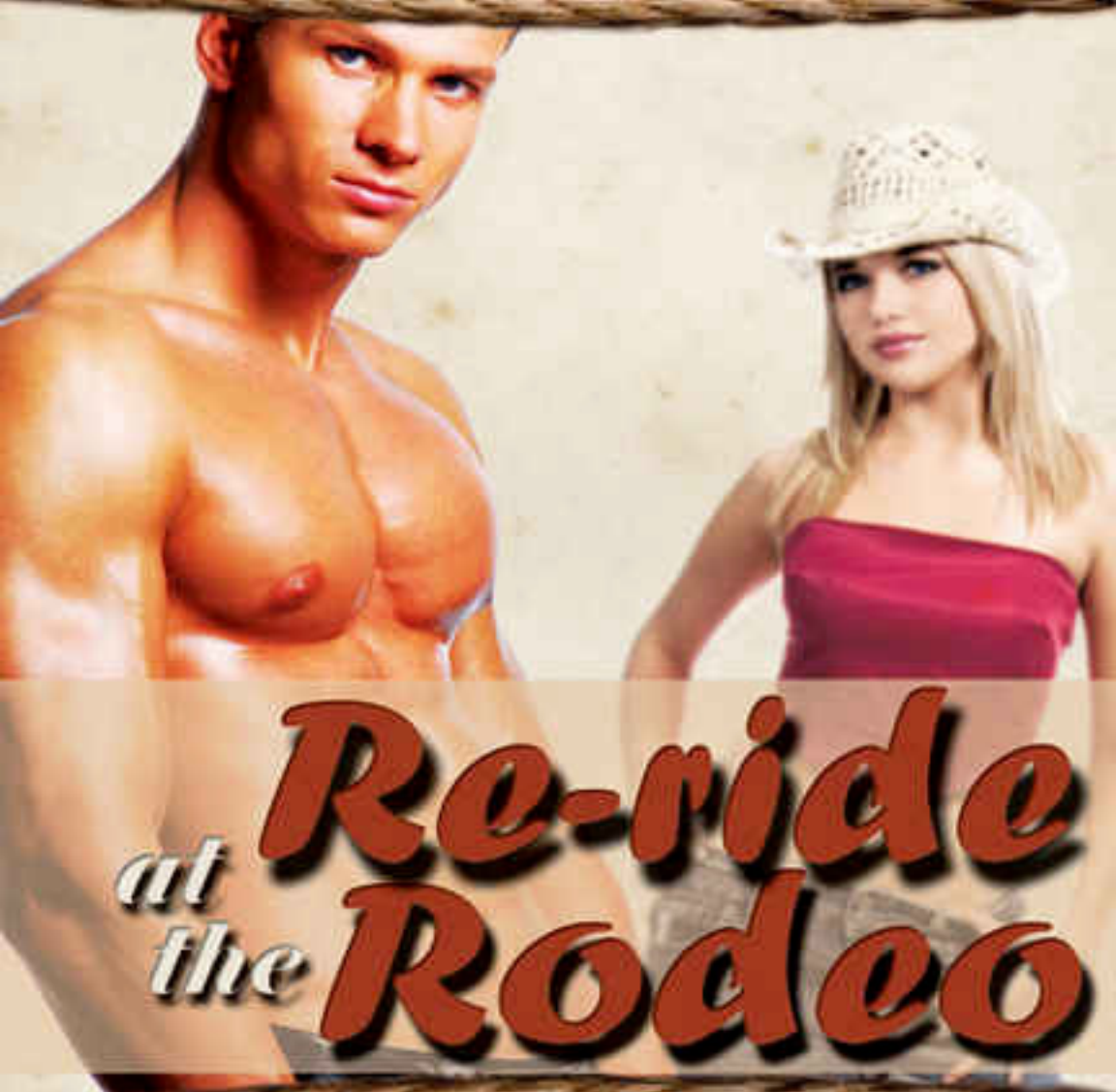


From the Series  
**WAYBACK TEXAS**



*at the* **Re-ride  
Rodeo**

Anne Carrole

Re-Ride At The Rodeo [Wayback Texas Series]  
*by Anne Carrole*

**The Wild Rose Press**

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*by Anne Carrole*

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Re-ride at the Rodeo

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## **Dedication**

To my own urban cowboy, my husband Michael.

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## **Chapter One**

"There he goes, ladies and gents. Tyler Wright has done it. An eighty-five. That's about as good as it gets," the announcer blared over the loudspeaker.

The cheers from the crowd were deafening, but Dusty didn't care to notice. She'd heard it all too many times before. Since the start, just about any weekend from March to November, it seemed she'd been at the rodeo arena. First watching from the stands. Now as barkeep handling the beer stall.

There was no escaping the rodeo if you lived in Wayback. It was the only game in town except for Friday nights at the high school field during football season. It was also a major source of the town's revenue. One way or another, if you lived in Wayback, you were connected to the rodeo. She was connected in more ways than she cared to count. More ways than she cared to remember.

The musty odors of horse and hay wafted through the walkway, competing with the scents of spicy tacos and refried beans emanating from Tito's food stand next door. Her stomach rumbled, a reminder it would be a while until closing time.

Tucking in a strand of blonde hair that had loosened from her bun, Dusty wiped down the scarred Formica counter with a damp gray rag. She watched the few patrons who had left their seats to use the bathroom and tried to guess their stories. It was a game she played to help with the boredom.

The old man and the young boy exiting were probably grandpa and grandson. The two noisy towheaded adolescents entering were most likely brothers.

Few people had ventured from their seats since the final go-round for saddle bronc was up, and that was a particular favorite with the Wayback crowd. Once or twice a summer, the rodeo extended over the whole weekend to pull in the tourist trade. Friday night was the qualifying go-rounds for everything but barrel racing and bull riding. Today, Saturday, was the finals for those events with qualifying for bull riding the evening closer. Sunday afternoon was barrel racing and bull riding finals.

Local rider Tyler Wright had just scored big for the home crowd. After the final bronc had been ridden, they would come pouring out for refreshments before the bull riders took their turn. Life was nothing if not predictable in Wayback.

"Holy cow, folks. That was some ride from newcomer Clay Tanner. He's posted an eighty-seven on Miss Popularity to slide into first place. What a night..." Announcer Allan Greeley's voice faded into the din of applause.

Eighty-seven? Even she had to admit that was a good score. And Miss Popularity was a rank bronc. That cowboy had some grit. But grit alone was not enough to make it in this world. She knew that from personal experience.

A hot breeze blew wisps of hair around her face and into her eyes. She smoothed them back, trying to tame the fine strands and grateful for nature's air conditioning because even the West Texas wind could die in the heat.



She lined up the plastic cups and began to squirt beer from the tap into them, a few drops landing on her. She always smelled like beer after a night at the rodeo. Once the standings of the riders were called, she'd have her hands full keeping up with demand if she hadn't prepared. The rodeo crowd liked its beer. No doubt the Blue Bug would pack them in again tonight after the competition was over.

Fifteen minutes later she was serving the last man in line. An impatient son-of-a-gun, he clicked and clucked and drummed his fingers while she poured his drink. The announcer was already calling for the first bull.

"Here." The barrel-chested cowboy slammed down a five dollar bill. "Keep the change," he growled and hustled back to his seat, gulping the beer as if he'd just come off the trail.

She rang up the sale and slid the change into the pocket of her worn denim skirt. Something to be said for impatience.

A few people scurried by, Coke and popcorn spilling from their hands. Dusty wiped the perspiration from her face and stole a look at her reflection in the shiny metal of the fountain.

She hated wearing her hair up. It was long and, when clipped on top of her head, it was heavy. She squinted at her blurry image and readjusted the loosened clip.

"Personally, I'd take it down." The unfamiliar voice was rich and husky, its deep timbre sending a little shimmer through her.

Taking time to get the clip right, she turned around. A tall, lean cowboy with slate-blue eyes was giving her the once-

over. His lips curved into an unexpected smile. The sexiest she'd seen in awhile. A long while.

Staring into those clear blue orbs framed by dark lashes too thick to be wasted on a man, threw her a little off-kilter, like her knees would give out any second. Years of being a waitress had taught her how to school her features into an expressionless stare, even as his gaze traveled from her face to her waist and back up again. He lingered at her small chest for an extra split second. About all the attention most men thought it was worth.

"How many?" she asked in her most business-like voice. No way would she let him see he'd had any effect on her. That handsome boyish face, shaded by a black Stetson, no doubt had left countless broken hearts along the way and was used to unbalancing women. He wouldn't get any satisfaction from her.

"How many times have I taken down a woman's hair?" That smile became lopsided. Those eyes sparkled. And her heart skipped a beat.

Damn he was hot. Slim hiped and nicely formed, he was too tall to be a rodeo rider. The most successful ones topped out at 5'10". Most were shorter, like her father had been. Had to do with the center of gravity or something. Between her mother and father, she was lucky she'd made it to 5'4" herself. But the stranger no doubt had something to do with the rodeo and that was enough to make her not interested.

She fought the smile forming on her lips at his question. No need to encourage. "How many *beers*?" she said,

emphasizing the last word. She slapped a napkin onto the counter ready to do more.

"Just one. I'm celebrating. Alone it seems." He gave her a "feel sorry for me" look. She didn't.

"What are you celebrating?" she said, knowing she shouldn't be continuing the conversation, but curiosity was often the bane of her existence. She filled a plastic cup and placed it on the napkin.

He leaned both elbows on the counter. A firm butt jutted behind to fill out his worn Wranglers. Along with the plaid, pearl-buttoned shirt, he had on the uniform of a cowboy. Based on the weathered cast of the fabric, she figured he might be for real rather than a wannabe *tourista*, even if he wasn't a contender.

"I just won saddle bronc."

His smile lit big, showing off snow white teeth and a very kissable mouth. It would definitely be someone other than her enjoying those full lips now that he'd confessed he was a rough stock rider. Not that she'd had any intention of trying, or any hope of success. She wasn't the kind of woman that guys like him went for.

She gave him a once over for effect before commenting. "You're too tall to be a bronc rider."

"So I've been told. But then Dan Mortensen's been an NFR saddle bronc qualifier multiple times and he's close to six feet. And, of course, I did just win a couple grand."

Wayback had just upped its prize money to try to attract more cowboys. With the changes in the PRCA tour, the town fathers were afraid the best riders might neglect Wayback if it

didn't provide more incentive. It had caused quite a ruckus until Corey and Tiffany Donovan, local ranchers, had agreed to guarantee the additional money.

"True, but he's the exception."

"That proves the rule?"

This time she couldn't help the smile.

"There it is." The cowboy chuckled, those blue eyes of his lighting right up. "I thought maybe you didn't know how."

"I know how about a lot of things." Those words snapped out before she could stop them. Last thing she wanted was this cowboy to think she was flirting. She wasn't into puffing up cowboy egos. Especially at her own expense.

He brought the beer to his lips while his gaze held hers. Darn if she could look away. "I bet you do darlin'." He took a sip and set the beer down. "This place on your T-shirt..." he stared at the small rise of her chest where bold blue letters spelled out Blue Bug Saloon. "You'll be working there tonight?"

Heat stole up her face as his gaze locked on her body. She'd never been well-endowed like her best friend Annagrace. Dusty was tiny—small-boned, her mother called it. Another name for barely there. She wasn't the kind of girl Texas cowboys hungered for. Not that she wanted this one to hunger for her. But she didn't appreciate the reminder his stare sent.

She waited for him to look up. No way was she going to have a conversation with his hat.

When he finally raised his gaze, she answered. "No."

"Just run the concession?"

This was getting beyond mindless conversation. *Didn't anyone else want a beer?* She stared out at the almost empty walkway. The announcer's voice was still booming from the box and cheers were heralding good bull rides.

"Only Saturdays," she said. "That's four dollars."

He fished in his pocket causing the denim to stretch over private places. Damn. Don't go there, she silently cautioned her eyes. Too bad they weren't listening.

"If I go to the Blue Bug tonight, will I at least see you there?" he asked, giving her the kind of smile that promised a good time. He held out a five dollar bill. "Keep the change."

"Thank you," she said, ringing him up. "And unlikely."

He frowned for the first time. He obviously hadn't expected that answer. Good looking as he was, she imagined few women said no to him.

"I'd appreciate the company unless you're in a relationship or something. Maybe even then." He flashed another grin but this time it didn't reach his eyes. He was undoubtedly looking for a reason for her refusal.

She wouldn't lie to give him the satisfaction of an easy out and she wasn't fooled into thinking he really wanted to be with her. He was just placing a safe bet in case he couldn't score with anyone else. She was all too familiar with the routine. She'd show up and he'd already have his arm around a woman with ample curves in all the right places and he'd forget he'd ever met Dusty. Not that she would have agreed under any circumstances. He was a rodeo cowboy after all. "No relationship. Just not interested."

"Ouch." He straightened to his full height, a frown creasing his rugged forehead.

Movement behind him caught her eye. Finally someone else was coming for a beer.

A wiry young cowboy sauntered up and slapped her customer on the back. "Hey, Clay. Thought I'd find you out here." He was shorter than his friend. His denim jeans and chambray shirt were dusty, his broad brow sweaty under the beige cowboy hat. "Where there's a pretty woman, that's where you'll find Clay. Howdy ma'am." He tipped his hat and settled it back on his blond head of hair. "Don't believe anything he's told you."

She graced the newcomer with a smile. He'd just confirmed her instincts. "Beer?"

"Please," he answered, giving her a huge grin in return. He wasn't handsome like his friend but he had an open, honest face.

"I'll buy," Clay called from behind as she drew the beer. When she turned around, a five dollar bill was on the counter.

She set the beer down and retrieved the money. The cowboy said his thanks, keeping his mouth in a grin.

"Keep the change but at least tell me your name." Clay's hands were keeping his hips company.

She rang up the sale, staring at the register rather than at him or his friend. "Dusty. Dusty Morgan."

"For your hair, I'm guessing."

She glanced up. He was smiling at her again. She had to give it to him for persistence—and for guessing right. She nodded.

"I'm Clay Tanner and this here grinning fool is Jesse Blair." He reached out a hand. She could do nothing but grasp it. His grip was strong, his touch warm. When he released, she felt tingles clear through her arm. *Lordy*. Jesse shot his hand forward and she gave it a quick shake—and felt nothing.

"How long is it?" Clay asked, staring at her hair. With it clipped haphazardly to her head, she must look a sight.

She glanced at Jesse. Clay's friend was sipping his beer, watching the by-play over the rim of his drink and just as interested.

She shook her head. "I've never measured."

"Well where does it come to?" Clay's eyes were like magnets, drawing her so she couldn't look away.

She swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry from all the scrutiny. "The middle of my back."

Both men let out a long whistle, breaking whatever spell had been cast on her. With that reprieve she grabbed the rag and started to wipe the counter. "If you boys don't mind, I've got to set up before the last bull rider gets thrown."

His friend tipped his hat again. "You'll be at the Blue Bug tonight?"

"I already asked her and she's not interested." Clay scowled as if he was seriously annoyed.

"Can't imagine your charm turned her against us," his friend said with a chuckle. "Hell, most of the time he's got to peel the women off him."

"Anyone ever tell you that you talk too much, Jess?"

"All the time." Jesse's brown eyes danced with mischief. "Don't matter though."

"Are we staying 'til tomorrow?" Clay questioned, still obviously irritated.

"Yep, got a seventy-nine. Guess you weren't watching. Had better things to view." He sent a wink her way.

"Tomorrow will be the finals. If I can hang on, I should be in the money."

Dusty could hear the sound of marching feet coming her way. The crowd was moving.

"Well, bye, Miss Dusty Morgan." Clay drawled her name like a caress, sending a shiver up her spine despite the warm weather. His smile said he knew it. "If you change your mind, you'll know where to find us tonight." Both men lifted their hats.

She watched as they walked away, her mind concentrating on the easy, rolling gait of the tall one as the breeze teased at the shirt stretched across his broad back. Their spurs jangled along with her nerves.

Why she felt so unsettled she couldn't say. They were rodeo cowboys. She'd been around them her whole life—one just like the other. She'd always been immune to their charms, vaccinated by life. So why had this one gotten under her skin? Before she could answer her own question, the line started to form.

\* \* \* \*

"What were you doing flirting with a sweet thing like that?" Jesse asked as they headed toward the truck, past the other concessions and the medical tent. He gulped his beer down as they walked.



"Sweet? You should have been there earlier. I felt like I'd been skewered."

Jesse shrugged. "Maybe you've lost your touch. She was accommodating enough to me."

"Lost my touch?" Hell, he hadn't lost his touch. Just the other night he'd ended up in a curvy red-head's bed back near home.

Jesse snorted. "She ain't your type anyway. She's mine though. Short and sweet with just the right amount of sass to keep things interesting. Did you see those big blue eyes and that cute dusting of freckles across her nose? Woman has a face of an angel with lips made for sin. That's the kind of woman you marry, Clay. Not dally with." Jesse batted a fly away from his beer. "Wish you hadn't gotten her all bent out of shape before I got there. Besides I'm sure the Blue Bug will be filled with ones who fit your physical requirements. Me, I'll take that slim little body and those slender legs stretching between the teeny jean skirt and those snakeskin boots, any old day."

What had he been thinking? Jess was right. She wasn't his type. He liked them with lots of curves, big peaks that overflowed when you palmed them, valleys you could sink into, and a welcoming attitude. Dusty Morgan was slim and tiny and delicate and feisty as all get out. Still, he wasn't used to women refusing him. And what was with that smile she'd sent Jesse's way?

"Your type or not, I'd bet you wouldn't have any better luck landing in her bed, even if you had seen her first," Clay challenged.

Jesse didn't have much luck with the ladies. In Clay's mind it had more to do with the man's mouth than anything else. Jesse believed in telling everyone what was on his mind, whether they wanted to know or not.

His friend pulled up short in front of their battered Ford pick-up, sending gravel from the parking lot flying. "How much?"

"How much what?"

"How much would you bet?"

"It's just a saying, Jesse."

His friend speared him with a sharp glance. "I'm serious. You think no woman can resist you. Well, I'm betting this gal can. And based on the smile she shot me, I think I have a chance of besting you with this one."

