a tummy ache, Old Boy? Just you're bad luck to be Morgan's favorite ride.* He slipped into the stall, took the baggie out of his pocket and opened it. Aristotle's water bowl was hooked to the rear wall. Cody stepped over to it, then poured a small amount of pesticide into the water. He went to the food bin and repeated the

process, pouring pesticide over the hay the big horse hadn't eaten that evening. The white powder clumped into a pile on the hay, so he sifted it around with his fingers until he couldn't see it anymore.

When he was finished, he closed the baggie, put it back into his pocket and slipped out of the barn. By the time he'd made it to his truck, his grin stretched from ear to ear. Once more, the truck started on the first attempt. He waved at the main house as he drove past, then gunned the engine and headed home.

His mother looked up from her crocheting when he walked in through the front door. She put down the afghan she'd been working on and motioned for him to come closer. "Did you go out with your friends?"

He strolled over and kissed her on the cheek. "Yeah, we played some pool at Harley's, then I took care of some business."

She studied his face, then picked up the afghan again. "I hope your business was productive."

He smirked. "Very."

She smiled as she wove the crochet needles in and out of her memorized pattern. "Good. Very good."

## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

The next day, Dr. Elimena arrived at the barn to check Aristotle. He'd been Morgan's vet for over fifteen years, and usually made himself at home whenever any of the horses needed to be checked. Jesse heard the door open and watched a tall, middle-aged man walk into the barn, grab Aristotle's halter and head for the center aisle. Aristotle's stall was the third in on the left, and Jesse had just enough time to get there and step in front of him before he opened the stall door. "Who are you and what the fuck are you doing in here?"

The vet stepped back, color rising in his face as he bit back an angry reply. "Excuse me?"

"I asked you what the fuck you're doing here!" Jesse stood in a defensive stance, left side to the vet, right side away.

Dr. Elimena took a step forward and put the back of his hand against Jesse's shoulder to push her out of his way. "I need to see this horse. Now get out of my way."

Morgan came around to the front of the barn from the kennels and saw Doc Elimena's truck parked in front. She'd forgotten to tell Jesse he was coming, and the vet was already in the barn. "Shit!" She ran the last few steps to the door and stepped inside in time to see the vet try to push Jesse aside.

"Jesse! Freeze!"

Morgan's yell from across the room startled Jesse enough to stop her fist from slamming into the vet's face. She controlled her anger and backed up, still blocking his way into the stall. Morgan ran up and slid the last few feet until she was between Jesse and the doctor. She held out her hand to shake. "Tom, glad you could make it."

No one said anything for a few seconds. Tom slowly reached out and took Morgan's hand. "Morgan."

"Here, give me the halter. I'll have Jesse bring him out where you can see him better." She took the halter and slapped it into Jesse's chest at the same time she put her arm on the vet's back and guided him to the front of the barn. "So, how's Arlene doing?"

Tom, who stood six one, put his hand on Morgan's shoulder as they walked down the aisle. "When did you get your new guard dog?"

"Sorry about that. I forgot to tell her you were coming."

"Why do I get the feeling her bite's worse than her bark?"

"Probably because it is."

Jesse brought Aristotle down the aisle and the vet stood back and studied how he walked.

"He's lost some weight." It took a good thirty minutes for him to check the horse with Jesse glaring at him the entire time. By the

time he finished, he'd gotten his temper in check and he held out his hand to Jesse. "I'd like to apologize for not introducing myself right from the start. I'm Dr. Elimena, the farm's vet."

Jesse continued to glare and didn't take his hand.

Morgan waited until Jesse met her eyes, then closed hers halfway and sent her a silent but well-understood message.

Jesse looked away, then took his hand. "Jesse."

"I hope next time we'll get off to a better start."

Jesse raised sullen eyes to his and kept silent.

Doc Elimena's even temper won out, mostly because he and Morgan had been friends for a long time. "I'm done with him now. You can take him back."

Jesse waited for Morgan to tell her they were done.

"Go."

She glared one more time at the vet, then led Aristotle to his stall. He should have told her who he was. She didn't appreciate a total stranger letting himself into the barn, then trying to shove her out of the way when she asked what he was doing. When she undid Aristotle's halter, he stood with his head down, his eyes dull. She ran her fingers through his mane and down his back, quietly telling him what a jerk she thought his vet was.

Morgan walked the vet up to the house, and since his truck was still there when dinner time came, Jesse decided to eat in her room. She pulled out a can of tomato soup, poured the soup into a mug and heated it in the microwave. The phone in the barn rang with the main house ring, and she left the soup where it was and went out to answer it. The phone was attached to the wall above the feed table and the ringer was set up so that it rang throughout the barn and also in the kennels. She grabbed the receiver. "Yeah?"

Courtesy was second nature for Morgan, and Jesse's rudeness always caught her off guard. "Is that any way to answer a phone?" The silence on the other end stretched out, and she handed the

phone to Ryland. "I'll be in the living room eating a bottle of Tums."

Ryland chuckled and took the phone. "Jesse?"

"Yeah?"

"Dinner's ready. Come on up."

"I'll stay down here, thanks."

"All right, then come up when you're ready for bed. That part's not negotiable."

Jesse hung up and went back in to grab the soup. She crumbled a handful of crackers and threw them in before taking the mug out into the barn to drink while she began the evening feeding. When she came to Aristotle's stall, she put her foot on the bottom pipe and watched him. At feeding time, he always waited for her with his head over the top rail, making sure she remembered to feed him too. Today he stood toward the back of the enclosure, head held low, uninterested in the hay she'd put in his feeder.

As she stared into the stall, her eyes came to rest on the water bowl that was bolted into the corner of his pen. Yesterday a leak had developed in the pipe running to the bowl, and she'd turned off his water until she could repair the hole. She'd been planning to carry water to him as he needed it, but the bowl was still full. She watched him for a while longer, then went back to the phone. When Ryland answered, she asked, "Can I talk to Morgan?"

Ryland raised her eyebrows and held out the phone. "Jesse wants to talk to you."

Morgan pointed to her chest and raised her eyebrows in return.

Ryland nodded and shrugged.

Morgan took the phone. "What's up?"

"I just thought you should tell the vet that Aristotle hasn't had anything to drink since yesterday morning. I turned off his water at about seven so his stall wouldn't get soaked. I still need to fix that

leak I told you about, and the water in his bowl is the same level as it was then."

Morgan mulled over this new information. "We'll be back down in a minute."

Jesse stood talking to Aristotle and running her hand down his neck while she waited. Morgan and the vet walked in and went straight to the water. Dr. Elimena opened a vial he brought out of his pocket and dipped it in. He recapped it and labeled it with a permanent marker. "How long do you think it's been since he had water?" He'd already taken blood samples, but now he took out a syringe, found a vein and inserted the needle. He connected a vial and dark red swirled down into it.

"At least since seven yesterday morning. I'm not real sure."

"Have you noticed any symptoms of colic?"

"Nope."

Morgan cocked her head. "Nope?"

"Anything different about his stools?"

"They were a little loose this morning."

"Do you feed him the same food you feed the other horses?"

From the same containers, I mean?"

"Yup."

Morgan shifted. "Yup? How about we try a little respect? Humor me, Jesse."

Jesse rolled her eyes. "I really doubt he's as hung up on 'yes Sir and 'no Sir' as you are."

Doc Elimena busied himself by moving to Aristotle's head and checking in his mouth.

"Tom, would you excuse us a minute, please?"

Jesse held up her hands. "All right, all right—respect, I got it." She ducked behind Aristotle and stroked his long neck.

The vet put the vial into his shirt pocket and asked, "Have you changed anything in his diet? Added vitamins, different oats, anything?"

"Huh uh." Jesse shot a quick look at Morgan out of the corner of her eye.

Doc Elimena leaned toward Jesse and asked quietly, "Do you always bait her like this?"

Jesse grinned. "Yup."

"You must like to live dangerously." He took a swab out of his bag, ran it across the bottom of the feed barrel, then placed the swab into a plastic holder and labeled it.

Morgan let out a breath that sounded like the brakes on a locomotive. She opened the stall gate and motioned for the vet to precede her. "Tom, you ready for dinner?" He walked out, and Morgan stepped back and waited for Jesse, who stayed behind Aristotle, hiding her grin.

"You have to come up to the house sometime tonight. I'll see you then."

Jesse muttered to Aristotle, "I'm shakin' in my boots."

"You'd better be. And move Aristotle to another stall tonight. And don't clean this stall until we find out what's wrong with him." Morgan followed the vet out and the two of them walked back up to the house.

Evening feeding never took long, and by seven Jesse was back in the apartment lying on her bed reading the only book she owned, *Anthem*, by Ayn Rand. Over the past year, she'd worn out the pages, reading and re-reading two passages that always brought her up short. Until recently, she didn't understand why. Tonight she read the first one over and over. She couldn't stop herself. She understood now. She knew why the words hypnotized her:

1.3 We are alone here under the earth. It is a fearful word, alone. The laws say that none among men may be alone, ever and at any time, for this is the great transgression and the root of all evil. But we have broken many laws. And now there is nothing here save our one body, and it is strange to see only two legs

stretched on the ground, and on the wall before us the shadow of our one head.

Her hands shook as she turned to the other passage she'd committed to memory:

6.10 The first blow of the lash felt as if our spine had been cut in two. The second blow stopped the first, and for a second we felt nothing, then the pain struck us in our throat and fire ran in our lungs without air. But we did not cry out.

6.11 The lash whistled like a singing wind. We tried to count the blows, but we lost count. We knew that the blows were falling upon our back. Only we felt nothing upon our back any longer. A flaming grill kept dancing before our eyes, and we thought of nothing save that grill, a grill, a grill of red squares, and then we knew that we were looking at the squares of the iron grill in the door, and there were also the squares of stone on the walls, and the squares which the lash was cutting upon our back, crossing and re-crossing itself in our flesh.

The words held her spellbound, but she was afraid to know why. She began repeating them, slowly at first, until the blood began pounding through her veins and her mind started spinning out of control.

At ten o'clock, Ryland shut her laptop and went to see whether Jesse had come up from the barn. Morgan was in the living room reading. She closed her book. "I told you I'd let you know when she got here. That's the fifth time you've checked the guest room. You want me to go get her?"

"I know, I know, I'm like an old mother hen, but this is a critical time, when memories start presenting themselves without

any controls. Would you mind going and getting her? I guess I'll be less worried once she's here."

Morgan kissed Ryland on the forehead and got her jacket out of the hall closet. She walked slowly down to the barn, not really in the mood for a confrontation. She saw light shining through the curtains in the apartment window, and she stepped into the barn and knocked on Jesse's door.

"Jesse, Ryland's ready for bed, but she won't go until she knows you're in the guest bedroom. Get your stuff and let's go." There was no answer from inside, and she knocked two more times before pulling out her keys and letting herself in. Jesse was tangled in the bedcovers, lying on the floor between the bed and the wall, unconscious. Morgan grabbed the bedpost and pulled the bed away from the wall. She put her fingers to Jesse's neck and when she found a pulse, she shook Jesse's shoulders and then her head, trying to wake her. Jesse's face remained slack, her eyes still. Morgan pulled her into a sitting position, ran her arms under Jesse's shoulders and managed to lift her to the bed. From there, she hefted her into her arms and carried her to the house, looking for Ryland around every turn in the path.

Ryland was on the porch watching for them, and when she saw Jesse in Morgan's arms, her heart climbed into her throat. "What happened?"

"I don't know. I just found her like this on the floor."

"Bring her into the guest room; then go into our dresser and you'll find the smelling salts in the top right-hand drawer."

Morgan laid Jesse and the tangled sheets on the bed, then left to get the capsules. The container wasn't in the top right drawer, so she began jerking drawers open and rifling through them.

"Ryland, they're not here, where else would they be?" She went into the bathroom and opened all the cabinets, rummaging through them and still not finding what she needed. They weren't in any of the logical places, and she went back to the guest room to

ask where else she should look. Ryland had untangled Jesse from the sheets and was sitting on the edge of the bed leafing through a book. Morgan stopped in the doorway. "Am I the only one who's panicking here?"

Ryland slowly shook her head. "No, I'm worried too, but I found this book in the sheets, and I know what happened. Look at this: *Anthem*, written by Ayn Rand. This page is torn and wrinkled, and I'd bet money she was reading it tonight. Damn it!"

Morgan took the book, and was startled by the anger in Ryland's eyes. She began reading about the nightmare of being flogged. When she'd finished, she closed it and sat on the bed close to Jesse's head. She slipped her hands under Jesse's arms and pulled her up so her head was resting on her shoulder. "I couldn't find the smelling salts; maybe you'll have better luck."

Ryland took the book again and re-read the passage. When she banged it shut and left the room, Morgan whispered softly. "What did you do, Little Shit? You'll be all right. I've got you."

Ryland returned with the salts, broke open a capsule and held it under Jesse's nose. Nothing.

Morgan waited, trusting that Ryland could bring her around. Her chin rested on Jesse's head, and she shifted her gaze from the smelling salts to Ryland. "What's the matter? Why isn't it working?"

"We'll give it a minute, then try another one." Ryland exhaled in frustration as she picked up the book again. "I told her not to think about the room without me. I didn't think I'd have to tell her not to read about it, either. This book is pretty well worn out."

"Is she gonna be all right?"

Ryland nodded and met Morgan's eyes. "If she wasn't living right here with us, I'd probably have her committed to a hospital at this point. We'll have to keep a close eye on her for the next little while." Ryland played with the cover of the book, opening and closing it while she considered what Jesse had done.

"The mind's a complicated labyrinth, Morgan. Psychologists like to believe we understand how it works, but in reality, we don't have a clue. We just hang on for the ride and hope for the best."

She broke open another capsule and held it under Jesse's nose. When she didn't respond, Ryland threw that one in the trash and opened another. "Okay, Little One, you're not going to like this." She held one of Jesse's nostrils closed and inserted the open capsule up into the other. Jesse immediately started coughing and grabbing at her nose and Ryland reached for a tissue. "Here, use this."

Confused, Jesse grabbed the tissue and blew her nose as tears streamed down her face. She coughed and wiped her eyes, laying her head back on Morgan's shoulder. Morgan leaned back against the headboard and closed her eyes, relief washing over her as she listened to Jesse's coughing.

Both of them jumped when Ryland slammed the book down on her knee. "Damn it, Jesse! What is the matter with you? I give you *one* order and you can't even follow that! Didn't I tell you not to do anything on your own? Why would you read something like this after I told you not to?"

Jesse took the book from Ryland and held it under her arm, close to her chest. Ryland had never upbraided her before, and although it angered her when Morgan did it, she was shaken by Ryland's intensity. She wasn't sure why her emotions were so raw. She wasn't even sure how she'd gotten to this room, and she turned her head into Morgan to hide her tears.

"Now listen to me, Jesse Shaunessy, and listen well! Do *not* do *anything* without me that even *remotely* reminds you of what happened. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Jesse turned her head farther into Morgan's shoulder and didn't answer.

Ryland snatched the book out of Jesse's hand and left the room.

They watched her go and were both quiet for a minute. Then Morgan reached up and ruffled Jesse's hair. "Whoa. She even scared me."

Jesse smiled despite herself and relaxed a little.

Morgan got up and took an extra pair of pajamas out of a drawer in the dresser.

"Here, put these on and go to bed. I'll get you up in the morning and we'll go down and feed."

Morgan found Ryland outside on the front porch, sitting on the porch swing with a down comforter pulled around her to keep off the chill of the autumn night. Lifting the blanket, she crawled in next to her, put her arm around her shoulders, and pulled the comforter around them both. Neither woman spoke as they listened to the soothing sounds of the night forest while they swayed with the motion of the swing. The half-moon rose slowly through the trees and bathed the front lawn in a gentle blush of moonlight. Morgan put her lips to Ryland's hair and kissed her gently. Ryland turned and met her lips with her own, then put her head back on Morgan's chest and listened to the quiet rhythm of her heartbeat.

Morgan said softly, "She scared you too, didn't she?" She nuzzled Ryland's hair again while they listened to a Great Horned Owl in the distance, its haunting call calming. "Why couldn't we wake her? Why was it so hard this time?"

Ryland pursed her lips and nestled down further into Morgan's embrace. "I'm not sure. I think sometimes the mind locks up, goes into nihilism, non-existence, to protect itself. I shouldn't have yelled at her the way I did, but I was more shaken than I realized."

Morgan chuckled. "Welcome to my world these last few months." She caressed Ryland's ear with her lips, then rested her cheek on her soft, silken hair. The swing continued swaying gently while they drowsed to the peaceful sounds of the moonlit night.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Organophosphate poisoning?" Morgan re-read the report the vet had handed her a few minutes before. "Where would Aristotle get organophosphate?"

Dr. Elimena surveyed the barn area. "A lot of places, but mostly from pesticides. I don't see any of those here, and besides, I'm confident at least one other horse would be showing symptoms if he were getting it from an accidental source. His symptoms are minor, so my guess is he hasn't ingested very much for very long."

"So the lab found it on the swab you took from his feeder and traces in his water. Can we test all the food and water bowls to see how many might be affected?"

"If you don't mind spending the money, just get the samples to me and I'll have them tested."

