



Loose Id

Spurs & Mistletoe

The Harder
They Fall

Beth Williamson

Praise for the writing of Beth Williamson

Spurs & Mistletoe: The Harder They Fall

Whew! *The Harder They Fall* is one hot read! The characters' interactions feel so authentic, I easily fell into the world Beth Williamson created, and I didn't want to leave. I highly recommend this story to warm a cold winter night!

-- Silvia Violet, author of *Cup of Revelation* (Loose Id)

When feisty TJ Maguire falls, she falls hard... right on top of rough and rugged rodeo hunk, Hank Beltane. Following this super sexy duo made for a very pleasurable, although sometimes bumpy, ride.

-- Maggie Casper, author of *Spurs & Mistletoe: Santa in Spurs* (Loose Id)

The Harder They Fall is a sizzling seasonally themed story. Whether you've been naughty or nice, you'll be wishing for a cowboy like Hank under your Christmas Tree. With well developed characters and an emotionally charged storyline, this is one story you won't want to miss.

-- Lena Matthews, author of *Spurs & Mistletoe: For Love's Sake Only* (Loose Id)

Beth Williamson's *The Harder They Fall* is an adorable story of two characters that seem like polar opposites, but who click everywhere it counts. They made me laugh out loud with their antics, while the sex scenes had me squirming in my seat.

-- Liz Andrews, author of *Redemption: Lily's Surrender* with Lena Matthews (Loose Id)

From the time they meet on page 1 until Tessa Jean gets her best Christmas present ever, you'll cheer for this Buckle Bunny and her Buckaroo. I was hooked from the beginning!

-- Lyn Cash, author of *Kinky Kruising: Mistress Mine* (Loose Id)

SPURS & MISTLETOE:
THE HARDER THEY FALL

Beth Williamson

LooseId
www.loose-id.com

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Spurs & Mistletoe: The Harder They Fall

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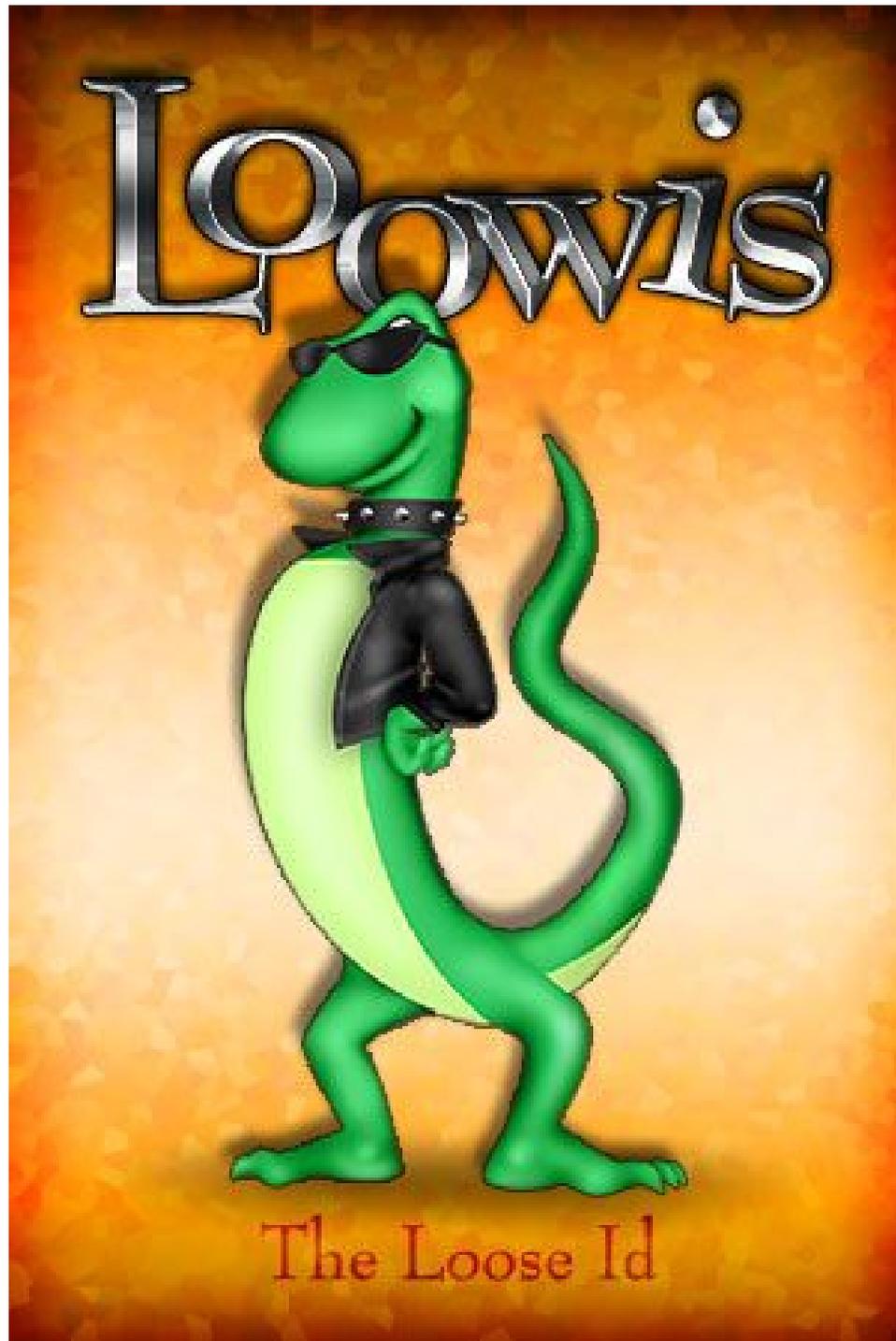
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Chapter One

TJ Maguire slammed the door of her fire engine red Silverado and cursed under her breath as the heat slapped her like a sauna. It was hot in southern California in November. No, it was more than hot; it was Hell on a hot day in July on the surface of the sun. She was sweating buckets and feeling like all she wanted to do was find a pool, a cold beer, and a float. However, that wasn't about to happen. She had two weeks' worth of haul ass work to do to pull off the Mission Viejo Rodeo Days event in Santa Estrella.

She slid her keys into her jeans pocket and clipped her cell phone to her belt, then headed for the trailer.

It was the last rodeo of the season for Bar T Rodeos, owned by her father, Big Tom Maguire, and run by TJ since she was eighteen -- more than twelve years now.

When she was little, she thought she'd be married by now, with a few kids, living on the ranch up in Sacramento. Well, that little fantasy never did pan out. Especially the husband part. Most men that TJ dealt with were either put off by her bright red hair, her size (she hadn't seen a size twelve since puberty hit), or the fact that she ran a huge operation like Bar T Rodeos, organizing, planning, and executing rodeo events.

She was intimidating, smart, and outspoken. There wasn't much TJ wouldn't say to anybody, especially a cowboy. She'd spent most of her life around rodeos and cowboys, and she knew how they operated.

TJ headed for the Bar T trailer, intent on getting into the air conditioning and finding a Diet Coke. She glanced at her watch expecting to see two o'clock or thereabouts. It was two-forty-five.

"Shit!"

She was supposed to call Charlotte at the High Impact PR firm at two-thirty to discuss the flyers for the rodeo. TJ hated more than anything to be late! She started running for the trailer. She couldn't even make the phone call without her notes, which were, of course, on her desk in the trailer.

TJ came around the corner of the trailer and ran straight into a wall that somehow had grown up in the middle of the grass. Except, it wasn't a wall. She'd slammed into a hard, warm body. A body that was toppling like a tree in the forest, and unfortunately, she was going down with it. She had the crazy notion to yell, "Timber!"

She landed on top of him -- it was *definitely* a him -- with all of her not inconsiderable body weight. Whoever it was that she had walloped fell on his ass in the grass with a loud "oomph" that gusted past her ear.

She looked down, and her tongue forgot how to work. Ye Gods, but he was a specimen of a man! He had to be six and a half feet of solid muscle. An incredibly handsome face framed with wavy golden hair that sparkled in the California sunshine, a matching mustache that rode his lip, shoulders as wide as the Grand Canyon. And beautiful blue eyes.

She was lying flush against him, from her DD cups down to her size-nine feet. Laid out flat on a man who felt like a pine tree with a very large branch growing in the middle.

Holy Mary, this was a man and a half!

Hank Beltane had the wind knocked out of him, something that didn't happen very often, even when a bull threw him. He was pretty agile, landing on his feet most of the time. However, this was a knock-down, flat-out slam onto the hard-packed ground that had completely stolen his breath.

The culprit was definitely a woman, because she was soft, with large breasts that flattened against his chest quite nicely. All he could see was bright red hair, and he could smell the scent of Tic Tacs.

She sat up and straddled him. Oh, damn, now his dick decided it was time to react to having a woman sit on his lap as if she were riding him. It started to pulse in a rhythm to match his heart. As he sucked the air back into his lungs, he looked at her tits -- *very nice* -- then at her face.

He saw shoulder-length flaming-red hair tucked behind two cute little ears, and a pair of deep green eyes like forest moss, staring at him with a mixture of embarrassment, curiosity, and downright sassiness. She had beautiful skin, cream-colored, with smatterings of freckles on her nose and forehead. Full, pink lips -- although the bottom lip was slightly larger than the top, just the way he liked it so he could suck it into his mouth. She was dressed in a pair of jeans and cowboy boots, with a concert t-shirt from Rascal Flatts.

Who was this woman? More than likely, a buckle bunny.

"Oh, hell, I am so sorry, mister!"

She tried to regain her footing and stand. Her voice was like fine whiskey, deep and satisfying.

"No problem, little miss." He enjoyed her wiggling her sweet self all over his crotch. It was like a free lap dance.

She finally got her feet planted and stood, looking down at him. She wasn't a small woman, but round in all the right places, enough to hold on to when going for a ride. He sure as hell would give her more than eight seconds' worth.

Stepping back, she offered him her arm. His eyebrows rose in surprise. He was too big for most men to hoist up, much less any woman.

“Don’t worry about me, I can get myself up.”

She withdrew her hand and sneaked a glance at the gold watch on her arm. He noticed the freckles also liberally sprinkled over her arms. Were there any other places on her that had that cinnamon coloring? Damn, why hadn’t he seen this one before at another rodeo? She was a luscious morsel he’d like to taste.

He stood and brushed off his ass, regaining his balance, and trying to will away the semi-hard-on before she saw.

Hello? She had been sitting on his dick; obviously, she had already noticed it.

“Really, I am so sorry. I’m running late, and I didn’t look where I was going.”

He smiled, expecting that the full force of his pearly whites would make her flush and stutter. It didn’t.

“I’m fine. Are you okay?”

She snorted. “Not much damages this chassis. I’ve got to run. Sorry!”

She turned and hightailed it toward the Bar T trailer. Hank appreciated the view of her ass for a moment before he realized her destination.

“Hey!”

She stopped at the door and looked at him expectantly.

“I need to talk to TJ Maguire. He and I need to have a talk about something.”

She glanced at her watch again. “Sorry, I’ve really got to make this phone call. Can you come back around four?”

She yanked open the door and started to step through.

“Hey, wait!” he called. “What about TJ? Can I talk to him?”

She frowned. “I’m TJ Maguire. You’ll have to wait until later.”

Then she closed the door.

* * * * *

TJ was looking for Charlotte's number when the door to the trailer opened with enough force to practically rip off its hinges. The huge man she'd knocked over filled the doorway, literally, as he ducked to enter.

She'd always thought it was a good-size trailer, but this man made it seem really, really small. There was fire coming out of those beautiful blue eyes and she had a sneaking suspicion he was pretty pissed. At her.

"Look, mister, I said I was sorry! How about I give you a couple of free tickets to the rodeo?"

That apparently just pissed him off even more. She was surprised smoke wasn't coming out of his ears.

"You're TJ Maguire?"

"Yes, I said that already. I'm TJ Maguire."

He reached into his back pocket for something. His shirt stretched across one of the most incredible chests she'd ever laid eyes on. She could actually see the outline of his muscles through his shirt. All muscle, all lines, all delicious. My, oh, my.

"You sent me this disqualification letter for the barrel-racing event. You need to un-disqualify me. Now."

He opened the paper up, then threw the letter down on her desk with a flick of one mighty hand.

TJ's perusal of his chest ended abruptly. She looked down at the familiar-looking letter and decided that perhaps he needed a lesson in manners. He had obviously forgotten how to speak to a lady.

She rose to her full height of five feet eleven inches and gave him her famous icy glare. More than one cowboy had turned tail and run at the sight of it.

“Look whoever you are, you can’t just barge in here --”

“The name is Hank. Hank Beltane.”

He’d interrupted her! That was on the top of her list of pet peeves. She absolutely hated when people did that.

“Okay, *Hank*. You can’t just barge in here and demand I remove a disqualification. There is always a reason for a disqualification, and I follow the rules. To. The. Letter. I will not change my mind simply because you want me to.”

She poked her manicured pink fingernail into his rock-hard chest. The wisps of blond hair sticking out the top of his shirt seemed to be calling her, waving in the breeze from the air conditioner.

Was the damn A/C actually working?

One of those large, callused hands closed over her finger. Suddenly Mr. Bully was gone and Mr. Suave took his place.

“Hey, little darlin’, no need to get in an uproar. We can settle this friendly-like. How about we go out to dinner and talk about it? There’s a great Italian place in Santa Estrella.”

Then he smiled and holy shit and crackers. Those pearly whites, that tanned skin. Good thing she was immune to cowboys’ charms because this one could do her in.

“Sorry, I’m busy.” She waved one hand toward the door. “Don’t let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.”