Clay shook his head. Jesse was a nice guy, but he was out of his league. Of course, Clay reminded himself, she had shot Jesse one hell of a smile, while for some reason she hadn't gone for Clay. Yet. "We're only going to be here until tomorrow."

"If you're going to win all the money you need, we've got to come back here for the next few weekends. We'll have to do it now before the ranch work picks up."

Clay had been thinking that, too. And he needed the money. Bad. Jesse had goaded him into coming to Wayback. He never thought he'd be able to compete, given that he'd only ever entered ranch rodeos as part of a team. But saddle bronc was something he knew, something he'd been born to on the Double T. Something he'd at least have a chance with. Since he'd won, he was determined to keep trying until he got

all the money he needed. But rodeo was one thing; playing around with the feelings of a local girl was another.

Though he tried to keep all of his encounters light, sometimes women fell hard for him. There had been times when he'd had to hurt someone when all he'd wanted was a good time. Dusty Morgan came off hard on the outside but there was something about her, maybe the look in her eyes when she told him no, that said she wasn't a woman to be trifled with, that she'd had some pain in her life. He didn't want to be the cause of any more.

"What are you proposing? That we spend time between go-rounds trying to get some girl and when *I* get her, which I would of course, I just throw her back? Hardly seems decent." Clay fished in his pockets for the keys to the pick-up.

Jess chuckled. "Well then, you won't mind if I try for her."

He shouldn't mind. "She has 'don't touch' written all over her."

"Guess you're just out of your element with a female who doesn't immediately fall in your arms. You know nothing about courting a woman."

Courting a woman? Were they living in the nineteenth century? "I bet I know how to go after a woman better than you. You, my friend, should worry. You've been out of circulation so long, you'll need more help than is available," Clay shot back.

"You're on. Winner not only gets a fine time with the little lady, but a hundred dollar bonus from the loser." Jesse leaned against the door of the truck, gulping the last of his beer, apparently waiting for Clay's reply.

It didn't feel right betting on such a thing. But if he didn't bet, it would be admitting that the woman didn't like him and while she'd been downright prickly, he had a distinct feeling she wasn't as immune as she wanted him to believe. Though she wasn't exactly his type, he'd sure like to see that hair tumbling down around her while he kissed her breathless. If Ms. Morgan was just interested in a good time, why not with him rather than Jess? And if she wasn't, neither of them would score, so no foul.

"Fine. One hundred dollars for the first one who takes that ride with her. But no promising marriage or anything permanent to get her there. She has to come fully aware this is a non-committed relationship." That was only fair since, left to his own devices, Jesse would be popping the question after the first kiss. The guy was a hopeless romantic. Someone like Dusty just might fall for his lines.

Jesse arched a brow. "I've sworn off proposing. Don't think I can take any more rejection." For once the man looked serious. Clay knew the last girl had blasted a hole in the man's heart the size of a cannon ball. Jesse had been convinced she'd been the one from the moment he spied her. Too bad the woman had been just marking time until her fiancé got home from Iraq.

"As long as we're clear. It's just a good time for both parties, nothing more."

"We're clear. I'm putting that hundred toward a new pair of hand-tooled boots. Saw some pretty ones in the store window in town." Jesse was a bit of a dude where boots and

hats and buckles were concerned. Had to have the best. On a cowhand's salary that was tough to achieve.

"Let's check out the Blue Bug. Even if the lady in question isn't going to be there, I've a hankering for some buffalo wings." Clay downed the last of his beer and threw the plastic cup in a nearby trash can. If he didn't claim that hundred dollars, it would be because the woman didn't want a good time and Jesse wouldn't be getting any either. That was a surprisingly comforting thought.

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## Chapter Two

"Hey Joe," Dusty called as the back door of the Blue Bug slammed behind her. She stepped into Big Joe's office. The place was jammed with paper on every surface. Dusty always wondered how the man ran a business. But the Blue Bug, being the only honky-tonk in town, was a popular spot, more so on the weekends with the rodeo crowd, which she hoped to avoid tonight.

Joe sat behind the desk, the tall stacks of documents almost obscuring his large body. He lifted his head and gave her a weary look.

"Good day or not?" Joe glanced at the cloth bag in her hand.

"Good day. We broke twenty-five hundred again. Next weekend with Heritage Days we should do even better."

"Good tips?"

She nodded as she set the bag on top of a stack of folders.

Joe's head bobbed in satisfaction. "Good. Sure you don't want to work Sunday for me? Karen's got sitter problems."

Her mind flashed to the two cowboys. She'd told the tall one she only worked Saturdays. If she came in on Sunday he'd surely think it was because of him. Ego types like him always thought it was about them. Yet she didn't have a blessed thing to do tomorrow except sleep late and the rodeo wouldn't interfere with that. And she sure could use the money.

"If she can't get a sitter, I'll work." Or maybe she should sit for Karen. But those four rambunctious boys were more than she was up to handling right now.

Joe smiled. "Thanks, Dusty. You're as good as your mama was."

"Thanks." Her mother had worked for Joe to put herself through college. Dusty, though, just helped on Saturdays with the rodeo. During the week she worked at the Mercy Creek Ranch, had every summer since she was fourteen. She was looking for a teaching position for the fall, again following in her mother's footsteps—at least where career was concerned. She'd definitely not be traveling the same path to romance. "I'll be going then."

"Annagrace is in the bar. Told me to let you know she *needs* to see you." Joe looked at her from under dark bushy brows. "Emphasis is hers."

Though Annagrace Ballew was a year younger, they'd been best friends since they'd found each other in Sunday school. Annagrace always wanted Dusty to join her at the honky-tonk on Saturday nights but Dusty had no interest in strutting around the floor with a bunch of hound dogs. Her life would start again when she got her teaching job, preferably away from Wayback and its memories. Right now she needed time to recover from Bradley's defection.

Nodding her good-by to Joe, she strode down the hall, past the noisy kitchen toward the bar door and more noise. Before opening, she peered through the diamond glass window. Place was jumping tonight, two deep at the bar and the dance floor was already filled with just the juke box playing. It was

still early, just past eight, and the band wasn't due till nine. Hopefully it was too early for those rodeo cowboys. Maybe they went to the Bluebonnet Café to get some chow first.

She pushed open the door and the noisy conversations combined with Tim McGraw on the juke box and the clanking of glass and porcelain to drown out any further thought. She scanned the bar and found Annagrace perched on a stool plumb in the middle, glass in hand. Like her older sister Gina, Annagrace was dark and voluptuous with a healthy dose of baby fat, just what cowboys liked. She was rarely without a partner from the rodeo crowd. In a committed relationship with a business major from Austin, Annagrace was in it strictly for the dancing.

"Hey," Dusty shouted above the noise.

Annagrace grinned. She was wearing a white camisole that barely covered her essentials and a flirty little black skirt that showed off her legs and red boots. Red boots seemed a signature of the Ballew girls. "Hey yourself, cowgirl." Her smile was the knowing kind, like she had a secret.

"You wanted to see me?" Even shouting, Dusty could barely hear herself above the crowd noise.

"Meet anyone interesting today?" Annagrace's grin broadened like a Cheshire cat's.

How the heck did the girl know? "Why?"

"They're here. Both of them. One cuter than the next. And they were asking about you. Both of them."

Dusty did a quick scan. Came up empty. *Phew*. They must have gone.

"There, in the booth behind you and to your left."



Dusty felt herself flush as she turned. There the two of them sat. With crisp white shirts on, they were more duded up than when she'd seen them last. Clay's arm was around Lyssa Callahan, a stacked brunette, and Jesse's arm was around Patti-Pie Murphy, a blue-eyed blonde. Both men were leaning in close to talk. Well they hadn't lost any time. The two women were friends of Annagrace's older sister. Dusty turned quickly back to Annagrace, lest those cowboys spot her and think she'd come for them.

"They seem well-occupied," Dusty shouted.

"Yeah, well, they were asking a lot of questions about you. They seemed really interested."

"And just how did they find you?"

Annagrace shrugged.

"Let me guess, the brown-haired one asked you to dance?"

Annagrace nodded.

"They're players, Annagrace. Weekend cowboys who are looking for a good time. Rodeo cowboys." And that said it all.

"So have a little fun. Take your mind off of things. I'll take the one you don't want for a whirl."

"They're with Pattie-Pie and Lyssa now."

"No they're not. They just headed for the bar."

"And I'm headed home." Dusty had to get out of there before they saw her.

Before she could blink, Paul, one of the bartenders, strolled over and plunked down two long-neck beers. "Guys at the end sent these with their compliments."

Hell. She'd been spotted. "Tell them no thanks—from me at least." Annagrace already had the bottle to her lips and was signaling her appreciation.

"Come on Dusty," said Paul, a grin on his weathered face. "If I take it back that means I'll have to refund their money. Joe wouldn't appreciate that, now would he?"

She felt like some saloon girl in an old western movie, shilling for the boss. "Fine." She took the beer and downed a gulp. She wasn't a beer kind of girl—and in a Texas town that was saying something. Since in most places that was the only thing served, she drank it but she didn't particularly enjoy it.

She would not turn around and say thank you, though. She hadn't asked for it, didn't want it, and certainly didn't want to encourage them.

"Ohhh. Here they come," Annagrace said in a voice that sounded almost like a squeal.

Dusty felt like running. But she'd never been a coward. So what? These cowboys would leave tomorrow and she'd never see them again. If they wanted to waste their money on a beer, so be it. She took another slug.

"Hey Dusty," Jesse said, pulling in close. "Annagrace."

Clay nodded and pushed beside Annagrace. Staring down at her from under the brim of his hat, the shadows crossing his face took away the boyishness and left the chiseled planes of a fine-looking man. A man with a self-satisfied smirk riding his face. Damn.

"You up for a dance, Dusty?" Jesse said and held out his hand. Dusty glanced at Clay. Did she imagine it or was there a dare in his eye?

"Sure," she said and plopped her bottle on the bar. "Why not?"

Jesse knew his country dancing. He twirled her around the floor like they'd been dancing together for years, a big old grin on his face the whole time. With Jesse keeping her in constant motion, she could only catch glimpses of Clay talking to Annagrace. Clay may not have asked her to dance but surely Annagrace would have asked him. So why weren't they?

The music shifted to a slow dance and before Dusty could form the words to suggest they part, Jesse had her in his arms. He pressed her to him, his thin body hard and strong. She looked into darkened brown eyes. Nothing. She felt nothing and that was good. He was a nice guy, no doubt. But fortunately, there were no sparks. She didn't want sparks with a rough stock rider. Not ever. Slowly, she relaxed.

"So tell me, Dusty, what do you do when you're not at the rodeo?" Jesse breathed in her ear. "Besides having the most beautiful hair I've ever touched."

She'd let her hair down as soon as she was done at the rodeo. Naturally wavy, blonde and long, it was her best feature—though her mother was constantly at her to cut it off, claiming it was too much for such a little girl. Bradley had liked it—only not enough.

"I just graduated Texas Tech and I'm hoping to get a teaching position come fall. I've been interviewing."

"Teacher?" He pulled back to look at her. "I knew it."

"What do you mean you knew it?" She stared at him again and still didn't feel a thing. Not a thing.

"Well, I didn't *know* it. But being a teacher, well, it seems right for you."

Seems right? Was he saying she was predictable? A certain type? A staid teacher type? She decided to change the subject. "What about you?"

"I'm a cowhand. Work the Double T ranch near Marfa."

"So you're a real cowboy?"

He chuckled. "Yes ma'am, and proud of it."

"What about your friend?"

"Ah, not a cowhand, exactly. But definitely a cowboy." Jesse seemed reluctant to say more.

"A bronc rider though?"

"Yep. He's definitely that. His destiny is busting broncs." And breaking hearts she'd bet.

"Your hair smells nice," he whispered in her ear.

That had to be the tritest line she'd heard in a while. "Thanks," she muttered as the music stopped. The band would be going on in a few minutes as it was closing in on nine. Time for her to exit, especially if she would be working tomorrow.

"I've got to get going. It was nice to see you again, Jesse," she said, smoothing her skirt.

He grabbed her arm. "Can't you stay a little while longer? I'd like to spend some time with you. For real."

Well, he was good at sincerity, she'd give him that.

"No. I can't. Good luck tomorrow." She tossed him a smile as he let go of her.

Without bothering to say good-bye to Annagrace, who was in conversation with Clay, she headed toward the front door.

For some reason she just had to get outside and garner some fresh air. And go home.

"Hey Barney," Dusty called to the older man stationed in the foyer to collect the cover charges. Pushing open the double glass doors, she breathed in the night air as the blue neon sign flashed above. It was dry and dusty and hot as hell during the summer, but Wayback had clean air and starlit skies, and it was home.

Through the full parking lot, she made a beeline for her shiny silver pick-up, parked toward the back. She'd bought it with her own money, the start she needed toward independence and a new beginning. Walking across the gravel, she kicked at the ground with her boots sending a spray of pebbles and dust in all directions. She did it again and again until she reached the truck. Fingers on the cool metal door handle, she stilled when she heard her name called.

She turned around to the sight of Clay bearing down on her. Her heart skipped a beat. His white shirt almost glowed in the moonlight while the rest of his body was etched in black against the gray night sky. He moved with the rolling gait of the cowboy he was, all fluid motion and power, a trim muscled torso on long lean legs. He held up his hands in surrender. "Don't I count? You gave Jesse a dance. Don't I get one?"

He sure was a hunk of a man. Her heart thumped hard inside her chest. She couldn't tell his expression with the brim of the Stetson shadowing his face but she guessed it wasn't a happy one.

"I didn't know you wanted one," she managed to get out, just as he stopped short in front of her.

His looming height made her feel small. She looked up at a set of unyielding lips, midnight blue eyes and the gray shadow of a beard etching his strong jaw.

"I want." His voice had a husky timbre to it. He reached for her and she endured the slight brush of his hand against her shoulder as he fingered strands of her hair. Goosebumps danced where he touched. "Your hair is down. I knew it would be worth seeing."

She couldn't move.

He smoothed a tendril back behind her shoulder with the barest touch. "I'll take this instead." He bent down.

He was going to kiss her. She knew it and still she rooted in place. Firm lips gently breezed across hers. The taste of hops filled her senses. His lips brushed again as his hand touched her shoulder and tugged her closer. She tingled clear to her toes. His lips pressed harder against hers, seeking a response. She opened and his tongue slid inside. A whimper of surrender escaped. He reacted to the sound by pressing her head closer to him, holding her for his taking as his mouth devoured her. She barely noticed the stubble of his beard scraping her cheek.

"So sweet," he mumbled against her lips. Strong fingers threaded through her hair. Hot and hungry, he deepened the kiss as he fitted her between his legs and moved against her like he couldn't get enough, like he was ready to swallow her up. He rubbed his hard length over her center.

Her legs weakened.

Instinctively, she wrapped her arms around his neck, skimmed her fingers through the hair that feathered his collar, and hung on, giving into the desire for a connection with someone warm and willing. Need pounded within her. It had been such a long while since Bradley. Clay's hands, hot and heavy, moved to her waist as his mouth drank her in. One hand slid across her back and pressed her nearer, while the other inched near her breasts. His thumb rubbed against her nipple. A jolt of sensation shot through her, and her mind switched on.

*What was she doing?* She pulled away, breaking the kiss, and glared at the man breathing heavily before her. A smug expression sat on his face. He was a player and he had been playing her like a virtuoso strumming a fiddle.

She resisted the urge to smack him.

"That was some kiss," he said, his hand rubbing his chin as if remembering.

*Run*, her mind screamed out to her, even as her weak body thrummed.

Turning, she wrenched open the truck door. The overhead light flashed on causing her to blink. Just what she needed, a spotlight on herself.

"Where are you going? You can't leave now, Dusty." His tone was one of disbelief. "We've started something and I damn well would like to finish it."

What she didn't want to do and would not do was start something with a rodeo cowboy who was just looking for another notch on his belt.

On rubbery limbs, she climbed into the cab and reached to close the door. He held the door open with a straight arm as the fabric of his white shirt bunched taut over hard muscle. Damn.

"I came on too strong. I'm sorry." He flashed a grin that surely had landed him in more than one woman's bed. "Not about the kiss though."

She tugged at the door. It was immovable. "I'm leaving. Before I have any more regrets."

The glow from the interior light spotlighted those dark blue eyes and the frown riding his handsome face. "You weren't having regrets during that kiss, honey."

"Well, I am now." She pulled the door again, her sweaty palms almost causing her hand to slip. This time he moved out of the way. The door clanged shut.

"You can't run from it."

She fumbled for the keys in her pocket.

"I'll see you tomorrow. At the rodeo?" he said through the closed window.

She'd be working tomorrow, captive behind that stand. "I'll be there, but I've got to work." She started the engine. He stepped back. She shifted into reverse, checked the rearview, and pulled out. As she swung onto the street she checked the rearview again. He was still standing there, framed by the glow of the moon. A tall, dark hunk of a man with hands on his hips and his legs apart. A gunfighter's pose.

She pulled up to the stoplight and leaned her forehead against the wheel. Hard vinyl greeted her skin. What had she been thinking? That was the problem. She hadn't been. He'd



ambushed her, and so had the thousand sensations and feelings he'd managed to stir with just one kiss. She'd never been kissed like that. By anyone. Ever. Even Bradley.

She startled at the sound of a car horn behind her. The light was green. She gave the truck gas and shifted into gear. She wound along the familiar streets to Peachtree Lane and turned into her driveway. Flicking on the cab light, she checked her reflection in the mirror. A face with puffy lips and skin chafed red from the stubble of his five o'clock shadow looked back at her. He was a rodeo cowboy. A player. And, unfortunately, one hell of a good kisser. Couldn't help but wonder what else he was good at.

\* \* \* \*

She'd left. Clay couldn't believe it even as he watched the dust kick up from her departing truck. He walked back into the honky-tonk on weakened legs. Damn. With a nod to the old guy standing sentry, he stood on the threshold of the saloon. The band was in place and blasting out a Shania Twain tune. Bodies were hopping, feet were stomping, and Jesse was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Annagrace. Damn again.

Clay leaned against the wall right inside the door and tried to think. With the music blaring and his boots in line to get stomped on, it was damned hard. So was he. That kiss had brought him to a salute in less than a minute. And she wasn't even his type.