"I don't. If you give me about thirty vials and thirty swabs, I'll have Jesse fill and label each one and I'll get them to you ASAP. I want the hounds' bowls tested as well." She looked around for Jesse and was surprised to see her standing close by, rage simmering in her eyes. Morgan pulled her aside where Doc Elimena couldn't hear.

"Leave it, Jesse. The sheriff and I will take care of it, not you."

Jesse had no intention of leaving Cody to anybody. He'd poisoned one of the horses, and she'd take care of him herself. She nodded and quickly looked away.

"I want your word on it."

Jesse raised feral eyes to Morgan and remained silent.

Morgan glanced over her shoulder at the vet, who'd gone to his truck to get more vials and was just coming through the door. She looked back at Jesse, who hadn't moved a muscle. Convincing her to stay away from Cody would have to come later. Right now the first priority was to collect and test the water and feed bowls around the farm. "I need you to get a box for all the vials and

swabs. Take a separate vial to each water bowl, fill it up and label which stall it came from. Take a swab from each feeder too. Barney's will be number one, Comstock's two and you'll count down the row, across the aisle, and back up again. Take the notebook, draw a diagram and number each stall on the diagram as well." Morgan twisted her neck, trying to loosen the knots that had embedded themselves in her muscles.

"There's a notebook out at the kennels. It's exactly like the one for the horses. Draw another diagram of the kennels and number each pen, then take samples from each of those as well. I want you to do everything by yourself. Too many people increase the chances for mistakes."

Jesse stepped around Morgan and went to look for anything she could use to hold the vials. In the medicine cupboard, she found a box with two rolls of vet wrap left over from the original eighteen. There was another full box in the cupboard, so she opened it and stuffed the two rolls down among the others.

Three hours later she had the samples filled and labeled and had drawn the diagrams to Morgan's specifications. The vet had left some time ago, and Morgan had gone up to the house. Jesse left the box of samples in the barn refrigerator, fed the horses their evening meal and checked on Aristotle. When she was satisfied she'd done everything she needed to do for the day, she headed out to the road to catch a ride into town. Thoughts of finding Cody simmered in her mind.

She'd walked about a mile, holding her thumb out and watching as cars and trucks passed her without even a glance from the drivers, when a red Ferrari convertible pulled over. Sandra smiled as Jesse opened the passenger door and got in. "Jesse, good to see you again. I hope you're headed into town because that's as far as I can take you. I have a seven o'clock dinner date with an old friend who flew in last night. We're meeting at a bed and breakfast just on the outskirts."

"Wherever you drop me off's fine. I'm trying to find somebody, and I don't have any particular place to start. Thanks for stopping."

"I rode with your hunt club Tuesday. I was disappointed I didn't see you." Sandra reached over and put her hand on Jesse's thigh as she pulled back onto the deserted road.

The familiar flutter started in Jesse's stomach and inched its way lower as Sandra's fingers began massaging her leg. She sat up straighter, her mind still focused on Cody. "I don't hunt. I just take care of the horses."

"Next time you'll have to show me around the barn. It's a wonderful old building, isn't it?"

"Uh huh." She tried to ignore Sandra's hand and concentrate on her need to get into town, but her thoughts of Cody were quickly taking a back seat to what was happening between her legs. She stared out the window and forced herself to tune out as Sandra chatted on about the barn, the hunt club, and her husband's trip to New York.

"I'd be glad to pick you up if you like."

Jesse tuned back in, and had no idea what Sandra was talking about. "Pick me up for what?"

"Earth to Jesse. Your mind is about as far away as my husband. I said, since James is in New York, maybe you'd like to come visit in the next few days? Dinner maybe? I'm a great cook."

Jesse put her head on the back of the seat as Sandra continued massaging the inside of her thigh. Now that she'd refocused, her body was responding with predictable results. "Uh, sure. Tomorrow's a day off for me. What time?" Her heartbeat sped up as the sensation between her legs became a persistent ache, and her stomach muscles tightened as she bit her lip to keep in the sounds that were trying to escape.

Sandra's little finger softly stroked the inseam of Jesse's jeans and she talked on as naturally as if they were discussing the

weather. "Does four o'clock sound all right? And I know you don't have a car, so I'll come by the farm and pick you up." She pulled onto a back road and, after several minutes, pulled into the driveway of what Jesse assumed was a local bed and breakfast.

Jesse turned to look at Sandra, who was watching her with a hint of mischief in her eyes. "Uh, listen, thanks for the ride, and four's great. I'll see you then." She reached for the door handle, but Sandra's grip tightened on her leg to keep her inside.

She reached up and pulled Jesse's head close enough that her breath tickled Jesse's ear. "Maybe tomorrow we'll finally get to dessert." She took Jesse's ear lobe between her teeth and nibbled her way to the bottom.

Jesse turned her head and took Sandra's bottom lip between her own. After a few seconds, she heard herself ask with a voice as close to begging as she ever cared to be. "Your friend's already here, huh?"

Sandra softly rubbed between Jesse's legs until Jesse thought her foot would push right through the floorboard. "Afraid so. But I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" Sandra let go and sat with her back resting up against the driver's door, her lips quirked into a teasing grin.

Jesse reached for the handle and was embarrassed to see her hand trembling as she pushed open the door and stepped out. She worked at getting her body back in control as she waved at Sandra without turning her head and walked out to the road that would take her the rest of the way into town.

The main street consisted of five blocks of businesses, bars, places to eat and a scattering of motels. It was easiest to start at one end looking for Cody and head down the street until she'd finished at the other.

Harley's Bar was her fifth stop, and when she walked in, she waited a second to let her eyes adjust to the dim lighting. A thick fog of cigarette smoke hung in the air, and she casually studied

each face, hoping one of them would be Cody's. Unfortunately, she was out of luck. She stepped up to the bar and ordered a beer.

"Hey Andy, have you seen Cody around lately? Has he picked up another job?"

Andy used a bottle opener to pop the cap on Jesse's beer. He poured it into a glass until the foam overflowed, then set the bottle on the bar next to the glass. "Don't know nothin' about Cody, but Morgan was in here a few minutes ago lookin' for ya."

Jesse took a drink of her beer, then picked up the bottle and headed for her table. She'd drunk about half her glass when Hank, the little guy she'd helped in the fight, came into the bar and ordered a beer. He spotted Jesse and came over and sat at her table. "Hey, Morgan's lookin' for ya and she don't look too happy."

"You seen Cody anywhere around?"

"Yeah, I heard he just got a job today workin' for Jake Tate. Tom told me he'll be livin' right there on the farm. That means he won't be comin' in as much as he used to."

"You know what night he'll have off?"

"Saturdays I think. Least ways, that's when most of Tate's men have off. Why? I thought the two of you didn't get along."

"I have a message for him, that's all. Thanks for the information though. And if you see Morgan again, I'd appreciate it if you hadn't seen me here."

"Don't worry, Harley's is safe; everybody knows that." He picked up his beer and wandered over to the pool tables to round up another player for a game.

This was Thursday night. She had tomorrow off and worked Saturday. It'd be more difficult to get into town after work on Saturday, but she didn't think it was such a good idea to confront Cody on Tate's property. She finished the last of her beer and walked up to the plate glass window to see if she could spot Morgan.

The farm truck was parked in front of the café, and Jesse leaned against the window frame to wait until Morgan came back out onto the street so she'd know when she could safely leave the bar. Her mind wandered to exactly what she wanted to accomplish when she tore Cody into pieces. The sheriff's office was across the street, and as she stared at it, it occurred to her she'd probably do some jail time for beating Cody into the ground.

She jumped when someone came up behind her and leaned an arm on the wall above her head. "So, who exactly are we looking for?" Morgan had a pretty good idea where she'd find Jesse, and had come in the back door on her second trip through the businesses on Main Street.

Jesse sighed and turned around. "I don't suppose I can buy you a beer."

Morgan pushed off the wall and headed for the front door. "Let's go."

Jesse followed her, but stopped when Morgan turned the opposite way from the truck. It took Morgan a few steps to realize Jesse wasn't with her anymore. She turned and walked back to where Jesse was standing. "I'm already really pissed off, Jesse, and I'm not in the mood for your shit. Ryland told us you needed to stay close to her until we finish your therapy, and you take off slick as you please for town without even a by your leave. Now follow me, keep your mouth shut, and if you're rude to anyone at this town hall meeting you've made me late for, you'd better run."

"I'm not going to any—"

The look Morgan leveled at her was enough to shut her up. Morgan started down the street again and Jesse followed. When they reached the town hall, she took a chair next to the door at the back of the room. Once again, Morgan came back to her and said between gritted teeth. "Do you really want me to haul you up to the chair next to mine in front of the whole goddamn town?"

Jesse got up and pulled a chair next to Ryland, who was seated close to the front of the room. The people in the meeting were well acquainted with Morgan's temper, and no one batted an eye when she slammed down a chair on the other side so Jesse was sandwiched between the two of them.

Jesse slumped down and suffered through an endless discussion about public toilets, tourism, and support for the local high school girls' basketball team, which needed funds to travel to the state tournament. When a woman stood up and started complaining about her neighbor's barking dog, Jesse put her head in her hands. "Jesus Christ."

The woman stared down her aquiline nose, and when Jesse sat back and started to ask what she was staring at, Morgan put her elbow on the back of Jesse's chair, locked her fingers on her neck and gave a warning pinch. Morgan smiled up at the woman. "Go ahead, Jo. She wasn't referring to your problem. She just realized she forgot to do something back at the farm."

Jo sniffed suspiciously, then started in on the dog again.

Jesse leaned forward and rested her forearms on her knees. She put her thumbs together, then her index fingers, middle fingers and ring fingers, and when Jo began imitating the sounds the dog made at one in the morning, Jesse's head dropped all the way down. "Oh, fuck me."

Ryland rested one hand on Jesse's back and covered her own mouth with the other. She couldn't believe the sounds coming out of Jo's mouth either.

Morgan leaned forward and said quietly, "Ditto on that one, Kid."

Ryland pinched the bridge of her nose to keep from laughing at the two of them. She couldn't believe the transformation that had taken place since the day Jesse had appeared on their porch. Jesse had softened Morgan's temper, and Morgan had reined in most of Jesse's anger.

They sat through the dog owner's rebuttal and, to Jesse's great relief, they came to the last item on the agenda. After the mayor read the initial complaint, Jake Tate stood to put in his two cents. Jesse hadn't noticed him in the room when she first came in, and she sat up to see where he was seated. She had to stretch to see around Morgan, who'd turned to face her full on and had reached her arm across the back of Jesse's chair.

Tate was on the other side of the room, about three rows behind theirs. Morgan moved her face into Jesse's line of vision, and Jesse sat back and slumped down in the chair again. She'd lost interest in Tate unless he provoked her, and she knew she'd be going too far with Morgan if she caused major problems in front of the whole town. When the meeting adjourned, Morgan and Ryland went to the refreshment table to visit with some friends. Jesse went out the door to catch a ride back to the farm.

"Jesse?"

She turned and Morgan threw her some keys. "Wait in the truck. We'll be out after a while."

Jesse climbed into the bed of the truck and sat leaning against the cab. The second passage from Ayn Rand's book came to mind, and she tried to distract herself by watching the people milling around outside the meeting. A picture flashed of a whip lacerating a man's back, and she shook her head to clear it. Two small boys ran past the truck shooting bullets out of their fingers and she smiled at their antics as she put her head back and closed her eyes. Immediately the whip cut through the muscles on her back and she gasped out loud.

She jerked her eyes open and searched the street for Ryland, needing to find her before she lost control and made a fool of herself. Memories were slipping out on their own, and when she stepped through the door of the meeting house, she started to panic as the dirt room began to form around her. A pain shot through her head. She pushed her fingers deep into her temples and leaned

against the door jamb for support as she frantically looked around for Ryland or Morgan, not caring which one she found.

Morgan was discussing one of her problem hounds with a member of her hunt staff when someone rudely pushed into her from behind. She stepped forward to give the other person room to get by and looked over her shoulder to see who it was. She saw Jesse barely holding it together, sweat running down her face, her fingers squeezing her head. Morgan reached around and pulled Jesse's head into her chest. "I've got you. You're okay." Morgan turned to the woman she'd been speaking with. "Could you find Ryland and ask her to meet us at the truck, please?"

The woman, Mary Gephardt, watched Jesse for a few seconds, then asked, "Does she need a doctor?"

"No, she's fine. If you'd just get Ryland, we'll be on our way home."

Mary held Morgan's eyes, politely refraining from asking the many questions running through her head. She'd fox hunted with Morgan for more than twenty years, had known her practically her entire thirty-five years, and they'd been through enough stressful situations together that Mary trusted her implicitly. She nodded and went looking for Ryland.

Morgan helped Jesse to the truck and got her up into the seat. Ryland and Mary came out a few minutes later and Ryland stepped to the passenger door. "Hey, Kiddo. Headache?"

Jesse nodded once.

"What were you thinking about?"

"The book. I...I didn't mean...to." She tried to control her breathing, but the pain was so intense she couldn't concentrate. Groaning, she slid sideways until her head was resting on the bench seat.

Ryland went around to the driver's side and leaned in so she could get her face close to Jesse's ear. "Jesse, you're all right. I want you to listen to me and do exactly as I say. You have to stop

the memories from slipping out on their own. Picture your balloon with the stones, and picture you and Morgan closing the hole where the stones are coming out."

"I can't."

Ryland waited a second, then backed out of the cab and spoke to Morgan, who was on the other side of the truck. "Can you slide in on the floor and let her know you're there?" She smiled. "This isn't the optimal location for therapy, but we'll have to make do."

Morgan raised her eyebrows, then looked at the floorboard. She scowled as she glanced back at Ryland, then leaned in and inched her way across the floor until she was even with Jesse's head. She put her hand on Jesse's shoulder at the same time Ryland leaned in and repeated what she'd just said. Morgan rubbed Jesse's back and said. "We'd better get that hole closed up pretty quick, Kid, 'cause I'm not staying in here like this for very long."

Ryland chuckled and Jesse opened one eye and squinted at Morgan through the pain. She tried to smile, and as she held Morgan's eyes, she pictured them working together to seal the hole and stop the stones. Gradually her breathing eased until the pain receded to the normal throbbing she'd lived with for so long.

"The pain's going away?" Ryland reached over and ran her hand through Jesse's hair.

Jesse nodded.

Morgan eased her way out of the truck and smiled at Mary, who'd been watching the three of them while they were in the truck. Ryland came back to the passenger side and slipped her arm around Mary's waist. "Thank you for not asking questions. She'll be fine."

Mary nodded, then shook her head. They all watched as Jesse sat up and wiped the sweat from her face with her sleeve.

Ryland said. "So is the pain manageable now?"

"Yeah."

"Good, then come back inside with us while we finish visiting."

Three sets of eyes locked on Ryland and she chuckled. "How many times do I have to say it? Trust me."

Jesse looked at Morgan, who shrugged. "You heard the lady. Let's go."

The four of them walked back inside, and Ryland pointed to the back table and told Jesse to get some food. Jesse noticed Mary watching her, and as their eyes met and held, Jesse felt a light color rise in her cheeks. She guessed Mary was in her mid-thirties, although it was hard to tell. She was about Jesse's height, 5'6", with golden-brown skin and high cheekbones that accentuated the air of confidence Jesse admired in a woman. Her black hair was short and wavy and, Jesse thought, an incredible contrast to the women's piercing grey eyes.

Jesse stepped around her and walked over to the food table. There was a variety of colorful fruits laid out on platters at one end of the table. She picked up a toothpick and stabbed a few cantaloupe and Kiwis and dropped them onto her plate. Homemade breads and rolls were next, and just as she reached for a piece of banana bread, someone shoved her from behind. As she fell into the table, she dropped the plate and turned, unsure what had happened.

Jake Tate stood behind her, his lip curled into a sneer. "Oh excuse me, did I bump you?"

Jesse was in the process of pulling her fist back when a curly head stepped between her and Tate and shoved him backward. Mary Gephardt put her hands on her hips and growled. "Maybe you need to be more careful where you're walking, Jake. That was pretty clumsy of you."

Morgan grabbed Jesse and pulled her to the side. Jesse tried to wrench her arm free, but Morgan switched hands and grabbed Jesse's neck with her free right hand, hard enough to get her full

attention. She leaned over and whispered. "Stand still and let someone else fight your battles for once. People saw what he did. Now stop."

Jesse couldn't pry Morgan's fingers off her neck, so she waited while Mary stared Tate down. A woman—Jesse assumed it was his wife—stepped up and curled her arm around his. "Let's go, Honey. We have to pick up the boys in a few minutes."

Tate switched his stare to Jesse, who stared back, eyes full of hate. He allowed his wife to escort him out, and as they walked through the crowd, Jesse noticed people turning their backs on him and shaking their heads. Once Tate and his wife were out the door, the buzz in the room returned to the low hum of easy conversation typical among a group of old friends.

Frieda, who'd catered the meeting from the café, picked up Jesse's plate and held it out. "Here you go, Honey. What else can I get you?"

Jesse blinked and looked down at the plate. She took it and mumbled. "Nothing else, thanks."

Morgan released her hold and patted her on the shoulders. "I wouldn't have believed it three months ago, but you're almost as trainable as my hounds."