She sat back down and tried to ignore him. It wasn’t an easy task. It became even harder when she realized that, after she sat down, she was eye level with his crotch. Unless he was stuffing socks in his tightie whities, he had one large package to deliver. She remembered her first reaction -- a man and a half. Easily. Perhaps even a man and three-quarters.

While she tried to take her eyes off his fabulous accoutrements, he leaned down and planted his hands on her desk. They nearly covered the blotter. They must be the size of dinner plates. Was there anything on him that wasn't super-sized?

"We have a problem, TJ. What kind of a name is that for a girl, anyway?"

"None of your business. Now get out."

He shook his head. That's when she realized he had a ponytail. A long, blond ponytail that reached down to his ass. She had a sudden mental image of his hair sliding down her nipples as he kissed his way to her ...

"Are you listening to me?"

No, she hadn't been. "Are you still here?"

"I am going to stick to you like flypaper for the next two weeks or until you remove the disqualification. I can't compete in the nationals without this all-around and I can't compete in the all-around if I can't barrel race."

His blue eyes locked on hers and his jaw clenched tightly. Damn, he was serious.

"You can try, *Hank*. But I am not going to change my mind."

Then he smiled again. "I give you two days. You'll be begging me to compete in the barrel racing."

Nothing got her blood up like a challenge. One thrown at her by an arrogant ass of a cowboy, even one built like a Greek God, was enough to really piss her off. A mixture of arousal and anger was a dangerous combination.

"Go gallop back to your pony, cowboy. You are setting yourself up for another fall. And you'll fall pretty hard, based on the size of you."

He sat down heavily in the chair next to the desk. "Don't let me bother you. Keep right on working. You won't even notice I'm here."

* * * * *

Hank sat in the chair, waiting for her to give in and lift the disqualification. He had his arms crossed over his chest and stared at her unceasingly. He could have been Casper for all the attention she paid to him. It was as if he wasn't even there.

So that was her game. Ignore him and he'll go away. Humph. Not likely. He started humming to himself.

She was on the phone for at least half an hour talking to somebody named Charlotte about the rodeo posters and handouts. They talked on and on about the color of the damn heading. Who really gave a shit about that?

It seemed important to them though. TJ seemed like a nitpicky kind of person. She had folders lined up like little soldiers in some kind of accordion thing. Her damn PDA kept beeping to remind her of something every ten minutes. She was constantly typing on her laptop. He couldn't possibly imagine enough things that were important enough in his life to ding him that often.

Why would anyone want to have that much going on?

"You can leave anytime, Mr. Beltane."

Hank smiled easily. "I've never been called Mr. Beltane before. How about you just call me Hank?"

TJ glanced at the letter sitting on her blotter that he had tossed there. An evil-looking grin split her pretty face.

"Or I can call you Henry ..."

If there was one thing Hank hated, it was being called Henry. He could see by the twinkle in her green eyes that she was counting on that. She certainly knew how to play dirty. So did he.

Tamping down his annoyance at her, he simply smiled. "Sure thing. What do I call you? Mr. Maguire?"

The smirk was off her face in a minute.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Am I not feminine enough for you?”

“You are a hell of a woman on the outside, you just don’t act like one.”

Her eyes narrowed on him and he noticed her hand had curled around his disqualification letter like a claw. Oh, yeah. It was working. Ten more minutes and she’d give in.

“Why don’t you haul your ass out of here?”

“I’ve got nowhere to go and nothing better to do.”

He stretched out his legs and got a little more comfortable. Well, as comfortable as he could on this tiny chair.

“Listen, *Henry*, you are bugging me. And I’m trying to get some work done, so why don’t you go find someone else to bother.”

“But I’m having so much fun bothering you.”

She stood and stomped to the door as he admired the view of her ass again. She threw the door open and gestured for him to leave.

“This isn’t a public place to loiter. Soon you’ll have a skateboard and your pants will be down around your ass. So do me a favor and take a hike.”

Hank didn’t want to push too hard, so he shrugged and stood. He stretched his arms up over his head and yawned hugely. He finished with a neck stretch. He could see her out of the corner of his eye tapping her booted foot.

“Today if you wouldn’t mind.”

As he sauntered toward the door, he saw her eyes widen just a fraction. She was a tall woman, but he topped her by nearly six inches. She stuck her chin up and met his gaze.

He ran a finger down her cheek, which was as soft as a goose feather. A shiver of pleasure streaked through him again at the thought of her straddling him.

“I’ll see you later, little darlin’.”

She didn't react for a moment as he stepped down the two stairs to the ground. Then he heard the trailer door slam behind him, hard enough that he was surprised the windows didn't crack.

Hank smiled at the blue sky and headed for his truck to wait for Ms. TJ Maguire to come out of her hidey-hole.

* * * * *

TJ was pissed. TJ was also aroused. That man was enough to set her teeth on fire and make her gnash them at the same time. It was as if he just thought if he hung around long enough, she would give in and change the disqualification. Maybe because he was such an incredible-looking man. On the other hand, maybe he was trying to annoy the hell out of her.

Neither reason mattered because it almost worked. While she was talking to Charlotte, he just stared at her like he was looking at a bug under a microscope. When he started humming, she about threw her PDA at him. Then he told her she didn't act like a woman! She was mad enough to chew a hole in the side of the damn aluminum trailer.

And then, oh, yes, and then ... he had touched her face with one long, callused finger, sending a shudder careening down her body straight to her nipples and mons. When he called her "little darlin'," that's when she knew he was full of it.

Bullshit! That's what he was made of. Six and a half feet of bullshit.

But damn! That infuriating man aroused her enough that her panties were damp and her pussy throbbed a bit.

Truth be told, TJ didn't indulge with the opposite sex often, so she had all kinds of toys and self-gratifying objects to keep her sexually satisfied. Hell, most times she didn't need anything more than her own five fingers to get the relief she needed.

She had the insane notion to find him and make him service her needs. He would probably think she would lift the disqualification if he did.

Not!

She was finally able to walk back to her desk without stomping. Sitting down in her chair, she tried to focus on the details for the ad campaign she and Charlotte had discussed, but it wasn't working.

She was too wound up. Perhaps she'd take a walk around the ranch and see how things were progressing with the bleachers and the stands that were being erected for the rodeo.

Her decision made, TJ closed her laptop, cleaned up her desk, and made piles of the items she still needed to address. She stuck her cell phone and PDA in their holsters, clipped them to her belt. She picked up her black Stetson, then popped it on her head.

As she walked toward the trailer door, she had a terrible thought and dismissed it. She did not (no, siree, don't even think it!) want to run into Hank Beltane.

Chapter Two

All that woman did was work. His mother would say, “Bless her heart, she forgot how to have fun, Henry.”

That was the damn truth. Hank trailed along behind TJ all afternoon. If she wasn't yakking on the phone, she was fiddling with her PDA, or inspecting something around the Mission Viejo Ranch. She was like a possessed, super businesswoman -- out to save the world from pleasure and the simple things in life.

He did enjoy actually watching her though. The sway of her hips, the way she blew her hair out of her eyes by pooching out her lower lip and blowing hard. Strange, he'd never liked women with shoulder-length hair, but hers was just right. The color was fabulous, too. It practically caught on fire when the sunlight hit it. She was a good-looking woman.

She finally spotted him and shot him a scalding glare when she stopped at the corral to look at the mustangs. They were a beautiful bunch of horses. Sassy and untamed, flipping their tails in the air as they went by her. She laughed and Hank realized he'd never heard such a sexy laugh before in a woman. Deep throated and natural. Just like TJ.

Okay, slow down. You're supposed to be annoying her, not letting her seduce you!

He mentally slapped himself and realized that's what he needed to do. Seduce her.

* * * * *

TJ tried to ignore Hank, but he was so damn big it was impossible. He followed her around, at a distance, for at least two hours. It was enough to give her the jitters. By five-thirty, she'd had enough and decided it was time to go eat.

She was walking past the stables when she realized that Hank was gone. She turned and looked around the courtyard and did not see him. A couple of the more playful horses stuck their heads out as she passed by. She petted and scratched a few velvety noses. Waiting for him? Oh, hell, no.

She walked quickly across the dusty ground toward the Bar T trailer. By the time she got there, she still hadn't seen him. Maybe he gave up. Yeah, and that was a pig she saw flying by.

She was going to go to her favorite pizza place in Santa Estrella -- Monty's Pizza. He was a retired Brooklyn restaurateur who made the best pizza in three counties. Last year, she discovered him when they were in town for the rodeo. She ended up over there every other night. Monty would always come out and chat with her for a few minutes too. He was a sweet old man.

She got to the trailer and went up the steps quickly. Stepping inside, she walked to her desk and flipped open her laptop to check her e-mail quickly.

"You know, some people actually do things besides work."

Hank's voice startled her enough that she jumped. She hadn't heard him enter, which was a feat in itself, because he was too big to be silent.

"Jesus! Don't sneak up on people like that!" she snapped. When she looked up, she saw him standing there, leaning against the wall. He had one tanned thumb hooked in his belt loop. His sinfully tight blue jeans stretched across his well-endowed body. The green t-shirt he was wearing, a little ragged around the edges, wrapped lovingly around the muscles in his

arms, shoulders, and chest. His ponytail was hanging over his shoulder, the ends near his belly button. Happy trails!

How can one man look so goddamn good? She wanted to get a can of whipped cream and cover him with it, then lick it all off.

Down, girl. He's just a cowboy after an easy lay or an easy way out of a sticky situation.

He smiled. "Thought maybe you could have dinner with me."

"Busy."

"I'm buying."

She rolled her eyes and continued to type. It was all just a bunch of gobbledygook, but he didn't know that.

"C'mon, Red. You know you want to."

She tried to glare at him, but it was so hard when he could clearly see her nipples were pointing at him like high beams.

"Can I call you Henry?"

One tawny eyebrow arched up high. "Do you really want to?"

She couldn't lie. "No."

The smile returned. "Good. I like Hank better. Or maybe later you can call me something else."

"Maybe later I will."

"Just so you know, I prefer 'Stallion.'"

"I was thinking 'Buttercup.'"

"Just as long as you don't call me 'Gelding.'"

She laughed. Oh, it felt so good to flirt again! She hadn't felt comfortable enough to flirt with someone for a long time. For some reason, it felt natural with Hank.

“I know we got started on the wrong foot, but I do really want to have dinner with you.”

“I’m not going to change my mind about the disqualification,” she warned, as the idea of having dinner with Hank was looking better and better.

“Well, you can’t blame me if I try?”

TJ closed her laptop and stood. “As long as you know it’s not going to work.”

He smiled and bowed to her. “I like a woman who knows her limits.”

She shook her head. “Do you like pizza?”

“Monty’s?”

She looked at him in surprise. “You know Monty?”

“He has to turn on a second rack of ovens when I come by.”

She laughed again. “You’re a big man. You must have a big appetite.”

The lids on his blue eyes dipped a bit as he looked her up and down very slowly. The perusal was enough to reignite her sleeping arousal.

“You have no idea.”

* * * * *

Monty’s was a little restaurant holding about ten tables with mismatched chairs. The plastic tabletops were in a cheesy red and white checker pattern. A bright orange-and-blue neon sign in the window threw a weird light over the entire place as it mixed with the fluorescent glare from the overheads. There was a constant smell of tomato, garlic, and grease. But the pizza. The pizza was hands-down scrumptious.

Hank was not kidding about his appetite. He ate an entire extra large pizza by himself. He’d ordered her one, too, then proceeded to consume half of it himself. He had to have drunk at least two liters of Coke. He was a serious eater and didn’t speak much while he was busy.

TJ was nibbling on the crust of a slice of pepperoni pizza and studying Hank as he chatted with Monty.

Monty was a little man, with thinning, graying hair, a shiny pate, and eyebrows that resembled caterpillars. A bit stooped, thin, with long fingers liberally sprinkled with gray and black hair. He also gestured wildly with his hands and arms when he spoke.

She had insisted on driving her own truck and meeting him there. He hadn't been happy about it, but he hadn't bucked her decision either.

"So you agree with me, then?" Hank said.

"Absolutely! Cara, you need to let Hank compete in the barrel racing," Monty said as his arms circled around once.

She pursed her lips. "Dirty pool, Buttercup. You can't recruit people."

"You didn't make that clear in the rules."

She tossed the crust on her grease spotted paper plate. "Well, I'm making it clear now. No recruiting!"

"See Monty? She won't be nice to me."

"I'll be nice to you tomorrow. Or the next day."

Hank smiled and TJ had to remind herself that he was after one thing, and it wasn't to get laid. It was to compete in the barrel racing.

She looked at her watch and was surprised to see that it was ten-thirty already. How the hell had she sat here for four hours?

"Time to go, Red?"

She scowled at him, "I wish you'd stop calling me that. Do you know how many times people have called me that in my lifetime? I want to be a person, not a hair color."

Hank held up in hands in mock surrender, then stood, bowed at the waist and held out his hand to her. She hesitantly placed her hand in his.

Oh, Lord, that was a mistake.

His hand was rough and callused, with long, strong fingers. The kind that would know exactly how to please a woman. A shiver raced down her spine and headed straight for her pink polished toes.

“Okay, then, Cinnamon Girl, I apologize for my disregard of your finer sensibilities.”

He leaned toward her and raised one tawny eyebrow. Up close his eyes were so blue, she thought she was looking at the sky.

“May I escort you to your chariot?”

She couldn't help it. She smiled. He was too damn charming. She decided to play his game, so she stood and did what amounted to a half-ass curtsy.

“Yes, you may, good sir.”

Monty looked at them and shook his grizzled head. “You folks are crazy. I see you soon, no?”

Both Hank and TJ assured him that they would see him within days. The pizza was too damn good not to come back.