Her slight body pressing against him had him wanting to go slow, to be gentle and tender. Not at all how he usually

felt when he was looking to have a good time with a woman. As she'd deepened that kiss, lust had rolled through him like plains thunder. He'd thought he'd made a sale. He'd started to play with those little tips of hers, hoping she'd feel the same thing, and instead she backed up like a horse facing fire. And ran just as fast.

He knew she'd enjoyed it. Something was spooking her. Maybe Jesse was right and she wasn't a woman after just a good time. Too bad. She had a sweet passion about her that would have been a lot of fun to taste. Just so long as Jesse didn't taste it, Clay could live with a missed opportunity. Of course there was always tomorrow.

"Hey," Jesse slid in next to him, back hugging the wall.

"Where you been?" Clay shouted over the blistering decibel level.

"Men's room. See you didn't convince her to dance." Jesse's smile was broad and irritating.

He just shook his head. He didn't want to discuss Dusty. He hated the fact Jesse had even placed his arms around her. "You ready?"

"Hell no. You won saddle bronc, remember? Cause for celebration. There's a pool room in the back and a lot of women who like to dance."

Clay looked around. Everyone was paired off. One couple in particular was showing everyone how it was done. He just wasn't up for it.

"I'm going back to the motel. Feeling a little stiff after that ride."

Re-Ride At The Rodeo [Wayback Texas Series]  
*by Anne Carrole*

Jesse scowled. "Geez. When did you stop being fun?" He batted his hat against his leg. "Let's go. I just better make some money tomorrow."

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### Chapter Three

Dusty wondered if this man was ever going to leave her be. After buying a beer, Clay had staked a spot against the thin pillar at the corner of the concession stand and there he'd stayed through the crush of patrons clamoring to get a drink before the bull riding finals started.

There were still three people in line and she had four minutes left before the clowns would warm up the audience for the big event. But for reasons she didn't care to explore, her mind wasn't on work right now.

She took the orders and filled their cups, operating on automatic pilot as her mind churned. With his tight black T-shirt stretched over all those muscles and those softly worn denim jeans hugging his butt, Clay ruined her concentration for anything else.

Hadn't he gotten the message last night? When he hadn't come in with the entrance of the afternoon crowd, and she hadn't seen him during barrel racing, she was sure he'd stayed down with Jesse and the other bull riders and she was fine with that. Really she was. More than fine seeing how she didn't want any of what he was offering—a one night stand. Though she was sure the memory of a one night stand with Clay Tanner would keep her warm all the way through to her old age, if that kiss of his was any sample.

There was no way she would risk it. What if she liked it? No, there was no *what if* about it. There could be no future—not with a rodeo cowboy—so why even venture down that

path? She wanted a future with someone. She wanted the house, the white picket fence, the kids and a husband who came home every night.

That's what she'd thought she'd found with Bradley, a computer whiz. She'd been sure that when they graduated he would ask her to marry him. Then they would live happily ever after in Silicon Valley or wherever he landed a job. It had turned out to be Boston and, before she'd had time to even think about moving up there with him, he had given her the old "it's been nice but, let's be friends" talk. Bradley had decided to move on without her. He'd told her the morning after they'd finally had some spectacular sex. She'd almost had an orgasm. Almost. At least she'd felt like she was on the verge of one.

The clatter of boot heels on pavement echoed through the walkway as last minute patrons scurried to get in before the bucking started. They had time. According to Allan Greeley, the announcer, Colt, the rodeo clown, was just getting started on his routine—one she knew almost by heart.

"I asked for two," said a young cowboy in an irritated voice. He was the last of the line, if she didn't include Clay dawdling at the side.

She filled another cup and collected the money as the cowboy stomped off.

"Everything all right, Dusty?" Tito called from the next stand. He nodded in Clay's direction and Clay tipped his hat. Tito was only a little taller than she was, but he was built like a bull dog and just as protective. He was an old-fashioned kind of gentleman when it came to women—a man who

guarded those he considered family, and most people he knew were included in the definition.

"Everything is fine, Tito," she said, and gave him a wink. After giving Clay another look, Tito went back to grilling. Her stomach rumbled and she prayed no one heard it. Usually, she'd be getting some leftovers from Tito right about now, given that bull riding closed the show.

"Aren't you going to go watch?" she asked when Clay didn't make a move.

He turned to her, tipping his hat up with the rim of the half-filled cup in his hand. Those blue eyes of his glinted in the late afternoon sunlight that cascaded through the open walls of the arena.

"No. I like the scenery out here better."

The announcer said something to Colt, and the audience roared.

Ignoring the intent of his comment, she wiped down the counter with the gray rag. "When is he up?"

"Jesse should be riding fifth. There weren't too many who landed with a chance at the money. Should be good for him." He leaned his elbows on the counter and jutted out his tight buns. Dusty could see the worn denim pocket stretch where his wallet resided. "Of course if *you* want to watch Jesse..." His eyes searched hers for an answer.

She shook her head. "I don't watch, especially not bull riding." She could never watch after that day.

He frowned. "I would have thought a girl like you would participate in the rodeo. Thought you might be a natural at

barrel racing, especially given your size, and growing up in Wayback."

She had been a natural. And she had loved it. She'd only raced here at the Yellow Rose, on a horse borrowed from Maggie Devereaux. She hadn't been able to afford the fees, or the trailer, or the horse to make a run at it anywhere else. And then, after all that had happened, she'd lost her taste for it. It was bad enough working the rodeo as it was.

Not wanting to explain, she just shrugged in answer to his question. "You'd have thought wrong."

He shifted as if to get a better look at her. "For a woman who grew up in a rodeo town and works at the rodeo, you don't seem all that thrilled with rodeo or cowboys."

She shrugged again. "Maybe I've just had my fill. Like when you have too much of anything, you can lose your appetite for it."

He chuckled. "Some things, maybe. Other things, never. There are things I would never get my fill of or lose my appetite for—guaranteed." His eyes glittered with amusement and something more, like he was talking about her, which was a foolish notion. She'd just met the man and they hadn't exactly gotten off to a good start.

He took a slug of beer. Over the rim of the cup he took her measure from top to waist and back again. "Like that kiss last night," he said in a low, sexy voice.

Heat rushed up her body like it was in a race for the finish line. In the distance some mother was arguing with her child about the bathroom. *Say something. Anything*

"Where's home?" she asked. Her heart began beating again. She threw the rag under the counter and wondered how she would keep busy till closing if he intended to nurse that beer until then.

He sighed. "Near Marfa."

"That's where you're a cowhand?"

"That's where I work. Jesse said you're a teacher?"

She gave him a short nod. "I'm trying to be. I'm looking for a job, actually."

Allan was calling the bull rides now and, from the sound of things, not too many were hanging on.

"Here in Wayback?"

She shook her head. She wanted a new start, a fresh beginning and she didn't think Wayback would provide that. Not that she didn't love the town. She did. She wanted to find one just like it. "My mom teaches here. I think I'd like to try someplace else. Not too far away. But something new. I've a job interview in Fort Davis on Thursday."

His eyebrows shot up. "You could travel a little farther south and come see me at the ranch."

"I can't."

"What is it about me, Miss Dusty, that gets your fur up?" He gave her a practiced smile, like a salesman who knows you aren't going to buy but tries anyway. "I'm a hard-working man, just won the saddle bronc yesterday, so I've got some money in my pocket. And I'm trying to be respectful as hell and not lean over and continue that kiss that had me up all night. Yet you act like I've got some contagious disease."



"Uh-oh." The announcer's words blasted from the speaker. "Hold on folks. He'll be all right. Our medical team is on the field and they know what to do."

Quick as lightening, Clay zoomed to the arena opening.

Dusty stood frozen as the world receded. Images from that day swamped her. Her father. Down. Not moving. The horns of the bull ramming him before anyone could distract the beast.

"It's Jesse. I've got to go." Clay was back before her, his face contorted but she couldn't answer him.

She felt his hands on her shoulders. Felt the shake.

"Yes. Go," she managed to get out.

He was gone. *Oh God*, she prayed. *Not again*.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm fine." Jesse looked pitiful as he lay on the cot's white mattress while a tall thin man Dusty didn't recognize wrapped tape around his middle. His face was pale, with cuts and scratches, his lean torso dotted with blue bruises. He looked anything but fine.

It had taken Dusty a few moments to recover. She'd put the concession to rights, served the few stragglers who happened by, and as soon as the rodeo was officially over, she'd closed up and headed to the medical tent. Allan had said the cowboy just had the wind knocked out of him, but Dusty knew they always white-washed injuries for the crowd. No one would have a good time if they thought the cowboys actually got hurt. And most of them didn't—not life-threatening hurt anyway. But rodeo—bull riding in particular—

was an extreme sport, dangerous and hazardous to the health. All these years she'd been trying to figure out why cowboys did it, and she still had no answer.

She brushed a hand down Jesse's cheek as the EMT finished up.

Jesse's fingers came up to still hers as a smile claimed his face, or was that a grimace? It was hard to tell.

"That feels good, Dusty. So good I'll be embarrassing myself with the medic here." His eyes searched hers. She almost wished she could feel something for him. He seemed a safer harbor than Clay. More settled, more committed, less a player. But still a bull rider.

The EMT stepped closer. "You need to rest up and get this checked out with some x-rays. You don't rate an ambulance ride, but you should stop by the Trauma Center. It's out on the interstate. You pass it on the way out of town." With a nod, the EMT gathered his things and proceeded to the cowboy waiting his turn on the other cot.

If her resolve was at all weakening where Clay was concerned, this incident shored it up. No way could she take the worry of watching a rough stock rider she cared about on any animal. Of course, Clay wasn't looking for a relationship—and Jesse probably wasn't either. They were just interested in a good time. The kind of time that would have landed one of them in her bed. It was Sunday afternoon, and they would be going home. Soon the temptation would be over.

Still, the sight of Jesse laid out called up tender feelings. "Is there anything I can do? You want something to drink or eat? You can eat can't you?"

"Yeah, none of my vital organs were touched. None of them." He gave her a wink.

Clay hovered nearer. "Need help getting up?" he asked in a clipped tone. He sounded unreasonably irritated with Jesse for getting thrown.

"A hand would be nice," Jesse said.

Dusty moved aside as Clay came around to brace Jesse's back. Clay offered his hand, Jesse clasped it and let out a deep moan as Clay pulled him up.

"Hell, if these are just bruised I'd hate to think what it would feel like if I broke 'em."

Clay scowled. "You don't know you haven't. We've got to get you to the hospital so they can x-ray those ribs."

"There ain't nothing different they are going to be able to do if they're broken. Just means I won't be feeling better for a longer while. No need for a hospital."

"What if something else is a problem? What if something else got busted?"

Like a lung got punctured? Dusty shuddered.

Clay must have seen that shudder because he placed a warm hand on her shoulder. "I'll see he does the right thing, Dusty. He's just bull-headed, as always."

Gingerly, Jesse moved off the table. "There is one thing you could do for me, Dusty," he said as he stood before her, pale, and probably weaker than he was admitting.

"What?" she asked as she glanced at Clay. He looked like a man getting ready to object, his feet spread apart, his hands now tense at his side.

Jesse's finger skimmed her jaw. He was going to kiss her. In an attempt to stave off the caress she quickly gave him a peck on his swollen cheek. He grimaced.

"Not quite the kiss I had in mind but guess it will do," he said in a low voice.

"Come on Romeo, we've got to make tracks. I've got chores waiting, yours and mine," Clay growled.

Jesse didn't move. "Will you be here next week?"

She gulped. "Next week?" Surely this was it. They weren't coming back. Were they?

Jesse nodded. "Sure, next week. I didn't earn enough yet to get those boots from that pretty blonde, and Clay's got a heck of a lot more to earn."

She didn't understand. "Are you cowhands or rodeo riders?"

"Both," they said in unison.

"We'll be back, Dusty," Clay said. "At least one of us will."

Jesse stepped cautiously. "I'll be here. Little tussle with some bull isn't going to sideline me." His face contorted and he let out a groan with each measured step as he moved toward the tent flap.

Clay removed his hat from his head and ran fingers through his tousled hair before settling it back on. "He's going to be whining the whole trip." With a light touch, he chucked her chin with his finger. "Are you going to be all right though? You went almost as pale as Jesse when I told you. I was afraid to leave you there for a minute." There was warmth in his eyes. Too much warmth.

She nodded. "I'll be fine. Just can't stand to see someone hurt, is all."

"You'll be here next weekend?"

She wished she could say no. Staring into those gorgeous eyes, her heart was beating out a tattoo. She didn't know if she'd be able to resist him if she saw him again. "I'll be working."

"Good. I'll see you then." He stared at her like he was waiting for her to say something.

"Clay, I don't think ... I mean we're not ... I'm not."

"I am," he gave her a wink.

"Clay, don't be jawing all night now. You said we've got to go." Jesse's voice was strained. The man was clearly hurting.

Clay stepped around her. She watched him offer an arm to help his friend.

Next weekend. She felt like she was the one who'd just gotten gored by a bull.

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## Chapter Four

"What's got you all tensed up, honey? Something happen at the rodeo?" Dusty's mother dried her reddened hands on her well-worn apron and reached for a cup hanging on the holder atop the counter. With movements born of habit, Dierdre Morgan picked the tea bag from the tin and poured the hot water from the kettle into the cup. She dunked the bag up and down before setting the cup of tea on the table, next to the one she'd just fixed for herself, and pushed the flower-decorated sugar bowl and creamer toward Dusty.

"Tell your mother all about it," she said before dropping her slight frame onto the chair alongside Dusty's. Dressed casually in a pair of khaki pants and a white blouse, her blonde hair was perfectly coiffed in a short, wavy cut.

Whitey, their little *bichon frisé*, sniffed at Dusty's leg as if he, too, was trying to get her story. Her mother had gotten Whitey shortly after her father had passed, believing they both needed something to care for and cuddle. Whitey wasn't the type of dog most people in these parts had, but her mother had spent a good deal of time researching the best companion dog and found a breeder up in Lubbock. Cute, sweet and loving, Whitey had made himself right at home.

"It's nothing. What makes you think anything is wrong?" Dusty strove to keep any inflection out of her voice as she shifted to get comfortable on the flowered pad covering the kitchen chair.

Whitey sat with his head cocked to one side waiting for an invitation. One pat on her leg and he was settled in her lap. She pulled out the teabag, plopped two spoonfuls of sugar into the large cup, added a helping of milk and stirred. A curl of steam wafted forth. She spared one sip before looking at her mother.

"Is it one of those cowboys?" Deidre arched a penciled brow.

How did her mother come to such a conclusion when she'd never mentioned any cowboys? As if she'd said her question out loud, her mother answered.

"I talked to Della Ballew today. Annagrace told her mama both of them were nice young men. Real gentlemen, she said."

Somehow, she'd have to stop Annagrace. Annagrace told her own mother everything—because there wasn't much to tell where Annagrace was concerned. Her life was progressing just as it should. Dusty's was not.

"They're rodeo riders. One rides saddle bronc and one's a bull rider." That said it all as far as Dusty was concerned. She took another sip of the hot liquid before petting Whitey. Thank goodness for air-conditioning. She'd have preferred some cold sweet tea given the temperature outside, but her mother always went for the hot stuff when there was likely to be a discussion. Something about it being a comfort drink.

"And that makes them what?" Deidre clasped her hands together on the table, as if getting ready to pray.

"It makes them looking for a good time and nothing more."

"They're not coming back then?" The disappointment in her mother's voice caught her by surprise. Did she think her daughter was desperate? Dusty might have been torn up when Bradley had dumped her, but that was months ago. She was over Bradley. Wasn't she?

"Actually they said they'd be back next weekend. Guess they need the money or something."

"Or something? That something could be you." Her blue eyes scraped over Dusty. Pity. That's what Dusty saw there. Good God.

"I'm not interested in a hit and run."

"Well maybe it could be more. Your father was a rodeo rider and a better man I never knew."

"I know you loved him, Mom, but a rodeo man isn't for me." She stroked Whitey's soft fur. He looked back at her, contentment in his black button eyes.

"Why? Some of the finest men I've ever had the pleasure of knowing were involved with rodeo."

"Dad was never here for you." *Or for me.* "He was always off chasing a ride."

Deidre's brows converged over the bridge of her nose. "What do you mean? He was always here for me. Your father gave me what I needed most." She sighed and sat back in her chair as if remembering. "I wish he'd been around more, is all. Lord, I wish he'd stayed on this earth longer. But while he was here, he gave me the two things I wanted most in my life."



Her mother had always defended her father, always made excuses for him. But Dusty had never heard her speak about him as fervently as she was now. "What did he give you?"

"His love and you, of course." She dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her apron. Though her father had been gone almost ten years, Dusty knew there was still sorrow there. How had the conversation gotten on this topic?

"And he sacrificed everything for us," she added with an uplifted chin as if daring Dusty to contradict her.

She was daring Dusty because it was just not true. Her mother was obviously building a fantasy to substitute for the reality. "How did he sacrifice anything for us? He did what he loved and left us to fend for ourselves."

Deidre's lips formed a thin, determined line. "Thank God he did love it. It takes a brave man to face those beasts and get on night after night and walk away. Lord, the bruises he'd come home with, the pain he'd suffer. But he'd get on those animals again the next day if it meant he had a chance to make ends meet. When some of the wells played out around here, there wasn't as much call for drillers, honey. When you came along, my teacher's salary wasn't enough, and fixing cars or pumping gas wasn't going to make it. Thank the Lord there is rodeo for strong, young men who don't have many choices."

"But you hated him leaving all the time. I remember you crying some nights." She'd listened to the sounds of sorrow through the thin walls of her bedroom, angry at the father who'd hurt her mother so.

Her mother frowned. "Of course I cried. Of course I minded. I loved him. Do you think I could look at his battered body, at the disappointment when he came home empty-handed or worse, in debt to some generous cowboy, and watch him go out to face it all over again without feeling something? I never let him see though." She held her tea cup to her lips and hesitated.

"I thought you were crying because you resented him for loving the rodeo more than us."