Jesse shrugged away from her and took her plate to sit in a chair where she could put her back up against the wall. She leaned back and studied Mary, who'd resumed her discussion with Morgan. Out of the corner of her eye she caught Ryland watching her. She blushed when Ryland smiled and winked at her, and she picked up a piece of Kiwi and shoved it into her mouth.

Frieda brought a plate and sat next to her. "It's no wonder that Cody boy works for Tate; they're two peas from the same pod."

Not good at small talk, Jesse shrugged.

Frieda popped a grape into her mouth and a huge grin spread across her face. "I was watchin' you after you came in with Ms. Davis. I almost burst out laughin' when Miss Jo started talkin' 'bout

that dog and I heard you take the Lord's name in vain. I wished you coulda' seen the comical look Ms. Davis and Dr. Caldwell exchanged behind your back after Ms. Davis tol' Miss Jo to continue. It was priceless." She put her head back and laughed, and Jesse smiled down at her plate.

Frieda laughed some more, then said. "I do believe that's the first smile I've ever seen you give. It's right pretty; I don't know why you don't use it more."

Jesse shrugged again and finished the last of her fruit. She got up and started to leave, then turned back to Frieda. "See you around."

"I'm sure I'll see you in the café. You take care now, and I surely enjoyed chattin' with ya."

Jesse went outside and slid down the wall to wait for Morgan and Ryland to finish visiting. Morgan came out soon after and looked around. She didn't see Jesse in the shadows so she started down the street toward Harley's.

"Hey."

Morgan didn't hear her, so Jesse ran up next to her. "So where we goin'?"

Morgan stopped and laughed. "Keeping an eye on you is harder than holding on to a raw oyster. Go wait in the truck and I'll get Ryland."

When they turned back, Jesse noticed Mary watching them from the doorway. She put her hands in her pockets and walked to the truck, suddenly self-conscious and shy. She hadn't felt that way in years, and she was surprised to be feeling it now. She climbed into the bed of the truck and didn't have long to wait before Morgan and Ryland returned.

Ryland opened the passenger door. "Come on, you'll freeze back there."

"I'm fine."

Morgan took off her jacket and tossed it to Jesse. "You're stubborn is what you are; I would hardly call you fine." She jumped in the driver's side and Ryland climbed in on her side and shut the door. Jesse made herself comfortable in the back and enjoyed the twenty-minute ride back to the farm.

### **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

At three-thirty the next day, a red convertible pulled up in front of the barn. Jesse was sitting outside on the bale of hay, and Sandra walked over.

"I know I'm a little early, but I dropped my friend off at the airport and decided to come get you before I went home."

"That's all right; you ready to go?"

Sandra rubbed the back of her tight jeans. "I've been ready for a while."

Morgan came around the barn just as Jesse opened the passenger door.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Where do you think you're going?"

"It's my day off." Jesse put one foot on the floor board and waited.

Morgan walked up to Sandra and held out her hand. "Sandra, good to see you again. How's James?"

Sandra took Morgan's hand and greeted her warmly. "Well, hello Morgan. James is just fine. He's on a business trip to New York, and Jesse and I are on our way to my house to have some dinner."

Morgan looked from Sandra to Jesse. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't care what two consenting adults did, but these weren't normal circumstances. "Would you mind waiting here a second?" She didn't wait for an answer, but instead walked into the barn and called the house.

When Ryland answered, Morgan said, "Sandra Adams is here to pick up Jesse and the two of them are headed to her house to have some dinner. Her husband's out of town in New York."

Morgan had told Ryland all about their meeting with the Adams.

Ryland was adamant. "Absolutely not. Not at this stage of the game. No."

"How do you really feel about it?"

"Do you need me to come down to the barn?"

"No, I'll handle it. I just wanted to know if my gut instinct was correct. Thanks."

When Morgan came out of the barn, Sandra said, "I don't know what the problem is. I've made a wonderful roast and thought Jesse would enjoy sharing it with me. I get so lonely when James is out of town."

"I'm sorry, Sandra. I was just checking on some extra work we have in the barn. I can't really spare Jesse tonight, but it was very nice of you to think of her."

Jesse knew Morgan had gone in to call Ryland, and if she was honest with herself, she'd been nervous her mind might start playing games at Sandra's house and she'd really be screwed. Morgan expected an angry confrontation with Jesse, and she stood with her hands on her hips, ready for anything.

"We'll only be a couple hours, Morgan. I'm sure you can spare her just that tiny bit of time."

Jesse stepped back and shut the car door. "Look Sandra, she's my boss. If she says I need to stay, then I probably need to stay. Can we get together some other time?"

Morgan was completely taken aback. Jesse had never sided with her on anything.

Sandra shook her head. "No, Jesse. We arranged this yesterday. She can't take your day off away from you." The way she held her bottom lip reminded Jesse of a petulant child.

Jesse didn't want to ruin the hunt club's chances for riding on the Adams' land, and she *had* been looking forward to some casual diversion with Sandra. "Tell you what—why don't I give you that tour of the barn you were talking about yesterday, and when we're done, I'll finish the work Morgan has for me?"

Sandra's face brightened. "I'd love to see your barn. That's a wonderful compromise, don't you think, Morgan?"

Morgan raised her eyebrows. "Wonderful."

As Jesse and Sandra walked past, Jesse slowed and said quietly so only Morgan could hear, "See that 'Do not disturb' sign on the door?" She continued walking and Morgan reached out and swatted her on the back of the head.

"I see it; I see it." Morgan chuckled as she watched them walk into the barn. When she turned around, she saw Ryland walking down the path. "Uh oh." She stood with her hands in her pockets waiting for Ryland to reach her.

"Why is Sandra's car still here?"

"We compromised."

"You compromised."

Morgan rocked back and forth on her heels, hands still in her pockets.

Ryland looked at the barn door, then back at Morgan.

"Morgan, this is not a good time."

Morgan nodded.

"Fine. If you can't tell her, I will."

She started past Morgan, who put her arm out and stopped her. Morgan asked, "Haven't you heard that old saying?"

Ryland crossed her arms. "All right, I'll bite. What old saying?"

"When the barn's a'rockin' don't come a'knockin'." She smiled at Ryland, who rolled her eyes. Morgan said, "Look, I'll stay down here at the kennels a while, then I'll kick Sandra out. If Jesse has problems, I'll be right here."

Ryland sighed. "Just make sure you bring Jesse up to the house with you. I don't trust her not to take off again like last night." She reached up and kissed Morgan on the cheek. "You'd better watch out or your reputation as an ogre might get tarnished."

Morgan watched Ryland walk back up the path, then went back to the kennels. She had a couple of hounds in sickbay, and this would give her some extra time to spoil them.

An hour after she'd gone to the kennels, Morgan heard Sandra's car drive away from the barn. She walked around front and found Jesse sitting on the bale of hay. "So, did she like the barn?"

Jesse picked up a stalk of hay and broke it into smaller pieces. "She was really impressed." She raised her eyebrows. "I mean *really* impressed."

Morgan held up her hands. "Spare me the details—and by the way, you owe me one. Now let's get up to the house before Ryland blows a gasket. She's called the kennels about five times already."

They walked up the path and found Ryland sitting on one of the benches. She got up as they approached, put her arm around Morgan's waist and started walking with them. "I've got dinner ready and waiting."

Jesse smiled. "Already ate."

Ryland stopped, mouth open, hands on her hips. "Jesse Shaunessy, I do not *believe* you just said that!"

Jesse kept walking and Morgan stuffed her hands in her pockets again. Ryland turned toward the barn, then turned back to her friend. "Morgan—"

Morgan wisely kept her mouth shut and Ryland laughed at the twinkle in her friend's eyes as she slipped her arm around her waist and they followed Jesse into the house.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jesse stood in the guest bedroom with her shirt off, her back to the full-length mirror. It bothered her that she'd never seen the scars before, how her mind could have hidden such a tangled web. Between the burn marks and other scars she didn't remember getting, there wasn't an undamaged piece of skin.

Dark shadows hung in the corners of the quiet house as Jesse slipped on her shirt and made her way through the living room and out onto the porch. She sat on the steps and leaned against the railing, running her hands over her face and arms, trying to feel anything that didn't belong. What other scars did she have that she didn't know about? That she couldn't see?

Movement caught her eye, and she watched as an older truck drove slowly down the main road, its headlights off. She pushed off the steps and walked toward the barn, making her way through the trees instead of using the path. Fallen branches littered the ground, and she stepped carefully around them, not wanting to make any noise.

The barn was to her left, the road to the right. Keeping to the tree line, she moved right, stopping behind each tree to listen for any night sound that didn't belong. There—movement between her and the road. The moon shadows concealed her and she watched as Cody made his way toward the barn. He was good, his steps careful and silent as he followed a trail familiar to him. He passed close by her tree, and she stopped breathing and made herself look at the ground so the whites of her eyes wouldn't give her away.

He was carrying a heavy container in his right hand that banged against his leg as he walked. She watched him switch it to his other hand and once he was a good distance away, she began moving from tree to tree, following him. When he came to the clearing around the barn, he stopped and lowered the container to the ground then knelt next to it and waited.

Jesse guessed he was listening, making sure Morgan wasn't out on one of her night patrols. When he was satisfied he was alone, he surprised Jesse by bypassing the barn and heading straight for the kennels. She moved up to the corner of the barn and slowly edged her head around so she could watch without him seeing her. He set the container on the ground, and moved his hand and arm as though unscrewing a cap. Jesse's heart raced as he poured a liquid around the base of the wooden kennel wall.

Her legs couldn't move fast enough as she raced toward him, knowing she had to stop him before he had time to light the gasoline. He jerked his head her way at the same time he swung the can in an arc. Before she could react, a wave of gasoline soaked her head and shoulders. She tackled him as the fumes triggered memories from the room. Her throat closed as she fought, and she knew that if she couldn't breathe she'd pass out before she could stop him from burning the hounds.

He was a clumsy fighter and whenever he'd swing his arm to hit her, he'd lead with his head. She stepped back, giving him a clear target to her face, hoping he'd swing hard. When he did, she timed her punch to take advantage of his forward motion and threw her full weight behind her fist. She heard him groan as he fell to his knees long enough for her to open the outside gate for the hounds, who didn't wait two seconds before joyfully stampeding to freedom.

Morgan sat bolt-upright in bed, knowing instantly that someone had let the hounds out of their kennels. Their joyous barking meant they were ecstatic that someone had come to play. She leapt out of bed, threw on her clothes and yelled for Ryland to call the sheriff as she slammed open the door and ran out into the night.

The moon lighted the path as she raced for the kennels where she saw someone pummeling another person who was on their

hands and knees struggling to stand. As she ran closer, she smelled gasoline and recognized Cody, who had just landed a hard blow to Jesse's midsection with his boot. Rage overpowered her senses, and she threw Cody up against the kennels and pounded his face over and over until someone grabbed her arm from behind.

Jesse managed to choke out, "You'll kill him...you have to stop."

Morgan heard her struggling to breathe and forced her anger down. Cody dropped to the ground as she let go of his neck and took Jesse's face in her hands. "Slow your breathing, Jesse. You can breathe." She brought Jesse's damp head close and realized she was soaked in gasoline. "Jesus!" She let go and reached down to turn on a hose.

When she turned back, Ryland took the hose from her and held it over Jesse. "You watch Cody to make sure he doesn't wake up and light a match. I've got her."

Morgan dragged Cody away from the gasoline and searched him. He had a lighter and several books of matches, which she took and stuffed deep into her pockets. She heard a siren in the distance and watched anxiously as Ryland rinsed Jesse and tried to help her breathe.

Two patrol cars drove down to the barn, dodging several hounds that were milling about, enjoying their freedom. The deputies took Cody from Morgan, and she ran over to check Jesse. Ryland was still rinsing off the gas, but Jesse had recovered enough to complain about being soaked to the skin.

Morgan went into the kennels and brought out a second hose, which she connected to another faucet and began hosing down the gasoline-soaked ground. A third patrol car pulled up and Sheriff Carlson stepped out, his uncombed hair standing out at unnatural angles from his head.

"Everybody all right? Dispatch called me out of bed, said there was big trouble and I should get down here."

Morgan filled him in on what she knew, and when she finished, he retrieved his Stetson from the patrol car and walked over to where Jesse was sitting. He stood with a wide stance, legs spread, arms crossed. "Why is it every time I see you, you're in another fight?"

Jesse shrugged. "Just lucky, I guess."

"Why don't you start from the beginning and tell me exactly what happened?"

Ryland hooked her arm around Jesse's and pulled her toward the house. "You'll get all the information you need after she's had a shower and changed into dry clothes. In the meantime, you can help Morgan corral these hounds and put them back to bed."

The sheriff touched the tip of his hat. "Yes Ma'am. I know an order when I hear it."

Jesse allowed Ryland to lead her up the path to the house. She took a long, hot shower and pulled on the clean clothes Morgan and the sheriff had brought up from her apartment. The three of them were sitting at the table drinking coffee when Jesse walked into the kitchen. The sheriff stood up and pulled out a chair for her.

There was no way she'd sit where he told her to, and when she started toward a different chair, Morgan growled, "Don't even think about it."

"I'll sit where I want."

"He's being a gentleman."

"He's setting the stage for an interrogation, my back to the wall, him fencing me in. Fuck that shit." She pulled out a chair where her back was to the open room and sat, arms crossed, waiting for Morgan to react.

The sheriff chuckled. "Am I that transparent?"

Morgan hesitated, then got up and poured a mug of coffee for Jesse. She brought the creamer from the refrigerator, mixed it with some sweetener and stirred it all up. She set the cup down in front of Jesse and went back to her seat.

Jesse watched her suspiciously, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The sheriff sat and picked up his coffee mug. "Okay...if it's all right with Ryland...." He pointedly looked at Ryland, who nodded. "I'd appreciate it if you'd tell us all what happened."

Jesse took a sip of coffee, letting the warm liquid soothe her aching throat. Trying to pull in air through constricted airways had shredded her windpipe, and she cleared her throat carefully.

Ryland pulled her chair closer to Jesse's. "Does your throat hurt?"

Jesse shrugged. "Just a little." She felt her face flush when Ryland took her hand and held it in her lap. She glared at Morgan, daring her to say something, but Morgan just sat back, waiting for her to tell them what had happened. She cleared her throat again. "Well, I couldn't sleep, so I was out sitting on the porch. I saw a truck drive down the road without any headlights on, and I figured it might be Cody coming to do something to Aristotle." She took another sip of coffee. "I headed into the forest 'cause I wanted to catch him doing it so I could beat the shit out of him." She glanced up at the sheriff. "Somebody's been poisoning one of our horses."

Morgan and Ryland exchanged surprised looks at Jesse's use of the word "our." Morgan grinned and Ryland winked at her.

Sheriff Carlson nodded. "I know, I've been making some inquiries at the various farm supply stores to see who might have bought some pesticide they didn't usually need. But go on with your story."

Jesse retrieved her hand from Ryland's lap and crossed her arms. "I saw him carrying something to the barn. Then he went around to the kennels and started pouring the gasoline on the wood. I ran up and he got lucky and soaked me in gasoline." She stood up and walked to the sink, keeping her back to them. She wasn't sure how to explain to the sheriff why she couldn't breathe without telling him about what Richard had done to her.

Ryland stepped in to help. "I don't know how anyone could function after being drenched in gasoline. I'm surprised the fumes didn't make you pass out."

Jesse turned back to them and nodded. "I thought I was gonna pass out. That's why I opened the kennels, 'cause I knew I had to get Morgan's attention somehow."

Morgan raised her eyebrows. "Well, it worked."

"After the hounds were out, I saw Cody reach into his pocket, so I went after him again. Then Morgan showed up." She returned to the table to sit down again. "You know the rest."

Everyone looked at the sheriff, who picked up his hat and stood. "Well, that answers most of my questions. If I have any more, I'll contact you. My thanks for the coffee, ladies, and don't worry about Cody. He'll be charged with attempted arson and attempted murder. Not to mention the fact that his fingerprints matched some we lifted from several of the local burglaries. He won't be getting out of jail anytime soon."

Morgan stood as well. "Did they match the prints you took from the pack of cigarettes?"

He nodded. "Yes Ma'am, they did, but unfortunately, planting cigarettes isn't a criminal offense."

Morgan nodded. "Maybe not, but it means a lot to me."

The sheriff started out the door, then turned back. "By the way, someone in town has been asking around about you, Jesse. Any idea who that might be?"

Jesse raised her eyebrows and shrugged. "I haven't a clue. A man or woman?"

"A man. I haven't seen him yet; I've just been hearing things. Anyway, ladies." He tipped his hat and walked out the door.

Morgan followed him out to his car, then returned to the kitchen rubbing her right fist. "I'd forgotten how much it hurts to punch somebody that many times." She grabbed her jacket off the back of her chair. "Well, considering it's five o'clock, we'd better

get down and feed everybody." Jesse stood up to join her and the two of them walked back to the barn. Morgan stopped her before she stepped through the barn door. "Hey, you saved my animals and my farm. I'll be indebted to you for the rest of my life. Thank you."

Jesse hesitated. "After all you and Ryland have done for me, I think we can call it even." She turned and walked into the barn, and for the first time, actually felt like she was home.

