

The book cover features a woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue patterned top and yellow shorts, posing in a large oval mirror. A man's arm is visible on the left. The title 'THE TRUTH ABOUT ROXY' is written across the center, with 'TRUTH' on a blue banner. The author's name 'Jenny Gilliam' is in the top right.

Jenny
Gilliam

THE

TRUTH

ABOUT

Roxy

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

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CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the author...](#)

[Thank you for purchasing](#)

* * * *

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

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He figured she was up in the library, and he headed there, sliding his hand up the smooth balustrade as he went. He hadn't spent much time on the second floor, but he knew she only used a couple of the rooms.

Taking a guess, he turned left at the top of the stairs and stopped at the first door he came to. He turned the knob and pushed it open.

Sweet Jesus on a footstool.

The room certainly wasn't the library, and Noah would've have been hard-pressed to admit that the naked woman toweling herself off inside was a librarian.

Roxy stood next to the bathtub, long, inky curls dripping water that rolled down soft, pink skin. Legs—good God, the woman had miles of legs—gave way to lush, feminine curves.

Curves she had no business having.

She faced slightly away, so he only got a partial view of plump, full breasts, a tease of a rosy nipple. Round tush.

Sweet Jesus on a footstool.

It took Roxy a moment to feel the draft hit her naked backside. Pausing as she toweled her hair, she looked over. And froze.

Noah Kennedy, her pal, the man she'd secretly lusted after for years, stood there, gaping at her.

She couldn't move. Oh, God, she couldn't move an inch. Noah watched her and his expression, a cross between shock and ire, might've have been amusing if the whole situation wasn't so humiliating. Heat crept from her naked breasts and traveled upward until her face flamed. He stood there

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

watching her as she watched him. Roxy finally regained control of her motor skills and whipped the towel around her naked body. "Noah!"

He looked dazed. "What? Oh, sorry. God. Sorry." He pulled the door closed. *Lord.*

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

The

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About Roxy

by

Jenny Gilliam

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either 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.

The Truth About Roxy

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The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Dedication

For Wally. My own personal hero.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

Lately, it seems my husband is no longer interested in me sexually. It started out slowly; just a casual brush-off here and there, complaints that he was too tired. However, it's been over six months since we've made love. We're too young to be having these problems. Could he be cheating on me?

Signed, Hurt and Confused

Dear Hurt and Confused,

Is it possible you're misinterpreting this situation? First and foremost, I suggest you discuss this problem with your husband. Unfortunately, men are not mind-readers (much as we'd like them to be), and often we have to spell it out for them before they understand. Like women, sometimes men just aren't interested in sex. If you have discussed it with no resolution, I suggest bringing up the idea of marriage counseling. I wish you and your husband all the best.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter One

On the day Roxanne Palmer decided to change her life, old Frank Anderson walked buck-naked into the bank.

Roxy should've left then and there, but she was too stunned to do anything but stare while Frank patted his old, wrinkled *bare* behind, looking for his wallet. "I'm sure I put it here *somewhere*," he said.

Beverly Krahn, the bank president's dour secretary, immediately phoned the sheriff.

Frank Anderson lived in Thorton's nursing home, Pleasant Acres. He was lucid, except for the occasional bout of dementia. Last time, he'd stolen a county truck and drove it into Olson's Hardware on Main Street. Apparently, security wasn't a top priority at Pleasant Acres.

Of course, if Roxy lived in a place called 'Pleasant Acres,' she'd bust out, too. She tore her eyes away from Mr. Anderson long enough to check her watch. It was now time for her appointment with Merle Granger, President of Thorton Savings & Loan.

Merle exited his office, a suit jacket dangling from his hand. He approached Mr. Anderson, covered him with the jacket and led him to a cluster of chairs near the back.

Roxy had been looking forward to this meeting for a month. After years of procrastinating, she'd decided to take the plunge, to chase her dream. Now, thanks to Frank Anderson's wandering naked butt, she had to wait longer. She

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

really did feel sorry for the old man, but nerves were making her cranky.

The front door to the bank opened and Sheriff Noah Kennedy, close friend and the unrequited love of her life, walked in alongside Roxy's next-door neighbor Bobbie Townsend. Roxy tracked the sheriff's most excellent behind as he approached Mr. Anderson. *Yank your tongue back in your mouth, Rox.*

Bobbie spotted Roxy and headed over. "Hey, kiddo. What're you doin' here?"

Roxy tapped the portfolio lying in her lap. "Business meeting with Merle."

"The bookstore?" Bobbie clapped her hands in glee. "I'm glad you finally decided to go for it."

Bobbie owned the local paper, The Thorton Gazette. She'd taken over the reins from her father, Jefferson Townsend after he keeled over from a heart attack two years ago.

"I'm a little nervous, but yeah, me too." Roxy twisted her hands in her lap. "I'll have the article to you tonight. With everything goin' on, I've been behind."

"Don't you worry, I'll stop by and get it."

Bobbie was a charismatic, inherently pushy person, which was how Roxy had found herself employed as a part-time writer with the paper. It began as a fill-in job for the weekly love columnist's maternity leave. The woman had decided not to return after the birth, finding greater satisfaction in raising babies than shelling out love advice to the women of Thorton, Georgia.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

For some strange reason, Bobbie found Roxy's opinions on the subject of love valid enough to print, so she offered—well, bullied was more like it—the position permanently. So, she'd become Paula Rockwell. She kept to the strict code of the town; the good ole' boy standard: keep it light, don't stir the apple cart and temper it with a lot of genteel Southern manners.

Bobbie said, "See ya," and left to take care of her business, approaching the teller Roxy liked the least. Connie Willows had been two years ahead of her in high school. She was everything Roxy wasn't: outgoing, bubbly, flirtatious and beautiful. She'd been head cheerleader and prom queen, a walking, breathing cliché. And Roxy just *knew* the little ... woman had her sights on Noah.

Breathe.

Two of Noah's deputies, and a man Roxy assumed was an orderly from Pleasant Valley, entered the bank and walked to where Mr. Anderson sat with Merle's jacket covering his lap. Mr. Anderson spoke loud enough that the whole bank heard him tell Noah he was sure he'd brought his wallet, but he couldn't seem to find it anywhere.

Obviously, the fact he wore no clothing seemed to have slipped his mind. Poor Mr. Anderson.

Merle headed back to his office and nodded at her. "Be with you in just a few, Roxy."

Roxy wanted to point out he was now fifteen minutes late for their appointment, but held her tongue. The day she worked up the nerve to rock the boat, she'd be ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

With the deputies handling Mr. Naked Anderson, Noah meandered to Connie's window. Apparently, he also had business to take care of. Probably Connie herself.

Noah Kennedy was, by far, the most eligible bachelor in Thorton. Every single woman in a fifty-mile radius had a tendency to lose brain cells in the presence of this particular catch. But, unlike most of the women who reduced themselves to giggling boneheads whenever he was near, she'd fallen for him long before he became Madison County Sheriff. Long before he and his gorgeous bod had led the Titans to the State Championships.

Almost six-five, he had broad shoulders and a well-developed upper chest that had filled out since his days as pitcher for the Thorton High School Titans. He emitted masculinity the way flowers released sweet scent. He had a ruggedly handsome face, not pretty, but Roxy supposed that added to the package. He was just so thoroughly male. He carried his silver Stetson in one hand. His curly, dark blond hair sported cute cowlicks. While Roxy pretended to inspect her nails, she watched him approach Connie.

Jealousy lanced through her, hot and fierce. Yeah, she had it bad. And the hell of it was, Noah would never notice her that way because, to him, she was like a kid sister.

Darn him. And darn her for being so unwilling to change. Roxy would never have the courage to seduce Noah Kennedy. She scoffed; he probably wouldn't even know what she was doing anyway. Heck, I wouldn't even know what I was doing.

Connie perked up as her eyes caught him in the beam of her tractor gaze. She set down the nail file she'd pulled out

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

after Bobbie had left and, while Noah looked for his deposit, fluffed her cotton-candy hair.

"Well, hey there, stranger," she said with a smile that clearly stated she wanted to yank him over her station and get to know him a whole lot better. If she hadn't already.

If she bats her eyelashes, I am going to throw up.

From her seat, Roxy watched Noah smile his amazing smile, the one that made every woman feel as though he'd designed it just for her. "Hey, Connie."

Roxy leaned forward, shamelessly eaves-dropping. Behind her, a throat cleared pointedly, and she sank down and glanced at Beverly Krahn, who glared at Roxy and went back to her *Southern Living* magazine.

Roxy didn't care how childish it was; she stuck her tongue out at Merle's secretary anyway. She checked her watch again, then groaned inwardly. She felt strung tight as a piano wire about to snap. *This is ridiculous*. It was a loan, not a line of faceless executioners.

The orderly and deputies escorted Mr. Anderson out of the bank under the carefully disguised curiosity of the other customers. "But, I need to make my deposit!" he exclaimed.

"You already did." Deputy Jose Moreno led him out the glass doors.

Roxy smiled a little and visualized the air as a light, calming blue, then tried to allow the peaceful haze to filter into her bloodstream. She exhaled a misty grayish-black, letting the nerves leave her body, just as she'd read in a book on meditation last week.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

It didn't work. She couldn't concentrate on anything other than what would transpire behind those closed doors if Merle ever got off his sorry behind.

While Connie flagrantly flirted with Noah, Roxy ran a self-conscious hand down the wild mane of dark hair she'd barely managed to tame into a braid. No cotton-candy hair for her. Curls were the bane of her existence. She smoothed a wrinkle from her navy blue cotton jumper and wished she owned something more professional. She had a closet full of jumpers. They were good at hiding the blasted curves she'd been cursed with.

She listened to the annoying, high pitch of Connie's voice, peppered by the deep rumble of Noah's. *Oh, you're so strong, Sheriff. Look at my fake breasts, Sheriff. Take me into the break room and boff me, Sheriff.*

Desperate to take her mind off Noah's flirting and her uncertain future, she darted her gaze around until her eyes landed on last month's issue of *Cosmopolitan*, the cover of which boasted *Eight Ways to Have Great Sex Tonight!* For lack of anything better, she picked up the fashion magazine and flipped through it. When she reached the article, she lifted her brows. *I thought they only showed this stuff in Playboy.* How in the world did a person manage that position? Not that she'd have any idea. At thirty, Roxy was still, depressingly enough—a virgin. She tilted her head to the right, trying to get a better feel for it.

"What're you readin'?"

Roxy froze. Noah plucked the magazine from her temporarily immobile fingers. He held it up, tilting his head in the same manner she had moments ago.

One dark blond eyebrow shot up. "Catching up on your sex education?"

She snatched at the magazine, but he held it out of reach. The scene reminded her of childhood, of a younger Noah holding a Barbie doll hostage. "I could ask you the same question."

Her gaze shifted to the row of tellers and his followed. "What's wrong with Connie?"

What isn't wrong with her? That was just nasty, Roxanne, she mentally chastised herself. But, still.... "I'm just looking out for your well-being. You should know, her kind eats her mate when she's done."

"What are you doing here? Catching the second edition of the Frank Anderson show?" He scowled. "They need to get some security over at that damn nursing home."

Again, she tapped on the file in her lap. "My business loan."

A smile broke out on his handsome face. Roxy swore she heard angels sing. "You're going to do it? Way to go, Rox! It's about time."

"Yeah, yeah." She shooed him off. "Now, go away before you bring me bad luck."

He reached out and tugged on a hank of hair that had escaped her braid. "Break a leg, kid."

He tossed the magazine back on the table and strode out, throwing a smile at Connie as he went by. Roxy sighed,

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

treating herself to another eyeful of his rear-end. Even the sourpuss secretary wasn't immune to his charms; her eyes were glued on his butt, too.

Noah Kennedy was too darn good-looking for his own good.

* * * *

"Thanks for waiting, Roxy." Merle Granger pulled out one of the chairs in front of his very large, very masculine desk and gestured for her to sit. Manners dealt with, he took his own seat and settled his clasped hands atop the shiny mahogany surface.

Merle Granger had been a fixture of this town for as long as Roxy could remember. In her mind, he had always been President of Thorton Savings & Loan, always been the president of the Rotary Club and always chaired the city council. Regardless, Roxy had forever sensed a falseness about him, and the décor in his office only solidified her opinion.

Merle Granger wanted the world to believe he was a Man's Man. Capitalized, underlined in bold letters. An avid hunter, evidence of his kills were mounted all along the room. An elk's head took the place of honor behind his desk, which, when seated in his chair as he was, made Merle appear as though he had sprouted horns. His wife, Charlene, was responsible for the decorating, and, Roxy suspected, the perfect placement of the beheaded elk.

"So," Merle said, glancing down at her application, "Beverly tells me you want to apply for a business loan."

"That's right, Mr. Granger." She folded her hands neatly in her lap to keep them from shaking.

He slipped on a pair of reading glasses. "May I ask what this loan is for?"

He hasn't even read the application. Determination won over disappointment, and she leaned forward. "I want to open a bookstore."

"A bookstore? Hmmm. Well, correct me if I'm wrong, but doesn't Thorton already have one?"

Roxy fought the urge to inform him Thorton's bookstore was an outdated hole in the wall, run by old Amos Miller, who was about as forward-thinking as tires spinning in a snowbank.

Instead, she drew in another of those 'calming' breaths. "While very charming in an old world sort of way, The Book Barn hasn't been keeping up with the market. Most people have to drive to Jacksonville to buy books by their favorite authors, since he doesn't have much new inventory."

"Folks seem to like it well enough."

Roxy's frustrated groan stuck in her throat. "With all due respect, Mr. Granger, this is the new millennium. Times are changing, technology is advancing. We either have to go along with it, or sink. My bookstore would offer the best of both worlds. I'll have the latest bestsellers, as well as unique non-fiction, travel and local authors. Plus, I'm going to offer patrons food and beverage; a cozy environment to browse while they shop."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

She had rehearsed this very speech in her mind several times, but each time, she still felt that rush, that *zing*. It was finally happening!

"Cozy environment?" Merle asked skeptically, as though the concept was as foreign to him as Democrats. Then again, given the condition of his office, it probably was.

Roxy spread her file folder on his desk and pulled out drawings she'd created, displaying her bookstore in its various stages of operation: the outside, hip and modern but with a touch of nostalgic charm; the inside, each wall painted in deep, rich colors of purple, green and yellow; plush armchairs clustered around as patrons flipped through their finds while sipping lattes and nibbling on scones from the coffee bistro.

Merle thumbed through her drawings, a frown on his face. This was why she'd dreaded their meeting. He was her biggest hurdle; a man stuck in his own ways, much like the rest of this one-horse town. But, Roxy had faith in her powers of persuasion. She may not be passionate and assertive under normal circumstances, but these were books they were talking about. And she had faith in her dream.

Merle hemmed and hawed a few moments more. He placed the last drawing back into the folder and closed it, passing it back across the desk. "Roxanne, I've known you since you were just a bump under your mama's apron. I think this idea you've got is grand, I really do."

Roxy smiled. *He liked it!*

Before she could begin enjoying the victory, he finished with, "But, I don't think Thorton is ready for this kind of

venture." He looked at her with an expression meant to be kind, but merely appeared condescending. "I'd hate for you to start up a project like this only to have it come crashing around you. I know your daddy would agree if he were here. But, he's not, and I promised your folks I'd keep an eye on you while they're gone."

Roxy couldn't believe her ears. She didn't need a flippin' keeper! She was thirty, not three. Why didn't he just pat her on the head while he was at it? "I can get a loan elsewhere, Mr. Granger." The words slipped out of her mouth as if of their own volition. Roxy barely contained her gasp, shocked by her audacity. What was wrong with her?

Her newfound efforts went unnoticed. He smiled patiently, like a father to a small child. "Even if you managed to get financing elsewhere, which, I can assure you would be quite difficult, you would have to get approval from the city council to start a business."

And that effectively took the wind from her sails. She sank down in her chair. Her dream, the one she'd spent years cultivating, had disappeared in an instant because the good 'ole boy didn't think it she could handle it.

He was judge, jury and executioner.

"I don't know why you want to worry yourself over a business anyhow," he continued as tears gathered at the back of her throat. "A pretty little thing like you ought to be out trying to snare yourself a husband."

Pretty and little were two words she'd never heard used in context to her before. It was hard to be little at nearly six

feet, and pretty ... But it didn't matter; she suspected Merle was simply going through the motions now.

"You have a nice job with the library. Why, you have all the books there you'd ever need, and you don't even have to buy them!"

She wanted to beat him over the head with her file folder. At the very least, stomp her feet and make a scene like you read about in the headlines. But, she did none of those things. She never would, she thought with a sniffle. "Thank you for your time," she said stiffly.

She needed to get out of this place before she made an even bigger fool out of herself by crying. That would only reinforce his image of her.

"I know this seems like a bit of a disappointment right now, Roxy, but soon you'll see it's for the best. Really."

She grabbed her file and purse and left the room with as much grace possible. She made it halfway across the marble floor before breaking into a run.

With tears streaming down her face, Roxy fled.

* * * *

"Hey, Sheriff."

Noah's only female deputy, Annie Swanson, sat behind the counter, flipping through a police manual. "Annie." He checked his watch. "Aren't you due to clock off?"

She shrugged. "In a few minutes. I'm catching a ride from Packer, and he's still in the locker room admiring his muscles, so I have some time to kill."

Rumors ran rampant through the town that Deputies Swanson and Packer weren't just carpooling these days. Noah listened to town gossip with half an ear, taking it for what it was: hearsay. As long as their extracurricular slide between the sheets didn't interfere with their work, Noah didn't give a damn what they did off-duty.

He opened a door, passed the counter and left the front office for the long hallway that led to his own. The hall opened up to an outer lobby where his sister sat typing and answering the phone.

Noah loved his little town. He loved the fields that gave way to forest on the outskirts; the Ocumulgee River with its blue-green water that turned a deep muddy brown when the rain hit; the quaint Main Street storefronts reminding all who passed through that history had been preserved within the town proper. It had taken him thirty-three years to figure out that Thorton was *his* town. The old cliché was true: absence did make the heart grow fonder. And after a nine-year breather, he'd returned.

Considering the harsh city life to which he'd grown accustomed in his recent past, the relaxed, meandering pace of Thorton had been a welcome change. Of course, he'd been Sheriff going on three years now, so his days as an Atlanta patrolman were now a distant memory.

Noah stopped in front of Mary Lou's orderly desk—she believed in the 'a place for everything and everything has a place' school of thought—and sifted through his messages. He hadn't been gone more than thirty minutes and he already had five.

"Mrs. Nolan called again," Mary Lou said without taking her eyes off her computer screen. "John Henry's dog has been—" she made quotation marks with her fingers—"defecating in her rose bushes again. She wants you to come out this time. That—" quotation marks, again, "Deputy Moreno is shifty-eyed."

"She only thinks that because he's Mexican," Noah muttered.

"Yeah, well this is Thorton. People think affirmative action is a Wesley Snipes flick."

"Give her a call and tell her I'll see to it on my way home."

"Done."

"Lou?"

"Yes?" she asked absently.

Noah stared down at his sister. She had been a beautiful girl who'd grown into a beautiful woman. Long blonde hair framed her heart-shaped face. She kept her petite, willowy body in expensive threads provided by the income her spineless husband, Preston, made as a bottom-feeding lawyer.

Under normal circumstances, his sister was a bit on the fragile side, like spun glass, but lately, those sapphire eyes were filled with sadness and worry, and it tore at him. "You okay?" he asked finally.

She waited a beat too long, and then said, "I'm fine. Just a little tired is all."

Noah didn't buy it, but he let it go and patted her shoulder. "You need to get more rest, kiddo." His cop's eyes scanned

her face and knew she was hiding something. "You seem tired all the time."

He'd drop it. For now. Something was wrong; he'd bet his badge it had to do with that piece of shit husband of hers. He looked away and saw a copy of *Cosmopolitan* lying on her desk. The same issue Roxy had been reading. About sex. "I saw Rox at the bank."

Mary Lou's face brightened at the mention of her best friend. "She said she was going in for that loan today. She should have done it a long time ago, but you know how Roxy is."

Stubborn as a mule and soft as butterfly, he thought. His honorary sister was a tangle of contradictions he'd never been able to figure out. She'd been running tame with him and Mary Lou since she could walk. And he'd been protective of her ever since. For some reason, seeing her flipping through that article on sex positions unnerved him. He didn't want to think of her as a sexual being. She was his pal. If he sometimes wondered what she hid under those dowdy, baggy clothes, well ... he was a man. One who appreciated the female form in all of its many shapes and sizes. "She's not seeing anyone, is she?"

Mary Lou lifted a brow. "Not that I know of. Why?"

Noah shrugged, embarrassed for asking in the first place. *It's not my business who she sleeps with.* But the idea bothered him nonetheless. "Just wondering. Don't forget to call Mrs. Nolan, okay?"

Mary Lou nodded as her brother disappeared through into his office and shut the door. She closed her eyes and let out a

sigh of relief. No, things weren't okay, but she wouldn't burden Noah with her problems, not when he had the entire town's problems to deal with. Preston's late hours and distance were nothing new, and hers to handle. Besides, if she knew Noah, he'd stomp over to Abbot, Smith & Meyer, and drag her husband from his expensive leather chair by the lapels of his three-thousand-dollar suit. To say Noah had misgivings about her choice in husbands was a gross understatement.

And why had he asked about Rox?

Her best friend had been half in love with Noah for years, though she hid her true feelings well. Noah, typical male that he was, had no idea. *Bonehead*.

Poor Roxy. She had such a big heart. Unfortunately, it also came with a sign that read: Please Take Advantage of Me. Too gullible for her own good, and always trying to save everyone and everything. Prime example number one: she'd had her heart stolen by a drifter who happened into town for a few months. Mary Lou had never seen straight-laced, reliable Roxy head-over-heels before—never thought it possible—but she acted like the guy hung the moon.

Mary Lou hadn't been impressed. She'd had to fend off the guy's advances more than once. She tried telling Roxy, but Roxy insisted Mary Lou misread his signals. She didn't bring it up again. Two weeks later, the guy split town with Lloyd Maynard's busty twenty-year-old daughter and a thousand bucks of Roxy's money. That was three years ago, just before Noah returned.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Mary Lou envied Roxy for going after her dream. The store was a hope seeded from a lifetime love of books. Mary Lou always felt her talents were being wasted at the library. Not that she had any room to talk; she stayed in a loveless marriage out of familial duty.

After finishing her correspondence and slipping it in Noah's inbox, Mary Lou lifted her head at the light knock on the door.

"Hey," Joe Fuller said with a smile. "I didn't want to startle you."

Joe, a widower whose wife grew up in Thorton, had moved to town about a year ago. After his wife had passed, he made the move from Charlotte to this little hole-in-the-wall town. He owned the local garage and made a decent living, Mary Lou supposed, but she couldn't figure out why he would want to make it *here*.

In a guarded, mostly ignored place in her heart, she found it terribly sweet and romantic that Joe had moved here. Most of the time, though, he made her uncomfortable. Like he knew things about her—things only she knew—just by looking at her. He unnerved her. And, she supposed, if she were honest, there was something arresting and intriguing about him, a depth and intelligence in those chocolate brown eyes.

She busied herself with the task of straightening her already tidy desk. Anything to keep from looking at him, from feeling that indescribable pull. "The sheriff's in his office," she said primly.

Joe smiled. He knew he made the sheriff's sister uncomfortable. In a queer way, he enjoyed it. He hadn't felt even a passing interest in a woman in a long while, but when

he'd locked eyes on Mary Lou Abbot, he'd felt like he'd been pole-axed.

"Okay," he said. *What scintillating conversation.*

Joe stood there a moment more, twisting the ball cap he always wore in his hands, and struggled to come up with something intelligent to say. Mary Lou kept her eyes trained elsewhere, and he could practically hear her thinking: *Go away.*

He conceded for now. He may make Mary Lou Abbot uneasy, but he wasn't blind. She felt that attraction, same as he did.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

I am a fifty-one year old housewife. I've always felt that raising a family and making a home was what I was put on this earth to do. I've always taken pride my duties, even as I see other women my age grabbing life and living it outrageously and to the fullest. Lately, however, I've been feeling restless. My children are grown, with families of their own. I see my daughter beginning to follow in my footsteps and I am overcome with fear that her life will turn out as thankless as my own. I no longer find joy in any of the things that used to comfort me; entertaining, cleaning, making a home. I feel resentful toward my husband, who expects me to keep on this way for the rest of my life. I feel trapped. Please help me.

Signed, Restless in Primrose Valley.

Dear Restless:

I have two words for you: Women's Liberation.

Women were not put upon this earth to play housewife to a man. Raising children and keeping a home is an admirable job that many women commit their lives to. But, how many Southern women actually want this? How many of those women follow blindly on a path chosen for them by someone else? Just who are you living your life for? From what I understand, it certainly isn't for you. You've done your job; you've raised good children who have turned into productive adults, provided a clean house and a hot supper every night for a husband who takes you for granted. Is this what you

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

want? Now that the kids are off living their own lives, isn't it time you began living yours?

Try discussing your concerns with your husband. But, if he is like most men in Thorton, which I suspect he is, he will probably be stunned by such a statement from his meek wife, whom he expects to fall into line. And why shouldn't he? You've done it every time before, correct? Well, this time, you are calling the shots!

Do you want to spend the rest of your days kowtowing to a man who doesn't appreciate you? I sure wouldn't. If you want to go dancing at a honky-tonk on Saturday night—by all means, GO! To hell with what everyone else thinks! If your husband can't handle it, tell him to go to hell. I'm tired of women in this town putting their own needs on hold just so some man can have his already enormous ego stroked. Ninety-nine percent of the men in Thorton need that kind of reassurance because keeping their women chained to the stove restores confidence in their manhood. And let's face it, ladies, if they were real men, the need to debase us as women wouldn't supersede our need to be treated as equals. So, how about it? This is the twenty-first century. I think it's about time we claimed what's rightfully ours.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Two

"God, what is wrong with this place?"

Roxy didn't care if the whole neighborhood heard her yelling. Everyone in Thorton thought something was wrong with her anyway. After all, a thirty-year-old woman not married was an anomaly in this outdated town.

"What is this? 1950? Backward-thinking, chauvinistic pig! So he thinks the little lady is too inept to do anything herself? Oh, yeah?"

Sooner or later Thorton would have to move along with the times. And while some might have found its constancy charming, Roxy found it cloying and outdated.

"The only flippin' clothing store is two years behind in fashion!"

She punctuated this statement with a fist in the air. Thorton needed a swift kick in the pants. Something that would force the town to sink or swim. God, she wished she had it in her to do something, instead of crying like a baby and carrying on like a lunatic.

Over the last three hours, Roxy had experienced a tier of emotions quite similar to the stages of grief. Denial had accompanied her all the way home where it morphed into tears, painful, pathetic tears that streaked down her face and left her looking like Tammy Faye Bakker. After the pity-party, she'd progressed to anger, absolute fury, which was where she remained and planned to stay. Anger felt far more satisfying than anything else she'd experienced so far.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

She paced the hardwood floors of her childhood home. Her parents had kept the old farmhouse, updating it as time passed, but essentially it remained the same. The only change was the furniture her mother had waxed and cared for now sat in storage, replaced by Roxy's own items.

After a lucrative career as both a judge and mayor, her father had been ordered to retire per his doctor's strict orders. His heart wasn't in the best shape and another year keeping the town could very well have killed him. William and Annabelle Palmer had packed up the house and departed for Europe, leaving the deed to the restored farmhouse in Roxy's name.

She missed her parents terribly, as she'd been close to both of them. It would've helped having them around at a time like this, when she was so frustrated she could have maimed. But, she admitted, having her father around to come to her rescue would just play into that misogynistic, mean Merle Granger's plan.

The rage inside her needed a release. She forced herself to take a couple of those calming breaths that hadn't worked their lick of magic earlier. Surprisingly, after a couple of minutes, she felt the anger free her of its sticky hold. She stood in the middle of the living room, the worn, but polished Georgia pine floorboards beneath her bare feet, her gaze taking survey of the room.

It wouldn't make the pages of *Southern Living*, but she'd made the farmhouse homey. It had been elegant when her mother was the mistress of the house, but Roxy liked homespun décor. Her tastes were evident from the

mismatched candleholders made from small colored bowls that graced the mantle. A handmade quilt stretched over the back of her olive green overstuffed sofa. Framed prints hung on the walls: Paris, New York, Van Gogh's *A Starry Night*, and a few paintings by Southern artists.

A staircase stood to the just to the left of the front door, dividing the living room from her home office. The farmhouse boasted five bedrooms, but Roxy only used two. She had converted one of the guest rooms into a library, and slept in her old room because she wanted to keep her parents' room the same for when they visited. The house was really too much for one person, but Roxy she couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

Her gaze drifted toward her office. She had an article to finish. Suddenly, she was struck by the irony of it all. Women's lib was a concept as alien as French cuisine to the people in this town, and she was just one of the many who fed the machine. Why should she expect to be treated as an equal when she preached the opposite to her readers? Never mind that none of them knew her identity.

Roxy walked into her office and stared hard at her computer, indecision and epiphany keeping her from moving forward. Perhaps she wasn't as helpless as she'd thought. There was something she could do.

She sat at her desk and pulled up her latest column. The woman seeking love advice lived in Primrose Valley, an exclusive neighborhood overlooking the only golf course in town. Affluent types resided there, lawyers, real estate brokers, judges. Moronic bank presidents.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Mary Lou lived there with her husband in a sprawling twenty-five room estate. She figured it was too much to hope that Restless in Primrose Valley was Charlene Granger, evil Merle's society wife.

Roxy had gotten halfway through her response the night before, and it was just as watered-down as all her other replies. Her fingers hesitated on the keyboard. She lifted one to the backspace key and held it, suspended. This had become much more than just an article. She felt as though she stood on a precipice, and if she jumped, she would never be the same.

Without further thought, she leaped.

* * * *

An hour later, as Roxy put the finishing touches on the column, someone knocked on her front door. Glancing at the document once more, saved it to a disk, printed it out, and then went to answer the door.

Bobbie stood on the covered porch, her finger poised on the doorbell. "Oh, you are here. What's wrong with your bell? I pushed it a bunch of times."

Roxy blew at the tangle of curls that had fallen over her brow and pushed her square, black reading glasses back onto her nose. "It's broken. I've been meaning to fix it, but I haven't got around to it."

She stepped aside to allow her editor inside. "What are you up to?"

Bobbie lifted a brow as Roxy shut the door. "It's Thursday night, remember? I told you this afternoon I'd drop by and

pick up your column tonight." She checked her watch. "It's after eight."

Bobbie took a good look at her friend. Roxy's cheeks were flushed and her eyes appeared larger than usual behind the horn-rimmed glasses. She wore another of her shapeless jumpers—nothing unusual there—and her feet were bare. A strange restlessness permeated the air; so tangible, Bobbie could almost touch it. Roxy looked ready to climb the walls.

"You okay?" she asked.

Roxy blew out another breath and ran a hand down her wild mane of dark curls. "I'm on a creative high," she said, and walked into her office. She grabbed a piece of paper from the printer tray.

Bobbie followed Roxy into the uniquely decorated office. Though not quite her style, Bobbie had to admit the colorful fairy pictures on the walls were cute. And the collection of bright dragons sitting atop her desk lent the office a protective vibe, as though the winged creatures watched over Roxy.

Assuming she held the column Bobbie needed to rush back to The Gazette office, she extended her hand, but Roxy clutched it to her chest. "I tried something different," she said slowly. "I'm not sure what you're going to think of it, so let me explain by saying it's very possible I was possessed by an evil underlord when I wrote it."

Bobbie wiggled her fingers, and Roxy hesitantly extended the document. Scanning it, Bobbie kept her features schooled, but inside, she was leaping up and punching her fist in the air.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Roxy hosted a weekly romance book club at the library on Tuesday nights, where the two had officially met. She had been drawn to her at once, as she'd felt a long-dormant motherly instinct to protect the guileless librarian. Bobbie suspected—no, scratch that—knew something lurked deeper in the younger woman, something she kept hidden from others. She did it in every way possible; from dressing down her looks to speaking only when spoken to. Roxanne Palmer had all of these great ideas and thoughts, but Bobbie knew she felt like no one cared, and it drove Bobbie insane.

"This is great," she said.

"You hate it."

"No. No, I don't. I love it, in fact. I can't wait to see the reaction it will cause. But, I have to wonder where all this is coming from."

Roxy chewed on her lower lip and stared down at the floor. "I'm tired of being a doormat. I dream about making a difference. I cringe at the old world traditions in this town, but I don't do a single thing to change it. In fact, if you read my columns, I add to it." She shrugged. "I'm through with being part of the problem. I want to be the solution."

Bobbie reached a hand up and ran it through her short cap of black hair. Mother Nature was trying to pull a fast one on her by threading the natural color with gray, but she refused to give in. She kept a monthly standing appointment with Carole at the Kut 'n Kurl. She may be pushing fifty, but damned if she'd go gracefully.

"Okay." She met Roxy's earnest gaze. "I'm glad you've decided to change formats. I'll support you."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Roxy let out a breath. "You've got to do me a favor and take it before I chicken out." She moved to the computer and came back with a floppy disk, which Roxy placed in Bobbie's hand.

"Sure. I should get back anyway." She turned to the door, but stopped. "Hey, how'd the loan go?"

Silence. Then, "I was refused. Told very politely that Thorton already has a bookstore, and I have a nice little job at the library."

Ah-ha. "I hope you told that pompous prick to shove it up his ass?"

Roxy laughed without humor. "Right. That's exactly what I did. Right after I thanked him for his time."

Bobbie laid a hand on her friend's shoulder. "Kiddo, you need a lesson on asserting yourself." She was the one to do it, but Roxy wasn't ready—not yet. But, given the new column format, maybe soon. She smiled. "I'm sorry, I really am. I know how much you had your mind set on it. But, don't give up, okay? Just because that little weasel said no, doesn't mean it won't happen."

Roxy looked lost for a moment, sadness in her big green eyes. "Yeah." She reached around Bobbie and opened the door, shooing her out. "Go, before I change my mind."

Bobbie kissed her cheek. "Catch you later."

Bobbie descended the porch stairs and headed to her own house, a grin breaking like a dam on her face. *It's about damn time.*

* * * *

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Noah said goodbye to Joe as they left The Mighty Quinn Tavern. Joe climbed into his Chevy pickup and started it, the big-block engine making music as it roared to life. Noah waved as the truck pulled out of the parking lot. His own police-issue Ford Explorer left a lot to be desired—a lot of horses, to be exact—but he didn't have to make payments, and all of the maintenance came free.

He had a couple of toys at home; his pride and joy being his Harley Softtail. He loved to cruise out of town, speeding along the winding roads that connected all of the little towns in Madison County.

His mother disapproved of such common behavior, but Katherine Windsor Kennedy pretty much disapproved of everything. Especially her oldest child.

Not going to think about that tonight. He climbed into his rig. After taking care of Mrs. Nolan, who he was convinced was just lonely, he and Joe had gone to the tavern where they'd shared dinner and a couple of beers.

Joe Fuller was one helluva guy. They'd met eighteen months ago when Noah took his Explorer to Fuller's Garage with a blown head gasket. Noah could putt his way around an engine, but Joe was an absolute genius. He treated each machine, no matter how decrepit, like a puzzle, or a fine wine to be sampled, his hands like a lover's. Watching the man work his magic was a strange and enlightening experience, like he understood them on some cosmic level. The Engine Whisperer, Noah thought with a grin. He was pretty sure if somebody sliced Joe open, they'd find motor oil running through his veins instead of blood.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Noah had unloaded a little on Joe about Mary Lou. Joe had listened, hadn't offered any advice. Noah suspected the other man was sweet on his sister, which they both ignored by tacit agreement. He wouldn't touch that one with a ten-foot pole.

Maybe Stilts knows, he thought, as he drove down Main Street. Taking a left on Tiger Lily Lane, he ambled the Explorer toward Roxy's old farmhouse.

The night was humid and thick, the air redolent with the smells of summer: honeysuckle and fresh-mown grass, of richly scented magnolia and night-blooming jasmine. A bit of a green thumb, Roxy kept the front lawn well tended with dozens of flowers he couldn't name adorning the yard. The cobblestone front walk divided the lush, green grass and led to a wide set of steps to the porch.

For as long as Noah could remember, the house had been a nondescript, but very classy, white. But, a little over three years ago, Roxy had gotten a wild hair and painted it purple and green. Noah suspected it had to do with that jackass who'd taken off with her heart and money. To be fair, the paint job didn't look horrible. But, it sure didn't fit in with the rest of the homes, with the other farmhouses and Tudors, restored Victorians and elegant Colonials. Which basically described Roxy. She had never quite fit in.

The light outside the door bathed the front half of the wide, wraparound porch in soft light while the crickets and locusts sang their night song. He took the stairs two at time and punched the doorbell. When he got no response, he lifted a fist and knocked. Still nothing. She was home. Roxy was nothing if not a creature of habit. That, and her green Honda

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

sat parked in the driveway to his right. She always arrived home from work by five, except for Tuesday nights, had dinner by six, and went to bed by ten. A guy could set his watch by the routine in her life. Roxy had once told him if she'd didn't adhere to the strict schedule, chaos would reign.

Since he and Roxy had become friends again, he'd discovered they just ... clicked. She understood him on a level no one, not even Lou, did. That being said, he didn't think she'd mind if he tried the door himself.

No one locked their doors in Thorton. Folks would consider it rude. So, he wasn't surprised when the heavy door pushed open after he turned the ornate brass knob. He walked across the threshold and into the house he knew almost as well as his own.

He smelled Roxy everywhere; that elusive woodsy and fragrant scent she wore. He saw her in the catch-all bottles that were placed about filled with flowers from her garden, in the enormous stack of library books heaped on her mother's antique dining table, the vividly painted walls. It was funny; here she was the Rox he knew and cared for. Out in the world, she became the reserved, quiet and demure woman he knew was also a part of her. But, he felt closest to her in this house, where her personality shone like the moon on a lake.

"Rox?"

Noah checked in the kitchen, found it empty, and then opened the door that led to the basement. His light shout received no response.

He figured she was up in the library, and he headed there, sliding his hand up the smooth balustrade as he went. He

hadn't spent much time on the second floor, but he knew she only used a couple of the rooms.

Taking a guess, he turned left at the top of the stairs and stopped at the first door he came to. He turned the knob and pushed it open.

Sweet Jesus on a footstool.

The room certainly wasn't the library, and Noah would've have been hard-pressed to admit that the naked woman toweling herself off inside was a librarian.

Roxy stood next to the bathtub, long, inky curls dripping water that rolled down soft, pink skin. Legs—good God, the woman had miles of legs—gave way to lush, feminine curves.

Curves she had no business having.

She faced slightly away, so he only got a partial view of plump, full breasts, a tease of a rosy nipple. Round tush.

Sweet Jesus on a footstool.

It took Roxy a moment to feel the draft hit her naked backside. Pausing as she toweled her hair, she looked over. And froze.

Noah Kennedy, her pal, the man she'd secretly lusted after for years, stood there, gaping at her.

She couldn't move. Oh, God, she couldn't move an inch. Noah watched her and his expression, a cross between shock and ire, might've have been amusing if the whole situation wasn't so humiliating. Heat crept from her naked breasts and traveled upward until her face flamed. He stood there watching her as she watched him. Roxy finally regained control of her motor skills and whipped the towel around her naked body. "Noah!"

He looked dazed. "What? Oh, sorry. God. Sorry." He pulled the door closed. *Lord.*

Roxy's heart thudded painfully in her chest. She clutched the towel to her as she let out a shaky breath. Noah's footsteps beat a hasty retreat down the hall.

Almost fearfully, she glanced in the beveled mirror above the sink. Her hair looked almost black, the curls dripping water, framing a face that had flushed from the steam and the encounter with Noah. Water trickled down her shoulders, disappearing beneath the towel to the slope of her breasts.

Oh, God, how much had he seen?

How long had he been standing there before she noticed him? Five seconds? Ten? Long enough to shock him, obviously. He'd run from the room as though the hounds of hell were on his heels. She moaned in embarrassment, wanting nothing more than to bury her head in her towel and lock herself in the bathroom for the rest of her life.

She couldn't do that, of course. Roxy imagined he was waiting downstairs, and if she knew him, he'd be rehearsing a speech that mixed apathy with humor: "Hey, I've seen you naked before. Remember when we were kids?"—ensuring there'd be no tension between them.

Roxy would have to hide her humiliation and pretend it was no big deal, too. The problem being, she sucked at hiding her feelings. *Well, you've done a damn good job so far, Rox.* You can do this, too. Either that, or Noah was very aware of her infatuation and had no interest in pursuing it further. Humiliation rose anew, and her cheeks grew even hotter. She could take rejection, but not his pity.

"Crap," she said to her reflection.

She opened the door an inch, waited a few moments, and then poked her head out. No one in the hall. Some part of her hoped he'd be waiting to sweep her off her feet and carry her to bed like she'd always imagined, even as the rational part of her brain screamed it would never happen. Noah liked women like Connie Willows—tiny, petite, feminine women who looked like they'd be blown over by a stiff wind. Not a five-foot-ten-inch Amazon with wide hips and a big butt.

Oh, Lord. Had he seen her butt?

She slipped out of the bathroom and into her bedroom where she quickly donned her most figure-concealing outfit—purple sweats. She shoved her size-ten feet into her white and pink bunny slippers and faced the inevitable.

Apparently, this was one confrontation that would have to wait. When she went downstairs, Noah had disappeared. She checked the entire house and then out front, but his Explorer was gone. This was even worse than she thought. Discomfiture caused her stomach to churn, and she placed a trembling hand against her middle.

Roxy closed the door and leaned against it with a heavy sigh.

For crying out loud. She'd scared him away.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

When my husband and I first married, he had a whole slew of hobbies (he still does). I kept waiting for him to spend time with me, or at least ask to. I addressed this issue multiple times, but he kept blowing me off until I finally stopped. Recently, I've begun acquiring my own hobbies. And now he's jealous! He says I'm being selfish and ignoring him. I tried to explain that I was tired of sitting around waiting for him to come to me, and then he threw a huge fit. Arggggh!

Signed, Fit to be Tied

Dear Fit to be Tied,

What did he expect you to do, wait docilely while he went on his fishing expeditions? Is his brain that small? Men think they've come so far, when in reality, they really just want a woman who will wait hand and foot on them after they've released them from the chain on the stove. Tell him you're keeping your hobbies. He has his, you have yours. If he still balks, hit him over the head with a frying pan (gently, of course).

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Three

Noah was scared. Definitely scared, on his way to being terrified, even, but not for the reasons Roxy imagined.

He pulled the Explorer into his driveway and shoved the gearshift into Park with more force than necessary. In the darkness of the cab, he expelled a pent-up breath, his nerves strung tight and his world spinning.

Christ.

Beyond his truck, crickets sang their loud song, locusts buzzed and Noah's body hummed.

Roxy.

What a chicken shit he was. After standing in her bathroom, staring at her wet—God, luscious—naked body like a dumbass, he'd finally regained his motor skills. He high-tailed it out of the farmhouse without thinking, hopped in his rig and tore down the quaint, tree-lined street leaving a trail of burned rubber in his wake.

Now, his heartbeat had returned to normal. The buzzing in his ears lessened, as did the pressure in his groin. He leaned his head back against the rest and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. With a sigh borne of absolute sexual frustration, he opened his eyes, pulled the keys from the ignition and got out of the Explorer.

He owned a small bungalow on the other side of town—and not the fancy side. He had over ten acres of cotton fields beyond his back door. As he trudged toward the front, he pushed thoughts of Roxy and the reaction she'd caused away.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

He forced himself to remember the state the house had been in when he purchased it three years ago. Now all he could think of was Roxy lying naked on his dining room table.

Noah shook his head. The house had been little more than a few dozen two-by-fours and a rotting roof. After a lot of hard labor, he'd reinforced all the beams and studs, remodeled every room and added a fresh coat of white paint to go with the dark green shutters.

It was a lot less than the house where he'd been raised, but it was his sanctuary. The emotion he'd held at bay for the last twenty minutes broke through like the sun in the eye of a hurricane.

Pink skin, dewy cheeks, long, long dark hair, wet ... dripping. Legs that went on for miles, leading up to shapely hips and a nice, round...

Stop!

He pulled out a bottle of Bud and shut the fridge. A little hard, but damn it, so was he. And getting a boner over Stilts was so not what he needed right now. He threw the popped top in the garbage can and grabbed the remote. Noah drained the beer in three long swallows, and turned his plasma to a Braves game before rising to toss the empty and get a fresh one. Maybe if he got himself stinking drunk, he would be able to erase the memory of Roxy's rosy, naked skin from his mind.

Right.

He pounded four beers and the Braves won, but the victory gave him little satisfaction because his brain hadn't been on the game. He'd sat on his sofa, feet propped up on the coffee

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

table, recalling in vivid Technicolor the early events of this evening. And spending the entire time aroused beyond belief.

Later, as he lay in his king-sized bed, he punched the pillow and let out a frustrated sigh. He wasn't a prude, for chrissake. He'd seen his share of naked women—hell, he'd been inside most of them. But, his reaction to Roxy had set his body aflame and created a four-alarm fire of lust coursing through his veins. He'd had a goddamn hard-on since he left her house.

This was Roxy. He should not be having lascivious thoughts about his friend. But, he couldn't stop himself, even now, as he tried to fall into the escape of sleep.

Noah punched his pillow again. Yeah, he was scared all right. Scared he had suddenly developed an infatuation for his sister's best friend.

It was going to be a long night.

* * * *

The next morning, Noah pulled his rig into the lot behind the courthouse, and parked in the spot marked SHERIFF. A couple of cruisers sat in the spaces beside him, next to a concrete sidewalk that led to the back entrance.

As expected, it had been a long night. He'd kept punching his damn pillow, trying to find a comfortable spot, but sleep had been replaced by visions of Roxy's smooth skin and feminine curves. He had a queer feeling things were not going to be comfortable for some time. Which, of course, had brought more flashes of Roxy's flushed, very naked body to his mind.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

He'd kicked his ass eight ways to Sunday for leaving the way he did, when what he should have done was make light of the situation. Something, at least. But, no, he'd left without saying a word, and now they would have this ... stuff between them.

Hell, maybe he'd imagined it. Maybe she was just puzzled by his strange behavior and nothing more. Maybe he could still feign nonchalance.

Right. And aliens might come waltzing into the SO looking for a job.

It should've been something they could joke about, he thought as he took the rear stairwell, his feet stomping harder than necessary. The sight of his sister's best friend naked—hell, his best friend—should have been something they shared a laugh about. But, no. Not when every time he closed his eyes, he imagined running his hands over all of that flesh.

No!

Pushing through the second floor entry door, he rubbed his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, as if he could physically shove away the memory. He didn't want to think about Roxy like that. She was damn near his sister.

He stole into his private office entrance like a thief, hoping he could exorcise whatever had possessed his mind before he had to face her again.

* * * *

Mary Lou looked up from her desk to the closed door that led to her brother's office. He was in there. She heard him

sneak in a few hours earlier, and second, he had poked his head out twenty minutes later snarling for coffee.

She'd long ago ceased trying figure out Noah. He'd always been a damn good brother, and she loved him to pieces, but he was a complicated man, despite his claim to the contrary. In fact, he reminded her quite a bit of Roxy, for whom the phrase 'still waters' may have been conceived. It was Mary Lou's burden, she'd decided, to be surrounded by moody, difficult people.

The phone on her desk rang. "Sheriff Kennedy's office, Mary Lou speaking."

"Hey, darlin'."

Her stomach sank at the sound of her husband's voice. "Hi."

Preston was the most difficult of all, but he wasn't very deep. "I've got some bad news," he said.

What else is new?

Mary Lou, who'd lived s sheltered life under the iron fist of a domineering father and the cold eye of a critical mother, was fresh out of high school, set adrift for the first time in her life when she met Preston. She'd been toying with the idea of art school when he swooped in on the proverbial horse.

At twenty-eight, Preston Abbot had been a cool drink of water in an otherwise dry desert that had been her life. He was charming, oh so charming, that Mary Lou had been like putty in his hands. He'd just started his practice, but he had a family fortune to back him. No local boy, his family hailed from Savannah society, and Mary Lou's mother had been

beyond thrilled that this well-bred son of wealthy planters had come calling on her awkward daughter.

"Listen, honey, I'm going to have to leave earlier than I thought for that convention in Atlanta," he said, bringing her out of her memories and back to the conversation.

"When?" Mary Lou asked. He'd promised to take her out for dinner and dancing. Though her marriage was crumbling like a rock in the sea, she wanted to at least try and make it work. But, Preston made it damned hard.

As he droned on about the importance of the conference and his attendance, Mary Lou thought back to those first days, as she'd done a lot lately. Theirs had been a whirlwind courtship followed by a very large, very sophisticated wedding attended by the *crème-de-la-crème* of the South. They honeymooned on the sun-washed beaches of Tahiti, made love for hours on end. When they returned home to the five-thousand-square-foot estate Preston had purchased prior to the wedding, she believed the honeymoon would continue.

Preston had transformed, just as surely as a chameleon changed his colors to suit his surroundings. Gone was the charming Southern gentleman who'd swept her off her feet with kind words and promises. In his place stood a man whose overwhelming need for control rivaled her father's. A man who insisted on having a wife who catered to his every whim; a wife who was always presentable, and ready to display on his arm like a trophy. No longer were they a young couple in throes of new love—no equal, fifty/fifty partnership here. It was always about what Preston wanted or how it made Preston look.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

During those first years, she had been devastated, confused and sure she had done something to precipitate the change in her new husband. She tried all the things a young, naïve girl could to sway him, but the harder she tried, the more distant and cold he became. By their third anniversary, she gave up and became what he'd wanted. A trophy wife.

Again, she turned her attention back to the telephone. What was one more disappointment on top of an endless pile of others? She cut off his self-important speech. "When, Preston?"

"I'm at home right now, Mary Lou. Packin' as we speak."

"But, we were supposed to go out tonight." She bit her lip. She sounded so pathetic. But, then again, that's what her life had become. *And I've done nothing about it, so who am I to complain?*

"I know, honey pie. I promise I'll take you to that movie when I get back."

Movie? *Movie?* "It wasn't a movie, Preston. It was dinner and dancing. Your idea, if I recall."

Silence greeted her for several seconds. Then, "Don't use that tone with me, Mary Lou. You know I have important obligations, both in my practice and in this town." She could imagine him clenching his teeth just as surely as he clenched the phone. "If you want to continue to live the life I've given you, then you need to be a little more lenient. Understand?"

Mary Lou took a breath just as the dispatcher, Ginny Keller, came rushing into the office. "Hold on, Preston." She placed the phone against her chest and looked up at Ginny. "What's up?"

"Grab Noah. We've got some kind of riot goin' on at The Gazette office."

"What about the other deputies?"

"Out on patrol, lunch, and two out with that summer bug."

Given Noah's mood, he would be none too pleased. But, that's what he'd signed up for when he decided to run for sheriff. "Will do, Ginny."

Mary Lou spoke into the phone. "Preston, I have to go."

"Goddamn it, Mary Lou. We're having a discussion here. I don't understand why you insist on working at that stupid place anyway. It's not like you need the money."

No, she didn't need the money. But, she did need to get away from the house. While he'd prefer her to perform the typical society wife duties like heading up charities and attending Junior League meetings, Mary Lou wanted to do something more fulfilling than spending her days with women she had nothing in common with. "We've discussed this. I like my job. Have a nice time at your conference. Goodbye, Preston."

As she stared at the phone, Preston's words echoed through her mind. If you want to continue to live the life I've given you. The irony wasn't lost on her.