She shook her head, her frown deepening in obvious surprise. She set the cup down. "I knew how much he loved us, how much he sacrificed for us. Of course, he did love riding, honey. He'd be doing it now. But I didn't resent him for it. The only comfort I had was knowing he enjoyed it. It's a hard way to make a living and of course I worried. But I was blessed with you and a job that I loved and a man who loved me. You know, even if he wasn't winning, I'd get a beautiful card in the mail from him to let me know he was thinking of me—meant more than just a phone call. And if he was winning, well, didn't he used to send us little presents from the road? Heavens, he'd sent you so many of those darn beanie babies I thought we'd have to add a room on to keep them all."

And she still had every one. Stuffed in a gray plastic tub in her closet. "I thought he was just trying to make up for not being here."

"Suppose he was and it was a nice way to do it. Listen here, young lady." She cocked her head and looked at Dusty from the corner of her eye. "Life isn't always the stuff of a TV

sitcom. Few of us are lucky enough to have a Brady Bunch life. Some husbands are off fighting in Iraq. Some men have sales jobs that cause them to be away from home weeks on end. What about the guys who pilot planes? Then there are some people who opt for those commuter marriages and make them work. What your father did wasn't much different. That's how he earned his living and he was darn good at it. He got to the NFR five times. Not many can say that even if he never won the gold buckle. Those years were good years for us."

"But when he got hurt? The punctured lung..." She'd never forget the image of him lying still as the bull rammed him again and again.

"What happened that day was hard to witness, I'll give you that. I knew it traumatized you at the time but I'd have thought you'd have gotten through it. Honey, if he hadn't gotten that punctured lung, they would have never found the cancer until it was over. Cigarettes did your father in, not the rodeo. In a strange way that punctured lung was a blessing. After he learned the truth, he gave up the rodeo and spent his remaining time, short as it was, with us. He might have never known until the very end." She dabbed her eyes with the apron again, her mouth set in a tight line, as if trying to hold back the tears.

"Mama, I didn't mean to make you cry by talking of it." She felt the ache in her own heart.

"I still miss him. There is nothing like the love of a good man. Maybe that's why I travel so much in the summer. Trying to find another one?" She gave a short laugh. "It hurts

more to think you've been upset with him all these years for not being here when that was the one thing about his life he regretted. Especially when he knew about the cancer. You always think you'll have time to make it all right. But time ran out for him."

Dusty rubbed her hands over her face. The smell of beer was still on them. They hadn't talked about her father in such a long time she hadn't known how much she'd needed to. "I guess that's why he tried to get me into barrel racing. After he died, I realized he knew he had cancer and I resented that he spent his last days trying to make me into a rodeo player."

Her mother drummed her fingers on the table "You had talent. He was trying to pass on what he could to you before it was too late." She leaned in to place her hand over Dusty's. Her hand wasn't smooth and soft. It was rough and dry and cold. Her hands told of a hard life—a life Dusty had never thought was a happy one. She'd been wrong. A knot pulled in her stomach.

"Dusty, your father never was much for book learning. He wasn't a philosophical man. But he had a good heart and he knew horses. He said more than once that he couldn't leave you much but he wanted to leave you with something from him. Something you'd carry with you. His knowledge about barrel racing and cutting horses was it. Afterward, I just assumed you didn't pursue it because it brought back painful memories. Memories of him."

Tears burned at the back of her eyes as the image of her father rose in her mind, thin and weak in those last weeks. She remembered the lessons and spending time together

after years of being apart. Lessons about reining the horse, changing leads, getting close without clipping a barrel and judging a horse's willingness to win.

"That was the reason, Mama." Her throat felt like it was closing up. "But instead of being grateful for the time, I guess I've been angry that he'd wanted me to pursue the one thing that had taken him away from me."

She patted Dusty's hand. "Oh honey. You have to forgive him that. You were the dearest thing in his life. He did all of that rodeoing for you, not for himself. He was desperate to give you what the Ballew girls had and the Murphys and all the other good people of Wayback. But with just a high school education and not enough drill work, he went to something he could do and do well. And something he loved. I never thought that was terrible."

Tears trickled down Dusty's face.

Her mother rubbed Dusty's back the way she'd done countless times before to make things better. "You've got to forgive him, Dusty. He was a good man. He did the best he knew how. And he loved you so much."

Dusty swiped at a tear with the back of her hand. "And I loved him. I think maybe if he hadn't been such a good father when he was around, I wouldn't have missed him so much. Wouldn't have resented his going."

Deidre's hand traveled up and down Dusty's arm, providing a trail of reassurance. "I never thought you had taken his being away so hard, honey. He loved you so much. He worried at the end that you'd forget him."

Dusty buried her head in her mother's chest as the tears came. She didn't hold them back like she'd struggled to so many times before. She let them flow, hoping they'd take away the bitterness. Maybe it was time to accord her father what he deserved, the only things she wanted to feel for him. Love and admiration.

\* \* \* \*

The knock startled her. Whitey jumped off her lap and raced toward the door, yipping at the top of his little lungs. It was Friday night and she'd had a long week. Besides the work at the Riley's ranch, she'd had her interview yesterday. It had gone reasonably well but she was still recovering from it and the drive. With her mom gone on a long holiday with another schoolteacher to the Grand Canyon, she was looking forward to some welcome solitude. She just wanted to curl up with the new western romance she'd bought and forget about the rest of the world. Forget about two rodeo cowboys and read about the gunslingers of the Old West.

She looked down at her sweats and fingered her messy hair. If Annagrace was here to take her to the Blue Bug, she'd be disappointed. Dusty padded to the front door in bare feet. Whitey was in full voice, jumping up and down to beat the band.

"Quiet," she said not forcefully enough to deter the dog from what he clearly felt was his duty. She scooped him up and he kept on barking. Though Whitey was mainly a companion dog, she was grateful for his protective nature when she was alone in the house. She peered out the side

window. Her heart took an extra beat, sending a wave of heat careening through her belly.

Standing there, with a grin the size of a Pecos canyon, was Clay. Whitey barked and squirmed in her arms. Heaven help her. She wasn't fit for any company much less the handsome cowboy on the other side of the door. She set Whitey down for a minute and began to finger comb her hair as she bit down on her lip to give it some color. Damn.

"Dusty, it's me. Clay."

"I'll be right with you, Clay." She side-stepped to the mirror near the door and prayed he wouldn't peek in. Why hadn't she kept her trim appointment at the Hair Crazy Salon yesterday? She looked like the bride of Frankenstein. A brush? She pulled one from her large leather purse sitting on the nearby table. He always commented on her hair.

Her cell phone chirped from the bottom of her bag. Someone had called. It wouldn't have been Clay. She hadn't given him her number. She pinched her cheeks for color and fumbled for a lipstick while Whitey attempted to bring down the house with his barking.

"Are you going to answer the door?" Clay yelled over the noise.

She swiped on the lipstick and smoothed out her sweats. They were so big on her it looked like they'd swallowed her whole. It couldn't be helped. Maybe he'd get so turned off by the sight of her, he'd give up. And why she cared, she wouldn't examine.

Picking up the dog again, she opened the door to the sultry heat of a West Texas summer day. Six feet of gorgeous

cowboy greeted her. Those blue eyes of his glimmered in the sunlight like the water of the Mediterranean Sea. He wasn't wearing his hat. Thick and shiny, a lock of wavy brown hair fell over one brow giving him a bad-boy look. He'd braced a well-muscled arm against the side of the doorway stretching his white T-shirt over his chest to reveal every plane, curve and crevice. His denims hugged thighs used to clinging to a horse and his bedroom eyes looked her over from head to toe. Her insides turned the consistency of oatmeal. Whitey quieted, as if he was too interested in the sight before him to worry about protecting anyone.

"Cute puppy," Clay said, nodding toward the dog. Recognizing he was the center of attention, Whitey started barking again but this time the yips were half-hearted.

Clay held out a hand for the dog to sniff. Whitey obliged and gave Clay's hand a quick lick with his tiny pink tongue. Some protector.

"He's not a puppy. Whitey's almost ten."

"You mean that's as big as he gets?"

"Yep." *Like me.*

Clay gave Whitey's head a gentle pat and rubbed his ears to her dog's evident delight. "Friendly little thing."

"Sometimes. What are you doing here, Clay?" *And how did you find me?* She held Whitey closer to her chest and waited for his answer.

He graced her with a lopsided smile. "I've a favor to ask of you. Can I come in?"

Letting a strange man into her house hardly seemed the smart thing to do, but her gut wasn't sending her any



negative signals. Besides she was curious what he was doing here. At her house. On a Friday night.

"Annagrace said she'd call ahead," Clay prompted.

That explained her beeping cell phone. Why hadn't Annagrace just called the house? Because she wanted Dusty to be surprised? Sometimes Annagrace tested their friendship something awful.

"She must have tried my cell phone. Come on in." Dusty moved aside as Whitey wriggled to get down. Probably wanted to sniff Clay all over. Dusty couldn't blame him. Scents of sandalwood and leather greeted her as she moved aside and set Whitey on the floor. Clay stepped in and true to form the dog began sniffing at the man's black crocodile boots.

She closed the door behind him and when she turned around, there was Whitey nestled snugly in Clay's arms, licking his face. Traitor.

"I'm not that familiar with small dogs but I can see why people like them." Clay nodded at the white ball of fluff.

"Yeah. He's a prince," Dusty said, motioning Clay toward the sofa. She was glad she hadn't had much time to trash the place since her mother's departure on Wednesday. It still carried Deidre Morgan's tidy stamp.

Clay sauntered forward, moving with an animal's grace. His tall form made her feel small and the room even smaller. It had been a while since a man had sat among the delicate lace and floral prints that filled their living room. Even when her father had been alive, he'd seemed out of place amid the feminine decorations her mother favored. But he'd never said

a word against them. He'd always noticed a new doodad her mother had added to her burgeoning collection of knickknacks, always made a point to tell her how good it was to be home with his girls.

The flowered cushions plumped around Clay as he settled onto the sofa. Whitey nestled in his lap, right there in the man's crotch, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"He seems to have taken right to you," Dusty said as she sat in a large wing chair covered in pink and green chintz. She couldn't keep the wonder out of her voice.

Clay's expression was one of mild amusement. "More than I can say for his mistress."

She leveled her gaze at him. "So what brings you here, Clay?" Remembering her manners, she added, "And can I get you something to drink?"

He shook his head. "No. Not yet at least." He shifted in his seat and petted the dog as if reluctant to answer her question. She waited, watching the gentle way his hand floated over her tiny, comfortable dog. She'd be comfortable too, snuggled up against him like that. Mustn't let her thoughts go in that direction. Not here, alone with him in the house.

"Where's Jesse?" She realized she should have asked that right off. "Is he all right?"

Clay nodded. "He will be. Turns out he did break a rib, but nothing else."

"I'm glad you talked him into being x-rayed."

"Wasn't me. I've never been able to talk a lick of sense into him. My mother read him the riot act. Few can deny Kate

Tanner when she sets her mind to something." His smile was broad and his eyes danced at the mention of his mother. She imagined the woman had to be a pistol with a son like Clay. He wouldn't have been an easy boy to raise. No doubt he'd been full of mischief and manipulative as the devil. "She also isn't letting him out of her sight. He's back home mending. He sends his regards."

She refused to ask Clay again what he was doing here. She'd already done that twice. So she waited. He continued to pet the dog. Whitey looked like he was ready to go to sleep in his new haven.

"As I said, I need a favor." He shifted his gaze to stare directly at her as if willing her to grant it.

Looking at that smile, she had to admit she was inclined.

"I scored in the go-round today so I need a place to stay for tonight at least. Annagrace said you had the house to yourself. She thought you wouldn't mind."

Dusty's jaw dropped. She wouldn't mind? Alone with Clay? Annagrace had gone too far this time. How did she know he wasn't a rapist or serial killer? All they knew was that he could ride saddle broncs.

As if reading her mind, he continued. "She had me checked out by Andy from the sheriff's office. Took my license number and called it in. Andy gave me a clean bill. She said she'd tell you that when she phoned. Seeing as how you didn't get the call, I can understand your reluctance."

He shot her that sexy grin he'd used before—on her and probably on many others. Her oatmeal insides were becoming more like cream of wheat.

"Look Dusty, I know this is sudden. But I didn't realize it was Heritage Days or whatever you guys call it. Apparently it pulls in a lot of out-of-towners. All the motels are full up. I didn't think to make a reservation. Didn't know I'd score so I'd have to stick around for tomorrow's round."

Dusty still couldn't speak. What could she say? She didn't want to turn him out with no place to go. She didn't want him to stay here where the temptation would be way too much.

He draped an arm along the back of the sofa—a strong, solid mass of bulging muscles. The memory of that arm around her, pressing her close to his hard body, had her stomach doing somersaults like it was trying out for the circus.

"Look, I know you don't know me very well. And I came on a little strong last week. But if it's just friendship you want, that's fine with me."

Somehow she didn't think it would be fine but, then again, she wasn't his type.

"I promise I'll be a perfect gentleman. I can sleep on the sofa, right here. If I can just use your shower—"

*Shower? Naked?* Her body went into overdrive as an image of his toned, tanned and nude body danced across her mind. She visualized every line, every muscle, and every hard plane. A moist warmth settled between her thighs.

"—to clean up that's all I need. I even bought some ribs at the Dixie Pig and if you have a grill, I do a mean barbeque. I know it's an inconvenience, so I'm willing to pay you what I would have paid The Corral."

Dusty held up a hand. "No need to go that far. I get that you're desperate. It will be Texas hospitality or nothing." How could he think she'd charge him if she allowed him to stay? Her reluctance had nothing to do with inconvenience and he knew it.

"And I promise I'll be a Texas gentleman. Whatever rules you want to impose, I'll abide by." He gave her a schoolboy look, the kind of look you'd give the teacher when she'd caught you doing mischief to convince her you were really an angel. But there was nothing angelic about Clay Tanner. He was all sex and sin in one delicious package.

She stroked her hands down her cheeks trying to rid them of moisture. Her cheeks. She'd forgotten how awful she must look. Of course he'd have no desire to pursue her after seeing her with her hair a mess and clothes fit only for shoveling manure. *What the hell.* She nodded before she could think too hard about the answer.

Relief spread across his face like melted butter over biscuits. "Thanks. I promise I won't be any trouble. And how about taking me up on that barbeque? I've got the groceries in the car along with my bag."

"You were pretty confident I'd say yes, I guess." She imagined few women would say no to him. The thought that he'd played her, and correctly, irked.

"Actually, I was praying it would be a good enough bribe. Of course, you haven't had them yet, but when I'm done with those ribs, I'm hoping you'll be impressed."

He hoped to impress her. Those cream of wheat insides had already gone to mush.

\* \* \* \*

Clay lathered more of his special barbeque sauce onto the ribs sizzling on the small grill in Dusty's fenced back yard. Beer, maple syrup, ketchup and some secret ingredients he shared with no one made for mighty good eating. He'd taken a fast shower and done a quick change of clothes while Dusty got the grill fired up. Then she'd disappeared. He hoped it was to change out of those sweats. Though she looked cute as a button in the over-sized garments, he'd prefer to see her legs and sweet figure.

He imagined her in that feminized pink-tiled shower, water spraying over her lithe body, her hair falling long and wet, steam rising as she scrubbed some sweet smelling gel over all those tempting places. Damn, what had he set himself up for?

Already she'd been invading his dreams, both day and night. How many times this week had he walked out of the house without his keys or been unable to find his wallet because he'd been thinking of her instead of watching what he was doing? And why he'd become obsessed with her (because what else could he call it?) he didn't know. She wasn't the kind of girl he generally looked at twice. Apparently, that had been a mistake all these years. Because, damn if he hadn't driven like a maniac to get here, blowing off a meeting with a beef contractor, too.

He'd thought he might find her at the rodeo. Instead he'd found Annagrace, right after he'd called every motel in the area and discovered there were no rooms. He hadn't thought to book one because there had been no problem last

weekend. He'd planned on staying around, whether he scored or not, just to see Dusty.

He'd asked Annagrace about another place to stay and she'd told him there were none. The bed-and-breakfast in town apparently filled first, so if the motels were full, so was it. In the next breath she'd been convincing him to try Dusty's. *She won't mind. She's home all alone in that great big house.*

Of course, before Annagrace would give him Dusty's address, she'd had him checked out by the cops. He couldn't blame her. And he had nothing to hide.

The grill sizzled as he turned the ribs and basted them some more. Whitey sat at attention near his boot, probably hoping for something to fall his way. "I'll save you some," Clay told him.

Nice night. Clear and warm but comfortable. The yard was well tended with flowers everywhere. One of the Morgan women loved flowers. Flowers on the upholstery, flowers in the yard, even a flowered shower curtain. He'd resisted peeking into the rooms upstairs, since the doors were closed, but he was sure curious about Dusty's bedroom. Hell, he was curious about Dusty.

How could such a little thing pack such a punch in her kiss? It had been just one kiss but it had set him off like an incendiary bomb. And he wanted more. More of everything, including knowing more about her. Jesse had told him a little. Annagrace had filled in a lot. Freshly minted teacher. Worked the Mercy Creek ranch during the summer. And then there was that relationship she'd just finished. A guy named

Bradley. Was he the reason for her prickly behavior? For her not wanting to get involved with Clay? Annagrace had warned him not to break her heart.

Her heart? That comment had reminded him that Dusty was a relationship woman. And he'd still come. Still wanted more. What did that say?

Being with her tonight was what he'd hoped, imagined and dreamed about this past week. But that had included being in her bed, and he'd just promised to be a Texas gentleman.

Courting. That's what Jesse had called it, and the man was right. Clay didn't know a thing about courting a woman. He'd never had to. Women came on to him. And he had a good time and that was it. He'd never even been in a relationship that had lasted longer than a few months. Hell, if it had lasted a few weeks he was lucky. He'd never looked for more. Too much investment. Too many other women to choose just one.

A bee buzzed by, looking for a taste of sauce no doubt. Clay swatted the air with his spatula, sending him on his way.

Jesse had been right about another thing. A one night stand, a good time, was not Dusty's style. This was a girl you dated. Took out to dinner. Went on picnics with. Went away for romantic weekends. And took home to your mother.