### **Chapter Thirty**

At dinner the next night, Ryland realized Jesse was moody and upset about something. Her answers were short and clipped, and she'd been trying to push Morgan into a fight all evening. Morgan hadn't taken the bait, and that served to make Jesse even more temperamental. They hadn't had a session that afternoon because of all the drama the previous morning, and Ryland wondered what was going on in Jesse's head.

"Something's bothering you, Jesse. What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

Ryland reached over and tapped the back of Jesse's hand.

"'Nothing' sure has you upset. I'd like to know what it is."

Jesse gathered her dishes and took them to the sink. Washing dishes was something she actually enjoyed, and she plugged the drain and began to fill the sink with soapy water. The other two were finished with their meal, and she carried the rest of the dishes over and set them in the water.

Ryland turned her chair to face the sink. "Jesse, what is it? Right now, you don't have the luxury to ignore your feelings and stuff them back in. Now, tell me—what's bothering you?"

Jesse began washing the dishes and rinsing them, placing them on the counter to await drying. "Why couldn't I see the scars? I see blood covering my face, and it's not really there, and I see un-

scarred flesh where there are scars. Where else do I have scars that I don't know about, that the rest of the world can see? What kind of a freak *am* I?" She threw the sponge into the water and walked out the back door, down the porch stairs and out to the road. She wasn't sure where she was going, she just was.

The door pushed open behind her. Morgan walked up on her left, Ryland on her right. They walked in silence for about a quarter-mile, until Morgan said, "I'd really rather walk in the pasture; it's a hell of a lot prettier."

Jesse stopped, fuming. "I don't remember asking you to come along." She turned off the road and climbed the fence into one of Morgan's pastures, the other two following behind.

Morgan caught up and fell in beside her again. "I don't remember needing your permission to go for a walk." Ryland joined them and interlaced her fingers with Morgan's, deciding to take advantage of a beautiful stroll in the moonlight.

Jesse's hands were stuffed deep in her pockets and she was kicking rocks in front of her as she went. "He whipped me, didn't he?"

Ryland shrugged. "I don't know. Did he?"

Jesse picked up a rock and threw it as far as she could. "You know."

"I wasn't there, Jesse. How could I know? Do you remember being whipped?"

"No."

"Then why do you say he whipped you?"

"Because there are lines on my back. I saw them last night. And because of that second passage in the book. I don't know." She picked up another rock and threw it.

Ryland noticed Jesse's face go red. "What is it, Jesse?"

Jesse shook her head and angled away from them. When they came up beside her, she stopped and shouted, "Why can't you leave me alone?"

Ryland reached up and put her free hand to Jesse's cheek.  
"Jesse, there are no scars on your face that are hidden from you.  
No blood, nothing. People can't see what happened to you."

Jesse jerked away from Ryland's hand and started walking again. After a minute, she stopped and turned so abruptly that the two women almost bumped into her. Her eyes locked onto Morgan's. "Where else do I have scars that I don't know about? What do people see that I don't?"

Morgan shrugged. "The parts I can see—your face, your arms—nothing."

Jesse stripped off her shirt and jeans and stood with her arms out from her body. "Where else, Morgan? I need to know."

A purple bruise covered Jesse's stomach and Ryland reached out and rubbed it with the back of her fingers. "Is that from when Cody kicked you yesterday?"

Jesse pushed Ryland's hand away. "That's not what I'm talking about. Where else, Morgan?" She stepped away from Ryland so Morgan could see better.

Morgan slowly walked around her, trying to find scars they didn't know about. "There are some scars on the back of your right leg similar to the ones on your back."

Jesse twisted around to see the back of her thigh. She reached back and felt the scars Morgan was talking about and nodded. "Where else?"

"I don't see anymore."

"My face?" Jesse blushed a deep shade of crimson again.

"Nothing."

"Swear on your mother's soul."

Morgan bent down, picked up Jesse's clothes and handed them to her. "I can't swear on my sainted mother's soul with you standing there in your underwear."

Jesse's mouth quirked up a little as she pulled on her clothes. When she'd dressed, she stepped in front of Morgan, who said, "I swear on my sainted mother's soul there are no scars on your face."

Jesse scowled. "Your mother wasn't a saint."

"How do you know?"

"She had you, didn't she? That's probably gonna keep her out of heaven, let alone sainthood." Jesse slipped around behind Ryland before Morgan could grab her. The three of them drifted back to the house, Ryland between the other two, trying to keep them from playfully punching each other as they walked.

The next day at one o'clock, Jesse stepped onto the house porch and waited. She put her hand up to knock, then lowered it again and sat in a wooden rocker near the door. The rocking mirrored what was happening in her mind, which was absolutely nothing. When she tried to think of the room, she drew a blank.

Morgan came up the path from the kennels and stepped onto the first step. "Ryland thinks we're close to being done. Maybe today won't be so bad."

The slow rocking continued, and Morgan walked up and opened the door. "C'mon, Jess."

Jesse stood up and walked inside. Ryland wasn't in the living room, so she went to the kitchen to see whether she was doing something in there.

Ryland came down the hall from the office. "I'm right here. I couldn't get off the phone. Let's sit down." She arranged the furniture the way she always had it during the sessions. The coffee table was pushed sideways, Ryland's chair was where the table usually rested, and Jesse and Morgan sat on the couch. Everyone took their places, and Ryland put her hands around one knee and leaned back. "You haven't had many headaches the last two days have you?"

Jesse shook her head.

"Have you been awakened in the middle of the night by pain?"

"No."

"Nausea, cold sweats—anything?"

"No."

"What do you think of that?"

Jesse shrugged. "I think my brain's shutting down."

Ryland raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Very good. How did you figure that out?"

"Because my mind is blank. It's gone." Jesse's jaws clenched, concern written on her face.

Ryland studied her a minute. Unfortunately, she knew the pain would return ten-fold once they began opening more of the deeper memories today.

Jesse raised her eyes to Ryland's. "Maybe it's okay. Maybe just knowing he whipped me is all I need. I don't think I have to remember it—just know it happened, that's all."

"The problem with that, Jesse, is that the memories are there, buried, and we've been working for months now to chip away at your controls, to weaken them. Do you remember telling us sometimes your brain felt as though it was full of stones, ready to explode?"

"Yeah."

"Does it still feel that way?"

"It's...different."

"In what way?"

She shrugged. "Not always, but sometimes, it's more like a black pit. I don't know how to explain it."

"Just say what comes to your mind. If it's wrong, you'll know."

"Well, you remember I told you that guy you worked with, the guy from Vietnam, must have been terrified?"

Ryland nodded.

"It's...well, it's like the pit is full of terror...kind of boiling."

She hesitated. "No, that's not right." Boiling didn't explain what she saw, so she began spilling out words that described what was

there. "Insane, incensed, demented, raging. It's all those things. Shit, I'm not making sense." She stood up and went to the window.

"And you're trying to hold that in?"

"I have to hold it in."

"Come sit down, Jesse." Ryland waited until she sat. "Does the terror have a face?"

Jesse nodded.

"A human face?"

"No."

"Describe it."

Jesse blushed and looked away.

Ryland sat forward and put her hand on Jesse's leg. "Jesse, look at me a minute. You're going to have to listen and trust me on this one."

Jesse met Ryland's eyes and nodded slightly.

"There is no such thing as demon possession. There is no demon in your soul straining to break free. Do you know what that Terror Being is?"

Jesse shook her head.

"It's your very panicked subconscious pulling out all the stops to make sure you keep these last memories locked up." She sat back and leaned on the arm of her chair. "That's why just knowing it happened is not enough. You don't have a choice. You *have* to remember it, see it, and put it away where it belongs."

Jesse turned sideways, leaned her arm against the back of the couch and rested her head on her hand. She studied Morgan, who sat patiently and waited. Without looking away, she said, "If I let it out, I'll be dead. It's *that* black. It's what I see."

Ryland was pretty sure the flogging did almost kill her the first time. She guessed it was the way Richard had meant for her to die, but for some reason, she was sitting here in their living room, very much alive. Now was when she needed Jesse to believe in her own strength as well as Morgan's, because without the two combined,

she didn't think Jesse would attempt to let the demon out. "You've been through a lot these last few months, and Morgan and I have been right here with you. Today, more than any other day, you have to believe Morgan can pull you back from the abyss, and you have to trust me that I know exactly what I'm doing."

Jesse held Morgan's eyes a very long time. "Can you do it? Because I can't."

Morgan didn't answer immediately. She felt like Jesse was asking her to pull her from the gates of hell, and she didn't know how to do that.

"You're not sure, are you?"

Morgan looked away, then back into Jesse's eyes. "No, but I can promise you this: I'll go with you wherever you go, and I'll do everything in my power to bring you back. I give you my word on that."

Jesse listened and tried to ignore the fear telling her to run before it was too late. There couldn't have been a better answer. Morgan was being completely honest, and she absolutely trusted Ryland.

"Damn." She eased to the edge of the couch. "Let's just get it over with."

Ryland had been waiting patiently, and she started right in before Jesse could change her mind. "Most of today, Jesse, will be on you. You need to let terror out of his pit. Release those last controls and let go."

Jesse choked back a paralyzing fear. "On me? What do you mean, on me? You've got to help me! I can't do it by myself!" It seemed as though there was a physical force drawing down on her heart, pulling on it until she was afraid it would detach and be sucked into the hole. "Ryland, I can't!"

Ryland had said what needed to be said, so she remained silent, waiting for Jesse to let go of the last controls she'd piled

onto her conscious mind. Experience told her if she was patient enough, Jesse would bring the memories up on her own today.

"I can't do it, Ryland!" Her eyes jerked from Ryland to Morgan and back, hoping one of them would reach out and stop her, would realize that she couldn't release the demon.

Morgan wanted to stop Jesse, to protect her. Ryland was throwing the flood gates open, and she'd told her last night that when she'd done this with other patients, memories of the physical pain often came flooding out in giant waves. Morgan watched Jesse cross her arms and close up against Ryland. She sat back and made herself comfortable.

They sat quietly—five minutes, then ten—until Ryland saw what she'd been waiting for. Jesse shook her head and unconsciously glanced to her left. Ryland said, "Tell me."

Jesse's eyes came back to Ryland. She closed them and tried to catch what she'd just seen. When she opened them again, she said, "It's gone. Nothing. Ryland, I can't do this by myself."

Ryland nodded and waited, still leaning back, hands clasped around one knee. The ticking of the grandfather clock sounded like a drum beating a steady rhythm into the silence.

Shadows clouded Jesse's mind. The demon clawed at her, straining against the chain that held him captive in the dark. Fear paralyzed her, and she knew she'd be Richard's prisoner the rest of her life if she couldn't face the festering memories that were locked so deep within her soul. She closed her eyes and forced herself to look into the pit.

Black spun in a vortex, dragging her in. Her heart convulsed and she jerked herself back and wrenched open her eyes, grunting with the effort it took to free herself. "I can't do this, Ryland! It's pulling me in! I thought it was supposed to come out. I *can't* go in!" She stood up, ready to run if she had to get away from Ryland's answer.

"Sit down, Hon. You're okay. And if it helps, I agree with you. You can't go in; it has to come out."

Jesse forced herself to relax. Ryland didn't expect her to be sucked in; she'd be dead if she was sucked in. Jesse sat down again, this time with her leg up against Morgan's thigh. Breathing deeply, she closed her eyes. The vortex was there, and the black was roiling throughout the funnel. She pushed it down, and it receded. She grabbed Morgan's leg and clenched hard, then released the black.

Her back ripped apart, flesh flayed to the bone. She screamed and went to the ground, bashing a knee on the coffee table on the way.

Morgan grabbed the arm of the couch and dug her fingers into the leather, keeping still despite the pain from Jesse's fist clamped onto her leg.

Ryland's jaw clenched, but she forced herself to stay as she was.

The pain stopped suddenly and Jesse found herself on her knees, one hand tearing into Morgan's leg, the other splayed out on the surface of the table. Her eyes stretched wide and her mouth gaped as she gasped for air. Without blinking, she found Ryland's eyes. "What the fuck was that?"

Ryland didn't answer and Jesse got up to leave. "I'm done. Fuck this shit!" She stepped over the coffee table just as white-hot pain exploded in a torrent of blood. She flung herself to the floor, screaming and arching backward to close the gap that ripped open sinew and flesh, muscles bulging out of their protective sheaths, escaping her body. Jesse could barely take in enough breath to scream the searing agony away from her body. Richard ripped her apart, new flesh splitting open, old tears widening with each crack of the whip. She rolled onto her back to stop the shredding, to keep the muscles inside, the bones covered.

Morgan grabbed the arm of the couch again, forcing herself to stay where she was, to do what Ryland had told her she had to do—nothing.

Ryland moved off her chair and knelt next to Jesse. "Talk to me. Tell me, Jesse."

Morgan couldn't stand it much longer. She got to her feet, hands stuffed so far into her pockets she felt the seams rip. She paced to the kitchen door and back again, needing to help Jesse, but waiting for the cue Ryland had told her to watch for.

Ryland put her hand on Jesse's stomach. "What's happening, Jesse? You have to *see* what's happening, not just feel it. Tell me what you see and hear."

"I... he—" She heard a crack and saw a ribbon of blood fly past her face. She screamed, her breath erupting from her lungs like fire.

"Jesse, you have to tell me what's causing your pain. Look at it. Tell me what it is."

Jesse ground her teeth and clenched her stomach, drawing on every ounce of control she'd ever had. She found Morgan through her tears and focused on her, needed her.

Finally, Morgan saw what Ryland had told her to wait for. Jesse's eyes locked onto hers, and she knelt beside her and held Jesse's face in her hands, never taking her eyes away. "Do it, Jesse. I've got you. You have to look at it. Please!"

Jesse grabbed Morgan's wrists, then looked beyond her to Richard, who stood over her with a bullwhip, using it to tear her flesh into pieces. He reeled back and brought the whip down, slicing across her legs. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she heard Morgan yell at her.

"Open your eyes and look, Jesse! You have to see it!"

She opened them, expecting to be split apart again, but instead, when Richard pulled the whip back, he stiffened and turned, a knife embedded deep into his back. The room began to

spin as blood soaked the back of his shirt. The spinning became blackness and she slipped into oblivion.

Ryland lowered herself to the floor and leaned against the coffee table. She rested her elbow on her knee and covered her eyes with her hand.

Morgan lowered Jesse's head gently to the floor, then picked her up and carried her to the couch. She sat down, cradling her in her arms. Blood trickled out of Jesse's mouth, and Morgan quickly opened it to see where it was coming from. Jesse had bitten a gash out of her tongue, and it was bleeding freely. "Ry."

Ryland twisted around and saw the blood. As she pushed herself up, she asked, "Tongue?"

Morgan nodded. Ryland brought a towel from the kitchen, sat next to Jesse and held it so the blood fell onto it instead of onto Morgan. "It should stop on its own fairly soon."

Ryland's hand shook as she held the towel, and she lowered it onto Jesse's chest to steady herself. The bleeding stopped after a few minutes, and they sat and waited to see whether Jesse would come around on her own. When fifteen minutes passed with no sign of consciousness, Ryland reached into her pocket and pulled out a capsule.

Morgan watched her. "What's going to happen?"

"Morgan, if I knew, we'd be two rich old women by now from all my speaking engagements and book sales." She managed a smile as she broke open the capsule and held it under Jesse's nose.

Jesse weakly turned her head to the side, and Ryland followed her with the capsule. When Jesse was able to focus, she saw Ryland sitting beside her and felt Morgan holding her. She closed her eyes again and allowed herself to be held, needed to be held. She whispered, "I think Richard is dead. I saw the whip, Ryland. I saw the whip, and I saw a knife in his back."

Ryland reached over and held Jesse's hand. She let her rest a while, until Jesse pushed herself off Morgan and sat in Ryland's

chair. Ryland sighed. "We have one more item to take care of. Then we'll be done for the day."

Jesse shrugged, too exhausted to care.

Ryland walked to the entry closet and brought out Morgan's whip. She came back and sat on the couch, the whip in her lap.

Jesse stared at it, then held out her hand. When Ryland handed it to her, she unwound it and ran her fingers down the length of the cord. "Do you use this on the hounds?"

"No, the crack it makes when we whip it is enough to get their attention."

Jesse remembered the crack the whip made as it came down on her back. "Why can I remember now without pain? How can I do this?" She held up the whip and ran her fingers down the cord again.

Ryland thought a minute before answering. "No two people react the same way. Over the last few months, we've been conditioning you to bring out a memory, look at it, feel it, describe it, and then let it go. If we hadn't been carefully preparing you to be able to let it go, I'm not sure what would have happened."

Jesse lay her head on the wing of the arm chair and closed her eyes. She felt Morgan take one arm and Ryland another as they led her into the guest bedroom and set her on the bed. Morgan slipped off Jesse's boots, and Jesse lay down and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

## **Chapter Thirty-One**

Jesse slept the rest of that day, through the night and part of the next day. When she walked into the kitchen, Morgan and Ryland were sitting at the table with Mary Gephardt, drinking coffee.

Ryland got up and went to the counter. "Jesse, come in and join us for some coffee."

"No. Ryland, could you come in the bedroom for a minute?"

"Of course." She turned to Morgan and Mary. "I'll be right back."

When they were both in the room, Jesse pushed the door shut and pulled off her shirt. "I tried to see it in the mirror, but everything's reversed and it gets confusing."