She'd pretended to have the perfect marriage for twelve long years. Mary Lou feared she would continue with the farce until she died. She didn't have the strength to leave him. Besides, where would she go? Mary Lou was no dummy; she knew both her brother and Roxy couldn't stand Preston—she could stay with either one of them. But it was still her battle,

and one she wasn't ready to fight. She didn't know if she ever would be.

Roxy had never said anything outright regarding Preston or their marriage, because Roxy wouldn't do that. She couldn't speak her mind any more than Mary Lou could tell Preston where to stick his society lifestyle. They both shared that quality. Even laughed about it sometimes. It was either that or start crying.

The sound of Noah's office door opening shook her from her reverie. Mary Lou needed to leave her woolgathering to her personal time. And this weekend seemed good.

Noah looked a little less punchy when he stepped into the outer office, but something still bothered him. "Are you going out to lunch today?" he asked.

She glanced down at her watch; five to noon. "I am, but you need to head to The Gazette office now. Ginny said there's some fight going on."

Noah ran his hand through his blond locks. "Oh, goody. Well, I guess I'm headin' out then. Can you swing by the diner and pick up my usual?"

His polite request was an improvement from the barked order from earlier, so she assumed he felt better. Thankfully, in a home where parents handed out cold control and disappointment instead of hugs and kisses, Noah had ended up unlike either of their parents, but his own man. A great man, she thought, even if he could be stubborn as a blackberry bushes and just as prickly at times. "Sure."

He kissed her cheek. "Thanks, Lou. You're a gem." He checked his watch. "Guess I better go see what the hell's got everyone in a dither."

Noah left, and Mary Lou gathered her purse and transferred the phones to Ginny.

* * * *

A group of angry looking folks gathered around the small brick building where Bobbie Townsend published the local paper. Since some of them had moved out onto the street, Noah pulled his truck into a space across the road and got out.

He pushed his way through the crowd of people shouting their outrage over some article. "Move aside, folks." When few heeded his warning, he shouted, "This is the sheriff. Get out of the way. Now."

That seemed to do the trick. He knew his voice was loud and commanding, but he rarely raised it. He moved through the parted group, some sporting picketing signs that read STOP PAULA ROCKWELL!

He knew of the column, of course. A man couldn't live in a town the size of Thorton and not know. Plus, Mary Lou read Paula Rockwell's words of wisdom religiously, so he'd learned more than he ever wanted of the women of Thorton's love problems.

However, he knew Ms. Rockwell's column ran toward the tame—just like the rest of the town. Noah couldn't imagine why all of a sudden people wanted her column banished.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Passing through the crowd toward the front door of The Gazette, various people shouted out at him.

"You have to stop her from running that column, Sheriff!"

"Paula Rockwell is promoting divorce!"

"She's against family values!"

"She's a feminist lesbian!"

Noah fought the urge to knock his head against the brick wall of the building as he stopped at the front door. He peered inside and saw Bobbie moving around the office, a smile on her face. Some days, being Sheriff just wasn't all that fun.

He turned and faced the group. "Now, folks, why don't we all calm down?" He raised his hands and lowered them in the universal gesture for, let's not break out the torches and pitchforks. "I understand y'all have some concerns regarding Ms. Rockwell's column, but Miz Townsend has the legal right to run whatever she wants in The Gazette. So, I'm gonna recommend y'all take up your issues by going through the proper avenues. Write a letter to the editor, 'cause if you folks don't get off Miz Townsend's property, I'm gonna have to haul you all in for disruptin' the peace." He smiled. "And I sure don't want to do that. We okay?"

His speech was met with grumbles, but the crowd gradually dispersed, each person moving back to wherever the hell they'd come from. When the last one was gone, Noah blew out a breath. He opened the glass door to Bobbie's business, removing his Stetson when he entered. "Afternoon, Miz Townsend."

Bobbie smiled, her blue eyes bright. "Sheriff."

"Quite a stir out there. You call it in?"

She threw back her head and laughed heartily. "Me? Oh, no. That stodgy old bastard Hockley across the street felt the ruckus was preventing him from gainin' clients." Bobbie snorted. "Like that dumb sack of rocks is gonna get any more business. He screws up more tax returns than he completes. It's a wonder he's still in business."

"So, you're okay with all that racket out there?" Noah asked, jerking a thumb out the door.

"Hell, I'm ecstatic."

Noah scratched his head. "What's gotten into you?"

She turned to a desk piled with copies of the paper, picked one up and flipped it open. "The new format."

He took the proffered paper and scanned the column. *Okay.* He looked at Bobbie. "You approved this?"

She nodded proudly. "I did. And I'm gonna keep rollin' with it."

Noah shook his head. "Mind if I take this with me?"

Bobbie shook her head.

"Just so you know, this kind of ... format's gonna create a storm of trouble for you."

"I know," she replied cheerfully.

He sighed. "Just give me a call if you have any more problems."

Noah walked back out to his rig, the newspaper in his hand zinging like an electrical current. Seated in the blazing heat of his cab, he reread the column. The prudent Paula Rockwell had obviously decided to shake things up.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

And Noah had the strange feeling this was going to throw his quiet, quaint town into an uproar.

* * * *

The Main Street Diner was a major staple in Thorton small-town life—had been for as long as Mary Lou could remember. Located two doors down from Thorton Savings & Loan, it boasted the same red, white and blue exterior it had when it opened thirty years ago. As she passed the bank, Mary Lou remembered she hadn't called Roxy to see how the loan meeting went.

She grabbed her cell from her purse and punched in Roxy's number. While waiting for her friend to answer, cars drove down Main Street, stirring the air just a bit as they passed to and fro. Time took on a whole other dimension in Thorton. The frenetic pace of the world was somehow kept at bay by the slower, country attitude.

The diner was half-full, normal for lunchtime on a Friday. It was the embodiment of Thorton; with its red vinyl stools that lined the front counter where the only thing that changed was the age of the patrons who settled atop them. The air smelled of grease and cigarette smoke; a staple of any Southern diner. Ceiling fans swirled overhead, but did little more than push the air lazily.

Roxy didn't answer her phone. Mary Lou placed her own back in her purse and nodded at familiar faces. Most of the patrons sat in the booths, which was unusual for a Friday afternoon. On a typical lunchtime weekday, they perched atop

those relic stools chatting with other diners and the waitresses.

Three waitresses gathered near the glass-enclosed pie display, its mechanical turnstile rotating a mouth-watering presentation of fresh-baked lemon meringue, pecan, chocolate cream and apple pies.

As Mary Lou headed over to the counter, she smiled at Joanie Austin, who was expecting her first child any day.

"Hey, there, Mary Lou," Joanie said, the glow of pregnancy on her face. "You here for the sheriff's lunch?"

"Yeah. His usual."

Little more than a girl, Joanie had married her high school sweetheart the previous fall. The youngest daughter of the diner's owners, Ed and Kathy Hudson, speculation ran rampant on whether or not the wedding had come before the baby, but Mary Lou knew it didn't matter; she had seen Joanie with her new husband, and the two looked positively giddy around each other.

"How're you feelin,' hon?" Mary Lou asked.

The younger woman blew a fringe of blond hair from her eyes. "I'll be glad when I'm not pregnant any more. This heat is killing me."

The two other waitresses were engrossed the newspaper. In fact, nearly all the customers had Thorton's weekly circulation spread out before them. Mary Lou had never seen so many people reading it at once.

Joanie caught Mary Lou's stare. "Have you read it yet?"

"Read what?"

"The new Paula Rockwell column. She went off the deep end. Everybody's talkin' about it. She told one of the women who wrote in to dump her husband."

Although the news rattled her, Mary Lou merely lifted a brow. She was one of three people who knew the true identity of Thorton's answer to Dear Abby. For over a year now, Roxy had been penning the Rockwell column and had always toned down her opinions to cater to her readers' old-fashioned values.

On occasion, Roxy showed her one of the letters sent in and they would laugh over how backwards some of her advice-seeking fans were. They often joked about her telling people how she truly felt, but Roxy would never act upon any of those fantasies. She feared the backlash such a gutsy move would rain upon her.

Sure that Joanie had misunderstood, Mary Lou grabbed a copy of The Gazette from the bar next to the pie case. The Ask Paula section ran on the left hand page above the community activities listing and across from the farm report.

She scanned the reader's letter and went on to read Roxy's response. Mary Lou's eyes widened as she caught the first line. *Dear Restless: I have two words for you: Women's Liberation.* Shocked, she read on. "What's going on with you, Rox?" she whispered when she'd finished the column.

"What's that, hon?" Joanie asked.

Mary Lou waved the paper. "Nothing. Mind if I keep this?"

"I don't see why not. The diner's chock full of 'em."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

"Hey, Joanie, can you do me a favor? Can you have George deliver Noah's lunch? I just remembered an errand I have to run."

"No problem. You want anything?"

"No, thank you. I hope you have that baby soon, for your sake," she added with a smile as she backed out of the diner.

"Me, too," Joanie replied.

* * * *

The two-story Thorton City Library sat three blocks down from the courthouse. It smelled like aged paper and leather. Like books. The scent never failed to bring a smile to Roxy's lips. She had spent countless hours inside these hallowed halls, her nose buried in a book. When she turned fifteen, the head librarian, who had since passed, offered Roxy a job shelving books. She'd been there ever since.

By twenty-two she'd climbed the ropes to assistant librarian. And here she remained. Maybe forever. Sitting at her desk near the circulation counter, she frowned. *What do I have to show for all these years?*

Damn Merle Granger for denying her loan. If he hadn't, she'd be purchasing the abandoned lot a few blocks over, applying for business permits, hiring a contractor...

Shoving all thoughts relating to her dashed dreams from her mind, she refocused on the task at hand. On her computer spreadsheet lay a list of books that needed to be replaced. Unfortunately, the list was long and their budget low. The library had lost some of its funding a few years ago when the city council decided a new stadium for the Thorton

Titans was more important than the library. Since then, Roxy and several other employees had rallied for a return of their funds.

Roxy was contemplating running a fundraiser when the glass double doors opened, Mary Lou strolled up to the circulation desk and brandished a copy of The Gazette.

"What's going on?" she asked without preamble.

For a few moments, Roxy stared blankly at the paper. Then it all came back in a horrifying rush. How could she have forgotten? A little voice whispered selective memory, but she ignored it.

Roxy walked around the half-moon counter and took the newspaper from her friend's hands. She flipped it open and read what she'd written in the heat of the moment. Her heart stuttered in her chest. It seemed like a childish prank, but she couldn't take the words back, and they jumped out at her from the page.

Oh, God. What have I done?

She leaned against the circulation desk, clutching the paper to her chest. Everyone had gone to lunch, so no one but Mary Lou witnessed the way her legs became as shaky as a puppet's.

Mary Lou put a hand on Roxy's arm. "Are you okay? You're pale as death."

Roxy drew in a few breaths, trying hard to steady herself lest someone enter and see her. "He denied my loan," she blurted.

Mary Lou blinked a few times before realization dawned in her eyes. "When Joanie said you'd gone off the deep end, I

was sure she was mistaken." It was Mary Lou's turn to take a deep breath. "Holy hell, Rox."

Roxy laughed weakly. "You're telling me." She placed a trembling hand on her clammy forehead. "Thank God no one knows it's me."

Mary Lou pursed her lips. "I'm really proud of you. It took guts to do this."

"I acted without thinking. I was just so ... so angry. At Merle Granger, at this town. I thought what I did would help somehow." She placed her face in her hands, the paper crinkling and smashed against her cheek. "I'm such an idiot."

"Roxanne. For as long as I've known you, you've been cautious. You've done the right thing, the proper thing. Lord knows, I have, too. So, of course you feel panicked. This is the first reckless thing you've ever done. To be honest, I'm a little jealous." Her blue eyes sparkled. "I think you should just go for it. Like you said, it's not like anyone knows who Paula Rockwell is." She grinned. "Live dangerously."

While both humbled and strengthened by her friend's pep talk, Roxy still felt embarrassed. "Thanks."

"Hey, I have an idea. Let's celebrate this newfound courage of yours. What do you say we have a girls' night out? We can get dressed up, go to The Mighty Quinn and dance a little. Then we can figure out how to rub some of that nerve off on me. How about it?"

Roxy almost said no. It was Friday, after all, and on Friday nights, she and Noah watched a movie at her house. Then she remembered last night. The painful embarrassment she'd managed to stave off came roaring back as Roxy relived the

scene in her mind. God ... the sight of her without clothing had been enough to send Noah running. It had been a night for humiliating moments all around.

Maybe she had turned over a new leaf. Maybe this was a new and improved Roxanne Palmer.

Riiiiight.

"What will Preston say?"

Mary Lou's face went blank for a moment. "He left early for some lawyerly conference in Atlanta. He won't be back until Sunday."

Roxy seriously doubted Noah would stop by for movie night anytime soon. "Okay, then. You're on."

Mary Lou pasted on a bright smile, but Roxy had the distinct feeling that her friend had lost whatever spunk spurred her to come up with this idea in the first place. "Fantastic. I'll be by your place around seven."

Roxy nodded as Mary Lou started to leave. "Oh. Can I borrow this?" She motioned to the paper still crumpled in her fist.

"It's yours," she said.

Mary Lou exited the glass doors and disappeared down the sidewalk. Staring at the blasted paper, Roxy just hoped no one had read the article.

* * * *

By the time Roxy left the library at five, that hope had been dashed. Lucy Atherton, her twenty-something assistant, had returned from lunch with a copy of The Gazette, and

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

proceeded to read it to the entire staff. Roxy feigned interest, but inside cringed with mortification.

The reactions varied according to age. The young women, like Lucy, laughed and said it was about damn time someone said something. The stodgy head librarian, Alice Monroe, or, as Roxy secretly called her, The Dark Mistress, clucked her tongue and muttered about a woman knowing her place.

All in all, it had been an exhausting day. People came in, some talking about the article, others wanting to look up past issues to compare. She couldn't believe her column generated this kind of publicity. Roxy didn't realize she had that big of a readership. *You wanted to make people sit up and take notice.* And she had. In spades, apparently.

The sun blazed in the sky as she let herself out of the back door of the library. The air was as thick and still as a stone, with storm clouds gathering to the south. Southern Georgia had spectacular thunderstorms during the warm months, and Roxy guessed tonight would be no exception. A fitting end to the day.

Roxy opened the door to her four-year-old Honda Accord and slid inside the stifling interior. She started the engine, rolled down all four windows to let in some air and turned the air conditioner on kill. However, by the time she drove the one mile to her house, the vents had just begun blowing cold air.

She rolled up her windows in anticipation of the storm, and spotted Bobbie heading across the yard. She wore a purple caftan—she always wore those, even in high summer—and a smile as wide as the Okefenoke Swamp.

"You did it, girl!" She hugged Roxy the minute she got out of the car. "By God, you did it."

"I guess it's too much to hope that the whole town didn't read the column."

"On the contrary, my dear. Everyone read it, and it's created a bigger buzz than when the elementary school principal and the janitor were found together in the broom closet." Bobbie punched a fist in the air. "Ha! Take that, you old bastard!"

Roxy guessed the old bastard was the late Jefferson Townsend. When Bobbie moved back to Thorton two years ago, Roxy's mother, Annabelle, let her in on the rumor surrounding Bobbie's sudden departure twenty-something years ago. Apparently, if you listened to town gossip, something Roxy rarely did (okay, sometimes), Bobbie had run off after becoming pregnant. Jefferson Townsend wasn't understanding when he learned about his impending grandchild and gave seventeen-year-old Bobbie an ultimatum: get rid of the baby or get rid of yourself. Although she'd left, Bobbie was childless, to the best of Roxy's knowledge. Sometimes, she wanted to ask, but was too timid and prudent to bring up the subject.

"It's good to know I rate somewhere above a couple of guys making out in a broom closet," Roxy said.

"I've had calls coming in all day long, not to mention a picket line outside my office Noah had to break up. They want to know who Paula Rockwell is. How can they meet her? Does she live in Thorton?"

Fear coursed through her. "You didn't tell them, did you?"

Bobbie sent her a disgruntled look. "Of course not. But, oh my, Roxanne, what you have done is ... it's revolutionary!"

"I think you're exaggerating a touch."

"Oh, no. The old sticks-in-the-mud are beside themselves. I received two calls from members of the city council. They wanted me to consider cancelin' the column. Can you believe that? I told them to go to hell." She giggled. "Oh, honey, Merle Granger is just about crappin' his pants right now. There's a rumor circulating that Charlene is Restless in Primrose Valley. Ain't that just perfect?"

Roxy had to admit that a small part of her reveled in the attention brought on by the article. Even though she'd penned anonymously, there was something heady in the reaction she—plain, boring Roxanne Palmer—had created.

And what about Mrs. Granger? *Could Charlene be Restless?* The Grangers did own a home in Primrose Valley. Right next door to Mary Lou, in fact. Roxy decided that if Merle's wife had written that letter, then it was some kind of karmic justice. She met Bobbie's delighted eyes. "Well, I'm glad to see you're so happy."

Bobbie beamed. "Oh, I am, honey. I am so happy, I could kiss you. But, I'm not into girls, so I won't."

Roxy lifted a brow. "Have you been drinking?"

The older woman waved a hand. "I'm high on life, girlfriend."

Roxy rolled her eyes.

"I want you to start thinking about next week's column. Maybe we should increase the column, maybe add a few more letters."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Her head started to pound. "I don't know, Bobbie."

"Don't think about it now. We'll discuss it in a few days."

Bobbie headed home, leaving Roxy standing confused and rumped in her work clothes on her front lawn.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

I'm terribly embarrassed to admit this, or to even be writing you, but I'm getting desperate. For several years, I have been unable to achieve an orgasm. My husband doesn't engage in enough foreplay, and as a result, I'm not turned on when we make love. To make matters worse, he won't even consider the idea of 'other avenues.' I feel I have no one to talk to because I was raised to believe that women didn't talk about things like that.

Signed, Sexually Frustrated

Dear Sexually Frustrated,

I feel your pain, sister! If your husband isn't willing to help you along in the climax department, then I suggest you take matters into your own hands, if you get my meaning. Some women have difficulty climaxing under the best circumstances, and no one knows your body better than you. Light some candles, play some soft music and run a hot bath. If you find that manual exploration isn't your cup of tea, there are lots of companies that provide "toys" with discretion. Trust me, if you wait around for him to give you the big "O," you'll go to your grave Sexually Frustrated.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Four

By eight-thirty, Noah had finally worked up the guts to face Roxy. Armed with a six-pack of Lone Star and a Jim Carrey comedy flick—nothing remotely romantic about that—he pulled up to the curb in front of the farmhouse.

He had decided he would play it ostrich-style; bury his head in the sand and it'd go away. They could watch old Jim perform slapstick, drink a few cold ones and things would go back to normal.

After some thinking, he suspected his reaction had more to do with the fact that he hadn't been with a woman in a while. Seeing Roxy just reminded him that he had ignored instincts that needed tending. While a little voice called bullshit, he grabbed the beer and movie and walked up the stairs.

A single light burned—the porch light. Beyond the gossamer drapes, the house stood dark and still. He knocked, but as he suspected, no one answered. Relief warred with disappointment as he knocked a second time.

Where the hell was she?

Friday night was movie night for the two of them, as surely as the Fourth of July fell on.... well, the fourth of July. He checked his watch. Roxy should be home even if it hadn't been Friday night. Hell, even if it was Saturday night. She was a homebody, in bed by ten every night. In all the years he'd known her, she had never diverted from her strict routine.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

He retreated down the steps and gazed up at the second story windows, but the upper level lay as dark and silent as the ground floor. Her green Honda sat in the driveway, the windows rolled up.

Puzzled, he made his way back to the Explorer.

"She went out," a female voice called.

With the beer under his arm and the movie in his other hand, he stared across the lawn at Bobbie Townsend.

"Pardon?"

"She went out about a half-hour ago. All dolled up—with your sister."

Roxy? All dolled up?

"Okay," Noah said, and fought the urge to scratch his head like a dolt. "Thanks. You have a good evenin', Miz Townsend."

"Sure thing, Sheriff," she replied, and disappeared back inside her house.

Irritated, but unsure why, Noah started the Explorer and pulled away from the curb. Where did Roxy think she was going all dolled up? Were she and Mary Lou out trolling? He dismissed the thought immediately. For one, his sister was married, and second, Roxy didn't have a flirtatious bone in her very sexy, very curvy body.

Damn it all to hell.

Well, fine. If she wants to cancel movie night, it's no skin off my hide. He took the turn onto Main Street a little sharper than necessary. There was no law against a woman dressing up to have fun. None at all.

He pulled the Explorer into the gravel parking lot behind The Mighty Quinn, spotting his sister's silver Mercedes a few

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

spaces down. With jerky movements, he got out of the rig and slammed the door, pocketing the keys. There was no crime in Roxy trolling a bar. None at all.

If one man laid a hand on her, he'd kill him.

* * * *

It had been a while since Roxy had been out for drinks at Quinn's. Like everything in Thorton, it didn't surprise her that little had changed. The same road signs still hung from the walls, mixed in with archaic newspaper headlines from around the country. Ball caps plastered the joint's entire ceiling, donated by customers over the twenty-five years Declan Quinn had been in business.

The bar was a wide U-shaped affair made from aged mahogany that Declan stroked like a lover. A large mirror spanned the length of the bar where folks could stare at themselves while pondering their next drink.

Two televisions were suspended on either side of the U, and at any given time they were tuned to NASCAR, baseball or rodeo. Past the bar, a dance floor opened up in the middle of the room, in front of a stage where live music played on the weekends. Tables were scattered around the perimeter of the floor and beyond, and in the back, sat a pair of pool tables, the green velvet worn from many a drunken game played.

Roxy sat with Mary Lou at one of the tables away from the stage, watching people two-step to the band's lousy rendition of Garth Brooks' "I've Got Friends in Low Places," which seemed to be the anthem of honky-tonks in the South. She

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

sipped a Long Island iced tea, which didn't taste anything like tea, but managed to let her forget the terrible day she'd had.

Mary Lou had shown up an hour early with a small army of cosmetics. She took one look at Roxy's red jumper and ordered her back in the house, stalking her with a gleam in her eye and a train case filled with modern torture devices. Terrified, Roxy stuttered a lame response claiming an allergy to makeup, but in the end, she had been outgunned.

Roxy made Mary Lou promise she wouldn't do anything drastic, to which her friend had agreed, but after a careful examination in the mirror, Roxy realized she'd been had. Now, her eyes were shaded, lined and brushed with mascara, her cheeks blushed and her lips glossed. Mary Lou styled Roxy's long wavy hair so it flowed free, its curling ends reaching the middle of her back.

The red jumper, of course, had been vetoed. Mary Lou suggested burning it, but that was taking things a little too far. She'd unearthed a pair of tight jeans and a bodice-hugging red sleeveless top from the back of Roxy's closet.

Not that she would ever admit it, but she felt attractive for the first time since her boyfriend skipped town with a twenty-year-old and the contents of her bank account. She kept swinging her head back and forth, enjoying the feel of her hair sliding across her shoulders and trailing down her back. She rarely wore it down—even to bed Roxy kept it in its customary braid. Now, she toyed with the idea of letting it loose more often.

Wow. You're sure getting brave, Rox.

Mary Lou had changed from her police-issue tan khaki pants and white polo shirt into a flirty yellow sundress that teased out the blond in her hair. She looked beautiful, as always, with her hair piled on top of her head and her makeup skillfully applied. Maybe Roxy would ask Mary Lou to give her pointers in the girly department. Maybe then she wouldn't feel so darned dowdy all the time. *You're not dowdy, Rox. Just invisible.*

As the band switched to The Nitty Ditty Dirt Band's "Fishin' in the Dark," Roxy turned to Mary Lou and said, "This was a good idea, Lou. I'm glad you strong-armed me into going."

Mary Lou lifted a brow. "Strong-armed? Please. You've been waiting for me to come along and do this to you for years." Her blue eyes twinkled, and Roxy realized her friend was on her third Alabama Slammer. "Hey! You know what we should do tomorrow? We should drive to Atlanta or Valdosta and have a spa day. It will be my treat. What do you say?"

"By 'spa day' are you meaning that some person will slick me down with wax and strip my body hair? Then wrap me in some green mud that smells like the swamp and tell me it's good for me?"

"Sure, but it's a ton of fun. Come on. It'll be like a girl's day."

"I thought we were already having a girl's day. Or night. Whatever."

"Come on, Rox. We haven't done anything like this in a long time."

Roxy wanted to weasel out. No way would she let anyone come near her with hot wax and mud. But, she thought of her

earlier pledge to make herself feel more attractive. More importantly, something in Mary Lou's face stopped her. It was as if she needed this from Roxy—needed to do something for her or just be with her.

Never one to turn down a friend in need, Roxy agreed, albeit grudgingly. "Nothing drastic."

"Of course not," Mary Lou said, and she turned her head so Roxy missed the diabolical gleam in her eyes.

Mary Lou lifted a hand and waved. "Noah!"

Roxy turned her head sharply in the direction Mary Lou waved. Damned if the man hadn't just walked in the door. Great. As her heart began beating wildly in her chest, she plastered on a bland smile. *Just pretend like nothing happened.*

Sure.

Noah approached the table and stood between the two women, his eyes stopping to rest on Roxy. They widened slightly; Roxy felt her cheeks burn. He pulled out a chair and straddled it, his big forearms resting on the back. His eyes seared and she looked away. "What are you girls doing?"

Getting trashed. Avoiding you.

"Rox and I are having a little girl's night."

He made a noncommittal noise and signaled to the waitress for a beer. Again, he turned his direct blue gaze on Roxy, but this time she held his stare. "I stopped by your house."

She blinked. "I was here," she said unnecessarily.

"Yeah. So I see." He ran a hand through wavy blond locks, and Roxy's hands itched. "Movie night? Remember?"

Oh, she remembered all right. Her skin warmed at the idea he'd come over after last night's debacle. Repeating her earlier mantra in her mind, she slapped her forehead. "I can't believe I forgot! When Lou asked me if I wanted to go out tonight, it completely slipped my mind."

Noah looked like he didn't believe her, but he didn't press the issue. The waitress delivered a long-neck bottle of Bud with a wink and a smile. Roxy rolled her eyes, but her blood continued to heat. *God in heaven, he's gorgeous.*

"Did y'all read that love column in the paper today?" Noah asked.

Roxy almost choked on her iced tea. "Hmm. Paula something?"

Mary Lou turned to her with a gleam of absolute evil in her eyes. "We thought it was great, didn't we, Rox?"

She nodded, wishing the floor would just swallow her up. She definitely did not want Noah to know about her alter ego, and she definitely did not want to talk about it now. She already felt guilty enough for not indulging her secret, but for some reason, she hadn't wanted Noah to know about her column. Maybe he'd laugh at her—as if Roxy had the right to give out love advice. And now, after he'd broken up the picket line at The Gazette office, well, he'd be none too pleased to discover his pal Roxy was behind the civil unrest.

Worst of all, Noah hated lying. Of course, given the way he'd been raised, it was no big surprise.

"I think it's about time somebody said something on behalf of women in this town," Mary Lou added.

Noah frowned and took a slow pull from his beer. His long fingers wrapped around the neck, and Roxy started to wonder what those hands would feel like on her body.

Don't go there. But her blood began to hum.

"It's created quite a stir around town," he said.

"I think that was the point," she heard herself say.

"Yeah, well, she made it. I read the article. Sounds like a feminist lesbian, if you ask me."

Some of the anger she'd felt last night rose like a tide within her. And she heated up in a different way. "Why is it when a man says something like that, other guys high-five him and congratulate him on his manhood, but when a woman speaks her mind, she's automatically a lesbian?"

Noah grinned behind his bottle. "Fantasy. Every man secretly hopes women want to get nekkid with other women. It's biological."

"Baloney," she said. "Men are just afraid that when a woman starts thinking for herself, she's breaking free of the chokehold he has on her."

Noah held out a hand. "Calm down, Rox."

"Don't you tell me to calm down," she hissed.

Brother and sister stared at her like she'd sprouted horns.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Hey, isn't that Connie Willows?" Mary Lou asked.

Noah's head whipped around so fast, Roxy was surprised he didn't give himself whiplash.

Pig.

"I didn't think she frequented honky-tonks. She seems more like a country club gal," Mary Lou commented.

"She's probably out hunting for a new husband," Roxy said.

Connie had married right out of high school and divorced by the time most of her contemporaries were finishing college. Roxy was surprised the marriage lasted as long as it had; Connie wasn't exactly known for her staying power.

She was, however, known as a home wrecker.

Connie had herself decked out in a tight black dress cut so low it ought to be illegal. With feet clad in black stilettos, she showcased a pair of killer legs that seemed to go on for miles, even though she couldn't have been an inch or two taller than Mary Lou. She'd teased and sprayed her cotton-candy hair into a cloud that surrounded her heavily made-up face.

"Yowza," Noah muttered.

"Down boy," Mary Lou said with a laugh.

Connie took a seat at the bar. Declan spoke with her for a moment and left to get her drink. In the time it took for him to fill a wine glass, she'd rebuffed the affections of at least three men. She took a sip of wine and glanced at the slim gold watch on her wrist.

"Must be meeting somebody," Mary Lou said.

"Who cares?" Roxy asked.

God, what was her problem? She was acting like a jealous shrew. She had no claim on Noah. They had nothing romantic going. In fact, if his actions were anything to go by, the thought of her naked body scared the bejesus out of him.

Pig.

She stood. "Want to play a game of pool, Lou?"

"Sure."

Roxy walked away so quickly, she didn't see Noah's gaze on her as she left.

When they reached the pool tables, she dug two quarters from her little purse and placed the change on the florescent light that hung suspended above the table.

The two men playing looked at Roxy and Mary Lou appreciatively and continued their game.

"What's the matter with you?" Mary Lou asked.

"I don't know. He just got on my nerves."

Mary Lou smirked. "More like Connie Willows got on your nerves. Wow. Now I know how you wrote that article last night. You were positively livid, Rox. Way to go."

When the two men finished, Roxy slid her quarters into the slot and racked the balls. She let Mary Lou break. Playing pool with her friend brought back memories of adolescence. Wilmer's Pharmacy had a game room as well as an old-fashioned soda fountain, and the two of them had spent hours there after school, playing pool and drinking vanilla Cokes.

Halfway into their second game, Noah sauntered up with Joe Fuller. Roxy liked Joe, who seemed like a genuinely nice man. He came into the library often, looking for information on cars and business, as well as mystery novels. Always friendly, he never hesitated to answer her endless questions about the inner workings of an automobile.

Joe smiled at both women and his gaze lingered on Mary Lou for a moment. "Hello, ladies."

Roxy threw a smile over her shoulder as she lined up her shot. "Hey, Joe. How's it goin'?"

"Can't complain. You read that article in the paper?"

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Noah chuckled. "Lesbian," he said in a stage whisper.

Roxy scratched. "Crap!"

Joe placed a couple of quarters on the light. "I've got the winner."

Although it was quite obvious Mary Lou tried to throw the game, she beat Roxy anyway. Roxy smiled and handed Joe her cue. "Good luck. She's a shark."

Mary Lou glared at her, but Roxy figured after the instigating Mary Lou orchestrated with Noah at the table earlier, turnabout was fair play.

Noah grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the dance floor, where the band had begun playing Toby Keith's "When You Kiss Me Like This."

"I'm a lousy dancer," Roxy said.

"I've seen you dance. I'll take my chances."

She might have argued some more, but she watched Connie Willows check her watch again, and then walk out of the bar. Noah didn't so much as blink, although Roxy suspected he knew the other woman had left. It was a small gesture, but enough that Roxy supposed she could spare one dance.

He slid his hand into hers and wrapped the other around her waist, pulling her close. He moved her slowly around the dance floor, his mouth resting near her hair. He smelled like beer, aftershave and hot male. She closed her eyes and inhaled.

Noah didn't know what possessed him to dance with Roxy, let alone hold her as closely as he did. All he knew was when he'd walked in The Mighty Quinn and saw her sitting there

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

with her beautiful hair flowing and her eyes bright, he felt like someone had hit him square in the chest. And those jeans...

He moved his lips against her hair, the intoxicating mix of flowers and Roxy rushing to his head. And other places. She relaxed against him, and he pulled her closer, fitting her curves to his body. Now that he knew what those curves looked like, his fingers itched to touch, to skim his hands along her soft skin.

The delicate curve between her neck and shoulder lay right there for his eyes only. He had the insane urge to nip at the lily-white skin. He wondered what she would do if he laid his lips on her neck and took a soft bite.

Probably run screaming.

Roxy felt lightheaded. She didn't know if it was the iced tea, the tight jeans that cut off her blood supply, or being in Noah's arms. Maybe a combination of all three. And she was fairly certain it wasn't his service revolver growing against her belly by the second.

Oh, Lord. Roxy was having a hot flash that rivaled a menopausal woman's.

The Toby Keith ballad ended, and the band decided to take a break, but neither Noah nor Roxy paid attention. A few people remained on the dance floor with them. Someone put a quarter in the old Wurlitzer, and George Strait began singing "I Swear."

He was so solid. Had she ever realized how strong and hard his body was? It felt so good to lean against him, to breathe in his scent. To feel his arousal against her.

He moved his head from her hair and looked into her eyes.
"Rox, about last night—"

She froze, and the giddy, wonderful haze she'd basked in broke in pieces. Why did he have to go and bring that up? So much for playing dumb. She cleared her throat. "What about it?"

"I, um, well, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry, you know, for walking in on you."

He was sorry about that? What about running off like a yellow-bellied coward? "Hey, no harm, no foul." She plastered on a grin, but knew it didn't reach her eyes. "Nothing you haven't seen already, right?"

He stared down at her for a long moment, his expression inscrutable. "Yeah." He held her tighter and stared dancing again, then stopped. "No, damn it."

"No?" She held her breath. Please...

"Well, I've seen naked women before, yeah, but when I saw you, I—" he broke off, swore. "What I'm trying to say is that I—" He took a deep breath "I haven't been able to get you out of my head all day."

That lightheaded feeling returned. Her heart tripped in her chest, and she wanted to break away and do a little victory dance right there in the middle of the floor. But, one look into his troubled eyes told her he wasn't happy about the situation. Her heart stopped its joyful parading. "And you think that's a bad thing."

"Well, kind of. No—shit. It's just that I don't want this to change things between us."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

"Don't worry," Roxy said flatly. "It hasn't." She broke away from him and turned back toward the pool tables. Mary Lou and Joe had disappeared.

"Sheriff?"

Roxy and Noah turned in tandem toward Declan Quinn, proprietor of the only Irish honky-tonk in Southern Georgia, who stood near the front door.

"We've got a problem outside," he said,

"What kind of problem?" Noah asked, slipping into cop mode as he made his way to the door.

"Well, your sister just plowed her car into Preston's Lexus across the street.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

For the last eight years I've been a stay-at-home mom. When I had my first child, my husband and I agreed that I would quit my job and stay home with the children. The problem is, my husband refuses to give me any down time. My "job," such as it is, is often thankless and lasts twenty-four-hours a day. I love my children, but there are times when a mother needs her own space. When I ask for it, he tells me to "get over it" and "it's my job." Yet, he leaves me with the kids to go hunting and fishing. Help me Paula, I'm about ready to strangle him.

Signed, Mommy in Crisis

Dear Mommy in Crisis,

I've always been in awe of women who devote their lives to staying home with their little ones. As you said, there is no time clock, and it is often thankless. Not to mention the fact that you're a cook, a maid, a nurse and taxi driver, and you get paid NOTHING for it. How old are your children? Are you ready to go back to work? You need to reach deep inside and find your backbone. Don't let your ass of a husband treat you like a servant! If you're this miserable, imagine how things will end up in a couple years. DIVORCE. Which, considering his caveman attitude, might not be such a bad idea. My advice? STAND UP TO HIM. DEMAND WHAT YOU DESERVE.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Five

"You think she'll be okay?"

"She's better off here than at home." A pause. "She'll be okay."

"Tell her if she doesn't feel like coming in Monday, she doesn't have to."

"I'll tell her."

Mary Lou lay in one of Roxy's big overstuffed chairs, having been deposited there moments ago by her brother. Her eyes remained closed, as they had been since Noah and Roxy had taken her away from Preston's law office in the back seat of Noah's Explorer. They thought she'd fallen asleep. She didn't want to deal with their questions just yet. And there were bound to be plenty. She wasn't even sure she could answer them.

It all still seemed like a haze, a gossamer film draped over the events as they'd happened, which she supposed she could attribute to the four Alabama Slammers she had guzzled in an hour's time.

After Noah had whisked Roxy away onto the dance floor, the air had become thick and cloying. Joe Fuller had that effect on her. He made her too damn aware of everything. And to top it off, he always sat back with that little half smile on his face, as if he held the key to life's mysteries, waiting for her to fulfill a destiny of which she hadn't yet grasped. He flat-out rattled her, which was unusual since she generally liked most people.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Mary Lou had excused herself and headed for the front door. The thought of fresh air, even thick, humid Southern Georgia air had been like a coveted prize, and she fled the noisy bar in search of it. Leaning against the building several feet down from the door, she watched Connie Willows exit the bar a few minutes later. Mary Lou wondered if she had left for a secret rendezvous with her married lover. With the exception of Noah—Mary Lou knew something had been going on there for a while—everyone in town knew Connie preferred her men with wedding vows under their belt.

No trees stood in front of The Mighty Quinn, only two medium-sized azalea bushes on either side of the front walk. Because of this, Mary Lou had an unobstructed view of Main Street. She watched Connie hurry across the road, checking left and right as she approached the offices of Abbot, Smith & Meyer, located across from The Mighty Quinn.

Preston had forever campaigned to have The Mighty Quinn shut down, because he considered the establishment a "den of iniquity." Mary Lou found the location prime, seeing as ninety percent of his clientele came from the honky-tonk anyway. Great for convenience as well as business; get into a bar fight, go see the lawyer. Apparently, their opinions differed.

What else is new?

Connie slipped around the back of the law firm, a strange course, because that way led to a fenced parking lot, and nowhere else. That eliminated cutting through the property to get to Second Street. Which left the only other feasible option: she was meeting someone at Abbot, Smith & Meyer.

After hours.

Perhaps it'd been the liquor coursing through her veins, or maybe it was just plain curiosity, but Mary Lou wandered across the street, following Connie. As she walked down the cement sidewalk lined by a wooden fence on the left and the office building on the right, she wondered if Connie had come to meet Aaron Smith.

A forty-year-old man who had married well, Aaron lived out in Primrose Valley with his country-club wife, Elizabeth and their two children. Mary Lou ditched that idea. It was a well-known fact around the Sheriff's Office that Aaron liked to act out his sexual fantasies with underage girls. Although still young, Connie would be considered elderly in Aaron's eyes, so chances were it wasn't him.

That left Harold Meyer. Harry was quiet man who kept to himself, but a brilliant litigator. In his late forties, he dressed well, but Mary Lou had always found him kind of nerdy. She pondered this match as she stepped off the sidewalk and into the rear parking lot.

And stopped dead.

No, that didn't leave just Harold Meyer. Looking back, Mary Lou figured deep down she knew she'd find her Preston's tan Lexus parked here. Why else had she bothered following Connie?

He wasn't due back until Sunday night from his conference. For which he'd had to leave early. Their disagreement rang in her ears. She stared down at her purse and thought of the ring of keys that held a spare to Preston's building. Before she could stop herself, she lifted the set from

her purse and slipped the key into the lock. Quietly, she opened the door and moved inside. Blood roared like thunder in her ears, so at first, she had a hard time hearing anything but *boom, boom, boom*.

Preston's office lay a few feet ahead on the right. Soft light spilled onto the floor from his cracked door. As Mary Lou crept along the wall, she heard heavy breathing and the occasional grunt.

She took a deep breath. What in the hell was she doing? Did she really want to face the evidence of Preston's infidelity? She had always suspected the affairs, but turned a blind eye and told herself she was overreacting. If Mary Lou pretended ignorance, then she wouldn't yet have to confront the mess and disappointment she had allowed her life to become.

Mary Lou drew in another deep, shaky breath. She still had time to leave and head back to Quinn's. Like nothing had ever happened. After all, she hadn't technically seen anything.

Then, Connie took that choice from her.

"Fuck me, Preston. Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me!"

Mary Lou heard her husband grunting, knew that sound first-hand, in fact. She wanted to flee. To get out of there and never look back. But, she couldn't make herself leave. As she stood there listening to her husband of twelve years screwing the town slut, the strange roaring in her ears returned.

Spurred to action, Mary Lou pushed open the door and walked inside the office. Disgust washed over her. Preston had Connie on the desk with her skirt pushed up, naked breasts spilling out of her dress. Neither had bothered taking

off their clothes, just pushing aside whatever article necessary to do the deed. Mary Lou couldn't remember ever feeling that much passion when they'd been intimate.

A green gooseneck lamp rested on the credenza behind the desk, illuminating the torrid scene like a spotlight.

"Harder, Preston. Harder. Oh, fuck me!"

Preston did as she asked, his face pinched in effort, his eyes squeezed shut. But he must have sensed something amiss, for his eyes popped open, and he stared at Mary Lou.

"Why are you stopping?" Connie whined.

"Yes, Preston," Mary Lou said. "Don't be rude. You haven't finished fucking her yet."

Preston pulled away from Connie so quickly, Mary Lou almost laughed. He must have been holding her up, because she flopped backwards like a fish, flashing her goods. "Oh, my God," she said, jumping up and tugging at her dress.

Preston tucked himself back in his pants and attempted to look dignified. Connie's candy-floss hair was teased further into a disheveled state, her cheeks stained red from embarrassment or exertion, Mary Lou wasn't sure which. Probably both. *Why do I care?*

"Oh, I'm sorry," Mary Lou said. "Did I inter-rupt?"

Preston buttoned his slacks. "Connie, you get on outta here."

Connie didn't need to be told twice. She grabbed her purse and slinked out of the office, her eyes cast downward.

"I take it your conference ended sooner than expected?"

What is my problem? She should be screaming and punching and kicking, not speaking civilly with her

philandering husband. Look at what you've done to me! she wanted to scream. *Look at what I've become!*

Preston slicked his salt-and-pepper hair back with a hand and leveled his gaze on her. "Mary Lou, I don't want to have a scene right now."

Her jaw dropped. "I'm sorry? You don't want to have a scene?"

"You're upset right now. It would be impossible to have a rational conversation with you."

Her blood boiled in her veins.

"The thing is, honey, a man has needs," he explained.

"Needs?" she echoed again, but a sliver of ice snaked through the question. Preston was too busy belittling her to notice.

"That's right. Needs he can't always come to his wife with. That would be dirty, wrong. So, really, it's in your best interest that I take care of these needs quietly, without you havin' to worry about it. You understand?"

Did he just say what I think he said?

"Let me get this straight. You're justifying pinning Connie Willows against the desk because you don't want me to worry about pleasuring you that way? What am I? Some Southern belle who swoons at the mere mention of sex?"

Preston tucked his shirt into his pants and snapped his suspenders back in place. He took a seat at his desk and spread his hands. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, honey. Lots of women are like that. And I guarantee their husbands are doing the same thing. It doesn't mean I love you any less. I just don't want to ... tarnish you."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Mary Lou wanted to slap her hands over her ears. She backed away. "I think I get it now, Preston. Thanks."

"I'll be on home in a few hours. You go on, get some rest." He eyed her critically. "You look terrible."

By the time she got outside, her lungs heaved with the shallow breaths of hyperventilation. She dropped to her knees beside the door and vomited in the arborvitaes. He had turned everything around on her. He always did that. Always made her believe whatever he did, right or wrong, was for her own good, that he'd done her a favor.

And the hell of it was, she'd always let him.

Her whole body trembled as she got to her feet. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she thought of Roxy, about Paula Rockwell and the article that had changed everything. The time of reckoning had finally arrived. Was she going to sit by while her best friend stood up for herself, for women? Hell, no. And the first thing she would do was stand up for herself.

The rest was hazy, as if Mary Lou watched herself from a distance. As she marched across the street, the blood that had pounded and boiled finally reached a crescendo, and burst free like so many fireworks.

About five minutes had lapsed since she had left The Mighty Quinn, but it seemed so much longer. *Five minutes to drastically change a life.*

She still gripped the keys in her left hand, and held them out as she sat inside her car. The big engine roared to life, and before she had a chance to think about it, she slammed

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

the gearshift into reverse, and tore out of the gravel parking lot.

There was little traffic at nine-thirty on a Friday night in a town like Thorton. Things were just getting started inside The Mighty Quinn, and the crowd wouldn't begin to disperse for another couple of hours.

She stopped to check for cars, and then sailed across the street and into the law office parking lot with such force the car bucked and bottomed out when she entered. The lot was on the small side, but big enough for Mary Lou to maneuver her Mercedes around the corner and straight into Preston's Lexus. She backed up and slammed into it again.

And again. And again.

Now, the sound of Roxy's front door closing brought Mary Lou out of her reverie. She didn't dare crack an eye, certain her friend was watching her. After a moment or two of silence, footsteps approached. Mary Lou felt the soft whisper of a blanket cover her. The lights flickered out a minute later, followed by the sound of Roxy's footfalls on the hardwood steps.

Left alone, Mary Lou turned her head into the chair and wept.

* * * *

Roxy had never been one to waste the day. As a teenager, she'd rarely indulged in luxurious mornings lazing around in bed, even those following late nights. So when the first stirrings of dawn teased her bedroom window, her eyes drifted open. The bedside clock read six-thirty.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Roxy considered six-thirty on a Saturday morning sleeping in, since she rose at five-thirty during the workweek. She got up, taking time to carefully replace the striped summer quilt and sheets on the large cherry sleigh bed, fluffing the pillows a bit. She removed her nightgown, folded it, and placed it in the top drawer of her bureau.

From the antique highboy, she retrieved a pair of black spandex running shorts and matching bra. On occasion, she'd been overcome by the insane urge to forgo her usual, predictable gray T-shirt with LIBRARIANS DO IT ON SHELVES emblazoned across the chest, and run in just the shorts and sports bra. But, such crazy ideas were never acted upon and always firmly pushed away.

This morning, in the wake of all that had happened, she decided to kick caution's nasty, nagging ass to the curb. She left the shirt tucked in the bureau.

She pulled her mass of hair into a neat ponytail. Perching her butt on the bed, she laced up her Nikes and headed downstairs.

Roxy heard no sound inside the guest room as she passed. She didn't expect to see hide nor hair from Mary Lou until at least noon. When Noah and Roxy had rushed across the street following the frantic announcement by Declan Quinn, they had found Mary Lou drunk and screaming mysterious accusations at Preston on the other side of the destroyed Lexus. By the time Noah had gotten the two separated, Roxy had gleaned the gist of the story.

Although Roxy wasn't quite sure how, Mary Lou had walked in on Preston and Connie Willows in his office. Noah

had to physically remove his sister from the parking lot, where she sobbed in the back seat of the Explorer, refusing to speak to anyone. By the time they had reached Roxy's house, Mary Lou had cried herself to sleep, leaving Noah and Roxy alone with a lot of questions and too few answers.

Roxy grabbed her pink iPod, strapping the sleek little number to her left arm, and slipped the earpieces into each ear.

Garth began singing about papa loving mama just as she stepped onto the sidewalk and jogged toward Main Street. Roxy smiled. Perfect running music.

Few were out and about at seven-fifteen on a Saturday morning. She passed a couple of elderly gentlemen who stood on their respective sides of the fence, chatting about politics. Both sent up a wave as she passed, which she returned. She didn't notice the rise of eyebrows as the old guys took in her running attire.

The Main Street Diner was busy, though. Farmers and planters, deputies after shift change, older couples reading the paper, all gathered at this mainstay of town for a plate of home-cooked food. She sighed.

Nothing ever changed in Thorton, Georgia.

A few blocks down, she passed The Mighty Quinn. While Tim McGraw crooned about being an Indian Outlaw, Roxy crossed the street, casually checking for Preston wrecked Lexus when she reached the law office parking lot.

It still sat there, of course, a mangled mess of metal. Thorton only had one tow service, and it stopped running at eight. Lloyd Maynard was a hard, unforgiving man, and didn't

have a heart when it came to folks with broken cars. If you blew a tire at 8:05 p.m., you'd just have to wait until 8:00 a.m. the next morning, yessiree.

She wondered how Preston felt about the whole incident last night. Embarrassed, for sure, but did he feel any remorse? Mary Lou had never mentioned any doubts regarding Preston's fidelity. Roxy hadn't much cared for her friend's husband, but out of respect, she'd kept her opinion to herself. Maybe if she'd spoken up, or at least inquired about the marriage, Mary Lou would have come to her with her suspicions, had there been any.

Smiling a little at the damaged car, Roxy headed out of the lot, but stopped abruptly when the back door of the office building swung open. Preston stepped out, and for the first time in all of the years she had known him, he looked rumpled and disheveled. His charcoal Armani suit was wrinkled and his hair stood out in tufts. The lines bracketing his eyes and mouth seemed more pronounced than normal, making him look all of his forty years.

Seeing him this way, Roxy felt a pang of sympathy. There were two sides to every story. Maybe Preston deserved a chance to tell his.

Any affable thoughts halted when Connie Willows walked out behind him. He hadn't seen Roxy since she'd stood off to the side, but as Connie made a yelping noise at the sight of her, he whipped around and glared at Roxy. "Where is my wife?"

Anger coursed through her. "None of your business."

A surge of adrenaline sizzled through her veins. She'd planned to bumble through the conversation with a lot of placating and nondescript, one-syllable words. But, to her utter amazement, those words wouldn't come. Instead, she created more conflict by instigating a bigger confrontation. It was incredible; she didn't know she had it in her.

"I want you to take me to my wife."

Roxy smiled. "That's right. Can't quite make it there yourself, can you? Have you called Lloyd yet? He can probably give you a discount. You know, you throw him a bone the next time Junior gets a drunk and disorderly, he'll shave twenty percent off the bill."

The old Roxy wanted to slap both hands over her mouth. But, the new one stood there fearlessly, flying high on that adrenaline.

He sneered. "You're nothing but an ugly, spinster librarian. A living, breathing cliché. Tell me Roxy, have you dated anyone since Mike?"

The reminder of the man who'd left her high and dry was a barb that stung, and it wiped the smile from her face.

"This is your fault, you know," he added. "You've been filling her head with nonsense."

Roxy frowned. "Pardon? Seems to me if you hadn't had Blondie here propped on the desk like a hood ornament, you wouldn't be in this situation."

Preston's face turned red and he began to sputter. Few people dared challenge Thorton's top criminal lawyer. And for a town of one thousand, that wasn't saying much.

Regardless, he took two steps forward. Roxy wasn't sure what he intended to do, whether to shake her or hit her, but she didn't get a chance to find out. Noah slipped in like a wraith, wrenched Preston's arm behind him and shoved him against the brick building.

"Let's just take a minute to cool down, all right?" Noah suggested.

Connie, forgotten until now, let out another of those annoying yelps that made her sound like a Chihuahua. They all ignored her.

"Let me go, you sonofabitch," Preston spat.

"Now, that's no way to talk to your brother-in-law."

"And Sheriff to boot," Roxy threw in, earning herself a warning glare from said Sheriff.

"I just want to talk to my wife," Preston ground out.

"Well, now, I don't think she wants to talk to you right now. You both need some time to mull things over."

"It's none of your business, Kennedy."

"I'm afraid that's where you're wrong, Preston. You see, you hurt my baby sister. I'm kinda particular about that girl, and that makes it my business."

Preston went still, and the short hairs on Roxy's neck rose. "Uh, Noah—" she began, but her warning was cut short by Preston's warrior-like cry.