He was twenty-seven and he'd never yet brought a girl back to meet his mother. Oh, she'd seen him with a woman here and there, at an event or function and been introduced, but nothing he'd ever planned. And she always had plenty to say afterward about his choice, little of it positive. His plain-spoken, forthright mother would love a girl like Dusty—sweet, unaffected and sassy.



"Hey, how's it coming?" A flowery scent more potent than the roses lining the fence wafted across the warm breeze as she moved up next to him.

Clay turned and his mouth went dry. Her shiny blonde hair cascaded in thick waves around her face and down, past her shoulders. She had on a little pink tank top, stretched just enough to outline two enticing nipples, and cuffed, white short-shorts exposing a pair of tanned and sexy legs. And he didn't dare touch any of it.

This was going to be a long night. A very long night.

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## Chapter Five

"I won again," Dusty said, sweeping a pile of pennies across the wooden kitchen table. They jangled as they fell onto the paper plate she held at the edge to catch her bounty. Her beatific smile said she was satisfied with the night so far. Too bad he couldn't say the same.

She'd told him she loved the ribs and, given the amount she'd eaten, he believed her. For a little thing she sure had a big appetite. She'd pulled out a bottle of red wine with a fancy label and offered him the choice of a beer. He'd chosen the wine. Three glasses later he was feeling mellow and way too romantic to be on the other side of the table from her.

Playing poker had been her idea. Right now he'd like to turn it into strip poker, see all that silky skin of hers and caress those slightly rounded mounds hiding under her shirt. And he'd sure like to feel those legs wrapped around his hips, squeezing tight as he drilled for oil. Instead, here he sat like a saintly school boy watching an angel.

"Just got lucky is all," he said. He shuffled the cards, letting the deck rip once, then again, complimenting Kenny Wayne Shepherd's riffs from the MP3 player blasting out of the living room. Who would have guessed the little angel liked a mean blues guitar? He'd had her pegged as country and western all the way.

He dealt out seven cards each and tried to think of a way to get her naked. Nothing came to mind except an image of

her nude. He said a silent curse as a certain body part twitched.

She settled back in her chair and perused her cards. Awful lot of rearranging going on over there. She'd been distracting him every hand. With the last one, he hadn't even seen the flush before he folded. She'd laid down only two pair to take the pot. He'd lost ten whole cents over that one.

"You open," he reminded her.

She threw two pennies on the table. He watched one roll on its side before keeling over with a clank.

"Why do you do it?" She pressed her cards to her sweet little chest and stared at him as if he should know what she was talking about. He didn't.

"Do what?"

"Ride saddle broncs." She shook her head, blonde hair swinging, as if he was some recalcitrant kid.

"I raise you one." He threw in three pennies. How was he supposed to answer that question? How could he make someone who had never done it understand? He shifted in his seat while he considered his words. "Partly for the challenge," he finally said.

Her eyes scrunched up. "And the rest of it is for what?"

She looked cute as the dickens when she was pondering. Something told him, though, this was more than just an idle question to make conversation. The answer mattered to her for some reason. Was it something to do with him? Or maybe a rodeo cowboy had hurt her. It wasn't that fool Bradley. Annagrace said he was a computer geek.

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table as he held his cards. "There's a rush, adrenaline probably, when you're sitting on that horse waiting for the chute to open. It opens and you usually know within the first few seconds if you're going to make it. When you finally hear the buzzer and you're still on his back, that rush increases several fold. Like going from 80 to 160 in a car in the same amount of time."

"And that's why you risk getting bones broken or your head stomped on?" A deep furrowed frown appeared on her lightly tanned face. She had the cutest freckles dancing across her nose before they faded into peach-toned cheeks.

He shrugged. He knew she couldn't appreciate it. But he sensed she was trying to understand because it was important to her. He gave it another shot. "There's also knowing that you've faced a difficult challenge. A challenge a lot of other people wouldn't be able to meet. And you've succeeded. Against pretty significant odds. Done what most people in the stands wouldn't even attempt, much less pull off."

"Why not team roping or tie-down?"

He smiled. Those were safer sports in many respects, though they took a lot of skill. "I've competed in those events during ranch rodeos. But besides the money, rough stock is more of a challenge for me."

She cocked her head. "It is about guts then." She tossed in two pennies.

"Some, but I think there are other factors. Hell, sitting on a bull or bronc is nothing compared to facing down the enemy in a place like Iraq, or saving people from a burning building.

There's an element of courage involved, sure, but it's more like you're testing yourself. Most rough stock riders aren't really competing against each other. Rodeo riders are a pretty tight bunch even though we play for each other's entrance fees when the purses aren't supplemented like here in Wayback. You try to better your own score, increase your standing. It's a way, I guess, to measure yourself against the rest of the world. And if you measure up, you can take home some serious money. Does that make sense?"

She nodded but her smile had tightened. Maybe it was time to change the subject.

"So you're going to be a teacher and your mom's a teacher. What about your dad?" She hadn't said a thing about her father. The house didn't seem like a man's home. Flowers on everything, pale shades of pinks and greens. Even the kitchen looked like a garden with its floral wall paper and green lattice print curtains. No sign of a male presence anywhere, except a photo on the fireplace mantle in the living room he hadn't had a chance to inspect. Maybe her parents were divorced. Having divorced parents could make a person wary of men. He added two pennies to the pile.

She worried her lower lip and stared hard at her cards. "He passed away nine years ago." Her voice was steady, no inflection from emotion.

"I'm sorry." He was. More than she could guess. "I lost my own around that time."

She peered at him over the top of the cards, those blue eyes curious. "Really? How?"

He shrugged. Time had made it easier to talk about at least. "Got kicked in the head helping shoe a horse."

"He was a wrangler, too?" With a clang she tossed a penny onto the heap.

He should have raised higher. "I'm following in his footsteps." He laid down his cards, a straight. No need to explain yet what he did or didn't do. Best if she thought he was just a rodeo cowboy. There'd be no expectations of anything more if she thought he was the type to drift.

"My sympathies, Clay. I know how tough it must have been." She laid down three of a kind, kings.

He scooped up the pitiful pile of pennies and added them to his small one. "How did you lose your father?"

"Lung cancer." Her tone was flat but she bit on her lip as if she was afraid it would run away.

"Sorry. That must have been tough."

She nodded and shuffled the deck. The cards ended up askew, and she fiddled to right them. They both were silent as she dealt. She obviously was wrestling with some unresolved pain. He knew about that. Watching the play of emotions on her face as she struggled to hide it, he felt strangely protective of her. She seemed fragile, as if all that bluster of hers was masking some deeper vulnerability.

He picked up his cards. Nothing. "You always think you'll have time. My father and I butted heads a lot. I wasn't exactly an easy teenager. I still miss him. Every day." He rarely talked about his father with anyone.

She lay down the hand and fixed her gaze on the back of the cards. "I know. I wasn't easy either. Actually, I was pretty angry at him for dying, for leaving us for good."

Yup. He sure could relate. "Me too."

Her gaze found him. Those beautiful lake blue eyes of hers could mesmerize Rasputin. His heart did a two-step.

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. Big time angry. Took me years to realize it wasn't his fault. I blamed him for always having to be in the center of things, you know. If he'd just left the shoeing to the blacksmith. Seems stupid when I say it out loud." He put in two pennies to open.

She shook her head. "I know. I think I've hung onto my grievance for too long. I'm not even sure any of it was justified. I think I was wrong about him all this time. And I can never tell him." Her eyes glistened, as if they were holding back tears.

He understood about finality, too. He'd gone through the same guilt after the anger had subsided. But apparently she hadn't been able to put it to rest yet. In fact, she looked like she could still use comforting.

"I'm pretty sure your father knows. You ever talk to your father?"

Her eyebrows shot up in question. "No, he's..."

Clay smiled. He should have expected the reaction. "I know. But I talk to my father just about every day over something. I'll be moseying along and find myself with a problem I'm sure he faced and I'll just ask for his help." Clay shrugged hoping he was hiding his unease in talking about

this. "Damn if the answer doesn't come to me." He shook his head feeling a little stupid for his confession and looked at her from under his brow. "Sound strange?"

"Actually, I've heard my mother doing just that when she thinks no one's around." She sent him a small smile. "I think maybe I should try it."

He gave a half-nod. "No guarantees, but if nothing else, I think it will make you feel better." Now she probably thought he was a complete idiot. "How about we go in there and just listen to Kenny Wayne?" He couldn't keep looking and not touching. And, while he'd every intention of keeping his word about being a Texas gentleman, he had a special brand of comfort in mind.

"Okay," she whispered the word.

Maybe now he'd get a chance.

\* \* \* \*

"I told you I'd be a gentleman, and, despite what it will cost me, I'll keep my word." Clay had a big old smile on his face as he patted the cushion of the sofa where he sat. Kenny Wayne was singing about giving a girl everything. She didn't doubt this cowboy could.

She fiddled with the sound control of the MP3 player on the end table. Every fiber of her being screamed for her to sit next to him. If he'd just keep it to kissing. Heck, who was she kidding? If *she'd* just keep it to kissing.

She'd no doubt he'd keep his word about being a gentleman. But if *she* asked *him*, he wouldn't be breaking it. Why had she thought she could entertain him alone in her



house and not find him in her bed in the morning? That lazy smile of his said he bet she couldn't. *What the hell.*

Within a second of her sitting down, he wrapped a muscled arm around her shoulder and tugged her closer. She could feel the heat from his body as her bare thigh made contact with his denim-covered one. She stared at warm eyes and a slanted grin and her insides went liquid like some blender had been switched on at full speed.

"Now being a gentleman..." His husky voice rolled over her like a soothing lullaby. "...I'll ask first if I can kiss you. Just kiss you, honey. That's all." His wine-laced breath blew hot on her skin, the last sentences half-whispered in her ear.

In an involuntary movement, her head nodded in agreement. Oh God, what if he asked permission for everything? And she granted it? She doubted she had the willpower to act differently. From the moment he'd stood at her door she'd wanted to kiss him and more. Having spent the evening with him, want had turned to need.

His hand caressed her cheek, leaving a rough trail of heat as he traced her jaw line. Her puréed insides began to quiver.

"I'm going to take it slow, darling," he drawled in her ear. He shifted so she was staring right into shining eyes beckoning her to trust him. But he wanted her for only one reason and the trust he was seeking was probably just her acknowledgement that he'd be a good lover, nothing more.

Part of her wanted to settle for that. Seeing him on her sofa, feeling his touch, her desire had ratcheted up to a whole new level—to a plane she'd never been on before. Not with Bradley or the few, very few, boys who'd taken her out in

high school. There was no future here—no white picket fence, no stability, nothing but this night. Maybe it was enough.

He brushed his lips across hers. The quivers increased. "That's it. Just a kiss." His hand went to her waist, the warmth seeping through her shirt. Again, he brushed her lips with his.

Why did she have to feel so much from just his touch? Her insides were jumbled, her hands shaky and her mouth had gone dry.

"I want you, honey," he said and his mouth came down on hers, hard, demanding and tasting of wine. His one hand held her head while his other stroked her back as though he was petting a kitten. Sensuous stroking that made her womb clench, stroking that said he knew exactly what he was doing.

She opened for him, his tongue flicking against hers, probing and tasting. She probed and tasted him in return. He pressed her closer. She snuggled up to him. Before she knew it, she was on his lap. While his mouth did a number on hers, her arms wrapped around his neck, her breasts pressed against his solid chest and her knees cradled his hips. His long, hard, length pushed against her center. *There, right there*. Moisture beaded between her thighs. All the time his mouth pulled her further into his vortex. Whatever resistance she'd managed before had evaporated. She closed her eyes and gave in.

Her hips moved against his hard flesh while his hands rubbed her back in encouragement. She slipped up and down, denim rubbing against cotton, the friction of the fabric creating wonderful sensations. Mirroring her desire, his

tongue darted in and out in rhythm, as his mouth consumed hers. Nothing mattered, nothing counted but this moment with this man who wanted her.

She burned to get closer, to have more. But what if it was only tonight?

She was only dimly aware of the phone ringing. It sounded distant, like it was in someone else's house. Not hers. The answering machine. The answering machine would get it.

He halted his assault, his lips hovering over her mouth, as if waiting for a signal from her. She continued the kiss. The answer machine clicked on.

"It's Annagrace. Pick up or I'll think something is wrong and storm over there."

*Damn.*

He broke the kiss. "You'd better answer that, honey. She sounds like she means it." His voice was deep, rich, and breathless.

She opened her eyes. Hooded lids, glassy pupils and a sexy grin greeted her. Damn again.

"Dusty, pick up," the machine cackled.

Why did Annagrace have to be such a conscientious friend? She fumbled for the phone stationed on the end table between the MP3 player and the vase with silk roses.

"Hello."

"Thank God. Are you okay? I was scared out of my wits. Wondering if I had sent a psycho over there." Annagrace's voice sounded strained with worry.

Dusty could barely catch her breath her heart was pounding so fast. "Everything is fine." Now was not the time

to have a conversation about what Annagrace had done and whether or not she should have done it.

"You're not mad?"

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay, but you're not mad? Tell me I did right. I had Andy check him out and all."

"Everything is fine. Really. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Promise? And you'll tell me everything?"

One of Clay's talented hands massaged her back. His other was inching toward her breast.

Dusty had to get off the phone. "Yes. Bye." She clicked off before Annagrace could say more.

Then she rolled off Clay before his hand could touch her nipple and put the phone back in its holder. What had she been thinking? He didn't want her, Dusty. He was just after a warm and willing woman.

With a satisfied grin on his face and a prominent erection under those jeans, Clay reached for her. She sat back and tucked her legs under her.

"Come here, honey. We were just getting started," he said.

She shook her head. Though her body was crying out for more, this wasn't what she wanted. Wasn't what she needed. He was just filling in the time between rides.

His grin turned to a frown. "She didn't say something bad about me?" He raised a hand. "I swear, Dusty, I've never been on the wrong side of the law. If she told you something, it was either a lie or a mistake."

"No, Annagrace didn't say anything. She was just checking up on me. Just being a good friend."

His frown relaxed. "Well then, come here." He patted his nicely rounded thigh. "Those kisses of yours are scorching me alive and I like to feel the burn."

She shook her head again. "No. I don't think so. Besides, I'm not your type." Sometimes you had to tell the truth even if it hurt.

The frown came back, deeper this time. He narrowed his eyes, making them look darker. "How can you know my type when I don't have a clue? Least not anymore."

She settled back against the couch. He knew darn well what type. "You know, the 'let's have fun' type. The sexy ones with the big boobs who every man wants from the moment they walk in a place." Not the petite blonde who looks like a kid wearing her sister's clothes. "Just what are you doing here with me?"

He rubbed his chin as if stalling for time. Because he knew she was right. Because he just needed a room and she was convenient.

"Maybe I like you?" he said, as if angry at the thought.

"You don't even know me."

"Maybe I'd like to get to know you better."

"Does that mean starting with the bedroom?" Now she felt the anger. Anger was good. Anger would help keep some distance between them.

He shrugged. A non-committal, "does it matter" shrug. *And yes, it mattered to her.* "I said we'd just start with kissing. And I asked, remember?"

Yes, she sure did remember. And she'd let her hormones do the answering. "Well, now I'm saying no." She swung her legs out and stood up.

"Where are you going, Dusty? What the hell did Annagrace say?" Frustration deepened the weathered lines of his face.

"I'm getting the bed linens. This is a folding couch and you'll be sleeping down here." Their spare room had been turned into a sewing room and study since her father's friends no longer came to bunk down during the rodeo season.

His mouth tightened into a flat line. "Okay. That's fine. But I don't understand why you're so all fired angry with me."

She took a deep breath. "I'm not angry with you Clay. I'm angry with myself. I was close to settling."

He stood up, straightening to his full six-foot height. "Settling? With me?"

She felt small again and she didn't like the hurt look in his eyes. He didn't deserve that. He'd really done nothing wrong. She stared over his shoulder, afraid to look at him. "No. I'd be settling for a one night stand just to prove I was ... well, that I was desirable to someone like you." She'd barely whispered the words.

He grabbed her arm, held it in a gentle grasp. "Dusty, look at me."

She raised her gaze and met his head on. His jaw was clenched, his smile tight as if he was wavering between control and something else.

"I desire you. Hell, I want you more than any woman I've been with. And that's not just talk. I don't understand it either. This is new to me. Because I'm pretty certain one

night isn't going to do it for me, either." His voice had gone soft and he took a deep breath as if he needed to brace for something. "That scares me because I don't know if I'm ready to offer more. And I understand if it's not enough."

At least he was being honest about not being ready to offer more. The rest, she wasn't buying. "It's not." She wrenched her arm free.

"Fine. But don't go thinking you've nothing to offer a man." Irritation tinged his words. "You're smart, funny, sassy and sexy as hell. I can't look at you and not want you. And I sure can't kiss you and hide the fact. I'm not sure where this insecurity of yours is coming from except that Bradley fellow must have done a number on you."

"How do you know about Bradley?" Anger flamed up within her because she knew the answer as soon as she asked the question. Annagrace had a lot to answer for.

"Look, I'm just saying that I'm attracted to you. You've sure been keeping me up at night." He gave her a lopsided grin. "And I mean that in every sense."

God he was devastatingly attractive, and so convincing when he said lines like that. But she didn't believe him. Not one word. He was a rodeo cowboy, after all.

"I'll get the linens."

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## Chapter Six

Dusty wondered if Clay was awake yet as she tip-toed down the stairs. It was almost ten o'clock, meaning she'd missed the Heritage Day parade. She hadn't missed the parade since she could remember. Not that the floats and the band were all that much, but in Wayback everyone went to the parade to show their support. It was a town thing.

She'd been up most of the night thinking about the hunk of a cowboy sleeping in her living room. After checking the clock almost every half-hour she must have finally fallen asleep sometime before dawn and had slept right through. By the time she'd showered and put on her make-up, which took an extraordinarily long time that morning, it was well past parade time.

Pausing at the bottom stair, she peeked into the living room at the bare-chested man lying under the pale yellow blanket covering the sofa bed. He was still asleep. Whitey lay next to him, his doggy eyes trained on her, watching. Even her dog was turning traitor.