They walked out the door with Hank right on TJ's heels. He had cupped his hand on her elbow, a gentlemanly thing to do, and it felt weird. She wanted to ask him to move it, but then again, she didn't. When they got to her truck, he spun her around and before she could even blink, kissed her.

Now here was a dessert she could get used to. His lips were soft, but firm. Plump, yet sexy. Yes, indeed, she liked the menu. Hell, he was just trying to seduce her into giving in!

“Why did you do that?”

He looked innocent. “Do what?”

“I'm not going to change my mind because you kissed me.”

“Can't blame me for trying.”

“Go back to your cave, Buttercup.”

His grin lit up that handsome face again. “You go back to your lair, Red.”

TJ climbed into her truck, started it, put it in reverse, and made a promise to herself not to have high hopes about Hank Beltane.

Chapter Three

Hank was waiting at the trailer for her when she got there in the morning at eight o'clock.

“Son of a bitch!” she cursed as she parked her truck next to the trailer. “Doesn’t the man have anything else to do?”

Getting out of the truck, she grabbed her grande coffee and headed for trouble. As she passed, she glared at him.

“Good morning, Cinnamon Girl.”

Her response was a snort. He didn’t follow her into the trailer after she unlocked it and went inside. In fact, he just settled himself down beneath a cottonwood tree outside and stretched out those long legs like he was getting ready for a nap.

What the hell?

TJ worked like a madwoman all morning. She tried not to think about him. Sitting outside doing nothing. He wasn’t stalking her, per se; he was just *there*.

At lunchtime, she debated whether to call Pablo, her assistant manager, to get some lunch from the roach coach that rolled in, but decided against it.

He wasn’t going to win this time!

She shut her laptop and grabbed her keys and phone. When she stepped out into the sunshine and heat, she remembered how much she hated hot weather. More, even, than she hated the man sitting in the shade of the tree.

She walked past him without a word. He just smiled and let her go with a “See you later, Cinnamon Girl.”

For three days, the stalemate continued. He would talk and she would ignore. Now, it was hard to ignore such a fine specimen of a man. He was, to be blunt, a helluva good-looking man, and she’d really like to see what he was like under the sheets.

On the fifth day of their “acquaintance,” she found out a lot more about what was under Hank’s clothes.

TJ was down by the bullpens, inspecting and making sure that the paperwork matched the animals. She had occasionally had an owner cheat and was always thorough in her inspections.

It was a good thing her parents hadn’t named her Grace. When a bucket decided to jump in front of her, she decided to trip over it and make a complete ass of herself. What she didn’t expect was to have a pair of strong arms try to stop her inglorious fall. That surely had not happened before.

His arms felt like steel beams beneath her. She landed on them with enough force to knock the breath out of her lungs. Unfortunately, her descent was still in progress, and she took him down with her. There was no stopping gravity. He turned her in time to stop her from landing face first, though.

She landed on the concrete floor, littered with hay, and stale manure and God knows what else. Then, he slammed on top of her.

Now, it had been extremely pleasant (or more so) to land on him five days ago. She had been pressed up against him then, but it had been so brief, she hadn’t really felt enough. However, to have him on top of her was like being stuck in a furnace. Naked.

He was so *hot*, literally. The man felt like a sculptor had carved him out of granite. Perfect muscle and bone blended to create a body that would probably stop a bullet. Her body was rising to him. Like two magnets pulled together.

“Damn, girl,” he ground out. “You feel good.”

She couldn’t agree more; she also couldn’t get air back in her lungs. He was heavy, pressing down on her, but, oh, it felt so good. She wiggled her hips and felt his hard dick pressing into her cleft. Just a bit to the left ...

Holy shit.

“Keep it up and we’re gonna shock the neighbors, Cinnamon Girl.”

His whispered words fluttered across her lips right before he kissed her again. This wasn’t the goodnight kiss from a few days ago. This was a ramrod, deep kiss that she felt all the way down to her toes.

His lips were as hard and strong as the rest of him. They captured her lips relentlessly, nibbling, sucking, and biting. Then his tongue snaked out and licked her lips from one side to the other. She moaned as her nipples grew harder and she opened her mouth wide for his questing tongue.

His tongue slipped between her lips and began a meandering path through her mouth, caressing, stroking, poking, at the same time as his hand landed on one breast. Firm fingers rolled an excruciatingly hard nipple back and forth between them, driving her crazy with desire.

It was enough to bring her to the brink of an orgasm.

She forgot she was lying on the floor. She forgot she was in a public place. All she wanted to do was rip his clothes off and find out if he was as good naked as he was clothed.

“Ah ... excuse me, folks, but what in the hell are you doing on the floor?” said an amused voice from above them.

She opened her eyes to see the blue eyes of Hank Beltane three inches from her nose. His pupils dilated and his nostrils flared a bit like a stallion scenting a mare in heat. Then he released that devastating grin again.

“Oops.”

She was absolutely mortified. To be rutting on the ground like a couple of teenagers. And to be caught! God, she was never going to live this down.

“Get off me, Buttercup,” she said through gritted teeth.

He kissed her hard one more time, then jumped to his feet with an agility most men his size only dream of. He held out his hand and pulled her up before she could protest.

Hank turned to the man who had spoken.

“Hey, Ty, how’s it going?”

Ty Wilcox was another regular cowboy that TJ knew from the circuit. He was looking at her with a shit-eating grin and his arms crossed over his chest. Under normal circumstances, she found Ty handsome, with his wavy, dark brown hair, blue eyes, and nice build. To top it off, he raised quarter horses, one of her favorite breeds. But today, he was just another man. One who had caught her in an incredibly embarrassing situation.

“Not nearly as good as it is for you apparently,” he said as his grin grew wider.

Hank laughed and TJ felt herself blush. Hell, she hadn’t blushed in fifteen years!

“Excuse me.” She grabbed her clipboard from the floor where it had fallen and walked away as quickly, and with as much dignity, as she could.

* * * * *

Hank watched TJ’s swaying hips as she hightailed it out of the bullpen area. Damn, that woman had an ass he could hang onto.

Ty was still grinning at him. He grinned back. Getting TJ to change her mind was getting to be a lot of fun. Even if she never changed her mind, it would be worth it just to get that woman in a bed where they could finish what they'd started.

Chapter Four

The next morning, TJ stepped out of the hotel she was staying at and found Hank waiting by her truck. Damn him anyway! He was wearing another sinfully tight pair of faded jeans, this one with a rip right by his inner thigh, and a black t-shirt that hugged him like a neoprene suit. He had both hands behind his back, like a little boy hiding a treasure.

A zip of pure lust bolted through her like lightning. She felt an ache between her thighs that only intensified the closer she got to him. That just pissed her off. She still wasn't over the encounter near the bulls yesterday, either emotionally or physically. She wanted him. She wanted to grab him by the hair, drag him back into her hotel room, and have her wicked way with him.

"Good morning, Cinnamon Girl." The lopsided grin was getting to her.

She licked her lips and forced herself to stop staring at his pectorals. They would probably be incredible to nibble on.

"I brought you a peace offering. Light and sweet."

He brought out his left hand with a grande Starbucks coffee. Little wisps of steam were escaping out the hole. Her stomach clenched and her mouth watered. Hot, delicious coffee and a hot delicious man.

“How do you know how I like my coffee?” TJ asked.

Hank shrugged one shoulder. “You drink Starbucks. There’s only one in town. I went in and asked Don if he remembered you. He did -- said you wanted your coffee light, the same color as your freckles. You’re hard to forget.”

She almost blushed again, dammit! “It’s usually because I’m so big.”

He raised one skeptical eyebrow. “Big? You’re not big. Besides, a man my size can’t hang around with little women. They might get hurt when I get busy.”

He grinned at her and offered her the coffee. Then he pulled out a bag in the other hand from behind his back.

“And a treat?”

She narrowed her gaze and sniffed. “Cinnamon bun?”

He nodded with a mischievous grin. “My favorite.”

He sure could crank up the charm! Cinnamon! She laughed and finally reached for the coffee.

“One condition.”

TJ stopped and nearly drew her hand back. He pressed it into her hand.

“You have to tell me what TJ stands for.”

She stared at the coffee and pursed her lips. What could it hurt? It was just coffee. She sighed and took the cup.

“Okay, but if you repeat it to anyone, I’ll deny it, then find you, and kick you in the balls so hard, your grandchildren will feel it.”

He held up his hand in surrender. “Scout’s honor. Won’t tell a soul.”

She took a sip of coffee and sighed. “Mmmm ... this is good.”

He was staring at her lips like a hungry dog in a butcher shop.

“Come on now, give over.”

She smiled a little tiny grin. "Tessa Jean."

Whatever Hank was expecting, it wasn't that. That was such a girlie, feminine name. It's not that TJ wasn't feminine; she was passion and fire. But not a pinky, girlie girl. Still, he liked the name Tessa. He wanted to whisper it to her when they made love.

He was fighting the urge to grab her and drag her back to the hotel room she'd just come out of and make her scream with pleasure until they both could barely move.

After their close encounter yesterday, he had a permanent hard-on in his pants that even his hand couldn't dispel. He was half-erect now just staring at her pink lips glistening with hot coffee.

He shook himself mentally when he realized she was talking to him.

"Huh?"

She scowled at him and took another swig of her coffee. "I said, good coffee isn't going to change my mind either. You are still disqualified from the barrel racing."

Damn, he forgot about that. He had been obsessed with thinking about TJ under him, over him, and around him. Her reminder was enough to get his back up.

"I know that, Miss Tessa Jean. Everything I do isn't about the goddamn rodeo, you know. I do have a life outside it!"

He threw the bag with the cinnamon bun on the hood of her truck, then turned and walked back to his truck parked a few spots away from hers. When he looked back, she was standing there, staring at him. Although he was at least fifteen feet away, he could swear he saw hurt in her beautiful green eyes.

"Aw, hell," he muttered, then stalked back to her.

She did look hurt. He cupped her face in his hands and rubbed his thumbs back and forth across her soft lips.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you, Cinnamon Girl."

Then he did what he'd wanted to do since her red head had popped out of that hotel room door. He kissed her. She tasted of coffee and some kind of minty toothpaste and woman.

Lord, Jesus, he could get lost kissing this woman for a year. She was a good kisser. Just enough pout, tongue, and lips to tango with him. His dick was rising like a frigging flagpole in his jeans, pushing its way up and declaring itself victor. It wanted the spoils of war.

She pulled her mouth away and dragged in a breath. "In another minute, I'm going to say to hell with this coffee and work and spend the day in bed with you."

As soon as it popped out of her mouth, her eyes grew wide. "I can't believe I just said that.

He chuckled and kissed her reddened lips again. "Why not? I was thinking the same thing."

Hank saw it in her eyes. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. His pulse kicked up a notch. Sweet Lord, his mouth was actually watering, thinking about getting her naked.

"I'll leave it up to you, Tessa. I'm yours if you want me."

Hank's deep voice vibrated through her, causing every small hair on her body to rise like a compass pointing north. At him. Oh, Lord, she wanted nothing more than to lose herself in bed with him all day. She swayed toward him, drunk on simply looking into his expectant, sexy eyes.

"TJ?"

Pablo's voice from behind her was enough to break the magical spell between them. TJ blinked and shook her head. Hank ran his hand down his face, then looked down at the ground with his hands on his hips. She could clearly see the beginnings of a very nice erection in those tight jeans.

Damn.

She heard Pablo's footsteps coming up behind her. He was her right-hand man and did a lot of the legwork for the rodeo. She turned to greet him. Pablo was forty-five, part Mexican, part Indian, and originally from Arizona. He stood at the same height as her, but he had black hair and black eyes. Together they looked like salt and pepper shakers -- very different, but complementary. They'd hooked up about five years ago in Tucson and had been together ever since. Pablo's family even traveled with them.

"What's up?"

His gaze darted back and forth between them. He looked suspicious, damn his hide.

"It's one of the bulls. The owner forgot to bring his papers. What do you want me to do?"

"Can the owner get someone to fax him the bull's papers? We'll accept faxed copies as long as they get us certified copies within a week of the rodeo. Give him two days."

"Sure thing." He paused as he was turning to head to his own truck. "Everything okay."

No! You just ruined my day of pleasure and lust with Captain Cowboy!

"Everything's fine. Hank and I are old friends."

She thought she heard him mutter "Not close enough" under his breath, but she ignored him. She frowned at Pablo's continuing presence.

"Andale, Pablo. This is none of your beeswax. Get lost."

He gave her one last concerned glance and walked away. When she looked back at Hank, he was wearing that lopsided smile again and had a pained expression in his eyes.

"Are you busy tonight?"

Wild horses, even big Clydesdales, couldn't stop her from seeing him later. As it was, she was going to spend the rest of the day with wet panties.

"Nope. I'm all yours."

He stepped closer and cupped his hand around her cheek. His callused thumb swept back and forth across her cheek, leaving echoes of shivers.

“I’ll be outside the Bar T trailer at five-thirty.”

“Make it five o’clock,” she responded, shocked to hear her own breathiness!

He smiled again, then leaned down and kissed her so thoroughly she could probably recite his dental history. With one last suck on her bottom lip, he turned walked back to his black Dodge Ram.

Anticipation began to thrum through her that she knew would last all day. She couldn’t wait for five o’clock to arrive.

Chapter Five

It turned out to be a shitty kind of day where everything that could go wrong did. With only six days left before the rodeo, each one promised to be as peaceful as a bronc ride. At least tomorrow was Sunday so she could have a day of rest. She planned to spend it in bed. With Hank.