"See what, Jess?"

"Do you see a line starting at my left shoulder and going down to the right side of my waist?"

Ryland stepped close and studied Jesse's back. "There are a lot of them going that way, Hon."

Jesse thought a minute. *What would make this one different?*

"Is there one underneath all the rest, maybe that the others cross over?"

Ryland put her hand up and tried to trace a single line. It was impossible. So many lines and burn marks crisscrossed each other, and scar tissue had built up between them. Ryland turned Jesse so she faced her. She handed her the shirt and Jesse put it back on.

"What are you looking for, Sweetheart?"

Tears came to Jesse's eyes as she sat down on the bed. "The first one. The first line, the first burn, because under that, I'm whole again. Underneath that one, there aren't any scars." She put her head in her hands and fought to hold back the tears.

Ryland sat down and pulled her close. "Oh, Kiddo, I'm so sorry."

Jesse let the tears come then. "I'm not who I was, Ryland. You can't find me under the scars."

Ryland kissed the top of Jesse's head. "We found you *because* of the scars, Jesse. We love who you've become, not who you were before. Everyone has moments in their lives that change them forever. We love the Jesse that you are today...scars and all."

Ryland held her a while, then reached over and grabbed some tissue. "Here, wipe your eyes and come out and say hello to Mary."

And watch out for Morgan since she had to do two of your feedings while you slept." Ryland took Jesse's hand and pulled her up. The two of them walked into the kitchen and Jesse poured herself a cup of coffee and pulled up a chair. She listened half-heartedly while the three women discussed their upcoming hunt.

Mary took a drink, then said over the rim of her cup, "So, Jesse—Morgan tells me you'll start hunting with us pretty soon."

Jesse stirred some sweetener into her coffee. "Morgan's wrong."

Mary set her mug on the table. "Well, if you do decide to ride, I lead the second flight, so you'd be riding with me." A twinkle in the grey eyes met a scowl in the brown.

The coffee cup felt warm in Jesse's hands and she brought it close and let the steam rise to her face. She breathed in the fresh aroma and felt herself becoming sleepy again. When she looked up, she was surprised to see everyone watching her.

"I'm still tired. I'm going back to bed for a while."

No one said anything as she put her cup in the sink and crawled back into bed.

Morgan woke her at six for the evening feeding. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty, c'mon. I'll help you get the horses fed tonight."

"I'm not feeling really great, Morgan."

Morgan reached down and felt her forehead. Jesse was running a fever, and Morgan straightened the quilt so she could sit on the bed. "What doesn't feel right?"

"I'm hot, but I'm cold. My head feels fuzzy."

"I'm going to start docking that huge amount of pay you draw every two weeks if you keep this up." She ruffled Jesse's hair and went to talk to Ryland.

She found her outside filling the bird feeder with seed. Ryland felt sorry for the birds that stayed through the winter, and she always kept their feeder fully stocked and ready. Morgan pulled on

her jacket as she walked outside. "Jesse's not feeling well. I think she has a little fever."

"I wondered whether that's what was happening when she went back to bed this afternoon. We're not completely done with her therapy, but I've seen this happen before. It's almost as though the body has to finish cleansing itself by burning out all the toxins. Don't ask me how it happens, but she should be all right soon."

Morgan put her hands in her pockets and looked innocently toward the top of the trees. "You wanna come down and help me feed?"

Ryland wrapped her arm around Morgan's. "I thought you'd never ask." They walked down to the barn to do the evening feeding and settle all the horses and hounds for the night. Morgan delivered hay to each stall as Ryland measured the oats and vitamins and spoke to each horse as she gave them their sweets. The pair of barn owls who made their home above the horses flew out for their evening hunting, the pure white breast of the male practically glowing from the reflected lights in the barn. The female's copper color made her harder to track as she flew through the open hayloft door.

While the two women finished with the horses and checked on the hounds, Jesse lay in a deep, troubled sleep, her dreams chaotic, the torture out of sequence with Cody dousing her with gasoline and lighting her on fire. Flames scorched her face and she burned from the inside out, dizzy from the heat that melted flesh from her bones and turned her life to chaos. When Morgan and Ryland walked into her room, she was fighting to throw off sheets wet from sweat while she begged Richard to stop tearing her body to pieces.

The fever climbed throughout the night, and the two women took turns sitting up with her, listening to her rants and watching to ensure she didn't hurt herself while she flailed and fought with her demons. Morgan wiped Jesse's brow with a cold cloth and tried to

reassure her. "Jesse, you're all right. You're at the farm. I've got you."

Jesse arched, rolled onto her side and began crying. "No, no, no, no—please no...."

Ryland came in with a bath towel soaked in water. "Here, let's wrap her in this and bring that fever down. She doesn't know what you're saying, Morgan, but keep talking to her anyway. Maybe it'll help." They unwrapped the sheets and wrapped the towel around her. Jesse kept begging for Richard to stop, and Morgan continued to speak to her about the farm and the horses and how safe she was here with them.

At three o'clock, Jesse settled into a fitful sleep, still mumbling, but not as frenzied as before. Her temperature started down, and they removed the wet towel. Morgan held her while Ryland put dry sheets on the bed and both of them wrestled her into dry pajamas. They lay her down and covered her with the quilt, then fell exhausted into their own bed.

Morgan awoke with a start at six-thirty. "Damn it!" She grabbed her clothes and walked down to the barn to feed.

Jeffrey was just coming out of the barn as she was walking in. "I fed them, Ms. Davis. They were making an awful ruckus, and I figured something must have come up."

Morgan shook his hand. "Thank you, Jeff. Something did come up and we didn't get to bed until early this morning. I overslept, and Jesse's been sick."

"Rico and I can take care of everything down here if you need to go back up. It's not a problem."

Morgan nodded and turned toward the house. "Thanks again." She walked back and climbed into bed and had no problem falling instantly asleep. Neither she nor Ryland awoke until eleven-thirty. Ryland got up to check on Jesse, wondering why the aroma of fresh rolls was wafting through the house. When she opened the

door to the guest room, she found Mary sitting in a wing chair reading and Jesse sleeping quietly.

Mary closed the book and the two of them stepped out into the hall. "I went to the kennels since we were supposed to work the hounds this morning. Jeffrey told me you guys had a rough night, that Jesse'd been sick. I came up to see if I could do anything." She started for the kitchen. "I've got some coffee on and some rolls in the oven."

Morgan came into the kitchen a few minutes later, looking for an intravenous drip for her morning coffee. "Jesse looks quieter this morning. Something smells wonderful."

Mary pushed the button to turn on the light in the oven and checked the rolls. "I threw together some croissants in case anyone was hungry." She studied the rolls a minute, then turned off the oven light. "Jesse was fevered and restless a few hours ago, but she settled down about eleven."

Ryland glanced at Morgan. "Did she say anything?"

Mary picked up her coffee and brought her eyes up to meet Ryland's. "Nothing that'll ever leave this house."

Ryland let her relief show. "Thank you." She trusted Mary implicitly, knowing whatever Jesse said would be safe. "I feel like I could eat breakfast, then go back and sleep for a month. In fact, I just might do that."

Morgan rubbed her head, messing up her hair and then smoothing it down again. "I'm with you on that."

"Why don't you two go ahead? I'll stay with Jesse. My day's totally unplanned anyway."

They enjoyed the hot buttered rolls as soon as they came out of the oven, visited a while, then excused themselves to go back to bed. Mary grabbed her book, settling into the armchair in the guest room while she thought about some of the things Jesse had said in her sleep. She'd known Morgan for more than thirty years and Ryland for ten, and she trusted their instincts about people, Jesse in

particular. Granted, Morgan went through employees like water through a sieve, but she'd been a loyal friend throughout the years who would give Mary her last penny if she thought she needed it.

She moved slowly when she realized Jesse was awake and watching her. The changes in her appearance were startling. Mary's mother used to describe the look as bone weary. That description fit Jesse perfectly. She closed the book and set it in her lap. "Hey."

Jesse didn't respond. Why was Mary here? This was her room, where the outside world couldn't get to her. She rolled onto her side, burying her head deep into the pillow.

"If you're hungry, I just made some fresh rolls. Or I can make whatever you'd like, as long as they have it in the kitchen."

Jesse pulled her covers higher, thinking Mary shouldn't see her like this. Nobody should see her. Fragmented dreams nagged at her. Mary had been in some of them. Or had she? Mary's arms around her, her gentle voice reassuring. Mary's arms around her. The thought felt comforting somehow as she drifted in and out of sleep.

Mary opened her book and returned to her reading, content to wait for Jesse to open up in her own time. An hour went by before Jesse finally swung her legs over the side of the bed. Mary quickly took Jesse's arm, afraid she would get up too fast and get dizzy, which is exactly what happened. When Jesse lost her balance, Mary put her arms around her and eased her back onto the bed. "Whoa there. You need to go slow."

Jesse put her head in her hands, waiting for the black spots to disappear.

Mary sat on the bed next to her. "What can I get you? You thirsty?"

Jesse nodded.

"Well then, you need to lie back so I can go get something. I'm not leaving you here to fall on your hind end without me."

Jesse raised her head and Mary saw a hint of a smile. She lay back, letting Mary pull the covers over her again. "Be right back. Don't move or I'll brain you so hard you'll have a reason to be dizzy." She smiled to soften her words, but she had an idea this woman would get up just to show her she could.

Jesse kind of liked having Mary do things for her. As a matter of fact, having Mary's arms around her had felt pretty good. Waking up in this room always made her feel comfortable and safe, and Mary seemed a natural addition to the surroundings. When Mary returned with her drink, Jesse couldn't help but smile.

Mary handed her a glass of orange juice. "What are you grinning at?"

Jesse drank the juice, then set the glass on the night stand. "A beautiful woman."

As Jesse leaned back again, Mary took the sheet and playfully flapped it in Jesse's face.

Jesse startled herself by giggling at Mary's antics. Her cheeks flushed pink, and to save herself, she said, "I guess I am kinda' hungry. I can come out to the kitchen though."

Mary shook her head. "No. It won't take me long, and you don't look that steady on your feet yet. What do you feel like?"

"Like shit."

Mary chuckled. "I meant, what do you feel like eating."

A blush spread from Jesse's throat all the way to the top of her head. Knowing Mary saw it made her flush even more. "Well, I guess shit probably wouldn't be on the top of my list then."

Mary's laughter came easily. "No, I guess not. I'll fix something and bring it in to you."

After Mary left, Jesse waited a few minutes, then headed into the kitchen. When she walked in, Mary was scrambling eggs at the stove and cooking bacon in the microwave. "I wondered how long it would take you to get in here. Grab a seat and I'll have breakfast ready in a sec."

Jesse sat at the counter and watched as Mary stirred the eggs.  
"You do the second flight, huh? They the people who can't ride?"

"No, they're the people who enjoy riding a little slower than the rest, that's all. It's also a good way for new people to learn the rules and etiquette of the hunt without disrupting the first flight."

"There's etiquette?"

"Yup."

"And I suppose Morgan's in charge?"

"Right again."

"That could be a problem."

"Why? She's already your boss. It wouldn't be any different during the hunt than it is at work." Mary set the eggs and bacon in front of Jesse and pulled out another stool at the counter.

"Does Sandra Adams ride in the second flight?"

Mary reached over and stole some bacon from Jesse's plate. She bit off a piece and smiled at Jesse as she chewed.

Jesse grinned back. "What?"

"You live in a small town, now, Jesse. You need to remember that."

Jesse took a bite of bacon and swiveled her stool so that she was facing Mary straight on. She felt a twinkle in her eye she hadn't felt in over a year. "Yeah, I hear she's a good rider."

Mary's laughter started low in her throat and rolled out so easily that Jesse surprised herself again by laughing along with her. She hadn't laughed in so long, she'd actually forgotten she knew how.

Mary took another bite of bacon. "In answer to your question, yes, she's ridden with my group a few times, but she's more than ready to move into the first flight. My guess is the next time she rides, Morgan will invite her to ride with them." When Jesse didn't ask any more questions, Mary watched her eat with quiet amusement. When she'd first seen Jesse working with the horses, her impression had been of a beautiful young woman who spoiled

her looks with a scowl and held everyone she met at arm's length. Now, a different impression was forming, and the stirrings she was beginning to feel were welcome, if not a little disconcerting.

Jesse knew Mary was watching her, and when she finished her breakfast—or supper, since it was close to three o'clock—she rinsed her plate in the sink and loaded it in the dishwasher. "I'm going down to the barn. I need to check all the horses to make sure they're doin' all right. Thanks for cooking."

"Um, no...actually, you're going back to bed. I told Ryland I'd watch you, and that's what I intend to do."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"Tough."

The two women stared at each other, neither willing to back down.

"So, how do you think you're gonna stop me?"

"Try me."

Jesse crossed her arms, unsure how to react.

Mary raised her eyebrows and waited, hands on hips.

Jesse started for the back door and Mary stepped in front of her.

"Move." Jesse wasn't about to push her way through those incredible gray eyes.

"No."

Jesse crossed her arms again and glared at Mary, who stood in front of her, waiting.

"Fine." Jesse turned on her heel and walked stiffly back to the guest bedroom. She shut the door in Mary's face and climbed back into bed.

Mary calmly opened the door, picked up her book, sat down and began quietly reading.

Jesse closed her eyes and fell immediately to sleep.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Several days later, Jesse was sweeping the floor, and Morgan came in and went to the feed table. She opened the notebook and casually announced, "Ryland wants to have a one o'clock session this afternoon. She says there are some loose ends we need to tie up."

"I thought we were done."

"I think the hard part's done, but she says we aren't finished, and I guess she knows what she's talking about." She read all the new entries Jesse had written in the book. With ten horses, there would always be one type of minor ailment or another: matter in the eyes, small cuts or an occasional sore. There weren't any new entries that needed Morgan's attention, so she shut the book and re-shelved it. "It's almost noon, why don't you come up for lunch before we start your session?"

"No thanks. I'll be up at one to see what Ryland thinks is so important."

Morgan smiled as she watched Jesse disappear into her apartment. In her fifty-seven years, there'd been a handful of people who'd made a life-changing impact on her overall view of the world. Her mother had been passionate about foxhunting, and had passed that passion on to her only daughter. Her father had given her his love of farming. She still remembered the woman who had introduced her to lesbian love, and of course, there was Ryland, her soul mate, with whom she intended to spend the rest of her life.

Now, as she stared at the closed apartment door, she realized Jesse had been added to her list. Morgan had never had children, had never been the nurturing type for anything except her animals and her lovers. She'd known intellectually why a mother bear violently protects her young, but now she understood it on a visceral level. She shook her head as she walked through the barn

door, thinking she needed to talk to Ryland about what was happening with her feelings toward Jesse. The whole concept was more foreign to her than anything she'd ever dealt with, and she knew Ryland could help put everything in perspective.

At one o'clock, Jesse walked into the house and saw Ryland sitting in her usual chair. She sat on the couch, and Morgan threw another log onto the fire. When the fire was just how she liked it, she joined Jesse on the couch and waited for Ryland to start.

"So you thought we were done, huh?"

Jesse nodded.

"Well, this session is more because there are a few loose ends that need to be cleared up and I need to be positive we've uncovered everything we need to know."

Looking down at her hands, Jesse shrugged. "We were done, Ryland. I don't want to do this anymore.

"Do you remember I said we'd be done when *I* said we were done?" She waited for Jesse to raise her eyes and then she smiled at her. "It'll be all right, Jess. I'm just concerned that there are some unanswered questions that need to be dealt with, so we're going to go over them to see what we find. If there's nothing there, *then* we can say we're done." Jesse's closed expression and crossed arms spoke volumes to Ryland.

"Okay, let's get started then. In our last session, you said you saw a knife in Richard's back and you thought he was dead. What do you remember after that?"

Jesse pictured the blood soaking into Richard's shirt, but she couldn't remember anything else. "I don't know. The next thing I remember clearly is getting out of the mental hospital."

"Were you down in the room when he was whipping you, or were you somewhere else?"

Ryland's questions always brought images that Jesse had no idea were locked in her head. "No...I remember walking up the

stairs, and the door at the top of the stairs was open, and Richard was standing outside with the bullwhip."

"Tell me everything you saw."

Jesse remembered her eyes burning from the light. She closed them now and covered them with her hand.

"What's the matter with your eyes?"

"The light was too bright...the sunlight."

"What happened?"

Jesse's heart started racing. "Can't we *please* stop, Ryland? I don't want to do this anymore."

"Just a little more, Jess. We need to make sure all the memories have been dealt with. Now, you're standing at the top of the stairs and the light is too bright. What happened next?"

Jesse heard Richard's whip crack. "Ryland, stop it! I'm not going through that again!"

"I think you can say it and remember it without pain now, Jess."

She shook her head. "No, I can't."

"All right—start with seeing the knife."

Jesse opened her mind a tiny amount, just enough to check her controls. She pictured the knife shoved into Richard's back all the way up to the hilt, and when she was sure the pain wouldn't return, she sat back and let out a breath of air. "There's a knife, and the blood." She looked down and to the left. She stared for a long time, watching memories move through her mind.

"Can you tell us what you're seeing?"

"Yeah, I remember a woman...an old woman, and she's...I don't know. I'm in her house, and she's taking care of me. She's really old—wrinkled...saggy cheeks...long, grey hair." She shrugged and looked at Ryland. "I don't remember how I got to her house."