She'd wondered what Clay looked like in the morning. Hell, she'd wondered what he looked like at night, naked. That had been one of the questions costing her sleep.

She tip-toed over to the sofa, peered down and took a deep breath. Clay laid spread eagle, work-hardened arms flung out across the mattress like some offering to a god—or goddess. His brown hair was tousled and those fringed eyelashes feathered his high cheek bones. She took in his



straight, sculpted nose, firm full lips and the dark shadow of hair that dusted his strong jaw line. Her gaze traveled to his chest where sun-kissed skin was stretched taut over muscle. He looked like a sculptor's masterpiece, lean, hard and buff. Eye candy to her sweet-starved brain.

She followed the thin line of dark hair that ran down the middle of his toned stomach. It disappeared under the tented blanket that covered the treasure trying to poke through. Her hands itched to pick up the edge of the fabric and discover that treasure for herself.

She stepped closer, desire warring with reason. Before a winner could be declared, a strong arm encircled her waist and brought her tumbling down onto that firm abdomen. She fell with a squeal as smooth skin and tight muscles greeted her. Whitey scrambled from the bed.

"Come here, darling." Clay crooned the words as he wrapped both arms tightly around her and pulled her up to him. Before she could think, he'd rolled over her. The only things separating them were her denim skirt and the thin cover, now bunched at his hips.

"I've missed you." He feathered little kisses along her neck. Waves of delicious tingles rolled through her.

She didn't try to resist. A long firm length prodded her thighs. Unless he'd taken a hammer to bed with him last night, the man was hard and ready. The wetness between her legs said she was too.

But this was insane.

"Clay, don't," she managed to eke out between signals from her body telling her to let it ride. Fortunately, her brain was on duty this morning.

Like she had thrown a switch, he released her and rolled onto his back, pulling the covers along with him. He covered his eyes with the back of a hand.

"I know you want it, Dusty. Why won't you let me give it to you?" Frustration edged his words.

He was right. She did want it. "I don't know." It was the only answer she could give. Something was preventing her from answering the call of every part of her body.

"I'd make it good for you, honey."

"Clay, it's not that."

He sat up in one fluid motion, the blanket barely covering his lap. "What is it then?"

She shrugged. She was struggling to attach a name to it, too. But if the guy didn't get some clothes on, there might be no need for this conversation.

He bunched the edge of the cover in his hand. "I've told you I'd like to see where this goes." He stared at her, his big blue eyes making her pulse jump.

"It's me. I've things to work out, Clay. Maybe it's too soon."

He took a deep breath and with a growl, threw the cover back and rose out of the bed. His erection stuck out, long and thick and aimed at her. She gasped and shut her eyes, but the sight of him in all his glory was one she'd never forget. The man was magnificent.

"I'm taking a shower," he said. She heard the sounds of feet slapping against wood. "A cold shower."

She shouldn't have peeked as he took the stairs two at a time, but she couldn't help herself. He looked like a wild animal as he climbed, his heavy shaft waving from the motion. Heaven help her. They'd never fit together.

\* \* \* \*

Why hadn't Dusty fallen into his bed like every other woman? He must have done something wrong.

He let the water from the shower spray over him. Warm water, cleansing water. The flowered shower curtain fluttered from the pelting of the drops. He lathered the soap and began to scrub.

He tried to clear his mind, but Dusty wouldn't let him. He saw her image, sitting on his lap, her core nestled against his hard length, her nipples erect, pushing through the thin fabric of her top, and her thighs squeezing his hips. Her kisses had branded him like a hot iron. And then she'd jumped off of him as if *she'd* gotten burned. This morning she'd said no outright. Stopped him cold when he'd had an erection that was close to painful.

What the hell was he going to do? He wanted her, and not just physically. He wanted more *with* her. He wanted to be closer to her, share her secrets, soothe her fears. He'd felt a connection with her, a bond. Hell, he'd never confessed to anyone that he spoke to his father. But with her it had seemed natural, safe.

Yet with the situation being what it was, how could he offer more? Until he raised the stud fee, he was in no condition to get serious about a woman. Hell, he'd never even thought about getting serious. It had seemed there'd always be time. He was only twenty-seven.

Who was he kidding? He wasn't exactly a young cub anymore. He had friends younger than him who were on their second kid. So why should settling down seem such a distant prospect and the stud fees such a formidable obstacle?

He didn't know if she was the one. He'd never even asked that question before. He sure wanted to find out. Except that she'd made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him. Jesse had been so right. Dusty was the kind of girl you married. The kind you courted. The kind you brought home to your mother. That Bradley must have been an idiot. And thank God for that.

Somehow, he had to get her to take a chance and see where things between them went. If it took several more trips to Wayback in order to convince her, he'd make them. Because this could go all the way. She could be the one. He'd find out, no question about that. He'd never gone after something he wanted and come up empty. And in the most important issue of his whole life, the woman he might actually marry—he had no intention of setting a new precedent.

He turned the faucet to cold.

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## **Chapter Seven**

Awkward as the morning had been, Clay had insisted on taking her to breakfast at the Bluebonnet Café. He'd kept the conversation light, had asked her a lot of questions about Mercy Creek, and then they'd gone their separate ways. Though he'd promised to stop by the beer stand after his ride, she'd told him he shouldn't feel obligated. She'd had mixed feelings all day about whether she wanted him to stop by or not. Life would be emptier if he didn't, more complicated if he did.

She hadn't expected to lament the decision she'd made last night. After all, she'd taken the high road, as it were. But in the parking lot after breakfast, when she watched him walk away, she'd never felt more alone. Regret over what she'd missed wore on her all day.

At the arena, she'd listened to every word as Allan Greeley, the announcer, said Clay's name and called the ride. Her heart had been in her throat, the old fear gripping her tight as she listened to the commentary and tried to decipher the sounds of the crowd.

When the thunderous roar had drowned out Allan's voice-over, she'd known something good had happened. She'd let out the breath she'd been holding and scrambled to the opening just in time to see him dust his hat against his jean-clad leg and hold up a hand to shade his eyes. He searched the rim and, even from a distance, she could tell when he saw her. He gave an extra hat wave to her before settling it on his

head. He'd just scored an arena record-breaking ninety-one on a bronc named Contrary Mary. Her stomach had tied in knots.

A half-hour later, the Saturday evening crowd had emptied the stands and was heading past her for their cars. Kids clung to the hands of their parents and tried to keep pace. Older people walked near the arena wall as if it would hold them up should they need it.

Clay stood before her, hands fisted on his hips. "So ... Doug Morgan? He wouldn't be your father would he?"

She handed him a drink, her pulse beating a tattoo. It was on the house. Big Joe's rules. Any record-breaker gets a free beer. Clay's lips sipped the brew, lips that had held her captive only last night.

Tito had already shuttered his booth though the heavy odor of fried grease still hung in the air. She began to empty the register's contents into the green zippered bag. Anything to keep busy.

"I asked you a question." His voice grated like rocks tumbling in a rolling wheel.

"Yes," she said, the sound more clipped than she'd intended. She didn't want to discuss her father, or the score, or Clay's besting it, but from the look in his eye, she doubted she'd get her wish. She slammed the cash drawer shut and tucked the bag in the waistband of her jeans.

"Your father was the saddle bronc rider?" There was incredulity in his tone.

She nodded. Grabbing a damp rag, she began to wipe down the counter.

He pushed back his hat and stood, feet apart, staring at her like she'd grown two heads.

"I'm sorry, then, that I broke his record, Dusty." His voice had gone soft.

"I'm not." And that was the truth. "The day he set that record was the day he decided to rodeo for a living," she said scrubbing at a non-existent stain. "He was on the road to the NFR for the next twelve years." She threw the rag under the counter and took a deep breath. Clay wasn't her father and he'd done nothing wrong. Heck, she wasn't sure, anymore, that her father had. Stepping around to the outside of the stand, she brushed by him and reached for a metal handle. The edge of the security grate hit the counter with a clang. She fumbled in her pocket for the key.

"You had issues with your daddy rodeoing? Is that why you've been walling me out?"

She locked the stand and faced him. "I haven't been walling you out." Not much.

"Hell you haven't. You'd think you'd have told me your daddy was a bronc rider."

"Why? Why would it matter to you? And he rode bulls too. Hell, he rode whatever moved if he thought he could make some money."

"I think the information would be of interest to the bronc rider who's courting you." He emptied the cup and threw it in the nearby trash.

She blinked. Her heart thudded loud against her chest. "Courting me? You're courting me?"

"Jesse said I wouldn't be good at it and I must not be if you don't even know that's what I've been trying to do." He flung his hands out as if he was exasperated. "Despite your thinking all I want is to get in your pants, which I won't deny, I've also been trying to court you. You know, get to know you. Like a normal guy."

She couldn't help the smile. It was such an old-fashioned way to say it.

A few stragglers wandered past on their way to the parking lot, their voices echoing in the walkway. She just had to drop the money off at Big Joe's and she was done for the night. And Clay could be well on his way back home. The thought wasn't a happy one. The way her heart jerked and her pulse sped up and her hands went all sweaty around him, maybe she'd already fallen for him.

"Now that you broke the record, are you going to do the circuit?" She slid the key back into her pocket and held her breath.

"I'm here to pick up some extra money," he said. "I'm not a bronc rider by trade and even after breaking your daddy's record, I'm not about to become one. It's a hard life. Harder than what I do."

He reached for her. She felt the pull like it was some magnetic force. She didn't want to fight it anymore. It didn't matter whether he rodeoed or cowboyed or drove a truck. She'd been struggling against demons that no longer seemed to matter.

One look at Clay's hand outstretched in invitation along with the silent plea on his face, and her boots were clicking



on the concrete as she went to him. His chest was solid, his arms strong as he pressed her to him. The heat of his body felt good in the mild chill of the night air.

His hands moved up her back in a warm caress. "I want to celebrate my win. Tonight. With you." His hot breath teased her skin.

She pulled back to look at him. She knew what he was asking. If she said yes, they'd be celebrating in a very intimate way. He may not be a rodeo cowboy but it was doubtful he was in this for the long haul, despite his words. He'd take his winnings and go home and resume his playboy ways. But looking into those dark blue eyes, she knew she couldn't let him leave just yet.

\* \* \* \*

Her room was like a cotton candy factory—pink, soft and fluffy. Ruffled curtains, shaggy carpet and so many pillows he'd had to push them off the double bed to make room. He'd felt as out of place as a sheep in a cow pen.

But he'd sure enjoyed taking the clips from her hair and watching each tendril drift loose over her shoulders, enjoyed peeling off her clothes, layer by layer, until she lay on the pink bed cover, naked except for a pair of white cotton panties. With her golden hair fanned out around her, Dusty looked like an angel in a pink heaven.

Her finger traced the veins that mapped the back of his hand. "You have large hands," she whispered. Her light touch tickled.

On bent elbow, he braced his head and shifted his body nearer so he had a better view of her adorable face with its delicate nose, sculpted cheek bones and wide eyes. His shirt was gone but he still wore his jeans which right now were uncomfortably tight and getting tighter by the second. "There's nothing so big about me that I won't be tender with you." He brushed his lips down her smooth throat. Her flowery scent filled his nostrils. "I know how to make it good for you."

In the dim gray light her darkened eyes were warm, inviting, encouraging, trusting. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Angel or a nymph, he couldn't decide. But tonight she'd be his.

"I'm not ... well I'm not as experienced as..."

He silenced her with a finger to her moist lips as his pulse raced. "You've been here before though?" He sure hoped she had, though it might explain her reluctance. Taking a virgin to bed was not an arena he'd ever ridden in. So why did the thought of someone else having her unsettle him? "With Bradley, I take it?" He'd like to know all about Bradley, like how close? For how long? And what did she feel for him now?

She nodded and worried her lip.

"He was the only one?" Not that it should matter how many men she'd been with. He'd never been a hypocrite about that kind of thing. But with her, he didn't want there to be any others.

She nodded again.

Relief. And he was being a hypocrite.

Needing to touch her, he ran his hand down her torso, past her budding breasts. This time she didn't flinch as his fingers skimmed those sweet nipples. She seemed insecure about her body, about whether she was attractive. Hell, he'd never been so attracted to a woman. Delicate and finely made, she made him want to be tender and loving. He rested his palm upon the silky bare skin of her stomach. Lovely.

Usually, he'd just shuck his clothes, enjoy a little foreplay, and then go at it hard and fast. Tonight he wanted to take his time, savor her like a fine wine, make it matter, make it memorable.

The idea some other man had made it memorable for her was jabbing at him. "Bradley must have been a special man to get such a gift." Why was he feeling jealous? It had been before he knew her and he'd never even met this Bradley.

"Once I thought so," she said. She ran her hand up his arm leaving a trail of heat before resting it on his shoulder.

"He's not now?" He swirled his thumb over her navel. Soft, smooth, warm skin. He nipped her shoulder. The fragrance of flowers was like incense, drugging him.

Talking about a woman's former lover when all he wanted was to bury himself deep within her wasn't his smoothest move, but he had to know. It mattered. It shouldn't have. He knew that. But it did.

"No." She shifted slightly, angling her neck for better access. He feathered kisses along its swanlike length. "And you? Was there ... is there anyone special."

No. There was no one. Had been no one. Until now. "Just you."

She smiled, a lovable, enticing smile. "At this moment," she said.

*Agree. Tell her it's just this moment. That's what she's expecting. Saying anything else will set her up with expectations you may not be able to fulfill. She's not going to run if you tell her it's just for now.* But his heart wasn't listening to his mind. "No, darling. For more than this moment. Could be for much more."

Her arms wrapped around his neck to pull him closer. Lips, soft and sweet, met his. He shifted, moved on top of her, covering the lithe body underneath him.

"Your buckle," she gasped.

He jerked back, let go a curse. Already he'd hurt her. His thighs straddled her hips as he fumbled for the clasp.

"Let me," she said and reached for the belt.

His heart was pounding as he watched her small hands undo the large silver buckle. His erection was pressing uncomfortably against the tight fabric. Watching her fingers brush against him made things a whole lot tighter. When the buckle was undone, her hand grazed his length as she tugged down the zipper. Damn, it was hot despite the air-conditioning.

"I'll take it from here," he said. He pulled back from her and set a foot on the floor to steady himself. His cock jutted out as he slipped the jeans and underwear down his legs in one motion and then stepped out. When he turned to look at her, her eyes were wide and rounded.

A satisfied smile claimed him. "Now I get to do you," he said, as he climbed back on the bed. In one movement he

drew the white cotton bikini pants down her limbs and off. A small patch of curly corn silk guarded the juncture of her slender thighs.

His erection throbbing with need, his pulse jumping with anticipation, he captured her hips, straddling her between his knees. He was going to make this good for her.

Her fine-boned body was toned and sculpted, probably from the work she did at Mercy Creek rather than any gym. Two small pale, crescent mounds topped by what looked like cinnamon candies called his attention. For some reason, she'd been skittish before when he'd touched her breasts. He hadn't met a woman yet who hadn't enjoyed his ministrations. Maybe her ex hadn't known what to do to make it good for her, but he sure did.

He ran his fingers up the cool skin of her abdomen until his palms rested right under those little sugar cookies. With practiced ease his thumbs flicked their hardened nubs.

"Clay," she whispered his name on a breathy breeze, but he couldn't tell if it was aimed to stop him or convey her pleasure.

"Let me have some fun, honey."

"I'm not, they're not..."

He glanced at her face. Her mouth was set in a tight line as if she was trying to hold something in. "You have beautiful breasts, Dusty. Perky. And your nipples are standing at attention which means they like what I'm doing."

"Perky?" Her mouth was agape.

He had to chuckle; she looked so cute. "Yeah. And finely formed like the rest of you."

"But they're not..."

"Honey you ever hear the expression 'size doesn't matter'?"

Her gaze traveled right to his member which was sticking out like it was reaching for her. Well, where that was concerned he'd like to think size did matter. He couldn't stifle a chuckle as he swirled a palm over each of her breasts. She sighed and her eyelids closed. Just the reaction he'd hoped for.

He leaned forward and nipped her ear, all the time massaging her pillow-soft breasts. "Giving you pleasure is giving me pleasure," he whispered. "I do anything you don't like, you tell me. But give me a chance to prove I can make it good for you."

She barely nodded, seemingly lost in what he hoped was a whirlwind of sensation. He feathered kisses across her brow, now relaxed and smooth, and ran his tongue down the silky skin of her neck. He left a wet trail along her collarbone before shifting down to her pert little bosom. His tongue licked her nipple. She moaned. That was all the encouragement he needed. He took the nipple between his lips and suckled, drawing gently but firmly on her. She moaned and gave a little shudder. He shifted to the other one and repeated the attention. She arched her back as if asking him for more. He obliged.

Lust was rolling through him like an avalanche. His member twitched as it rested against her leg. He went slower than ever and pulled up all his self-discipline to control the

urge to take her hard and fast. But he had an idea it would all be worth it.

When he kissed her again, her mouth fairly devoured his. Her hands grasped his bare back like she was holding on for the ride of her life. He hoped to give it to her. He deepened the kiss, probing and tasting with his tongue as he rubbed against her. He moved over her with a slow and measured rhythm, mimicking what he'd be doing inside of her. She felt so good, so perfect. When she moaned against his mouth a deep tremor rumbled through him. He wanted more of her and something to distract him from the need pounding through him.

He kissed his way down the silky skin of her throat, her flowery scent tickling his nose. He tongued between her breasts and resisted the desire to feast on them again. He showered kisses down past the ribs rippling under tanned skin and mouthed the slight crater of her navel.

"Clay?" She shifted under him as he aligned his body lower. His legs were hanging over the foot of the bed, his stomach rested between her knees.

"Humm..." He muttered in a half-answer as he swirled his tongue over those pale curls, his hands holding her hips like they were an offering. To him they surely were.

"What are you..."

Her voice trailed off as he laved her. Her salty, sweet taste was like heavenly elixir.

"I've never ... no one has ever..."

He raised his head. Her stomach was heaving, her cheeks were crimson and her body tense. Her former lover had a lot to answer for.