At precisely four-fifty-nine, TJ opened the door of the Bar T Rodeo trailer and peeked her head outside. She had used the bathroom inside the trailer to give herself a quick wash and brush her teeth. She munched on a Tic Tac as she looked for the familiar behemoth she was getting very attached to. Too attached. In fact, she'd even missed him today. She wanted to hear his rumbly voice call her "Cinnamon Girl" and to see his amazing grin.

TJ told herself it wasn't disappointment she felt that he wasn't there exactly on time. Most guys were at least a minute or two late. And she was early.

She debated whether or not to go back into the trailer to wait until an angry voice called her name.

"Hey, Maguire! Yeah, I'm talking to you!"

She stepped out of the trailer and saw Sam Asbury walking toward her. Sam was an old cowpoke who did things his way and no other way. He was a tall, wiry man, with Brillo-pad

hair and a bow-legged stance that spoke volumes about how much time he spent in the saddle. His skin was like cracked leather, and he constantly had chaw in his mouth.

Sam was also the owner of the neighboring ranch and he'd put up three of the broncs for the event. His paperwork was a mess and he was mighty put out that she demanded he get it in order for the event. TJ didn't tell Hank a lie when she said she did things by the book. The rodeo was her job and her life.

Her life? Was the rodeo her life? Was Hank right?

"Are you going to ignore me all night, Maguire? I'm talking to you!"

Sam's angry face appeared in front of her. He was flushed and his neck wattle was quivering. To her disgust, he turned his head to the side for a moment and let loose a stream of tobacco juice. TJ hated chaw and the disgusting habits of those who put it in their mouths.

"Listen up, missy. There ain't nothing wrong with my broncs or their paperwork. You need to just put yore stamp of approval on them horses and get on with it."

He took a step closer and was now all of two feet in front of her. TJ wasn't about to be intimidated.

"Mr. Asbury, I explained this to your foreman earlier. I need the entire history of those broncs, including dam and sire."

"Bullshit! There ain't never been no rules like that!"

TJ held back her anger with a tight rein. "Times change. Rules change. I follow them because that's my job. These cowboys want to compete in the nationals. If the paperwork isn't in order, then their points don't count and they might be disqualified."

Her own words came back to bite her in the ass. Is that what she did to Hank? Kept him from competing because of paperwork? She honestly didn't remember since it had been a few weeks ago that she sent out the handful of disqualification letters. Was she that anal?

Sam took another step closer. Now he was in her face. His breath stank worse than the smell of manure that clung to his shoes. People always assumed that because she was a

woman, a little intimidation would get her to change her mind. Nothing could be further from the truth. It just served to glue her feet even further into the ground. Her anger was barking like a pit bull wanting to attack.

“Back off, Mr. Asbury.”

He brought up his hand and had started to waggle it in her face when she sensed a presence behind her. Right behind her. Without turning, she knew it was Hank. Sam looked way up into Hank’s face and flushed a deeper shade of red.

“Tell her, Hank. Paperwork ain’t what’s important. It’s the ride.”

“You’d best get along, Sam, before I get angry,” came his voice that revealed a tightly controlled anger. “It ain’t nice to talk to a lady like that.”

“Lady?” Sam snorted. “This ain’t no lady. It’s just TJ!”

Sam apparently saw something in Hank’s face after his last remark that put the fear of God into him. He muttered something about “frigging paperwork” and scuttled away.

This ain’t no lady. It’s just TJ!

It shouldn’t hurt. It really shouldn’t. She had heard it, and many other comments like it, so many times. She knew she wasn’t a lady. It shouldn’t hurt.

But it did.

Hank’s strong hands landed on her shoulders and began gently massaging the knots and kinks out of them.

“You didn’t need to interfere,” she said.

“I know,” he responded. “But Sam’s an ass. Always has been and always will be. I liked having the excuse to tell him to go scratch.”

TJ knew that wasn’t the truth, but she let him lie for her. He really was a good man. His hands were performing miracles on her shoulders.

Her anticipation had bubbled away with her anger. Now, with Hank's magic hands, it was coming back. With the speed of a freight train. Her nipples were popping out like pink jack-in-the-boxes and her panties were growing damp again. A pulse of excitement danced through her, leaving goose bumps all over.

"Are you ready to go?" he whispered in her ear.

All she could do was nod. Then he pushed her hair from her neck and planted a moist kiss at the base. The goose bumps started to do the tango down her skin.

"Lord, I can't wait much longer, Tessa. Let's get a really quick dinner, nothing sit-down, okay?"

"Burgers and fries. To go," she croaked and started walking toward her truck.

The drive-thru line wasn't crowded, so they got their food in record time. Turned out they both liked orange soda and extra pickles.

The silence in the truck was ripe with an undercurrent of leashed passion. His whole body was pulsing to a beat controlled by his cock. All he wanted to do was pull over and yank her onto his lap. The food sat between them, untouched. The smell of french fries was almost overpowering. However, his hunger lay elsewhere.

It seemed to take an hour to get to the damn hotel. Although in this neck of the woods, it was more "motel" than "hotel." This one was called Captain Clayton's and sported a nautical theme (in southern California, no less) with a lighthouse and a huge ship's wheel out front.

TJ pulled in and parked her truck near her room. As she reached for the keys in the ignition, Hank was surprised to see her hand trembling. She didn't seem like the type of person to be rattled. Perhaps she was as anxious as he was.

"Hungry?" He asked as he picked up the to-go sacks of food.

She glanced at the bags, then up into his eyes. The green in her eyes was shadowed in the light thrown by the lampposts. He could swear he read her thoughts and they closely aligned with his.

“Not for food,” she finally answered. Her normally husky voice was even deeper. What would it sound like when she was really aroused? It made his partial erection grow another inch or two.

TJ stared into his eyes and the pulse between them grew stronger. He had the uncontrollable urge to grab her and kiss her so hard that she’d forget her name.

Instead, he grinned and tried to be nonchalant, when he was feeling anything but. “Let’s go inside, then, and see if we can feed your hunger. Wait right there.”

He thought he saw her shudder, and for damn sure her nipples were as erect as his dick. Damn, he never thought he’d almost expire from wanting. He opened the door to the truck and ran around to the driver’s side. He opened the door like he thought a gentleman would and bowed to her, then offered his hand to assist her.

She laughed at his foolishness. It took off the razor edge of the desperation he was feeling, that he thought she was feeling, too.

TJ placed her hand in his and he felt the contact all the way down to his size fourteen feet. It was as if a bolt of electricity had leapt from skin to skin. His erection was now a full-blown woody.

She stepped out and he slammed the truck door. Without ever breaking his gaze, she flicked the lock button on her remote control. She reached into her pants pocket and pulled out the hotel room card key.

“The magic kingdom awaits,” he murmured, taking the card key from her.

He realized he had about one more minute before he wouldn’t be able stand it anymore. He had to kiss her. Had to touch her. He put his hand on the small of her back and

practically pushed her to the hotel room door. He fumbled trying to put the card key in the slot. He cursed heartily when it didn't work the first time. Or the second. Or the third.

She chuckled and took the card key from his hand before he snapped it in two.

"It's temperamental. Let me try," she said.

Hank breathed in deeply and realized that was a mistake. She smelled flowery up close, not like a perfume, but more like something she washed with. It wasn't overpowering, but rather seductive, like a garden on a hot southern night. He held his breath until the green light glowed on the lock.

"Hallelujah!" he muttered as she opened the door. When she stepped inside, he followed in like a puppy on its master's heels. Oh, Lord, he felt like an oversexed seventeen-year-old boy about to get laid for the first time. What was it about this woman?

The cool room was like any other, a cheesy-looking bedspread, an RCA TV with the remote control glued to the nightstand. A small round table and two chairs, and a noisy air conditioner. It was cranking and wheezing like a ninety-year-old man in a marathon. He decided he didn't care if it sounded like a Harley. He doubted he would notice.

TJ turned and locked both locks on the door, then drew the curtains closed. The twilight sky disappeared along with the rest of the world. That's when he realized his own hands were trembling.

Something was different about this. TJ couldn't quite put her finger on it, but something was definitely different.

She had never felt such anticipation, this incredibly heightened awareness of a man. Her sexual encounters were limited. She had lost her virginity to a cowboy at the age of sixteen. It had been a messy, painful experience she hadn't repeated for five years. Since then, she had chosen her partners very carefully, so that she was never with the same man more than once, and never out of control of the situation.

Now, she felt completely out of control. Like a very fine thread of restraint had snapped, and she would never be the same.

She'd never had such fanciful notions before, but they appeared now in her head regardless of her pragmatism. This felt ... different.

Hank's blue eyes were heavy-lidded and ravenous. He perused her from the top of her head down to her Justin boots and back again.

"Damn woman, I can't wait any longer."

Then he was kissing her. No, check that. He was devouring her. His mustache scraped against her skin as his hot mouth melded with hers. Tongues danced and mated like twining snakes. Licking, sucking, and kissing until they were breathless.

Hank finally broke free and rested his forehead against hers; his breath blew against her open mouth so they were breathing in each other.

"Damn, I'm dizzy."

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him against her. He was so dang big; it was like hugging an oak tree wrapped in cotton.

He kissed her ear, slowly laving the shell with his tongue. Her nipples grew impossibly tight as each lick echoed in a ripple down her body. She was incredibly aroused. More aroused than she'd ever been in her life. His hands began roaming up and down her body, squeezing her ass, dipping lower to tease the cleft of her jeans.

"I think you have too many clothes on," he whispered as he gently bit her ear lobe.

"I think you have too many clothes on, too." Her voice belonged to someone else. Some sex goddess from the 1950s maybe.

She grabbed the bottom of his t-shirt and began peeling it up his body as he did the same to hers. When they reached their shoulders, the shirts tangled up in the arms and they ended up bumping into each other. The first press of flesh on flesh.

“Take off the bra,” he rasped as the t-shirts landed in the corner and his big, callused hands cradled her breasts. “Please.”

TJ was only too happy to oblige. She reached behind her, trying to concentrate on the hooks instead of those thumbs rubbing back and forth across her rock hard nipples. When she finally got all the hooks undone, he grabbed hold of each shoulder strap and inched it off little by little. She watched his eyes. They were positively on fire when her nipples finally broke free of the purple lace.

“I’ll be damned,” he said reverently as his bare hands closed around her bare skin. “They’re cinnamon-colored.”

The first tweak of his fingers sent a jolt to her pussy, which was now throbbing and aching like a starving animal.

She reached out and touched his chest, too. Marble slabs covered in tanned flesh with whorls of blond hair. His nipples were dark pink and as erect as hers. She used her manicured fingernails to scrape lightly over them once. Twice. He hissed and tweaked her nipples harder.

TJ could barely see straight, much less think straight, but she saw the impossible. His cock was actually poking out of the top of his jeans. It was that big and hard.

Holy shit.

Her original assessment of Big Hank was right on target. She reached for the button of his Levis to release the beast, but his hand stopped her.

“Wait, Cinnamon Girl; if you touch that right now, I’m liable to come all over you.”

She grinned up into his blue eyes, “We can start over then, right?”

He grinned back, “I want to make it good for you, darlin’, so just hang on, and let me drive, okay?”

It wasn’t in TJ’s nature to give over the reins to anyone, but she felt safe with Hank. After a very brief inner struggle, she pulled her hands back and let herself just feel.

He got down on his knees and his head was level with her breasts. As he fondled one nipple to an almost painful hardness, his mouth began to work wonders on the other.

Hank had a talented mouth. His tongue seemed to be double-jointed as it licked and nudged her nipple. His teeth lightly grazed the sensitive tips as his tongue caressed the areole. When he took the whole nipple in his mouth and sucked deeply, she felt each tug way down deep inside. Even as he sucked, his tongue was busy teasing and dancing over her flesh.

When he let the nipple out of his mouth, his tongue reached out and laved it one last time.

“I don’t want to play favorites.” He then proceeded to lick, nibble, and suck her other nipple. His big hand closed around the recently released nipple and the damp flesh puckered even more.

“Goddamn.” She was half-afraid she was going to come from just having her nipples licked. In fact, she was moving her hips slightly back and forth with each stroke.

Oh, Jesus, he was going to make her come.

Just seconds before she was ready to explode, he stood, and with one last, wet kiss, let her breasts go. Her disappointment was a keening cry that she couldn’t keep in her throat.

“Easy, girl. I’m just getting started.”

He grabbed hold of her waist and walked her backwards toward the bed. Her hands itched to rip off his jeans, but she let him keep hold of the reins. For now. His chest hairs tickled her nipples; oversensitized from the tongue-lashing they had just received, the buds throbbed anew.

“Please, Hank, I need ... I just need.”

“I know, darlin’, hang on.”

He unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans, took off her boots and socks, then slid off her jeans and her panties, which were embarrassingly stuck to her nether lips. As she stepped out of them, he looked up at her and smiled.

“Every bit as sexy as I imagined. Damn, girl, you’re just perfect.”

TJ felt her heart flutter and felt a prick of tears behind her eyes. Hank made her feel beautiful, made her feel perfect. The dark, hooded expression in his eyes told her that his words were truthful. It wasn’t bullshit to get her into bed (not that he’d need any words).

“No fair. You need to be naked, too.”

He smiled again and kneeled in front of her. As he unbuttoned the top button of his jeans, he reached out and licked her pussy. One long lick that had her blood pumping like a steam engine.

“Mmmm ... you are so ready for me.”

“You could say that again,” she said shakily.

He finished opening his jeans, button by frigging button, and his cock finally sprang free. The sheer size of him momentarily stunned TJ. She had seen many male members in her time, including horses, cows, and a few men. But Hank was ... well, he was magnificent. He was as wide as her wrist and nearly as long as her forearm.

“Like it?” His lopsided grin widened as he shimmied off his pants, boots, and socks.