The older man kicked back at Noah with his right foot, landing a few inches shy of the twins, but throwing Noah off just the same. Preston spun around and rammed Noah in the stomach with a shoulder, lifting him off his feet.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Roxy didn't think. Later, she'd wonder what made her charge Preston Abbot like an Amazon warrior. At the moment, however, she only knew this sonofabitch had hurt not one, but two of her dear friends, and she would not tolerate that.

Preston had his back to her, maybe preparing to run. She sprinted the few feet that lay between them and leaped onto his back. Obviously startled, he twitched while trying to grab at her. She landed a few kicks and punches while Preston danced around like he had ants in his pants, and made an odd "ah, ah, ah" sound. Connie stuttered around them, darting a cautious hand into the melee only to have it slapped back by both Roxy and Preston.

Noah recovered quickly. After calling for backup, he took a split second to observe the scene before him, trying to figure out how best to approach a situation that in the blink of an eye had turned into a clusterfuck. It was almost comical, given the circumstances. But Noah wasn't laughing. Not with scrapes and bruises and Preston swatting at Roxy. With rage like quicksilver running through his veins, he joined the fray.

It took several minutes and considerable effort on his part, but Noah eventually subdued his brother-in-law. Roxy sat on her spandex-covered butt on the concrete, her ponytail twisted to one side, a scrape on her face. Her chest heaved, causing her breasts to strain against her sports bra. She watched Noah with open curiosity.

He had to check the urge to go over and make sure she was okay. He placed a knee between Preston's shoulder blades and snapped handcuffs on Preston's wrists while he read the asshole his rights. His brother-in-law howled

injustice and civil suit the whole time, but Noah ignored him and kept on reading him the Miranda.

Noah pulled Preston to his feet as Deputies Packer and Swanson arrived in their cruiser.

He handed him off to them. "Good timing. Take him in. He assaulted a police officer—"

"Sheriff!" Roxy interjected.

Noah turned and pointed a finger at her. "Quiet. He assaulted me, and then resisted arrest. Throw his ass in lockup."

A crowd had gathered at the entrance of the parking lot. His deputies had come screaming down the road with lights and sirens blazing, so naturally, the rest of the town had followed, including a couple of waitresses from the diner, as well as some of his mother's girlfriends.

Great.

Noah didn't want to think about the gossip this disaster would generate. Pushing it from his mind, he walked away from the cruiser his deputies had just dumped Preston in, and over to where Roxy sat. He held out a hand.

She stared at it for a moment, and then grabbed it, using his weight to haul herself up, and then brushed dirt from her butt. Noah tried not to notice how firm the round globes were. And failed. He ended up wishing it was his hands running across her ass. "You okay?" he asked wearily.

"Are you kidding?" she asked breathlessly. "I'm fantastic! My first real brawl!"

Noah stared hard at her only to realize she wasn't joking. Maybe she had taken a hard hit to the head. Gently, he took

her chin in his hand, and tilted her face up so he could inspect the raw scrape on her cheekbone. "You shouldn't have done that, you know. You could have been seriously hurt."

Roxy tried to push his hand away, but he held on tight. "He hurt you," she said simply, and Noah's heart stuttered.

She dropped her hand, but didn't tug her chin from his grasp. She stared at him unflinchingly, every emotion showing on her face. For an insane moment, Noah wanted to taste those lips, and he had a pretty good idea she wouldn't object.

"Sheriff!" Deputy Swanson called.

Both of them jerked, the spell broken. Noah turned to his deputies.

"Will you be in later to file the report?"

"In an hour or so. Get these people out of here," he added.

Leaving a sputtering, incoherent Preston in the capable hands of his deputies, Noah led Roxy through the dispersing crowd.

Most of the gawkers couldn't decide which was better grist for the gossip mill: one of Thorton's most prominent citizens being arrested for brawling with the one of the town's librarians and Sheriff; the librarian half-naked; or the fact that the Sheriff had placed a possessive hand on the half-naked librarian's back. Few missed the heated stare the two shared while the deputies took care of the leftovers. Tongues were wagging before Noah opened the passenger door of his Explorer parked on the street and helped a limping Roxy inside.

A few people turned and continued to stare as he maneuvered the SUV away from the curb and around the crowd of onlookers. Roxy returned the curious glances boldly, feeling like she was made of steel, constructed to withstand even the most destructive forces.

Noah remained silent the entire drive back to her house, his expression inscrutable. The only indication of his mood was the white-knuckled grip he had on the steering wheel.

He pulled the Explorer in front of the farmhouse, alighting and rounding the hood to open the passenger door before Roxy had a chance to do it herself. Holding out a hand, he helped her out and walked her to the door.

"I'm fine," she said, though it did feel incredible to have those strong, capable hands on her body.

"Shut up," he replied. "I'm not ready to talk to you yet."

Uh-oh. Somebody was not happy. With her. Roxy wanted to feel bad, but the adrenaline that flowed through her just plain prevented that from happening.

Noah opened the front door as if he owned the place and led her inside to the half bath across from the kitchen. As though she weighed lighter than a feather, he lifted Roxy off her feet and sat her on the countertop. "Stay," he ordered.

Although slightly wowed, she muttered, "I'm not a child."

"You sure as hell acted like one."

Gauging his mood, she decided it wise to obey, and watched as he rummaged through cabinets looking for a first aid kit.

"It's in the little closet there," she said, pointing behind him.

He opened the door and scanned the contents—toilet paper, potpourri, Comet. She cringed at a box of tampons sitting in plain view. He snagged the first-aid kit and set it on the toilet. The small bathroom left little room to maneuver. Roxy felt like the room had shrunk even smaller with Noah so big, so male and so close.

He squatted down to get a look at the scrape on her knee. Shifting, he opened up the first aid kit and pulled out a band-aid and some peroxide. He doused a cotton ball, then hesitated a moment before wrapping those long, deft fingers around her calf. "This is going to sting," he warned, and pressed the cotton to her scraped skin.

"Ouch! Dang it!"

"Hold still."

For such a big, imposing man, he was surprisingly gentle, a contrast that warmed her body. He threw away the cotton ball and opened the bandage, placing it over the wound. Roxy didn't miss the slide of his hand down her leg, and tried to hide the shiver of awareness his touch created.

Noah stood and wrapped his big fingers around the nape of her neck, using his thumbs to turn her head so he could examine the abrasion on her face.

"You're not putting a band-aid on my cheek," she informed him.

"Anyone ever told you you're a lousy patient?"

"Just you," she replied sweetly.

Grabbing another cotton ball, he repeated the same procedure as before, but this time, Roxy prepared herself for the sting. What she hadn't prepared for was the way he

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

stopped suddenly, as if struck by something. He still held her neck in his hand, his other resting on the sink, large fingers touching her outer thigh. He stood about six inches from her face, and she saw something in his eyes, an awareness she knew had never been there before. Not even last night, when she felt him growing hard against her as they danced. Something warm and delicious unfurled deep within her, and she recognized it as lust.

Noah felt as though he'd been punched in the chest. It was like he was seeing Roxy for the first time. With the exception of a couple of nights ago, he always thought of her in terms of friendship; a pal he could shoot the shit with who also happened to be female.

Now, he was painfully aware of the lush swell of breasts barely contained by black spandex, the sweet curve of hip beside his fingers. He noticed for the first time just how pretty she really was. Although her dark brown hair looked a mess, it was thick and full and wavy, and he had a vision of tangling his hands in it as she wrapped her legs around him.

Stunned by the fantasy, he gave himself a mental shake.

Roxy grabbed the hand that held her neck, needing to find an anchor in this sea of wild emotional chaos. She moistened her lips and watched Noah's eyes darken as they flickered down to her mouth.

"Roxy! Are you here?"

Noah shot backward as if he'd been hit by a live wire. Roxy lifted a hand to her chest to calm the rapid beat of her heart, and stared at him as he ran a hand through his blond hair.

"I think you're okay," he said roughly, and walked out of the bathroom.

Shaking, she slid from the countertop and shut the bathroom door, leaning against it while she collected herself. In the kitchen, she heard Mary Lou and Noah talking, but their voices were little more than background noise above the roaring in her head. Still trembling, she turned and looked at herself in the mirror.

Her hair had declared mutiny; the neat ponytail had been pulled to the left side and tufts of hair that escaped stuck to her face and neck. The scrape she had sustained during her 'brawl' was beginning to show signs of bruising. Beyond that, her cheeks and chest were flushed pink, but she knew that the effects of the adrenaline had worn off.

Her problem had nothing to do with Preston Abbot and everything to do with the big, bad Sheriff who she swore was just about to kiss her.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

I've been married fourteen years. I have three children. I'll be the first to admit that I no longer have the body I had when I spoke my vows. Having three kids will do that to you. However, my husband blatantly ogles women in front of me. He's forever saying, 'why don't you lose some weight so you can look like her?'. He brings home diet magazines and has recently suggested breast enhancement surgery. I'm at my wit's end.

Signed, Not That Fat

Dear Not That Fat,

I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but your husband is an ass. I'd be willing to bet that he's not as fresh as a daisy either. For some reason, he feels it's okay for him to humiliate you on a daily basis. My question is this: do you allow it? Stop being his doormat! The next time he tells you to lose weight, tell him you will lose some weight—starting with him! Don't let him make you feel like you're worthless. No one, and I mean no one, is allowed to do that (except ourselves, of course). If he won't listen to reason, then kick his sorry ass out.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Six

"What's going on?" Mary Lou asked. "Where's Rox?"

Noah stared at the closed bathroom door for a moment, and then started making coffee. As he measured out the grounds, the door opened.

Noah kept his back to Roxy, afraid of this sudden and strange physical reaction he had whenever she was near. He had come within inches—millimeters—of kissing her. What a disaster that would've been. Roxy, of all people. But, as preposterous as the idea seemed, he couldn't shake her from his mind.

"Good grief, Roxanne!" his sister said. "What happened to you?"

Roxy pulled up a chair at the breakfast nook and sat down, avoiding Noah's questioning glance. "I got into a little brouhaha."

"You've got to be kidding." Mary Lou leaned against the large island butcher block and folded her arms. She still wore her pajamas—a pair of drawstring pants and an oversize T-shirt depicting the Eiffel Tower.

"No," she said as Noah placed a steaming mug of coffee in front of her. "I'm not."

Now that she'd had a few minutes to think about it, she was horrified by her behavior. This whole 'new and improved Roxanne Palmer' thing had gotten way out of control. If she didn't watch it, she'd be on the top of the clock tower picking off pedestrians with her father's rifle.

Mary Lou, on the other hand, appeared awed. She sat down next to Roxy, her blue eyes wide and curious. "Do tell."

Noah leaned back against the counter with his coffee. He seemed to have distanced himself from her, both physically and emotionally. Relief and disappointment warred inside her.

"Well," he began, "Roxy took it upon herself to charge Preston."

"Charge?" Mary Lou asked. "As in, 'Charge!'?"

"Exactly."

"You didn't do it with your car, did you?"

Roxy shook her head and wrapped her fingers around the mug. "No, I jumped on his back and started hitting him." She gingerly touched her bruising cheekbone. "The details are kind of foggy."

"Not for me." Noah proceeded to explain the entire fiasco from his perspective.

When he finished, Mary Lou sat back in her chair, aghast. "I can't believe what you did, Roxy. You could've been hurt."

Noah blew out a breath. "Finally. The voice of reason."

She ignored him. "But, way to go, Rox! You totally beat me. I mean, I didn't even do bodily harm, but you, you're like an Amazon Queen." She clutched Roxy's hands. "I am indebted to you more than you will ever know."

Roxy couldn't help but smile.

"Are you both insane?" Noah asked, his voice raising several octaves. "Between what you did last night, and what the Amazon Queen here pulled this morning, you two could be looking at some serious charges."

For the first time, the consequences of their actions sunk in. Still ... "There were mitigating circumstances," Roxy protested. "I was defending myself." She eyed her best friend, and then motioned with her hand. "The gas pedal slipped. She's been complaining about it for months."

Noah thumped his coffee down and stalked over to the table. "Don't think because I happen to be Sheriff that I won't hesitate to haul both your asses in. This has—"

The doorbell interrupted his tirade. Roxy jumped up. "I'll get it." Trying to repair some of the damage to her hair, she approached the door. She didn't know who would come to her house given the fact she'd just assaulted Preston, but she was downright shocked when she opened the door.

Katherine Windsor Kennedy was the type of woman who would make Roxy feel unkempt even if she were dressed to the nines. A regal woman in every sense of the word, she had the money to prove it. The daughter of a rich planter, she'd married the high school quarterback and settled into the life so many admired and coveted. But, despite the fairytale, Roxy knew it was little more than a front. Rumors abounded that the wedding had been shotgun style, after Mrs. Kennedy became pregnant with Noah just shy of graduation. Stuart Kennedy turned out to be a hard man who ruled with an even harder hand, and his propensity for infidelity was a well known fact. Mrs. Kennedy always overlooked his affairs and wrapped herself in cold ignorance and pride.

To be quite honest, Roxy didn't know how Noah and Mary Lou turned out as well as they had, considering the environment they'd endured as children. Of course, the two

had spent so much time at Roxy's house maybe her own parents' goodness of had rubbed off.

"Hello, Mrs. Kennedy," Roxy said.

"I'm here to see my children," she replied by way of greeting.

Mrs. Kennedy had never liked her. Roxy wasn't sure what she'd done to rub her the wrong way. Even as a child, Roxy had been astute enough to see the snub. On the rare occasions Mary Lou and Roxy played at the Kennedy home, it was clear Mrs. Kennedy only tolerated her because she and her husband traveled in the same social circles as Roxy's folks.

Painfully aware of her disheveled state of dress, Roxy gestured behind her. "They're in the kitchen." She opened the door wider.

Mrs. Kennedy hesitated a moment, and then charged ahead toward the kitchen. Roxy watched her look around disdainfully as she followed. Mrs. Kennedy's mouth tightened when she saw Mary Lou sitting at the table sipping coffee.

Noah was back at the sink, a look of surprise on his face at her arrival. "Mother."

Mrs. Kennedy turned stiffly to Roxy. "I understand this is your home, but I need to speak with my children privately and would appreciate it if you would accommodate me."

Roxy pursed her lips and nodded, and then disappeared back the way she came.

Noah tried unsuccessfully to keep his eyes from her retreating backside. When he lifted his head, his mother was staring at him with a horrified expression, and she drew in a

breath. He didn't give a good goddamn; his mother's censure was nothing new. She stood as prim as a virginal nun, her eyes taking in the eclectic decor of Roxy's kitchen; from the stained glass piece hanging in the bay window above the sink to the china secured inside an antique hutch. "It has come to my attention that the two of you have been acting ugly in town," she said.

"If by ugly you mean standing up for ourselves," Noah said, "then, yes, Mother, we've been ugly."

"Don't you take that tone with me, Noah James. I am your mother and you are to treat me with respect. You are not to be running around town like a wild man with that woman. You've humiliated me with your behavior, both of you."

Noah leveled her with a cold stare. "Careful. That woman happens to be a friend of mine."

"Well, she is no friend of mine. And you'd be wise to realize that a man in your position should always be wary of cat looking to dig its claws in."

"Just what are you saying exactly, Mother?"

"You know what I'm saying," she said. She turned to Mary Lou. "Why are you doing this? Why are you staying here, away from your husband, while the town talks? Do you know how this makes you look?"

"I know how it makes you look," Mary Lou muttered. "But, I caught Preston with another woman. I can't just stand by and allow that."

"There are certain things a man needs," Katherine said, avoiding her son's eyes. "Things he cannot turn to his wife for."

Mary Lou's eyes widened with disbelief. "I cannot believe you're taking his side!"

"Perhaps your husband needs to learn some discretion."

"He had her propped against the desk in his office, Mother."

"Mary Lou. That is unladylike. You will not speak like that in front of me." She straightened pearls that were already perfect, smoothed out wrinkles in her pale blue summer suit where there were none. "I believe I've said all I need to say. You know how I feel. Behave yourselves. You have an image to uphold."

No hug or kiss goodbye. Just a cold reminder of their familial duties. Neither would have expected any more.

Noah waited approximately two minutes after he heard the front door shut before he made his exit. "I gotta go. Tell Roxy I said goodbye."

Mary Lou watched her brother leave. In some ways, he was as emotionally inaccessible as their parents. He put it all away, refused to deal with it, to talk about it. It explained a lot, like why he had never been able to maintain a serious relationship. The same could be said for her, she supposed, for how serious was her marriage when her husband screwed everything in a skirt?

For the second time in less than twelve hours, Mary Lou laid her head down on the table and cried.

* * * *

As Katherine Windsor Kennedy drove through town, she thought of how well she was handling the situation. At the

last Board of Directors meeting for the bank, Merle Granger had mentioned Roxanne's upcoming loan meeting. As the director, she'd used her clout to inform Merle that processing her loan application might be a decision he'd come to regret. Fortunately, he'd realized he didn't want Katherine Windsor Kennedy as an enemy.

Her late husband hadn't the daring to take care of things the way they needed to be done. He had been too concerned with greasing the right palms. She imagined the old fool sitting from his perch in Hell, stamping his feet.

Driving back to her pristine home on the outskirts of town, she smiled. From the moment she learned her children had befriended the Palmers' daughter, Katherine had been against it. It was, perhaps, the one thing she'd stood her ground on during her marriage. But, as with all arguments between husband and wife, Stuart had the final say.

William Palmer had been an influential man in Thorton, and it would not have done well to alienate him. So, she had been forced to endure the presence of Roxanne Palmer, but she had never been friendly, nor did she ever intend to be.

Now that her husband was little more than a rotting corpse, and William and Annabelle Palmer were no longer living in Thorton, the time had come to start exercising her rights as a parent.

The fact her children were grown never entered into it. She had brought them into this world—had in fact, been quietly controlling them for years. When unable to achieve results the direct way, one often had to resort to going about it in a different direction. Many roads led to the same destination.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

When her youngest child had almost thrown her life away to attend art school, of all things, Katherine had done what any mother would do to protect her child. But now, Mary Lou had walked out on Preston, ruining the life she'd created for her. Katherine shook off the irritation like a pesky piece of lint and pulled the Cadillac into the wide, circular drive of the most prestigious home in Madison County.

Stuart had been dead for over ten years. Before her son's return to Thorton, she'd been content to live her life without acknowledging Roxanne Palmer. But, things had changed. She no longer had to answer to Stuart. Her children might be grown, but they would still obey their mother. And if they didn't, she had no qualms about interfering and removing the problem herself.

* * * *

After locking himself inside the Explorer, Noah punched the dashboard with enough force to send a shot of pain singing all the way up to his shoulder. Goddamn, but that frigid old woman had a way of getting to him.

When he had helped win the state football championship his senior year of high school, his father's only comment had been on the mistakes Noah had made during the game. Katherine hadn't even bothered to come. All his life, he had been harped on to do better, to be better.

"You have an image to uphold, Noah James."

"This town looks up to you. You have to be above the rest of them."

"No one ever succeeded by doing things halfway."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

He fumed all the way to the Sheriff's Office, where he put all of his hurt and frustration away, just like he'd been doing since about age five, so he could attend to more pressing matters, like whether or not to bother the acting judge today or let Preston sit it jail until Monday for arraignment.

Since he couldn't get rid of all the frustration, he had a surly disposition when he stormed into the jail. A lifetime of bitterness spilled over onto the job, and he decided to let his bastard of a brother-in-law sit it out for the weekend.

He filled out the necessary paperwork and checked out for the day. He sat on his Softtail, a half-rack of Bud Light, his gear and a sleeping bag strapped to the back, and headed out to his favorite fishing spot along the Ocumulgee River. He encountered little traffic on the state route as he maneuvered the bike across the meandering road through acres upon acres of cotton and tobacco fields, and pecan groves. Thoughts of his sister, of Roxy, persisted, but he forced them out of his mind, concentrating instead on the steady white line that lay out for miles ahead.

By mid-afternoon, he reached the turn-off. The air blew past him, thick and heavy like hot syrup. He was grateful for his helmet as dust drifted up and around the bike until the road he'd traveled disappeared in a cloud.

Overgrown vegetation sagged and crowded both sides of the little-known road, with cypress hanging low, its boughs heavy like dripping, tangled hair, as if it, too, felt the humidity of the summer air. Gnarled oaks, their limbs swollen and knotty, stood sentinel beyond the gravel drive, mixed in with scores of other plants Noah couldn't name.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

He bet Roxy could, though. Noah cursed and once again, pushed her from his mind.

Noah pulled the Harley to the side and stopped when the long gravel road opened up into a clearing. Beyond the front of the bike, an embankment began, its slope leading down to the river. Leaving the sleeping bag strapped to his bike, he grabbed his pole, tackle box and beer and set out on the red dirt trail that led to the riverbank.

The footpath revealed the sandy banks flanked by large rocks. The color of café au lait, the river carried with it sticks and other debris as it traveled downstream. He climbed onto his favorite rock, a boulder the size of his Explorer, and began opening up his pole. Only when he'd strung his line out into the water, had a cold beer in his hand, and sat shirtless in the hot Georgia sun, did he feel his blood pressure drop.

Women could drive a man to drink. He took a long pull on his beer, and contemplated the rash of problems that had recently cropped up with the fairer sex.

His mother he could handle. He had long ago given up trying to win her approval. Mary Lou didn't have it so lucky. Akin to a turtle without its shell, when she wasn't protected, she hurt, and she hurt bad. However, her current behavior suggested a vein of strength previously undetected. While he commended her for the sudden burst of self-reliance, it was making his life hell.

And Roxy. Just the thought of her started a low hum in his blood. What was it about her? Why now? They'd been friends for over twenty years, and he didn't think he'd ever thought

about her beyond friendship. The fact she owned a pair of breasts had always been secondary.

It was a sad testament to his love life when the sight of naked flesh caused him to react like a hormone-driven teenager. The last time he got laid was close to six months ago, when he'd run into Connie Willows at The Mighty Quinn late one night. He thought about their encounter. It had been hot, no doubt about it. Miz Connie sure knew her way around a man's body.

Noah had gone into it looking for release, a good time, and nothing more. But, he suspected Connie had her eye on a permanence he had no intention of delivering, so he had ended the affair before it barely began. And while he realized it'd been some time since he'd scratched that particular itch, he had no desire to find release in a woman who had just screwed his brother-in-law.

Christ, she could've been fucking us both. His stomach roiled.

With the sun beating down on his shoulders, he thought of the bastard his sister married. Noah had disliked him on sight. Something had never been on the up and up with him. Nothing he could ever put his finger on, just a disquieting sense of wrongness about the man, but Noah's radar went off just the same. Preston was too slick, too polished. When Noah had voiced his concern to his parents, they'd rebuffed him—no big surprise there—and told him to mind his own business.

Now that Preston had finally shown his true colors, Noah found no happiness in the victory. His baby sister had wasted

twelve years on that worthless piece of shit, and his infidelity had crushed her.

A slow smile broke over Noah's face, and he reached for his beer. At least the sonofabitch had got his just desserts. A weekend in lockup would certainly scratch the polish on that smooth exterior.

* * * *

Preston Abbot stalked the confines of his jail cell.

Rage, bright and red, misted inside him. The cell had no window, and those bastards had taken his watch. It felt like days, but he'd only been here for hours.

If he ever got his hands on Noah Kennedy ... God, he'd love to wipe that self-satisfied smirk off his face with his fist. But, he couldn't. The events of this morning notwithstanding, he had an image to uphold. Unfortunately, his image was now tarnished by Roxanne Palmer.

Goddamn bitch, he thought viciously, running a hand through his hair. It was her fault Mary Lou had stayed away from him. That dizzy woman had been filling his wife's head with lies for years.

Preston wrapped his hands around the cool metal bars the way he'd like to wrap around them around Roxy's neck, and shook. And he shook some more. "Hey!"

He received a few colorful responses and one proposition from the other prisoners. Preston ignored them, steaming while he waited for one of the deputies to answer his call. He was damned important in this town—his current status

notwithstanding—and he would get the respect he commanded. Still, no deputy came, so he called out again.

When they'd first married, Preston encouraged Mary Lou's association with the mayor's daughter. It made him look good, for one, and second, it kept her occupied. Between Roxanne and the silly little job working for her brother, it allowed him plenty of time to pursue his ... lustier exploits.

And things had been moving along just fine. Until now. Panic seized him as he thought of the files he'd yet to doctor back at the office. He and his partners had been planning the Atlanta conference for months. At the last minute, he executed a brilliant lie, using one of his clients as an excuse to get out of the event.

With his partners gone, Preston had the time and privacy he needed to ensure the paper trail he'd left by accident was gone. They were starting to suspect, he knew, which is why he had to take care of it fast. He'd been close, so goddamn close, last night. Then Connie had slipped into his office and pulled up her dress. She hadn't been wearing any panties, and within seconds, Preston had her on the desk.

He had always been careful to keep his affairs quiet. Rarely did he indulge in sex with women he knew. Preston preferred whores—the dirtier, the better. Connie liked it nasty, so he kept her around. Miz Willows herself was nothing more than a well-pampered whore.

Now, his whole world was crashing around him. The files were incomplete; the evidence pointed at him. He feared he'd be stuck in of this hellhole until Monday, which screwed him in every sense of the word. And now his wife was under the

influence of a woman who filled her head with rubbish. God only knew how much damage Roxy had done.

Preston dragged a deep breath into his lungs. It wouldn't do at all to get upset. He hadn't gotten this far by operating on emotions. No, what he needed was a plan. "I'd like to speak with a deputy, please," he called out, his voice much calmer this time.

"Yeah, and I'd like to screw your mama," some asshole returned.

"Fuck off, dickhead."

"Ladies, ladies." Deputy Moreno sauntered up with his hands on his service belt and a smirk on his dark face. He approached Preston's cell. "What do you want, Abbot?"

Preston's fingers tightened on the bars. "I want my phone call."

Moreno took the toothpick out of his mouth and switched sides. "Now, I'm sure Sheriff Kennedy already allowed you one, so you'll have to wait." With that, Moreno walked away.

Preston imagined the bars coming apart in his hands and attacking the bastard from behind. A nice little smash to the concrete floor would wipe the smirk off his face. "You're violating my rights! I plan to sue this entire county when I get out."

"I plan to violate you," his next-door neighbor informed him.

Preston didn't bother with a reply. He accepted Kennedy had decided to keep him in lockup all weekend. That was the trouble with breaking the law on a Friday night. He often told

his clients the very same thing. Ironical he'd been forced to eat his own words.

When he got out, he'd find a way to fix the files without his partners' knowledge. After all, he had managed to skim over a million from the business right under their noses. Hell, he'd been getting away with it for seven years.

As for Mary Lou, she'd come home where she belonged. Mary Lou was his, damn it, *his*. She would see reason, and she would go where he told her.

She never had defied him before. She was like clay; he had molded her into what he wanted, and if Mary Lou knew what was good for her, she would obey.

* * * *

Roxy turned off the Honda's engine, but left her fingers on the dangling key ring in the ignition. "Are you sure you want to do this now?"

In the passenger seat, Mary Lou looked straight ahead at the sprawling estate she shared with Preston, and then nodded. "It's better to do it now, while he's in jail."

Roxy supposed that made sense. Preston wouldn't take the news that his wife had moved out well. "Maybe we should call Noah in case he's out already."

"I don't want to bother him. Not after that scene with Mother."

Roxy hadn't heard the conversation with their mother, but from the tear-streaked face of her best friend in the aftermath, she could imagine. Noah, not surprisingly, had already left when she'd returned to the kitchen. Heartsick for

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

both her friends, Roxy did the only thing she could think of: she cooked. Big, fluffy pancakes with blueberries, fresh maple syrup, thick bacon and omelets. Roxy stood there like a mother hen, ensuring Mary Lou forked down every last bite.

Mary Lou opened the passenger door. "Let's get this over with."

The hot Georgia sun scorched the neighborhood; the humidity bordered on oppressive as they stepped out of the car. Down both sides of the street, opulence shone as bright as diamonds, from the luxury cars to the landscaping companies that kept the yards pristine.

Above the midday song of the locusts and cicadas, mowers hummed and children played. Next door, Merle Granger's Lincoln sat parked in the driveway of his three-story mansion. Roxy briefly contemplated stabbing his tires with her nail file.

Mary Lou dug the keys from her purse and unlocked the door. The house was blessedly chilly and silent, and Roxy basked in the cool air. Preston's presence marked every part of the house, from each piece of expensive art to the cold, black and chrome furnishings.

"Where should we start?"

"I just want my clothes and a few other things." She gestured to the rest of the place with a flick of her wrist. "I don't give a damn about anything else." There was nothing inside the house that spoke of Mary Lou. Preston supervised everything, a testament to the controlling life her friend had endured for the past twelve years.

But, not anymore. *Thank God.*

"Is the maid here today?" Roxy asked, wondering if they'd have privacy.

Mary Lou mounted the twisting staircase that led to the top two floors. "She has the weekends off."

Roxy stared at the heavy crystal chandelier suspended from the ceiling as she climbed. The sun shone in through the high, beveled windows and shimmered off the teardrops, and she watched shadows chase prisms on the white Berber carpet.

Inside the master bedroom suite, Mary Lou dragged a set of large Coach suitcases from her walk-in closet and tossed them on the bed. She began stripping designer duds off the hangers, dumping them into the luggage.

Roxy glanced uncomfortably at the mirrors on the ceiling. "I'll, uh, start on the bathroom."

Their bathroom was bigger than Roxy's bedroom. The Italian tile gleamed, chrome fixtures shone and not a speck of dust or soap scum dared show its face. *A far cry from my own. Which*, of course, brought to mind Noah, standing dumbstruck as he stared at her naked body.

Now that she thought about it, she wished she had done something really bold, like slap a hand on her hip and ask him if he liked what he saw. Although, given the fact he'd run like a big 'ole sissy, Roxy supposed she knew the answer.

But, he'd said, "I haven't been able to get you out of my head all day." Of course, he seemed to think that was a bad thing.

Then again, she swore he was about to kiss her in the bathroom this morning. Little tingles broke out over skin,

chasing her flesh in goose bumps as she thought of those big, rough hands caressing her legs. Roxy had never felt more confused in her life. But, she admitted, with Noah as the cause, she sure as heck enjoyed the feeling.

She opened the medicine cabinet and pawed through the contents, grabbing bottles at random. Only Mary Lou knew that Roxy had yet to lose her virginity. She'd told Mike she wanted to wait until they'd married before she gave him that sacred part of herself. She must've known on some base level Mike wasn't the right man for her because she didn't give a damn about marriage when it came to Noah. She wanted to strip naked and attack him.

Now.

Although she'd fancied herself in love with the man who'd taken off with her money and Bitsy Maynard, in all of the months she'd been with Mike, she'd never felt anything close to the desire that had rushed through her with Noah these last few days.

"Okay," Mary Lou called out. "I'm about done in here." She walked into the bathroom and stared at Roxy's hand. "I don't think I'll need that."

Roxy looked down. *Hair Be Gone For Men*. In small print on the bottom, it fairly screamed, Gets rid of unsightly hair in those hard to reach places!

"Gross," she said, and dropped it.

Both women stared at the offending bottle on the floor. Roxy looked at Mary Lou. "He doesn't...?"

Mary Lou nodded. "He does."

"Oh, jeez." She wiped her hand on her jumper. "I really didn't need to know that."

"Welcome to my world."

They made quick work of the bathroom, packed and wrestled the suitcases downstairs to sit by the front door.

"Anything else?"

Mary Lou looked around at the formal living room. "This house was never mine. Let's go."

As they loaded the heavy bags into the back of the Honda, a shout rent the air. Roxy looked up, her eyes tracking the sound. Next door, Merle Granger stood in his Saturday golfing best, hands on his hips while articles of clothing rained down on him and the lawn.

"Now, Charlene, honey, be reasonable."

"I'll show you reasonable, you controlling bastard!" From the second-floor window, a golf club went sailing, missing Merle's head by mere inches.

"Damnation, woman!" Merle shouted. "That's my best nine iron!"

"You can take your nine-iron and shove it up your ass!"

"Oh, my," Mary Lou breathed, coming around the back of the Honda. She stood next to Roxy. "Looks like that rumor is true."

"What rumor?" Roxy asked, mesmerized by the sight of Charlene Granger tossing a stuffed fish out the window. It bounced off the hood of Merle's Expedition and caused the banker to spew another litany of curses.

"You know," Mary Lou said, "that Charlene is Restless in Primrose Valley."

Oh. That rumor.

At the time, Roxy had written it off as grist for the mill. After all of the publicity her article had generated, she figured any married couple within the city limits had the potential to be used as fodder. But, now, as Charlene sent a package of golf balls raining down the street, Roxy wondered if the universe could really be that kind.

"Is this about that silly little column?" Merle shouted to his wife.

This seemed to throw Charlene into a rage, since items began sailing from the window with increasing speed, each punctuated by fierce words from Mrs. Granger.

"That." A shoe landed out in the street. "Article." Here came its mate. "Was." Antlers. *Antlers?* "Not." Picture frame. "Silly." A vase came crashing down, clipping Merle in the shoulder. He howled in pain. "Or." A dozen roses rained down. "Little!" This last statement was followed by the obvious coup de grace: the mounted head of a buck.

Roxy didn't know how Charlene managed to wrestle the large animal's head out of the window, but apparently rage gave people all kinds of strange powers. Roxy slapped a hand over her mouth as the buck landed on the hood of the Expedition with a crash. The windshield buckled inward from the impact.

"I wonder what the insurance company will have to say about that," Mary Lou commented.

A crowd had gathered across the street to watch the display. Old men stood next to their wives, whispering behind

their hands. Kids in the middle of summer play stopped to stare, awestruck by the screaming and destruction.

In the distance, Roxy heard the sharp song of a police siren. "Uh, oh. Here comes the heat." She hoped Noah wasn't the one behind the wheel. One altercation with the police a day was enough for her. "Maybe we should go."

Mary Lou stared at her like she'd gone batty. "Are you nuts? This is like an episode of *Cops*."

As the police cruise pulled up—not Noah, thank goodness—Mary Lou started singing, "Bad boys, bad boys; whatcha gonna do? Whatcha gonna do when they come for you..."

"You know what you can do with your fancy dinner parties, Merle?" Charlene shouted. "You can stick 'em! I am done with you! You hear me? I was not put on this earth to play housewife to some man!"

O-kay. She'd just paraphrased the Paula response. Definitely Restless in Primrose Valley. Roxy eyed the mounted head on the hood of the Lincoln and the pile of clothes on the front lawn. *Well, she's not restless anymore.*

"I'm calling the shots now!" Charlene leaned out the second-story window and did the unthinkable. Well, the unthinkable for a society wife in Thorton, Georgia, that is. She climbed up on the windowsill and dropped her slacks, baring her behind for the world to see. She twisted her head around and yelled, "You can kiss my ass, Merle Granger!"

Who would have known one little article would incite such bedlam?

* * * *

By Saturday night, word had spread like wildfire that Charlene left Merle. Rumors abounded in the checkout line at the A&P as to whether it'd been another man who'd spurred the sudden decision, or if perhaps Charlene was "one of those lesbians." Whether or not Mrs. Granger had been entertaining men or women on the side, the general consensus was that the catalyst had been Paula Rockwell's scathing response to the *Restless* letter.

Feeling empowered by her neighbor's ballsy move, Mary Lou fished out Preston's charge cards from her wallet and ordered Roxy to keep on driving. They sailed along the interstate for three hours until they hit Atlanta. Mary Lou spared no expense. They stayed at the Westin in Buckhead, shopped at all the trendy boutiques, checked out the unique wares at Little Five Points and spent Sunday morning in a posh spa treating themselves to the works.

Preston had always insisted she keep her hair long. Whenever Mary Lou suggested a cut, he had given her one of his condescending stares and told her no one liked short hair on a woman. She wanted to remain beautiful in his eyes, didn't she? he would ask. Then he would pat her on the head and dismiss her. All these years, she'd taken it, stupidly assuming if she cut her hair or did any of the other things she longed to do, Preston would no longer love her.

Mary Lou never stopped to ask herself how long it had been since she stopped loving him.

Until now.

In an upscale salon, she paid two-hundred bucks for a stylist to whack off all of her hair. Now she sported a pixie-

short cut, with a small fringe of bangs and platinum highlights threaded into the honey strands.

She. Absolutely. Freaking. Loved. It.

The change was metaphorical as well as literal, this weight she'd cast off with each snip of the stylist's shears. As each hunk of hair hit the glossy floor, she felt lighter of heart. When the stylist spun her around in the chair, Mary Lou looked at the unfamiliar face in the mirror and she felt free for the first time in her life.

Seeing the positive change in her convinced Roxy to slap her butt in the chair and get drunk on freedom, too.

The wind blew in through the open sunroof, playing with the ends of their new hair while they sang wholeheartedly along with "I Will Survive" on the radio.

After a while, Mary Lou said, "He gets out tomorrow."

Roxy glanced over. Her friend looked fabulous. Completely fabulous. The short hairstyle fit her face perfectly, and gave her the look of a very sexy fairy. Roxy shook her own hair. Although she hadn't been as brave as Mary Lou, she had taken off about four inches, and the stylist had put layers in her long locks and added in some red highlights.

While she might not be able to burn her jumpers, as Mary Lou had suggested, it was a step forward.

The new, bold Roxanne Palmer.

"Preston?" she asked.

Mary Lou nodded.

"What do you think he'll do?"

She shrugged, but Roxy thought she detected a shudder as well. Before she could question her, Mary Lou's cell phone

rang. She fished it out of her purse and checked the display. With a faint smile playing over her lips, she flipped open the phone and put it on speaker. "Hello, Noah."

"Where in the hell are you?" he demanded, his deep voice a rumbling timbre that set Roxy's blood aflame.

"Where are we, Rox? Halfway from Atlanta?"

"More like three-quarters, I think. I'd say about an forty-five minutes from home."

"Atlanta?" he roared. "You left town? Un-fucking-believable."

"Noah James Kennedy," Mary Lou admonished. "Don't you curse at me—I mean us—like that."

"I'll do whatever the damn hell I please. This was her idea, wasn't it?"

"Whose idea would that be?" Roxy asked sweetly.

"You know I'm talking about you, Roxy. Goddammit! You two are up to your pretty little asses in trouble and you go and leave town? I oughta turn you over my—"

Overcome by this newer, bolder Roxanne, she asked Noah, "Is that a promise?"

He met her proposition with silence. Mary Lou giggled. "We'll be home later, sugar. Don't you worry."

She snapped the phone shut on Noah's protest. "God, I feel amazing, Rox!" At the exit for the state route that led to Thorton, Mary Lou unsnapped her seatbelt and rose, lifting her upper body out the sunroof. "We are wild and free, world! Do you hear me? Look out!"

Roxy let out a whoop, and they giggled, riding high on their giddiness all the way back home.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

* * * *

Joe Fuller pulled his pickup alongside the purple and green farmhouse on Tiger Lily Lane and checked the address he'd scrawled on a piece of paper. No lights shone in any of the windows, and no Honda sat in Roxy's driveway. He ran a hand across his face and switched off the engine anyway. From everything he knew of Roxy Palmer, the woman lived and breathed routine. He'd expected her to be home at eight o'clock on a Sunday evening.

He got out of the pickup and walked to the front door, although he figured no one would answer his knock. He could've just as easily left a message, or called Mary Lou on her cell phone.

Joe wanted to see Mary Lou.

He'd left the bar before she'd driven her Mercedes into Preston Abbot's Lexus. When he'd heard the news Saturday, he was sure folks were mistaken. No way would the very quiet, very demure Mary Lou Abbot ever do something that rash, that ballsy.

Of course, when Noah called Joe later that day to ask him to take a look at his sister's wrecked car, he knew she'd done just what everyone said she had.

And damned if he didn't find it a little thrilling.

Joe considered leaving the estimate, but then he wouldn't see her. And he wanted to see her.

She's married, pal, a voice reminded him.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Never mind that she had caught her husband cheating, or she'd left the sorry sonofabitch. Never mind her marriage was probably over.

She was married.

But, like a heroin addict, Joe couldn't stop himself. He just wanted to see her. Talk to her. Get his fix, so to speak. No harm in that.

Joe stood on the front porch, stymied by indecision, and looked out along the tree-lined street. From the moment he'd arrived in Thorton, he'd been entranced by its homey charm. Hannah had loved it, had always spoken of it with affection.

He wondered if she would approve of what he'd done. Moving back to her hometown, making his livelihood here, surrounded by her memory.

Stalking a married woman.

Disgusted with himself, Joe walked down the front steps. He would get his card, write a brief note on the back, leave the estimate and be on his way. If he needed to contact Mary Lou, he'd call Noah.

He heard the blast of country music before he saw the Honda. In the fading light, he made out two women. Changing direction, he walked down the cobblestone path leading to the driveway on the right.

The music stopped, and Roxy emerged from the car. She looked different, although Joe couldn't quite put his finger on what.

"Evenin'."

"Hey, there, Joe. How are you?"

"I'm doing well, thank you. Uh, I need to have a word with Mary Lou."

The second woman got out, but Joe realized it wasn't the woman he sought. "I'm sorry; I assumed she'd be with you. Can you give her a message?"

Roxy laughed. "Joe, honey. She's right here."

He gave the second woman a closer inspection. Mary Lou waved a hand. "It's me, Joe."

"You, uh, cut your hair."

Brilliant, Fuller.

When her hand went to her head and she smiled, the bottom of his world dropped out from under him. "It was time for a change."

Joe had liked her long honey-colored hair, but he flat-out loved the short cut. It accentuated the high slash of cheekbones and made her beautiful blue eyes seem impossibly bigger. "I like it."

He saw her close off like she always did, and he was sorry for it. For a moment, she'd let her guard down, and he had been dazzled.

"Why are you here, Joe?"

"I took a look at your Mercedes. I can do the repairs, but it's going to be pretty expensive."

Mary Lou frowned. "Why did you look at my car?"

Warning bells sounded in the back of his brain, but Joe forged ahead, heedless of the danger. "Noah asked me to see to it."

"Noah."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, you tell Noah, if I want my car fixed, I'll damn well ask you myself!"

Mary Lou opened the rear passenger door, retrieved several bags from the back seat of the Honda and stomped up the front steps. She spun around at the door. "You can also tell that big buffoon I can handle my own life, thank you very much!"

Mary Lou disappeared inside the farmhouse with a sharp slam of the door. He stared at the porch.

"You'll have to excuse her, Joe," Roxy said. "She's going through some changes."

He tore his eyes away and looked at Roxy. "Changes?" he asked dully.

"Well, her husband and all that. You know, changes."

He nodded, but he didn't know what her cheating husband had to do with that little tirade. Or why he was suddenly hard as stone.

"If you want to give me the estimate, I'll be sure to pass it along to Mary Lou when she's feeling a little more ... gracious."

"Here." He passed the two-page estimate to Roxy. "I gotta go."

Roxy watched Joe Fuller take off in a near sprint to his pickup. The Chevy roared to life, and he tore away from the curb leaving a peel of rubber in his wake. Seemed to be a lot of men were doing that in front of her house lately.

She grinned.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

I am in a true bind. I recently found out I was pregnant. While I wasn't expecting this, I've always wanted children, and I want this baby, desperately. Unfortunately, when I told my boyfriend the news, he totally freaked out. He's insisting on an abortion. He says that if I keep the baby, he's leaving. I love him so much, but I want this baby more than anything.

Signed, Pregnant and Scared

Dear Pregnant,

Why on earth would you want to raise a child with a man who is insisting you go against your own wishes and destroy the life you carry inside you? Get rid of him and raise that baby on your own. It'll be hard, but in the end, you'll have made the best choice, for you and your child. Reread your letter and I think you'll see the answer loud and clear.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

PS—What an @\$!*

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seven

In the course of one weekend, women had become the bane of Noah's existence.

He was beyond pissed; he was downright fuming. Between Roxy and Mary Lou's little excursion to Atlanta and his conversation with Joe this morning, he wanted to rip something, anything apart. With his goddamn bare hands. And teeth.

To compound matters, he had just gotten out of a meeting with Merle Granger, who wanted to know if Noah could do anything about The Gazette and the Paula Rockwell column. Never mind Bobbie Townsend had the First Amendment backing her civil liberties.

He had a nasty headache and a raging case of lust that a twelve-pack of beer and two hundred miles hadn't been able to put a dent in. He couldn't yell at Mary Lou, because one look at her face this morning had sent him back the way he'd come.

Well, he would damn well deal with one of them. Noah stormed through the glass doors of the library. His manners abandoned him, a testament to his state of mind, as he failed to remove his Stetson. He scanned the circulation desk for the librarian who was causing mutiny in his body and ... heart—no, mind.

"Can I help you, Sheriff?" Alice Monroe asked.

"I'm looking for Roxy."

"She's re-shelving books in non-fiction."

He didn't have a clue where non-fiction was, but damned if he'd ask. In his current mood, he might unload on the head librarian and get himself banned, Sheriff or no.

It took him under a minute to find her. She stood at the end of the 800's, a book in her hand, her eyes on the top shelf.

She wore one of those God-awful jumpers, and she had done something to her hair. It floated down her back in sable and crimson waves, and the sides were clipped back by some metal contraption. He felt a wave of unwelcome lust punch him square in the groin. He tried to focus on the shapeless dress she wore, but now he knew what she hid under it.

Soft, pink skin, gorgeous curves and one amazingly perfect ass.

His groin tightened again, irritating him further. He wasn't supposed to have these feelings for Roxy. Damn it, he wanted things back the way they were. As if she had put some sort of spell on him, bewitching him with her sexy body, he charged forward, ready to give her hell. She'd caused this. If she hadn't...

What, Kennedy? Taken a shower in her own house? Hell, he was more pissed off at himself. For his reaction to her, and her lack of reaction to him. He'd never been in this place before. Women always chased *him*. All he'd ever had to do was sit back and wait to be caught.

It was unsettling to be the pursuer this time.

Roxy looked up as he approached, her lush mouth forming a little "O" of surprise. He swore she flushed just a little

before looking back down at the cart of books she was shelving.

Satisfied he affected her on some level, he stalked toward her. "I need to talk to you."

"Really?" she asked. "Well, it's a good thing you caught me then. I'm awful hard to track down."

Noah narrowed his eyes. Was she making fun of him? He closed the distance between them, looking hard into her wide green eyes. "You're damned lucky I'm the law 'round here, Roxanne."

In a purely female move, she tilted her head back and fluttered her eyelashes. "Why, Sheriff, I had no idea."

With frustration and lust dueling inside him, he grabbed her arm and pulled her body flush against him. Her soft, heavy breasts pushed against his chest, and he went from semi to full salute instantly. "I ought to haul your ass into lockup to teach you a lesson."

All teasing fled. The shallow breaths she dragged into her lungs, and the flush that worked up her pretty neck were all Roxy. Unable to control himself, he pushed her against the metal bookshelf, widening his thighs to cradle hers.

"Noah," she whispered.

She'd have to be dead from the waist down not feel how she affected him. While the rational part of his brain screamed *This is Roxy!* The wild beast straining to break free looked down into her face, into eyes gone emerald with lust, and smiled.

This is Roxy.

Giving in, he lowered his head and nipped her neck lightly. She gasped, her hands snaking up to grab his shoulders. Sure she would push him away, she stunned him when she fisted her hands in his shirt.

"I can't stop thinking about you," he murmured into her ear. She shivered, and he nipped her lily-white skin again, the way he'd longed to do at The Mighty Quinn Friday night. When he'd spoken these same words.

"I've tried to get you out of my head, but I can't." He leaned back and stared into her eyes. "Have you put a spell on me, you little witch?"

God, if only she had, Roxy thought. At least then there would be an explanation for the maelstrom of emotion storming through her. It had been different before, when she'd had fantasies to keep her warm. Now, she had Noah, hot, solid and in the flesh, and the reality almost destroyed her.

Noah stared at her, waiting for an answer, as if he expected her to command the elements with a sweep of her hand. She shook her head. He pressed his hips into hers, and she gasped at the electric contact. He was solid there, too. And big.

I did that to him, she thought in amazement.

Suddenly afraid he would change his mind, she ran her hands up his chest and grabbed his face. With shocking bravado, she dragged his head down and she pressed her mouth to his.

She had imagined this moment for so long. How many nights had she lain awake, picturing his big body crushed

against hers while his fingers delved into places she only dreamed of?

None of her fantasies had prepared her for the instant demand of his lips and tongue. No amount of daydreaming could have primed her for the desire that spun inside her, making her skin hot and itchy, and wetness pool between her legs.

She released her grip on his head and looped her arms around his neck, pulling him down further. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, hot and slick, chasing hers while his hands fisted in her hair. She wanted to climb inside him, to hold onto this feeling forever.

Roxy felt his heart thundering beneath her breast. Dizzy with need, she nipped at his lip. She was out of her mind with the feel of him, his scent, her brain hazy with lust. She dropped her hands to his tight butt, and pulled him forward until his groin pressed to hers, granite against soft heat.

He groaned into her mouth, a deep, guttural sound that telegraphed his need better than a neon sign.

"I beg your pardon."

It took a moment for the voice to penetrate the sex-hazed fog of Roxy's brain. Noah ripped his mouth away from hers and stared down the aisle. Disoriented, bereft, Roxy reached up to turn his face back toward hers. When her eyes found Alice Monroe, standing twenty feet away, face aghast, she dropped her hand. The head librarian's lips thinned into a tight line and she shot them a look of disgust before walking away.

Noah turned back to Roxy, rested his brow against hers.
"Shit. I'm sorry, Rox."

She stared into his blue eyes. And grinned. "I'm not."

He lifted a hand and cupped her cheek. Chuckling, he said,
"What in the hell am I going to do with you?"

"Well, I could think of a few really good ideas."

He straightened, and she felt the loss of contact down to
her soul. "We're going to talk about this."

She nodded. "Now's probably not the best time."

"Later, then." He walked down the aisle and turned,
shooting a smoldering glance over his shoulder before
disappearing.

Roxy sagged against the bookshelf. She was starting to
get the hang of this bolder, new Roxanne Palmer stuff.

And she flippin' loved it.

* * * *

Preston glared at the deputy who dumped the contents of
a manila envelope onto the counter.

"Watch, gold money clip with three hundred cash, cell
phone and wallet."

Preston snatched up the money clip and counted the bills
while the deputy watched with a lazy smile. "All there?" he
asked.

Preston ignored him, slipping on his Rolex and pocketing
the rest. The deputy pointed down at the bottom of a release
form. "Sign at the X."

He scrawled his name and tossed the pen at the sardonic
deputy.

"Pleasure doin' business with you, Mr. Abbot."

"Fuck off," Preston growled and stalked out of the jail. He pushed through the double doors. He had been here before. Of course, he'd been counsel to criminals. Again, the irony of the situation struck him.

The temperature was already in the mid-eighties. Preston longed for a shower and a stiff drink. He lifted his eyes and stared at the second floor of the courthouse.

She's up there. My wife. Mine.

He really wanted to march upstairs and drag Mary Lou out. He cast a furtive glance at the parking lot, where Noah's Explorer sat in his designated space.

Preston didn't have the luxury of any of those things. Not a shower, not a drink and not his wife. Not yet, anyway. He checked his Rolex. His brother-in-law had kept him sweating until eleven. The judge had dressed Preston down before setting a court date in three weeks.

Fucking idiots. Every last one of them.

By now, his partners had likely heard about his weekend in jail. Just one more reason for them to suspect, and he blamed Roxanne Palmer for his current situation. He'd deal with her later. And Mary Lou. Right now, he had to get to the office and make sure no one had touched his files.

He got plenty of stares as he walked down Main Street. Once, the citizens of this hole in the wall town had revered him, respected him. Now, they whispered and smirked.

Fucking spinster bitch.