"Does she have a name?"

Jesse shook her head. "I don't think we ever spoke. I don't think she spoke English anyway. She'd come in several times a day and put some kind of plant thing on my back and my wrists and leg. I remember she'd feed me and make me drink some horrible...something...and then she'd leave. But—"

"But?"

"Well, there was a man who'd come into the room sometimes." She stopped while the images played out in her mind. She closed her eyes and listened, trying to hear what he was saying.

Ryland watched her cock her head slightly, concentrating on something.

Jesse opened her eyes. "I can't hear him. It's like a buzz, or just a low murmuring."

"Okay, that's actually good. It probably means it's not a hidden, painful memory, it's just a memory. Try to remember your conversation with him the same way you'd try to remember a conversation you had with Morgan two months ago. Don't try too hard, just let it come."

Jesse thought back to the discussion they'd had about the fox clock Morgan had hung in the barn. "It's weird, but when I remember about the dirt room, the memories feel heavy, but when I remember talking to Morgan, they're more light. Does that make sense?"

Ryland nodded. "It does. So, think about your conversation with Morgan, then lightly switch to the conversation with the man."

Jesse tried what Ryland suggested. She blinked rapidly. They were forcing the man's head down onto her face, and she closed her eyes and shook her head to stop the memory.

Ryland watched her. "Tell me."

Jesse ground her teeth and turned left, trying to control the images. "How do I stop seeing what happened?"

"I doubt you'll ever totally forget, Sweetheart. But your memories won't control you anymore. When you remember things or see images in your mind, come find Morgan or me and talk to us about them. Don't try to stuff them." Ryland put her fingers to Jesse's chin and turned her face towards her own. She smiled and put her forehead down onto Jesse's and playfully growled. "Like you're trying to do right now." Jesse pulled in a long breath and nodded, and Ryland sat back. "What were you seeing?"

"Them forcing the man's head onto my face. That guy in the house was his father."

Morgan rested her foot on the coffee table. "Richard had killed his son, and he'd come to kill Richard, right?" She shrugged. "That's what I'd do anyway."

Ryland smiled again. "Morgan, would you let her tell the story, please?"

Morgan shrugged sheepishly, knowing she shouldn't fill in the blanks. "Well, it makes sense."

Jesse nodded. "The man and some other people had come to kill Richard, and they were watching him, waiting for the right time. When they saw him whipping me, they rushed him and stabbed him in the back." She looked at Ryland. "Then one day the man took me away from the old lady's house, put me in a car and dropped me somewhere...and then I retired."

Ryland smiled. "There's a little bit of a gap in there. What happened between the man dropping you somewhere and retirement?"

Jesse focused angry eyes on Ryland. "I ended up in a hospital, then a psych ward. Then the department said I was too screwed up to be a cop anymore, and they gave me a retirement and sent me on my way."

Morgan shifted on the couch. "Were you always such a pleasant employee to have around?"

Ryland chuckled. "Morgan, would you stop?"

"Just curious."

Ryland turned back to Jesse. "What do you remember about the hospital?"

Jesse glanced left. "Not much. Everything's real fuzzy, like there's a film over my eyes."

"They probably kept you heavily drugged, and by the time your back had healed, my guess is your subconscious had already buried all your memories. What happened at the mental hospital?"

Jesse's eyebrows lowered as she tried to focus. "All I remember are nightmares...people screaming...and I didn't understand why I was there. I remember being terrified, because I didn't belong with all the crazy people walking the corridors. When they let me out, the department told me I couldn't be a cop anymore."

She looked at Ryland who smiled and added, "And the rest is history, as they say. I'm sure we're going to run into new memories every now and then, and when we do we'll deal with them. But I think for the most part, we're done. You should be extremely proud of yourself."

Jesse shrugged and leaned into Morgan. She wanted to thank them for everything they'd done, but somehow nothing she could come up with seemed enough. "You guys saved my life." She tried to say more, but ended up walking out instead, hopefully before they saw the flood of tears running down her face.

### **Chapter Thirty-Three**

Two weeks later, Morgan walked into the barn. She and Ryland had agreed that getting Jesse involved in foxhunting would begin the re-socialization process she needed to make a complete recovery. "Saddle Smokey. You're riding with the second flight today."

"Bullshit."

"I don't believe I own a horse by that name. Now go get Smokey."

"I said I'm not learning how to foxhunt. I shovel shit. That's my job."

Morgan stepped up close to Jesse and bent forward. Her warning growl was soft, but left no doubt as to her intentions. "Do you work for me?"

Jesse turned to go to her apartment. Morgan grabbed her arm and the back of her shirt and dragged her over in front of Smokey's halter. Jesse put her feet on the wall and pushed backward into Morgan, who stepped back and let her fall. She landed flat on her back, her breath knocked out of her. She lay there a minute, trying to catch her breath, then pushed up off the floor and shouted at Morgan, "Why? What's it to you if I do or if I don't?"

Morgan shouted right back. "There's no why about it anymore, Jesse! Pick up the goddamn halter and go get Smokey or I'll wipe the floor up with you!" Morgan had crossed from irritated to pissed off, and she felt the muscles in her neck tightening. Her hands clenched on her hips.

Jesse met her glare for glare. She reached up and jerked the halter off the wall and swung it as she went to get Smokey, banging metal garbage cans and posts with it as she walked.

Morgan ground her teeth and walked out into the chilly dawn air. Andy, one of the whippers-in who helped keep the hounds under control during the hunt, walked over, but when he saw the tornado on Morgan's face, he backed up. "I think I hear my mother calling." He walked away, and Mary, who was brushing her horse, Asiago, glanced toward Morgan. She was well acquainted with Morgan's moods and refrained from saying anything.

When Ryland came down the path, she couldn't help but notice the hushed atmosphere of the normally raucous hunt preparations. She caught Mary's eye, and Mary shifted her gaze

toward Morgan, who was standing with her back to them, pulling on her gloves.

Ryland recognized the angry set to Morgan's shoulders and stepped over next to Mary. "Trouble?"

"I'm not sure. Nobody's dared ask what the problem is."

"You're all a bunch of cowards, you know that? Well, I think I'll just head back to the house until you figure out what's wrong."

Mary grabbed her arm. "Oh no you don't, Missy. We're all counting on you to talk to her."

Ryland laughed as she realized everyone had their eyes on her. "All right, all right. I'll gird my loins and head into battle."

Mary chuckled as she watched Ryland walk up to Morgan and start to massage her shoulders. Morgan shrugged her off. "Not now, Ryland. I've got to get this goddamned hunt started."

"Have you looked around at your loyal followers? They're all walking on eggshells."

Morgan ripped off one of her gloves and turned it inside out to find the sticker that had just pricked her finger. She fumbled with it until Ryland took the glove from her and pulled out the tiny spine.

Morgan didn't take the offered glove right away. Instead she mumbled, "What's wrong with 'yes Ma'am' and 'no Ma'am' and 'how high would you like me to jump, Ma'am?'"

When Ryland burst out laughing, Morgan gave her a withering look. Ryland held out her hand, indicating the assembled group. "I'm sorry, Honey, but you could tell any person in this yard to do something right now and you'd have thirty people falling all over each other to 'yes Ma'am' you before you finished your sentence."

Morgan turned a full circle, surprised at how subdued everyone was as they watched her and Ryland talking. Each person immediately found busy work as she surveyed the group. If they were going to hunt sometime today, she needed to get everything moving. "Mary?"

"Yes Ma'am?" Mary trotted over and waited.

Morgan glared at Ryland, who raised her eyebrows and shrugged. Her intention had been to tell Mary to deal with Jesse, but she decided against it. "Never mind. I'll do it myself." She turned and started for the barn.

Mary nodded. "Yes Ma'am."

Morgan stopped and glared at Ryland again, daring her to say something. Ryland stifled a smile and looked away. As Morgan started for the barn again, she realized she still needed to get the whippers-in organized and ready to go. "Andy?"

"Yes Ma'am?" Andy came over to her, ready to jump whichever way she told him to.

Morgan put her thumb and forefinger into her eyes and pushed, hard. Why was it everyone except Jesse could grasp the concepts of respect and obedience? "Would you please brief the other whips on what we're doing today?"

"Yes Ma'am." He called for his two counterparts to meet him next to the gnarled beechnut tree where Morgan usually held her briefings.

Morgan heard Ryland laughing behind her, and chuckled quietly. "All right, everybody over here—now." All thirty people hustled over and stood around her, except Ryland, who ducked behind a horse so Morgan couldn't see her face.

Morgan slowly pulled on her glove. "I apologize if my temper put a pall over the hunt preparations this morning. I promise I won't bite anyone's head off if you behave like the normal bunch of drunken sailors I'm used to seeing out here before a hunt. Now go on and get ready to have a hell of a good time."

A chorus of "Yes Ma'ams" sounded from the group, and she shook her head and laughed. Everyone started talking and the hunt staff exchanged relieved glances. Andy called the whips back over to the tree, and Mary called for the second flight to meet her by her horse trailer. Morgan caught Ryland's eyes and smiled. Ryland

walked over, stepped behind her friend and began massaging her shoulders again. "Go get her, Tiger."

Morgan playfully rolled up her sleeves as though readying herself for a fight. "She's gonna ride, and she's gonna enjoy it if I have to kill her to get it done." The two of them walked through the barn door and saw Smokey, fully saddled, standing by himself. "Jesse?"

A surly snarl sounded from the tack room. "What."

Morgan stood silently, reining-in her temper and waiting for Jesse to step out. Ryland surprised her by angrily stepping to the tack room door. "Jesse, get out here—*now!* You are an employee of this farm. When Morgan calls you, you come out and find out what she wants. Do you understand me?"

Morgan heard something hit the inside of the tack room wall, and she lowered her head and raised her eyebrows when Ryland stepped into the little room and slammed the door behind her. When they didn't come out right away, she went over to Smokey, checked his saddle and ran her fingers through his mane.

The door opened. Jesse came out and stood in front of her, arms crossed, face red, refusing to meet her eyes. Morgan glanced at Ryland, who'd come out behind Jesse, stalked out of the barn and slammed the door behind her. Morgan looked back at Jesse and leaned her arm over Smokey's neck. "You ready to ride?"

Jesse muttered, "Yes Ma'am."

Morgan did a double take, then looked at the barn door again. "Uh...good." She patted Smokey's neck one more time. "Good." She shrugged as she headed out of the barn.

Jesse grabbed Smokey's reins and followed. She led him over to Mary's group and mounted when Mary said it was time to get ready. Morgan called for the hounds, and Jesse waited until everyone else left the yard. She walked behind Mary's group, staying as far away as she dared without losing sight of them.

Mary trotted back to her, all business and very much the leader. "Move your horse up with the group."

Jesse squeezed Smokey's sides, and he moved up behind the rest of the second flight. She listened to the quiet banter among friends, and once Morgan cast the hounds, she watched Mary moving among the people, telling them to keep silent, keeping an eye on Morgan and waiting for the hounds to open up when they found the fox's scent. When they did, Mary waited until the first flight was well away, then signaled for her group to move out. "Let's go. Stay together as well as you can. And what do I always say?"

Everyone, except Jesse, chorused, "Have fun!" They galloped over the hills, listening for the hounds or the huntsman's horn whenever they lost the pack. Jesse actually forgot to be angry as she heard the hounds coming back their way.

Mary directed everyone to the side, making sure the horses' heads were facing toward the pack as the first flight thundered past, following the fox who had obviously doubled back.

Mary headed them out again and they followed the first flight over fences and through thick vegetation. Not all riders are created equal, and it wasn't a huge surprise to Jesse when one of the newer riders overbalanced and came off his horse right in front of Smokey's hooves. Jesse automatically set herself in a two-point jump position and the two of them sailed over the downed rider, then circled back to make sure he was all right.

The man picked himself up, and Jesse dismounted to give him a leg up into his saddle. When he was settled, she jumped back onto Smokey and was surprised to see Mary waiting for them. When both riders were back in their saddles Mary nodded, then turned and started after her group again.

Jesse and the man followed, catching up to both groups, who were sitting quietly waiting for the hounds who had apparently lost the scent. She pulled Smokey to a stop a short distance from

everyone so she could watch the hounds as they searched. One lifted his nose, catching a scent that had risen slightly off the ground. He circled, trying to find the source, and when he had it, she nodded, acknowledging his find.

He opened up, letting the rest of the pack know he'd found the scent, and the chase began a second time. After another half-hour, the fox scrambled into his den and Morgan blew "gone to ground." Jesse knew this particular fox since she'd had to help Morgan put out food and worm medicine for all the foxes who had dens around the farm.

The two groups started back, Jesse walking far enough behind everyone to make sure she wouldn't have to talk. Following the hunt had been exhilarating, but all the laughter and socializing on the way back irritated her. She slowed Smokey even more, until she could barely hear the rest of the people in front of her. Hoof beats sounded close by, and she looked up to see Mary riding back to her.

"Well, what'd you think?"

Jesse shrugged and watched the ground again.

"You're an excellent rider, you know. I thought we'd have a wreck when Norm Roberts came off right in front of Smokey. I'm assuming you learned not to follow so close behind the horse in front of you?"

"Yeah."

"So will I see you on Sunday?"

"Can't you just hunt without all these people around? Just take the hounds out on your own?"

Mary rode next to Jesse a while, thinking. "Part of the fun of foxhunting is the camaraderie, and part of the skill of the Huntsman and Field Masters is working and following the hounds so everyone feels as though they've participated in the actual hunt for the fox. It's all interwoven into thousands of years of tradition. It's just the way it is."

Jesse rubbed her temples, and Mary glanced at her. "Does your head hurt?"

"Just a little. I hate being around so many people, that's all."

Mary reached into her jacket and pulled out a flask. "Here, try some of this. It's a cold day remedy my mother used to bring out with her when she was the Master and Morgan hunted with her forty years ago. It might take the edge off being around so many people." She grinned as she handed the flask across the space between horses.

Jesse took a swig. Her throat immediately closed up as the liquid burned its way down into her stomach. Tears came to her eyes as she coughed, trying to open up her burned airways.

Mary laughed, reached for the flask and took a swig of her own, not choking quite as much as Jesse, but coming close. When she caught her breath, she handed it back to Jesse and wheezed, "Yup, Mom was a pretty tough old bird." She wiped the tears from her eyes and grinned as Jesse took a much smaller sip, the two of them enjoying a relaxing ride as they followed the hunt back home.

By the time they reached the barn, Jesse couldn't care less how many riders were milling around, unsaddling their horses and laughing with each other. Some of the non-riding club members had set up tables in the yard, and a huge vat of chili and plates with rolls and butter awaited the riders. Both Jesse and Mary practically fell off their horses as they dismounted, and Jesse slid down and leaned against Smokey's front legs. Mary sat next to her and leaned back on her elbows.

When the hounds had been put away, Morgan and Ryland walked over and looked down at the two of them. Morgan grinned at Mary. "Your mother's recipe?"

Mary held up the flask and turned it upside down, with barely a drop leaving the lip.

Jesse slurred, "God bless Mary's mother." She held up her fist.

Mary raised the flask to Jesse's knuckles. "God bless Mom."

Jesse looked seriously at Mary and said, "I think I'll get a tattoo blessing your mother."

Mary started giggling and lay all the way down on the ground. Jesse smiled sloppily up at Ryland, who took Smokey's reins from her. Morgan took Asiago's and they led the two horses into the barn. When Jesse lost her backrest she crawled over and lay her head on Mary's stomach. The two of them lay on the ground, enjoying their own brand of after-hunt festivities.

### **Chapter Thirty-Four**

Jesse started riding regularly with the hunt, and Morgan and Ryland began systematically outfitting her with proper hunt attire. They raided the closets of several of the wealthier club members, and what they couldn't steal, they purchased and told Jesse it would come out of her paycheck, which it never did.

It was during the hunts that Jesse's reckless disregard for her own safety became apparent. Although she listened to Mary as the leader of the second flight, she began to push the envelope whenever she saw the opening. If Mary rode in front of her, she'd veer off and take a jump the other members of the second flight avoided. She'd often "get lost," more out of boredom than anything else, galloping through the fields at an all-out sprint and jumping whatever fences she could find. The experience usually ended with a tongue lashing from Morgan and a several mile walk back to the horse trailers on foot.

It was after one of these acts of not so subtle disobedience that Mary finally decided it was time to approach Morgan about moving her into the first flight. Morgan had blown "gone to ground" on the hunting horn and Mary had just finished counting heads to make sure all her riders were accounted for. Jesse was missing, and she noticed Sandra was gone from the first flight as well. She glanced at Morgan and recognized the storm clouds

building as Morgan tried to locate Jesse. Morgan motioned for Mary to ride over to the stream where she was allowing the hounds to cool and water themselves. When she rode up, Morgan asked, "Where is she?"

Mary shook her head. "I'm not sure, but Sandra's missing too. I don't know whether they're together. I just thought it was curious they were both gone at the same time."

As Morgan watched her strike-hound cooling herself in the stream, Ryland rode up and sat quietly, knowing the tension in the air had to be about Jesse. Morgan raised her eyes to Ryland. "Maybe it was a mistake, making her hunt. I can't have someone constantly flaunting the rules, Ry. I have rules for a reason, to make sure everyone comes back safely. It's not right for Mary to always have to baby sit an out of control rider."