She tried not to stare, but goddamn, it was hard not to.

“I don’t think I could like it any more unless it was inside me,” she whispered.

Hank sucked in his breath at her bold response. She couldn’t help it; she was on fire from the top of her head to her toes. She was pulsing, throbbing, *needing* him.

He stood and cupped her face in his big hands and kissed her as he lowered her back onto the bed. The cool touch of the air-conditioned bedspread was a shock for her fevered body. His tongue laved and caressed the inside of her mouth as his cock pressed against her mons. His hair fell gently onto her bare skin, tantalizing and tickling.

Oh, Jesus, she needed him. Now.

“Please.” Her ragged voice surprised even her.

“Give me a half a second.” He reached down to his jeans and pulled out his wallet, then slipped out a condom and threw the wallet back on the floor. As he sheathed himself in a condom, she promised herself that, before tomorrow arrived, she was going to give him a tongue bath he’d never forget. Neither would she.

When he lay back on top of her, she immediately opened her legs and felt the weight of his erection. It was wonderfully hard and pulsing.

“We’ll go slow later, but please, now, Hank, now ...” She hated that she was begging.

He sensed her desperation -- or his own desperation engulfed him. Regardless, he slid into her as if he was made to be there.

“Oh, Jesus, you’re so tight. So tight,” he said into her ear as he trembled above her.

And he filled her. Literally filled her. It was incredible. She felt ... whole. Nothing had ever felt better. After a few moments, he began to move.

“Hank ...” she started, then simply let herself feel the power of their mating.

He started slowly, sliding in and out of her wetness. Her hips rose to meet each thrust.

“Tessa ... I can’t hold back ... I don’t want to hurt you ...” His voice was chiming in with each thrust.

“Don’t hold back,” she responded.

Oh, no, she didn’t want to hold back. She wanted to let loose and fly.

His balls slapped against her ass as he began to pound into her in earnest. He was fucking her like they were headed for the moon, hard, fast, and with every particle of energy they had.

He was touching her cervix with each thrust, and the pleasure was so keen, she held back her orgasm to savor. She tightened around him slowly, tighter and tighter, as she felt herself spiraling out of control.

“I’m so close, so close ... come with me, Tessa.”

“Yes.” She hissed as she grabbed his shoulders and raised her legs up to circle his waist.

Then she exploded. Like the grand finale at the fireworks show, or tequila on an open fire. Hot, colorful bursts of pleasure streaked through her. She jerked and trembled with the force of her release.

Hank shouted her name as he buried himself inside her as far as he could. She could feel him pulsing as his orgasm shook him. His neck muscles were corded and strained and his eyes were squeezed shut. He gasped and sucked in a breath of air as if he’d been holding his breath.

As the pleasure began to fade, his arms began to tremble. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down. His hair was like a curtain over them, cocooning them from the outside world.

“I’m too heavy,” he protested.

“No, you’re not,” she said as he settled his weight on hers. He covered her like a warm, hard blanket. It was exactly where she wanted him. It was perfect.

She couldn’t wait to do it again.

Chapter Six

Hank had never, in all his thirty-four years, ever had an experience like it. He was embarrassed to admit that it would take him a few hours to recover from it. He was absolutely wrung dry. His entire friggng body was shaking like a newborn calf.

Whatever he had expected from bedding her, it wasn't a life-changing experience. Nevertheless, goddamn it, paint him blue and stick him on a flagpole, he felt changed. He felt like, and it sounded like something from a romance novel, but he felt like he found a place to belong.

Hank had spent a lot of his life on the road, from rodeo to rodeo. His only concern was the next paycheck, the next drink, and the next lay. Not necessarily in that order either. He had no family to speak of back in Texas. His parents were both dead, and his sister disappeared years ago. His life was the rodeo.

Until now.

Until Tessa Jean Maguire slammed into him. She was so different, so full of spirit. Seeing how she looked at the world as compared to him, gave him a completely different perspective on life.

He figured it was true what they said. The bigger they are, the harder they fall.

He had fallen. Hard.

* * * * *

“I want to give you a massage.”

They were lying together, spoon-style, under the cover of a lone sheet.

TJ wiggled around until she could look him in the eye. “I’ve never had a massage. I was always too embarrassed to get one.”

He frowned. “I don’t know why you would be embarrassed.”

She rolled her eyes and lightly punched him in the arm.

“Geez, Hank, you can’t pretend I’m one of those cute little buckle bunnies that try to ride you. I’m a big girl. I don’t feel ... comfortable with my clothes off in front of a stranger.”

He shook his head. “I won’t pretend to understand why you think being big is a bad thing. I’ve always been big. I think you’re one sexy, hot woman. I’ll give you a ride anytime. Anywhere.”

He waggled his eyebrows and she laughed. “More than eight seconds’ worth, right?”

His mouth fell open, and she laughed again.

“How did I know about that? You’d be surprised what you hear walking around the bull pens and the bronc corrals.”

He laughed with her and hugged her tightly. He kissed her on the forehead.

“I want to touch you all over, to please you. Please, Tessa, let me.”

When he called her Tessa, she felt herself melt a bit inside, like butter on hot toast.

“Okay.”

She rolled over on her stomach and he pulled the sheet back. He lightly slapped her on the ass.

“Ow!”

“Don’t be a baby, TJ,” he said as he straddled her with his great, hairy thighs.

To her utter delight, his cock rested in the crack of her ass. A heavy weight that seemed to have a life of its own. Sliding up and down as his hands traveled up and down her back.

And his hair. Oh, Lord, she loved his hair. It swayed back and forth on her skin, just barely touching, and teasing.

Hank found knots that had probably been there for five years or more. His large hands kneaded and caressed her until she felt languid. Like a sated angel that had landed in heaven.

“Mmmm ... I think I’ve changed my mind about this massage thing. I may have to do this again.”

He stopped and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Nobody touches this back but me.”

TJ was so surprised, she didn’t respond at first.

“What does that mean?”

He stopped and rested his hands on her waist. “Damned if I know. It just came out of my mouth.”

TJ didn’t ask again, and Hank didn’t offer an explanation. She knew whatever it was between them was special; he obviously did, too. Saying it out loud was a horse of a different color.

He continued rubbing her back, this time dipping lower down to caress the sides of her breasts. Her nipples rasped against the sheet, making them ache with want, with need for Hank’s mouth.

He scooted back a few inches and gently spread her legs. The cool air hit her fevered pussy and she clenched involuntarily. The anticipation was incredible.

As his hands massaged her ass, his cock was sliding closer and closer to her wetness. There, just the tip of it touched. And again. TJ was no longer melting. She was boiling.

He leaned forward again and put the entire head of his cock inside her. She grabbed him with her muscles and he let loose a groan from deep in his throat, but pulled out again. Teasing her, torturing her.

“Do it again,” she murmured into the pillow.

So he did. This time putting in just a bit more, then running his fingers up and down the crack of her ass. A shudder wracked her body when he pulled out again. He did it again and again. Each time putting just a bit more of his cock where she most wanted it. He was so big again, that only half of him made her feel nearly full. Each time he pushed in, she felt herself try to come. Then he would pull it out and her pussy would scream with want.

“Just put it all the way in.”

He tsked and smacked her ass again. “You’re impatient, Miss Maguire. All in good time.”

Then he started rubbing his cock up and down her, teasing her clit and her asshole. Light, then hard, over and over. She had never felt so turned on.

“Do you like that?” he asked as he pushed his cock back inside her just an inch or two, and his thumb caressed her other hole.

“Hell, yes,” she replied. Desperate, she reached for her nipples and began playing with them herself.

“I can’t tell you how much that turns me on,” his voice was husky with need.

“Same here.”

His answering chuckle was rusty. “Believe me, darlin’, I’m torturing you as much as me. But I love it.”

She felt him push inside her again and pinched her nipples as he slid back out.

“Same here.” She finally said.

As his thumb pushed its way into her, she realized how little she knew about sex. Because that was turning her temperature up even higher. Then without warning, he impaled himself inside her.

And TJ came. Screaming like a banshee. It was so intense; she actually saw stars in front of her eyes.

Hank pulled out of her, then rolled her over. She was like a rag doll. He was grinning like the Cheshire cat.

He leaned over and rubbed his mustache on her reddened nipples. Unbelievably, they perked right up, hungry for his attention.

“Did they miss me?”

“Terribly.”

He gave each nipple an equal amount of tongue laving, nipping, and sucking while her pussy throbbed anew. Then he sat up and situated herself between her legs again.

“Time for the frontal massage.” He grinned.

“Oh, no. It’s my turn, cowboy.”

She struggled to sit up and get on her knees. Blood was zinging through her like a swarm of bumblebees. She wanted to return the favor.

She grabbed his face and kissed him. Hard. Her tongue was like a combatant in his mouth, conquering the foe.

“You lay down and let me give you a frontal massage.”

His eyes turned an even deeper shade of blue and she knew that she had him. He wanted it as much as she did.

“Your wish is my command,” he said as he laid himself down. TJ realized his feet hung off the bed. Poor Hank -- too big for the bed, like Goldilocks.

He was lying on the bed like a banquet table of goodies. TJ didn't know where to start - he looked delicious all over. She decided to start with his nipples. She straddled his thighs, very close to his cock, leaned forward, very carefully rubbing her own nipples on his stomach. She licked his little nubbins and very lightly grazed them with her teeth.

She felt him jerk and his cock slapped against her stomach. She hid a grin and continued to torture his nipples. While she tortured herself with his hairy chest on her own sensitized nipples.

"How long you gonna play with those, woman?" He groaned.

"Got something else for me, big man?"

"Yup, a lollipop."

She smiled at his obvious attempt at stupid humor. "I don't take candy from strangers."

"Cinnamon Girl, we are anything but strangers now ... I promise you'll like this lollipop."

"Mmmm ... I'll bet I will. Might as well at least taste it."

TJ was torturing him. Oh, not with a rack or a whip (not yet anyway), but torture all the same. She looked up at him with those green eyes bright with passion and he felt his heart skip a beat. Then she smiled and started kissing her way down his chest, her velvet-soft lips caressing as her tongue snaked out to lick.

His cock was waiting like a bull in the chute. Breathing fire and jumping. Lord have mercy, he had never wanted a woman so bad before.

When she finally got down to it, she kissed all around, over, and above it, but ignored it. His inner thighs got a good licking from her tongue. Then she reached out and lapped at his balls, too.

"My, but you are big all over, aren't you?" came her husky whisper.

Then she started suckling his balls.

Goddamn!

She didn't touch his cock, even with her fingers. Instead, she cupped his balls, licked, and suckled each one. It was the most erotic moment of his life. Talk about teasing. Talk about torture!

"Do you like this?" she asked.

He couldn't make his mouth work, so he simply moaned loudly.

She chuckled and continued to torture his balls. Then she licked her way up to the base of his cock. It started twitching and heaving like a fish on the deck of a boat.

Lick it! Suck it! Do something!

He had never been harder in his life. Hell, he could probably break concrete with it! He squeezed his eyes shut against the ache of watching her.

She licked and kissed all around the base of his cock. Then her fingers started lightly scratching it, up and down, up and down. Her teeth nipped and he seethed with want.

Her pink tongue finally licked daintily up to the head of his cock like a hot little kitten.

"Mmmm ... you're right. I do like it," she purred.

Then she took the head in her hot, wet mouth and suckled. He nearly threw her off the bed as he jumped and jerked. Then her mouth slid a bit lower, then back up to pop him out of her mouth. She licked all around the head, lapping up the wetness that was squeezing out the tip.

Then she took him in her mouth again. Her agile tongue licked while her lips slid up and down, lower and lower. Her hand found his balls again while her thumb pressed and caressed his asshole.

He thought he'd died and gone to heaven. His body positively pulsed with need. She suckled, licked, and nibbled him, at one point nearly taking him entirely in her mouth until he touched the back of her throat. She swallowed and the sensation made him grip the bed with his hands to keep from coming.

“Are you close?” she whispered.

“Yesssss.”

She started sucking him in earnest then. Her hands were busy with his balls, which had tightened up like walnuts, and his ass, which was puckering around her finger.

He opened his eyes and watched. She slid her mouth off, leaving a wet trail on his cock. Her tongue never stopped moving. Each time it got to the head of his cock, she whirled, lapped, and licked until he thought he'd go mad.

“Please,” he said raggedly.

TJ continued to give him the most incredible blowjob of his life. She sucked and licked harder and harder, until he felt his orgasm rising.

“I'm coming,” he warned, seconds before his whole body froze with an intense pleasure that radiated out like ripples in a pond. She sucked and licked, prolonging his orgasm until he felt his vision begin to gray around the edges.

As the waves began to recede, she finally let him loose. After one last long lick, she kissed him, then crawled up to lie next to him. He lifted one arm with a great bit of effort, and she snuggled up, laying her head on his shoulder.

“Jesus, woman. I think I'm going to have to marry you.”

Chapter Seven

For a moment, TJ was speechless. She looked into his big blue eyes and tried to determine if he was serious. She couldn't tell and that threw her into a panic. Unfortunately, TJ could never leave a question unasked.

"If you think that's funny, I'll knock you into next week, Henry Beltane. What the hell did that mean?"

Hank looked a little pale and opened his mouth to speak, then changed his mind. He sat up in the bed and looked down at her.

"What if I was serious?" he asked.

Her heart did a traitorous flip, then her common sense kicked it back into place. "I ... well, hell, I don't know. What if this is part and parcel of you trying to get me to change the disqualification? I haven't forgotten about that, you know."

His jaw hardened and she could practically hear his teeth grind together.

"Is that what you think this was?"