Silence met him when he pushed open the heavy oak door of law office he'd built. The legal secretary they all shared was

absent from her desk. Alarm pricked his spine, but Preston pushed past it, pasting on a smile that said everything was fine.

Just fucking fine.

The alarm morphed into panic when Preston stepped into his office and found Aaron Smith and Harold Meyer standing at his desk. Papers were scattered about the top of it and he knew—knew—he'd screwed it all up.

No, everything was not fine.

Both men looked up.

"Gentlemen."

"Preston," Aaron said, his drawl derisive. "I see you made bail."

"What are you doing in my office?" he asked. The best defense was a good offense, and Preston was a very good lawyer.

"I think you know," Harold said.

"What are you talking about?" Preston pretended he had no idea. All the while his heart threatened to trip out of his chest. He felt his well-ordered life begin to slip from his fingers.

"We've suspected for some time," Harold continued. He gestured to the files spread out on Preston's desk. "Now we have the evidence."

"I don't know what you think you—"

"Shut up," Aaron said. "Shut. Up. You're done, Preston. We're going to the authorities."

Panic turned to sheer terror. This wouldn't be a weekend in county lockup. No, for this he could go to prison. And prison

would ruin a man like him. Every survival instinct inside him reared up. "Now, y'all, let's be reasonable. There's no need to involve the police."

"You've stolen over a million dollars from us!" Aaron roared. "You fucked us and you want us to be reasonable? You're goddamn lucky I don't rip your balls out through your throat!"

Harold placed a hand on the other man's shoulder. "Aaron." He looked at Preston. "Given the given the circumstances, I think it's best if you leave."

"This is my firm! I started it. You two were just pissants out of law school when I took you on! You'd be nothing without me."

"And now you're nothing," Aaron spat. "Get the hell out before I call your brother-in-law."

No, no, no. This isn't happening. He had not worked this hard to have his world come crashing down on him. He eyed Aaron. "Maybe I should be telling the cops about your penchant for teenage girls."

Aaron blanched, but apparently refused to be swayed. "Go ahead. Everyone knows you've lost it. First your wife and now your practice. Who do you think Noah Kennedy is going to believe? Me, a well-respected attorney, or a two-bit con artist parading around like a kid in dress-up clothes?"

"You little sonofabitch!" Preston reached over the top of his desk and grabbed Aaron by the lapels. Harold stiff-armed Preston and knocked him backward. He lost his balance and landed flat on his ass. Fury boiled in his veins.

"Get out!" Harold barked. "You're finished, Preston."

Heart pounding, he glared at the two men for several seconds before walking out of Abbot, Smith & Meyer. He paced the sidewalk, trying to calm his raging temper. Preston took some deep breaths, when he really wanted to do charge back inside and beat that little shit, Smith to a pulp.

Getting angry didn't help his things, though it certainly made him feel better. However, he needed a clear head. He had to channel his anger into something tangible, use it to formulate a plan of action. These base emotions reminded him of his youth; a young man, out of control and wild. He'd taught himself to direct his rage into other avenues; a trait that had raised him from his wild roots and turned him into the best defense attorney in Southern Georgia. Hell, all of Georgia.

The temporary resolve he'd crafted was wholly challenged when he went to Lloyd Maynard's impound lot to retrieve his Lexus. The insolent bastard just couldn't resist needling him. Somehow Preston checked the urge to ram his fist into the man's face.

Mary Lou had done significant damage to his car, but at least he the engine still ran. Barely. It smoked, coughed and rattled, limping the short drive to Primrose Valley.

Preston felt some of the rage melt away when he stepped inside his spacious home. His sanctuary. Evidence of his great wealth and taste spanned the entire estate; a testament to the man he'd become.

Feeling better, he climbed the stairs and focused on his wife. She didn't care to have his affairs broadcast, and he couldn't say he blamed her. He'd been taking a risk with

Connie, but well-pampered whore or no, she was damned hard to resist, even for a man like him.

The fury he'd battled back came rushing forward with the force of a freight train when he stepped inside their bedroom. Mary Lou's closet door lay open, the light on.

And empty.

In the bathroom, some of her toiletries still sat on the vanity, though, he noted through a red mist, they were all the ones he'd bought her.

He swept the glass bottles onto the floor with tremendous force, then opened the mirrored medicine cabinet door and ripped it from the hinges, throwing it at the wall. A knee-high statue of David sat on the expansive lip of the Jacuzzi tub. Teeth clenched, Preston took the ancient man in his hands and swung wide, shattering the glass enclosure of the separate shower.

Chest heaving, he caught his reflection in the mirror. His face blazed red from rage and exertion, and his eyes flashed violently.

He smiled.

Heart still pounding, he stalked into the bedroom and snatched up the cordless phone on the bedside table. Mary Lou had programmed Roxy's home number on speed dial. The digital readout on his alarm clock read twenty after five. Roxy was home; he knew it as surely as he knew she'd been responsible for Mary Lou's desertion.

"Hello?"

"I'd like to speak with my wife," Preston said with what he considered amazing aplomb.

Roxy paused. "I don't think that's a good idea, Preston."

He took a breath. "Why?"

"She doesn't want to talk to you."

"Put her on the phone."

"No. Please don't call here again."

The phone clicked in his ear. He threw the cordless unit at the wall and plastic pieces rained to the floor. Goddamn it! That woman was ruining his marriage. He should've forbid Mary Lou to associate with her right from the start. Katherine had always said he needed to keep his eye on Roxanne Palmer. He'd passed it off as the ramblings of a deranged widow at the time, but now he wished he'd taken the old woman's advice.

Pacing the floor of the bedroom he had shared with his wife—still shared—Preston struggled to find a solution. As long as Miz Palmer held Mary Lou under her influence, his wife would refuse to come home. To him. Where she belonged.

All of a sudden, everything clicked. The answer became so clear he didn't know why he hadn't thought of it before.

He'd just remove Roxanne Palmer from the equation.

* * * *

Roxy's Tuesday night book club drew a much larger crowd than usual. She watched at least twenty women head toward the library's exit at the meeting's end, and suspected it had less to do with *Pride and Prejudice*, and more to do with her part in the recent gossip.

Oh, well. At least people are coming.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

"Hey, kiddo," Bobbie said, her purple caftan swirling as she approached Roxy. "Some turnout."

"I think they wanted to see if I would bust out some of my kung-fu moves."

She smiled. "How's Mary Lou?"

Roxy pursed her lips. "Okay, I think. She won't talk about it, but I know she's hurting."

"Give her time, hon. She's been through a lot in the last few days."

She had, Roxy thought. And a lot like her brother when it came to expressing her feelings. Bottle it up and put it away. The Kennedy motto.

Bobbie opened up a tote bag large enough to fill everything but the kitchen sink, and pulled out a thick manila folder. She held it out to Roxy. "These are for you."

She took the folder. "What is it?"

"All for you. For the column," she added.

Roxy's eyes widened as she weighed the heavy folder in her hand. "There's got to be at least a hundred letters in here!"

"About fifty of them are for the column. The rest is fan mail."

"Fan mail?"

Bobbie nodded. "You've become quite the star, Paula."

She shushed her. "Not so loud!"

The older woman chuckled. "That's right. Cloak and dagger; I forgot." She tapped a red tipped fingernail on the folder. "There's also some that are ... less than enthusiastic."

"Hate mail."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Bobbie shrugged. "You've gotta take the good with the bad, kiddo."

Roxy stared down at the letters, indecision and self-doubt tugging at her. In the heat of the moment, it had seemed like the right choice, but now ... "I don't know, Bobbie. I'm not sure I have it in me to keep on like this."

Bobbie cocked a black brow. "Why's that?"

"I was angry," she answered. "Angry at Merle Granger, angry at this stupid town. Angry at myself," she added self-deprecatingly. "And look what happened. Mary Lou drove her car into Preston's, Charlene left Merle. Bobbie, she threw a deer at him. A deer!"

Bobbie slapped her hands on her hips. Obviously the girl needed a little prodding. She carried her uncertainty around with her, wearing it like a shield to keep others at bay. Fire existed in this woman; she felt it. She knew it. The trick would be getting Roxy to see it, too.

"So, let me get this straight. You believe one article you wrote in a teeny-weeny paper suddenly made these women up and leave their husbands? That you're responsible for their crumbling marriages? Wow. And here I thought your modest act was for real."

Bobbie got the pleasure of watching color flood Roxy's face. She opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it. Bobbie cocked her eyebrow again, and tapped a booted foot on the ground, trying to keep her tongue tucked in her cheek.

"Of course I didn't cause their problems," Roxy said at length. "I'm sure Mary Lou and Charlene would've left their

husbands eventually, but ... my article was the catalyst, don't you see?"

"So, you think Mary Lou is better off back with Preston?"

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? 'Cause from where I stand, it sounds remarkably like what you're trying to say."

Roxy frowned. "No, I didn't say that."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is, this isn't me," she said, shaking the folder. "It isn't who I am."

Bobbie chuckled. Fear of self was a great motivator. Hadn't she spent a large portion of her adult life trying to deny the very same thing? For a brief moment, she thought of what she'd given up. The pain of that loss. And here she stood, twenty-seven years later, facing herself. She'd made big mistakes, and for a moment that pain washed over her. But Bobbie liked who she'd become, and she knew Roxy would like herself too, given the chance.

"I think that's the real issue, Rox. This is who you are. The part of yourself you've suppressed all these years, although only God knows why."

Still frowning, Roxy remained silent. Could that be? Did she fear this part of herself she'd never known existed?

"Look at what you've done," Bobbie said. "You made these women sit up and think. You helped them look at their lives, at what they've become. And some of them didn't like it. Their lives may just turn out better because of it." She placed a hand on Roxy's shoulder in a maternal gesture. "Sure, these problems were there to begin with. Think about it. How long

would Mary Lou have stayed with Preston? How long would she have taken the affairs? Five years? Ten? The rest of her life?"

Roxy honestly didn't know. She hoped Mary Lou would've come to her senses in time, but hell, she'd already wasted twelve years of her life on the bastard. Who's to say she wouldn't have wasted another thirty?

"Don't make a decision tonight. You've got until tomorrow. Take the folder home, read some of the letters. Let that be your guide." Her brown eyes searched Roxy's. "There's a lot of good in there, Roxy."

As she left, Roxy had the distinct feeling the older woman wasn't talking about the letters.

At ten, Roxy locked the library doors. After closing up for the night, she had come no closer to a decision about the column. She slipped out the back service entrance, twisting her key into the lock. The blooming magnolias lining the greenbelt behind the library lent an intoxicating smell to the warm air. Crickets and cicadas competed with bullfrogs in the still night. Twenty yards away, cars passed by on Main Street.

Alice insisted all library personnel park at the public lot a block down the road on Second Street, which was perfectly ridiculous since there were never more than twelve cars in the library lot at one time.

It provided space for fifty.

Roxy, however, was not the head librarian, only the assistant, and she needn't bother herself with such matters. At least, that's what she'd been told when she had voiced said concerns to The Dark Mistress. She'd never been frightened

walking to her car in the dark. Little crime occurred in a place like Thorton, and what there was consisted of drunk driving and bar fights.

And assaults on slimy lawyers.

Roxy secured the strap of her tote bag on her shoulder, and double-checked the knob on the back door. A cement path meandered through the greenbelt, and she took it on Tuesday nights so she could enjoy the sweet scent of night-blooming jasmine and magnolia, the shadows of the live oaks.

Tonight, however, disquiet gripped her. She had the uncanny feeling she was being watched. Which only intensified when she turned from the service door and heard a snapping sound to her right, as though someone had stepped on a branch.

Uneasy, she peered around the dimly lit area. Several arborvitaes rested against the back of the building, providing ample hiding for a grown man.

Which was silly.

My imagination is going overboard yet again. Shaking off the sense of being watched, she walked across the lot and onto the path.

Roxy had just about convinced herself she was overreacting when she heard the sound again, this time behind one of the dark magnolias that lined the path. Her breath hitched before she could stop it, and she picked up the pace. Just because Thorton was a small town didn't mean she should borrow trouble by making herself an easy target.

Roxy tried to focus on the column and the decision she needed to make, but found it impossible to concentrate. Her

senses felt heightened, the hair on her arms and neck prickled and her heart tripped like an air hammer in her chest.

Relief swamped her when she saw the bend in the path. The public parking lot entrance lay just beyond the sharp curve up ahead. She'd parked her car there early this morning. *Salvation.*

As she moved closer, she heard footsteps behind her. The quick, slapping sound of shoes on pavement. Roxy shot a glance behind her, but found no one.

Just someone walking their dog, she assured herself. It was a little embarrassing to be afraid of the dark—of her own shadow!—at thirty years old. This was Thorton, for crying out loud, not Atlanta.

The footsteps sounded again moments after she started walking. She stopped abruptly and spun around.

Nothing. No one.

I'm losing it. Crazy or no, she decided to be a grown up. "Hello?" she called out. "Is someone there?" She waited a beat and received nothing but silence. She shook her head and took a breath. This was ridiculous. She needed to gather some courage instead of—

"Roxanne."

Roxy whipped her head to the left, where she'd heard the sing-song whisper. Okay, someone shared the greenbelt with her. And that person wanted to scare her.

Well, they'd done a fine job. She turned and walked at a clipped pace, almost running. Feet slapping against pavement started moments later, this time closer. Very close.

"Roxanne."

Her heart in her throat, she broke into a sprint, no longer caring that she ran away in the dark. She heard laughter at her back as she sprinted around the bend, and Roxy knew whoever chased her was only moments away from grabbing her.

She didn't dare look behind her. Instead, she focused on the street entrance just within breathing distance. Just a couple more feet...

When she turned, she crashed into a wall. Strong arms locked around her, and Roxy did the first thing that came to mind.

She fought.

With terror fueling her survival, she kicked and punched; her arms and legs searching and finding purchase. She felt a surge of satisfaction when her aims drew grunts out of her assailant.

"Help!" she screamed. "Please, someone, help me!"

"Goddammit, Roxy. Hold still."

She opened her mouth to scream again, but stopped as recognition dawned. "Noah?"

"Jesus H. Christ, woman. What the hell's the matter?"

The gas lights from Second Street cast an eerie yellow glow onto his face, but it was Noah, all right. He rubbed his shoulder and scowled down at her.

Relief swamped her, and she launched herself into his arms. "Noah. Thank God."

Perplexed, he held Roxy in his arms. Why had she been running? Had someone scared her? Chased her? Rage, swift

and fierce, coursed through him. No one messed with his ... with Roxy. He wanted to catch the fucker who had done it, but he had a terrified woman to take care of. She trembled in his arms, full body shakes that quaked through her soft body.

He held her out at arm's length. "What's goin' on here?"

She sucked in the sultry night air in great gulps. "I— someone was following me."

Although it confirmed what he'd suspected, every instinct in Noah went on alert. "Where?"

She gestured behind her. "On the path."

"Stay right here."

"Noah, wait. I—"

He tossed her the keys to his rig. "Get in the Explorer. It's parked next to your car. Lock the doors."

He took off through the street entrance at a quick trot, his hand resting on his service pistol. After pulling his flashlight from his belt, he clicked it on and swept the area, searching along the path. "This is the Sheriff," he announced. "Show yourself now."

Nothing. Not a sound. Zip. If she'd been followed, he knew whoever had tailed her was long gone, and Noah's instincts were seldom wrong. He checked along the path anyway, looking between the magnolias and live oaks for someone playing a prank.

When he returned to the Explorer, Roxy sat inside like he'd instructed.

Good girl.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Her green eyes were wide with fright when she stepped out of his rig. They looked like great big emeralds against the backdrop of her too-pale face.

"Did you find him?"

Noah shook his head. "Nobody there, Rox."

She closed her eyes. "I didn't imagine it."

He slipped a finger under her chin and tilted her face up to him. "I didn't say you did. Tell me what happened."

She opened her eyes and took a breath. "I was walking to my car. I always take the greenbelt on Tuesday nights because it's nice and I like the walk. I heard someone stepping in the brush when I locked the back door." She ran a hand along her long braid, bringing his gaze to the damp tendrils that clung to her long, elegant throat.

She looked over at the greenbelt entrance. "I thought I was imagining things. But, then I started walking and heard it again. I called out, got nothing. I heard footsteps when I started walking, and then someone said my name."

Noah frowned. "Your name? Roxy?"

She shook her head. "Roxanne. Like a song."

"That's weird."

"I thought so, too, so I started running. He was behind me, close behind, and he said my name again, and then started laughing. That's when I ran into you."

Every protective impulse in Noah reared up when he thought of some asshole scaring her like that. He didn't have much crime in his town, but things like rape and murder weren't exclusive to big cities. "I'm going to follow you home. From now on, I want you parking in the library lot."

"Alice doesn't want employees parking there."

"I'll talk to Alice. I don't want some whacko chasing you down. Got it?"

She saluted him in an obvious attempt at levity that fell short of the mark. It was tough to be lighthearted when the woman he cared for stood pale and shaking like a palm tree during hurricane season.

He walked her to her car, and she started up the Honda, gunning the engine like usual. It didn't matter how many times he told her it was fuel injected; she always hot-rodded the damn thing.

She still hadn't shaken the nerves. He saw it clearly from her jerky movements behind the wheel. He should've just driven her home himself, but he feared what he might do with her, or rather, to her, so damn close. Stupid reason for letting her go behind the wheel in her condition, but there it was. *I'm an asshole*. Here she was, shaken to the core, and all Noah could think about was sex.

Noah had thought kissing Roxy would somehow exorcise her from his mind. He thought if he tasted her, he could put it out of his mind and move things back where they should be. As friends. Good friends, great friends, best friends. But, friends.

Not so much.

Now, he knew she tasted like peppermint with the faintest hint of lemons. Now, he knew her nipples tightened into little points when she was turned on, that she made the sweetest little moans when he licked inside her mouth. That she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

All day, Noah had relived every moment of that hot kiss. He'd been walking around with a hard-on that wouldn't quit, trying to figure out a way to get her in private so he could do it all over again.

And at the same time, damning himself for wanting her so much.

He didn't want to want her. He didn't want to think of Roxy Palmer—a woman he'd grown up with—that way. He liked things the way they were.

Uncomplicated.

Easy.

Unchanged.

He thought of the way she'd grabbed his ass and tugged his aching erection into her soft mound, and nearly groaned out loud.

Roxy pulled into her driveway, bringing his erotic thoughts to a halt. He had every intention of waiting until she walked inside, and then driving off. But, his dick had taken control of his brain, and he parked behind her.

Just one more kiss, his libido whispered. Maybe once hadn't cut it.

As he followed Roxy up the wide steps of the farmhouse, he wished like hell his libido would shut the hell up.

When she reached the front door, she turned to him. "Thank you, Noah."

He shrugged, uncomfortable with her gratitude when moments ago, he'd been picturing her naked. "Hey, I'm the Sheriff, remember? Protect and serve."

Her wistful smile tore at his heart. "And this morning? Is that what you were doing?"

His heart thudded against his ribs. "If I'd wanted to protect you this morning, I never would have touched you."

She closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she stared at him with so much lust and desire, he felt it all the way down to his toes.

This woman is dangerous.

He'd never been a danger junkie, but damn, he wanted to capture the reckless feelings she inspired in him and bottle it.

"About this morning," Roxy said.

Ah-ha. Here's where she'd be the voice of reason. She'd tell him that sleeping together would ruin their friendship.

She continued to stare up at him, darting out her tongue to moisten her lips. Noah felt it in his groin, and his cock swelled. *Come on, Roxy. Tell me what a bad idea this is.*

"About this morning?" he prompted.

"I want you to do it again."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

My live-in boyfriend lost his job last winter. He told me he would search for another, but he wanted to take a week or two to relax. Seven months have passed and he still hasn't found a job. Scratch that—he hasn't even bothered looking for one. I don't make a whole lot of money to begin with and his unemployment has run out. Now, I'm the one carrying him and it's getting old. We've discussed this so many times I've lost count, and it always ends in an argument. I'm getting ready to kick his butt out.

Signed, At The End of My Rope

Dear End of My Rope,

Go with your instinct! Kick his ass out! If he's too lazy to get off his butt and find a job, then he's not worth wasting your time. Either that or move out on your own and leave him with the bills. Bet he gets off his ass in a hurry. Best of luck.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eight

"Good morning, Noah," Mary Lou sang from her desk.

Her brother shot her his meanest big-bad Sheriff glare, and then pointed his finger at her on his way into his office. "Zip it, Lou."

As the door clicked shut, she smiled. Considering what Mary Lou had interrupted on the front porch last night, she thought Noah would be in a much better mood. It appeared Roxy had finally caught the attention of her dream man. Although, knowing her brother, the idea probably bothered him more than anything, which would explain his grouchy mood.

Still, Mary Lou's heart sang. For the couple, anyway. She wasn't exactly having a stellar day. Preston had been released yesterday afternoon. She had taken a moment to step inside the stifling courtroom to listen to her husband's case, hoping the judge would keep him locked up until his trial date. She knew it wouldn't happen, especially since Noah himself had admitted such violence was uncharacteristic of Preston.

So, he'd been released.

Mary Lou was surprised when he hadn't come charging up to the Sheriff's Office after being turned loose, but she supposed one infraction a week was enough. Preston had called Roxy's house Monday night, but Mary Lou instructed her friend to tell him she didn't want to talk. Roxy said her

husband had been less than pleased, but then Mary Lou wasn't real happy with Preston either.

Hell, Lou. You haven't been happy in over ten years.

The door swung open and Joe Fuller sauntered in, his dark, dark eyes on her. Tingles spread out along her body under his intense gaze, and she suppressed a shiver. "Good morning, Joe," she said, her voice husky. She cleared her throat and tried again. "The Sheriff's in his office."

His eyes were so dark they were almost black. They mesmerized her, reminding Mary Lou of the swirling depths of the Ocumulgee River in the dead of night. He trapped her with his stare like some powerful magician, and she couldn't look away.

For a long moment, neither spoke. In the anteroom, a couple of the deputies were talking, but their words were little more than a jumble of sounds mixed with timbre and pitch.

Finally, Joe said, "I'm not here to see Noah."

"Oh." *That* was the best she could come up with? Oh? And if he wasn't here to see Noah, then that left Mary Lou. Her heart pounded faster at the realization. *What is wrong with me? Why am I reacting this way?*

She had the feeling Joe knew just how he affected her, almost like he unsettled her on purpose. But he continued to do it. From the moment she'd met him a year ago, he'd inspired uncomfortable, yet strangely exciting feelings in her. Feelings she thought no longer existed, feelings she didn't want to acknowledge.

"What can I do for you?" she said at length.

"I wondered if you had a chance to look over that estimate I left."

Mary Lou gave herself the mental equivalent of a forehead smack. *Duh!* Of course he wanted to talk to her. About her car. *Not about me. Not interested.* "I've looked it over, yes. I'm not submitting it to my insurance company for obvious reasons." She smiled self-deprecatingly. "I'll need to figure out my financial situation before I can give you a definite answer." She still had the trust her parents set up for her when she'd turned twenty-one, but Mary Lou wanted to do this on her own. She'd depended on others for far too long.

"So, you're not going back to your husband?"

Okay, maybe not as uninterested as I thought. And why in the world do I even care?

Mary Lou knew why, but she didn't want to admit, even to herself, that she was attracted to Joe. "Do you have some kind of payment plan?" she asked, ignoring his question. She didn't want to discuss something that private with a man who made her feel so unsteady. And wild.

He smiled a little, and Mary Lou knew she wasn't fooling him. But, he let it go. "We can work something out. I'll go ahead and start the repairs; we'll figure out the rest as it comes."

Mary Lou lifted a brow. She doubted he made those kinds of concessions for other customers and told him so.

"Noah's a good friend of mine," he said.

"Well, thank you," she said, even though she felt foolish. Her pride stung at the obvious handout, but she didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth.

He smiled—really smiled—at Mary Lou for the first time in all of their awkward conversations, and she felt the bottom of her stomach drop at the exceptionally attractive display.

Wow. Joe Fuller was hot.

"Mary Lou, would you like to have dinner with me?"

Her stomach sank even further, this time in panic. "What?" she asked faintly.

His smile slipped. "You know what? I'm sorry. Forget I asked." He turned and walked to the door, then stopped and looked at her. "I'll start on your car right away."

He left like he couldn't get out fast enough. Considering the way she'd responded to his invitation, no doubt he'd avoid her from now on. The idea depressed her.

She had been so stunned by his question. And while it was only dinner, Mary Lou had the feeling she'd just hurt Joe Fuller.

* * * *

Joe punched his right fist into his left palm. Of all the stupid, idiotic things he could have done, he went and opened his stupid, idiotic mouth and asked Mary Lou out on a date.

A date!

Yeah, he was so damned attracted to her, he could hardly see straight. Yeah, she intrigued him in a way he'd never experienced. But, she was married.

Joe kicked at the sidewalk as he made the short jaunt to his shop. He wanted to kick his own ass, but the concrete would have to do. Granted, Mary Lou had left her husband. A husband, who, if the rumors were true, had been caught

screwing Connie Willows. Hell, he didn't even know if their split was for good. And double hell, it happened less than a week ago.

He was such an ass.

"Hey, boss." Joe's only employee, a mostly silent, enigmatic man named Jack Richter, nodded at him from under Louise Nolan's Crown Vic.

Joe returned the greeting and went into his office, shutting the door. He sat down at his desk, ignoring the stacks of invoices and repair estimates, and dropped his head into his hands.

She had looked so damned beautiful; the memory of her short blonde hair and soulful blue eyes made him smile. He realized it'd been the first time Mary Lou hadn't run like a scared little rabbit when they'd spoken. For the second time, she let down her guard, allowing him to read everything on her gorgeous face. She'd been flustered by his presence, sure, but it hadn't frightened her. Of that he was sure.

Which was why he'd blown it and asked her out.

Someone knocked on his door, and Joe knew his Monday morning quarterbacking session had come to an end. "Come in."

Jack didn't open the door and step across the threshold. No, his mechanic didn't shut the door with a quiet click and walk to his desk. Because his mechanic sure as hell didn't look like an angel who'd lost her way from heaven.

"What can I do for you, Mary Lou?" he asked, fearful of reliving his stupid, idiotic mistake.

"Did you mean it?" she asked.

Joe considered playing dumb. But, he suspected Mary Lou had dealt with enough lies and subterfuge in her marriage.

"Yes, I meant it."

"Why did you change your mind?"

He ran a frustrated hand through his hair, wishing things hadn't gotten so damned tricky. "Because you're married. I don't poach."

Color flooded her face, casting a striking pink hue on her porcelain skin. She planted her delicate hands on Joe's desk and leaned down into his face. "I am not a piece of property. Certainly not some man's. Got it?"

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. Damned if she wasn't the prettiest thing he'd ever seen. "Yes, ma'am."

His easy acquiescence seemed to throw her. She blinked once, then stood upright. "Alright. Okay. Good."

"Glad we cleared that up."

"I'd like to have dinner with you, Joe. If the offer still stands, that is."

Shock warred with pleasure as he stammered out a reply. "Yes. Yes it does."

"Okay. Good," she repeated. "But, you are right. I am married. You should know I won't be going back to my husband. Ever," she added when he lifted a brow. "But, I've been married for twelve years. Preston was my first and only ... lover. I can't make you any promises, Joe. I can be your friend. That's all I have in me right now."

He'd take whatever he could now and work on the rest later. He nodded slowly. "Okay." When she thrust out a hand, he smiled and shook it. "Friends."

"Friends," she echoed.

"Saturday night? Pick you up at six?"

She took a breath and nodded. "I'm staying at Roxy's," she said, then must have realized he knew that since he'd been there Sunday night. "Okay, I'm going now, before I say anything else stupid. Goodbye, Joe."

He grinned as she struggled with the knob, finally yanking the door open. Mary Lou didn't know it, but she'd just behaved like a woman who wanted to be a lot more than friends with a man.

* * * *

"Rox?"

From her desk, Roxy glanced to her left where Mary Lou stood on the staircase, looking rumpled in that sexy way only petite, beautiful women managed. One delicate hand gripped the newel post, and she wrapped the other arm around her middle.

"What are you doing? It's after three."

Roxy huffed out a breath and pushed her reading glasses up on her head. She grabbed a sheet of paper off the printer and shook it at her friend. "The stupid column."

Mary Lou approached and took the proffered sheet. Her blue eyes widened as she read. "Ah."

"Yeah."

"Why are you so miserable about this?"

When Roxy dropped her head into her hands, her glasses fell to the desktop with a clatter. "I don't know. It's silly, but I'm still waffling about the whole thing."

Mary Lou lifted a brow. "Hon, this is really good. And I'm not saying that because I'm your best friend." She placed the article on the desk, and then rubbed Roxy's shoulders. "Get a grip, girl. You're doing something special here."

Roxy twisted her head to stare at Mary Lou, stunned by the other woman's bluntness. Mary Lou was never blunt. She seldom spoke her mind, and she never told people what they didn't want to hear. Well, until recently, anyway.

Twin rays of hope and pride unfurled in Roxy's belly.

"You're right. From now on, I am going to embrace Paula Rockwell." She frowned. "Well, not literally, but you know what I mean."

Mary Lou chuckled, then motioned to the stack of loose papers scattered about the desk. "What's all this?"

"Fan mail. For the column."

"Cool. Can I read it?"

"Sure. Some of it's actually kind of funny. The rude ones, anyway."

"Dear Miss Rockwell," Mary Lou read. "'You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Here you're giving the women of this town unsound advice, when it's an obvious case of the blind leading the blind. Why should anyone even listen to you when you spout off your "advice" under the guise of a false name?"

"That one's from Mrs. Frederickson down the street." Roxy chuckled. "She does have a point."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

"Maybe, but you're still giving people, and yourself," Mary Lou added, "the swift kick in the ass we've been needing." Satisfied, she nodded sagely. "And if they don't like that, well ... fuck 'em if they can't take a joke."

Before Roxy could get over her shock at hearing Mary Lou Abbot drop an F-bomb, she burst out laughing.

* * * *

A hot, wool blanket settled over the town of Thorton, the denizens suffering in the wet heat of it while waiting for the blazing summer sun to set. Night would bring little relief before the sun rose again for another agonizingly hot day.

Mary Lou closed her eyes for a brief moment against the wash of cool air that settled around her as she walked inside the library. At three to five on a Friday afternoon, few people were inside the building. Lucy Atherton leaned along the half-moon counter and perused the latest edition of *The Gazette*. She had little doubt Roxy's assistant was reading the Paula Rockwell column, reveling in the latest scathing replies to three of the letters selected for printing.

Alice Monroe, the head librarian, looked up as Mary Lou approached, her expression disapproving. With renewed courage, she met the librarian's gaze head on, cocking an eyebrow, something she never would have done before. When the older woman looked away, Mary Lou did a mental tap dance. If she'd have known how freeing this whole becoming her own woman business was, she would've left Preston years ago.

Okay, probably not, but still ... A hell of a feeling, this sudden empowerment. She felt like she could take on the world! Okay, probably not, but still...

Roxy sat at her desk, her eyes focused on her computer, a frown marring her brow. When Mary Lou tapped on the monitor, Roxy looked up. "Hey. Is it five already?"

"It is."

"I'll be done in a second." Roxy gestured to a stack of hard-cover books on her desk. She looked over at Alice and lowered her voice. "The Dark Mistress over there's been foisting extra work on me ever since she caught me and Noah..." Roxy's words drifted off and she turned pink. "Uh, what I mean is—"

"When she caught you and Noah doing what?"

Roxy bit her bottom lip. "Kissing. In the nonfiction section."

"Roxy!"

Mary Lou's delighted squeal was met with shushing from said Dark Mistress. "This is a library, Miz Palmer. If you cannot control your friends, I suggest you advise them to visit you on your own time."

Roxy ducked below her computer monitor and stuck her tongue out at her boss. The woman had been finding little ways to punish her all week, and she was tired of it. If it hadn't been for that moron Merle Granger and his refusal to approve her loan, she wouldn't have to endure The Dark Mistress anymore. She would've been her own boss.

Damn it.

Pushing the gloomy thought away, she looked up at Mary Lou. "You're not freaked out by this? I mean, he is your brother."

"So, what? I don't care who he gets busy with. But, I'm glad it's you." She leaned on Roxy's desk and propped her chin on her hand, a dreamy look on her face. "I kind of figured things out after Tuesday night."

"We weren't doing anything."

"Yet."

"Yet," Roxy agreed with a little smile. "To be perfectly honest, I don't think Noah is as excited about this as I am." She pursed her lips. "But, I'm going to change his mind if kills me."

"Joe asked me out."

"What? What?" Roxy sputtered.

"Joe asked me out to dinner. I accepted."

"Holy crap! Sorry," she called out to Alice, anticipating her boss's wrath.

The head librarian passed them a critical glare. Roxy wondered if that was the older woman's sole form of expression. To Mary Lou, she whispered, "So you're going out with him?"

"Yes. As friends."

Friends, my foot. Joe had been making cow eyes at Mary Lou for the better part of a year. And Roxy knew her friend had feelings for him. A person would have to be blind not to see the attraction simmering between them. "So, you're not planning on going back to Preston?"

Mary Lou scoffed. "Right. As soon as I buy a chain at the hardware store so he can lock me to the stove."

She let out a relieved breath. "Good. This is the only time I'm going to say this. That man is no good for you. He never was."

"Too bad you waited twelve years to say it."

Roxy shrugged. "Hey, what can I say? I'm the Queen of Passivity." She smiled wickedly. "And you're my loyal servant."

"Not anymore, sister."

"Can I get an 'amen'?"

"Amen." Mary Lou straightened. "So, what's on the agenda for tonight? Want to go to Quinn's for drinks?"

"It's movie night."

Mary Lou dragged her bottom lip through her teeth. "With my esteemed brother?"

"The one and only." She frowned. "I hope he doesn't bring over one of those creepy alien movies he likes so much." She brightened. "Hey, we can pick up some tequila at the liquor store and make margaritas! Enough of those and I won't care if an alien is invading my body."

Roxy tidied her desk and punched out on the time clock. Under The Dark Mistress's evil glare, she and Mary Lou stepped out into the sultry afternoon.

Noah had made good on his word, and Roxy now had a reserved parking spot in the library lot. He must have infused one hell of a dose of Southern boy charm, because Alice hadn't batted an eye at the request. To Roxy's dismay, a

particularly annoying pest rested against the hood of her Honda.

Preston straightened when he saw them approach. He ran a hand through his salt and pepper hair and tried to look downcast.

Roxy didn't buy it for a second.

"Mary Lou?" he said, his voice a hoarse rasp. She wondered if he'd polished it for the act. "Honey, can we talk?"

Mary Lou squared her shoulders and stared at her husband, waiting to feel something, anything for the man she'd pledged her heart to for twelve long years.

Nothing.

"Preston, we don't have anything to discuss."

"Now, come on, Mary Lou. We've got twelve years. Are you going to let a little thing like this come between all our history?"

No, scratch that. She felt something, all right. She was *pissed*. "A little thing like this? You mean catching you *fucking* the town whore on your desk? Is that the *little thing* you're referring to?"

Preston's face colored with either embarrassment or anger, Mary Lou wasn't sure which. And she didn't care. He eyed Roxy with obvious contempt. "Do we have to have this conversation with her here?"

"Understand this, you philandering bastard. Roxy is my family. Got it? Where I go, she goes. If you've got a problem with it, that's too damn bad." She nodded to Rox. "Let's go."

Roxy hit the key fob and unlocked the doors. Mary Lou's heart pounded hard and fast as she approached the

passenger side that Preston now blocked. Preparing herself for a possible physical confrontation, she took a deep breath. "Move, Preston."

He remained standing, his hazel eyes hard as he stared first at her, then glared at Roxy. Then he muttered, "Bitch," and spat on the asphalt.

"Unbelievable," Roxy said, watching him as he stalked off the lot.

"Let's go get that tequila."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Readers:

In lieu of a column this week, I am challenging all the women in this town to grab what's rightfully yours by the horns. I am officially declaring Saturday LADIES NIGHT at The Mighty Quinn. So, get dressed up, slap on your dancing boots, leave your men at home and get your freak on! You ALL deserve to be treated to a night on the town with other like-minded women. See you at The Quinn, ladies.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nine

Noah's Explorer sat parked at the curb in front of Roxy's house when she pulled her Honda into the driveway. She didn't see him in his rig, so she assumed he was already inside. Although, considering what had happened the last time he moseyed on in unannounced, Roxy was surprised he would risk it again.

Of course, things had changed between them since then. She allowed herself a quick moment to wonder if perhaps he'd been hoping to find her in the shower.

Her dreams were dashed when she realized her absence would have been obvious from the empty driveway.

Damn.

Halfway up the front walk, Mary Lou stopped and put a hand on Roxy's arm. "Don't mention this to Noah."

Roxy didn't have to ask her friend what she referred to. Noah would blow a gasket if he found out Preston had been waiting for them outside the library. And while she understood Mary Lou's need for discretion, she didn't exactly agree with her. But, she nodded anyway. "So, when's the big date with Joe?" Roxy asked, pushing open the front door.

"Sunday. I rescheduled. Didn't want to miss 'Ladies' Night'."

Roxy colored at the mentioned of her self-declared 'holiday'. What had she been thinking, announcing a woman's night in the paper? In her article, for crying out loud. It would either be a total bust or a riot. Literally.

"Who's going on a big date?" Noah lounged on her sofa, looking like big and handsome and good enough to eat. His long fingers grasped the remote control as he paused in the middle of channel surfing. A frown marred his brow.

Darn mouth. She really needed to learn when to shut it. Mary Lou glared at her, close the door and carried the paper sack filled with margarita fixings into the kitchen.

Noah stood, looking tense. His vibrant blue eyes bore into hers. "Are you going on a date with someone, Stilts?" he asked softly. She detected a hint of anger in his tone. Noah Kennedy, jealous?

"Um..."

"I'm going out, Noah," Mary Lou said, coming back into the living room with a shot glass in her hand. She knocked back the amber liquid and wiped her mouth. With her other hand, she lifted the bottle of Jose Quervo and dumped some more into the shot glass. She held it out to Roxy.

The tequila burned a fiery trail down Roxy's throat, stealing her breath. While she coughed, Mary Lou patted her on the back. "Easy there, champ."

She narrowed her eyes at the bottle. "What is that, gasoline?"

Noah laughed. "Not like the wine you're used to, Stilts." When Mary Lou lifted the bottle in his direction, he shook his head. "I'm on call." His gaze sharpened on his sister. "Who are you going out with? I thought you were still married."

Mary Lou poured another shot. "I'm going out with Joe. As friends," she added when Noah started to sputter. "And, for

your information, Noah Kennedy, yes, I am still married, and quite aware of the fact."

He lifted his hands in surrender. "Settle down."

"Don't you tell me to settle down, goddammit. I've just about had it with men pushing me around today. First Preston—"

"Lou," Roxy warned, and then winced when Noah stalked over to his sister and gripped her shoulders.

"Has that piece of shit been bothering you?" he demanded.

Mary Lou pressed her lips into a thin line and glared at her brother. The two stood, locked in a heated stare. Since it didn't look like either of them would crack anytime soon, Roxy took the shot glass and bottle out of her hands.

"It was nothing," she said, taking another shot. The second one went down a lot easier. She didn't even wheeze. "No need to get all big brother on her, Noah."

He whirled on Roxy. "You were there?"

She nodded, feeling the liquor slide through her blood in a slow glaze. "He just wanted to talk, right Lou?"

Mary Lou looked between Roxy, who was lying to protect her hide, and Noah, who looked like he wanted to rip something apart with his teeth. She sighed. No sense in making this into something it wasn't.

"He was his usual charming self," Mary Lou admitted. "He wanted to talk, like Roxy said, but he got a little aggressive when I told him no."

Noah's lips tightened, and he turned towards the door. Mary Lou grabbed onto his arm. "Don't, Noah. Things are screwed up enough as it is. He knows better than to do

anything but make noise." His eyes had hardened, but she could tell he was about to cave. She went in for the kill.

"Please, Noah. This has been hard enough. Don't make it worse."

He let out an explosive curse and ran a hand through his hair, disrupting the tawny curls. "Fine. Jesus." He pinned both Mary Lou and Roxy with a fierce glare. "On one condition: that asshole makes any more noise, and I want to hear about it. We clear?"

They both nodded.

"So what's on the menu for tonight?" Roxy asked, clearly trying to break the sudden iceberg that had sprouted in her living room.

Noah ran a hand through his hair again. "Invasion."

She groaned. "I need more tequila."

* * * *

Roxy discovered she didn't need margaritas to ignore the movie. Sitting next to Noah, her leg pressed against his long, hard thigh provided enough stimulation that she could've forgotten her own name.

Mary Lou had curled up on the armchair adjacent to the sofa, her blue eyes shut after fighting a losing battle with sleep.

Noah appeared relaxed and unaffected by her close proximity, which only made Roxy more aware of him. They both sat at the end of the sofa; his long, heavy arm draped casually across the back, fingers dangling just above her

shoulder. He had one booted foot crossed and resting on the opposite thigh.

And totally into the alien/human saga playing out before them.

Roxy, on the other hand, couldn't remember the last five minutes let alone the freaking plot. Every once in a while his big fingers brushed her shoulder, but the contact was fleeting—the barest of passes—so she decided he must have done it by mistake. Her skin felt tight and hot, like a flush had worked over her entire body, covering her from head to toe in a skin suit that no longer fit.

They'd spoken just once, about thirty minutes before, right after Mary Lou nodded off. "When's Lou going out with Joe?" he whispered, casting a furtive glance toward his sleeping sister.

"Sunday."

"Why not tonight? Or tomorrow?"

"Sunday is a perfectly fine day."

He slanted a look at her. "This coming from the queen of routine?"

Roxy's cheeks flamed. Because she couldn't refute that fact, she gave him the truth. "We're going out tomorrow night."

He lifted his dark blonde brows. "I thought y'all learned your lesson last weekend."

"It's 'Ladies' Night' at Quinns."

"Jeezus," he drawled in plain disgust. "I expected better of you, Stilts."

"What? I'm female. Why can't I go enjoy a night out just like the rest of them?"

He pulled his Stetson lower on his brow and looked back at the television. "I just didn't think you listened to that bullshit."

"Paula Rockwell is not bullshit, Noah."

"Well, she's certainly making life hard for me. I had a handful of angry husbands beating down my door today, demanding I do something about her."

"That's ridiculous!"

"You've gotta look at it from their point of view, Rox. Their worlds have been turned upside down, and all because of some feminist writer who hasn't got the balls to say it true. Hell, everyone knows Paula Rockwell's a pen name."

"Who cares? The women in this town are finally standing up for themselves. That's what's got everyone in such a tizzy. God forbid we upset the apple cart."

As she blew out a frustrated sigh, Noah grinned. "You're slippin'. That was way too easy, Stilts."

After that, Noah had become immersed in the battle of slimy aliens and hard-bodied humans while she sat and fumed. After a while, the anger morphed into sexual awareness.

However much she wanted Noah to touch her, she knew it wouldn't happen. Not with Mary Lou five feet away. Resigned, she stood and headed for the kitchen. Maybe a snack would help take her mind off of Noah and S-E-X. Some popcorn, perhaps. Or an—

Noah pushed open the swinging kitchen door, wiping food from her mind like an eraser on a chalkboard. His eyes were full of delicious intent as he grabbed her by the shoulders and pressed her against wall none too gently, rattling the Wedgwood china in her mother's antique hutch.

He crushed his mouth to hers. His tongue thrusting into Roxy's mouth with no warning, chased her own in a dance she felt in her blood. As Noah cupped her face with his hands, she reached up and grabbed onto his wrists. But she wasn't content to stay there. No, she had to touch him—she burned to touch him—so she closed her eyes, and let her hands feel her way around his body. He had a hard chest and abdomen; the muscles strained beneath his khaki uniform. She squeezed the bulge of his biceps, running her fingers along the sinewy length of his arms and down his narrow hips.

When her fingers brushed his behind, he growled low in his throat and changed the angle of the kiss. His lips and tongue grew hotter, searing, as though he wanted to brand her. She throbbed between her legs. Mike had never evoked this wonderful ache, and her body fairly screamed for Noah.

"More," she whimpered against his lips. "Please."

"God, you drive me insane," he whispered roughly. He pressed his hips into hers. When she felt the long, thick length of him, her eyes widened. "See what you do to me?"

"I did that?" she murmured.

"God, yes." His lips left her mouth and traveled down her throat. Teeth nipped gently; his tongue lashed out to soothe the sting. His hands seemed to be eager to explore, too, as he ran them down her sides. He lifted one of her legs up and

pressed his arousal into that ache, and Roxy nearly came apart.

His eyes were like sapphires and color rode high on his cheeks as he looked up at her. "You like that?"

Roxy bit her lip and nodded. She pressed into his length and his eyes drifted shut on a moan. She felt a surge of satisfaction, and realized for the first time how amazing it felt to bring a strong man to his knees.

Noah felt the change in Roxy as sure as blood pounded through his veins. Lust like he'd never known hit him square in the groin as he took in her flushed cheeks and green eyes. She dragged her teeth across her lower lip.

Jesus God.

His hands shook as he fumbled with the button on her jumper. He had to touch her, to see if her skin felt as soft and radiant as it looked. He was getting ready to rip the damn thing from her body when at last he slid the buttons free. Noah drew the bib down and lifted the hem of Roxy's blouse, his heart tripping wildly at the prize he was about to unwrap.

The sight of her lush breasts overfilling her white cotton bra. Tight nipples distended and pushing against the fabric, forced the breath from his lungs. "Beautiful," he murmured, drawing his finger around the top swell of her breast.

"They're kind of big," she said, and he looked up at her. She looked doubtful, as if unsure of his reaction.

"They're perfect," he said, looking her in the eye. "You're perfect." He licked his lips. "I want to taste you."

Roxy reacted like a live wire in his hands, strung so tight he knew she would shatter in his arms. She was so wanton,

her response so strong, he wondered if she had ever been touched like this before. The idea of another man's hands on her brought about jealousy and possessiveness so fierce, he faltered.

Returning his focus, he peeled the cups of her bra down, a fresh punch of lust hitting him, thickening him as he took in the sight of her naked, heavy breasts. Leaning down, he licked her, gently at first, twirling his tongue around a pink nipple. Her hands were in his hair, her hips thrusting in an ancient rhythm. As Noah scraped his teeth over her sensitive flesh, he glanced up at her. Roxy was the picture of utter rapture: cheeks flushed, eyes closed, her teeth tugging on her bottom lip. She moaned and begged as he touched her, and when he took her nipple into his mouth, her hands fisted in his hair and she cried out his name softly.

Noah throbbed, his arousal palpable, a need so intense he almost lifted her dress and took her right there against the wall. With his sister sleeping in the next room.

Which ultimately brought him to his senses.

Though it pained him, he replaced her bra and rearranged her clothes, patting her awkwardly when he finished.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Aside from a raging hard-on? He shook his head. "We keep picking public places to do this. I'm beginning to think you're an exhibitionist, Miz Palmer."

She blushed. She looked so damned pretty he leaned in and kissed her tenderly. How had this woman managed to turn him inside out in such a short amount of time?

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

The door to the kitchen swung open, and Noah jumped away from Roxy. Mary Lou stared at the two of them for a moment, and then moved aside. Bobbie stood on the threshold, worry pinching her features.

Noah slipped into cop mode. Something had happened. "Everything okay, Miz Townsend?"

"No. I just received a call from Ed and Kathy Hudson at the diner. The Gazette office has just been vandalized."

* * * *

Since The Gazette was located across from the Main Street Diner, folks who'd been interrupted during their evening meal had wandered outside to check out the commotion. The ancient old men, those mascots of any small town, had abandoned their post outside Olsen's Hardware to make their requisite commentary on which direction "the great U.S. of A." was headed in the hands of those "ignorant youngsters."

Noah sighed and pushed his Stetson up as he scratched his head. Settling it firmly back on his head, he took in the damage to Bobbie Townsend's legacy. It was a simple brick building, built back during the early 1900s when Thorton had been a tiny—well, tinier—planting town. The plate-glass windows on either side of the heavy oak double doors were smashed. Graffiti decorated the red brick in the waning summer light: *Bring family values back to Thorton!* and *Stop Paula Rockwell!* Noah decided *Femanest manhayter lisbeens!* was best.

Only in Thorton.

A couple of his deputies walked the perimeter on the outside, looking for evidence. In a county as small as Madison, he didn't have the luxury of a lab like those boys on *CSI*. No, he had a small evidence room with a microscope no one but Lou knew how to use, and some plastic bins filled with fingerprint dust. "You want to take me on in, Bobbie?"

Bobbie took a breath and nodded, leading him along the concrete sidewalk to the front doors of The Gazette. She let out a small gasp when she reached the door. "The lock's busted. Goddammit."

Gently nudging Bobbie aside, Noah pulled his MagLite from his service belt and pushed open the door. He ran his hand along the wall, and then flipped on the lights. The room was a wide-open space with three wooden desks clustered in the center. Computers sat on each workspace, although from the looks of it, they'd be heading to the dumpster. In the back, a glass door lay partially open.

Papers were strewn everywhere. The five-foot-high filing cabinets had been rifled through, some knocked to the floor, leaving a heap of twisted metal and debris.

"Those cock-suckin' sonsabitches," Bobbie swore from behind him.

Noah walked to the overturned cabinets and toed through the scattered papers. He looked up at Bobbie. "What was in these cabinets?"

"Past issues, notes, everything relating to the production."

"Any confidential information?"

She shook her head, then nodded to the glass door ahead. "Those are all in my office." She closed her eyes on a sigh.

"Might as well get this over with," he said quietly. Noah took care as he pieced his way through the rubble, stopping to ensure Bobbie traversed safely.

When they stood at the open door, she let out a groan. "Goddamn it."

Her desk, a mountainous piece made from heavy pine had been overturned. The chair was gone, presumably resting somewhere outside the window that had been shattered.

"My computer is missing."

Noah's spidey-sense kicked in. From his initial take, it had appeared like a simple smash job; a retaliation against the controversial column Bobbie printed. But, with desks and filing cabinets rifled through and the owner's computer now missing, Noah suspected the vandalism was a cover-up for the real crime: a burglary for information. "What was on your hard drive, Bobbie?"

She hissed out a breath. "Everything. Invoices, staff information, bank information." She took another breath. "A lot of the sensitive stuff is encrypted, but any hacker could easily bypass it all."

Noah felt compelled to ask the obvious. "Any reason you think someone might want to harm you or yours?"

She scoffed. "What do you think? A week ago, I would've said no. But, with the racier articles we've been printing in the Ask Paula column, we've gotten the lion's share of complaints." She smiled wryly. "And that's putting it lightly."

Noah frowned. "What kind of complaints?"

"Hate mail, mostly. There was that protest you broke up. Threatening phone calls, heavy breathers, the usual. They

want to know the identity of Paula Rockwell, and I've been less than forthcoming with the information."

"Do you have copies of the hate mail?"

"Yes. I copied everything and have it at home." She blanched. "Oh, God. You don't think they've..."

"Don't worry. I posted a deputy outside your house until further notice." He didn't add he had done it for both Roxy and Mary Lou's safety as well. "Can you tell me who Paula Rockwell is?"

She looked at him strangely for a second, and then said, "I'm sorry. Confidentiality clause. Per the writer."

"I understand. However, it's possible whoever broke in here now has the identity, so if you can't tell me, you may want to warn her or him to be aware. The backlash could be severe." *And I don't want that kind of riot on my hands, or in my town.*

She gave him another cryptic look and then nodded.

What's really going on here? Bobbie was hiding something, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what or why. Not with her office in shambles and sensitive information missing.