Mary knew Morgan usually wouldn't budge on rules, but she thought she'd ask anyway. "Why don't you move her into the first flight? I think she's basically just bored with my group."

"I never put first-year hunters in the first flight. It's too dangerous."

Ryland put her hand on Barney's neck to settle him. "It's her first year for fox hunting, but she's a better rider than most of the people in the first flight. Maybe this case might call for an exception. It's either that or make her stay home, but if you want my opinion, I think she'll benefit from the club in the long run."

"I definitely don't have time to baby sit her and I'm not going to foist her off on Ron." Ron Harding was her field master who ran the first flight while Morgan hunted the hounds. He had no patience for Jesse and would actually prefer it if she were left behind. He believed in following the rules meticulously, and he thought anyone who broke them should be shot.

Ryland tried again. "Make her stay right behind you then; she can keep up."

"In front of the riders wearing colors? That would go over big." People who had demonstrated a certain level of ability and a loyalty to the club were awarded the club's colors, hunter green for the Myrina Hunt Club. They wore the green on the collar of the hunting jacket, and those who had earned the distinction rode to the front of the first flight.

Laughter floated up from the copse of trees they'd ridden through earlier, and after a minute, Jesse and Sandra rode out into the open and up to the group. Ron rode up to them, a stiffness to his back that meant trouble for whomever he'd singled out. Morgan rode over and joined the three riders, listening as Ron asked where they'd been.

Sandra smiled. "Well, I became separated from the group, and luckily Jesse found me. We followed the sound of the horn." She reached over and squeezed Jesse's arm. "She was just what the doctor ordered. I'd still be lost and frustrated if she hadn't come along."

Morgan watched Jesse rub her eyelids, then sit back and cross her arms. The glint of amusement she saw when Jesse raised her eyes told her everything she needed to know. Jesse raised her eyebrows at Morgan's glare and cocked her head as though daring her to call her out.

Andy's voice carried over the meadow as he called the hounds to order, and a thought suddenly occurred to Morgan. She swiveled around in her saddle and studied Mary, who was waiting by the stream with Ryland. At one point, Mary had been one of her whippers-in, only moving to the second flight as a favor to Morgan who had needed her in that position when her other Field Master had been taken ill with cancer.

Ron rejoined the other members of the club, and Sandra moved over to talk to her husband, who was visiting with some riders about the merits of the various breeds of horses used in foxhunting. Morgan swiveled back around and smiled. The

amusement left Jesse's face, and she shifted nervously in her saddle, wondering why Morgan looked so pleased with herself. The hounds finished cooling themselves, and Morgan called them to her and started walking toward home. She signaled for Ryland and Mary to join her as she led the hounds back the way they had come. Jesse fell in behind the second flight and rode by herself, wondering what Morgan was up to.

When both riders joined her, Morgan turned to Mary. "How would you like to become a whip again?"

As far as Mary was concerned, the only position other than whipper-in she cared to hold was huntsman, and she knew, with luck, it would be another twenty years before Morgan vacated that slot. "I would pay you to put me back in that position. Heck, I might even stop drinking Mom's recipe if I didn't have to stay with the second flight."

"Even if you had a whip trainee along for the ride?"

Mary smiled and caught Morgan's eye. "You mean like a one-on-one where certain trainees would be under my thumb and couldn't get into any trouble? Absolutely. But I take back what I said about Mom's recipe. I think I might need it after all."

Ryland moved Barney close to Aristotle and reached over to rub Morgan's back. "My love, I think you are the best Master any club could ever have."

Morgan felt silly blushing at Ryland's praise, but her cheeks turned a healthy shade of red as she basked in the compliment. Mary inconspicuously rode back to join Jesse, and the two of them sipped the recipe, more judiciously this time, as they followed the club to the trailers.

Christmas came and went, and Jesse was inordinately relieved once the holidays were over. She'd lost her parents at a fairly young age, and she'd never enjoyed being odd person out at holiday functions. Morgan began ground-training her with the

hounds, teaching her the basics of becoming a whip. She'd started bringing Tums with her in the mornings because Jesse caused her no end of grief. It was one of Jesse's little pleasures in life.

After one particularly freezing cold day of hunting, Morgan and Ryland finished their day's work and headed off to bed earlier than usual. They'd been invited to hunt with a neighboring club the next morning, and since they had to get up early to get there, they were sound asleep by nine.

A cold breeze blowing through the house tickled Morgan's subconscious, and when the wind blew through her hair, she came fully awake. It was the middle of January, and there was no way they would have left a window open. She opened her eyes to a gun barrel resting next to her forehead, the curtains from their open bedroom window blowing gently in the breeze.

"So, you're finally awake. I wondered how long I'd be able to watch two women sleeping so soundly side by side."

Ryland sat up and unconsciously moved behind Morgan, pulling her nightgown up tight around her throat.

The man focused on her, then down at the fabric clenched in her fist. "Don't worry, my little lesbian, I haven't come for you. I've lost one of my sheep, and I believe you have her."

Morgan's blood suddenly ran cold. She saw the scar descending from the man's hairline to his eyebrow, and moved her eyes back down to meet his. She heard another man laugh, and she realized someone else was standing next to Ryland's side of the bed.

The first man, whom the women realized had to be Richard, reached over and slowly lifted Morgan's robe from the chair next to the bed. The other man did the same with Ryland's. "Here, put your robes on and let's go into the living room where we can all be more comfortable."

Both women pulled on their robes and walked in front of the men into the living room. Richard pointed toward the couch with his pistol and they walked over and sat. He took a seat in the wing chair and the second man stood by the window, watching the path to the barn. Richard crossed one leg over the other and said calmly, "It shouldn't be long. Then we'll be on our way and the two of you can go quietly back to sleep."

They sat in silence, Morgan not sure what she could do, Ryland recognizing insanity when she saw it. A shot rang out from the direction of the barn. The man at the window turned quickly to Richard, who just shook his head. "Tsk, ts. I told Miguel not to get too close to her, didn't I, Guillermo? Relax, my friend. She'll be here soon enough, with or without Miguel's help." Guillermo turned back to the window and continued watching the path. Richard casually stood up, walked over to Ryland and sat next to her, draping his arm around her neck. He pointed the muzzle of his gun at her mouth and said happily, "Open up, my little lesbian."

Ryland opened her mouth and he shoved the barrel in. He looked at Morgan. "No heroics, or I'll blow her pretty brains all over your very nice couch." They sat like that for almost five minutes until Richard finally sang out, "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Very slowly, with a gun aimed at Guillermo, Jesse stepped out from the kitchen into the open living room. "Don't turn around, Guillermo, or you'll be as dead as Miguel."

Guillermo froze, and Jesse walked over to him and took his gun. She tucked it into her belt, felt under his arms, around his waist band, and at the bottom of both pant legs. "Get on the ground, Guillermo."

Guillermo went to his knees, then down on his stomach. Only then did she turn her attention to Richard and the two women on the couch. "So Richard, you didn't die? Even the devil wouldn't take you, huh?"

Richard shrugged. "I'm here."

"And you want me back..."

"Of course. After you and those cretins left me to die, Guillermo and Miguel saved my life. It's taken me over a year to find you, but God always rewards a persistent man." He casually pointed to Morgan with the hand he had draped around Ryland's neck. "We have your honest, law-abiding employer to thank for that. She was the first one to actually report your earnings to the government. Your social security number finally showed up in the computers." He laughed. "A little money, a greedy but lovely, federally employed data entry clerk, and voila! I have my little sheep again."

Jesse finally looked at Ryland, then at Morgan. "Well, here's how we're gonna do this. Guillermo and I are leaving. When we're gone, I'll give you thirty minutes to leave as well, then I'll call the sheriff. When I get a call from him that you left them in one piece, I'll give the guns to Guillermo, and I'm yours."

"No!" Morgan pushed up from the sofa and Richard pushed the gun further down Ryland's throat. Ryland gagged, felt for Morgan's robe and grabbed it, pulling her back down to the couch. She'd dealt with insanity before. Morgan hadn't. She was terrified. Morgan wasn't terrified enough.

Jesse smiled a little at Morgan. She held her gaze for a long time, blinked back some tears, and nodded. "This time, you get to do what I say. When the sheriff gets here, have him call your phone in the truck. When I know you're both safe, Richard can have me." Jesse cocked her head sideways, worried more for her friends than for herself. "What more can he do to me, Morgan?" Jesse shifted her gaze to Richard. "Absolutely nothing."

Richard nodded. "Take him and go. I don't like to be kept waiting."

Jesse stepped back and told Guillermo to get to his feet. She motioned with her chin for him to go out the front door. He stepped to the door and she said, "Wait."

She took Morgan's keys off the front table. "Gotta borrow your truck, Morg. I'll be sure you get it back, okay?" When she held Morgan's eyes, memories of the past six months came flooding back, and she wished she could say what needed to be said. She looked at Ryland and knew it would be a fatal mistake to let Richard know how much these two women meant to her. There was one thing she could do though. She turned to Richard. "Take the gun out of her mouth, Richard. I don't want to remember her that way."

"Your word, my little sheep going bravely off to slaughter."

"My word." Jesse clenched her jaw to keep her eyes from filling with tears, but one escaped just the same. She reached up and angrily wiped it away.

Richard chuckled and removed the gun.

Jesse didn't say anything. She just held Ryland's gaze, then Morgan's, trying to communicate more than *thank you*, more than *I love you both*. She turned and motioned again for Guillermo to lead her out into the yard.

Once outside, she opened the bed of the truck, then had him get in and lie on his stomach. She tied his hands and feet behind his back with bailing wire and connected them, pulling his hands back and down to his feet and securing them together. She took another wire, wrapped it around his throat and wrapped the end of that one around his ankles. Pulling the end of one of the wires to the tailgate, she shut it in the gate to secure him in the bed. The farm had become her home, Ryland and Morgan her family. She took one last, sad look around, got in the truck and drove away.

Richard watched from the living room window. He aimed his gun at the back of Jesse's head and mimed pulling the trigger. "Pow. You're dead, Little Sheep." He turned back to the women

and grinned. "Ah, but that's too easy for her, no?" He stepped over to the little bar, picked up a bottle of sherry and three glasses, then walked back to the couch and set them on the coffee table. "A very good vintage—from Spain, I believe?" He poured them each a glass and motioned for them to take one. Ryland did as he said, but Morgan refused.

Ryland reached down, picked up the third glass and handed it to her lover. "I won't live without you, Morgan. Don't push him, please."

Richard chuckled and sipped the sherry. "Very good advice, my little lesbian. It takes very little to make me angry."

Morgan blinked back tears and took the glass.

Richard held up the glass in a toast. "To the pleasures of the flesh."

The women slowly reached up and tapped his glass with theirs. They both pretended to drink, but neither could.

Richard finished his drink and stood. "Time for me to go. Your phones are dead. All you need to do is wait for the sheriff to arrive, and please follow your instructions. I'd hate for Jesse to hear that you're both very dead back on the farm."

He left them sitting on the couch, numb and frightened but still very much alive.

Several sheriff's cars surrounded the house a short time later. "You in the house—come out slowly where we can see your hands."

Morgan took Ryland's hand and the two of them stepped out onto the front porch. The sheriff motioned toward some deputies who converged on the house to search it. When they'd finished, one stepped out the front door. "All clear here, Sheriff."

The sheriff told several of them to go search the barn. Morgan said, "You'll probably find a dead man down there."

The sheriff nodded. "That's what Jesse told me. She explained everything. She wouldn't tell me where she was, but I don't think

she realizes you have GPS on your truck, Morgan. We're closing in on it as we speak." He opened his cell phone, dialed a number and listened a minute. When Jesse answered, he said, "I've got them. They're not hurt."

She immediately disconnected.

Morgan realized whom he'd called and grabbed the phone from him. "Jesse?" She looked at the display. *Call ended*. She pushed send, willing Jesse to pick up the phone. The answering machine picked up, and she hit end, and then send again.

The sheriff gently took the phone from her. "She probably knows we can trace the truck phone. What she doesn't know about is your GPS. That's what we're counting on."

Morgan grabbed onto the little hope he was offering. "You've got to stop her! We can leave, and we'll be safe, but you have to find her and stop her!"

"We're trying, Morgan, but I don't think she wanted to be found. She said she had some unfinished business to attend to if she could, and if she couldn't, well...." He looked down at his boots, then back up at the two women. "She said to tell you goodbye, that she loved you, and that she'd be watching over both of you until she saw you again."

Tears fell unchecked down Ryland's face as she turned and walked back into the house. Morgan watched her go, then asked the sheriff. "When will you know, Mike? How long before you find the truck?"

"Sheriff?" A deputy walked back up the path to the house. "One dead in the barn. Shot in the head. We're gonna need Doc Hayward and the body wagon."

The sheriff turned back to Morgan. "As soon as I know, you'll know, Morgan. I promise." He stepped to his patrol car and made the necessary calls for the Office of the Medical Examiner, who was actually just a local doctor, then made arrangements for an

ambulance service to stand by to pick up the body. He spoke to the deputy. "Show me the body while we're waiting."

Morgan watched the two of them walk down the path to the barn. She followed them half-way, then turned aside and sat on the bench where she'd proposed to Ryland ten years earlier. When the sheriff returned, he sat next to her.

"Any news yet?"

Michael shook his head, then got on his radio. "Sheriff Carlson to dispatch."

The radio crackled. "Dispatch."

"Any news on Morgan's truck?"

"10-4. Highway Patrol located it about thirty miles north of here. It was empty. They said there was a lot of blood next to one of the tires—a lot of blood and some drag marks."

Morgan felt light headed. She covered her face with her hands, slowly leaned over into her friend's arms and, for the first time in many, many years, completely broke down.

## **Chapter Thirty-Five**

Jesse waited inside the truck for the sheriff's call. When the phone rang, she grabbed it, terrified she'd hear that Richard had murdered the only people she cared about in the world.

"I've got them. They're not hurt."

She immediately hung up, her relief so palpable she felt light headed. There was no way she would endanger their lives again by crossing Richard. The truck phone rang again, and she ignored it as she walked to the back of the truck and unwound the bailing wire she'd used to tie Guillermo. She handed him the guns and his cell phone. "Here. Call Richard."

He sneered, then put the phone on speaker. Richard picked up on the first ring. "Yes?"

"I've got her."

"Good. Now, shoot her in the leg, but make sure you miss the artery. I want to know she can't run, but I want her very much alive."

Guillermo pointed at the outside of Jesse's thigh and pulled the trigger. Jesse felt a blinding pain shoot up her spine and she crumpled to the ground.

She heard Richard laugh over the speaker. "Now, tell me where you are."

"I don't know where we are. She had me tied in back."

Jesse took off her sweatshirt, pulled her t-shirt off, then pulled the sweatshirt back on. She spoke as she tore the t-shirt into strips and wrapped them around her bleeding thigh. She knew if she didn't get the bleeding under control, she'd be dead before Richard got there. "Tell him to go east on State Route forty-nine, then north on one-fifty for twenty miles. There's an old billboard on the right hand side of the road. It says something about some kind of cigarette. He needs to turn right on the dirt road immediately beyond the sign. If he follows that road he'll find us."

Guillermo relayed the message and then they waited until Richard arrived. When he drove up, the two men handcuffed her, dragged her to Richard's car, threw her in the trunk, and drove away. They drove for several days. Once or twice a day, Guillermo would open the trunk, pour some water down Jesse's throat, and shut it again. At one stop, they opened the trunk and cleaned and re-banded her leg.

"I can't have my little sheep dying too soon now, can I?"

Richard smiled and gently ran his hand through her hair. "We have many, many fun times ahead of us, Little Sheep. We're almost to our room." He stepped back, and Guillermo shut the trunk again.

The next time it opened, they dragged her out and threw her down the stairs into the dirt room. Richard looked down from above. "I have to leave for a while, Little Sheep, business that can't

wait. You know how that can be. Guillermo will watch over you while I'm gone, and when I return, we will begin our little talks."

Once Richard left, Guillermo began bringing her little bits of food and made her drink water to keep her alive. After the fourth day, he came down to talk, and she guessed there was no one else around to keep him entertained. He told her about his hometown in California, which surprised her since she'd assumed he was from Mexico. "You know, Richard was born in Mexico City, but his parents came to America illegally when he was seven. He worked hard in school and went to a good college. He's very wealthy, you know."

Jesse listened quietly, all the while trying to decide the best way to kill Guillermo. She began to talk, making up stories about her family even though she had none. Her plan was to lull him into a sense of security, a camaraderie where he would drop his defenses one too many times. Then she could do what she needed to do.

### **Chapter Thirty-Six**

Morgan and Ryland were numb for the first two weeks after Jesse's disappearance, waiting and hoping she'd miraculously appear on their doorstep. Now, at Mary's urging, they were trying to return to some semblance of normal. One of the neighbors found a man to work in the barn since the horses still needed to be fed and taken care of. Mary packed up what little Jesse had left in the apartment so the new man could move in. Morgan knew something had died inside her, and as she'd watched Ryland the couple weeks, she'd seen her grow older and sadder than she'd ever thought possible. They didn't ride out in the mornings anymore. Once the new worker came, Morgan rarely went into the barn. Rico, Jeffrey, Mary and the hunt staff took care of the hounds.