"For all I know, it could have been. I'm not a catch, Hank, but you sure as hell are. You could have any buckle bunny you want in your lap every night. But instead you got an Amazon with flaming red hair, a big mouth, and a big ass."

“You don’t have a big ass. But your mouth ... well I’m not going to dispute that one.”

She felt the sting of his words and her mouth seemed to grow larger.

“I have good reason for that. You’ve been trying to get me to change the disqualification from the second we met. You can’t blame me for being suspicious. You’re just a cowboy.”

Hank stared a moment longer, then jumped out of the bed. The sexual spell between them was broken and they both knew it. He went over to the strewn clothes on the floor and started picking up his. TJ had the sinking feeling she had just thrown away something she shouldn’t have.

“Hank, listen, sometimes things pop out of my mouth and my foot ends up in their place.”

He stopped in the middle of buttoning his jeans and looked at her. She could see a combination of frustration, hurt, and anger in his eyes. All of which she had incited.

“Please don’t leave angry. I ... I like you, Hank. More than I should. It’s just ... I have trouble trusting men, especially cowboys.”

He walked back to the bed and sat down next to her. He reached out and touched her cheek with one hand.

“I can’t stay here right now. I’m liable to say something we’ll both regret.”

With one last hard, angry kiss to her mouth, and a brief sweep of his hair on her bare breasts, he scooped up the rest of his clothes and left the hotel room.

TJ stared at the closed door for a long time before she roused herself enough to take a shower. Then she crawled into her lonely bed and went to sleep, with only her distrust for company.

The next morning, TJ woke in a foul mood. She hadn't slept well, and when she had slept, she'd had erotic, hot dreams about Hank. Each time she woke, she remembered how she had practically kicked him out of the bed.

It was just so hard to believe he was attracted to her. She couldn't trust her heart. She'd never had much use for it. Until now. Until Henry Beltane crashed into her world.

She spent the day in the hotel room since it was Sunday, watching infomercials, crappy old movies, and Seinfeld reruns. She was a pitiful mole-like creature and was ashamed to admit that she ate nothing but Diet Coke and Cheetos all day. She was miserable ... and lonely.

She didn't even know how to call Hank and apologize. Or ask him to come back. Or ask him to marry her.

Where the hell had that thought come from?

She'd only known him a little more than a week! One tumble in the hay and she was ready to say "I do"?

Her thoughts were chaotic and rambling. She decided to ignore both her head and her heart and wallow in self-pity. Sunday the thirteenth was a day of hotel hell.

Monday morning rolled around with a vengeance. When she went out into the bright California sunshine, she was dismayed to realize it was already nearly eighty degrees and it wasn't even nine in the morning. It promised to be another scorcher. It just wasn't right. Too hot for November! For Pete's sake, it was Thanksgiving in another week and a half!

She had another conference with the High Impact PR firm at ten, so she needed to hightail it over to the Mission Viejo Ranch. She wanted at least a little bit of time to compose her sorry self into some semblance of order so she didn't look like a forlorn lover. Which is what she was. Dammit.

Mentally slapping herself, she walked -- or rather, stalked -- over to her truck. There sitting on the hood was a steaming grande coffee and another small bag, which no doubt held a cinnamon bun.

A note was under the cup. She pulled it out to read "For my sweet Cinnamon Girl. Meet me at Monty's for dinner at six. Hank."

Unaccountably, TJ felt four hundred times better than she had when she'd walked out the door. Her heart was lighter, and even her head had stopped pounding.

TJ had a date tonight.

* * * * *

Hank felt like an eighteen-year-old on his first date. He was determined it was only going to be dates until she trusted his motives. No more -- God have mercy on him for this -- sex until then.

He was waiting for her outside Monty's in a clean pair of Wranglers, a button-up shirt, and his best turquoise-and-black string tie. He'd even cleaned his boots and polished them. In his hand, he had a single yellow rose bud.

His mother had loved yellow roses. She used to sing that corny old song to him all the time. Now he didn't think it was so corny. He wanted to give her something ... romantic. He almost pitched it into the big red trashcan outside Monty's, but he saw her truck pull into the parking lot and knew she'd already seen him.

She stopped the truck and sat in it for a full minute before she got out. Hank felt his balls tighten with need at the sight of her. She was dressed in a pair of white jeans and a bright blue peasant blouse. It had an elastic neck that begged him to pull it down and free her breasts from their constraints.

He shifted uncomfortably in his jeans as his cock began to rise to the occasion.

Down, boy!

As she walked toward him, he forced himself to hold her gaze when what he really wanted to do was throw her back in the truck and have his wicked way with her. She almost looked ... shy? No, it couldn't be. Not TJ Maguire.

"You look beautiful," he said.

She looked down at herself and then back up at him. "Thanks. I didn't ... well ... thanks. You look pretty spiffy yourself."

He smiled and held out the rose. Her eyes widened and she stared at it, but didn't take it.

"TJ?"

"Huh? Oh, is that for me?"

He wanted to slap her forehead for her. "Yup, sure is."

She slowly reached out and took it from him. He thought he was seeing things when he saw her hand shake.

"Thank you." She buried her freckly nose in the bud and sniffed. "It smells beautiful."

Hank reached out and pulled her toward him. She didn't protest or make a peep, so he pulled her in until they were thigh-to-thigh and chest-to-chest. Damn, did she feel good. His cock was definitely knocking on the door wanting in.

"You look good enough to eat," he whispered as he started nibbling on her cute little ear.

"So do you."

He jerked at the reminder of how talented TJ's tongue was. To hell with dinner.

"I can't wait too long, Tessa. I have been in pain all day thinking about you. Please tell me this isn't just a platonic date. I'll fall down dead on the spot."

She chuckled huskily. "Can we eat first? I haven't eaten anything all day ... except for a cinnamon bun."

He groaned and started nipping at her neck. She pushed him away and waved her finger in front of his face.

“I’m going to think you’re only after one thing, Buttercup.”

He smiled and tried to get her neck again, but she sidestepped and avoided him.

“What’s that, Red?”

“Me. Naked.”

He groaned and made a grab for her again.

“It’s been two whole days ... take pity on me.”

She frowned and the teasing light in her eyes faded. “I didn’t know how to call you, Hank. I don’t even know your number.”

Hank felt awful that he hadn’t even considered it. He’d spent the entire day Sunday working with his horse, Charlie, and some of the bulls at the Mission Viejo Ranch. He worked himself into a stupor so he didn’t think about TJ. Not that he was successful. He still woke up hard enough to ache for hours.

“I’m sorry, darlin’.” He frowned as he opened his arms for her. “Forgive me.”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it.”

She walked past him into the restaurant. Hank cursed vividly at her continuing aloofness. While he did, fervently, want her to remove the disqualification, he wasn’t going to ask her again. She knew what he wanted and it was up to her to change it or not.

Hank followed her into Monty’s and tried to forget why he had decided to seduce TJ Maguire. He wasn’t too proud of it, and wished like hell he could go back and undo it.

TJ was nervous. It was the first time she’d ever really gone on a “date” with a guy instead of simply hooking up after a rodeo. She hadn’t had a normal adolescence, what with being on the road nine months of the year, and dating had never been a high priority.

She'd had a tutor and had attended school in the off months. She had missed her high school prom and graduation. She wasn't socially dysfunctional, but she was riding the line.

Hank looked so good, she thought she'd embarrass herself by throwing her arms around him and dragging him off to screw his brains out. Just being around him, smelling his unique scent, was enough to make her very slippery between her legs. She was already aching with need. She figured she had it bad, all right. She had gone and fallen in love with a cowboy.

She watched him while they ate. The way he wiped his mustache after every bite. He was a gentleman, not an ignorant bonehead like the rest of the cowboys she'd hooked up with. So the question was, what did she do about it?

After they'd finished their pizza, they stepped back outside into the twilight. TJ decided to stop thinking so damn much and simply let herself go. She grabbed hold of his arm and slid into his embrace. She leaned up and kissed him as if he were going away to war.

After a surprised moment of hesitation, he leaned into the kiss, scraping his tongue back and forth across her teeth, on the roof of her mouth, below her tongue. She felt her body rise, flush with desire and passion. She hung onto his shoulders, digging into the muscles, conveying with her body what her mouth could not speak.

Hank, it appeared, got the message.

"If you don't want me to take you right here on the street and shock the hell out of Monty, we'd better stop."

She moaned her denial and continued to assault his mouth. He resisted for a split second, then gave in and grabbed her again. TJ didn't know how long they stood there, lost in the passion that flared as hot as a sunspot.

"What is it with you two? Can you find a bed somewhere so the rest of us don't keep stumbling over you?"

TJ heard Ty's voice and let Hank loose. Damn that cowboy! What the hell was he doing there anyway?

She could feel Hank's hardness against her hip and longed to be where she could rip those ass-hugging jeans off and get some of it.

She turned to glare at Ty. "Don't you have someplace to be? Or some paperwork to get together for those ponies of yours?"

He narrowed his gaze. "I'm not the one standing on the street, going at it like bunnies."

She humphed. "Don't watch."

"Hard not to. You're standing right under the street light."

She hadn't realized that. Every car that passed by had gotten an eyeful of their groping. Well, not exactly what she wanted, but what's done was done.

"Good work on Charlie today, Hank. I guess old TJ finally gave in and lifted the disqualification, eh?"

Ty's casual words flung over his shoulder as he went into Monty's hit TJ like a bucket of ice water. She turned her gaze to Hank's and saw guilt in those blue depths.

"What did he mean by that?"

"I have no frigging clue. Yes, I did work Charlie on the barrels today. He's a good horse, but he needs regular practice."

Her heart was pounding and her palms felt slick. She stepped back away from Hank.

"So how does Ty know you wanted to change my mind?"

"It wasn't a secret. Everyone knew how pissed off I was."

"But why does he think I 'gave in'?"

Hank threw up his hands in frustration. "How the hell do I know? I'm a cowboy, not a mind reader. Maybe he was trying to piss you off because you snapped at him and made a comment about *his* prize quarter horses. Some people bite back when you snap at them."

That took TJ aback. She never thought of herself as someone who snapped at other people -- well, not much, anyway.

“Listen, darlin’, I like you. A lot. I’ve been missing you the last two days, and all I wanted was for us to spend time together. If you think this is about the disqualification, you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

He leaned forward and kissed her. His mustache tickled her nose.

“I think this is goodnight, sweet Cinnamon Girl.”

With that, he turned and headed for his truck. As TJ watched him drive away, she realized he hadn’t given her his cell phone number again.

The sweet smell of the rose bud she had tucked behind her ear was a reminder that more was at stake than a rodeo. That man already owned a bigger part of her heart than she was willing to admit.

Chapter Eight

TJ was sitting at her desk the next afternoon staring at her laptop. She had so much to do in the next two days before the rodeo. Instead of doing it, she was sitting there like a lost puppy dog.

Whatever had happened last night with Ty had put a halt to her evening's plans, which included showing Hank that she hadn't even been wearing panties. She shifted in her chair, still consumed with the thought of being with Hank. Of touching him, of kissing him, of licking him ...

"TJ? Where the hell are you, girl?"

Her father's gruff voice slammed her back into reality. She jumped in the chair. Daydreaming about Hank's body, for God's sake!

"Sorry, Daddy. Got a lot on my mind."

Big Tom Maguire towered over her desk. He had the same shock of red hair as TJ, only he had a lot missing on the top. His bushy eyebrows were sprinkled with gray, as were his temples. His eyes were as blue as sapphires, and just as hard. He was as big and tall as a bear, with a round belly and hairy arms, and a great, big, booming voice that could be heard for miles.

Big Tom's wife, Teresa, had left him a year after he started the rodeo; she had also left TJ, who refused to leave her father. Theirs was a physically close, but emotionally distant, relationship. TJ ran Big Tom's business, and Big Tom let her. If there was work to be done, he was never around. But when the celebrating began, he was sure to be first in line.

"You better have a lot on your mind. We only got two more days! What are you doing in here sitting on your fanny when there's work to be done?"

TJ glared up at her father. "You have no idea what's left to be done and don't pretend you do. What are you really doing here, Daddy?"

Big Tom sat down heavily in the chair in front of her desk. She couldn't help but have a mental flashback to Hank sitting there, humming and staring at her last week.

"I heard some stuff."

TJ rolled her eyes. "What stuff?"

"Stuff about you and some cowboy. I heard that he was sweet-talkin' you into lifting a disqualification. Tell me that ain't true, Tessa Jean." He leaned forward and tried to look fierce.

"That's none of your business."

His eyebrows shot up. "None of my business? This is my business! If you are letting this yahoo lead you around by the nose, and putting aside the rules, that is definitely my business!"

TJ stood and threw down her pen (not that she was using it), and slammed her hands onto the desk.

"I would *never* compromise the integrity of Bar T Rodeos. And to think that you would even ask that pisses me off more than you can imagine!"

She was furious and, surprisingly, hurt that her father would even ask her that. He stood up and pointed at her.

“Don’t you get high and mighty with me, missy! You can just find yourself another job!”

TJ dropped back down in the chair. Her heart nearly stopped beating at his pronouncement. She had put her entire life, her heart, her *soul*, into this company and this job. Now, because of a rumor, her father was ready to kick her to the curb.

“I can’t believe you just said that.”

“I can’t believe you would be putting your personal life in front of your job.”

That was it. TJ *never* put herself in front of the job. It was always about Bar T or the current rodeo. Even during the off-season, she worked on ideas and promos constantly. There was no TJ. There was just the manager of Bar T.

“I need to get out of here, Daddy.”

Without another word, she grabbed her keys and her phone and bolted out of the trailer. She decided to go for a ride on her mare, Sandy, a beautiful palomino she had bought five years ago. Escape. That’s what she needed to do.