"Why don't we go on to the SO? We'll fill out a report. You're going to want to contact your insurance company first thing Monday morning. Also, wouldn't hurt to get down here with a camera for the damage. My deputies are going to rope off the area, but you still may have problems with teenagers looking for trouble."

Bobbie nodded, touched his arm. "Thanks, Noah. You're a hell of a Sheriff."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

When I met my boyfriend, things were wonderful. But, we've been together almost two years now and the bloom has left the rose. He doesn't listen to me no matter how hard I try to get through that rock he calls a brain. We moved in together, and he and his cronies have turned our spare bedroom into an entertainment room. Now, not only do I have a boyfriend who doesn't listen, doesn't help, and is generally a pain in the butt, I have a houseful of idiots to deal with, too! I'm running out of patience with this man I thought I loved. Help me before I do something drastic!

Signed, Fed-Up in T-Town

Dear Fed-Up,

Sometimes drastic times call for drastic measures. If he won't listen to reason, then perhaps you should do something that will get his attention. Some men are thick-headed and don't get it until you blow it up in their face. If that doesn't work, take a good, hard look at your life and make a decision. Is this how you want to spend the rest of your life? Unheard and fed-up? You've got the power, girl. Make it happen! Make your statement!

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Ten

The Mighty Quinn was having one hell of a Saturday night.

Granted, the honky-tonk always drew a big crowd on the weekends, but since Roxy declared Saturday "Ladies' Night" at the Quinn, it was rapidly filling to capacity.

Apparently, her readership spread wide throughout the county, because Roxy knew there weren't that many women in Thorton. And she'd lived here since birth.

Declan Quinn looked a little frazzled moving at the taps, a bar rag tossed over his shoulder as he rushed to fill orders. Women were dressed from rodeo to beauty queen and every fashion in between. At nine, it started to get rowdy. Roxy figured by eleven, Declan would call Noah to shut the place down.

Someone had figured out how to jack up the sound on the Wurlitzer. Trace Adkins told all the women about the Honky-Tonk-Badonkadonk.

In a very, very, loud voice.

Of course, it didn't help that with the liquor flowing, the women were starting to hop on the tables. In fact, a group of twenty-something gals dressed in Wranglers, skin-tight tees, and cowboy boots stood on chairs and shouted, "And ooh-eee, shut my mouth, slap your grandma!"

Any lingering doubts Roxy had about the column vanished as she realized what a good time these women were having. And it wasn't just the young ones. She spotted a couple of

blue-hairs sitting at the bar, their beehives bopping to the beat of the music.

"You should've done this way sooner, Rox," Mary Lou said in her ear.

As she surveyed the scene from their booth near the back, Roxy nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah."

"And did you get a load of all those guys camped outside?"

Roxy eyed Mary Lou. This was the third—yes, third—time her friend had brought up the line of bad-tempered men standing outside of The Quinn.

Of course, Mary Lou was on her third—yes, third—drink in thirty minutes.

A couple of men had tried braving the inside of their favorite—and single—watering whole, only to be chased out on a chorus of "Boos!" from the women.

Since she'd created this little melee, a part of her felt as though she ought to be up there dancing on tables, shaking her Honky Tonk Badonkadonk. But, here she sat in a corner booth in the back, watching. While Mary Lou laughed and urged the women on, Roxy contemplated her beer. She should be up there. This is what she wanted, right? For Thorton to shed its old-fashioned, misogynistic ways and enter into the millennium, open-minded for the changes of the future.

Instead of basking in the change she'd created, she became overcome by a sense of disquiet. It wasn't the column; she knew she'd done the women of this town—hell, this county—a favor. But, it hadn't given her the satisfaction she'd craved.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Irritated she felt morose instead of pleased, she lifted her beer and chugged the damn thing down. Maybe her problem lay in her sobriety. Look at Lou. She'd just discovered her husband was a philandering prick, had packed her stuff and left her former life behind. And she was having a grand time.

Then again, Mary Lou was heading to blotto-land with the help of those Cosmopolitans.

Screw beer. I'm going for the hard stuff.

* * * *

Jackie Chambers, a.k.a. Fed Up in T-Town, snatched the keys off the kitchen counter in the apartment she shared with her good-for-nothing, possibly two-timing, truck-and-gun loving boyfriend, Buck.

Buck the Butthead, as she had come to call him, was passed out drunk inside their apartment, inside the second bedroom he'd converted into his 'entertainment room'. When they'd signed the lease, Jackie had been so happy, excited and in love, she had overlooked the aforementioned suggestion and scribbled her name on the line.

It turned out Buck the Butthead had been serious. Jackie may have lived in Thorton all of her life, but Thorton wasn't Mars. Normal people had entertainment rooms. They were called living rooms. She, on the other hand, had wanted to turn the second bedroom into her sewing and craft room. A space of her own.

Now, she had to make her beaded jewelry at the kitchen table while Buck the Butthead sat in his stupid 'entertainment

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

room' and watched football and basketball and baseball and hunting and who-the-hell-knew what else.

She opened the door of Buck the Butthead's truck and slipped inside. The hell of it was, when they had met, Jackie had been certain they'd be perfect together. That life would be roses and butterflies. They'd buy a house on Tiger Lily Lane, have a yard full of kids while he worked at the Mill and she made and sold her crafts.

Yeah, like that was gonna happen.

When he wasn't working at the Mill, he sat in his 'entertainment room', either alone or with his buddies—more idiotic buttheads, if you asked Jackie. Sometimes she wondered if an alternate universe existed, one where all of the buttheads of the world met and watched bass-fishing marathons and drank Pabst Blue Ribbon, and then proceeded to crush the empty cans against their heads and high-five each other. If so, her apartment was that alternate universe, and Buck the Butthead was their fearless leader.

Since he was out cold from said beer, she doubted he would hear the roar of his Chevy two-ton when she spurred it to life. Jackie didn't wait to find out; she jammed the gearshift in reverse and stole out of the parking lot.

Buck the Butthead loved a lot of things. He loved hunting (which Jackie hated), fishing (again, hated), four-wheeling (okay, she liked that) and football (not a fan). However, he loved little else more than his Chevy pick-up.

Every Saturday morning, he would get up bright and early—ten a.m. in Butthead land—and wash and wax the black rig to a brilliant shine. He vacuumed the floors, Armor-

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Alled the inside and buffed and polished the chrome wheels. He'd take his tape measure and ensure the gun rack on the back window sat just so.

When they'd first started dating, Jackie, too, had loved the truck. She loved riding in the middle on the bench seat with George Strait crooning from the stereo, loved it when Buck put his arm around her while he maneuvered the wheel with one hand.

Jackie had assumed at some point, she'd be allowed to drive it, too, but *nooooo*, only Buck the Butthead drove the truck.

Eighteen months later, she lived with a man she no longer loved, and the first time she got to drive his truck was because she'd stolen it.

Thanks to the help of Paula Rockwell, he'd find out faster than you could slap a tick what happened when you pissed off a woman like Jackie Chambers.

* * * *

Roxy was right.

By ten-thirty, "Ladies' Night" had progressed from rowdy to down right wild. The wild factor came in the form of six men who'd walked into The Quinn, undeterred by the women's insistence that they "go back to their caves!"

This idea of hers had completely spiraled out of control, but at the moment, she just didn't care. She and Mary Lou had line-danced with a group of females to some Garth Brooks song, engaged in a loud and extremely off-key version

of the Star Spangled Banner and played a game of quarters with a couple of middle-aged women from the Mayor's office.

Except for occasional room spin, Roxy felt glorious; her earlier sense of Alice outside the Looking Glass had transformed into Roxy inside the Screwdriver Glass.

Unfortunately, those six men all had women who they claimed "belonged to them." The fifty or so women packed into The Quinn had stood as a united front—Roxy and Mary Lou included—and told the men they could take their hairy, knuckle-dragging selves back on home and wait for their missus'.

Suffice it to say, that had not gone over well.

Obviously bolstered by the previous group's courage and lack of instant retreat, a new set of guys decided to enter into the fray.

Roxy was standing next to the pool table, trying to figure out why the table had turned into five, when a fight broke out right next to her.

Some guy yelled, "Fucking cocksucker!" right before Roxy got knocked flat on her butt by a huge, lumberjack-looking man. "Hey, asshole!" the lumberjack yelled. He hopped up, oblivious to Roxy, on whom he'd landed (ouch). The lumberjack drew back his fist and plowed it into the other guy's face (again, ouch). She sat agog, watching the fight with a sense of wonder.

Someone pulled her arm. She looked up and saw Joe Fuller staring down at her, Mary Lou weaving next to him. He lifted Roxy up, looked at the two of them and shook his head. "Let's get you out of here before they put you in jail."

* * * *

"Sheriff, we've got a situation up on Blake's Ridge."
Ginny's voice crackled over the radio.

"Can you send Moreno out?" he asked.

"Deputies Moreno and Thompkins are in route to The Quinn for a 10-103F," she said, indicating a fight had broken out at Declan's place. "And Swanson and Packer are on a domestic."

Noah sighed. He'd been looking forward to heading home, propping his feet up, and catching the Braves game he'd TiVoed. "Blake's Ridge?"

"There's some kind of fire. Local truck's up there already, but they said it's suspicious. Want you to check it out."

"Okay, I'm headin' up there. Thanks, Ginny. Over."

Noah turned the Explorer around and headed to Blake's Ridge, a high, forested bluff on the outskirts of town. Christ knew what awaited him up there. After the week he'd had, the only thing that could surprise him would be a shipwrecked UFO with a bunch of aliens whistling Johnny Cash tunes.

Noah thought about Moreno and Thompkins and swore. The Quinn. Damn that Paula Rockwell, he thought. He knew, just knew Roxy and Lou were there tonight, celebrating some misplaced sense of freedom with a hundred other women.

He really hoped Roxy stayed out of trouble, 'cause he'd hate to get arrested for kicking some idiot's ass.

She'd been making quite a stir lately, come to think of it. Although quiet and pensive most of the time, Roxy had a wicked sense of humor he loved. She was smart—hell, she

should've left Thorton years ago. Why she'd stayed was a mystery to him. Then again, he'd come back, so who knew?

Maybe she'd been taking Paula Rockwell's advice, too, which left a sour taste in his mouth. He didn't want things to change. More importantly, he didn't want Roxy to change. Noah liked her the way she was.

Just the memory of her flushed face and those beautiful breasts made his cock throb, which wouldn't do at all, since he was headed to a possible crime scene. With considerable effort, he pushed Roxy from his brain and drove up the winding gravel road that led to the top of Blake's Ridge. In the bath of moonlight, black smoke rose from up above. The blazing lights of the fire truck illuminated the scene in a glow of red, white and blue. It reminded Noah of the raves he used to bust while working the beat in Atlanta.

Blake's Ridge was a local spot where teenagers went to park—or at least they did back in his day. Hell, he'd lost his virginity in the backseat of his Mustang just to the left of the burning mess.

Noah got out of his rig and walked over to the smoking heap—it looked a lot like a truck—and surveyed the damage. The entire cab and bed were charred; a smoking, crispy shell of what it had once been.

The fire chief, Dean DeLauer, dressed in full gear, pulled down his mask and approached Noah. "Sheriff."

"Chief. What do have here?"

DeLauer lifted a gloved hand and pointed to an embankment behind the fire truck where a young woman sat with her arms wrapped around her knees. One of DeLauer's

men stood sentry. "Jackie Chambers. That's about all I got out of her. My guess is she started the fire—the burn patterns indicate an accelerant." He huffed out a laugh. "That and the two gasoline cans sitting about twenty yards away." He nodded over to the woman. "Figured this was your headache now."

"Yeah, thanks a lot, Dean." The fire chief didn't have a family to go home to, but maybe he'd TiVoed the Braves game. According to local lore, Dean and Bobbie were an item years ago before Bobby left town and Dean went to Auburn on an athletic scholarship. Noah hadn't seen the two of them together since his return.

He nodded to the fireman, said, "I'll take it from here," and walked over to Jackie Chambers.

Noah sat on his haunches and took in the young woman before him. Early twenties, long blonde hair, pretty cute. Not your typical arsonist. "You want to explain this situation, Miz Chambers?"

She lifted her head and met his stare. "I set the fire, Sheriff."

"Now why did you go on and do that?"

She sighed. "It's a long story."

"I've got the time."

Miz Chambers began with her initial courtship with Edward "Buck" MacAlister—a.k.a. "Buck the Butthead"—continuing with all of the events leading up to the demise of his "penis truck." By the time she finished, Noah thought his head would explode.

He stood and held out a hand. "You understand I have to arrest you, Miz Chambers?"

She nodded. "I figured as much." She turned around and put her hands behind her back and Noah slapped on the cuffs. "Reason I didn't leave's 'cause I wanted that worthless sonofabitch to know exactly who torched his stupid truck."

God save him from scorned women. Noah led her to the Explorer and helped her into the back. When he got inside, she said, "Paula Rockwell was right, you know."

Jesus H., not Paula Rockwell again. He was getting damned tired of that woman. He eyed his prisoner in the rear view mirror. "How's that?"

"Well, I don't know if you read her column, but I'm Fed Up in T-Town—you know, the one from yesterday. I told her about Buck, and she said I should quit putting up with his B.S. and make a statement."

Noah turned around and stared in disbelief at Jackie Chambers. "You set your boyfriend's truck on fire, risking your life as well as the life of others—not to mention the possibility of a wildfire—because Paula Rockwell told you to?"

"Well, not in so many words, but yeah." She leaned back in the seat with a satisfied smile. "And I have to say, it feels pretty damn good."

Noah jammed the rig in gear and started down the road.
Un-fucking-believable.

He started to sympathize with the husbands who parked outside his office every goddamn day demanding the cancellation of that column.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Paula Rockwell had proved nothing but trouble. And if he ever figured out the identity of the woman who was wreaking havoc on his town, there wouldn't be enough of her followers in the world to keep him from making her life a living hell.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

I have a problem. My wife is a terrible housekeeper. She doesn't work, she just sits around the house all day long—or goes shopping. When I come home from a long day, the dishes are piled in the sink, there's stuff everywhere and I have no hot dinner waiting for me. I want to tell her, but I'm afraid she'll brain me if I do. Should I hire a maid?

Signed, No Dinner Waiting

Dear No Dinner,

While I sympathize with your problem, I think you should consider the wisdom of hiring a maid. Perhaps that would remedy the problem, but it might send your wife off the deep end. Have you considered asking her what it is she does all day? Maybe she's doing something important—like writing a book. Maybe she's afraid to tell you because she senses your disapproval. Sit down with her like an adult and bring up the issue. Otherwise, she might brain you—with a frying pan.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eleven

"I thought you were just going out as 'friends'."

Mary Lou met Roxy's eyes in the mirror. "We are."

Roxy lifted a brow. "Then why have you spent the last hour-and-a-half in here getting ready? You don't take that much time to fix your face when we go out." Roxy pouted. "That hurts, Lou."

Mary Lou grinned at her. "Shut up." She leaned forward to inspect her eyes. "I just want to look nice. That's all." Okay, maybe she'd told a teensy white lie, but no one had to know, right? She still felt so nervous about this non-date that a barn full of square dancers hopped inside her stomach.

Downstairs, the doorbell rang and Mary Lou thought she might throw up.

"That's him," Roxy said cheerfully, and went to answer the door.

Oh, God. Oh, God.

Mary Lou braced her hands on the counter and stared hard at her reflection. *This isn't a date. It isn't.*

Then, why did it feel like one?

She was still a married woman. Though she hadn't felt like one for the last five years; she stopped loving Preston long before that. But, she was still married. And she had walked out on her husband a little over a week ago.

Suddenly panicked, Mary Lou wondered if she should cancel the whole thing.

"Lou?" Roxy called. "Joe's here. Get the lead out!"

Mary Lou dragged in a shaky breath. Okay. She could do this. They were just having dinner. It's not like she had to sleep with him, or even kiss him, for that matter, although surprisingly, the idea of kissing Joe Fuller held enormous appeal.

Joe stood in the foyer, looking relaxed and tense at the same time, if that was even possible. He'd dressed casually in tan slacks and cotton polo. His dark hair was combed, but one stubborn lock refused to stay in place and kept straying to his eye.

He looked so damn good, Mary Lou wanted to cry.

Joe glanced up as she came down the stairs, his brown eyes widening. "Hey. You look amazing." His face reddened, and he ran a hand through his neat hair. "Sorry."

Charmed, Mary Lou relaxed and smiled at him. "Don't be. I was thinking how handsome you look."

They locked in a stare, and feelings—feelings Mary Lou thought were long dormant—rose like the tide inside her, and her blood heated in a thick, slow roll. She felt his eyes all over her body though they never left her face. She became swept away with a flush of desire so sudden and heady she almost thought she had a fever, it had been that long.

She had never felt anything close to this with Preston.

Sounding as if from far away, Roxy cleared her throat. "So, uh, where are y'all going?"

Joe's gaze flickered away, and Mary Lou immediately felt the loss. "It's a surprise," he said, his voice husky.

Yes, this whole thing certainly is a surprise.

* * * *

Noah pulled the Explorer into the wide, circular drive of his mother's house. He drove into the service entry that branched off from the main driveway, as he knew his mother didn't like to see his "common" car parked out front.

"I don't understand why you don't drive a car of your own, Noah James. Goodness knows you have enough money in your trust to buy a whole fleet of those hideous trucks."

The money in his trust sat in an account that gained interest every day. He rarely touched it. He had no use for the lavish, despite having been born with the proverbial silver spoon. To Noah, it meant a lot that he provide for himself. He didn't want his parents' money. It was just one more thing for his mother to hold over his head, and Christ knew she already had enough to last both his and her lifetimes combined.

The humidity strangled the air even in the early evening, and by the time he'd walked the short distance from his truck to the front door, sweat beaded his forehead and back. He knocked lightly and pushed open the door.

It was cool inside the house of his youth, but it wasn't just the air conditioning that kept the temperature frosty. His mother's house—he'd never considered it his own, even as a child—emitted a coldness that had to do with its mistress. Maybe it was a whole lot of hullabaloo on his part, but Noah felt the owner had a large effect on the atmosphere of a home.

His sister's house was similar; cold and heartless, like a museum, though he knew it had more to do with Preston than Mary Lou.

Now, Roxy's place ... There was a warm and inviting home where a man could feel comfortable. Then again, he thought with a grin, Rox was a warm and inviting woman—in more ways than one.

"Mama!" he called out.

His Timberlands clomped on the gleaming tile that led to the kitchen. The large kitchen laid empty save for acres of stainless steel counters and top-of-the-end appliances. Nothing but the best for a Kennedy, Noah thought bitterly.

He found her inside the screened porch off of the sunroom, sitting primly in an antique rocker, a glass of sweet tea sweating on the table at her elbow. Ceiling fans swirled lazily above, circulating the evening air.

The temperature still hovered around eighty degrees, and yet his mother looked as pressed, polished and cool as if she'd been reading in the library. "Mother."

She looked up from her magazine and blinked at him. "Noah. I've been waiting over an hour."

Noah bit his tongue to prevent the litany of scathing replies that threatened to spill from his mouth. "I had to finish up some things first."

"Must you work every day of the week?"

"I'm Sheriff, Mama. I take my days when I can."

She sniffed and looked back at her magazine. His parents had never approved of his choice of career, but Katherine Windsor Kennedy was the loudest, and by far, his staunchest critic.

Remembering his manners, he leaned down and kissed the cheek she offered.

"Have a seat, Noah. I'll ring Ingrid." Katherine pressed a button on the house intercom behind her.

"Yes, Mrs. Kennedy?" Ingrid asked.

"Noah is here, Ingrid. Please bring him a glass of sweet tea."

"Yes, ma'am."

He'd have given his left nut for a beer—hell, a shot of whiskey—but one took what one was offered in the kingdom of Katherine Kennedy.

Noah nodded his thanks to Ingrid and took a sip. "How have you been?" he asked his mother.

"As well as I can be considering my daughter has left her husband and making so much gossip it's a wonder I can hold my head up at all in this town."

Yeah, it's a wonder, all right. "I'm actually proud of the old girl," Noah said, keeping his smile to himself.

Katherine turned her icy blue gaze on him. "Of course. It's nothing less than I would expect from you, Noah James."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't you talk to me like that. I am your mother, and I demand respect."

"I'm sorry. What is that supposed to mean?" he repeated in the respectful voice she demanded.

"It means you're no better than your sister, engaging in lewd acts with that woman in the middle of the library," she hissed.

Fury lanced through him, bright and hot. "Mama, I will warn you one more time. That woman has a name. It's

Roxanne, and she is a very dear friend of mine. I won't have you talking about her that way."

Katherine stared at him, her face aghast. "This is much worse than I thought."

"Oh, for God's sake—"

"This is not why I asked you to come."

Noah leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. He felt like a petulant child—hell, he was acting like one—but Katherine had that effect on him. "Could've fooled me."

"I want to know how you're sister is faring."

"What don't you call her yourself?"

"Your tone, Noah," Katherine warned. "I want an unbiased opinion."

"She's doing great," he said. "Better than I've ever seen her, come to that."

His mother frowned. "And she's still living with ... Roxanne Palmer?"

He nodded. "She's staying there until she gets her own place, I presume."

Katherine visibly paled. "She doesn't intend to return to her home?"

He looked at her. "Are you serious? After what Preston did? After what that piece of shit has put her through over the last twelve years?"

"I'll admit Preston has some problems—"

"Unbelievable," Noah muttered.

"—but he should be given the benefit of the doubt. Do you think I don't know how Mary Lou feels? If I had left after each

one of your father's ... indiscretions, we never would have had this." She waved her arm around the porch and the expansive lawn beyond.

"There are a lot of things more important than money, Mother."

"Name one," she said.

"Love."

Katherine shook her head. "I've obviously failed you somehow, Noah." She waved her hand again, this time in a dismissive gesture. "But, this is all immaterial. There is another situation that needs your attention."

"What?"

"It seems Preston has gotten himself into a bit of trouble at the firm."

Interested, Noah leaned forward. "How so?"

"Well, there is some talk of embezzlement, which is absolutely ludicrous. Why would a man of such obvious means want to embezzle money from his own firm?"

Noah could think of a lot of reasons, beginning with Preston Abbot, but he kept his mouth shut.

"I want you to do what you can to help him."

He stared blankly at Katherine for five full seconds until he broke into laughter. He couldn't help himself. When he got a hold of himself, he took in his mother's censorious stare.

"This is not funny, Noah James. Preston is your brother-in-law. He's family."

"Mother, I am the Sheriff. Which means I'm the law. Understand? If Preston embezzled from his firm, I'm sure the partners are hiring an investigator to look into it. I'm not—no,

I flat out refuse to help that worthless bastard. You can find someone else to do your dirty work." He stood. "I'm outta here."

Katherine watched her son storm off as cold fury unfolded in her. Damn him. Damn him!

She schooled her breathing to an acceptable level. Emotions were messy, ugly things and should be avoided at all costs. She found it always best to operate with a cool, clear head.

Always.

Ingrid came onto the screen porch, the telephone in her hand. "A call for you, Mrs. Kennedy."

"Thank you, Ingrid," Katherine said with a nod, dismissing her servant.

She waited until Ingrid had retreated back inside before lifting the phone to her ear. One never spoke about private matters in front of servants. It was improper, not to mention tasteless. "Yes?"

"We have a problem."

Katherine inhaled sharply. "I thought you were working on that."

"No, this is another problem. A worse one."

As the voice on the other end explained the terrible turn of events, Katherine knew she needed to take a more active role in this situation. "Continue doing what you're doing," she instructed. "Keep your eye on the other, and I'll see what can be done."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

She hung up the phone and stared blindly out into her immaculate yard. She hadn't worked this hard to have all of her life, her children's lives, unravel at the seams.

No, this had to stop.

* * * *

Mary Lou Abbot, Joe realized, was a study in beauty, class and style.

He watched her bite daintily into the fancy cheese and crackers he'd packed away in a picnic basket; gazed at her long, graceful throat work as she swallowed the wine he'd brought.

He'd had no idea what a woman like Mary Lou would enjoy, so he enlisted Roxy's help. She told him that he should just go with instinct and that would be fine. But, hell—if he'd gone with instinct, they'd be out here with a bucket of fried chicken or a couple of burgers and a six-pack of beer.

No, a woman like Mary Lou deserved better.

However, she didn't look like she was enjoying the 'better' he'd provided. In fact, she seemed very uncomfortable on the ragged quilt he'd unearthed from his linen closet. Joe cursed himself again for thinking a picnic dinner was a good idea.

He thought of the way she'd looked at him in foyer when he picked her up, and decided if he could get her to look at him like that again, he'd spend the rest of his life choking down bitter cheese, dry crackers and drinking wine that cost a set of platinum spark plugs.

"How's the cheese?" he asked.

"It's, um, great."

Mary Lou Abbot, Joe realized, was also a terrible liar.

Frustrated, he ran a hand through his hair and opened the picnic basket. "I've got some other stuff in here." He pulled out a glass bottle of caviar. "What about this?"

She crinkled her nose. "Oh, you know, I'm really not a fan of caviar."

Shit.

He let out a breath. "I'm not doing a very good job here, am I?"

She blushed prettily and laid a soft hand on his arm. "You are, Joe. It's just that I've lived a lifetime on caviar and brie, and to be quite honest, I'm tired of it."

Mary Lou congratulated herself on her candor, but winced inwardly at the same time, waiting for disappointment and anger to show on Joe's face.

To her surprise, his features relaxed in relief, and he laughed. "You don't know how glad I am to hear you say that."

Joe Fuller, Mary Lou reminded herself, was not Preston. Thank God.

Mary Lou laughed with him. "I hope I haven't embarrassed you."

Joe shook his head. "Roxy said I should go with my gut, but I assumed you're used to the fancier things, so I brought that." He grinned boyishly, and Mary Lou's heart beat faster. "Guess I should've listened to her, huh?"

"She can be quite perceptive when she wants to be." She pushed aside the crackers and crossed her legs. "Tell me, Joe, what would you have brought instead?"

"Honestly? A couple of burgers and a six-pack."

It sounded so delightful, so Joe, Mary Lou smiled again.

"Next time, we'll do that."

"There's going to be a 'next time'?" he asked.

She met his eyes. "I hope so."

He let out a breath and nodded. "Yeah, me, too." He ran a hand through his hair. He'd been doing quite a bit of that since they'd arrived. Mary Lou reminded herself that this was likely his first date—non-date—since the death of his wife.

"Will you tell me about her?" she asked.

Joe looked up, obviously startled. "Hannah?"

Mary Lou nodded. "That's a beautiful name. Back when I thought I would have children, I wanted to name my baby girl Hannah."

"She was my life," he said simply. "We met in Augusta about ten years ago. I was turning wrenches in a dealership. She worked in the office." His brown eyes had taken on a faraway look as the memories of his late wife washed over him. "I took one look at her, and knew I would spend the rest of my life with her."

"Was she nice?" Mary Lou asked, comparing Hannah to Preston. Then again, she had to have been amazing if Joe had married her. *What does that make me?*

"Just about the sweetest thing you'd ever met. Kind, even to strangers, always willing to help out anyone. It was what made her so special."

"How long were you married?"

"Five years. Five glorious, happy years."

He sighed in such a way that Mary Lou wondered if he still pined for his dead wife. *Then what is he doing here with me?* She shook off her morose thoughts and focused on their conversation. "No children?"

He shook his head. "Hannah'd had some problems during her youth that required a hysterectomy. We were looking into adoption when she ... died."

Sensing he needed the contact, Mary Lou placed her hand on his. "How did she die?"

"Those female problems I mentioned? Turned out it developed into cancer—cervical. It'd spread so bad before we knew what was wrong, she only lived a couple of months."

Mary Lou felt a piece of her heart—a heart that had been under firm lock and key for ten years—start to give. It had been two years, but from the strain in his voice, she knew he was fighting tears.

"Not exactly date conversation, huh?" Mary Lou asked. "I'm sorry I brought up that painful memory."

He shook his head fiercely. "Don't apologize. There's nothing wrong with it. I don't talk about her very often—her family doesn't like to mention it—so it's nice to have someone to share her memory with."

Touched, Mary Lou said, "As you may have heard, my marriage wasn't exactly rainbows and butterflies."

"Why'd you marry him?"

The question was blunt, but Mary Lou appreciated his candor. She leaned back on her elbows and stared at the live oaks that surrounded the greenbelt, waiting a long time before answering. "He slayed me. With lavish gifts, affection,

love." She laughed bitterly. "Well, at least what I thought was love. But, what the hell did I know? I was only eighteen years old."

She glanced over, surprised to find his brown eyes intense on her face, taking in every word she said. Mary Lou realized she felt a kinship with him. Like being with Roxy or Noah, she felt that comfortable talking to him. All of her conversations with Preston or her mother were stiff and painful. "My parents weren't in love. To be perfectly honest, I don't know why they even married. It was probably some pedigree thing, but let me tell you, it was not a good match. My mother is the queen of disapproval and my father was ... well, I hate to speak ill of the dead, but he was a mean sonofabitch who never had a kind word to say.

"When Preston came along, I thought: here's my out. Here's my escape to that brilliant world I've always dreamed of. Noah had already gone on to Georgia for college and I was all alone." She chuckled. "'Woe is me', huh?"

He shook his head softly. "Tell me about that brilliant world you'd always dreamed of, Mary Lou Abbot."

She turned to him, her face alight in a brilliant smile tinged with just a hint of sadness that hit Joe in the solar plexus. Then she closed her eyes and leaned back on her elbows again.

"I would meet the man of my dreams—the whole knight in shining armor bit—clichéd, but true. And he would whisk me away from my parents. In my dream, my parents wouldn't really like him because he was real, and he wasn't like them. We'd stay here or move, buy a little house where I would

tend the gardens on my days off. I would go to art school—" She looked at him. "I always wanted to paint. Anyway, we'd have children, a baby girl named Hannah, who had her daddy's eyes and my smile. And a little boy named Bobby, who'd always get into mischief but we'd never utter harsh words because he'd be so precocious. My husband, with whom I was madly in love, would bring me wildflowers he picked on his way home from work. We would eat home-cooked meals at our kitchen table with toys all over the living room floor. We'd barbeque in the summer and have Noah and Roxy and their families over." She opened her eyes and looked at Joe. "Kinda stupid, huh?"

"No. It's not stupid at all. In fact, I think that's about the most refreshing thing I've heard in a damn long while."

She let out a very unladylike snort. "Well, I got the 'knight in shining armor' bit right, anyway. But, after the honeymoon, he turned out to be worse than my father."

"Why did you wait so long?"

She closed her eyes again and sighed. "To leave him? I always suspected about the affairs. Never had any proof, mind you, but a wife knows. That night at The Quinn, I saw his car parked outside the firm and caught him screwing Connie Willows."

She sat up and began arranging things on the blanket. "I may have even looked the other way—I don't know. For so many years, I've been a doormat. I've allowed everyone else to make my decisions and always followed along like a good little girl. But, afterward, he calmly told me that 'a man has

needs he can't come to his wife with,' and then proceeded to blame the whole incident on me."

Joe's fury blindsided him and he wished, really wished, Preston Abbot stood there beside them so he could beat the fucker to a pulp.

"I guess I'd had it, and I finally did something about it. Really, Paula Rockwell's column spurred me to do it." She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "Can I tell you a secret? You have to swear, and I mean swear, not to breathe a word to anyone, especially Noah."

He held two fingers to his temple. "Scout's honor, ma'am."

She laughed. "Roxy is Paula Rockwell."

Joe was well and truly floored. "Well, knock me over with a feather. Innocuous Roxanne Palmer's the one who's been causing such an uproar in this town?"

Mary Lou nodded. "I don't know if you're familiar with her column, but it used to be bland. But, the business loan for her bookstore—a big dream of hers—was denied, and she lost it. Thus, the bolder Paula Rockwell was born."

Joe huffed out a breath. "Well, I definitely won't tell Noah, that's for sure. He's convinced that woman is the bane of his existence."

"Exactly. Noah hates lying because we lived with it our whole lives. If he found out his good friend Rox was the one making such a fuss, he'd be furious with her."

Joe began packing up the wine and cheese. "This wasn't so bad for a date between friends, huh?"

"I've been calling it a 'non-date'."

"A non-date. Hmm. Do you think it would be inappropriate if I kissed you?"

After Mary Lou recovered from the stunning question, she started to tremble. "Well, that was certainly forward," she managed.

"I'm a forward kinda guy."

He didn't press the question, and instead leaned forward and captured her mouth in a soft kiss. He nibbled along her lips, as though testing their softness, how they fit against his. The desire that had simmered all night exploded, and she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him to her.

Joe groaned low in his throat, his tongue darting out to run along the seam of her lips. She opened her mouth and let him in, and desire shot straight between her legs, aching and throbbing. Mary Lou hadn't felt this way in so long—wasn't even sure if she'd ever experienced it—it was foreign. Foreign, yes, but delicious, and she wanted more.

Joe's tongue swirled erotically with hers, performing the most amazing tricks that made her body feel flushed and itchy. His fingers framed her cheeks, brushing them against her skin as if he were a blind man memorizing her face.

With a groan, he pulled away. "We have to stop."

Mary Lou sat up, the old feelings of inadequacy rearing to the forefront. "What is it? Did I do something wrong?"

He smiled gently and caressed her cheek. "No, baby. You did everything right. So right, I'm afraid I might embarrass us both."

Oh. "Really?" she asked.

He shook his head. "You are something else. You don't know how long I've wanted to do that. Ever since I saw you at the Buy 'N Bag a year ago, you've been revving my motor."

She felt a blush creep up her cheeks. "Me?"

His brown eyes turned serious and intense. "Don't you ever doubt for a second that you're a desirable and amazing woman. That prick husband of yours didn't know what a good thing he had." He took her hand in his. "But, that doesn't change the fact that you are a married woman. And I don't think it's right to do this—prick or no—when you've still got a legal paper that says you're his."

"I was never his," she whispered.

"I believe that. Tell me, Mary Lou. Are you going to divorce Preston?"

His question startled her. Because, yes, she had left her husband, but what else had she done? Divorce was final. It's not like she wanted to remain married to the man. Absolutely not. But, divorce?

To borrow one of Noah's phrases, it was time to shit or get off the pot.

But, did she really have it in her?

Later, Joe pulled his truck into Roxy's driveway and switched off the engine. An uncomfortable silence had descended upon their otherwise lovely non-date (kissing notwithstanding) after the mention of her crumbling marriage. She hated that she had allowed Preston to ruin her wonderful evening.

Joe turned and grabbed her hand. "I had a really nice time with you, Mary Lou. I'd like to do it again sometime, but as friends. I really mean it."

As friends.

Other than Roxy, she was in short supply. She could use one, and Joe certainly fit the bill, although she wasn't sure she could fight her growing attraction to him. "I'd like that."

His lips grazed her knuckles. "Sweet dreams, Mary Lou Abbot."

She smiled. "You, too. Thank you for a terrific non-date." Mary Lou got out of his truck, charmed when he waited until she'd opened the front door of the house before backing out of the driveway.

Joe Fuller was a true gentleman.

Why couldn't she have met him instead of Preston all those years ago?

Because he'd been desperately in love with Han-nah.

Roxy was sitting on the stairs when Mary Lou walked inside. She jumped up the minute she saw her, all atwitter like a mother hen.

"Well? How'd the non-date go?"

"Good. Really good." She ran a hand through her hair, still shocked when she didn't feel all of her locks filling her fingers. "Want to grab a glass of wine and sit on the back porch? I'm too wired to sleep, and I can give you all the sordid details."

"Ooh, ooh, ooh," Roxy breathed. "Sordid details. Yay!" She headed for the kitchen. "You go on back, and I'll get the libations."

When they were settled on the porch swing, Mary Lou said, "I really like him, Rox."

"What's not to like?"

"No. I mean, I really like him."

"He's a good man." Roxy said, leaving out the obvious statement that Preston was most definitely not a good man.

"We kissed."

"Wow. Pretty intense for a non-date." She paused. "So, how was it?"

Mary Lou closed her eyes as if to savor the memory. Roxy had been doing quite a bit of that of late as well.

"Gentle at first, then it kind of got out of control. He had so much passion, and he directed it all at me."

"He really likes you. I think you're the only one who had no idea."

"Maybe," Mary Lou hedged. "He didn't want to take it any further, though."

"Because you're still married?"

Mary Lou nodded. Joe was a really good man.

"Frustrating as his gesture is, it was noble of him. But, it got me thinking. Why haven't I filed for divorce?"

Roxy pursed her lips and considered. "Are you thinking of a reconciliation?" *Please, say no.*

Mary Lou shook her head. "No. Definitely not. I've wasted too many years on that man. And I'm fairly certain he doesn't love me. Lord knows I stopped loving him a long time ago."

"Then why did you stay?" Roxy asked softly.

She shrugged. "Because good Southern girls don't rock the boat. We hold our heads up high even when our world is crumbling at our feet. Right?"

"That sounds like Katherine's BS to me."

"What can I say? I was weaned on bitterness and proper etiquette."

"But, you're changing now. Look at all you've done."

Mary Lou laughed without humor. "I didn't do it for me. I did it because you found the courage to step up and take what was yours."

"No," Roxy disagreed, "I just gave you the push you needed."

"Well, thanks." Mary Lou sipped her wine and stared out into the dark yard. "I'm not cramping your style by staying here, am I?"

"Are you kidding? I love having you. It's like those dreams we used to have when we were kids; us livin' together in an old ramshackle house, a couple of crones with nothin' but a houseful of cats and ourselves." Roxy touched Mary Lou's hand. "You're welcome to stay as long as you need."

She smiled. "Thanks. It might be a while, after all." Mary Lou slid a sideways glance at Roxy. "Don't be mad, but I told Joe about the Paula Rockwell column."

"What! What if he tells Noah?"

"He swore he wouldn't. He's won't welsh, Rox," she added at Roxy's disbelieving stare. "And speaking of my brother, have I told you how much of a living hell you're making his life right now?"

"Me or Paula?"

"Probably both, but Paula especially. Did you hear about that woman who set her boyfriend's truck on fire?"

Roxy's heart dropped in her chest like a stone. "Oh, my God. Please tell me she isn't Fed Up in T-Town?"

Mary Lou nodded. "One and the same." She chuckled. "Noah had to haul her in. Let's say he's been less than pleased with your new format."

Roxy smiled with a nonchalance she didn't feel, but inside, she was reeling. She hadn't owned up to the column initially because it was her own personal business. But, then she had sort of gotten involved with Noah, and the man hated lying. Now, if he found out, any chance she had with him would be blown.

Yes, it was definitely wise to keep this whole column business under wraps.

* * * *

Preston crouched between a night-blooming jasmine bush and an old magnolia tree in Roxanne Palmer's backyard. The idea that his wife had gone on a date with that low-brow mechanic set his blood aflame, and he had to restrain himself from storming up to the back porch, throwing his wife over his shoulder and carrying her home where she belonged.

With him.

And that goddamn Roxanne. She wasn't getting the message. He would have thought her little scare on the greenbelt would've knocked some sense into her, but she was as obtuse as a heifer. His little mission of subterfuge hadn't been a complete wash, however. He didn't pay much

attention to The Gazette, but he'd have to be deaf, dumb and blind not to hear about the uprising of the infamous Paula Rockwell.

And he'd just learned Roxanne Palmer and Paula Rockwell were one and the same. He could definitely use this to his advantage. His prick of a brother-in-law was one of those uptight types who prided himself on truth and honor and blah blah blah. He would hold this little tidbit of information should the need arise. Of course, the asshole probably knew Roxanne's little secret.

Preston wanted his life back. He wanted his wife—she was *his*, goddamn it—he wanted his reputation and he wanted his firm. His partners had called in an auditor and the FBI, who were currently going over the books from the last ten years. Although he had doctored them with meticulous care, there were always possibilities for screw-ups. And right now, he was worried that he may have made one.

If it hadn't been for Roxanne Palmer, a.k.a. Paula Rockwell, none of this bullshit would have ever happened. He would just have to up the stakes. Show Roxanne he meant business. You didn't steal a man's wife and ruin his life without dire consequences.

He waited until the women moved inside before pulling out his cell phone. He hit speed dial and waited for the answer. When the voice on the other line spoke, he said, "We've got a problem."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

I play in Little League. I'm the first base guy on our team. We play all the time. I'm upset because my mom's the only one who comes to my games. My dad always says he's got 'something to do.' Please help.

Signed, Little League Guy

Dear Little League Guy,

Sweetie, I'm so sorry. If I could wave a magic wand and make your dad come to your games, I would. I suggest you talk first to your mom and bring up your concerns. If that doesn't wield results, try testing the waters with your dad. Let him know how much this means to you. If none of that works, rest assured, I'll be there, kiddo. Good luck, sweet pea!

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twelve

Thirty minutes before Roxy's lunch break on Monday, Bobbie waltzed up to into the library, orange caftan swirling. "Hey, gotta minute?"

Roxy glanced over at Alice, currently engrossed in cataloging a new shipment of books, and nodded. "Let's go somewhere private."

She led her to the break room, which consisted of two scarred Formica tables, six rickety plastic chairs and a soda machine. And was, thankfully, empty.

Bobbie declined the seat Roxy offered and leaned against the counter instead.

"I've been meaning to get a hold of you," Roxy said.

Bobbie lifted a brow. "Well, given recent events, I'm surprised you waited this long."

Stalling, Roxy asked, "How's the refurb going?"

"Slowly. Insurance companies are a pain in my ass. I've moved the printing presses to my study, which is makin' my house stink like you wouldn't believe, but the show must go on, no?"

Roxy took a breath. "I think I should go public. Or at the very least, discontinue the column."

Bobbie remained silent for a moment. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not? Did you hear what happened to that girl and her boyfriend's pick-up? She could've gotten herself killed. All on

my 'advice'. Then that huge fight at The Quinn, and let's not forget the vandalism to The Gazette."

"Babe, you can't achieve any kind of change without people getting into a dither. Folks around here like the way things are, regardless of however outdated their mentality may be."

"But, that's the problem, Bobbie. What if I'm creating an even bigger mess?"

"You're doing the people in this town a service," Bobbie said, shaking her finger for emphasis. "Don't you ever doubt that, you hear?" She leaned back and sighed. "And besides. Your coming out isn't best at the moment."

"Why?"

"It wasn't just vandalism, Roxy. Whoever broke into the office went there looking for information." This time, Bobbie took a breath. "And they got it."

Roxy felt the blood drain from her face. "What are you talking about?"

"Your file? All the employee files? They're gone. I've got back-ups at home, but all your information, including your real name is in the hands of whoever broke into The Gazette."

Roxy stared down at the table. "Damn."

"Yeah. So, the less who know, the better. I don't want a maelstrom of shit raining down on you right now. Give it a couple of weeks for the heat to die down. If we don't hear about anything, then by all means, go public. But, be prepared for a lot of backlash." She ran a hand through her black hair. "We've been getting quite the influx of hate mail."

"Splendid."

"And they've escalated to threats, which I take very seriously, even in a town as bass-ackwards as Thorton. All we need is some card-carrying, NRA hillbilly taking a pot shot at you, so watch your back."

"I'll let Mary Lou know. And Joe. She told him."

"Friday night, I got the impression that Noah has no idea."

Roxy looked down at the table again. "No. I haven't told him yet. Something tells me he won't take the news well."

"Well, it'll be better comin' from you instead of someone else. Besides, he's the law and who better to protect you?" She smiled wryly. "Pissed or not, I suspect he wouldn't want anyone touching his woman."

"I'm not really his woman."

Bobbie laughed. "That's the biggest load of bullshit I've heard all day. Have you seen the way that man looks at you? Better yet, have you seen the cow eyes you two make at each other? Well, I, for one, have. And let me tell you, Noah Kennedy has it bad for you."

Despite the serious nature of their conversation, Roxy's heart soared. She had always thought of Noah as hers, but never imagined those feelings would be reciprocated. Then Roxy recalled the way his lips had coaxed and seduced, she and blushed.

Okay, maybe.

"So, keep a low profile for now, kiddo," Bobbie advised. "I'm running the paper on time at my place, so you can deliver your column directly to me, same as always."

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Roxy nodded and walked Bobbie out. But as the older woman made her way outside, Roxy couldn't help but wonder if she'd gotten herself in over her head.

* * * *

That feeling became glaringly apparent when she walked out of the library at five and found all four tires on her Honda slashed. Attached to the windshield lay a note on which the words *Meddling Bitch* had been scrawled.

Well, great. Just great. How the hell was she supposed to get home? Joe still had Mary Lou's Benz at his shop. She could always ask Noah, of course, but if she went to him, she'd have to explain. And a happy camper he wouldn't be. Given what happened last week, he would get all big brother on her, which flat drove Roxy crazy. Noah would want answers or he'd start digging. She was running out of options here.

Then again, she could always play dumb.

Mary Lou worked until six on Mondays, so she'd still be up at the SO. Hopefully, Mr. Sheriff would be absent, so she wouldn't have to reveal the situation. However, if she went to Joe, he would inevitably mention it to Noah, and then Noah would be pissed she hadn't come to him in the first place.

Crap on a Popsicle stick.

She crumbled the note in her fist and threw it on the passenger seat. Then, hitching her tote on her shoulder, she left her Honda parked in the lot and walked through the sultry afternoon to the Sheriff's Office.

Though only a mere three blocks, she was sweating like a man in a one-legged ass-kicking contest by the time she reached the top floor of the courthouse. She smiled at Deputy Moreno, who passed her through to Noah's anteroom where Mary Lou typed away on her computer.

"Hey," Mary Lou said, her eyes intense on Roxy's face. "What's the matter?"

Roxy dropped into a chair and ran a hand through her sweaty hair, which hadn't been in a braid since she'd gone to Atlanta. "My tires got slashed."

"What?" Mary Lou picked up the phone and hit a button. "Noah, get out here now, please."

So much for the avoidance tactic.

Noah waltzed out of his office, looking virile and handsome in his uniform, the butt of his gun secured on his service belt. He smiled when he saw Roxy. "Hey, Stilts. How's it goin'?"

"Oh, just peachy." *Play dumb. Play dumb.* "I walked out of the library a few minutes ago to find all four tires of my slashed."

Concern and anger fused his features into a hard mask. "What the hell?"

"My thoughts exactly." *Excellent. Keep him thinking you have no clue.*

"First things first. Let's call Lloyd and have him tow it to Joe's. He'll get you fixed up right and quick." He sat down next to Roxy and rubbed the back of her neck, sending a rush of hot tingles down to her toes. The last time she'd seen him, his mouth and hands had been on her breasts. She flushed at the memory. "Any other damage?"

Just my heart.

"No." Damned if she'd mention the note. That would only raise questions she didn't want answered.

"I'm sure it was just kids messing around," Noah said, but in reality, he wasn't so sure.

If it had only been her tires, then, yeah, punk kids could very well be the culprits. But, there was also that little scare last week on the greenbelt.

Noah could think of but one person who might want to frighten Roxy: Preston Abbot. It was no secret he was in a tizzy about Mary Lou moving out of the Primrose Valley mansion and into Roxy's farmhouse. In Preston's narcissistic mind, he no doubt blamed Roxy for the problems in his marriage.

Fucking idiot.

And given the fact he faced possible charges for embezzlement, Noah would lay odds the man was getting desperate.

Yeah, Noah thought, it would be a real good idea to keep an eye on that bastard brother-in-law of his.

* * * *

"Lloyd passed this on to me," Joe said quietly, while Roxy and Mary Lou sat outside the shop in the fading twilight talking softly.

Noah took the slip of paper and read the vile words. Rage filled him as his suspicion deepened. Yeah, this had Preston's slimy fingerprints all over it. Noah would love to go have a little chat with him, but he had nothing to base it on. And

knowing Preston, he'd start screaming police injustice before Noah could even back out of the driveway.

What he could do was keep a closer eye on Roxy. She wouldn't be happy about it, but tough shit. He needed her to understand that while this could be nothing at all, it warranted further investigation.

As Joe went back to replacing the tires on her Honda, Noah wondered if he would've been so diligent had it not been Roxy Palmer. He liked to think he was an assiduous Sheriff, but if he were honest, Noah didn't think he would've taken the threats as seriously. He pocketed the note and asked Joe, "How much longer, guy?"

"Ten minutes."

"I'm going to take Roxy on home in my rig. You can leave the Honda for Lou and give her the bill to pass on to Miz Palmer. I want to have a little chat with our favorite librarian."

Joe smiled out of the side of his mouth. "Uh-oh."

"Thanks for doing this, man. I appreciate it."

"Hey, Roxy's my pal, too."

"Well, thanks all the same. Catch you at The Quinn tomorrow night?"

"Same time, same place, bro'."

Noah walked out of the garage and approached the women.

"Is he done already?" Roxy asked, her cheeks pink from the heat. She wore a frumpy green jumper that hid her curvaceous body, but in that moment, he didn't think he'd ever seen anything more beautiful.

Man, where the hell did that come from?

"No, it'll be a few more minutes. Lou, I want you to wait here for the Honda. I'm going to take Roxy home."

The two women shared a knowing look before Roxy sighed heavily and rose. "Lecture time, I suppose."

"Want my pepper spray?" Mary Lou asked.

"Shut the hell up, both of you." He pointed at the Explorer. "Roxy, get in the rig."

As she trudged off, Mary Lou looked up at him. "Be nice, okay?"

"Jesus H," he said in exasperation. "I'm not going to shoot her."

"Hey, anything's possible. Just remember how sensitive she is."

"I'm aware of her sensitivities, Sis."

She wiggled her fingers at him. "See you later, *Sheriff*."

The ride to Tiger Lily Lane was quiet and filled with tension. Roxy had no idea what Noah had on his mind, but she prayed Joe hadn't given up the goods on the Paula Rockwell column.

Please, God.

He pulled the Explorer into her driveway and shut off the ignition. His hands tightened briefly on the steering wheel, and then he reached behind him and pulled out a familiar slip of paper.

Damn.

"You forgot to mention this."

"I, um, didn't think anything of it," she lied.

He stared hard at her for several seconds. "I'm starting to get the feeling someone thinks you're causing a lot of trouble."

You don't know the half of it.

She schooled her features into a mask of innocence. "I don't know why anyone would think that."

"I can think of one really good reason."

Roxy's heart thundered in her chest as she waited for Noah to drop the bomb and kick her out of his life for her lies.

"You were followed on the greenbelt last Tuesday. Someone was definitely toying with you, if you heard right. And you did, correct?"

Roxy nodded. "He said my name, like I said. And then laughed."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I wouldn't make that up."

"Okay, well, here's what I think."

Roxy held her breath.

"Preston hasn't exactly been quiet about his dislike for you over the years. Now that Lou walked out on him and moved in with you, I think he's lost it. I think he blames you in some sick and twisted way. He's also under suspicion for embezzlement by the FBI, so he's getting desperate. I want you to watch your back."

Roxy was so relieved he hadn't brought up the column, she started to shake. But, some contrary part of her refused to believe what he'd just said. "That's ridiculous, Noah! He can't possibly believe I'm the reason Mary Lou left."

"I'm pretty sure he does. And we're not talking about a normal person here. This is a man who's likely been embezzling millions of dollars from his own firm for years. Look at the way he's treated Mary Lou. He's the kind of guy who'd kill three people in a drunk driving accident, and then blame the other guy."

While Noah's rationale held plenty of merit, Roxy knew he was wrong. Just this afternoon, Bobbie had informed her that someone knew of her alter-ego. And her new format hadn't pleased many of the citizens of Thorton. The list of suspects was impossible to contemplate.

Protecting Paula Rockwell's identity was of utmost importance, especially if she wanted to pursue a relationship with Noah, so she placated him. "I'll be more careful. I promise."