The temperature had dropped several degrees overnight, and the morning air felt cold and sent a chill through Morgan as she watched her breath swirl in white clouds while she waited at the kennels for Ryland. They'd decided to take Digidy, one of their oldest and dearest foxhounds, and walk out to the cliff above the creek where Morgan had found Jesse so many months before. Ryland's steps were heavy as she walked around the corner of the barn carrying a backpack. She saw Morgan and smiled, holding out the pack for her to take. Morgan opened it and looked inside.

Ryland said, "I thought I'd make some cinnamon rolls and bring a thermos of coffee. I'd like to stay out there a while. It's so beautiful, even if it is cold."

Morgan reached into her pocket and brought out a box of matches. "And I hate to be cold, so I thought we'd build a fire to stay warm." She shouldered the pack and they made their way through the near pasture and on into the forest, Digidy following at their heels.

When they came to the clearing, they gathered what dry wood they could find, dug a fire pit at the top of the cliff, and built a small fire. Morgan piled rocks into a backstop, and they sat with their backs to the rocks, the fire in front of them, staring out over their valley.

Morgan pulled up her knees and rested her arms and head on them. Ryland leaned into her, slipping her arm around Morgan's while listening to the soft sounds of nature surrounding them. Morgan spoke without lifting her head. "You believe in God, don't you, Ry?"

Ryland leaned over and rested her head on Morgan's back. "I do."

She raised her head, staring out at the valley below them. "Is He like Richard?"

Ryland didn't answer, because lately, she'd been having the same thoughts. Jesse didn't deserve to be taken the first time, and

now, after she'd come through so much, God had allowed Richard to finish what he'd started.

Morgan wiped away some tears. "I think the Greeks had it right. The gods sit up on their thrones and laugh at our pitiful dramas, making bets on who will survive and who's going to drown." She put her head down again. "I'm drowning, Ry, and I can't seem to pull myself up."

Ryland rubbed Morgan's back. "I'll pull you up, my love. We'll either make it together, or we'll drown together. I know it's an old cliché, but healing does take time. As much as I'm hurting, I can't imagine Jesse would want us to give up, can you?"

Morgan picked up some stones and threw them, one by one, over the edge. "No...she'd say, 'Fuck you guys! You think you got it bad? Fuck you!'" Morgan chuckled sadly. "Fuck you guys."

### **Chapter Thirty-Seven**

Jesse shivered in the cold, underground room. "Guillermo, when's Richard coming back? Did he tell you?" Guillermo had brought her a thin blanket, but it wasn't nearly enough.

Guillermo shrugged. "Soon, I think. It's been two weeks, I don't think he'll stay away much longer."

"Are there any cards up there?" She motioned up the stairs with her chin. "You think we could play some cards?"

Guillermo studied her a minute, then laughed. "I remember what you did to Miguel. He underestimated you. I won't." He walked up the stairs and bolted the door behind him, leaving Jesse in complete darkness.

The next day, when the door opened, Jesse squinted up into the light. Guillermo walked down the steps, carrying a candle and holding a deck of cards. He set the cards and the candle in the middle of the room. "Stand up."

Jesse inched her way up the wall as best she could. Her leg felt thick and swollen and it throbbed with every new movement. She'd been sitting down in the darkness for too long.

"Turn around, lean your head on the wall, and move your legs away from the wall."

Jesse tried, but couldn't get her legs very far back without her bad leg collapsing. Once she got into the best position possible, Guillermo grabbed her belt and pulled her back some more.

She groaned from the pain.

"Don't move, or I'll pound you into the ground." Guillermo unlocked one of the handcuffs. "Now, slowly, bring your hands around front and put that handcuff back on."

Jesse felt the barrel of the gun on the back of her head and did as she was told. Guillermo backed away. "Now stand up, turn around, and come out into the room."

Jesse inched to a standing position as shooting pains ripped through her leg. She stumbled into the room and sat as best she could, holding onto the shin of her good leg to stay upright.

Guillermo sat opposite her, put his gun in his lap and shuffled the cards. "We play for sex or food. I win, we have sex." He shrugged. "I've never liked sex with a woman who fights. That's Richard's thing, not mine. You win, you get food. Sound fair?"

Jesse nodded.

"We play Blackjack. First to win three out of five games wins." He dealt the cards and they played, each one playing conservatively for the first few games until Jesse had won two and he'd won two. She watched carefully as he dealt the last hand. He had a ten showing, and she had an eight. She lifted her hole card, a king. "Hit me."

Guillermo threw her a card. A three. He looked at his hole card again, then studied Jesse, who remained impassive, staring back at him.

He grinned. "I'll hold."

Jesse blinked. Her hand shook as she lifted her hole card, then glanced at Guillermo again. She looked around the room, then back at Guillermo, who was leering at her.

"You've got to play. Either hold or take a card."

"Hit me."

An ace landed on her cards.

Jesse took a shaky breath and shook her head. "Hit me."

Guillermo threw a queen and started laughing. Jesse grabbed her cards and threw them across the room so he couldn't see what she'd done. "Fuck you, Guillermo! One more round! Five games aren't enough for a bet!"

Guillermo set his gun over by the wall. "A bet's a bet. You gotta pay up."

Jesse refused to meet his eyes. She lay back into the dirt and stared at the wall. He moved over her and kissed her stomach as he undid her pants. She grabbed the top of her jeans and held them closed as best she could.

Guillermo growled, "Move your hands. A bet's a bet." He reached down and undid his own pants, in a hurry now that he was getting what he wanted.

She let go and raised her hands to cover her eyes. He moved his lips over hers. She gathered her strength, jerked her hands forward and wrapped them around his neck, squeezing the handcuff chain tight around his throat.

He fought back desperately, punching her in the leg where he'd shot her weeks before. Jesse held on, but as he punched, the wound opened and black spots appeared in front of her eyes. She thought of Morgan and Ryland, drew strength from their memory, and hung on until Guillermo stopped struggling. She held on longer, much longer, until she saw the death stare and knew he was gone. When she let go, blood rushed back into her head, and the all-too familiar blackness engulfed her.

Light filtered into her brain. She opened her eyes and saw Richard, who was sitting on top of Guillermo and aiming a gun at her head. "So, Little Sheep, you did it again. I find I'm running out of loyal employees." His lips pulled back into a demented grin and he fired a round next to her head.

Jesse flinched and pain ripped down her leg. Blood completely soaked her jeans where Guillermo had re-opened the wound.

"Up, Little Sheep. Up and to the stairs." He stood and picked up a whip lying by his side. He watched her reaction, and her lack of fear enraged him. He kicked her in her leg. "I said get up!"

She crawled to her knees, then to her feet. Stumbling to the stairs, she dropped to the ground, dizzy from loss of blood.

Richard kicked her again. "Up the stairs!"

Jesse rolled onto her back, trying to catch her breath. "You've lost your cool, Richard. What's the matter? Have I killed too many of your people? Miguel, Guillermo...." She smiled at him. "Your asshole little brother."

He screamed and flew at her, his eyes bulging in a demented rage. She gathered every last bit of strength she had and brought both fists up in one last, massive, fuck-you gesture to her demons.

## **Chapter Thirty-Eight**

Morgan led Comstock out of the barn, then walked over and untied Barney. She loaded them into the trailer and waited for Ryland in the truck. They'd been invited to ride with a neighboring hunt, and Ryland had insisted they go. Morgan refused to ride with her own club. Mary, who had hidden her grief as best she could, had pleaded with them to ride, but neither woman wanted to go without Jesse along. Mary had reluctantly agreed to become the interim huntsman, but she insisted that it was only until Morgan came back to resume the position.

Morgan wasn't even wearing her hunt attire on this ride. She planned to stay with the hilltoppers, people who generally stay to the rear of the hunt or up on the hills where they can watch the others fly after the fox without having to take the jumps or gallop at a breakneck speed. Ryland slid up into the passenger seat wearing jeans, boots, a sweater and a warm winter coat. Neither of them spoke as Morgan started the truck and drove to the fixture.

They rode slowly behind the group, not really paying attention to or caring whether the hounds ran well. When the hunt returned to the trailers, the two of them dismounted, and Morgan rested her head on Comstock's neck. "I've decided to sell them, Ry. It's not fair to the animals, and I just don't enjoy it anymore."

Ryland unsaddled Barney and brushed him down. She loaded him into the trailer and shut the door. "I think you need to wait a while longer, but if that's what you've decided to do, go ahead. I don't really enjoy them anymore either." She walked to the truck and climbed inside to wait for Morgan to finish with Comstock.

They drove back to the farm in silence. As they pulled up, the new employee, Drew, was standing by the barn, arms crossed, a scowl on his face. When Morgan got out of the truck, he stalked up to her. "What the hell? If you didn't like my work, all you had to do was tell me! They told me you were a bitch to work for, but you didn't have to go in my apartment and throw all my things out in the dirt! And you owe me money! I'm not leaving until I get my money!"

Some of Morgan's old anger surfaced, and she took a step forward, her hands on her hips. "What?"

Ryland stepped up beside her, listening.

He glared at Morgan. "You heard me! You need to pay me what you owe me!"

From back by the trailer, someone softly said, "Lady in town said you were hiring."

Neither Morgan nor Ryland moved.

"Well, are you hiring or not?"

Both women slowly turned and saw Jesse, ten pounds lighter, leaning up against the horse trailer, tears streaming down her face. Morgan started walking toward her, then ran and grabbed her in an enormous embrace. She picked her up off the ground and held her while Ryland came up and threw her arms around both of them, crying and laughing at the same time. Morgan pulled Jesse's head in close and surprised herself by completely letting go and crying unashamedly onto Jesse's shoulder.

Drew stood and watched them a minute, then grabbed his bag and headed for his truck. "Craziest bunch of nutcases I've ever worked for."

Ryland stepped back and Morgan finally put Jesse down, still holding on tight, unwilling to let go. Ryland took Jesse's sweat-soaked head in her hands. "You're sick. We need to get you a doctor."

Jesse managed a weak smile. "Yeah, I'm not feelin' too good." She leaned all her weight into Morgan's arms and knew she could finally let go.

### **Chapter Thirty-Nine**

When Jesse awoke, she was in the guest bedroom. A woman was checking a thermometer and smiling down at her. "Well, good morning. I'm Ann, your nurse. You're one pretty sick young lady, but you've got the best doctors in the county looking in on you and you're going to be just fine." She set the thermometer on the nightstand and stepped out of the room.

Jesse pushed herself up into a half-sitting, half-reclining position, pulling the quilt to her face and breathing in its familiar scent. A few minutes later Morgan and Ryland walked in. They each took a side and climbed onto the bed next to her. Morgan put her arm around Jesse's shoulders. Jesse leaned into her, gently took

Ryland's hand and brought it to her face. She closed her eyes, laid Ryland's palm across her cheek and held it there. "A minute didn't go by that I didn't think about you guys. I knew I had to come back, 'cause you two can't—" She stopped talking to keep from crying again.

Ryland rested her head on Jesse's back and finished for her. "Because we aren't whole without you in our lives. How did you do that to us, Jesse Shaunessy?"

The three of them were quiet for a while. As Jesse looked around the room, she realized a wide assortment of flowers filled the shelves and empty surfaces. Her eyes were getting heavy, and she asked in a sleepy voice, "Why are there so many flowers?"

Ryland first pointed to some carnations at the left side of the room, then slowly moved from one arrangement to another. "Sandra, Sheriff Carlson and his wife, Clarisse, Rico, Jeffrey, Dr. Elimena, Frieda." She pointed to a dozen red roses. "Mary." She bounced her finger between three more arrangements of roses. "Mary, Mary, and Mary."

Jesse smiled, burrowed her head deeper into Morgan's shoulder and pulled Ryland close so that her head rested on Jesse's back again, her arm around her waist. Morgan had her arm around both of them, and they stayed like that until the nurse returned. Jesse had fallen asleep, and Ryland and Morgan were content to wait until she awoke again. The nurse smiled and walked out, gently pulling the door shut behind her.

A few days later, Jesse awoke to find Mary sitting in the armchair reading a book. She lay quietly and watched her read for a few minutes, her eyes heavy and her mind a little fuzzy. Mary glanced up and smiled when she realized Jesse was awake. "They won't let me stay very long, but I wanted to give you a message." She stood and leaned over the bed, covering Jesse's mouth with her own. Jesse put her hands on either side of Mary's head and pulled her in close, enjoying Mary's tongue as it caressed her lips. Mary

slowly lowered her body onto Jesse's, careful not to touch her injured leg. Jesse's entire body responded as she ran her hands down Mary's back while Mary gently kissed her cheeks and her eyes before once again sliding her tongue between Jesse's lips. When she heard Jesse moan with pleasure, Mary slowly pulled back and whispered, "Welcome home."

## **Chapter Forty**

A week later, Jesse was more than ready to get out of bed. The doctor had ordered her to stay down another week, and she was getting crabby. Ryland sat next to her on the bed, writing in her laptop. Jesse lay aside the book she'd been reading. "I'm done with being sick. I'm ready to go back to my apartment."

"No." Ryland didn't stop typing.

"I'm fine."

Ryland hit the save button, then closed the lid. "Wait here." She went out, grabbed the phone, came back in and pulled a chair up next to the bed. Resting her feet on a stool, she pushed a button and waited. After a pause, she said. "Morgan, can you come up to the house, please?" She listened a minute, then pushed end. A cup of orange juice sat on a table next to the bed, and she picked it up and handed it to Jesse. "Here, you're supposed to drink until you float away, and this has been here for an hour. Now drink."

Jesse glared at her but did as she was told. She'd never liked arguing with Ryland. It didn't have the same appeal as irritating Morgan.

Ryland watched her and smiled.

Jesse finished her drink and said, "What?"

"Nothing. It's just good to have you back, that's all."

Jesse pushed down farther in the bed and lay her head on the pillow. She was tired, so she closed her eyes to wait for Morgan.

When she opened them again, Morgan was reclining next to her on the bed, studying a stud book she kept on her hounds.

"It's about time, Sleeping Beauty." Morgan closed the book and called out, "Ryland, she's awake."

After a few minutes, Ryland came in, pulled the chair back up to the bed and sat. "So are you ready?"

Jesse sat up a little more in bed. "Ready for what?"

Ryland chuckled. "You don't think that after—what, six months—of working through issues, you get to disappear with Richard for three weeks and we're just going to pretend nothing happened, do you?"

"Ryland—" Jesse sounded exasperated as she sank back into the pillow.

"Yes?"

Morgan chuckled.

Jesse looked at her. "What?"

Morgan reached down and messed Jesse's hair. "It's just good to have you back, that's all."

Ryland crossed her legs. "First, an easy question. Morgan and I have been trying to figure out how you got back to us when you were so sick."

"I don't know... I took Richard's car and drove until I figured out where I was, then headed this way. I ran out of his money about a hundred miles from here, so when I ran out of gas I left the car and hitched a ride with a trucker."

Ryland nodded. She wanted to ease into the questions about Richard. "I guess we should start with what's going on right now. We didn't want to upset you with anything while you were so sick. Morgan has hired off-duty deputies to protect the house twenty-four hours a day. Once you came back, neither of us could sleep very well at night."

Jesse said quietly, "He's dead, Ryland...they're all dead." She leaned over until she felt her shoulder brush up against Morgan. "I

killed Guillermo and...and Richard came after me down in the room. He threw himself at me and I drove his fucking nose up into his brain." She paused and looked away, then turned back to Ryland. "He's dead. I made sure he was dead this time."

Ryland and Morgan shared a relief so intense that they left Jesse to herself and went out into the living room together. Morgan sank down into the couch and Ryland tucked herself up under her friend's arm and began to cry. She hadn't realized how terrified she'd been that Richard would be back, and with a vengeance this time. She let it all come flooding out, and Morgan gathered her into her arms and held her very close.

Morgan rubbed her cheek on Ryland's hair. "I'm sorry I didn't protect you. I should have protected you. Shhh...I'm so sorry...I am so sorry."

Ryland cried until she was exhausted. The afternoon sun had fallen below the tree line, and the room began to fill with shadows and memories. "Morgan?"

"Hmm?"

"If you had protected me, and he had killed you—" She put her hand to her eyes. "I thank God you didn't protect me."

Morgan rolled Ryland's words around in her head a while, then smiled. "I'm not quite sure what to say to that. You're welcome that I didn't protect you?"

Ryland chuckled and they were quiet a while longer until Ryland sighed. "I guess you can tell the deputies they can go home. We don't need them anymore, and our life can maybe start to get back to normal. What do you think?"

Morgan kissed the top of her head. "I think that's a wonderful idea."

Jesse, who'd been standing in the hallway listening, limped in and sat down on the other side of Morgan. She leaned up against her, reached over and took Ryland's hand in hers. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you guys."

The serious tone in Jesse's voice concerned Ryland, who put her hand on Jesse's cheek. "What's that, Hon?"

"Do you think we could ask Mary if she'd like to come nurse me back to health? Maybe bring me some dessert?"

Morgan threw her head back and laughed while Ryland pulled Jesse's smiling face close and playfully tapped her on the head with her knuckles. Life had started down its own path to normal, and Ryland knew all they could do was hang on for the ride.

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