"Honey, don't deny me, now," he said in as soothing a voice as he could muster given the circumstances. "I've wanted to taste you since ... well pretty much since we met." He craned his neck to see her better. She had propped up on her elbows. Her face was flushed and her eyelids heavy. She looked like she'd been drugged. That it was by him gave him no small measure of pleasure. "Just relax and let me take you someplace you may not have been before. Will you do that? I promise you won't be disappointed."

She didn't answer but sank back into the mattress. Her body relaxed and her breathing calmed.

He lifted her hips, spread her thighs wider and placed his mouth over her. His chin dipped into her opening and his tongue swirled over the nubbin in a set tempo, then flicked at random moments. Each time he flicked she moaned. He drew on her lightly and she writhed under him. When he began flicking her again, her moaning increased, her breathing grew rapid, and she elevated her hips as if to seek more. He increased the rhythm in concert with her breathing. She was near if she would let herself go. He stepped it up.

She cried out, his name ringing loud in the still air. From outside the door he heard a small yip. Her body shook as he lowered her gently onto the mattress. He'd love to come into her now, feel the clenching and unclenching of her release, but if this was her first time, she'd need a moment to recover. Instead he slid up next to her, gathered her in his arms and



pressed her close. Her body was warm, her skin dew-kissed and her muscles relaxed.

She felt so slight, like he was holding a delicate crystal vessel. She hid her head in his bare shoulder, wrapped her slim arms around him and squeezed herself against him. He was hard, heavy and ready to take her.

"That was incredible." Her breath tickled his skin.

He wanted to ask if it was her first orgasm, but he knew it was his ego talking. "We're just getting started, honey."

She pulled back to stare at him. Her hand slipped between them. Her delicate fingers caressed his length. "I know."

He got even harder.

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## **Chapter Eight**

Dusty slid her hand up and down his velvety smooth shaft while her heart pounded hard against her chest. He'd just consumed her, sent her up in flames and they were just getting started? This wasn't anything like what she'd experienced with Bradley.

Her ex-boyfriend would be in and out a few times then it was over. She'd wondered why Annagrace loved sex so much. Now she knew.

Looking into Clay's eyes as he lay beside her caused her heart to flip. She saw longing and desire in those blue depths, along with a clenched jaw and rigid smile. She knew he was fighting for control. She stroked her thumb over the moist tip of him. His eyelids fluttered shut as a low moan escaped his open lips.

She longed to check out the hard, thick length she was stroking but she was too embarrassed. Bradley hadn't been built anything like this. It made her wonder if she'd be able to accommodate Clay.

She felt his hot breath as he nuzzled her neck. "You ready for me, honey? Because if you keep stroking me like that it's going to be all over." He kissed her throat.

"I'll try."

"You'll try?" he muttered against her skin.

She pulled back to look at him. His eyelids were half-closed, his pupils dark, but the smile on his face had her insides dancing.

"You're ... you're big Clay. I'm not."

The corners of his eyes crinkled as his grin broadened. "Honey, I'll fit. Long as you're wet enough." He pushed her onto the mattress. "Got to put the cowboy hat on."

He reached for a foil wrapper he must have placed on her bedside table. She wished she felt confident enough to help him but he seemed more than capable, slipping it on over his engorged member with ease. She'd bet they were magnums.

Once the condom was in place, he stretched out over her and his hand pushed between her thighs. With her muscles turned to jelly, she'd no notion of resisting him. His fingers probed her before she felt them enter. He stroked her, his fingers moving in and out, sending wonderful little tremors through her and causing moisture between her thighs. Her head fell back and her eyes closed as she gave way to the erotically hypnotic sensations.

"That's it. Enjoy it, honey," he crooned against her ear.

With the next breath she felt the weight of his body on her. Instinctively, she opened her legs to accommodate him and he answered the invitation, nestling at her opening.

"Open your eyes, Dusty. I want you to look at me when I come into you." His voice was husky and gritty, like sandpaper scratching rock.

She did as he asked. His flushed and handsome face loomed before her. He held his features tight as he pushed against her with a gentle thrust. He'd moved just inside of her.

"More." She whispered her need.

She watched as his hands grasped her hips and he leaned back. His form was a shadow in the gray light, an outline of broad shoulders, muscled arms and a torso that narrowed to the spot where he joined with her.

He thrust his shaft into her again, filling more of her and then he slowly pulled back out, creating wonderful friction. He bent over and nipped her neck before his next thrust sent him deeper. The electrifying tremor that shot through her seemed to flip on all her nerve endings, amplifying the jolt. Again he pulled out and thrust further in. Out, in, out, in. The strokes were long and leisurely eliciting quiver upon quiver until she was awash in sensation.

"You're tight honey. Nice and tight."

She hoped that was a good thing. From the bliss on his face, she figured it was.

He slipped an arm under each of her knees as he worked her, pushing her thighs back against her stomach. Suddenly the sensations he'd been creating were magnified. In, out, in, out, his hips pumped in a rhythm as measured as a line of music.

*Oh God.*

He chuckled.

She must have said the words out loud. Through the slits of her lids, she saw him throw his head back and close his eyes as he moved his hips in pace with her breathing.

It was building again. That delicious tension from before was building. He moved slightly faster as he pushed against her thighs. In, out, in, out. The luscious friction wound her tighter and tighter. She arched, her body tensed.

"Let it go, honey," Clay coaxed. "Let it go."

He pumped faster—once, twice, three times, and she shattered. While her muscles pulsated, he pumped harder, again and again. "Dusty," he called, as he tensed. Then collapsed on top of her.

The hard weight of his body felt so good, so warm, and so protective. Tears fell on her cheeks and she nuzzled against his bare chest to hide them. She didn't know why she was crying. She was happy, ecstatic and wonderfully sated.

"Did I hurt you?" Clay was looking down on her, a frown on his face.

She shook her head and wiped at the tears with the back of her hand. "I don't know why I'm crying. I'm happy."

He smiled and the sparks in his eyes danced. "So am I darling, so am I."

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## **Chapter Nine**

The next morning Dusty had started breakfast by the time he came down. Dressed in fresh jeans and a plaid shirt with pearl snaps, he looked every inch a cowboy. A cowboy with a sexy smile and the body to deliver.

Earlier, he'd threatened to join her in the shower. Given that they'd just concluded another round of love-making, she'd begged him for mercy. As incredible as it had been, and it had been incredible, she needed time to recuperate, time to sort out her feelings. He'd been true to his promise and taken her someplace she'd never been before. And now she feared her heart had gone along too.

When she'd been dating Bradley, their relationship had been comfortable. No heart-pounding moments, just steady contentment. And sex had been a way of feeling closer, not necessarily to give and get pleasure. With Clay she'd achieved both intimacy and gratification at a magnitude she'd never even imagined.

Was this just afterglow or was this real? She feared it was real. If it was, she'd likely set herself up for incredible heartbreak—deeper and broader than anything that had happened before. Or incredible happiness, a small voice of hope countered.

Clay sauntered over to where she stood at the stainless steel stove, Whitey following on his heels. Clay growled as he kissed her throat and then pecked her cheek. The scent of

sandalwood followed him. It was a sweet peck, and she returned it.

His gaze softened, taking away some of the awkwardness she felt.

"I've made bacon, the home fries are almost done, and the eggs will be coming up in a minute. Scrambled or once over?"

He smiled, a full faced smile. "Scrambled. I kind of like this. Feels nice and homey. Can I help?"

She smiled back. "No. You've cooked already. My turn this morning. Just sit right down at the table and I'll get your coffee."

As she busied getting his coffee from the coffee maker, she heard the scrape of his chair on the tile floor. When she turned back he was seated with his legs stretched out.

"Service, too?" he asked.

"With a smile," she said and set the steaming hot cup before him. "Milk and sugar?"

"I take mine black, but I'd like a little sugar. From you." The blue of his eyes deepened. "Come here." He opened up his arms.

After last night she had no embarrassment about kissing him. He pushed back in the chair and spread his thighs. She came and stood between those powerful limbs, rested her hands on his shoulders and stared into those baby-blues. What would it be like to stare into them on a regular basis?

"I intend to earn your trust, Dusty. I want more. From you."

Something deep inside of her let go. She believed him. She was just going to say so when an acrid smell greeted her nose. "The fries!"

Gratefully, they weren't too burned and she was able to get the eggs finished without setting off the smoke detector. Sitting across from Clay, eating their breakfast together, it wasn't hard to imagine them as a couple. But she would need to know a lot more about him first.

"This is good, honey." He gave her a wink as he inhaled more food. "I like my 'taters well-done."

She looked down at the mix of brown and blackened potatoes and cringed. "They're a little on the crisp side." She squirted some ketchup over them.

He dropped a piece of bacon in Whitey's direction. The dog gobbled it up in one bite.

"We don't really feed him table food." She sounded like her mother.

"Hard to resist those button eyes. I was just trying to make up to him for taking his place last night in your bed." He gave her another wink.

Her stomach fluttered. But this was no time to get distracted. If he wanted a relationship with her, there were things she was curious about. "Clay, can I ask you some questions. Some personal questions?"

He stopped, fork in mid air and gave her a long look. "What's on your mind?"

"You said you were here to earn money. If it's not to get to the NFR, can I ask what it's for?"



Setting down the fork, he leaned his elbows on the table.  
"I'm not a rodeo rider—but I'm not exactly a cowhand either."

She raised her eyebrows. Possibilities swirled in her head.  
"What exactly are you?"

"I'm part owner of a ranch, with my mother. It's our family spread. When Pa died I inherited forty-nine percent."

"A rancher?" Rancher meant prosperous and someone tied to a place. That ember of hope was sparking. "What kind of ranch?"

"It's a cattle ranch, but with the price of beef and all the issues with raising cattle, we're struggling with our modest spread. I'm considering raising and training cutting horses instead."

"Like Mercy Creek?" Mercy Creek had a long history and a sterling reputation.

He chuckled and the corners of his eyes crinkled up. "Well, maybe by the time my kids are running it we can say like Mercy Creek. For now, I'm just trying to raise stud fees."

"You can't afford stud fees?" Maybe not so prosperous.

"Well, my mama..." He looked up at her from under his eyebrows, "She isn't as convinced as I am about all this. I'm determined to raise the money myself. I own a fine mare with good bloodlines from Cogdell stock and I'm hoping to breed her to a prize-winning stallion from Mercy Creek."

"Duel Sole Ray?" He was the finest at the ranch.

Clay nodded. "He's the one."

And very expensive. "You can't convince your mother, huh?"

"Kate Tanner's a smart woman but change comes hard to her. She's from the "show me" state of mind. She's got to see something before she's going to embrace it. In the meantime, I'm also looking into going organic. Costs more but you charge more for your beef and for a small outfit like us, the numbers could work out."

Dusty rested her back against the chair. She was impressed. Clay was full of ideas. Full of dreams. But it sounded like he wasn't just dreaming, he was doing something about them. She had to admire that. From working at Mercy Creek in the summers, she knew what he planned would take a lot. Even Mercy Creek with its storied reputation had fallen on hard times before Hawk Riley had come along, though that had more to do with outside forces than the nature of the ranch.

"So you're really not a rodeo cowboy?"

He shook his head as he took a large forkful of fries.

"Disappointed?"

She couldn't help but smile. "No."

"Good. Because I'm afraid you've let your breakfast get cold."

After nuking her breakfast for thirty seconds in the microwave, she sat back down. He'd finished and was sipping his coffee, apparently watching her every move.

"How about you? Like, what if you got a job in Fort Davis. Would you move down there? It's not all that far from Marfa."

That sounded an awful lot like planning for a future. If she didn't watch it, that spark of hope might ignite something.

"I'd consider it."

He shot her a slow and sexy grin. "Is that what you want, to be a teacher?"

She loved kids, enjoyed teaching. But what she really loved were horses, which was the reason she worked the ranch in the summers. Maybe it was a legacy from her father. Maybe he had left her that after all. Pride swelled inside of her. Not for herself but, for the first time, it was for her father.

But she didn't feel comfortable enough to confess her dream to train horses, yet. Besides, what she really wanted would probably be enough to send him running. No time like the present to find out. "I like teaching, but I want more."

"You do?"

"I want it all, Clay. Home, family."

"Kids?"

She nodded—especially kids. "And a man who comes home at night."

"Can't imagine any man not coming home to you, sweetheart." He gave her a wink.

Why did he have to be so appealing? It was no wonder women pulled back the covers for him. Just like she had done. "And you, what do you want?"

"Besides more time with you? I don't know. I'm just in the process of finding that out. But I'm looking in the same direction as you are."

"Really?"

He chuckled. "I hear that disbelief in your voice. I don't blame you. You had me pegged pretty accurately. I have been a player. A one-night stand kind of guy. But maybe

that's because I hadn't found the right woman." His gaze traveled along her body as if to make sure she had no doubt as to his meaning.

"You don't even know me, Clay."

"Funny, I feel like I do. I feel like I've known you all my life." He reached a hand across the table and settled it over her own. "And I'm coming back, darling, next weekend to find out even more. That's a promise."

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## Chapter Ten

The sun beat down on Dusty's back as she sat on the blistering hot seat at the only free table near the edge of the hospitality tent. Thank goodness her scrap of a black skirt covered enough to keep the back of her legs from getting burned. A bead of sweat channeled down between her breasts. Small but perky breasts, Clay had said. She liked the idea of perky. Apparently, so did Clay because he'd kept his promise. He'd returned the last two weekends.

Her mother had still been away and they'd spent those Friday nights, Saturday mornings, and Saturday nights, after the rodeo, in bed. He'd only placed third the first weekend and had gotten bucked off the second weekend, but he'd told her he'd had the best rides of his life.

A smile slipped past her lips as she remembered their long, slow lovemaking. So had she. He'd made her feel sexy and desirable, shown her all that was possible between a man and woman. She hadn't been able to concentrate during the week, hadn't even worked on getting more teaching interviews, had barely been able to keep on task at the barn. She wasn't hungry, she wasn't tired, and she wasn't interested in doing anything but thinking—day and night—about him.

They'd traded opinions and ideas on training horses, shared their love of the Old West, and swapped names of southern blues bands they followed. She'd told him her real name, Deanna. He'd said he couldn't think of her as anything but Dusty, which was fine by her.

She also learned they had some different tastes, like in movies. She liked romantic boy-meets-girl movies, he preferred action flicks with a fair amount of violence.

He'd spent the first Sunday teaching her how to lasso the grill. The next Sunday, she'd taken him to a craft fair in a nearby town and he'd bought a hand-tooled belt for himself and a beautiful turquoise and mother of pearl necklace for her. Life had gotten very good. So good that hope was now a consuming fire inside her. The realization that she had fallen in love with him was taking shape. She prayed he felt the same.

Last Monday, her mother had come home and read her the riot act. The house was a mess, she'd yet to find a job though the Fort Davis school district had called to schedule a second interview, and Della Ballew had apparently filled her mother in about the cowboy who'd been staying over. Her mother hadn't been as upset over that tidbit of gossip as Dusty expected. She'd only insisted she meet him and asked if Dusty was happy. Dusty had answered truthfully—she was.

Today she'd finished her work at Mercy Creek early so she could be in time for his ride and she'd actually watched. No near panic attack ensued, even though he'd gotten bucked off four seconds in. He'd jumped to his feet, waved his hat in her direction and trotted off. Now she was waiting for him in the picnic area as planned. And looking forward to a reunion tonight, in his room at The Corral, since her mother had returned.

The new black lace bra and silk panties, courtesy of the Victoria's Secret catalog, felt deliciously sinful against her

skin. As did the weight of the necklace he'd bought her. She felt sexy, womanly, and wholly feminine. Swinging her leg back and forth in time with the Trace Adkins tune blaring from the speakers, she turned her attention toward the opening where the cowboys entered and exited the arena and prepared to wait. A steady stream of people flowed in and out of the tented area. Kids ran and parents walked. Young, old and in-between, the rodeo drew them all.

Even with sunglasses on, Dusty had to shade her eyes as she scanned for Clay. Her heart was hammering to beat the band. She bit her lip as several cowboys emerged from the black opening, carrying their saddles. None was Clay. Then the form of a tall, lean cowboy materialized, a saddle over his shoulder. Alongside was another, slightly shorter cowboy. Clay and Jesse.

Clay had said Jesse was mending nicely but surely he wouldn't be riding bulls in his condition. Not yet. He couldn't want boots that badly.

She stood and waved. Clay gave a nod and headed toward her, his stride visibly lengthening. She wanted to run into his arms but with the crowd closing in, she was afraid to give up their table. No doubt Clay was hungry—he always seemed to be—and he'd want to catch a bite.

"Hey, honey," he said as he dropped the saddle to the ground with a thud and removed the shades from his eyes. He tucked the sunglasses into his shirt pocket before he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. Leather and horse and fresh air greeted her as she buried her nose in the

soft fabric of his white shirt. She felt like she'd come home. He kissed her hair.

"Well, well, well." Jesse stood beside Clay. With those sunglasses on it was hard to tell if Jesse was glad to see her. "Is this how it is now?"

Clay grimaced as he gazed at her. "He's not too happy. I told him we were dating. I don't think he believed me."

Dusty turned a smile on Jesse. Jesse had never really had a chance but she couldn't tell him that. It was flattering though to know they'd both been interested. Wonders never did cease. Jesse met her smile with a frown.

"He took advantage of my being out of commission." Jesse scowled. "Some friend you are, Clay."

Clay stepped back, keeping one arm around Dusty's shoulders and motioned toward the table. "All's fair," he said, but the smile he'd plastered on his face didn't quite meet his eyes, as if there was tension between the two friends.

Jesse climbed over the bench and sat down on one side of the table, leaving Dusty and Clay on the sunny side. Dusty cuddled close to Clay's hard body. He gave her a chaste kiss on the head. Jesse's pique must be an act, Dusty thought. They'd only had one dance together.

Jesse removed his hat to the table and finger combed his blonde hair. "So am I to assume we've got separate rooms at The Corral tonight? Or am I just supposed to high-tail it to the Blue Bug and stay put all night? Alone." He stared hard at Clay.

Clay's Adam's apple moved with a hard swallow. "I've paid for separate rooms."



Jesse nodded with a tight-lipped smile. "Oh you paid, did you? Anticipating my hundred dollars, are you?"

"No. That was just funnin', Jesse and you know it." Clay's voice had gone gruff. Something was going on between them. Something to do with her. Dusty shifted from Clay's arm.