"I'm serious, Rox." He leaned forward and touched her face. She dipped her head into his palm, suddenly desperate for his touch. "I don't want you going home alone, especially after your Tuesday night book thing."

"Well, Mary Lou has been catching a ride with me most nights."

He nodded. "Good. Now get your ass over here." In a move so sudden it stunned her, he pulled Roxy to him and crushed his mouth to hers. His tongue gained immediate entrance. Noah slid his hands from her face and ran them down her sides, skimming the outsides of her breasts until they ached.

"God, Noah," she breathed.

His lips left her mouth, and he nibbled on her throat, his hands busy at the buttons on her jumper. "Have you ever made out in a car before, Roxanne?" he whispered in her ear.

"No," she managed as his hand closed over her breast. "I, um, didn't date in high school."

She felt his smile against her neck. "Guess we'll have to remedy that problem."

"What about Mary Lou? She'll be here soon."

He swirled his tongue inside her ear and her toes curled. "We better be quick then, huh?"

Excitement curled in her belly as his hands dipped under her prim cotton blouse and caressed her breasts again. Her nipples were distended and aching, and when she arched into his hands, he laughed quietly. "What's the matter, Stilts?"

She couldn't answer because of the sensations that bombarded her. His fingers reached inside the cups of her bra and he plucked at her nipples, drawing a long, heartfelt moan from her throat.

"Oh, yeah. You like that."

His lips brushed her collarbone and moved south where he replaced his hands, his teeth nipping lightly on her sensitive flesh.

She grabbed his head to anchor him there, terrified he would stop. Roxy thrashed in her seat, unconsciously thrusting her hips in an age-old rhythm she had no experience with, but instinctively knew nonetheless.

Noah lifted his hand from the front of her dress and ran it down her leg, lifting the hem. His fingers felt like fire as he

crept up toward the plain cotton panties that were wet with her arousal.

He took the other nipple into his mouth, suckling her to the point of near pain, but she wanted more—this strange blend of pleasure-tipped pain. His cheeks hollowed as he sucked the peak into his mouth. At the same time, his wily fingers had managed to slip across her mons and he caressed her there, too, startling a gasp from her lips. "Noah," she whispered uncertainly.

"Shh. It's okay. You'll like this." He looked up at her and licked her nipple. "I promise."

No one had ever touched her there, not even Mike. Noah touched her softly, his fingers grazing over the top of her panties. "You're so wet," he said.

She looked into his vibrant eyes. "Is that bad?"

He shook his head. "Trust me, it's very good."

He slipped a finger inside the elastic of her panties, and then he stroked her where she burned. And Holy Mother, did that feel wonderful! She gasped. "Noah..."

"It's okay, baby. It's supposed to feel like this. Do you want me to keep touching you?"

"I'll kill you if you stop," she said breathlessly.

He chuckled at the same time he slid his finger along the folds of her, touching her core in such a way that she shot off her seat and moaned his name.

"I think I've found you're sweet spot," he said.

"I think you better hit it again."

He did, moving his finger in a circular motion that had a brilliant pressure building until she couldn't stand it.

"Noah ... Noah, something's happening. I..." The words ended on a long, strangled moan, and she fisted her hands in his hair as pleasure exploded where his fingers probed and spread throughout her body in pulsating waves.

Roxy's head felt limply against the headrest, and she closed her eyes on a sigh. "Oh, my God. Noah. What just happened?" She opened her eyes and looked down to find him smiling at her. "Was that normal?"

"Baby, you had an orgasm."

"I did?"

He lifted a brow. "Please tell me you've had an orgasm before."

She shook her head. "No." She smiled. "Now I know what all the fuss is about."

Noah sat up, taking care to tuck her shirt back in and secure the buttons on her jumper.

"What about you?" Roxy asked.

"What about me?"

Roxy blushed and nodded to the Georgia pine-sized erection tenting out his khakis.

"Don't you worry about me, baby. Just being the first man to make you come is enough to carry me over until I can do it all over again." He cleared his throat. "Uh, Rox? Are you a..."

"Virgin?"

He nodded.

"Yes."

"How?" he asked, incredulity in his voice. "How is that possible? You are a beautiful, amazingly sexy woman. What about that guy you were dating? Mitch?"

"Mike. I was 'saving' myself for marriage. We didn't do anything past kissing." She looked down at her hands. "He didn't really do it for me, I guess." She gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Obviously, I didn't do it for him, either."

"He was a fucking asshole."

Touched, Roxy brought her palm to Noah's face. "That goes without saying. Mary Lou says I'm too trusting."

"You are. But, that's not necessarily a bad trait, Stilts. It means you have faith in people; you believe in the good."

"Leave it to you to turn a horrid mistake into a life lesson." Roxy almost said, And I love you for that.

She drew in a sharp breath. Oh, Lord. She was in love with Noah. Had been for as long as she could remember. And now that she knew what it felt like to hold him, to kiss him ... the feelings were flooding her and like a dam with a leak, she couldn't keep them from bursting through.

"I want to make love to you, Roxanne."

Desire surged anew through her veins. "Um, uh, oh."

Noah laughed. "Not right now, but soon. Soon. I don't know how much more of this I can take." He looked at her with earnest blue eyes. "Okay?"

She smiled. "Yeah, I think I can get on board with that."

* * * *

"I think she's just some feminist lesbian who gets her rocks off by gettin' everyone's dander up," Mrs. Nolan declared.

Roxy decided one of the pitfalls of encouraging the women in Thorton to *Take charge!* of their lives was that attendance for her romance book group had dwindled.

Only four had shown tonight, including herself: Bobbie (a regular), Mary Lou (who took pity on Roxy) and old Mrs. Nolan (who Roxy suspected had merely come to get a look at the woman who'd dared leave Preston Abbot).

Roxy tried to take it in stride, but they ended up talking less about the book and more about the gossip that had sprung up from "that rotten Paula Rockwell" (this from Mrs. Nolan).

They'd finished *Pride and Prejudice* last week, and were onto a contemporary novel, one of her personal favorites. She fought back the surge of temper that threatened to erupt from the lack of coordination the gossip-fest had brought on.

"What I really liked about *Bet Me*, by Jennifer Crusie—" Roxy said (again).

"Maybe she's just a woman who's tired of men," Mary Lou interrupted (again).

Mrs. Nolan's rheumy blue eyes landed like heat-seeking missiles on Mary Lou's face. "Well, that would certainly make you a candidate, wouldn't it?"

"Watch it, old woman," Mary Lou shot back, earning a shocked stare from both Roxy and Bobbie. Mary Lou was nothing if not polite, because like she'd said, it's what good Southern girls were.

"Ladies, ladies. Let's just calm down," Bobbie said, another surprise. If there had ever been a person to upset the apple cart, it was Roberta Townsend.

"Why?" Mrs. Nolan, now well and truly pissed, demanded. "It's a well-known fact there ain't a woman in this county named Paula Rockwell, so we know she's writin' under a false name." She held up a wrinkled finger. "Secondly, the gal knows enough about this town, so it ain't like she's from Atlanta." The old woman eyed Bobbie. "Is she?"

"I'm sorry," Bobbie said, "I can't reveal confidential information."

"That's the sorriest bunch of bullshit I ever heard," Mrs. Nolan declared, and stood. She gathered a garishly colored macramé handbag and let out a huff. Shaking a finger at the three remaining women, she said, "You mark my words. That woman is gonna ruin this town. Things we're hummin' along just fine and dandy until she started makin' a stir." She leveled Bobbie with a hard stare. "And you'll feel the kick in the ass worst of all. Your father would be ashamed of you."

"Oh, bite me, you old biddy," Bobbie grumbled.

Roxy sighed and sank down into her chair, resigned to the fact that this week's book group was a complete wash.

* * * *

Blue smoke rose from the back of The Mighty Quinn, gliding up to the ceiling like a wraith, its fog-like tendrils reflecting in the mirror behind the bar.

Noah twisted his bottle of Bud and eyed Joe's gin and tonic. "Someone's been harassing Roxy."

Joe's black eyebrows lifted. "Really. Mary Lou didn't mention it."

"Speaking of which; what are your intentions with my sister?"

Joe looked Noah square in the eye. "I'm after making her wife."

Noah choked on his beer. "Wh-what?"

"You heard me."

Noah choked a bit more and tried to wrap his mind around Joe's declaration. "Okay, beyond the obvious: she's married. And if she divorces Preston, Lou doesn't need another husband at this point. I love you like a brother Joe, but my sister absolutely, positively does not need a man dictating her future. She's got wheelbarrows of bullshit with our father and that cocksucking husband of hers."

"With all due respect, Sheriff, I have no intention of dictating her future. In fact, after our date, I made it clear I just want to see her as a friend."

Noah sighed. "And now I've pissed you off." He cuffed his friend on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, buddy. But, she's my baby sister, and I'm kinda protective of her. She's had a rough life."

Joe met Noah's stare. "I'm not pissed off. Well, a little, maybe. But, I want you to know this. The only time I've ever felt this way about a woman was when I met Hannah. And as much as it pains me to admit it, I fell a lot harder with Lou. She doesn't remind me of Hannah, but she sure as hell makes me a happier man."

Noah lifted his hands. "Okay, 'nuff said." He took a drink of his beer. And swallowed gently this time. "Back to the original

topic. Roxy said someone followed her last Tuesday after her book group on the greenbelt."

"A jogger, maybe?"

"I thought so at first, but she said he called her name and laughed. Then he chased her." He sighed. "Now the tires. And that note. I don't know what's going on, but I expect it has to do with Preston. He's made his dislike for Roxy clear from the beginning, and blames her for Lou leaving him."

Joe scoffed. "What a load of bullshit."

"Yeah, I know, but the guy's a fucking head case. I'm keeping an eye on both Rox and Lou, since if it is Preston, he's going to be after getting his wife back."

"I can help you with that."

Noah slapped him on the back. "Let's start by going by the library and making sure they make it home all right."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

My family desperately needs a second car. Granted, we have one, but it's simply not big enough for three children. I want a minivan, but my husband refuses to even consider it. He thinks it makes him look old. His mother has tried talking to him, as have I, as well as his sister, but to no avail. I can't afford to do it myself, so I need his help. I don't know how much longer I can take this!

Signed, Needing A Bigger Car

Dear Bigger Car,

Can your mother-in-law or sister co-sign for you? There are lots of places online and otherwise where you can sell your old car. You can use the money from the smaller one and put it toward the payments. I'd suggest approaching your mother-in-law, especially if she's on your side. Pardon my bluntness, but your husband is being an ass. He needs to grow up and realize he has a family that requires his attention.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Thirteen

"The auditors we've hired have been finding some interesting discrepancies in the books, Preston," Harold Meyer said.

Preston sat in the visitor's chair in Meyer's office, feeling like a petulant child who'd been called to the principal's office. Which had happened to him quite often, as a matter of fact. "Could be the bookkeeper, you know."

"Who was your wife, which we had until seven years ago. The discrepancies started after you took over the books."

"What's your fucking point, Meyer?"

"I want to give you a chance to confess; tell the truth, as it were, before we bring in the FBI."

The Feds. Fuck me with a chainsaw.

"I don't know the hell you think you've got, but you're barking up the wrong tree." Preston stood, rage boiling his blood. He swept an arm around the lavishly appointed office. "I built this place. My money started this firm. If it weren't for me, you two would be public defenders in the courthouse barely making enough money to pay for your pitiful little house and Aaron's teenaged hookers."

Harold sighed. "Okay. I can see this was a mistake. I'd like you to leave, Preston. But, before you do, I want you to know the FBI is coming in on Thursday. You have until then to talk."

"Fuck your little head shrink bullshit. I'm outta here." On his way out, Preston kicked the visitor chair—which went a

long way toward making him feel better—and then stormed out of the firm. He walked to his hobbled Lexus, the anger still sparking out of control like a lit match on a trail of gasoline.

Across the street, he saw the front door of The Mighty Quinn open. Noah Kennedy and that wife-stealing, sonofabitching Joe Fuller exited, laughing as they walked down the front steps and headed west.

Preston waited until they had a good lead before he moved on to the sidewalk and followed them, making sure to blend in with the arborvitaes that lined the path.

He wasn't surprised when the men crossed the street and marched into the library parking lot. Noah, the heroic shit, had been waiting for Roxy that night on the greenbelt, so he hadn't been able to carry out his game like he'd wanted. And of course, she ran to him when her tires were slashed, so no doubt his ever-suspicious brother-in-law was performing his sworn duty to protect and serve.

What a crock.

Good thing he'd overheard Mary Lou and Roxy's conversation Sunday night, otherwise he might never have known Roxy was Paula Rockwell. Preston didn't know for sure if Noah had discovered that little tidbit of information. So, in all reality, he may not suspect anyone else but him.

Preston stood behind an old magnolia and watched Mary Lou and Roxy leave the library. He couldn't hear what they said, but it was obvious the women were surprised to find Noah and Joe waiting.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

He knew one thing; he might despise Roxy Palmer, but he flat-out hated Joe Fuller. And that little bastard was definitely out to steal Preston's property. *Another person out to fuck me over.*

As the women got into Roxy's Honda and drove off, he remembered a shopworn adage his grandmother, a soft, pitiful woman if there ever was one, had told him. *Preston, sweetie. You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar.*

Maybe he ought to take the old woman's advice.

* * * *

"Gotta big ole' delivery here for you," Ginny informed Mary Lou the following morning.

She looked up from her desk to see Ginny's head hidden behind an enormous flower arrangement. The dispatcher set them down on the credenza behind Mary Lou's desk and huffed.

Mary Lou spun around in her chair. Three dozen long-stemmed pink roses were mixed in with several white calla lilies, baby's breath and some sweet smelling hyacinths. She thought of Joe first, but then dismissed the idea because a.) he seemed like the kind of guy who'd pick a handful of wildflowers, and b.) he had no idea pink roses were her favorite.

Dread curled low in her belly.

"Looks like he's tryin' to win you back," Ginny said.

Mary Lou ignored Ginny and searched through the arrangement for a card. Preston's familiar handwriting blazed

across the fancy paper. *You will always be mine, as I am yours. I'm sorry.*—P.

She tossed the card and envelope into the shredder right as the phone on her desk rang. "Sheriff Kennedy's office, Mary Lou speaking."

"Did you get the flowers?" Preston asked.

"What did you do, follow the delivery boy?"

"I paid him an extra fifty to shuffle my order to the front."

How very like Preston; money was everything. "Yes, I received them. Thank you for the sentiment, but I'm not interested in your apologies. I believe I've made myself clear on several occasions. I don't want a reconciliation. Goodbye, Preston."

She replaced the handset with more force than necessary and picked up the arrangement. Turning to a shock-faced Ginny, she said, "Will you please dispose of these? I don't want them anywhere near me."

A moment of silence followed before Ginny shrugged. "Hell, I'll keep 'em."

"They're yours," Mary Lou said, and watched the dispatcher shake her head as she walked off.

Mary Lou's hands trembled as she stared blindly at her computer screen. Why had the simple act of flowers flustered her so?

Because it was completely out of character.

Sure, throughout their marriage, Preston showered her with gifts. Fancy perfume, jewelry, clothes, vacations. That was, she had come to discover, his way of expressing affection, if not love.

Did Preston still love her? Or was she just another possession?

Are you going to divorce Preston?

And wasn't that still the question of her life? She picked up the phone and dialed Roxy. "Hey, it's me."

"What's up?"

"Preston sent me a huge flower arrangement with a card that went something along the lines of 'you will always be mine and I yours' and blah blah blah. Plus, he apologized."

"Uh-oh."

"Yeah." Mary Lou chewed on her fingernail. That's what she loved about Rox; she'd jumped to the same conclusion.

"Any chance he's seen you with Joe?"

"I suppose anything's possible. It's not like we were discreet when we had dinner. Then there was the, you know, kissing thing."

"This is so not like Preston. He's like a big volcano covered by the veneer of Southern charm. Apologizing is not a good thing."

Mary Lou looked up as Noah came out of his office with Jackie Chambers, a.k.a. Fed Up in T-Town. "I gotta go. We need to brainstorm, though. Should I tell Noah?"

"No, he already thinks Preston is the one who's been harassing me—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. What?" Mary Lou lowered her voice. "Someone's been harassing you? Since when? And why in the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't you say you had to go?" Roxy asked in a high voice, the one that said she'd been caught in a lie and the time had come to jump ship.

"We are going to talk about this tonight. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mama."

Mary Lou hung up the phone for the second time in five minutes. Her brother was speaking to Jackie Chambers in the hallway.

"Mr. MacAlister has decided not to press charges, Miz Chambers, as you know. Although I don't agree with your method, I think this may have been a wake-up call for your relationship."

Jackie Chambers snorted like Noah's comment was the funniest damn thing she'd ever heard. "You tell Buck the Butthead he can take his 'relationship' and shove it straight up his ass! I'm movin' out this weekend. Hell, maybe I'll start me up my own little bead and sew shop. On my own." She shook her finger at Noah and Mary Lou winced. "Paula Rockwell is right on the money. She knows. We don't need any of you boneheaded cavemen 'taking care' of us." She grinned. "Present company excluded, of course."

Noah folded his arms across his chest and frowned. "Of course. Well, whatever you decide, best of luck to you. But, let me leave you with a piece of advice. Next time you have a beef with someone, don't let it build up until it blows up in your face, okay?"

Mary Lou winced again. He'd just described Roxy's reason for exploding with the feminist path of the righteousness format for the Paula Rockwell column.

Mary Lou hoped, for both their sakes, if Noah ever discovered Roxy's secret, he would get past his obstinacy before it destroyed their burgeoning romance.

* * * *

"So what's this I hear about you being harassed?" Mary Lou demanded. She looked ever like the clucking mother hen; hands on her hips, toe tapping, stern expression on her face. "And why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to worry you. You've already got enough on your plate. Fretting about me isn't going to help.

"The Gazette break-in? It wasn't vandalism, Lou. Someone busted in there to steal my information." Roxy took a breath. "And now they have it."

"Shit." Mary Lou sank down on the sofa.

"What's worse is that Noah thinks Preston's behind all of this."

Mary Lou held up a hand. "Two things. Where the hell is his brain, and what harassment has been going on?"

"Noah thinks your leaving Preston was my idea, so he's getting back at me."

"I repeat: where the hell is my brother's brain? Preston wouldn't stoop so low as to harass you. Sure, he wants me back, but only because I left." She waved a hand. "Now tell me what's happening."

Roxy filled Mary Lou in on the pranks carried out. When Roxy was finished, Mary Lou said, "Well, that explains the tires." She stood and approached Roxy. "I really wish you'd come to me. That's what friends are for, right?"

Roxy nodded and breathed a sigh of relief when Lou hugged Roxy tight. "I'm sorry. I won't keep anything from you anymore."

"It's okay. I'm not so sure I wouldn't have done the same thing." She withdrew. "But, I'm with you. I don't think Preston's capable of this sort of thing. He's too self-absorbed; he'd rather wallow in it than perform any kind of action."

"I can't tell Noah about the reason behind the break-in; then he'll know about the column."

"And there goes Roxy and Noah," Mary Lou surmised.

"Exactly."

"We'll figure out something, Rox. I don't think whoever it is wants to hurt you, just scare you." Mary Lou blew out a breath. "At any rate, it's been a long, taxing day, and I'm headin' to bed. You comin'?"

Roxy shook her head. "I have a column to finish."

She paused. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. The gal who torched her truck? It was Fed-Up In T-Town. Jackie Chambers. I've seen her in town a couple of times."

Roxy's heart dropped. "Oh, no. Please tell me you're joking."

"No. But it's not your fault. She took matters into her own hands."

"That's what I told her to do! And I wasn't talking about arson." Roxy dropped her head into her hands and shook it.

"What if someone was hurt?" She lifted her head. "This has to stop."

"Don't worry too much. You don't control what people do. And as for this other matter, we'll get to the bottom of it. Without Noah."

As Roxy watched her friend climb the stairs, she wasn't so sure.

Later, as she finished her column, Roxy decided she felt good for Jackie Chambers, well, beside the whole arson thing, but something about it, some part she couldn't quite put her finger on, unsettled her. Though it sounded like good news—the kind of progress she had hoped for when she'd taken on this whole mess—it didn't feel like good news.

And Roxy didn't quite know why.

She finished the column and made the necessary changes and revisions before backing it up on a CD and printing it out. She slid her feet into a pair of flip-flops and headed next door.

Bobbie answered the door in a gray caftan and wool slippers, as if it was the middle of winter instead of the dog days of a Southern summer.

Roxy handed her both the disc and the hard copy.

"What's got you down, kiddo?" Bobbie asked.

"Down?" Roxy asked. "I'm not down. Just tired, I guess."

"Well, this oughta cheer you up. I heard today Charlene Granger filed for divorce and put the Primrose Valley house on the market. She's moving to Atlanta to get her degree. Can you believe it?"

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

The unsettling feeling from minutes ago returned, magnified and made her downright morose. "Really?"

"Yeah. And you're the one responsible!"

"But, it wasn't me, Bobbie. Obviously, she had issues way before I wrote that article."

"Yes, but like I've been trying to drive into that stubborn head of yours, you were the catalyst. Now, go on home and have a glass of wine. Congratulate yourself on a job well done."

Roxy nodded, feeling strangely numb, and headed down the front steps.

"And keep up the good work!" Bobbie called out right before she shut the door.

Roxy trudged across the lawn and went back into her own house but bypassed the wine, taking the stairs instead. She needed to lie down.

But, sleep eluded her.

She lay awake for several hours, trying to figure out exactly what was so troublesome about the rash of good change her column had created.

This was what she wanted, right?

Yes, she assured herself. It caused chaos, sure, but the only thing constant was change, so the disruption was inevitable.

Then, why did she feel like she was the one being left behind?

* * * *

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Sitting under the shade of a live oak on the greenbelt the next afternoon, it hit her. As she dove into her turkey and swiss on rye, Roxy realized that while helping the women of Thorton find themselves was satisfying, it wasn't why she'd begun rewriting her column in the first place.

It had all started with the life-long dream of owning a bookstore. And then being turned down for her business loan by a patronizing, misogynistic asshole who then subtly threatened her when she suggested getting her financing elsewhere.

So what had she done? She'd gone home and channeled her anger into a newspaper column, for crying out loud. Instead of taking action for her own sake, she had created a whole other disaster. Yes, it seemed for the better, but where did it leave her?

In the exact damn place she started.

Well, to hell with that. Tomorrow, she was driving to Jacksonville. Or Valdosta. It didn't matter. She'd drive to Tallahassee if she had to. She would reapply for a business loan, and she'd take on Merle Granger.

She'd do what she should have done two weeks ago. Turn her dream into a reality. To hell with Merle Granger and his stupid city council.

* * * *

Two years ago, the Main Street Diner had purchased a fancy espresso machine. It took the owners one of those years to figure out how to operate it.

Now, however, the diner served mean lattes, fabulous cappuccinos and heavenly mochas.

Mary Lou didn't know which Joe preferred, so she bought one of each and strode down Main with a cardboard drink carrier in her hands, her steps bouncing in excitement. She sort of dug this friend thing. Sure, she wanted to sleep with him. Hell, she wasn't dead. But, she liked that he didn't push; that he'd suggested they keep it light until she decided what she wanted to do. It showed a depth of character that was refreshing and severely lacking in her love life.

Mary Lou stepped inside the Fuller's Garage. Jack Richter stopped his air gun and peeked out from under a Nissan Pathfinder. He nodded gravely. "Mary Lou. Joe's in his office."

"Thanks," she replied to Joe's mysterious employee, then picked her way through the garage and knocked on Joe's door.

"Come in," was the terse reply.

She winced. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. She still had time to dash back to the SO. *Come on, Lou. Quit being such a chicken.*

She pushed the door open and smiled tentatively at Joe, who wore a scowl on the handsome face she'd come to adore. His dark hair was pulled in tufts as if he'd been running his hands through it.

"What?" he barked, his eyes on his computer screen.

O-kay. Definitely should've made a run for it.

"I, um, just brought you something."

At the sound of her voice, his eyes shot upward and his face softened. "Mary Lou," he said, the pleasure in his voice

bolstering her courage. "Sorry. I'm going over the books. I keep telling myself to hire a bookkeeper, but that's tantamount to admitting I'm a failure."

Mary Lou shook her head as she took a seat in the visitor's chair, setting the cardboard carrier on the desk. "No, it means you're human and you need help. You know, I used to do the books for Preston's firm. I could help you out if you need it."

"For real?" He looked so earnest and relieved she couldn't help but laugh. "But, aren't you busy at Noah's office?"

"I'm terribly efficient and not afraid to admit it. Plus, it'll give me something to do."

"It's yours, then." He lifted his hands from the keyboard like it had burned him. Joe eyed the steaming cups on his desk. "What's that?"

A blush crept up Mary Lou's neck. "I thought you might like some coffee. The diner has some pretty good espresso, but I didn't know what you prefer." She blushed deeper. "So, I brought you a selection."

Joe stared at her, his heart turning slowly in his chest. It was done. He had thought so last weekend on the greenbelt, but now, it was official.

He'd fallen in love with Mary Lou Abbot.

All the things he wanted to say were lodged in his throat, and he feared if he opened his mouth those words would come tumbling out and send Mary Lou running from his office.

In the end, he picked a cup at random and took a sip. It tasted like chocolate, caramel and coffee, and it was the best damn thing he'd ever had. "Thank you, Mary Lou. This was really nice of you."

She blushed prettily again. God, he loved it when she blushed. *I am in so much trouble here.* "You want to go outside? Get some air? The A/C's on the fritz again, and it's getting stuffy." Actually, that was a lie, but Joe didn't think he could stand another minute being this close to her without touching her. Especially after his vow not to, at least not until she made the decision to divorce Preston.

She nodded, as if she, too, couldn't take the close proximity. He led the way, making sure to kick aside a few errant air hoses and wrenches. Outside, the temperature hovered close to ninety, but as if by tacit agreement, neither of them mentioned it. Joe motioned to the side of the building to a picnic table and benches.

"What did you decide on?" she asked.

"Huh?"

She nodded at his drink.

"Oh. I think it's some kind of mocha."

"How've you been?"

This is bordering on uncomfortable. Sipping his mocha, he nodded. "Good. Business is good. Aside from the bookkeeping, that is. But, now that's a headache you've so graciously taken from my shoulders."

"Someone is stalking Roxy," Mary Lou blurted.

"Noah told me. He thinks it's your husband."

"Preston wouldn't do that. He wants me back, but he's not violent."

Joe arched a brow. "Didn't he attack Roxy in the parking lot of his firm a few weeks back?"

She blew out a breath. "There is that. So, I suppose he is violent. But, what man isn't?"

Me. Another thought occurred to him, this one much more frightening. "He never..."

Mary Lou shook her head. "I was nothing more than a possession to Preston, and he likes to keep his things shiny and beautiful."

Bastard.

As if they'd conjured him by their conversation, a busted up Lexus pulled into the drive. Preston Abbot unfolded his lanky frame from the car and stalked towards them. "What the fuck do you think you're doing with my wife, asshole?"

Joe rose and stood in front of Mary Lou, and planting his feet as her husband approached. Fury came off him in waves Joe could feel from twenty feet away. Mary Lou stood as well, intending to move between the two men, but Joe grabbed her arm and pushed her behind him.

"Don't you touch her," Preston hissed. "She's mine. Do you hear me, you idiot mechanic? Mine."

She moved from behind Joe and glared at her husband. "I am not yours, Preston. How many times do I have to tell you? LEAVE. ME. ALONE!"

Preston charged forward with startling speed and grabbed his wife's arms before Joe had a chance to react. He shook her roughly. "What is the matter with you? I gave you everything you ever wanted!"

"Not everything," she said, so soft Joe almost didn't hear her.

He moved between the couple and pulled Mary Lou from Preston's grip. "Jack!" he shouted, only to find his mechanic had already rounded the building. "Grab this fucking asshole, will ya?"

Jack, a big, bruising guy ran up. He twisted Preston's arms behind him. He fought, his rage making him strong and dangerous. Jack wrestled him to the ground, and simply sat on his back.

"You know you're just a pity fuck, don't you?" Preston spat. "She doesn't want you. She wants to see how the other half lives; have a little blue collar fuck, and then she'll be back." His crazed glare landed on Mary Lou. "You'll be back, you stupid bitch. And you'll be goddamn lucky if take your slutty ass back."

Joe walked over to where Preston lay prone on the ground. He squatted on his haunches and got into his face. "Now you listen here, you ignorant piece of shit. If I ever hear you talk to Mary Lou that way again, I'll break your arms. If you ever touch her again, I'll fucking kill you." He said it easily, as if he was speaking to a customer or someone at the bank, but his own rage was barely banked. "We clear, asshole?"

"Fuck you."

"Yeah, I feel you there." Joe rose and walked to where Mary Lou stood watching, pale-faced and shaking. "Let's get the hell out of here."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

Every year my husband and I go on vacation. The problem is, he always picks the locale. Whenever I suggest something, he balks. He only wants to go somewhere he can golf—which is what he spends the entire time doing anyway. How do I convince him there's other places to go?

Signed, Vacated But Not Vacationing

Dear Vacationing,

GO BY YOURSELF! Pick your favorite destination—some place you've always dreamed of going, and take a much needed vacation from your husband. Separate vacations, especially when he won't consider your wants, can be a good thing. Maybe then he'll see reason. Good luck!

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Fourteen

Noah was standing impatiently next to Mary Lou's desk, waiting for his lunch when Joe came into the anteroom, his arms around his sister. Tears streaked her pale face, and she trembled violently.

Every protective instinct when on alert and leapt forward. "What happened?"

"Preston Abbott," Joe said through clenched teeth.

In the two years he'd been friends with Joe Fuller, Noah had never once seen the easy going, laid-back man speak so much as an angry word. But Noah could see his friend was furious and holding it back on a very tight leash.

"Joe..."

"No, Lou. He needs to know what that sonofabitch did."

Noah watched indecision play over his sister's face before she nodded. "I know. You're right."

"Do you want to tell him, or should I?"

At this point, whatever had happened was immaterial; Noah wanted to tear out of the SO and strangle the bastard, Sheriff or no.

"Joe and I were having coffee on my lunch break," she began, then winced. "Oh, I forgot your burger."

Noah waved a hand. "Doesn't matter. Go on."

As his baby sister recounted the incident, Noah fought to stay impartial, which was goddamned hard considering what he wanted to do. But, he tried to keep a cool head, reminding

himself that as Sheriff, he had no place beating his brother-in-law to a meaty pulp.

No matter how satisfying.

"What happened then?"

"I walked Mary Lou back to the SO," Joe said, "and I told Jack to wait ten minutes before he let him go." Joe leveled him with a stare. "Might be you want to have a chat with that man. Next time, he could do worse than shake her up."

Noah approached his sister and lifted the sleeves of her white polo shirt and examined the bruises Preston had left behind. He'd had to have shaken her hard to leave that kind of damage.

Rage boiled anew.

He searched his pants for his keys. "You stay here with Lou," he told Joe. "I'm going to find Preston and haul him in for assault and battery."

"No," Mary Lou said.

He stared at his sister. "Why the hell not?" he fairly shouted. "Look at your arms! Look at what he did to you."

"I'm not pressing charges."

Noah pinched the bridge of his nose and stared up at the ceiling in frustration. "What is wrong with you?"

"If you arrest him, it'll just make him angrier."

"That's the point, Lou. If I don't arrest him, think of what he'll do next time."

"Next time, he'll go after Joe," she said quietly.

Joe's face softened, and he slipped an arm around Mary Lou. "Don't worry about me, baby. I can handle Preston."

She shook her head. "I'm not pressing charges, Noah. You can't make me." She untangled herself from Joe's embrace and searched her desk with wild eyes. "Can I please have the rest of the day off?"

"Sure," Noah said, resigned. "I want to state for the record that I think you're making a real big mistake here."

"Duly noted, Sheriff." She grabbed her purse and walked out the door.

"You go talk to him anyway," Joe said, and took off after Mary Lou.

Oh, he'd talk to Preston Abbot. That worthless motherfucker would be sorry he'd ever married his baby sister.

* * * *

"I waited for half and hour and you never showed," Roxy said as she walked into the house and saw Mary Lou curled up on the big armchair.

"I left work early."

Roxy took one look at Mary Lou's pale face, dropped her bag at the door and rushed over. Squatting down, she took Mary Lou's icy hands in her own. "What happened?"

"Preston found me with Joe, and there was an incident."
Oh, crap.

After Mary Lou explained the situation, Roxy asked, "Has he tried calling? Coming over?"

Mary Lou shook her head. "Joe drove me home and sat with me. He left about five minutes ago." Fresh tears pricked her eyes. "I made him go. We had a big argument about him

trying to protect me when I didn't need protecting and yada yada yada."

"Men," Roxy said with a sigh. "I'll go get the wine." A moment later, she returned with two large wine glasses and an open bottle of Chardonnay. "Well, you've had a hell of a day, I see. Things just keep getting better and better for us, huh? So much for 'owning our power'," she said with disgust.

"We sure made a mess of things, didn't we?"

Roxy took a healthy sip of wine. "I had an epiphany today."

Mary Lou lifted a brow. "Do tell."

"I realized that instead of giving up on my bookstore idea, I should've kept moving forward." She motioned with her glass. "And not by writing those damned articles."

"But, look at all you've done, Rox."

"Yeah, but it's all for other people. Hey, I'm all for altruism, but where the hell has it gotten me? Stuck in the Thorton Library with the Dark Mistress."

"Well?"

"I'm taking tomorrow off to reapply for the business loan. Maybe in Jacksonville or Valdosta."

Mary Lou smiled brilliantly. "That's good news. I'm proud of you. And you know what? That works perfectly because I'm taking tomorrow off, too."

"Why?"

"I'm filing for divorce. I made an appointment with a divorce lawyer in Valdosta for tomorrow at one."

Thank God. "Great minds and all that."

They toasted each other. "To reowning our power as women," Mary Lou declared and Roxy laughed.

"Or die trying, anyway."

* * * *

Noah decided to wait until Friday to approach Preston. It had taken a six-pack and a Braves game to calm down enough to allow reason to take over.

Mary Lou blew off work for reasons she wouldn't explain, so he was short-staffed, but he had Ginny working double-duty. Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't have made a difference, but between Preston and the mess Paula Rockwell had created, he needed all his people available.

He pulled the Explorer into the driveway of the Primrose Valley house his sister had lived in for twelve years. Preston's busted Lexus sat parked in front of the expansive three-car garage.

Good.

The house reminded him of his mother's; cold, uninviting and full of priceless possessions. Until recently, his sister had been one of them. He'd never understood how she could stand to live in such a place; why she'd never added her own warm decorating touches. But, with a controlling dick for a husband, she hadn't been granted many privileges in that respect.

Resting his left hand on the butt of his pistol he strolled up the front walk and rapped on the door. He heard stumbling inside followed by a stream of blue curses before the door wrenched open.

Preston threw up an arm to fend off the bright sun and glared at Noah. "Oh, for fuck's sake. What now?"

His brother-in-law looked like shit, which put a little kernel of joy in Noah's heart. Preston wore a wrinkled polo shirt and khaki shorts. The eyes staring back at Noah were bloodshot, and his face was scraped on the right side, blood crusting over the wound like rough gravel.

Noah smiled cheerfully. "Just wanted to have a chat with you, Preston. Nothin' wrong with that, is there?"

Preston eyed him suspiciously. "You're not here to arrest me?"

"Oh, you mean for roughing up my sister? Much as I'd like to, no. For some strange reason, she's decided not to press charges."

Preston smiled. Noah had to check the urge to drive his fist through the other man's already battered face. "Can I come in or you want to do this out here?"

Preston grumbled and opened the door, stalking off into the kitchen, leaving Noah to follow. The interior looked like a tornado had dropped right down on 2351 Primrose Lane. There were empty bottles of rum and whiskey scattered on the floor like so much trash. Fancy decorative pillows had been scored down the middle, their stuffing strewn around the room.

The place reeked.

As he ambled into the kitchen, Noah asked, "Maid's week off?"

"I fired her."

"Why?"

"She's a stupid bitch. Just like all women." Preston reached up into a cabinet and pulled down a bottle of Jim Beam. A highball glass rested on the messy counter. He tore at the seal and poured five fingers into the glass. "What do you want?"

"Couple things. First off, Miz Palmer's been on the receiving end of some nasty pranks, and I'm kinda thinkin' you know something about it."

Preston's face remained impassive. He lifted the highball glass and took a long swallow. "I don't give a rat's ass about that woman."

"See, I've got evidence to the contrary, Preston. You engaged in a physical confrontation with her a couple weeks ago, and she told me you approached her and Lou in the library parking lot last Friday."

"So what? I wanted to talk to Mary Lou. Miz Palmer won't allow me to speak to my own wife."

"Well, considering the way you treated her yesterday, I'd say that's probably a good idea. Now, I'm not accusing here, just givin' you fair warning. If you're the one who's been hassling Roxy, you're gonna be dealin' with me."

"Whatever," Preston said, and knocked back the rest of his whiskey. He filled the glass again.

"You better watch it with that stuff. Don't imagine you being inebriated all the time's gonna help with your little embezzlement problem."

Preston narrowed his eyes. "There is no problem. Those idiots are just looking for a patsy."

"The second thing I want to talk to you about is that little incident at Joe's yesterday."

Preston tensed, and Noah knew he was rearing up for a fight. He held up a hand. "Relax. I'm not going to beat you up." *No matter how much I want to.* "I am the law, after all."

"It was a misunderstanding," Preston mumbled, still tense.

"I don't really believe that, and I'd lay odds you feel the same way. Sure, I'd be pissed if my wife was hanging around another man." A better man. "But, you've got to remember: your wife left you, and you were screwing around first."

Preston's face turned scarlet. His jaw set and Noah could hear him grinding his teeth. He bet Preston wanted to beat the crap out of him here and now, but was, amazingly, smart enough to know when to hold back. "I don't know why Mary Lou didn't press charges, but you can bet your ass that if you ever lay a hand on her again, I will haul you in so fast your head'll spin. And I won't give you your own cell this time." He smiled wolfishly. "Naw, I'll put you in with the rest of the criminals." He eyed Preston. "I bet those scrappy Southern boys would find a pretty boy like you a mighty fine prize." He stared hard at his brother-in-law. "We clear?"

Preston was silent for a few moments before he nodded tersely.

"Okay," Noah said. "Glad we got that straightened out. I'll let myself out."

* * * *

Mary Lou's appointment with the divorce lawyer, a tiny, efficient looking woman named Betsy Campbell, went so well

she wanted stand up right there in the conference room and dance a jig. The initial paperwork would be filed Monday and by the end of next week, Preston would be served.

Her father, less concerned for Mary Lou than his money, had insisted upon a pre-nup before their wedding, so thankfully, there wouldn't be a problem with assets. She had come into the marriage with a lot more than Preston. Even if they hadn't had a set agreement, if she had to give up half of her trust just to get out of the marriage, then so be it.

Then, there was that rumor floating about that Preston had gotten into trouble with an embezzlement scheme at his firm. Seven years ago, Preston had come home from work and informed her that she was no longer in charge of his books. He had offered no explanation, just stating that it wasn't her concern any longer. Given the fact that he was now under investigation, Mary Lou had a sneaking suspicion she knew why he had taken the job from her; so he could alter the books for his benefit. She wouldn't put it past her soon-to-be ex-husband—God, it felt great to say that!—to steal from his own company. It didn't matter that the man already had millions. Money was, and always would be, everything to Preston. Mary Lou had never quite figured out why, but it wasn't her problem anymore.

She was free.

Mary Lou floated down the street from the lawyer's office, her heart so light and happy it was as if the missing air of oppression had lifted her two feet off the ground.

She found Roxy sitting outside the bank on a concrete bench facing a fountain fashioned to look like metal salmon

jumping in the stream. She plopped down beside her, wincing at the heated seat. "It's done," Mary Lou sang and wiped her brow. "It was so easy, I don't why I didn't do it sooner. He'll be served by the end of next week." She turned and saw Roxy's face. "Uh-oh. What's wrong?"

"They turned me down."

"Again? What the hell is wrong with these people?"

"What Merle failed to mention while he patted my head and sent me on my merry way was that in order to get the business loan, I have to have that parcel of land secured—hence the loan—but after that, I need permits from the county to build."

Roxy looked so lost and disappointed, Mary Lou put her arms around her and gave her a big hug. "Well, that sucks, sweetie."

"It's my own fault. I should have researched all of this beforehand. I'm a librarian for goodness sake. If I can't even make it past this part, how in hell am I supposed to run a business?"

"Now, Roxanne Palmer, you stop talking like that. You made a mistake. Big deal. So we find another way."

"I guess I'll have to call my parents," she mumbled.

"Why?"

Roxy sighed and stared up at the light blue sky. "For the down payment. I wanted to avoid that seeing as my history for handling money hasn't been stellar."

"You mean Mike Matthews?"

She nodded, tears welling in her eyes.

"Rox, it's not your fault that jerk ran off with Bitsy Maynard and your money."

"Well, he couldn't have taken my money if I hadn't put him on my checking account."

The woman did have a point. But, it didn't make her stupid, just a little careless in love. "That was over three years ago. And you've learned your lesson, right?"

Roxy laughed through her tears. "Oh, yeah." She dropped her head into her hands and mumbled, "What am I going to do?"

From the time they were in their early teens, Roxy wanted to own a bookstore. As time passed, she'd decided to add a coffee shop or a café onto it, which Mary Lou had always thought was a fabulous idea. There were just two places in Thorton to eat: The Mighty Quinn and The Main Street Diner. One little café wouldn't provide much competition.

As Mary Lou stared at the trickling fountain that sat before them, she thought of all of the things she'd wanted to do: go to art school, stay in Paris for a couple of months embracing and studying the beauty of the paintings there. Things she'd never been allowed to do because she had a controlling husband.

No, scratch that. If she was honest, she could have done all of those things. She just hadn't had the will to stand up to Preston. She'd had the means. She could've traveled the world twice over, and it wouldn't have put a dent in her trust...

"Roxy."

Head still in her hands, Roxy grumbled unintelligibly.

"I'll loan you the money."

Roxy's head shot up, and she stared at her friend. "No. No, you won't."

"Why not?"

"I don't want your pity, that's why."

Mary Lou's back went up. "The last time I checked, we were best friends." She pointed a finger at said best friend. "Don't think for one second that I pity you. That's absolute bullshit. And it's not just for you. You have an awesome dream, kiddo, one I think will really take off. I'd like to help you and be a part of it."

When Roxy remained silent, Mary Lou sighed. "Okay, how about a business partner? I could front the start-up costs, and I'll get a larger stipend of the profit. Sound fair?"

Tears stained Roxy's cheeks. "Why are you doing this for me?"

"Like I said, I want to be part of something important. You're the closest thing I have to a sister and I love you, kid. Let me do this. Let me help you. Think of all the fun we'll have."

Mary Lou knew the precise moment Roxy caved. She wiped her eyes and smiled. "God, we would have a blast, wouldn't we?"

Mary Lou stood and reached out a hand. "Let's go see if we can find a business lawyer to write something up while we're here anyway."

Roxy stared at her outstretched hand and clasped it in her own. "Okay. Partner."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

My husband and I both have full time jobs. The problem is, he thinks I should do all of the housework and cleaning. Not only that, he wants me to cook dinner, too. He thinks that just because his work is more physical than mine (he works at the mill, I'm a nurse) that I'm responsible for what he refers to as "women's work." How do I convince him it's fifty-fifty without breaking his neck in the process?

Signed, Never Ending Frustration

Dear Never Ending,

What in the HELL is it with the men in this town? I swear to God, I have never met/heard of a more misogynistic, lazy bunch. Is it just me, or aren't we in the twenty-first century? The days of "women's work" went to the wayside decades ago. Why haven't the men's attitudes gone as well? Here's my advice: stop doing it. See how he likes. When he gets nasty, tell him he has two hands and two feet; he can damn well do it himself. See how he likes it.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Fifteen

It was done.

Mary Lou had filed for divorce, and would back Roxy for the bookstore as her business partner. They drove back to Thorton, steely determination in Mary Lou's baby blue eyes, hesitation and discouragement in Roxy's.

Halfway home, Roxy burst into tears.

"Oh, no, sweetie. What's the matter? Are you upset because I'm paying for it?" Mary Lou asked.

Roxy shook her head. "Well, a little. But, like you said, we're business partners. And I really like that idea, the two of us running it. It's just that ... I've dreamed of this for so long, and after Merle turned me down ... I never thought it would happen."

"Well, it's happening, so get used to it." She laughed without humor. "I know what you mean about dreams, though."

"Art school?"

Mary Lou nodded wistfully.

"There's still time for that, you know. I mean, we're only thirty. I'm sure there's an art school somewhere in Georgia." Roxy brightened. "Hey, you could start painting again, and we could sell them in the bookstore."

Her friend took a breath. "I got my big wish today. Let's take this one step at a time, okay? Speaking of which, would you mind dropping me off at Joe's place?"

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Roxy checked her watch. "At his house?" she asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

Mary Lou gave her a purely licentious smile. "Why not?"

* * * *

Roxy honked and drove off, leaving Mary Lou standing on Joe's front porch with a thundering heart and a bad case of self-doubt.

His truck was parked in the drive, which she took as a good sign. With a fortifying breath, she knocked.

He answered almost immediately, his dark hair mussed, a bottle of beer in his left hand. He wore a pair of cargo shorts and a white, ribbed tank that defined every inch of his amazing chest. She realized she had never seen him in anything but his uniform.

The self-doubt fled and she leapt into his arms, raining kisses over his face. The bottle was icy on her back but she didn't care. All she cared about was this man whom she wanted bad.

He seemed to have forgotten their friendship pact, using her body to shut the door. After putting his beer down, his mouth sank down on hers, his tongue tangling hotly as it chased hers. In her position, she felt the exact effect she had on him, and she reveled in the power of it.

His lips nipped and licked a blazing trail down her throat as his hands got busy on the buttons of her blouse. When he parted the silk, he breathed, "My God, Lou. You're beautiful." He lifted his head and met her eyes, his senses seeming to have returned. "What's all this?"

"I filed for divorce today."

A dazzling smile broke out on his face, as refreshing as a ray of warm sunshine after a bitter, cold winter. She couldn't stand to be without his touch, so she leaned in for another kiss, this time going for the gusto: no holds barred, teeth-clacking, lips smashing, tongues twisting.

She felt the desire pool instantly between her legs, her reaction to this man so strong. She longed to have his hands on her body; those rough, hardworking hands shaping and molding her aching breasts, fingers slipping into her wet panties.

But, instead of satisfying her deep, dark and wanton desires, he broke the kiss and moved away. With trembling fingers, he slipped the buttons back into their holes until she was fully clothed again and completely confused.

His expression was unreadable and doubts began to cloud her mind. Had he only wanted her because she was a married woman? She'd never thought of Joe Fuller that way, even when she hadn't known him well, but was it possible? Now that the risk of being caught had gone, did he no longer want her?

Mary Lou let out a pent up breath. She moved back against the door, trying to blend in with it, to disappear along with her hurt, confusion and disappointment. "What is it?" she asked in a small voice, hating herself for feeling this way, for letting Preston to turn her into this timid woman. "Don't you want me?"

Joe huffed out a frustrated breath and ran a hand through his unruly hair. He gestured downward. "I think it's pretty obvious how badly I want you right now, Lou."

"Then what's the matter?"

He sighed again. "I'm so glad you filed for divorce. I'm doing cartwheels in my head right now. But, you're not just some random fling, and it's been a long time for me. I guess ... I just want to take it slow." His dark chocolate gaze was unwavering as he met her eyes. "You're special, Mary Lou. I don't want to risk spoiling whatever—" He gestured between the two of them "—it is we might have."

Mary Lou stared at him. And it happened.

Her heart danced right out of her chest and into Joe Fuller's palm. That he cared enough to cherish what they had ... that he thought they had a future—whatever that may be—spoke volumes. And she was learning that not all men were like her father and Preston Abbot.

There were good men. Men like Noah. And men like Joe.

Her heart swelled with love, and she offered him a weak smile. It was either that or start crying. "But, no more of this 'friends' stuff, okay?" she told him. "I want to start dating you. Seriously."

He pulled her into his arms and held on as though he might never let go, and Mary Lou had never felt so cherished and safe in her life.

"You couldn't stop me if you tried," he said.

* * * *

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

It was after eight when Roxy pulled her car into the drive. Disappointment speared through her when she didn't see Noah's Explorer. Of course, neither she nor Mary Lou had indicated where they had gone or why they had suddenly taken Friday off.

With Mary Lou out for the time being, it'd seemed like the perfect time to change her status as a virgin.

She gathered her things and headed up to front porch, but took a detour at the last minute since she didn't really feel like chatting with Bobbie tonight. Not after the emotionally taxing day she'd had.

Roxy slipped her key in the side door leading into the garage and opened it up. The darkness was thick and sultry from the heat of the day and overwhelming, like a blanket of black smoke had settled upon the large room.

Something was not right.

She didn't know why or how, but Roxy knew with a certainty that something was wrong. She grabbed her cell phone from her tote and dropped her bag on the floor. Using her sense of touch to move, she walked to the end of her father's workbench and felt along the edge of it that led to the inner door of the house.

At the cement steps, she leaned off to one side, held her breath and listened. Noises sounded from the interior of her home: a clatter here, a crash there.

Someone is inside my house.

And why was the intruder still inside when it was obvious she had arrived home?

What in the world was she going to do? She needed to call Noah and alert him. No, no, no. The first thing she needed to do was get the hell out of the house. Fast.

No, screw that. This was her house. She'd lived on her own for seven years. If someone was in there, she was going to have to learn to protect herself.

As quietly as possible, she sent a text message to Noah along with a silent prayer that he received it. Then, she dialed his number and tucked the phone in her pocket, hoping he was on the line and listening. Or at the very least, recording this on his voice mail.

Her fingers brushed across a pair of pruning shears on the wall rack, and her lips trembled into a shaky smile. She'd cut his dick off if she had to.

From the pocket of her jumper, she heard the distant sound of Noah's voice, and he was screaming what sounded a lot like, "Get the fuck out of the house!"

Not before I prove to this jackass that I'm no dummy.

Roxy mounted the steps leading from the garage into her kitchen and placed an ear to the door. The sounds had stopped. She took a deep breath, raised the shears in one hand, and turned the doorknob with the other.

Roxy stepped inside the kitchen, expecting a full attack. Some faceless person coming at her with a knife. Visions of what the intruder had in store for her—torture, rape and murder—ran through her head like a loop.

She checked the bathroom—empty. As was the pantry and the rear staircase leading upstairs. No intruder lay in wait in any of the rooms above.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

She sighed with relief and carefully moved down the front staircase, still not convinced the person had left. When she got into the living room, she saw her front door lay wide open.

The clanks and clatters she'd heard from inside the garage were the sounds of her pretty collectible bottles toppling to the floor. The antique hutch containing her tiny statues of dragons, fairies and other mythical creatures lay on its face; crystal spread out like a glass mosaic, scattered about the hardwood floor.

In the kitchen, the small herb garden she'd cultivated on the windowsill above the sink had been thrown to the floor; the ceramic pots shattered, the verdant herbs smashed as though someone had stomped the helpless plants under a boot.

With fury.

"Roxy!"

She started at Noah's booming voice and turned toward the living room. He was headed up the stairs when she pushed through the swinging door, and his gaze shot down, pure terror on his face as his foot stopped its ascent.

He ran down the stairs and scooped her into his arms, burying his face in her neck. "Oh, God. Oh, Jesus."

She lifted a hand and rubbed his back. "It's okay. I'm okay."