* * * * *

Standing at the corral fence, Hank was taking a moment to catch his breath. He had just finished his practice time with the broncs. And damn, his ass was sore. He had landed wrong on that last run and bruised his tailbone. He unbuckled his chaps and slid them off. He hung them on the fence and leaned forward to stretch his tired muscles.

“Are you the cowboy sniffing around my daughter?”

Hank turned to look at the speaker and realized he was finally looking at Big Tom Maguire. If he hadn’t recognized the hair, he would have recognized the pugnacious jut of his chin. TJ had the same look when she had her feet planted in concrete.

“Pardon?”

Big Tom stepped a few feet closer and crowded Hank a bit. He wasn't about to let this old cowboy win the pissing contest. Hank stepped closer and pushed his hat back.

"You got something to say?"

"You bet I do. Leave TJ alone. She don't need a no-account cowboy messing with her head or her heart. She's a good girl."

Hank shook his head. "That's your problem, Maguire. She's not a girl. She's a woman. And she can make her own choices."

Big Tom frowned even harder. "She ain't your woman. She ain't gonna lift the disqualification on you. So you just get on your horse and ride outta her life."

"Can't do that."

"You'd better."

"It's not your choice. And nobody, not you or any other son of a bitch here, is going to tell me who I can or can't be with."

Hank grabbed his chaps and started to walk away. Maguire huffed out a breath.

"You listen to what I told you, boy."

Hank turned and pointed at the older man. "No, you listen to me. Tessa is a great person. I like her and she likes me. Where it goes from there is our business."

He slapped the chaps against his leg and stalked off.

Big Tom watched the blond cowboy walked off and was dismayed to realize that the boy had a ponytail! How in the hell did TJ pick this one? He was a winner. Probably had a nipple pierced, too.

Dammit, he couldn't lose her. Without TJ, Bar T Rodeos would fall apart. He had to do something to keep them apart.

Chapter Nine

TJ ran the curry brush down Sandy's flank again. The horse was already well-groomed, but the motion was soothing for her mistress. There were many chaotic thoughts trying to push their way around in her brain. Being with her horse was enough to calm all of them for a bit.

"Hey, Cinnamon Girl."

Hank's voice was like a shot of whiskey. Her blood started pulsing and her stomach jumping. She had never had a reaction like that with any other man.

She turned to look at him. Dressed in a t-shirt and jeans with chaps thrown over his shoulder, he was dusty, sweaty, and had obviously been working, but, oh, she breathed in the scent of him anyway. All man.

"Please tell me her name isn't Buttercup."

TJ laughed and tossed the curry brush into the bucket by her feet.

"Nope. Even I wouldn't be that cruel. Her name is Sandy. Kinda boring, I know, but I'm not too imaginative."

He stepped into the stall and stood in front of her. Running a callused finger down her cheek, he murmured, "Oh, I don't know about that. I've seen you do some pretty imaginative things."

Unbelievably, she felt herself blush. He reached up to cup her cheeks and smiled. Then he leaned down and kissed her. It started as a soft kiss, just a touch, but together they were like oil on a fire. With a moan, he dropped the chaps on the floor and wrapped his arms around her.

"You're like an addictive drug. They'll need to put warning labels on cinnamon."

She tried to laugh, but he swallowed it up when his mouth settled on hers again and began kissing her in earnest.

As the kiss went on, her nipples rose to scratch at his chest, begging for his mouth. Her jeans were suddenly too tight around her pussy, which begged for its own attention.

After what seemed like five solid minutes of dueling tongues and sliding lips, he finally pulled himself away and sucked in a ragged breath.

"I lose my head around you. I only meant to say hello and here I am practically fucking you in the stall in front of your mare."

TJ chuckled against his neck. "I'm not complaining."

He let his arms drop away and stepped back. TJ couldn't help but eye the hard cock in his jeans. Damn, but she wished there were more privacy so she could get her hands on him.

"I've got another practice session in ten minutes."

"And I really need to get back to work."

Hank's blue eyes stared hard into hers. "You hear what people are saying? About us?"

She nodded.

"Does it bother you? All you need to do is say the word and I'll do my damndest to leave you alone. I don't want you hurt because of these rumors."

TJ had to try twice before she could swallow the lump in her throat. Hank was always surprising her. Instead of laughing off the rumors, he wanted to protect her. Something shifted and slid inside her, and she realized it was the door to her heart. Miraculously, Hank had apparently found the key that had been missing all her life.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll get through it.”

He reached out and touched his finger to her nose. “You mean we’ll get through it. We are a team, aren’t we Tessa?”

Her answer seemed to be extremely important. There was anticipation in his gaze that almost scared her.

“Yeah, we’re a team.” She reached up and kissed him quickly. Grabbing her bucket, she walked out of the stall. “Meet me in the trailer after practice.”

Hank grinned and saluted.

TJ turned to head back to work, ignoring the fact that she was humming under her breath. She was trying to accept the fact that she was in love in Hank.

Hank watched the sway of those jean-clad hips, and his balls tightened with need. He wanted to hang onto those hips and bury himself in her. He felt like he was absolutely obsessed with TJ Maguire. He thought about her all the time! When he was showering, walking, talking with other people. Hell, he even had dreams about her!

Was this love? More than likely, but he’d never been in love before so he wasn’t completely sure. Who knew a disqualification would turn his life so completely around?

He turned and headed back to the practice arena. The bulls were likely to stomp him to bits if he didn’t keep his mind on them and not on being a lovesick calf.

TJ ran into Pablo on the way to the trailer. His normally laughing brown eyes were serious and troubled. She had a feeling she wasn’t going to like what he had to say.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

Pablo fell in step beside her. As they walked down past the corral fence toward the parking lot, he sighed and ran his hand down his face.

“Lots of rumors flying with the cowboys today.”

She knew she wasn’t going to like it now.

“And?”

“There is talk that you are trading sex for favors with that big blond cowboy.”

Her anger bit her then. “That’s bullshit and you know it, Pablo. I would never do that.”

He shrugged. “Someone saw you on the street in Santa Estrella, and someone else saw him leaving your hotel room in the middle of the night.”

She threw the bucket on the ground. “So? I can’t have a personal life?”

Pablo picked up the bucket and kept walking. She took a deep breath and followed him.

“No, *amiga*, that’s not it. What I heard was that the Pro Rodeo Circuit was investigating.”

Her stomach dropped literally to her knees. Investigating? Her?

“Tell me that you are kidding, Pablo.”

They reached the Bar T trailer and he held out the bucket to her. His brown eyes were now full of worry.

“This is what I *heard*. I don’t know that it’s true. Be careful. You don’t need me to tell you that this affects you and Bar T.”

Holy shit. This could not be happening. How could anyone even think it? There was only one way the rumors were even flying. Someone was spreading them, but she sure as hell didn’t know who.

Unfortunately, what she needed to do was to stop seeing Hank and put an end to the rumors before she ended her career and her father's company. Because if the rumors were true about the circuit investigating, she would be up shit creek without a paddle.

* * * * *

TJ worked like a madwoman to get all her work completed for the day since she'd lost so much time. She had just finished the schedule for the rodeo when the door opened and Hank walked in.

Her heart started beating harder and actually ached for what she had to do.

He had showered and put on clean clothes. His blond hair was still damp and the ends of the ponytail were stuck together like he'd forgotten to comb them.

"Hey, darlin'," he said as he stepped in and closed the door.

She rose from her chair and started to speak, but he held up a hand to stop her.

"No talking. Not now. I need you so bad even my teeth are erect."

He was so big, and so hard, and so ... hers. She had to be with him at least this last time. Then she could tell him it was over. The biting feeling of tears in her eyes was a bittersweet reminder of what was at stake. Her heart.

She walked toward him with her arms open. They fell onto each other like desert wanderers finding water. Greedily kissing and lapping at each other's mouths, while hands roamed up and down bodies, squeezing, caressing, and teasing.

Hank had one hand on her ass and one on a nipple, tweaking gently. TJ had both hands on his ass, pulling him toward her. Wanting, *needing* him.

"Lord, woman, in a minute I'm gonna have your pants down around your ankles and you spread-eagle on the desk."

Just the image of that had her wet in a second.

“Lock the door,” she murmured as she stepped back and started pulling up her shirt. After a moment of surprised hesitation, Hank stumbled to the door and locked it. He briefly looked at the windows. The blinds always stayed closed to keep the hot sunshine from TJ’s domain.

TJ pulled off her shirt and unbuttoned her jeans. Hank stood there watching, his eyes full of hunger and restrained passion.

“Now the bra,” he said huskily.

Feeling like a striptease artist, she gave him her back and slowly unhooked her bra, then dragged it down her erect nipples. The cool air conditioning made them perk up even higher. When she turned back to him, his eyes were burning brighter than the center of a propane flame.

“I want to bite them, Tessa.” She tried hard not to jerk at his words as her arousal grew to new heights.

She unzipped her jeans and shimmied them off. When Hank realized she wasn’t wearing any panties (again! what a slut she was), his pupils practically took over. His hand grabbed his Levis and unbuttoned them in record time. He pulled off his shirt and threw it.

As she was pulling off her jeans, socks, and boots, Hank made record time divesting himself of his. When she was finished, he was cocked and ready, with a condom on and a hard-on that would rival any tree limb.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he said.

“Funny, I was thinking the same thing.”

Her eyes wandered over the slabs of honey brown flesh, the absolute spectacle of maleness presented in front of her like an oversized present.

He smiled and his gaze flickered to the desk. “Sit on there for me, Cinnamon Girl.”

With a jolt of anticipation, she did as he bade and sat on the cool metal desk. She yelped in surprise at how cold it was, eliciting a chuckle from her lover.

“Don’t worry. It won’t be cold for long.”

He used his hands to push her legs farther apart, then kissed her thoroughly before turning his attention to her breasts. He laved and nibbled at one, while tweaking and rolling the other nipple with his hand. She felt a little embarrassed at the way she wiggled and moaned under his skills.

His other hand drifted down her body to gently caress her inner thighs. Light touches like butterfly wings. She felt herself ache, mentally willing him to touch her.

“What do you want, Cinnamon Girl?”

“I want more.”

“Where?” He bit her nipple, and she almost jumped off the desk.

“My pussy.” Saying it out loud had the effect he wanted. She grew even wetter, waiting for his touch.

One lone finger started at her ass and slid all the way up to her clit, where it circled. Once.

“Yesssss,” she hissed.

“There? Is that where you ache?”

“Yes, there, please.”

He used two fingers to stroke her up and down again. And again. She felt herself reach out to try and clutch the elusive digits.

“Can I lick you there?”

She moaned and thrust her hips forward.

“Can I suck you there?”

She grabbed his head and kissed him hard. “Go down on me, cowboy. Lick, suck, nibble, and eat me like I’m a goddamn filet mignon.”

He smiled. “All you had to say.”

She wanted to tell him to hurry up, but she held it in and waited -- ever so impatiently.

Hank kneeled down and spread her legs just a bit more. He ran his hands up and down her thighs; then his thumbs gently spread her pussy lips. He blew on her lightly. She shivered and clenched at the sensation.

“Looks like a strawberry patch. Let’s see if it’s just as sweet.”

The first swipe of his tongue shot a zing through her like an arrow. She moaned again and squeezed her eyes shut. Then he really started. His lovely tongue seemed to be double-jointed. Licking, then fucking her, then laving. His teeth nibbled at her clit, while his fingers slid inside her.

“Oh, God, yes!”

When he started sucking on her clit, she knew it wouldn’t be long before she came. She reached up and started tweaking her nipples, twisting and pinching in rhythm to Hank’s sucking and finger fucking.

“Hank ... I’m coming, Hank ...” she breathed as the release started crashing through her like an ocean wave. Slammed by sensation, she clenched around his head, trying not to squeeze him, but unable to stop herself. He pushed back a bit with his hands until her body finished bucking.

Hank looked up at her and then licked her one last time, a long lave from top to bottom. She jerked and felt another brief wave of her orgasm. Lord, that man had a great mouth.

She slipped down onto shaky legs.

“Sit on that chair, Buttercup.” She pointed to the chair where he had sat that first day they met.

He grinned, then rose to his feet, kissing her skin as he went. By the time he reached her mouth, TJ was flushed with arousal again. Throbbing for him. His erection rose stiff and hard from between his legs. He kissed her and she tasted her own arousal on his tongue.

He finally released her mouth after his usual bottom lip suck, then sat down in the chair.

“Ride me, Cinnamon Girl.”

She straddled him, and positioned him at the entrance to her pussy. She had planned to tease him, but her need was so great, she simply impaled herself.

TJ threw her head back and clutched his shoulders as the sensation of being completely full of Hank echoed through her. It was as she remembered. Intense, incredible.

“God,” he whispered. “Un-fucking-believable.”

She couldn’t agree more. After catching her breath, she started moving up and down. She set a rhythm he caught immediately by meeting her down thrust with an upward one.

He used his hands on her nipples again, caressing and arousing her to a fevered pitch. TJ felt an orgasm starting somewhere in her toes and knew she had less than a minute. She reached behind her and cupped his balls, lightly scratching them.

He jerked and moaned loudly.

“You are magic with me,” he breathed as he grabbed her waist to slam himself home.

She started to come and a keening sound escaped her throat. He shouted hoarsely as his own release hit and he thrust inside deeply while squeezing her hips with his hands.

The whirling circles of pleasure cut through her leaving layers of sensation so sharp they almost hurt. She was breathing heavily and laid her head on his shoulder. She inhaled his scent along with the smell of their joining.

She stood and felt the loss of his erection as if someone had cut off part of her own body. TJ never wanted to give him up. Nevertheless, the time had arrived.