"What hundred dollars?" she asked.

"This hundred." Jesse pulled a bill from his pocket and slapped it onto the rough-hewn table. A hundred dollar bill. "I was going to put this toward those boots Patti-Pie is making me, but here."

Clay's face had turned red—and angry. He glowered at his friend. "Put that money away, Jesse. You don't owe me anything and you know it."

"Sure I do. A bet is a bet. I lost, but I'm not sure it was fair and square."

Heat climbed Dusty's back like lava from an erupting volcano. "A bet? What bet?"

Jesse leaned forward, his arms folded on the table. "He did say it was just a good time right? No commitments or anything?"

"Dusty, don't believe anything he says. He's just goofing on you." Clay's voice was hard as steel. Something was very wrong here.

"Don't suppose I can blame him for not 'fessing up. Clay wouldn't want to ruin a good thing—and I'm sure you're all that." Jesse gave her a look up and down.

"Jesse, I'm warning you," Clay bellowed.

"No. I want to hear what he has to say. What bet?" Dusty's stomach suddenly felt like it had been hollowed out, along with her heart.

That tight-lipped smile clung to Jesse's face. "We bet a hundred dollars as to which one of us you'd choose to have a good time with. I tend to fall in love pretty easily and Clay never does, so he made it a condition we couldn't propose to you or suggest it was anything more than a good time." Jesse's gaze bore into her like a dentist drilling a cavity. Only no Novocaine was going to blunt the pain. "He didn't say it was more than a good time, did he?"

Her heart seized up, her palms went sweaty and the pounding in her head told her to flee.

"Jesse, you asshole. Dusty, Dusty, look at me."

Clay's voice sounded like he was in a tunnel somewhere. She felt the pressure of his fingers circling her wrist. She wrenched free and stood. She had to get out of there. Fast.

"Dusty, it's not like that and you damn well know it."

"You can't say I'm lying, Clay. Hey if it was just a good time what is everyone so upset about?"

She barely heard Jesse's words as she stumbled away from the table. The sounds of spurs jangling and boots hitting dirt came from behind her.

"Dusty," Clay grasped her wrist; this time his grip was tighter.

"Let me be." Dusty heard the shrill voice, but it didn't sound like hers. Several faces turned in her direction. She didn't care. Tears welled in her eyes. "Don't ever touch me again, Clay Tanner. Don't come near me again. Ever."

Her legs were moving, fast. Across the hard-packed earth, toward her truck. Toward home. Alone.

\* \* \* \*

"I should kick your ass all the way back to the ranch," Clay hollered. Feeling his blood pressure rising, he stood by the old pick-up parked in the lot, clenching his fists to keep from using them, and glared at Jesse's expressionless face. He wanted to knock those sunglasses right off of him. Instead he tossed his saddle into the truck bed.

"Don't take your anger out on me, cowboy. You should have told me."

On that score and only that score, Jesse was right. He'd mentioned that he'd been courting Dusty and Jesse had been none too happy. In fact, he'd insisted on coming today even though he was still in no condition to ride. Clay hadn't gone into the particulars of just what courting meant, but Jesse had to guess.

"You should have known." Clay held himself rigid to contain the fury that threatened to shake his body. He fought for control because he was about ready to haul off and punch his best friend. The only explanation for Jesse's coming was that he wanted Dusty to know about the bet. But why?

"No, you should have told me not to say anything. You should have told me that you lied to her to get her in bed." Now Jesse sounded angry and that was just plain ridiculous.

Clay threw up his hands in frustration and leaned back against the door of the cab. Several people had already given them interested stares. They were putting on a show for

everyone. He took a deep breath and tried to calm down as he folded his arms across his chest. "How do you know I lied? You don't know what I said. You don't know how I feel." And that was the truth because Clay didn't know himself.

"I know you, and Dusty doesn't deserve your brand of romance, Clay. One look at her today and it was obvious. She's in love with you. She may not be feeling too good right now, but it's better than she'd feel in a few weeks when she was hearing wedding bells, if she isn't already."

She was in love with him? Wedding bells? Moisture pooled under his arms.

"Hell, I did you a favor. And Dusty, too." Jesse slapped at his denim-clad thigh as if he was trying to rid it of some imaginary dirt. "You've got no business toying with that girl. I told you before she's made for marrying not dallying. Girls like that don't understand your kind of fun. They get hurt. Badly hurt. The scarred-for-life kind of hurt and then guys like me—decent guys who want to get married and settle down—don't have a chance because they won't trust anyone."

What the hell was Jesse saying? The scary thing was he was making some kind of sense. But how come Jesse was the good guy and Clay was coming out as the bad guy?

"She thinks she was part of a bet, God damn it." How could that be good for anyone? "I'd forgotten all about the damn bet. You know I didn't go after her for your hundred dollars."

Jesse shoved his hands in his pockets. "Hell, every time you see a pretty girl, you make a bet with yourself. It's a

challenge with you. You may not be playing for the hundred dollars but you sure as hell were playing."

Is that what he'd been doing? Betting with himself? Was that what it had been with Dusty? A challenge? She had been challenging, for sure. He'd never met a woman more reluctant to go to bed with him. That had hurt his ego. No doubt about it. But loving her had been one of the most beautiful things he'd ever experienced. He'd felt honored, like it had been a great gift, not a mark on his belt. She'd called up feelings he didn't know he had. Protective feelings, tender feelings, sensitive feelings. Feelings.

He hadn't been able to think about anyone or anything but her. That curvy redhead had called several times and he'd absolutely no desire for her size D fundamentals. His mind had been occupied by a size A with a sweet smile and a sassy line. A little spitfire that lit him up every time.

"What if I wasn't?" Clay ground out. "What the hell if I wasn't? What if I actually love her, Jesse?"

Jesse's face paled. "You serious?"

Clay closed his eyes. All he saw was Dusty. With tears streaming down her face. How the hell was he going to right this one?

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## Chapter Eleven

Whitey jumped from the bed and started to bark.

"It's me, Dusty, open the door." Annagrace's voice carried through the sealed off room. "Your mom's worried about you. Let me in. Please."

Dusty barely stirred from under the covers of her bed. It felt like a two hundred pound anvil was sitting on her chest, the pain was just as intense. "Go away." The words came out in a strangled gasp.

"No. I'm not going away. So open the darn door."

Dusty pulled her body upright in a slow jerky movement. She swung her legs over the side, flung back the covers and stood. The cool air of the air-conditioning chilled her skin. Passing the mirror, she caught sight of the lace bra and panties she was wearing and the necklace around her neck. Tears burned her eyes. How could she have been so stupid? How could he have been so calculating?

"Dusty, open this door. Your mama is worried."

With robotic movement, Dusty made it to the door, threw the latch and cracked it open. "I'm alive. Now go away."

The door slammed into Dusty. With a yelp, she staggered back and Annagrace stepped into the room. Whitey did a jig around her feet. Hands on hips, pursed lips, Annagrace looked as angry as Dusty felt. No it wasn't anger Dusty felt. It was more defeat, closer to self-loathing. How come she hadn't listened to her brain? Why had she let a smooth-

talking cowboy get past her defenses? Why had she been so needy?

Dusty shoved the door closed and padded back to her bed. Her bed, where Clay had made love to her too many times to count. No. Correction. He'd had sex. Filled an elemental need. Had a good time.

Tears clogged her eyes. She climbed in, the soft bedding still warm from her body, and pulled the covers over her head. Whitey followed and snuggled close.

"Oh Dusty." Annagrace's voice had softened. "Look at you. You're a mess."

"Tell me something I don't know."

The bed shifted as Annagrace sat down. "Okay. Clay Tanner loves you."

Cruel. She was deliberately being cruel. "Tell me something *true* that I don't know."

"He's all torn up. He's been trying to call you. Did you know that he came here? Your mother wouldn't let him in."

No, she didn't know. She'd been in bed with the pillow over her ears wondering how long she could stay in her room without having to use the bathroom. But what did it matter? Nothing he could say would change the facts. He'd bet on bedding her. Had lied to her about his intentions. Had never cared for her beyond a good time.

Annagrace shook Dusty's legs. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes. Now go away, Annagrace. I just want to be left alone."

"I believe him. I think he does love you."

She did not want to have this conversation. "I don't love him so what does it matter."

Annagrace let out a deep sigh. "Yes, you do or you wouldn't be so broken up. Look, he was just doing what guys do—before he fell in love with you."

Dusty shot up in bed so fast the room swam in front of her. She held her head until Annagrace's face came into focus. "Doing what guys do? Making a bet with another guy as to who could get in my pants first?"

"Shush. Your mother will hear." Annagrace had the nerve to giggle. Giggle!

"What kind of man is he? He knew I wasn't interested in a one-night stand. He knew I ... He took advantage of me. Plain and simple."

"Does he look like a guy who needs a hundred dollars from his best friend?"

Dusty folded her arms over her chest and felt her temper flare hot. "Yes. He said he needed money. Riding horses and betting on women are obviously his way to get it." She couldn't hold the tears back anymore. They ran down her face like a gusher had just come in.

"Won't you even listen to him? He's planning to leave for home. I asked him to give me an hour to see if I couldn't talk some sense into you."

Her best friend was working for the enemy. "Absolutely not. There is nothing he can say." She struggled to contain the sobs that were choking her throat.

"Ah, how about I'm sorry, forgive me, I love you. I think he has a lot to say to you."



Dusty swiped the back of her hand at the wetness covering her cheek. "Look, why would I want some guy who even considered betting on such a thing—even if he did care for me—which he doesn't. What kind of egomaniac is he? What decent guy would bet on such a thing? What kind of guy would lure a woman into believing there was more just to win a bet? That will teach me. Because no gorgeous hunk of a guy would want scrawny little me. Only if he could win a hundred dollars." Her body shook as the emotions she'd held inside released like a dam breaking. "Oh Annagrace, I've been a fool." The sobs broke free as she felt the stab in her heart.

Annagrace shifted closer and Dusty felt her friend's arms around her.

\* \* \* \*

"This better work," Clay said to Jesse as he climbed into the announcer's booth. It was Saturday at the Yellow Rose Rodeo and he and Jesse had come back, not to ride but to see if he could make one last bid for Dusty's forgiveness.

He'd screwed up. Big time. Seven bouquets of flowers delivered, over 25 phone calls unanswered and more than double that amount of e-mails sent over the last week. If it wasn't for Annagrace keeping him informed, he'd have gone plumb crazy. He finally understood the whole "absence makes the heart grow fonder." He didn't need any more time away from her to know she was the one for him. When he fell, he apparently fell hard—and this time right on his head. She just had to forgive him.

Annagrace had said Dusty didn't believe him and no longer trusted him. Okay. He deserved all that, if he looked at it from Dusty's point of view. But he had to get her to see things differently. She thought he'd used her to win a bet. She didn't think he was serious. He was out to prove just how serious he really was.

Jesse waited outside in the hallway, hands in his pockets. It had been Jesse's idea. His friend had come to Wayback during the middle of the week to set this up and had made sure Dusty was working today.

"She looks like she hasn't slept in a while but she's here," he had reported just a few minutes earlier.

Clay's heart had clutched at the reminder of how much he'd hurt her. He made a silent oath to never hurt her again. He would do everything he could to protect her. He didn't want to be that player anymore. He wanted to be one thing. Her husband—with the right to hold her at night, the privilege of having children with her, and the joy of making her happy. That's what he wanted. Now it all depended on what she wanted.

"This is the wireless mike," the announcer told him. Allan Greeley was a tall, balding, man in a Rhinestone-studded cowboy shirt and faded denims. "Here's where you switch it on," he said demonstrating with a flick of his well-padded thumb against the small plastic knob. "The whole place will hear every word."

Clay's insides were flipping around like water on a hot griddle. If she said no it would be a humiliation he'd have to bear for the rest of his days. If she said yes, it would be

worth every minute. He took the mike from the announcer's outstretched hand.

"You're slated right before saddle bronc. You riding today?"

Clay shook his head. No way would he be able to concentrate.

"I knew Dusty's dad. Nice guy. Regular guy." The announcer looked him over from head to toe. "Kind of ironic, isn't it? You being a saddle bronc rider and all."

"Yup." And that had been part of the problem. But only part. The rest was his alone.

"I think old Doug would approve. Hell, you broke his record. Seems only fitting to keep it in the family."

"I just hope she feels the same way."

"You think she won't? Dusty's a sweet girl. Little bit of a thing but sometimes the best things come in the smallest packages." He gave Clay an encouraging smile.

"You're right on that score." Clay's heart was beating like a wild man was using it for a drum.

"Okay. Once the winner of the bareback takes his ride, I'll call the special announcement. Be ready."

Clay nodded. He shook Allan's outstretched hand. As he and Jesse walked down the cement hallway he said a small silent prayer to her father. *Help me out, Doug. I'll do right by her, I promise.*

\* \* \* \*

Dusty felt like she'd been tossed in a washer and tumbled in a dryer. She'd almost called in sick today. But she couldn't let Big Joe down. It was her problem. Life went on, even

when it was stripped of any joy or happiness. Even when it was only disappointment and heartache.

Was he here? Saddle bronc was coming up next and she didn't dare look. She didn't know if she could handle hearing his name called from the speakers, knowing he was in the same place.

While she didn't cry anymore at the mention of him, the steady, dull ache still resided inside. She'd been betrayed, used. No matter what Annagrace said, no matter how many voice-mails the man left, it didn't erase that fact.

She wished she could believe he had cared for her. The hurt wouldn't cut so deep if he'd at least come to care something for her after making such a bet. That the man who had kissed her, caressed her and buried himself deep inside of her while calling out her name hadn't felt anything was more crushing than anything else she was dealing with.

The roar of the crowd said the winner of the bareback riding was taking his victory lap. She finished serving the waiting customers and started filling up some cups in anticipation of the crowd who'd surely come at the break.

"We've got something special to do right now. And I'd appreciate it if you all could keep your seats," Allan's voice blared out over the speakers. "Especially if you could wait a moment before going for any beer. It's important is all I'm going to say."

Not going for beer? Big Joe would have a fit if he knew they were singling out the beer concession that way. She stepped out from the booth and headed toward the opening in the arena. Peering in, she saw several cowboys milling in the

entrance way, all looking toward the center. A lone figure was out there.

Someone was going to sing. She leaned against the concrete wall and waited. Guy must be really good for them to hold the audience like that.

"Ladies and gentleman," a familiar voice rumbled out into the arena at full volume.

Her heart stood still.

"I'm Clay Tanner and those of you who follow saddle bronc may remember seeing me these last few weeks. I had the privilege to break the record of a hometown boy, Doug Morgan, a few weeks back." Applause followed.

What the hell was Clay doing? She held her spot. Though she didn't want to see him, though it hurt just to hear his voice, she was curious. "I have also had the privilege of dating Doug's daughter, Dusty Morgan." Blood drained from her body as a smattering of applause and a catcall echoed through the place.

"And you know what? I screwed up. Yup. I didn't do enough to let this sweet woman know how much she means to me. In fact, I did just the opposite."

Holy shit. The cowboys standing at the entrance turned around and grinned at her. Her insides twisted.

"I was wrong. Dead wrong. Seriously wrong. You know, the kind of wrong that has a woman not returning your phone calls or your e-mails. Not even flowers worked. You know I'm in trouble if flowers haven't worked."

The crowd laughed.

"Any of you guys ever been there?"

Several in the crowd yelled they had.

"Yeah. Well, I may need to come to you for some advice if this doesn't work out. See because of what I did, she doesn't believe I love her. I do. I swear before all of you and God Almighty, I love her. She's the kind of woman that makes a man want to settle down, have kids, raise a family. The kind you take home to your mother. And since I don't think Dusty will go anywhere with me right now, I brought my mother here to meet her. Stand up Mom."

The cowboys parted and looked back at her. Through the entrance she saw a small, brown-haired woman rise from one of the bleachers behind Clay and give a wave. His mother. He brought his mother.

"And Mrs. Morgan, Dusty's mom, is here too. Mrs. Morgan."

Dusty's eyes went wide at the sight of her mother standing next to Mrs. Tanner. How could this be?

"Because I've got something very serious to ask Dusty. First I've got to ask her for forgiveness. And second, I want to ask her to marry me."

The crowd began to clap, the sound thundering in her ears. Had she heard right? He was going to ask her to marry him. No, he *had* asked her to marry him.

"He's serious Dusty."

She jumped and turned to face Jesse.

"I didn't think he was, which is why I pulled that stunt. But I've never seen him like this. He's so in love it's hurting him something awful," Jesse said.

Her mind felt numb, as if this was all some dream—or nightmare. Why was he doing this? Why was he exposing both of them in this public display?

"Now if she'll forgive me," Clay's voice rang out. "I'm hoping she'll walk out here and make me a happy man. Put an end to my misery. And if she doesn't, well, I'll be looking for some advice from those of you in the stands. Dusty, if you hear me and if you can forgive me, will you come out here and accept my proposal?"

The clapping was deafening. Feet were stomping. The crowd started to chant her name.

"Can you forgive him, Dusty?" Jesse whispered in her ear. "He's waiting on your answer."

Could it possibly be? She took a deep breath and her heart started to race as she heard the crowd roar. What had Clay said about her talking to her father?

*I'm talking now, Daddy. What should I do? I love him but is he for real?*

The moment she thought the words, her feet started moving, as if they had a mind of their own. The cowboys were clapping as she brushed by them. She entered the arena and the handsome man with the microphone held out his arms to her. The crowd was on its feet. The next thing she knew she was running.

Tears streamed down her face as she rushed into his embrace. Happy tears. He grabbed her, held her tight against him. "Honey, I love you. And I'm so sorry."

Re-Ride At The Rodeo [Wayback Texas Series]  
*by Anne Carrole*

The place was going wild. "I love you too," she managed to say, startled to hear her words ring out over the loud speaker.

"Then will you forgive me? Will you marry me?"

She looked up into his gorgeous face. Tears ran down his cheeks, his gaze focused on her and only her.

"Yes. Yes to everything."

The next thing she knew Clay's lips were claiming hers as he lifted her off the ground and against his hard chest. It was the best eight seconds of her life. She'd taken a re-ride on love.

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