"I thought you were dead." He shuddered out a breath. Noah pulled back and searched her face as though he needed to see for himself that she was alive.

"I'm okay," she repeated. "He left before I saw him."

Noah ran a hand through his hair and blew out another breath. Then went into cop-mode. "Okay, tell me what happened." He held up a hand. "Wait a sec." Speaking into the microphone attached to his shoulder, he called in the crime. "Ginny, dispatch two deputies to Roxanne Palmer's house on Tiger Lily Lane. There's been a break-in. Tell them to bring the forensics kit, too. Over."

"I'm sending Deputies Thompkins and Moreno, Sheriff. Over."

He took hold of her arm and led her to the purple couch. "Sit down and let's go over this."

While she relayed the story to him, he stopped several times to express his exasperation ("Why in hell didn't you just leave? You could've been killed for chrissakes!")

She had gone over it twice by the time the deputies showed up, their "forensic kit" (a tackle box) in tow. Noah snapped out a couple of orders to the deputies before turning on Roxy. "Where's Lou?"

"She's at Joe's."

"Okay, that's good." He paused. "Wait a minute. I thought they were just friends."

"Well, my guess is that they've moved from friends to lovers by now." She checked her watch. "Yeah, an hour and a half is long enough, don't you think?" She reddened. "Not that I'd know or anything." She buried her head in her hands, embarrassment burning her flesh like wildfire.

Noah smiled. When he finally got his hands on Roxy, it would take a hell of a lot longer than ninety minutes to satisfy

the wild fantasies that had been blazing through his mind lately. "Why the sudden change?" he asked.

She looked up, her cheeks still tinged a bright pink. "Oh, she filed for divorce today."

That's why she wanted the day off. He felt like punching his fist in the air in victory. "It's about goddamn time."

"That's what I told her, too."

"You went with her?"

She glanced away. "Yeah. I, uh, went to reapply for my business loan."

"And?"

"They turned me down."

Noah wanted to go down to the bank and rip the loan officer by his cheap little tie and shake him until coins and dollar bills started spewing from his mouth like a slot machine.

God, what was it about this woman that had all of these dormant protective instincts coming out? That wasn't like him at all, and he wasn't sure he liked the sudden change.

"Go pack a bag for the night," he said, a little more gruffly than he'd intended. She blinked at him in confusion. "You're staying with me tonight. I'll call Joe and Lou and let them know what's up."

After he'd placed the call to Joe, who wasn't (he swore) in bed with Noah's sister, he felt better. His deputies would root through the mess for fingerprints, although he doubted they'd find anything. The most important thing was that Roxy was safe. Noah had never been so goddamned scared in his life.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

He and Roxy would put her house back to rights tomorrow morning. Or afternoon.

He smiled.

Depending on how long he kept her in his bed.

* * * *

In some ways, Noah's house was typical for a bachelor pad. He had the necessary big-screen television with all the bells and whistles: satellite, DVR, sports package, surround sound, blah blah blah. There was the requisite fridge full of beer, but he was a fine cook, so it was well stocked with plenty of food, and not of the frozen "pop it in the microwave" variety. His furniture matched; brown suede couch and a chair with wolves inlaid in the upholstery. A couple of suede recliners were placed about for ideal viewing of the hi-definition plasma.

Roxy's favorite piece in the house was the old, rustic dining table that sat eight. Noah had slowly, painstakingly, chipped off the rotting wood and refinished it back to its former glory. The legs were thick and strong as a man's; the tabletop scarred and well used.

He was cooking on the back porch at the barbeque, flipping chicken for their late supper. Roxy stood at the stove, sautéing fresh summer squash, Vidalia onions and red peppers. On her left, a bottle of Merlot was breathing, and at her right, her first glass was half full.

Alan Jackson sang soulfully about a lifetime with a woman while Roxy hummed along, savoring the image of Noah with

only a white-ribbed tank top and his police-issue khakis, waltzing outside to fire up the barbeque.

The man's body was pure sin. And damned if she didn't want to go straight to hell just for looking.

But, that didn't stop the bundle of nerves from spinning like a top in her belly.

What hadn't been said when he'd told her (well, demanded, really) that she was staying at his place tonight was that tonight may very well be *the* night. She might have been fantasizing about losing her virginity earlier, but now that she stood here in his house, that fantasy had become a distinct possibility.

Oh, Lord.

She drained the rest of her wine.

Roxy left the vegetables to simmer while she fixed a salad, hoping tossing lettuce would take her mind off of sex. As she chopped tomatoes, she cursed at herself. She was an adult, for crying out loud. A thirty-year-old woman who was, yes, still a virgin. Why should the prospect be so terrifying?

And why was she even speculating? Maybe Noah wasn't interested in sex tonight.

I want to make love to you, Roxanne.

Yeah, right.

"Chicken's done," Noah announced, the screen door slamming shut and startling Roxy out of her reverie.

"Okay."

"What's up?"

"Nothing," she lied. She really was a terrible liar. "The veggies are almost done, and I'm just putting the finishing touches on this salad."

"Okay," he said slowly.

Roxy turned with the bowl of salad in her hands and smacked into his rock-hard chest. Light whorls of blonde hair peeked out from under the neckline of his shirt, and his bronzed skin glistened with the sheen of sweat. He smelled like barbecued chicken, hot, hot male, and S-E-X.

He steadied her with his hands. "How many glasses of wine have you had, Stilts?" There was humor in his voice.

"Just one."

"Where's the fire?"

In my pants. Oh, dear. She really had to stop this. How in the world was she supposed to keep her mind off sex when he looked like that? It wasn't fair.

And wasn't she the one who'd brought up the subject of sex in the first place? She wanted to be bold and tawdry, but in her dowdy jumper, she just felt clumsy and inexperienced.

Noah moved back into the kitchen with the natural grace of an athlete; the muscles in his back flexing, his triceps bunching as he reached high into a cupboard for a couple of plates and bowls. She watched his delectable body as he rummaged through the silverware drawers for utensils; ate him up with her eyes as he pulled open a drawer and drew out a couple of cloth napkins.

Noah had it all piled together when he turned and caught her staring. Maybe that wine had gone to her head, but she was suddenly burning up. It had to be the wine; cool air of

the A/C blew through the vent at her feet, so she knew it couldn't be the temperature. Then again, there was that peculiar throbbing between her legs, that aching in her breasts as she stood there like a ninny next to the table holding a salad bowl and staring at Noah.

Something on her face must have given her away, because he promptly put down the service ware and switched off the stove. Then he walked toward her, his eyes focused on her face, then roving her body in the same way she'd been ogling him moments ago.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her through the living room. "What about dinner?" she asked.

"Dinner can wait," he said in a clipped voice. "I can't."
Oh, God.

He pushed open the door to his bedroom. Then, he lifted Roxy and tossed her onto the king-sized log bed as if she weighed nothing.

"Noah," Roxy said breathlessly.

His eyes were like hot embers searing her body as he took her in. Her heart tripped in her chest like a jackhammer. He reached behind him with one hand and pulled the material of his tank up and over his head, tossing it on the floor.

Noah walked slowly to the bed, his eyes never leaving her face or body. "Take off your clothes, Stilts."

Roxy hesitated. Except for the time he'd walked in on her in the bathroom, no one had ever seen her naked, not even Mary Lou. Her hands hesitated as she lifted them to the straps of her jumper, and her fingers trembled as she slipped each button from its hole.

Closing her eyes, she pulled down the bib and shimmied out of it, leaving her in the plain white blouse and panties. She couldn't stand to see the look on Noah's face, so she kept her eyes shut as she unbuttoned her blouse and shrugged out of it.

Running as often as she did kept parts of her firm, but she was nonetheless a big girl. Taking a breath, she opened her eyes. Stunned, she saw intense hunger in Noah's eyes. He was silent as he unbuckled his belt and shucked his trousers. If the very large bulge in his boxer briefs was any indication, he liked what he saw.

Emboldened by his reaction, Roxy reached behind her and unhooked her bra, her heavy breasts springing free. Then she slipped her thumbs down the sides of her panties and shed those, too.

"Man," Noah croaked. "I had no idea you were hiding all of that. How could I have missed this?"

Conversely uncertain yet determined, Roxy bit her bottom lip and said, "Come here."

He put one knee on the giving softness of the mattress and crawled toward her until he lay beside her. "Can I touch you?"

"God, yes," she breathed.

Instead of going straight for the sex, like she'd anticipated, his hands made lazy strokes down her body, over her sides, as though he were memorizing her by touch. With each pass of his hand, the throbbing between her legs intensified, and the aching in her breasts became unbearable. She wiggled restlessly against his hands.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Noah laid his lips against her throat and nipped at Roxy with his teeth, soothing the sting with his lips and tongue. Her hands reached out and grasped his strong shoulders, pulling him to her, but he seemed determined to draw this torture out.

Roxy raked her nails down his back, moving her hands over his butt and pulling him against her until she could feel his erection, hot and throbbing, against her hip. Remembering his assault on her breasts, she dashed her tongue out and made lazy circles around his nipple, smiling against his hot skin when he hissed out a breath.

Suddenly, she was flat on her back with Noah reared above her, his mouth on hers. And there was nothing gentle about it. He thrust his tongue in her mouth, his passion so intense she could taste it. She gripped his hips and moved restlessly against his erection, wanting that hardness against the throbbing between her legs.

He squeezed her breasts (finally!), and she arched off the bed and moaned his name. While his kisses drove her mad, he fondled her breasts, and then his hand slid south into the patch of curls at the apex of her thighs.

When he touched her where she blazed, she cried out, the pleasure so intense. "Noah, please."

"You're so wet, Rox." He took her hand and guided it down. "Can you feel that? It makes me hot when you get that wet for me."

She knew she should have been embarrassed, but she couldn't get past the wanton need inside her. "Touch me again, Noah, please."

"I'll do you one better."

Noah's mouth left hers to forge a fiery trail of kisses down the middle of her body. God, she was sexy. It was killing him, absolutely killing him, taking it slow, when all he wanted to do was sink in to that wet heat. But, this was her first time. She needed to be ready, and he wanted her to enjoy it.

Propping her thighs on his shoulders, Noah gently eased her knees wide. He spread her sex wide with his thumbs.

"Damn..."

"Noah, what are—Oh!"

Her hips shot off the bed as he replaced his hand with his mouth, finding that little nubbin and circling it with his tongue. She tasted sweet, like honey and musk, and he wanted to lap her up forever like this. Her thighs tensed against his head, and he looked up at her.

"It's okay, Rox. I want to do this. You're going to love it. I promise. If you want me to stop, I will."

She stared down at him, her green eyes uncertain, but she nodded. He put his mouth back on her, keeping eye contact with him while licked at her. Her hands gripped the bed covers, and this time, when her thighs tensed, it wasn't out of fear.

Her eyes drifted shut on a long moan as her climax took her over the edge and he smiled, still using his tongue to draw out her pleasure. Her sweet juice filled his senses, and she fell back against the pillows.

As he kissed his way back up her body, his own arousal bordered on pain. He ached so badly, he feared he would split in two—or worse—come before he even made it inside of her.

A sleepy, satisfied smile lit her face when he settled between the cradle of her thighs. Noah kissed her as he reached to the bedside drawer to pull out a condom.

He sat on his haunches for a minute, ripping the foil with his teeth, watching Roxy's eyes widen as he rolled the condom over his shaft.

"It'll be okay, baby. We'll take it real slow. If it hurts, I'll stop."

She shook her head. "I don't want to stop."

He settled back on top of her, slipping his forearms under her shoulders to keep most of his weight off her. "You're going to want to relax, okay?"

Once again, uncertainty crossed her pretty face, but she nodded. God, how had he known her this long without seeing how beautiful she was? He kissed her softly, determined to bring her back to that place where she wasn't concerned about her body, only about how good it felt to have him touch her.

Before long, she became restless again, wiggling against him with her hips, unconsciously thrusting. He positioned the head of his penis at her slippery opening and eased it in gently. "Okay?"

Eyes closed, she moaned, "Mmmm. More, Noah. More."

Reigning in all of the control he had to keep from driving inside her, he slipped in another inch. A woman didn't make it to the age of thirty without losing her barrier, so Noah wasn't surprised to find none. Nothing but a slick, tight glove. *Mother of God*. Noah brought his lips to her ear, whispering hot words while he slipped a hand free and teased her core. When

he knew she was ready, he increased the pressure and buried himself inside her, wincing when she gasped.

"Roxy?"

"I'm okay. It hurts, but not bad. Keep going. Keep doing what you were doing."

She was so wet, so tight that he nearly came right then as he slid all the way home. She moaned again. "That's not bad," she said breathlessly. Her hips moved back and thrust forward and they both groaned. "Oh, yeah. I get it now."

"I'm gonna move now, baby. I can't hold back any longer. You tell me if I hurt you, okay?"

"Do it, Noah. For God's sake..." She gripped his ass and pulled him deep inside her.

And his control snapped.

He thrust into her, consumed by the feel of her milking him as he pumped inside her. She made the hottest little moans and breathy sounds. The way Roxy raked her nails down his back, grabbed his ass and met his fierce thrusts, he never would've guessed she was a virgin.

Her breathing became shallow at the same time his testicles drew inward, and he reached between them and circled her clitoris with his thumb, still pumping, still thrusting, watching her gorgeous breasts bounce as he filled her. Another climax hit her, and her muscles contracted around him and his own release slammed into him, shooting straight up his spine and around his pelvis. He bared his teeth at the intensity of it and let out a roar, collapsing on top of her.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

My fiancé and I are getting married in three months. He proposed on Valentine's Day and so far, he has made no effort to help plan the details. I've picked out the church, the reception site, everything! Every time I ask for his help, he comes up with some lame excuse why he can't. I'm starting to wonder if this is how our marriage is going to be. Am I making a huge mistake?

Signed, Questioning

Dear Questioning,

If I were you, I'd be questioning the wisdom of marrying him, too. Unfortunately, some men just don't like to get involved in what they call "women's work." My first piece of advice is to bring this up to him; your feelings on the matter, etc. If he still shucks the duties, then maybe it's time to start wondering where you fit in his life. If he can't make time for the wedding, then how in hell is he going to make time for a wife? My two cents, anyway.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Sixteen

"I'll get off of you in a minute," Noah said. "As soon as I can feel my legs."

Roxy smiled and ran her hands through his silky hair. "Thank you, Noah."

He lifted his head and shifted his weight so that he lay facing her. His fingers traced circles on her abdomen as he regarded her with humor. "If anyone should be thankful, it should be me." He grinned. "Damn, Rox, but you are a wild woman."

She felt herself blushing, but his praise pleased her. "It could have been so much worse ... my first time, you know. I just wanted to thank you for making it ... nice."

"Nice?" he asked, doing an excellent job of appearing affronted. "Nice? Try hot. Blazing. Knock-my-socks-off, by-far-the-best-sex-ever."

Roxy stared at him. "You're just saying that." She paused. "Really? The best sex ever?"

Noah picked up her hand and kissed her fingertips. "Baby, if I'd known how hot you were, you wouldn't have stayed a virgin this long." He grinned.

"I have a confession to make."

"At night you're a cross-dressing truck driver named Frank."

"No, you dope. I've had the teensiest crush on you since ... well, for a while."

He looked genuinely surprised. "Really?"

She nodded, horribly embarrassed. She put her face into her hands. "I can't believe I told you that."

He pulled her fingers away from her face and kissed her softly. "I never would have guessed. I wish I would have known sooner." He grinned again, and Roxy's heart melted right there in the middle of the bed. "I'm kinda crushin' on you right now."

"Yeah," she said wryly, "I can feel how much you're crushin' on me."

"Well, I can't help it if you make me want to have crazy monkey sex all the time now."

"All the time?"

"Any time you want."

"How about now?"

"Aren't you sore?" he asked.

"A little, but I really want to do it again," she said eagerly.

"I'm beginning to feel a little used."

"Poor baby," she said, and attacked him.

* * * *

They ate in the dim candlelight near midnight, the flickering flame casting shadows on the walls around them.

"Why did the bank turn you down?" Noah asked.

Roxy cut into her chicken slowly, unsure how he'd react to the news she'd taken a business partner. "I didn't have enough to back up the business."

"Oh." He forked veggies into his mouth and chewed. "I thought you already bought the land."

"No. Apparently that's the issue. But Merle didn't tell me that when he turned me down; he just patted me on the head and told me that I 'had a nice little job at the library.'"

Noah shook his head. "What a prick."

"Yeah."

"So, what are you going to do?"

Roxy swallowed some wine and pursed her lips. "Um, Mary Lou offered to front the money for me for the parcel."

He stared at her for several moments while Roxy's heart tripped in her chest.

Finally, he said, "Sounds like a sound business investment to me. Christ knows we've both got enough money."

"That's it? No argument? No 'you're taking advantage of my sister' speech?"

He scoffed. "Do you think that low of me, Stilts? You're salt of the earth. You're the last person I would ever think of who would lie, cheat or steal."

Well, he had the cheat and stealing part right. Guilt surged through her veins as she thought of the Paula Rockwell column. *You have to tell him.*

Not tonight, but, she would, soon.

"We're going to be business partners."

Noah gestured at her with his fork. "Now that is a damn good idea." He frowned. "Course that means I may lose my secretary."

She smiled at him. "I'm sure you'll survive. There are all sorts of ladies in Thorton who would love to be at the beck and call of the Mighty Sheriff Kennedy."

He grinned at her. "Jealous, Stilts?"

"You bet your butt I am."

"Don't worry; now that I've had you, you couldn't beat me back with a stick." He winked lasciviously at her.

Oh, I can think of one good reason.

* * * *

"You had sex!"

Roxy glanced around her destroyed living room, then back at Mary Lou. "Would you be quiet!"

"Ohmigod! You finally did it. I can't believe it. I want details." She covered her ears. "Wait. No, you had sex with my brother. I don't want the details."

Thankfully, Noah was checking for evidence his deputies might have missed, and not in the room to hear their discussion. "Where's Joe?"

"Out back, looking for Noah." Mary Lou folded her arms across her chest and smiled triumphantly. "I feel like I should high-five you or something."

"What are you, twelve? Yes, I had sex. With Noah. It was amazing, earth-shattering, and I'm looking forward to having much more of it." She handed her friend a broom. "That's all you're getting out of me."

Mary Lou began sweeping up the glass on the floor. She moved closer to Roxy and whispered, "Did you tell him?"

Roxy crouched down and picked up a colorful dragon with a broken tail. "Not yet."

"You've got to do it soon, you know."

"I know this, Mary Lou. I'm not an idiot."

"What's got you in a dither?"

She sighed and swept an arm around her living room. "Besides the obvious? Noah's dead set on Preston being the culprit, but I haven't told him that whoever broke into The Gazette has my information and is very likely the one who's doing all this. But, if I tell him that, then I have to admit I've been lying. And I love him."

"Oh, honey." Mary Lou crouched down and gathered Roxy in her arms. "I'm sorry. I know you're goin' through a rough time right now, and I'm not makin' things any better. We'll figure a way out of all this, and everything will be right as rain, you hear?"

"Well, whoever he was, he didn't leave anything behind," Noah announced as he came through the kitchen door, Joe trailing behind. "I've put in a call to a security company. First thing Monday, they'll be out to install an alarm system."

He looked at the two women embracing on the floor and quirked a dark blonde eyebrow. "Are we having a Hallmark moment?"

"Shut up, Noah," Mary Lou said.

"So, I hear you're gonna be Miz Roxy's business partner."

Mary Lou's chin went up a fraction as she eyed her brother. "I am. Is that a problem?"

"For chrissakes, I'm not Preston or Mother, Lou. I think it's a great idea." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Gonna be a hell of a lot of work, though."

"What, just because we're women, we can't handle it?" Mary Lou asked hotly. "It might be a lot of work, but it's nothing we 'little ladies' can't handle." She linked arms with Roxy. "Right, Rox?"

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Noah pinched the bridge of his nose and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "Christ save me from liberated women." He stared at his sister. "Have you been reading that piece of shit Paula Rockwell column, too?"

Roxy winced inwardly. She slid her gaze to her friend, who met her eyes. Roxy lifted her brows.

"Oh, just shut up, you big stupid ape," Mary Lou said, and finished sweeping up the glass.

* * * *

The parcel of land Roxy had been eyeing had lain abandoned for years. Up in Atlanta, or even Valdosta, land didn't sit around like a lonely old widow.

In Thorton, it did.

Late Monday afternoon, Roxy had to take a moment to breathe—so she wouldn't pass out—when Mary Lou whipped out her checkbook and wrote a check for fifty thousand dollars with the same ease as if she were buying a pair of Manolo Blanicks.

They thanked the elderly gentlemen who'd owned the property as they left.

The land was theirs.

Once they were back in the Honda, Mary Lou said, "Here," and handed Roxy the deed. With shaking fingers, Roxy stared at it. The deed to her—no, their—property; property that would become her dream, her bookstore. "I can't believe it," she whispered.

"Well, like my boneheaded brother said, there's still a lot of work to be done, but the land's ours." She dug through her

bag for her sunglasses. "What do you say we head home and start planning?" Mary Lou rubbed her hands together like a child anticipating a piece of candy. "I'm itchin' to get it going."

Noah was true to his word. On her lunch break, he picked her up in the Explorer and drove her home to give her a brief demonstration on the alarm system he'd had installed. It was fairly easy to operate; so easy, in fact, they'd had forty-five minutes left, to which they'd put good use her couch—and her kitchen counter.

She'd spent the rest of the weekend at Noah's. They'd made love so many times, she couldn't remember ever being a virgin in the first place. Every time was magical; his hands bringing her to an even higher peak than before, his lips like fire as he showed her things about her body she hadn't thought possible. And every time, she fell deeper and deeper in love with him.

With each tumble of her heart, her guilt intensified. While her mind told her it would be no big deal when she finally revealed the truth, her heart screamed DO IT NOW!, because Noah absolutely, without a doubt, did not like Paula Rockwell.

Or lying.

She was seriously considering quitting the whole thing anyway, now that she'd completed the first step toward achieving her dream. But, even if she stopped penning the articles, her conscience would still demand Noah learn the truth.

It seemed like she couldn't go two steps forward without taking three steps back. Now that she had Noah and the

bookstore, the guilt of her subterfuge ate away at her like cancer. She was by turns both ecstatic and morose; a dizzying and altogether discomfiting feeling.

After a dinner of salmon over a bed of salad greens, Roxy and Mary Lou researched all they needed to do to get the bookstore up and running. If things went according to plan, they could have it open for business by spring of the following year.

They agreed to apply for the business license tomorrow at lunch, after which they would contact the zoning department and a contractor to figure out what sort of building they wanted. The facts were mind-boggling; so much, that after two hours they just put it all away and went to bed.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow would be another day.

* * * *

Noah pushed open the library doors, his ears automatically seeking and finding Roxy's lilting, musical voice in the back. He removed his Stetson and quickly finger-combed his hair as he made his way to the reference area where her Tuesday night book group was held.

According to his sister, (who was absent because she was going to Joe's tonight—and he was so *not* going to think about that) they had applied for, and received, their business license today.

Apparently, Roxy had been concerned because that idiot Merle Granger had told her she needed city council approval before starting a business in the town proper, which was

bullshit. Yet another banker he wanted to strangle on Roxy's behalf. The list was growing at an alarming speed.

The reference area sat ensconced within a large break of four aisles; twelve tables lined up in twos with four chairs per table. Roxy stood at the front of the tables facing a group of six women.

She was wearing one of those ridiculous jumpers—actually, they were kinda growing on him—her curvaceous body hidden by the yards of cotton. When he got his hands on her, it was like unwrapping an unexpected Christmas present; all those sexy curves and valleys disguised under the schoolmarm outfit. She wore her hair long, the curling waves trailing down her breasts like raw silk. His fingers itched to touch it, even though the texture was etched into a corner of his brain.

She was talking about some book, but he couldn't understand what she was saying because a sudden buzzing started in his ears, and his whole body went dizzy and hot. She spoke with passion; her elegant wrists and hands animated as she talked, her cheeks tinged with pink, looking a lot like she did when she lay naked in his arms.

And then it hit him like a Mack truck.

Oh, shit.

Noah was in love with her. He loved Roxanne Palmer. How had that happened? How had he managed to lose his heart to her after only a few short weeks? True, he'd practically known her his whole life, but he'd never been affected by her before. Had he?

Well, there was that summer when she'd been fourteen, right before he left for college at Georgia when he'd seen her

in a modest one piece bathing suit down at the swimming hole. And if he remembered correctly, he'd gotten painfully hard staring at her very pert, very lovely breasts.

How had he forgotten that?

Because you were in such a hurry to get the hell out of town, you didn't want anything to stop you.

However, he'd been back for three years, and he hadn't had the inkling to start anything romantic with her until he'd walked in on her in the bathroom nearly a month ago.

Bullshit.

As Noah stood there watching her talk, he realized that his reconnection with Roxy, their Friday movie nights, their dinners out, it was all just a really long courtship. Sure, they started out as friends, but somewhere along the way, he must have begun thinking about her differently. Because it had taken one look, and he was hooked. He'd seen his share of naked women. He had, in fact, slept with plenty of them, but he'd never been in this deep.

Something about Roxy just got him. She was kind, caring and honest. All of the things he'd never had growing up. She didn't hide her emotions; she wore them unapologetically on her sleeve. Roxanne Palmer was like a breath of fresh, clean air in a world full of choking smog.

And she was hot.

He grinned. Yeah, Roxy definitely had the world fooled as far as that uptight librarian act was concerned.

And she was all his.

* * * *

Joe sat back in his recliner watching the Braves game and took a long pull of his beer.

While his eyes may have been on the game, his mind was on Mary Lou. She was making it damn difficult to take it slow. Everything she did seemed to turn him on. Hell, all she had to do was breathe, and he was hard as granite.

And it wasn't making life at work any easier. Today, he'd almost lost a finger while pulling the heads out of a Ford diesel truck because he'd been picturing her naked. Straddling him.

A knock on his door shook him from his brooding. He set the beer down and opened the door to find Mary Lou standing on his front porch, a shiny red raincoat wrapped tightly around her.

"Hey," he said, poking his head out the door to check the sky. Nope, no rain.

"Hey," she said, her voice husky.

Oh, man, there went Little Joe. Her hands moved to the belt of the coat and she loosened it, pulling the sides wide.

Okay, now Little Joe wasn't little anymore.

She wore a lacy black and red bra, her lovely breasts spilling over the tops, her rosebud nipples just barely visible under the material. Her gorgeous legs were encased in black stockings that led up to a pair of black and red panties and matching garter. On her feet, she wore a pair of fire-engine red stiletto heels.

"I can't wait any longer," she murmured. She grabbed his hand and placed it on her breast. "Please, Joe. I need you. I need this."

How in the hell was he supposed to say no to that? Grabbing the hand that held him to her breast, he pulled her inside, using her body to shut the door. He gripped her upper arms and looked into the bottomless pools of blue that stared back at him. "You don't know what you're asking here."

"I know what I want." Proving it, she reached down and squeezed his engorged sex. Joe hissed out a breath. "I want you. Now."

Ah, well, fuck it. He'd tried.

"Take off your coat," he demanded roughly.

Satisfaction shone clearly in her eyes as she obeyed his command, shimmying out of the shiny red slicker and kicking it out of the way.

He'd wanted their first time together to be soft, gentle; to treat her with the reverence she deserved, but he didn't think he could do anything like that, not with her in that outfit, staring up at him like she wanted to eat him alive.

She took a step toward him, her hands immediately seeking out the button on his shorts. In two swift moves, she had his shorts and briefs down around his ankles and had dropped to her knees.

She stared up at him as her tongue shot out, circling the plump, pulsating head of his cock. His hands fisted in her short hair as she drew the length of him into her mouth. Her tongue slid up one side and down the other while she fondled his testicles in her hand. Pleasure gripped Joe as she suckled him, so intense he forgot to breathe.

Fuck, he was going to lose it right here if she didn't stop. He put his hands on her shoulders and lifted her up. "I don't

want to come in your mouth," he whispered and pushed her against the door. He crushed his mouth to hers, tasting himself on her and it drove a spike of lust through him. He felt hot, edgy and out of control, like a wild animal straining on a tight leash.

Mary Lou reveled in the onslaught of sensation. Sex with Preston had always been restrained and proper. In a word: passionless.

Joe wanted Mary Lou in a way that stunned her to her core. His heavy erection, still wet from her mouth, pressed against her stomach, and she wanted nothing more than to let him invade her with his searing, aching girth.

His teeth nipped none too gently at her flesh, his tongue hot as it trailed down her collarbone toward her breasts. He found the front closure to her demi-bra and out popped her breasts, cool air tickling her sensitized nipples for a split second before Joe took her into his hot and eager mouth.

His hand moved down her stomach and slipped inside her panties where she was soaked, and he drove a finger inside her, his hands rough and wonderful. Gripping the lace, he ripped the panties from her.

"Wrap your legs around me," he said hoarsely.

She'd barely gotten her ankles around his hips when he drove into her, and she cried out at the sheer brilliance of being filled so perfectly.

"Jesus, Lou. You drive me fucking crazy," he breathed. His hips pumped wildly into her. This was the Joe she'd sensed. This was the man she'd known on some primal level lived inside; not the eternally nice guy, but wild and out of control.

It was nothing less than she wanted. She needed his loss of control; needed to know that he was as wild for her as she was for him.

As the pressure built inside her, he reached between their bodies and fondled her again, leaned down and took one pebbled nipple into his mouth and sucked hard.

She exploded around him, convulsing in an orgasm so intense she nearly blacked out. "Joe..."

"I'm here, baby. I'm right here with you." His pace quickened, a sheen of sweat coating his muscular body as he pounded her against the door. His breathing became harsh and short, a low, keening moan escaping his lips as he buried his face in her neck and thrust one last time.

"Sweet baby Jesus," he gasped, still supporting her. She clenched her muscles around him as a second orgasm came in from nowhere, and he groaned and thrust a few more times.

Hoisting her up, he got rid of his shorts and walked to the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him. He laid her on the bed, their bodies still joined.

"So much for taking it slow, huh?" she asked with a cheeky grin.

He flipped her around so that she straddled him, felt him growing hard inside her again. Gripping her hips, he raised her off of him and slid her back down, his eyes clenching shut.

"Fuck. That."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

I absolutely hate my wife's dog. It barks constantly, jumps on the couch, chews and pees on everything. I'm about to give it away. Help me.

Signed, Chihuahua Hater

Dear Heartless Dog Hater,

Maybe your wife should just give you away! The dog is a helpless animal that can't help its nature any more than you obviously can. If you want to stay married, and why your wife would want to is beyond me, take yourself and the dog to obedience training. Maybe you'll both learn something!

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seventeen

Noah quirked a brow as his sister stormed into the office. Mary Lou glared at him as she tossed her purse into her desk drawer.

"You know," she said through clenched teeth, "if I didn't know any better, I'd think someone was out to sabotage us."

Noah kept his expression neutral. *Please don't let it be woman problems.* "The bookstore?" he asked, trying to keep hope out of his voice. He really didn't want to know about her and Joe. And the idea of Roxy discussing him with his baby sister, well, that was enough to make a man break out in hives.

Mary Lou nodded, anger staining her cheeks pink. "We got the business license lickety-split, but suddenly, all of our other permits are 'on hold', and no one will tell us a damn thing." She shook a finger at him. "And you know what else just grates on me? I even called Evelyn Bennett, you know, that nice lady who opened up her antique store a few years back? Well, she built from the ground up and had no problems at all. She said she was surprised, because she expected a headache, but then she's from Atlanta, not from a tiny, hole-in-the-wall, ass-backwards town like Thorton." Mary Lou heaved a breath.

Noah tried to digest what she'd said without getting a headache himself. It was a rarity to see Mary Lou in such a tizzy, but then she'd been raised to act like a lady and not show anger. Since she'd left Preston, she'd displayed a

lifetime of unspent irritation, which he thought was healthy, but it was making him crazy.

But, back to the matter at hand.

If what Mary Lou said was true, then Noah suspected they were being sabotaged, and he figured the culprit for none other than Merle Granger. He was the one who'd initially threatened Roxy if she decided to find funding elsewhere. And the man had clout in the town.

Leaving his sister to stew, he decided to do a little checking. Anyone anywhere could be bought. It just depended on the price.

Locking himself up in his office, he picked up his phone and dialed the county clerk's office.

"Madison County Clerk's Office, this is Missy."

"Hey, Missy, it's Noah. How you doin'?"

"Well, I'm just right as rain. So nice to hear from you. I understand you're datin' Roxanne Palmer?"

Word sure got around fast.

Missy Carmichael was a recorder in the clerk's office and one hell of a cook. They had dated on and off during high school until he left for college. Now, she was settled into a comfortable life with a husband and three kids.

She was also the town's biggest gossip.

And damned if that didn't work out for him.

"That's right, I am."

"I've always loved Roxy. She's just so friendly and honest and open, you know?"

"Yeah, I do now. Listen, Missy, I need a favor from you. Roxy and Mary Lou are trying to start up a business and have

been runnin' into some trouble down there in the permits' offices. I understand that it can be a complicated process, but I was wonderin' if you'd be so kind as to keep your ear to the ground for any rumors floatin' about regarding their status. Seems the folks down there keep giving them the runaround."

"Well, that's a damn shame. I heard about that. A bookstore, right? With a coffee shop, too? That's just what Thorton needs. I would love to go there. I absolutely hate havin' to drive all the way to Vidalia or Jacksonville to get my books. Old Amos Miller, he just doesn't keep up with the times, you know what I mean? What I wouldn't kill to have a nice selection of romance novels right here in town." She giggled, and Noah rolled his eyes with a smile. "But, I'll be sure to do that for you. We'll just keep this between you and me."

"You're a saint of a woman, Missy. Tell Ben and kids hello for me."

"Will do. And you do the same for your sister and Roxy."

Noah hung up the phone with a satisfied smile. If anyone were being paid to tie up the permits for the bookstore, Missy would find out.

* * * *

Katherine Windsor Kennedy hung up the telephone in the kitchen and stared blindly out the window while she violently tamped down the rage threatening to take over her body.

This could not be happening.

If it wasn't bad enough that her daughter had made her a laughingstock by leaving her husband and moving in with another woman, for God's sake, she was using her trust to fund a joint business venture for that stupid bookstore.

Where did I go wrong?

Katherine had done all of the things she'd thought were right for her children, mapping their lives according to the life plan for which she felt they were destined. They were Kennedys. Kennedys did not become police officers and date dowdy women, and they certainly didn't leave well-respected husbands, take in a roommate at thirty and start silly little bookstores.

Noah had always been her challenge. He'd been a contrary child from birth. Whenever she pushed, he pulled. He'd deliberately defied her and Stuart at any chance—and look at the man he'd become.

How could he be happy with the life he'd created for himself?

Mary Lou, now she was acquiescent. She had been like clay; easy to mold into the perfect image of what any Southern woman of clout would expect from her daughter.

Now that image was disintegrating before her eyes.

Then there was Preston. The man she'd groomed from his youth to marry her daughter, the man who, until recently, had been the perfect match for Mary Lou. Now, he was neck-deep in with the law. Imagine, a man of his wealth, embezzling!

On the other hand, Katherine thought, taking a deep, calming breath, his wildness was what had gotten him

ostracized from his powerful family in the first place. Had Katherine not rescued him, bankrolled the law firm and coached him, where would he be? In state or federal prison, no doubt. Which, ironically enough, was probably where he was headed.

She hadn't worked this hard for all of her dreams and plans to come falling down around her. The Kennedy name still stood for something in this town and damned if she was going to stand by and let her children ruin it.

* * * *

Roxy stared at Noah from across her dining room table, watching the powerful muscles in his jaw clench as he chewed. The man exuded strength and virility by just being. His biceps flexed as he brought his beer to his full, sensual lips. He sat with his left hand resting on his lap, lifted the grilled halibut on his fork to his mouth and didn't sit hunched over his food.

Roxy could watch him all day long.

"What?" he asked, shaking her out of her ogling. "Do I have food on my face?"

She propped her chin in hand and smiled. "No. I was just thinking how beautiful you are."

He snorted and took another long pull off his beer. "Men aren't beautiful, Stilts."

"You are," she insisted.

His deep blue eyes shifted downward. Roxy squinted and thought she caught a blush rising over his cheekbones.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you. I was just thinking how lucky I am to have such a handsome man to share a meal with."

He glanced up at her. He was definitely blushing. It was so adorable, she wanted to laugh, but dared not. She'd obviously embarrassed him enough.

"Haven't you dated? Besides that cocksucking creep who took off with your money?"

Annoyed by his language, but touched by his protectiveness, she shook her head. "Mike was the only guy I ever dated. And he wasn't really that good looking. I mean, he was cute, but he wasn't you."

"Why didn't you date?"

She gestured vaguely over her face and body. "I'm not exactly what the men in Thorton go for. I'm that nice librarian lady. I'm the cliché to top all clichés. At least that's what Preston said." She saw his expression darken at his brother-in-law's name, but before he could comment, she pinned him with a stare. "Tell me something. If you hadn't walked in on me in the bathroom, do you think we would've ever made love?"

"Yes," he said, so quickly and with such certainty that her heart stumbled.

"How can you be so sure?"

Noah dropped his napkin on the table and pushed his chair back. Walking toward her, he held out his hand. "Come with me."

"We're making a habit of this, you know. Interrupting dinner." A little unsure, Roxy obeyed, pushing back her chair

and clasping his hand with her own. He led her up the stairs and went directly into the bedroom.

When he faced her, she lifted a brow. "You don't have to prove that you want me with sex, Noah."

By way of responding, he grasped the loose front of her jumper and yanked her toward him. He turned her so she faced the large mirror that rested atop her chest of drawers.

Immediately, his hands went to the buttons of her jumper. Alarmed, she stilled his hands. "Noah..."

"Shh," he whispered in her ear. His breath tickled her neck and set her flesh aflame. He pressed hot kisses along the column of her throat while his hands deftly undid her jumper. "Don't be afraid, Rox. I want you to see what I see when I look at you."

The jumper slid to the floor. In deference to the heat, she had worn a sleeveless blouse. He lifted her arms and pulled it off, dropping next the jumper on the floor.

Roxy stood staring at herself in the mirror, dressed in only her plain white bra and matching panties and cringed. Her hips were too wide, her stomach was, well, not as firm as she'd like, and she was pretty sure her butt was big enough they could make it a county.

She wanted to cover herself as her cheeks flamed from embarrassment. She went to do so, but Noah grabbed her wrists and locked them behind her back. He pressed flush against her, and her fingers brushed his erection.

"Leave your hands at your sides," Noah demanded. He added softly, "I don't want anything obstructing my view. Or yours."

Though everything in her rebelled, she left her arms resting at her sides when he released them. His fingers moved to the back clasp of her bra, and a moment later, she felt the cool air rush over her naked breasts.

Again, she stared at herself in the mirror, naked except for her white panties. Her breasts were large, and instead of attracting the boys, they'd been a source of ridicule, along with her height.

Don't think about that now.

In the mirror, Roxy watched Noah cup each breast in his large hands. "You have the sexiest breasts I've ever seen. I saw you once when you first got these. Down at that old swimming hole, remember? You were wearing this black one-piece, and I was so hard I ached."

Stunned, she met his eyes in the mirror. "Really?"

His teeth nipped at her earlobe. "I wanted you back then, Rox. I just didn't realize it until recently. Touch them with me. Feel how soft they are."

Hesitantly, she lifted her hands. He released her breasts and entwined his fingers with hers until they were both cupping them. Although still shocked at her behavior, a part of her was captivated. The part of her that throbbed between her legs; the part of her that became wild and reckless when she made love with Noah.

He rubbed his thumb over each of her rosy nipples, and Roxy felt the responding pull in her womb. His touch was like a brand, and her own fingers eagerly joined in the game.

"That's it, baby. See?"

One hand left her breast and trailed down her stomach, gliding over her hip. "Look at your curves. You're built the way a woman should be." With his hand at the top of the waistband of her panties, he met her eyes again in the mirror. "When I'm with a woman, I don't want the fear I'll snap her in two." He dipped his hand inside her panties, his fingers toying with the curls there, and then he slid a finger through her slick folds. "And that? That drives me fucking crazy. You're so wet, so hot. For me."

His language caused a rush of dew to pool in her center. He drew her panties down her legs, and she stepped out of them, no longer feeling like the embarrassed teenager and woman she once was. No, she felt wanton and, for the first time in her life, beautiful.

Noah kissed his way back up her body, his tongue dipping at the small of her back, her hips and then her sides. His teeth nipped at her shoulders; little love bites he soothed with his lips until he stood upright behind her.

"Noah," she moaned, thrashing under his sensual assault. She felt him smile against her neck. Turning her head, she met his lips with her own, immediately thrusting her tongue in his mouth, pouring her passion and love into the kiss.

She arched her back, pressing her bottom into his groin, the contact hot and intense. Roxy's reflection smiled back at her as she heard Noah groan into her ear.

He whispered, "Touch yourself," in her ear and took a step back.

Ignoring the voice that called her foolish, Roxy boldly slipped her fingers down below, though she had to admit it

didn't feel nearly as wonderful as when Noah's skillful hands were on her. The heat in his eyes staggered her as he tore off his shirt and began unbuckling his pants, never breaking eye contact. She flooded into her hand as his hot gaze raked over her like he wanted to eat her alive.

Never in her life had she ever felt so wanted, so desired. It was wonderful.

When he moved behind her again, he was naked, his body like an oven as it threw off heat. He grasped her at the waist and bent her over slightly. "Put your hands on the dresser," he said huskily.

She braced herself, watching their reflections as he kneed her thighs apart and lifted her up to him. "Look at me, Roxy."

Their eyes met in the mirror as he plunged into her from behind. She bit her lip and moaned as he withdrew and drove into her again.

"Roxy," his whispered. "God, you're so tight. Like a fist."

She watched him pump into her in the mirror, the sight amazingly erotic; her breasts bouncing with each thrust, his hand dipping into her curls to fondle her, his mouth feasting on her throat as he touched her core.

Roxy felt the pressure build inside her. Tingles of pleasure-tipped pain rippled along her sensitized flesh as a sheen of sweat broke over her skin. She turned her head toward Noah, seeking out his mouth. Their lips crashed upon each other, wild and needy.

Noah's body was on fire. In exquisite torture, he wanted to go on like this forever, yet his body screamed for release in the worst kind of way. His orgasm was coming right behind

Roxy's. Whenever she came, she started moaning and thrashing, her elegant fingers fisting.

He broke the kiss. "Look at me," he demanded. "I want you to look at me when you come."

She stared at his reflection, and he felt her convulse around him, her inner muscles milking him, stroking him until he, too, was convulsing, spilling himself inside her wet heat.

Their eyes locked in a stare and he knew that this moment would be forever branded in her mind and, more importantly, in her heart.

* * * *

"Please sign here, Mr. Abbot."

Preston glared at the courier who'd just informed him he'd been served with divorce papers. He was mad enough to refuse, but he knew that would only make matters worse, and he needed a clear head if he was going to talk Mary Lou out of this hair-brained idea.

He scrawled his signature on the clipboard and tossed the pen back at the courier, who cheerfully said, "Have a nice day, sir," before trotting off to his pick-up.

"Cocksucker," Preston muttered, slamming his front door shut. With menace, he ripped open the envelope as he stalked to the kitchen. He dumped the contents onto the counter, staring at the petition his wife had filed.

That bitch, Roxanne Palmer was behind this, he knew it. Her and that idiot mechanic Mary Lou was screwing. So far, none of his ploys to warn Roxy away from Mary Lou had worked. The Feds had been called in earlier in the week, and

Preston knew it was only a matter of time before they came visiting. Days, weeks, maybe.

Preston picked up the phone and dialed Katherine. She had always been his savior. From the time he'd been kicked out of his house at twenty-six and cut off from his trust, Katherine took him under her wing and groomed him for the life she'd known he was destined to lead.

"Yes?" his mother-in-law answered.

"I've been served with divorce papers," he said without preamble.

Her sharp intake of breath was a hiss in his ear. "Dammit, Preston. You were supposed to take care of this matter."

"Well, this matter has gotten out of control. Worse, she's been screwing Joe Fuller."

"For God's sake. How could you let it get this far? I trusted you to be efficient, but you've done nothing but make a bigger mess. Your wife is living with another woman, trying to start up a bookstore with her now, and she's been having ... relations with a no-account idiot." She sighed. "I'm taking over from here, do you understand me? I will handle this mess. All I want you do is sit there in that empty house of yours and wait until I bring your wife home. Are we clear?"

Preston bit the inside of his cheek to keep from snapping at her. How dare she talk to him like he was nothing more than a child? He was a better son to her than Noah, and for her to cast him off like some imbecile was a bitter pill to swallow.

But, he needed help. He needed Katherine on his side to get both his wife and his life back.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

He forced the words from his mouth. "Yes, I understand, Katherine."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula:

I'm having a problem with my husband. To be frank, he's a stick-in-the-mud. He refuses to try anything new. We're empty nesters now. I want to go out and expand our horizons, travel, try new things. But, he stands firm that he wants to remain where we're at. He says we've waited so long to have the house empty, and he wants to enjoy it. I've tried compromising, reasoning, but nothing seems to work. He's dead set in his ways. What do I do?

Signed, Longing For Excitement

Dear Longing,

What do you do? Go without him! I understand he's your husband, and you want to explore your newfound freedom with him, but really, if he's that much of a downer, he's just going to drag you down and ruin your trip. My advice? Leave his sorry butt at home and go traveling with by yourself. Better yet, grab a friend and hit the highway. No doubt you'll have a more fun anyway.

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eighteen

"Jesus H., woman, you're going to kill me."

Still reeling from the aftermath of her climax, Roxy collapsed on Noah's chest, enjoying the tickle of his coarse chest hair and the thundering of his heart under her cheek. "I have thirty years to make up for," she said breathlessly.

He ran his fingers through her hair. "Good God, why didn't we do this sooner?"

She snorted. "This is way better than Friday movie night."

His touch was gentle and tender as he ran his hands up and down her back and nuzzled the top of her hair. God, how she loved this man!

You need to tell him the truth.

She had put it off long enough. Things were starting to get violent, and he was looking for the wrong man. And besides, if she wanted any kind of future with Noah—and she did, with every fiber in her being—she needed to be upfront about the column. "Noah?"

"Hmm."

"There's something I need to tell you."

"Is it about that crush you had on me?"

"You're never going to let me live that down, are you?" she asked, looking up into the cerulean depths of his eyes.

He grinned wickedly and shook his head. "Not in this lifetime, baby."

Stop stalling.

"You know that Paula Rockwell column?"

This time he snorted. "Like I could forget the woman who's making my life a living hell. What about her? You don't really believe all that bullshit, do you, Stilts?"

Irritated, she said, "It's not all bullshit, Noah. Women have every right to be treated as equals, not like pieces of meat or to be chained to the stove."

He quirked a brow. "Last time I checked, this was the twenty-first century. Women are allowed to choose their own lifestyle. If a woman doesn't want to be treated like a piece of meat, she can leave. Mary Lou did it."

Damn, but the man had a point. Of course, she wasn't sure Mary Lou would have left Preston had Roxy not gone off the deep end and written that first dreaded article. Her friend had admitted as much herself.

"And it's not like women don't have rights. They're treated like equals 'round here. Paula Rockwell is just an uptight feminist who gets her jollies by stirring things up."

Obviously, this was not going to be easy. Roxy took a breath and said, "Well, the thing is, I—"

Her confession was interrupted by the chirping of Noah's cell phone on the bedside table. He picked it up and glanced at the display.

"Kennedy."

Roxy watched his features harden as he listened. "I'm on my way. Give me fifteen minutes."

He snapped the phone shut. "Seems like the women of Thorton have decided to make another go at Ladies Night at The Quinn. There's been a fight." He leaned down and kissed

her on the lips. "It might take a while, so I'll probably just crash at my place after it's all said and done."

Relief and disappointment warred inside her.

Although guilt still coursed through her, she couldn't help but marvel at the splendid sight of his naked body as he slipped out of bed and searched for his clothes.

"Quit lookin' at me like that, Stilts," he said, his back turned as he slipped on his trousers. "Or I'm liable to fail my civic duty and hop back into bed."

"It's not my fault you're so damn hot," she said devilishly. Her hand flew to her mouth. Had she actually uttered those words?

He turned and grinned at her. "Uptight librarian, my ass," he muttered.

Leaning down, he sank his mouth on hers and what was supposed to be a kiss goodbye turned hot and carnal in an instant.

"Damn," he said, breaking away. "Never in my life have I regretted being a cop until right now."

"Be careful," she said.

He winked. "Stay beautiful."

After he walked down the stairs, engaged the security alarm and left, she sank back down into the pillows.

Now what?

* * * *

Roxy spent a restless night, guilt giving her fits until she finally gave up and went downstairs. She scrubbed the

kitchen floors with a toothbrush, cleaned out all of her cupboards and washed five loads of laundry.

But, she came to a conclusion.

Clearly, she was a little hesitant to tell Noah the truth. Given his obvious distaste for her alter-ego, the news would not be welcome and could very well end their romance in its infancy.

That was accepting, of course, that they had a relationship, other than sex. She wasn't sure what Noah wanted. They hadn't discussed it. Most of the time they spent together was in bed, and while she loved being intimate with him, a little part of her missed him as a friend. Because they were no longer 'just friends'. Friends with benefits, surely, but for how long? What if Noah saw this as just a fling?

Roxy had loved Noah desperately most of her life, but she had truly fallen in love with him that night out in his truck. And the way he worshipped her body ... well, it was making her realize that all of those years she'd spent cursing her looks were just plain silly.

Roxy had no desire, however, to reveal her true feelings to Noah, at least not until she knew what he wanted out of this ... affair. And if she revealed that she was Paula Rockwell, then she would lose the 'friends with benefits' bit, as well. Probably the friend part, too. And the thought of Noah out of her life terrified Roxy and filled her with a profound sense of loss. So, she was keeping it herself.

For now.

But, damned if she wasn't going to take advantage of what they had in the meantime.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

* * * *

Roxy dressed in her jogging outfit and headed out toward Noah's at ten Saturday morning. She smiled as she rounded Main Street and jogged past the diner. She bet he'd had a rough night. Well, Roxy was going to wake him up right. She noticed an older model car behind her slowing as she waved and crossed the street.

Noah owned a piece of land on the outskirts of town, a little over a two-mile drive. When he'd bought it, he'd told her he liked the privacy of stepping out on his back porch and seeing nothing but cotton fields and pecan trees.

Two blocks from Noah's, she'd worked up a mean sweat. Even at mid-morning, the southern Georgia heat and humidity was stifling. It was like running through molasses in wintertime as she gulped greedily for air.

All around her, the cicadas and crickets buzzed and hummed, but the birds were silent, as if they, too, knew it was too hot for anything but lying low and lazy.

She gave herself a cursory sniff. Fresh as a daisy she wasn't. Maybe they'd have to take it straight to the shower. Roxy grinned. The things that man could do with a removable showerhead ought to be illegal.

Noah's street lay up ahead. Roxy turned her head. The same older model car she'd noticed on Main trailed slowly behind her. There weren't many houses on this road, but it was possible the owner of the car lived in one of them.

It didn't, however, halt the sudden thundering in her heart.
Stop being paranoid.

Paranoid? You were chased in the dark, your tires were slashed and someone broke into your house. If there was ever a time to be paranoid, it's now!

Roxy refused to give into the fear. She was tired of being the meek doormat everyone expected to follow the rules. Hadn't she proved she had the cojones, as Joe would say, to be daring?

She boldly crossed the street.

The car was about twenty yards away; she lifted her hand in a wave again as she crossed. But, this time, the car didn't slow.