* * * * *

Hank was feeling good. Not only did he just have another fantastic sexual encounter, but it was with the woman he was in love with. Yup, no doubt now, he loved her.

She grabbed the box of tissues and used some to clean herself off, throwing the used ones in the trashcan. With a sigh, she opened a desk drawer and got a pair of underwear (he didn't want to know why they were there), and slipped them on, followed by her bra, shirt, and jeans.

Hank sat in the chair, still weak in the knees from the way his woman had ridden him. And put him up wet.

"Can you get dressed?" she asked quietly.

With a frown, he stood and walked to the little bathroom to dispose of his condom, then dressed quickly. As he was pulling on his boots, he saw something that made the bottom drop out of his stomach. The TJ that sat behind the desk now looked like she had that first day. Tough and immovable.

Hank had a feeling he wasn't going to like what she said.

"Listen, Hank, I ... I, uh, need to tell you something."

No, he definitely was not going to like this.

"Certain information has come to me, and it's not good. It implicates me and Bar T in an investigation by the rodeo circuit."

He swallowed hard.

"About our relationship and your disqualification. I've got to make a choice here, Hank."

He stood, unable to sit still any longer. His anger was rushing up from the depths of his soul to stop her in her tracks.

"Not a goddamn chance! You are throwing away what we have because of this?"

"It's my job, and my father's business, Hank. I can't throw away twelve years of work for a relationship that's been going on a week!"

"You're not throwing it away if you stick to your guns and answer any questions truthfully. You didn't do anything wrong."

She ran her hands through her red hair. "I know that, but the point is, if anybody comes under investigation, *nobody* forgets it. We won't be able to contract our rodeos next year. People don't want to deal with a cheat, even if it's proven that they didn't cheat!"

He clenched his hands into fists. "You're kicking me to the curb for nothing."

"It's not nothing! It's me, it's everything I do, and who I am!"

He felt like someone had taken his heart out of his chest and stomped on it. He was hurting something fierce, but he was also angry as hell.

"It's not who you are, Tessa. It's what you do! I love you, dammit! Are you going to tell me that you don't love me?"

TJ stared at him; her green eyes brimming with unshed tears. Her mouth was open in a small "o" of surprise.

"Don't ask me to give up my career for you."

Hank turned and stalked to the door. The sweet musky smell of sex was making him nauseous. On the other hand, perhaps it was his heart breaking and his soul bleeding.

"I guess that's all there is to say then. We could've had forever, Cinnamon Girl. And you threw it away. For a job. I hope it keeps you warm at night."

He practically yanked the door handle off in his haste to escape her trailer. To escape the selfish choice that she had just made. That robbed them of any future they could have had. Somewhere in heaven, their unborn children wept.

Chapter Ten

Hank Beltane had never been in a worse mood. He wasn't angry or anything like that. He was just as blue as a winter sky. He guessed he was heartbroken. He tried to talk to TJ, but then Nathan Mills from that damn PR firm came by, and with a dismissive nod to Hank, she left with that dandy.

He was getting ready for the rodeo, checking his lasso, securing the buckles on his chaps, and such, but his mind was not there. Neither was his heart. They were both with one redheaded stubborn woman who had taken his heart, then thrown it back at him.

Other cowboys were milling around talking. All of them avoided talking to Hank. The rumors were still running rampant and he was keeping a low profile.

"So, she dumped you, huh?"

Hank turned to look at Ty, who was dressed and ready.

"None of your frigging business."

Ty held up his hands. "Hey, I'm telling you what I heard."

"Jesus, does anyone around here mind their own business?"

"Nope."

Hank nearly snapped the strap on his chaps he yanked so hard, then swore when it bit into his leg.

“I don’t really want to talk about it, Ty.”

“I understand. I just want you to know that I never thought TJ was going to change the decision. No matter what you did. She’s too honest and too stubborn.”

Hank nodded and turned to walk away. He felt a little lost, so he went to see Charlie. The horse that would not be competing in the barrel racing.

* * * * *

Looking out of the control booth, TJ saw Hank down at the fence talking to Ty. Her heart began to pound in her chest, her palms got sweaty, and her eyes stung. After Ty walked away, she saw a spot of color next to Hank and realized he was talking to someone with red hair. It was Lauren O’Shea, that teeny tiny thing. TJ felt sick as jealousy roared through her, sinking talons deep and ripping up and down. She thought she saw Hank smile and laugh.

Dammit, did it have to hurt so much? Why did she have to make the choice between her life and her heart?

TJ realized she couldn’t stay there. If she did, she’d make a complete ass of herself by breaking down and blubbing. She fled out the door with her clipboard in hand. She ran down the stairs and under the bleachers, ignoring the looks people gave her. She hit the side door with a bang and kept running. If she didn’t, the tears would start and they wouldn’t stop.

TJ ran all the way to the trailer, the sounds of the crowd, the cheers, and oohs and aahs followed her as the first events got underway. She should be proud. She should be watching. She should be with Hank, but she’d made her choice. Her heart told her it was the wrong one.

Her father was just walking out of the trailer when TJ stopped. She was out of breath and wheezing like an out of tune accordion. Her father looked at her and slapped her on the back, as if that was going to help her breathe.

“Stop it, Daddy!” She waved his hand away. “Here, take this. It’s yours ... tonight.”

She slapped the clipboard into his chest and kept walking toward her truck.

“Tessa Jean Maguire! Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home, Daddy. I’m going home.”

“Wait, who’s going to run the show tonight?”

TJ didn’t answer. It was his company. He could damn well run the show. She was done. More than done. It was time to go back home to the Bar T Ranch.

* * * * *

Hank was about to climb the fence to the bronc chute, when he stopped and realized there was nothing on earth that he wanted to do less than compete.

Instead, he waved at the official.

“I’m forfeiting. Go on to the next one.”

He walked purposefully toward the control booth. TJ was more important than any rodeo. It was about time she heard it from him. He’d give up this one and every one after it if he could have a chance to make a life with her.

His decision made, his heart felt a hundred pounds lighter. He knew this was the right course, for both of them. He took the steps two at a time, ignoring the families watching the bronc busting. When he reached the control booth, he looked inside and only saw three men. One of them was Big Tom; another was a fancy-dressed man in a suit who glanced at him with curious eyes. The third was the announcer, Bob Sullivan.

He couldn't quell the disappointment that seeped through him to find that she wasn't there. He tapped on the door and Big Tom turned to glare at him as he stomped over and yanked the door open.

"What in the hell do you want? TJ ain't here, thanks to you. She ran outta here an hour ago and left the whole shebang to me. Ungrateful girl!"

Hank felt the worried fingers of panic tickling his neck.

"Do you know where she is?"

"Probably past L.A. by now. She's got a lead foot."

Past L.A.? She was gone? Gone?

"Why did she leave?"

Big Tom threw up his hands. "She got it in her head to start acting like a woman, I guess. I thought you did something."

Hank shook his head. "No, it wasn't me. She told me she didn't want to lose her job or hurt your business, and with the rumors flying about the circuit stepping in ..." He stopped to take in a breath and swallow to release the tightness in his throat. "She chose you and this frigging rodeo."

"Good choice."

That's when Hank lost his temper. He grabbed hold of the man's shirt and backed him into the glass wall.

"No, it wasn't a good choice. I love her! And I think she loves me! All this shit with the disqualification came between us. We could have had a life together. Now it's gone! It was not a good fucking choice!"

Hank let Big Tom loose and stepped back, trying to get the reins on his anger. He turned and stalked out of the control booth.

Big Tom watched TJ's cowboy barrel his way out of the arena and had to admire him. The man had brass balls coming in there and shaking him like a dog.

He should've taken him down a peg or two, but ... what he said about TJ and her choice ... He had started the rumors about the circuit. He realized that perhaps he had been hasty in starting them. He hadn't meant to hurt TJ, but he had. Badly.

Apparently ruined her chances with her big cowboy, too. Big Tom decided he would try to fix it.

First, he had to figure out this goddamn schedule and pull off the rodeo by himself. Something he hadn't done in twelve years without TJ to help him.

Chapter Eleven

It was Christmas Eve at the Bar T Ranch. The traditional Maguire gathering was in full swing. Every employee, and their families, came for dinner and a party each Christmas Eve to celebrate the success of the rodeo season. TJ was dressed in an emerald green dress that matched her eyes.

It was TJ's favorite party. At least it used to be. She was still licking her wounds from her break-up with Hank. It had been more than a month, but she was still hurting deep down inside. For the children's sake, she kept a smile plastered to her face, but the adults could see past that façade into the misery that lurked behind her eyes.

Her father came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"You're not having any fun, kitten."

His childhood nickname for her hadn't been spoken out loud for at least twenty-five years. She turned and looked at him.

"I'm a helluva big kitten, Daddy."

He smiled. "You're still my kitten."

She shook her head at his foolishness. He got so mushy, like a marshmallow, at Christmas time. He loved to give presents, big ones, and watch people open them.

“Don’t change the subject, TJ. You’re looking real down in the mouth.”

She shrugged. “I’ll get over it. It’s just gonna take some time.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “I know. I ... I got something to tell you, girl. And you’re not going to be happy about it.”

TJ felt her stomach drop. “What is it, Daddy?”

He took her elbow and pulled her out of the great room where everyone was gathered and into the panel lined hallway. The smell of lemon was strong since the cleaning crew had polished the wood in preparation for the party.

Big Tom actually looked uncomfortable and his eyes darted around, never settling on her eyes. She grabbed his arms and forced him to look at her.

“What?”

He actually looked guilty! TJ could almost grin at his expression. She didn’t ever remember him looking guilty.

“It was me.”

“What was you?”

“Um ... the Mission Viejo Rodeo? The rumors about the circuit investigating you over that cowboy. It was me. I spread ’em.”

TJ knew her mouth was hanging open, but she couldn’t close it. There was a pain in her chest that almost forced her to sit down.

Her father? Her father had almost ruined her career? And stolen her chance at happiness with Hank.

“How could you?” she finally whispered.

He looked down and heaved a big sigh.

“It scared me something fierce, Tessa. I thought for sure you were leaving me, leaving Bar T, and all for a cowboy. I ... I panicked. I know it was selfish and mean. But in the end,

when you left, it gave me a kick in the ass that I needed. Running the show that night was the most fun I've had in a long time."

TJ stepped back from him and wrapped her arms around herself. The green velvet of her dress crackled with static electricity when it touched the garland hanging from the doorjamb behind her.

"I'm sorry, kitten. I can't tell you how much. You've been moping around here like a hound dog ever since. I know it ain't right between us yet, but I'm gonna try to make it up to you."

He awkwardly reached out and hugged her briefly. She was stiff as a board and as angry and hurt as she had ever been at her father. He mumbled "I'm sorry" under his breath and went back in the great room.

TJ bit her lip to keep from screaming at him. She wouldn't ruin Christmas Eve because of her father's callous treatment of her. After a few minutes of wrangling with her temper, she went back into the great room, too.

Her father was just announcing that Santa had arrived. It didn't quite register with her until she realized she was staring at her father and he wasn't dressed as Santa. He *always* dressed as Santa.

Instead, a tall stranger was weaving his way through the kids in his merry red outfit and bulging bag of gifts. The kids were all scampering around, trying to see inside the bag; Pablo's daughter Maria was hanging on his leg as he walked. Then he laughed.

TJ almost stumbled. She knew that laugh. Her heart began to pound in earnest. It sure as hell sounded like Hank.

No, she must be hearing things. He was back home in Texas somewhere. He couldn't be in California.

Santa made his way to the big chair by the fifteen-foot Christmas tree that sparkled and shone. She couldn't quite see him for the children packed tightly around him. Knowing she

wouldn't be able to budge them until he'd given out gifts, she waited, albeit impatiently, by the table with the cookies and punch.

Each child received a gift and went squealing away with it clutched in his or her hands. Within five minutes, they all had a box and Santa's bag was empty.

That's when he looked up at her. That's when she saw the familiar blue eyes of Henry Beltane. Her stomach fluttered and her heart was singing. Oh, God, it was Hank.

"I have one more gift!" he yelled. The children all stopped to stare at him. "This one is for Tessa Jean Maguire."

She heard a few of the kids ask who Tessa was. TJ looked at her father who smiled and shrugged at her. This was what he meant by making it up to her. He was the one who had brought Hank here. Who had brought her future back to her.

"Come on, then, Tessa Jean, come get your present!"

The children started chanting her name and like a sleepwalker, she walked toward him. Each step something on her body began to either cry, weep, or jump like a jackrabbit. When she finally reached him, real tears were leaking out her eyes.

He pulled the Santa beard and mustache off with the hat. His beautiful blond hair was in a braid tucked into Santa's suit. His mustache had bits of white fluff stuck to it. He was sweaty from wearing that getup.

She had never seen anything more beautiful in her life.

He took her hand and pulled her down onto his knee.

"What do you want for Christmas, Tessa Jean?"

His eyes were full of love, hope, and joy. She knew the answer now.

"A cowboy."

TJ threw her arms around her Christmas present and kissed him for all she was worth. She didn't even bother to listen to the screeches and squeals behind her. Santa had brought her what she had always wanted.

 THE END 

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Beth Williamson lives just outside of Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband and two sons. Born and raised in New York, she holds a B.F.A. in writing from New York University. Beth has worked as a newspaper reporter, a poet, a novelist, and a technical writer.

Beth loves cowboys (long, hard, and packing), and anything from the Old West. She writes historical as well as contemporary erotic romance and romance. Look for strong women who know their minds and are not afraid to show it. No wimpy, whining, weeping heroines within a thousand miles! She professes a weakness, however, for alpha men and their controlling personalities. You can learn more about her work on her website at <http://www.bethwilliamson.com>.