She heard the screech of tires before she actually saw the car move. Whoever was behind the wheel had punched the gas and barreled towards her. There was now no doubt in her mind that it was the time to be paranoid.

Roxy sprinted across the street, but the sidewalk seemed miles away, and the car was seconds from slamming into her. Never had she known such terror as now, as she put everything she possessed into getting to safety. Legs pumping, lungs heaving, she hit the sidewalk at the same time the front bumper slammed into her hip, sending her sprawling onto the pavement. Pain radiated up her side as she skidded along the sidewalk.

Heart skipping wildly in her chest, she dragged herself onto the front lawn of the house before her, desperate for safety. "Help!" she screamed. "Help me, please!" The last plea came out as a sob. Her arms quaked, and she was losing the energy to pull herself forward. The front door to the house opened, and a man and a woman ran out.

Roxy heard more screeching and buried her head in her hands. "Get away," she shouted at the couple. "He'll run you over! Get away!"

"Mitch, go get Noah," the woman said.

Noah.

The woman bent down and rubbed a hand over Roxy's trembling back. "Sweetie, the car's gone. He turned around and drove off."

Roxy kept her eyes squeezed shut, unwilling to believe the woman who was comforting her. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

"I d-don't know," Roxy answered shakily. She was precariously close to hysteria; maniacal laughter threatened to bubble in her throat along with her tears.

"Let's see if you can sit up. Do you want to try that?" the woman asked gently.

Roxy nodded and finally opened her eyes. She allowed the woman to ease her into a sitting position as Roxy searched for the car that had run her down.

"Roxy!" Noah shouted.

She lifted an arm in a weak wave as he ran toward her. Dropping to his knees, he lifted her face to him and checked her out.

"Are you hurt? What happened?" Beneath his tanned skin, he was pale.

"I think someone tried to run her down," the man named Mitch said.

Noah looked to Roxy for confirmation. "That true?"

She managed a nod.

"Did you get a look at the car?" he asked.

"Older model. Big, like elderly folks driving. Dark; black, dark red or brown." She took a shaky breath. "Following me."

His brow furrowed as he pulled out his cell phone and barked an order to one of his deputies.

"Okay, tell me what happened."

She smiled weakly up at him. "We seem to be doing this a lot lately."

He didn't smile back.

Taking another breath, she said, "I was going for a jog, over here, to your house. I saw the car on Main Street, and it slowed to let me cross. Then I saw it on this road, but I figured whoever it was lived on the street. He was a ways back, so I crossed, and then he hit the gas. I knew he was going to run me over. I sprinted as fast as I could, but he clipped my hip before I got to the other side."

"Where?" Noah asked, his hands instantly seeking.

The owners of the house seemed to make a tacit agreement to stand back on their porch to give them privacy as Noah's hands pulled discreetly at her running shorts.

When he saw the bright red welt that had already swelled and turned purple, pure unadulterated rage poured through his veins. Covering her up, Noah stood and walked a few feet away. He wanted to punch something, anything; needed to pummel the living shit out of the nearest available thing. He'd always thought 'seeing red' was just an expression, but at that moment, a fine red mist gathered before Noah's eyes as fury surged through him.

It was bad enough to taunt; worse to break into her house. But, this time, someone had actually tried to kill Roxy. He pulled out his cell phone again and ordered an ambulance.

"Noah, no. I don't need one. Please."

"I don't care. You're going to the hospital." He looked down at the tears streaming her beautiful face and thought about what could have happened. Walking back over to her, he dropped back to his knees and took her into his arms. "I'll find whoever did this, Rox. I'll find him and I'll kill him."

She pushed him back. "No," she said emphatically. "I need you to find him and lock him up, not go commando and end up in jail yourself."

He pressed a gentle kiss to her head as the ambulance pulled up. Taking her face in his hands, he searched her face. "You're sure it wasn't another car? A Lexus, maybe?"

"I didn't see the driver, but it wasn't a Lexus. It wasn't Preston, Noah. I'm sure of it."

Something about the car niggled at him, but he couldn't pinpoint the source. It wasn't hard to borrow or even steal a car. Preston could've easily done that. As soon as Roxy left, he'd head to the SO to check on any vehicles reported stolen in the last twenty-four hours.

He kissed her fiercely as the paramedics started to load her onto the gurney.

"This is really unnecessary, boys," she told them.

"Do it for me, baby. I want to make sure you're okay." Noah huffed out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. "And from now on, I'm staying with you at your place, got it? I drive you to work, I pick you up. Clear?"

Her face set into that mulish expression he'd come to love, but she nodded. "Fine."

"I'll be up to see you in a few hours, okay?" He kissed her again, then nodded to the medics. "You take care of her, you hear? I want her treated with kid gloves. If anything happens to her, you're gonna have to deal with me."

Amusement shone in the medics' eyes as they nodded. "Yes, sir, Sheriff."

Noah watched the ambulance take off. As he turned to take the statement from his neighbors, his only thought was, *Someone tried to murder my woman.*

* * * *

"How do you feel about kids?" Mary Lou asked, tracing lazy patterns across Joe's naked belly. The mid-morning sun filtered in through the curtains of his bedroom, playing peek-a-boo with the hardwood floor.

His hand stilled in her hair, and Mary Lou froze. She'd spoken too soon, she knew it. Damn.

"Lou?"

When she refused to look up at him, the fingers that were drifting languidly through her hair left her head and moved to her chin to tilt her face toward his. "Why are you asking?"

She shook her head. "Never mind."

"No. I want to know. Do you want children?" He frowned. "And why don't you have kids by now? You were married twelve years, right?"

"Preston didn't want any."

"Hannah couldn't have any. We were thinking about adopting."

"So, you like kids? Want them?"

He nodded. "What's going on here, Lou?"

She stared him in the eye. "I love you, Joe. I've wasted the last twelve years, and I don't intend to let my life pass me by. I know what I want. And it's you," she added, praying he didn't kick her out of bed for being so bold.

Instead, his face lit up so bright, she was almost blinded by the brilliance of it. He leaned down and kissed her thoroughly, then said against her lips, "I love you so much, Mary Lou. I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you."

Joe's cell phone rang. "Leave it," she murmured against his lips, rising above him. A moment later, her own phone rang. "Crap," she muttered. "Must be important."

Joe reached over and answered his phone. Mary Lou leaned over him to grab hers, noticing the way his features hardened as he listened.

Uh-oh.

The display number wasn't one she recognized. "Hello?"

"I'm at the hospital," Roxy said without preamble. "Get me out of here before I start picking off nurses with a scalpel."

"What do you mean? What's happened?"

As she listened to Roxy describe the event that had ended her up in the emergency room, Mary Lou understood why Joe's face had changed and instinctively knew her brother was on the other end of the phone.

"Did you break anything?" Mary Lou asked.

"No. I just bruised my hipbone. I'm going to have to take it easy for the rest of the weekend, but I can walk on the damn thing. So, please come and get me, or I can't be held responsible for what I might do."

"Joe and I are on our way."

"Thank you."

She was slipping on her short set when Joe snapped his phone shut. "Someone sure wants to hurt Roxy," he commented, rising from the bed. He walked over to the bureau and pulled out a pair of shorts and a T-shirt.

"I know. She just called me from the hospital," Mary Lou said, buttoning her blouse.

"Yeah, Noah said the same thing. He wants us to pick her up and take her home, stay there till he gets there."

"She needs to go public about the article, or at the very least, stop writing them," Mary Lou said. "This is getting dangerous."

"Noah thinks it's Preston."

"I know, but Noah's wrong. Someone has her information, Joe. And that someone is not very happy."

Joe zipped his shorts and took Mary Lou's face in his hands. "We'll continue our earlier conversation later. As for your question, yes, I want children, and I want them with you."

Mary Lou stood there, stunned, as she watched Joe saunter out of the room.

* * * *

"For the tenth time," Roxy said, "I'm fine. Just hand me the bottle of Advil and get me a glass of wine. Please," she added as Mary Lou quirked a brow. "Sorry. I'm a little testy. Someone tried to kill me."

"Why don't you take the painkillers they gave you instead?"

"Can I take those with wine?"

"You probably shouldn't."

"Then get me the Advil."

She had been home for about two hours now, with no sign of Noah. Roxy knew he was probably at the SO working double time to find out who'd tried to run her down—and had damn near succeeded—but she wanted him here with her. Now. Joe was a big, strapping guy, but he didn't make her feel safe the way Noah did.

"How long did Noah say he would be?" Roxy asked Joe for the third time.

"He said he'd be here as soon as he could," he told her just as patiently as he had the other two times.

"Are you hungry?" Mary Lou asked.

"No," she replied, folding her arms under her chest and huffing from her prone position on the couch.

Someone knocked on the door. When Joe answered it, Bobbie came barreling in, green caftan spinning behind her. "Oh, Lord." She walked briskly to the couch and crouched in front of Roxy. "Honey, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Bobbie. Just a little fender bender." At Bobbie's stern glare, Roxy added, "Ha-ha. Hey, I can joke about it."

"Roxanne, if I'd ever known the new format was going to get you into this kind of trouble, I never would have supported it."

"It's not your fault there's a freakin' whack job out there trying to kill me," Roxy said. "Ahh, thank you. You're a goddess," she said to Mary Lou, who delivered her a large glass of Chardonnay. "However, given recent events, I think I should go public."

"Do you think that's wise?" Mary Lou asked. "Why not just stop writing the articles?"

"The person trying to hurt me is the only person, besides y'all, who knows I'm Paula Rockwell. If everyone knows, then it'll take the wind out of his sails." Hopefully.

Bobbie covered Roxy's hands with her own. "I'll stand by whatever decision you make."

Roxy took a breath. "I want you to print a notice in the paper. That'll give me a week to work up the courage to tell Noah."

"Noah still doesn't know?" Joe asked.

"Joe," Mary Lou admonished.

"What?"

Bobbie shook her head sadly. "Men."

Joe peeked out the front window. "Looks like that's him now."

Bobbie stood. "I'll get on, then. You let me know if you need anything, kiddo. Okay? Instead of the Ask Paula column, we'll print a notice in next week's edition."

Roxy nodded just as the door opened, and Noah stepped through, a grim expression on his handsome face. His eyes

searched the room until he found Roxy. He nodded to Joe as he made his way to the sofa. "Thanks, man. I owe you."

"Hey, no thanks necessary. Roxy's a friend."

Noah sat on the coffee table and leaned ahead to kiss Roxy's forehead. "How you doin'?"

"A little tender. I just took some Advil." She grinned. "With a big glass of wine."

She was still pale, Noah noted. Too pale. But alive. Thank God. "Why don't you take a couple of those painkillers, too? The wine won't do too much damage and it'll help you sleep."

Roxy pouted, but didn't complain when he shook out two Vicodin into his palm and slipped them into her mouth. "I missed you," she whispered.

He pressed another kiss to her forehead, trying not to imagine what would have happened if she hadn't gotten out of the way in time. She'd barely made it as it was.

By God, if it was Preston who'd done this, he would take that motherfucker apart piece by piece. He had twenty acres of cotton fields. Plenty of space to bury the piece of shit.

As Roxy's eyes drifted shut, Noah knew he needed to calm down. He looked at his sister. "Can you watch her for a minute?" He motioned Joe toward the kitchen.

When they were alone, Joe asked, "Anything?"

Noah shook his head, still frustrated. "My neighbors, Mitch and Susie said it looked like a dark car, big, older model, like Roxy said. Mitch thought he saw an 'S' on the license plate when it was taking off, though he said they were definitely Georgia plates."

"Doesn't leave you with much."

Noah raked a hand through his hair. "Yeah, you're fucking telling me. I also ran a county-wide check on vehicles reported stolen in the last week. Nothin' but a dirtbike and '68 VW Bus."

"Shit," Joe said.

"Yeah. My thoughts exactly."

"Are you still thinking it's Preston?"

"My gut says yes, but unless he borrowed a car, I don't have shit to go on. Still might haul him in next week, give him a few days to think he got away with it, then question him. The only thing I can do at this point is stick to Roxy like glue."

By tacit agreement, neither broached the subject of their relationships with the two women out in Roxy's living room.

"If you think Preston's behind this," Joe said, "a good motive might be the fact he got served this week."

Noah rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'd forgotten. Idiot still thinks Roxy's responsible." He pointed a finger at Joe. "Now that would be a damn good motive." Noah looked out the window briefly. "Also, he probably knows about you and Lou."

"There is that," Joe agreed. "I'd welcome the sonofabitch. I gotta shotgun locked and loaded if he wants to try any shit with me."

Noah grinned. "That's what I like about you, Joe."

* * * *

As promised, Noah stayed with her through the weekend, though she had to literally beg him to make love to her

Sunday night. He had flat out refused on Saturday out of fear of hurting her.

Finally, lying up in her large bed with the summer wind blowing the curtains about the room, she had teased his body into such a state that Roxy'd gotten her way.

Monday morning, they were parked in front of the library. "Joe or I will be here at five to pick you up, okay?" Noah said.

"Yes, sir." She saluted him.

He grabbed her chin and pulled her in for a kiss that turned hot and steamy in an instant. How was it she could get so turned on by a kiss? Roxy wanted to climb inside him, absorb him into her skin until his essence was everywhere. She wrapped her hand around his neck and pulled him closer, the fingers on her other hand inching toward the swelling bulge in his trousers.

He pulled away and rested his forehead against hers. "I'm going to have to sit in my rig for a full ten minutes now."

She grinned wickedly and got out of the Explorer. Refusing the crutches the hospital had given her she hobbled toward the entry. Noah waited until she entered the building before pulling out of the parking lot.

It seemed like the entire staff save The Dark Mistress swarmed Roxy the moment she entered the library.

"Ohmigod, Roxy, are you okay?" Lucy gushed. "I heard what happened. Was it really terrible? Are you in pain?"

"I'm fine." Roxy reached into her tote bag and pulled out the bottle of Vicodin. "And if I'm not, I have these little babies to help me through it."

"Is it true a drunk driver tried to run you over?" Ashley Jacobsen, the reference librarian asked.

"No, I really—"

"I heard it was an old man who fell asleep at the wheel," Louise King, one of the assistants said.

"Roxanne." The Dark Mistress' voice rang out ominously above the din.

Roxy looked up and saw Alice standing at the doorway to the only private office in the library. Beside her, a triumphant smirk on his face, stood Merle Granger.

Oh, shit.

* * * *

"Jesus H., man, would you knock off that fucking whistling?" Jack grouched. "I feel like I'm in an alternate universe here."

Joe grinned as he finished the buff and polish of Mary Lou's Benz. "Can't help it, Jack. I'm in love."

Jack immediately clapped his hands to his ears. "No, no, no. I don't want to hear any of that shit. Not in here. You feel me? This is not the place for happy, touchy feelings, okay?"

"You forgetting who pays your wages, my friend?"

"Kiss my ass, pal. When you signed me on, you knew what you were getting yourself into."

That was true enough. Jack was a man's man if there ever was one. And an unapologetic, mouthy bastard at that when he spoke at all. But, he was one hell of a mechanic. A man with a mysterious past, he'd shown up at Joe's garage and bet Joe a day's pay he could replace the engine Joe had

sitting in pieces on a stand in under three hours. And he had. With an hour to spare.

"Okay, no more whistling. But, you can't take away my happy, touchy feelings, no matter how hard you try."

Jack grumbled in reply and went back to work. Smiling, Joe returned to his own work, only to be interrupted by the sharp clack of high-heels on the concrete floor.

He looked up to see Mary Lou's mother, Katherine Kennedy, staring down at him with the same blue eyes her children possessed. But, instead of the warmth that shone through both, Katherine's were as cold as the North Atlantic.

"Mr. Fuller."

Joe rose and wiped his hand on a shop rag. "Mrs. Kennedy. What can I do for you?"

She looked around his garage with obvious distaste. Joe chose to ignore it. He'd dealt with enough people who valued money over integrity. It was useless to let it get to him. Even if the lady standing before him was the mother of the woman he planned to marry.

"Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

"Sure," Joe replied, and motioned toward his office. "Mind your step there, ma'am."

Once inside, her demeanor didn't change. She deigned the chair he offered, so he stood, as well. "Do you need service?"

Katherine Kennedy shook her head. "I take my vehicles to the dealership in Jacksonville."

Good. Those poor bastards could have her.

"I want you to stay away from my daughter."

Joe stared blankly at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Stay away from Mary Lou. She has a husband that's awaiting her return. This ... little foray of hers is just a whim, and she'll return to where she belongs."

"You're joking, right?"

Katherine's cold blues bore into his. "Young man, do I look like I'm laughing?"

No, she didn't. But, Joe had no intention of ever letting Mary Lou go. "I won't. I'm sorry. I love her, and she loves me."

Now Katherine laughed, but it was a hollow, bitter sound. "Then she has you fooled. She loves Preston. She belongs with Preston." Katherine dug into her designer purse and pulled out a check. She thrust it at Joe. "I assume this will grease the wheels, so to speak."

Joe covered his disbelief with a cough. There were enough zeroes he could start a chain of garages. "You're buying me off? Is that what I'm getting here?"

"View it however you want. I assume you'll stay away from her now?"

He didn't hand her back the check, just stared down at the amount, barely hearing the door click shut as Mary Lou's mother left his office.

* * * *

"What's this about?" Roxy asked, closed inside the small office with Alice and Merle.

"Have a seat, Roxy," Alice said.

Shifting gingerly, she sat down while the other two did the same.

Alice regarded her with censure. "Mr. Granger has brought a matter to my attention."

"And that would be?" Roxy asked, wishing Alice would get to the point.

"We know you've been penning the Paula Rockwell articles," Merle said. The bastard was smiling slightly.

Roxy nearly rose out of her chair and smacked the smirk off his face. "Are you the one who's been tormenting me?" she demanded.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said in a baffled tone.

To his credit, he hid his guilt well. If Roxy didn't know better, she would have believed his innocent act. "Bullshit," she said vehemently.

"Roxanne," Alice admonished.

She turned to her boss. "Alice, I've been chased through the park at night, my tires were slashed, my house was broken into and on Saturday, I was nearly killed. I have every reason to be upset. None of this happened until The Gazette was broken into and my information was taken."

Now, Merle looked guilty.

"It was you, wasn't it? Why, you little worm—"

"Roxanne, this is not what we're in here to discuss. Merle has graciously brought this to my attention. Whether or not he's 'tormenting' you, which is preposterous, by the way, is immaterial." Alice folded her hands atop the small conference desk and looked down at Roxy from above her glasses.

"Given this new development, I'm going to have to let you go."

"What?"

"We can't have this kind of publicity for the library. We have enough trouble with funding as it is. Having a woman who has caused so much trouble in one town in just a month might be our undoing. It's you or the library, Roxanne. I choose you."

When she had started the new format, Roxy hadn't given a thought as to the backlash on the others in her life it would affect. Hell, even on Saturday, when she'd told Bobbie to print the notice, she hadn't thought about the ramifications on the library.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Alice completely stunned her when she added, "We'll make this a voluntary quit. I don't want your years as a city employee tarnished. And I think your benefits package will help while you're setting up your bookstore."

Mollified, Roxy stood and nodded. "I appreciate that, Alice."

With one last glare at Merle, Roxy pointed her finger at him. "I know you're the one behind the permit problems, Merle. You'd better face the facts. My bookstore will be part of this town."

Roxy walked out with her head held high and went to pack up her desk.

* * * *

"Ginny," Noah told his dispatcher, "send Packer and Swanson out to Preston Abbot's place in Primrose Valley and bring him in for questioning."

There was a long pause on the line before Ginny said, "Alright, Sheriff. Will do."

Noah stood and stretched his muscles. He opened the door to his office and walked up to Mary Lou's desk. "I'm bringing Preston in for questioning. You wanna make yourself scarce or are you okay?"

Lips pressed in a thin line, she said, "I think you're barking up the wrong tree, but I'll be fine here."

"Well, when you're Sheriff, you can make the decisions."

Brother and sister looked up when Joe marched into the office, anger hardening his normally handsome features.

Mary Lou stood. "What's wrong?"

He thrust out a scrap of paper and handed it to Mary Lou. Her eyes widened as she looked at the amount. "What...?"

Noah snatched the check away. "She tried to pay you off, didn't she? To stay away from Lou."

Fury snapped in Joe's eyes, turning them black. Mary Lou shook from rage. "She thinks you took the check."

"You're mother is a fool."

Swamped with love, she moved into Joe's arms. "I love you, Joe Fuller. I love you so much."

"I'm going to go have a word with her," Noah broke in.

Mary Lou looked at her brother over Joe's shoulder. "No. This isn't your fight, Noah. It's about time I stood up to her. Besides, don't you have Packer and Swanson bringing in Preston?"

Noah growled in frustration. It seemed like everywhere he went he was banging his head against a goddamn wall. But, Lou was right. This was her battle.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Joe looked down at her. "Do you want me to go with you?"

She shook her head. "No, but can I borrow your truck?"

He fished the keys out and placed them in her palm. Mary Lou looked at Noah. "If it's Preston's who's been hurting Roxy, you nail his ass, you hear?"

Noah smiled. "Oh, you bet your ass I will. And more."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Paula,

I can't count on my husband to be on time! Whenever we're supposed to do something that involves me, he's always late. But, if it's an event for him—something he wants to do—he wants to go yesterday. I've told him how I feel, but he refuses to acknowledge the difference—he says I'm imagining things! What do I do?

Signed, Lost in Time

Dear Lost in Time,

Get the man a watch! If that doesn't work, be late to his functions and see how he likes it. Obviously talking hasn't made a dent in his thick head, maybe you're being late will. Good luck!

Signed, Paula Rockwell

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nineteen

On her way out to her mother's house in Primrose Valley, Mary Lou passed the Sheriff's cruiser containing her soon-to-be ex-husband. She had the insane urge to wave at Preston when his eyes bored into hers as they passed on the road. While she didn't wave, she kept her gaze strong on Preston's.

Pulling Joe's truck into her mother's driveway, she parked boldly in the middle of the circular drive behind her mother's Cadillac, just to make her point. In her pocket was the outrageous check her mother had written Joe.

Oh, how her blood boiled at that thought. The nerve, the absolute nerve of her mother thinking she could buy the one man who actually loved her. It was as if she somehow knew Mary Lou had a shot at happiness, and she wanted to steal that from her. Swallowing her nerves, she got out of the truck and walked to the front door.

Katherine flung open the door. "Where on earth did you get that?" she asked, motioning dismissively to Joe's truck.

"It's Joe's."

At his name, Katherine's lips compressed into such a thin, tight line, they lost color and disappeared. Mary Lou garnered her courage, pushed past her mother and stalked into the kitchen. She strode to the counter, dumped her purse on it and pulled down a bottle of whiskey, knowing she was going to need a stiff drink to fortify this little mother-daughter chat. She grabbed two glasses and poured a healthy amount into both.

Katherine trailed behind her, distaste clear on her features as Mary Lou knocked back the whiskey. As the alcohol burned a path down her throat, Mary Lou calmly reached into her back pocket, pulled out the check, and laid it on the counter.

Katherine stiffened, grabbed the second glass of whiskey and Mary Lou smiled. "Did you think he could be bought, Mother?"

"Everyone has a price."

"Not Joe."

"You have a husband. You have an obligation to this family. To the Kennedy name. To Preston."

Mary Lou scoffed. "You never cared, Mother. Admit it. Why are you bothering now?"

Katherine drained her glass in one long swallow, and then slammed it down on the counter. "It's because I care so much that I'm doing this! Don't you see, Mary Lou? If it hadn't been for me, you would've run off to art school. You would've been miserable!"

Everything in Mary Lou stilled. "What are you talking about?"

Her mother's hand shook as she filled the glass a second time. "I had your life all mapped out. You would marry well and live the life your father and I deemed best for you. But, that woman suggested art school, of all things. I knew I had to intervene."

Art school was my idea! she wanted to scream, but her mother's last words sent chills down her spine. "What did you do, Mother?"

"I did my duty as a mother. Preston Abbot was the son of an old family friend. During your high school years, during your foolish pipedreams of art school, I groomed him into a proper young man. And when the time came, I introduced the two of you."

"*You what?* You picked out my husband! You *groomed* him for me? What kind of mother are you? You're insane, you know that? Absolutely fucking crazy."

Katherine's hand shot out so fast, Mary Lou's brain didn't have time to process the slap. Her head flew to the side, and her cheek stung from the contact. Before she could react, her mother gripped her arm and dragged her across the kitchen.

"What is the matter with you?" Katherine screeched. "I've given you everything! Everything! And how do you repay me? With shame and embarrassment. You are disgrace to this family."

Katherine now had Mary Lou by the hair, making it near impossible to stop her from dragging Mary Lou across the room. Her mother opened the door to the butler's pantry and shoved her inside, slamming the door shut. Moments later, she heard the unmistakable snick of the lock.

Mary Lou pounded on the door. "Let me out of here right now!"

She was met with nothing but cold silence.

* * * *

Noah eyed his brother-in-law from across the metal table inside the only interrogation room in the SO. Preston sat in one of the folding chairs, trying to appear nonchalant, but

Noah didn't buy it for a second. He kept checking his watch and squirming ever so slightly in his seat, which was as good a tell as any that he had something to hide.

Just to keep him agitated, Noah stood, pacing slowly back and forth across the room, presenting a relaxed and lazy attitude. *Not a care in the world, you bastard.*

"See, what gets me, Preston," Noah said, infusing a little more Southern boy charm into his voice, "is that you don't have an alibi for June 14, the night Roxanne Palmer was pursued in the park. Nor do you have one for the day her tires were slashed, and the same for when her house was broken into." He scratched his chin and cast a glance at Preston. "Yet, Miz Palmer nearly gets run down and—" Noah snapped his fingers "—you were spotted at The Quinn."

"I was at home all of those days before, like I explained."

"With no one to back you up since you fired your maid."

"I had no idea that Roxanne had been hurt until I heard it from someone at the bar."

The hair on the back of Noah's neck rose. "Refresh my memory. What time did you say you were at The Quinn?"

"From ten to eleven."

"Hmm. Roxy was run down at about ten-thirty. Took about another ten minutes for the ambulance to cart her up and take her away. The hospital's on the backside of town—nowhere near The Quinn, by the way—which would've put her at the hospital around eleven. Yet, someone from the bar told you."

Preston turned red and looked away. Another tell. "Must have been someone else then." He glared at Noah. "You have

three people backing me up. I was nowhere near Roxanne when she got hit. I didn't do it."

"You're right on that, Abbot. I don't have you there. It wasn't your Lexus." Something about that car still bothered him, but he had yet to put his finger on it. Like a burr that dug in, it refused to let go. He had run all kinds of possibilities on the DMV database with what little he had to go on—which would in all likelihood, take hours, days even. "But, I know you're in this. You're up to your eyeballs in this mess. And I'm going to prove it, and when I do, you're gonna wish you'd never messed with Roxy Palmer, 'cause I'm gonna nail you're ass to the wall."

Preston smirked. "Did it ever occur to you that all of this harassment Roxy's been receivin' might be due to the fact that she's Paula Rockwell?"

For a split second, Noah didn't hear the other man. He got this strange buzzing in his ears, and his face heated. He spun around. "What did you just say?" he asked softly.

"Oh, so you didn't know?" Preston asked with mock sympathy. "That woman you've been off carousing with is none other than the famous Paula Rockwell." He smiled, baring his teeth. "If I know about it, then chances are others do as well. I'd be looking at some of them. After all the broken marriages she's caused, I wouldn't be surprised if there's a line of disgruntled husbands waiting to shoot her."

Noah pushed back his rage and shock a moment and tried to focus. No. Roxy was not Paula Rockwell. And then he remembered their conversation the night before she was run down.

"Noah, I have something to tell you ... you know Paula Rockwell..."

The break-in. He'd thought when The Gazette office was vandalized, it was for information on Paula Rockwell.

No fucking wonder Roxy had been so adamant the perpetrator wasn't Preston Abbot.

No, no, no. It couldn't be.

"Can I go now?" Preston asked, a look of pure glee on his face.

"Get the fuck out of here," Noah snarled.

Noah was glad the door to the interrogation room eased shut because he didn't want his people to hear him when he punched the wall.

Goddamn it.

He would straighten this out once and for all. Noah opened the door. The look on his face must have revealed his mood, because everyone got the hell out of his way as he left the office and headed to the library.

The sun baked the asphalt, the temperature in the high nineties with dark, ominous clouds on the horizon. But, the air did little to clear his mind. If anything, it only made matters worse. He could relate to those storm clouds.

"Sheriff!" a familiar feminine voice called from behind him. "Noah!"

With a growl, Noah turned and saw Bobbie Townsend hurrying toward him, her expression grim. "What?"

Bobbie looked taken aback by his tone for a moment, but pressed on. "I know who broke into The Gazette."

Not now, Miz Townsend. I have a librarian to interrogate.

"Really. And who would that be?"

"Merle Granger. I just came from the library. Merle told Alice Monroe that Roxy is penning the Paula Rockwell articles."

It was true, then. Roxy had lied to him. *Lied*. How long had that stupid column been running? A year? Two, at least. And the whole time she was writing them. She knew—knew—how he felt about that stupid piece of shit column. Yet, she had sat there and said nothing, probably laughing at his stupidity.

Yeah, he was stupid, all right. Stupid to ever have gotten involved with her in first place. She knew how he felt about honesty. She knew how he'd grown up.

The rage, the fury, he could handle. But the pain, the feeling his heart had been ripped from his chest and stomped on—that, he couldn't take.

He loved her and she'd lied to him, made a mockery of his beliefs.

"We were planning on printing a notice to reveal her identity," Bobbie said, "but since no one else knows, it has to be him." She pursed her lips. "Alice fired Roxy due to the publicity."

Noah refused to allow any sympathy temper his anger towards the woman he supposedly loved. Instead, he said, "I'll tag him on the way back from my errand. Thanks for the info."

"You did know, didn't you?" Bobbie asked. "The truth about Roxy? She said she was going to tell you."

"Not until about fifteen minutes ago."

"Be gentle, Noah," she said softly. "She didn't do it to hurt you."

"I'll be the judge of that. Thanks for the advice."

* * * *

"I really appreciate you letting me use your car," Roxy said to Lucy.

"I think it's just horrible what Alice did," Lucy said. "That's so unfair!"

"No, she was right. It would've caused problems for the library." Roxy laughed bitterly. "It's already caused problems I can't undo."

Lucy handed the keys to Roxy. "Well, I still think it stinks."

"You better get back inside," Roxy said. "Before The Dark Mistress fires you, too." She winked, but there was little mirth in the gesture.

As Lucy walked back into Roxy's only known place of employment, Roxy lifted the last box of her belongings into the trunk of the car. She slammed it shut and looked up in time to see Noah walking toward her.

Her instant smile faltered when she saw the hellfire in his eyes. *Oh, God. He knows. Somehow, he knows.*

Noah crossed the street and headed straight at her, his posture stiff and fairly screaming his rage. He was twenty feet from her when he shouted, "How could you!"

Although Lucy's little hybrid was scalding from the heat, Roxy backed up against it, praying she would melt into the car and not have to face the onslaught of Noah's wrath. She

knew he'd be angry, but she never thought he'd be this furious.

Yes, you did. That's why you never told him.

"I take it you've heard the news," she said.

When he reached her, his hands were fisted at his sides as if to keep from striking out at her. "You fucking lied to me."

"Noah, I didn't lie, I just didn't—"

"You know how I feel about lying and that stupid column. You played me for a fool! What, did you think you were just gonna keep writing those damn articles and keep me in the dark? I bet you had a good laugh at the idiot Sheriff."

Roxy felt the blood drain from her face. "Noah, no. I would never have done that. I was afraid to tell you. I didn't want you to hate me."

"Too late," he spat. "Who else?"

"What?" she asked, her heart broken and bleeding from his words. She didn't know it was possible to feel physical pain from an emotional wound.

"Who else knows?" he ground out. "I found out from Preston, of all fucking people."

Preston? How—she cut off her wayward thoughts. Now wasn't the time. "Bobbie, of course, and Mary Lou." She winced and added, "Mary Lou told Joe a couple weeks ago."

Noah's face turned bright red. "I must be the last fucking one to know, then, huh? Were you even going to tell me, Roxy? Or was this just some big joke to you?"

"Noah, I never meant to hurt you or lie to you. It was just I was so angry when I got rejected for the business loan, that I just sort of lost it and started writing the articles in a

different format. Then it all spiraled out of control and turned into this big mess, and we got involved, and it was this lie that kept getting bigger and bigger."

Noah's face remained impassive, his heavy forearms crossed against the broad chest he'd held her lovingly to so many times in the last weeks. She was getting nowhere with her explanation, knew she should've told him weeks ago. Hindsight was kicking her ass to Atlanta right now; she deserved his anger.

So, she said simply, "I'm sorry, Noah. I was wrong."

He glared at her. "We're done. I don't sleep with liars. I can't even stand the sight of you right now."

The tears she'd been holding back burst through like a dam. She cursed herself because she wasn't using them as ammunition. But, a man like Noah would believe the opposite. She reached out to touch his arm, and he angrily shook her off. "Noah, please." She swallowed. "I love you. I've loved you for as long as I can remember. Since before you saw me at the swimming hole, my heart has been yours."

His snapping blue eyes bore into hers. "I thought I loved you, too. Guess I was wrong."

Noah turned and stalked out of the parking lot, leaving her heart bleeding on the blistering pavement.

* * * *

"Mother!" Mary Lou's voice had gone hoarse from all the screaming, but she hadn't given up. From her watch, she could see that she'd been in the butler's pantry for little over a half hour. And Katherine hadn't responded to any of her

pleas. The only reason she knew her mother was still in the kitchen was for the occasional clink of glass.

Had her mother gone insane?

"Mary Lou." From the sound of it, Katherine stood right outside the door.

Thank God. "Please, let me out of here, Mama."

"I can't. You have obviously lost control of yourself, and it's all because of that rotten woman."

What rotten woman? "Roxy?"

"Yes," her mother hissed. Through the door, Katherine's words were slightly slurred. *The whiskey.*

"Roxy's done nothing but help me. None of this is her fault."

"This is all her fault!" Katherine roared.

"Why do you hate her so much?" Mary Lou whispered. She'd known it from the moment she'd befriended Roxy that her mother had taken an instant dislike to her, but this was crazy. If anyone was responsible, it was Preston.

"When I was in high school," Katherine said, so softly, Mary Lou had to press her ear to the door, "I was madly in love with William Palmer. We were an item, a pair, inseparable."

Her mother had dated Roxy's father? The idea was almost laughable. The rigid and cold Katherine Kennedy with the boisterous and gregarious Billy Palmer.

"We had plans to marry. Close to graduation, we ... we had a terrible fight. I was so angry that I acted rashly."

Tingles spread down Mary Lou's neck. "What did you do, Mama?"

"I gave myself to another boy, your father. It was just to get back at Billy, but I ended up pregnant. Billy found out and broke things off. He went off to college, and I did my duty and married your father.

"When Billy returned to Thorton, he'd married, too. A woman so obviously beneath him it was outrageous. Everyone knew how common she was, but no one dared say it."

"And I became best friends with their daughter," Mary Lou finished. She still didn't understand why her mother still held so much venom when the fault was clearly all on Katherine. "It's not Roxy's fault, Mother."

Katherine's voice hardened. "Do you know what a slap in the face it was to see that child and her mother in town? I could barely hold my head up. Billy should have stayed away. He knew I was here. He did it to throw my infidelity back in his face."

"And you think Roxy is trying to get back at you by helping me get away from Preston? A man who treated me like his property? Who cheated on me countless times?"

"Mary Lou," Katherine said. "It's time for you to go back where you belong."

Dread and fear curled in Mary Lou's belly.

"It's time to go home to your husband."

* * * *

By the time Roxy unloaded her belongings into her house, she had cried enough tears to fill the Ocumulgee River. Her

shoulders shook with sobs as she dropped the boxes on the dining room table.

She sunk down on her favorite chair and clutched a pillow to her chest, Noah's words still ringing in her ears. She'd had no idea he could be so cruel. That the man she loved so desperately had the ability to cut her to the quick so deeply.

She deserved nothing less.

This whole mess was her fault. If she had done the smart thing, she would've stood up for herself in the beginning. Instead, she'd allowed herself to remain a doormat, taking Merle Granger's rejection and letting it interfere with her self-confidence and reverted to form. Thinking she was becoming a bolder version of herself, she'd written the first of those stupid articles and created her own downfall.

She'd ruined lives. Merle Granger, even though he was a heartless pig, was now facing divorce and that was no emotional picnic. The girl who had lit her boyfriend's truck on fire had damn near caught the forest on Blake's Ridge aflame. The boyfriend had been recalcitrant after the incident, but she had spurned him.

While she may have helped some people, Roxy had most assuredly done more harm than good. She'd incited two large bar fights at The Mighty Quinn from her Ladies' Night declarations. Worst of all, she'd lost the man she loved. The man who was also one of her dearest friends. *Two for one, Rox. Way to go.*

Roxy sucked in a breath. This was no time for self-pity. She had to make this right somehow. There had to be a way to fix this mess.

Unfortunately, it was so huge, she couldn't see the forest for the trees. Maybe that had been the problem all along.

An idea hit her. She picked up her cell phone and dialed Bobbie. After telling her what she wanted, she hung up and slipped her cell inside the pocket of her jumper, satisfied that something had been done.

It would likely never fix the rift between her and Noah, but it might be a bit of balm for his heart and soul.

I thought I loved you, too. Guess I was wrong.

Roxy would make this up to him, if she had to die trying. Feeling lost in her huge house, she stood, looking for something to do. She'd seldom taken her accrued vacation time, so it was rare for her to be home on a weekday.

Before she could decide what to do, someone knocked on the door. Praying Noah had changed his mind, Roxy rushed to the door and wrenched it open only to find Preston Abbot standing on her porch. Roxy frowned. "Mary Lou isn't here."

"I know. I wanted to talk to you," he said, his voice almost gentle and contrite. Roxy's radar went up immediately.

"Why?"

"It's about some things I'd rather not discuss on the porch. May I come in?" He smiled disarmingly. "I promise not to bother you too long."

Against her better judgment, Roxy opened the door wider to let him in. He moved past her in time for her to see that it wasn't his Lexus in her driveway, but an older, black Lincoln.

Panicked, Roxy spun around, but Preston had already shut the door and slammed her against it. He held her to the door,

his forearm pressed tightly against her windpipe. Roxy clawed at his arm, but he was too strong, and she was losing oxygen.

"Now, here's what we're gonna do, Roxy," he drawled. Madness swirled like sludge in his hazel eyes. "You and I are going to walk calmly and quietly out to Stuart's car. You are not to scream, run or draw attention in any way, shape or form."

With his free arm, he reached behind him and pulled out a big, shiny gun. What little oxygen Roxy had left fled at the sight, and she struggled to stay conscious.

He pointed it at her as he released her. "If you do, I have no qualms about shooting you. We clear?"

Roxy dropped to the floor, the room spinning. Preston grabbed her roughly by the arm and dragged her to her feet. "Quit being such a pussy. Guess that's what you are, though, huh?" He smirked. "Have to say, if Noah's been hittin' it, you must have something hiding under all those dresses."

Roxy spat in his face. For her defiance, he backhanded with the butt of the gun. The pain was so intense, she nearly blacked out. But, she refused to drop to her knees and pass out. She wasn't going down without a fight. Tenderly, she touched her cheek. Her fingers came away with blood.

"All right now. You ready? I can just as easily shoot you here, but that'd spoil all the fun we've got planned for you. And you know how I love my fun."

He opened the door, and Roxy contemplated her escape at the same time he jammed the barrel against her side. He was on her right, the gun hidden to anyone walking by.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Preston opened the driver's door to the Lincoln that had tried to run her down two days ago and ordered her inside.

"Climb over on the passenger seat." He kept the gun low, but trained on her as she got inside. When she settled in, she felt the square plastic of her cell phone bounce against her thigh, and the relief nearly paralyzed her. Thank God she'd kept it on vibrate.

Preston got in and started the engine. While he was trying to maneuver the car out of her driveway and keep the gun positioned, Roxy reached into her pocket and felt for the numbers on her phone. She hit Noah's cell phone on speed dial.

Roxy just prayed that when he saw the display, he would answer it. Not likely, but she prayed just the same.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear readers:

In lieu of a column this week, I'm printing a notice. Next week, Paula Rockwell is coming out. I'm revealing my true identity. Stay tuned for the shocking revelation.

Signed,

Paula Rockwell, a.k.a.???

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty

Hurt and anger still coursing through his veins, Noah crossed the street and entered Thorton Savings & Loan.

Connie Willows didn't even bother looking up as he passed, but he didn't give a shit. His heart belonged—had belonged—to a lying librarian with no conscience.

He barged past Granger's stuttering secretary and pushed open the bank president's door. Merle was on the phone, but at the sight of Noah, he quickly hung up.

"I assume this is about Miz Palmer," Merle said defensively.

"No, this is about you breaking into The Gazette office and stealing confidential information and using it to taunt and harass Miz Palmer."

Granger's face turned bright red, and he dropped his face into his hands. "Shit."

"Yeah," Noah agreed. "So, you were the one who chased her in the park, slashed her tires, broke into her house and tried to kill her on Saturday?" Noah refused to allow the emotions he felt rise, so he ruthlessly tamped them down. He was done with Roxy Palmer.

Granger's head shot up. "I didn't do that."

"You didn't harass Roxanne Palmer on several occasions?"

Granger shook his head fiercely. "It's true I broke into The Gazette. That was all me. I also put a stall on the permits with..." He looked away. "Some help."

"Who?"

"I really don't think you need to know."

"And I really don't think you're in a position to tell me what information I need and don't need." On his belt, his cell phone rang. He checked the display. *Roxy*. He pinned Granger with a glare. "Who else bribed the county clerk, Merle?" When the bank president just stared, Noah added, "I'm in no mood, Merle. I have no compunction about beating the shit out of you to get the information."

"But-but you're the sheriff!" Merle sputtered.

Noah pulled out his nightstick and not-so-subtly tapped it against his hand.

Merle hemmed and hawed for a moment before finally admitting, "Your mama."

Noah closed his eyes on a sigh. He should've known. "Please stand up and turn around. Merle Granger, you are under arrest for breaking and entering, second degree burglary and bribing an elected official. You have the right to remain silent." Noah continued the Miranda as he cuffed Merle and led him out of the bank.

When he returned to the SO, he passed Granger off to one of his deputies and ran a hand through his hair. If Granger hadn't been the one harassing Roxy...

"Sheriff," Deputy Swanson said anxiously. She held a printout in her hand. "You're going to want to take a look at this. We finally got a partial hit from the DMV."

Noah scanned the printout until he found the one highlighted in yellow. "My father's Lincoln," he murmured. He'd known there was something familiar about that car. His own mother had tried to kill Roxy. Was it possible? Had she

been behind this whole thing? His mind ran like a hamster on a wheel as all the possibilities rushed around his brain.

Swanson nodded. "Thought you'd want to know."

"Thanks."

His cell rang again. This time it was Joe. "What's up?"

"Have you heard from Lou?" he asked instantly. "She left in my truck to your mother's house over three hours ago. She isn't answering her cell."

Alarm pierced him. Surely Katherine wouldn't hurt her own daughter? Then again, she'd nearly killed Roxy. Anything was possible at this point. "Did you call Roxy?"

"All I got was her voicemail. They told me she quit when I called the library."

Quit, my ass.

"I'll do some checking and get back to you. Keep your cell on you. Better yet, hoof it on over here, just in case. I just found out the car that tried to run Roxy over belongs to my mother."

"Shit," Joe said.

"Yeah."

After Noah shut his phone he remembered Roxy's call. He checked his voicemail. There was a lot of rustling, like the phone was in her purse.

"I don't know why you're doing this, Preston," he heard her say.

"If it hadn't been for you and your meddling, my wife would be home where she belongs."

"And if you hadn't screwed Connie Willows on your desk, you wouldn't be in this mess."

Silence followed, and then a thump. Noah heard Roxy cry out, and his heart dropped to his feet.

"Shut your fucking mouth!"

More silence. Then, "Where are we going?" Roxy asked groggily.

"None of your goddamn business. Now zip it before I hit you again."

The line went dead. Noah desperately wanted to call her back, but if her phone wasn't on vibrate, it would give her away. It didn't matter; he had a pretty good idea where Preston was taking her. His mother and Preston were working together on this; he was sure of it.

Joe walked in.

"Preston's kidnapped Roxy. I think he's taking her to my mother's house." He called to his deputies for back up and headed out like the hounds of hell were on his heels.

* * * *

Roxy was weak from the blows she'd taken from the butt of Preston's pistol. Her face felt like it had swelled as big as a balloon. Blood streamed from her cheek and temple, staining her yellow jumper.

Preston pulled into Katherine Kennedy's driveway, taking the service entrance and stopping at the back of the house. While he was getting out, Roxy dialed Noah's phone again.

Preston wrenched open the passenger door and pulled her out by her hair. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. A moment later, she heard Katherine's voice. "You stupid fool!"

Look at her face! It was supposed to look like an accident. There's no way we can hide this."

"Bitch has a mouth on her," Preston said.

"Take her out to the old slave's quarters. After you're done, park the Lincoln back in the garage."

Still gripping Roxy by the hair, Preston asked, "Where's Mary Lou?"

"Inside. Don't worry. She won't get away. You'll have your wife back and enough money for the two of you to escape after you've taken care of your part of the deal." She lifted her chin at Roxy.

Oh, goody.

Preston released his grip on her hair and pushed her forward. A moment later, she felt the cold steel of the gun against her back. "Move," he said.

"You're not going to get away with this," Roxy said.

"Didn't I tell you to shut up?"

"It's Katherine who's holding the reins, isn't it? You do everything she tells you to. It's all about money, Preston. Money's what drives you."

Preston grabbed her by the hair again, jerking her against him. He pressed his lips to her ear and whispered menacingly, "If you don't keep your yap shut, I might have me a little taste of what the Sheriff's been after. You feel me ... Paula?"

Roxy couldn't control the shudder that ran through her body. But, she kept her mouth closed as they tromped through the thick pines and live oaks that bordered the expansive yard. After about a quarter mile, they reached an old, dilapidated building.

The old slave's quarters.

Roxy remembered Mary Lou and Noah talking about how they'd been forbidden to go near it in their youth, but when their parents were away, they'd sneaked off and went exploring. Roxy recalled how much she'd wanted to go exploring, too.

Not quite this way, though.

Kudzu covered most of the exterior of the quarters, but someone had hacked away enough in front to reveal a small door. Oh, God. How long had they been planning this? From that night in the greenbelt?

Her thoughts halted as Preston pulled a length of rope from his back pocket—how had she missed that?—and roughly tied her wrists together.

Which meant she no longer had access to her phone.

Inside, the slave quarters were dank and humid, the stench of a hundred years' worth of Southern Georgia elements wreaking havoc. The wooden floor was rotted out in places, the windows had apparently been broken out and cockroaches scattered as they entered. It was a simple, one room building. There was only one piece of furniture in the house: a high-backed, iron chair.

When Roxy saw the two pairs of handcuffs clipped to the rung on either side, she shuddered. Preston pushed her forward and forced her to sit down. He went to work on the knot at her wrists. Roxy knew this would be her one and only chance for escape. He was using both of his hands, the gun lying on the floor. As he fought with the knots, she considered her options.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

There was a chance that Noah may not have heard her calls, or worse, refused to take them. No one knew she was missing; Mary Lou was still at work and wouldn't return home until this evening.

When he freed her hands, should she grab the gun or make a run for it? She didn't have a chance to mull it over. Preston released her wrists from the painful bind.

Relying on instinct, she reared back her boot-clad foot and struck him hard in the groin. Preston roared in pain and dropped to his knees.

Roxy leapt from the chair, kicked the gun across the room and ran like hell.

* * * *

"Oh, fuck, oh, shit."

"Man, maybe you oughta let me drive," Joe said.

Joe had Noah's cell phone on speaker, holding it as the two men listened to the horror Roxy was going through.

Noah had never known anything like the debilitating fear and rage that tore through him when Preston threatened to rape Roxy. There was no doubt that sonofabitch would follow through on his threat.

Right before he killed her.

And Noah would never forgive himself. He would never be able to take back the last words he'd spoken to her. Words of anger and hurt, meant to wound.

She would die thinking he hated her.

Birds twittered through the phone as Preston walked her to the old slaves' quarters. He had no doubt his mother had

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Mary Lou in the house somewhere. She was going to turn his sister over to Preston and let him escape.

At that moment, Noah hated his mother.

As he turned down the street toward her house, there was rustling on the cell phone; Preston's heavy breathing. Noah prayed he wasn't touching Roxy.

Then there was a loud male cry, the sound of a tussle and Roxy's gasps, then her footsteps sounded across wood.

"Roxy, you bitch!" Preston screamed.

"Fuck you!" Roxy yelled.

Noah would've smiled had he not been so terrified.

Siren blaring, he skidded into his mother's drive behind Joe's pickup. "You keep the phone. I'm going into the house to get Lou." Much as it killed him to not go after Rox, he knew his mother would welcome him more than Joe. She might shoot Joe on sight.

As they exited the rig, Noah pointed to the northeastern corner of the woods. "He took her to the slaves' quarters. They're about a quarter mile that way. From the sound of it, Roxy's escaped. Go find her. Go!" he shouted.

Noah rounded the front of the house and opened the front door. "Mother!"

Katherine came in from the kitchen, the only time he'd ever seen panic on her stoic face. "Noah. What are you doing here?" Her voice trembled.

Placing his hand on the butt of his service pistol, he said, "Where's Mary Lou?"

"She isn't here." Her hand fluttered to the antique pearls she habitually wore. "I don't know what would make you think that."

"Mary Lou. She said she was headin' over here over three hours ago. She came in Joe's truck. It's parked behind your Cadillac."

Katherine's lips compressed into a tight line. "Well, she was her. But we had an argument and she left."

"Don't fucking lie to me! I know she's here and I know about Dad's Lincoln." Noah stared hard at his mother. "Tell me something. Since Preston had an alibi, was it you behind the wheel?"

She paled. "I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"Roxy had her cell phone on when Preston abducted her, Mother. I heard everything. It's recorded. There isn't anything you can do now but surrender. Roxy's escaped Preston from the slaves' quarters, and Joe's out there looking for her. I have four deputies on their way here as we speak. Now tell me where Mary Lou is."

Katherine's eyes widened for a fraction of a second and then turned cold again. From the folds of her skirt, she withdrew a .22 Derringer and aimed it at Noah's chest.

"I can't let you be with that woman, Noah. And I can't let you ruin everything I've worked so hard for."

With those last words, she fired.

Katherine Windsor Kennedy watched her oldest child, the child who'd ruined her life, crumple to the floor as blood blossomed on front of his uniform.

She felt no remorse.

She felt nothing.

Noah spoke the truth. How else had he known she'd ordered Preston to take Roxy to the slaves' quarters? And as she stood there doing nothing, the police were on their way here to arrest her. Within minutes they would arrive and haul her away like a common criminal. And all because she had tried to save her children.

She could leave. She certainly had the means. Start over somewhere. But the idea held no appeal. In fact nothing did.

She had just killed her son. And she felt nothing.

Katherine slipped the stinging barrel of the Derringer into her mouth and pulled the trigger.

* * * *

Mary Lou heard Noah's voice briefly, just a muffled sound, really, but she recognized the timbre. Her mother spoke next. They were behind her, which meant they stood in the formal living room or the foyer. As she was about to shout for him, she heard the gunshot. No sound for two horrifying minutes. Then, a second shot.

She searched around the butler's pantry, wondering why in hell she hadn't thought to break her way out before. She grabbed the first thing her eyes landed upon: a heavy wine bottle. True, it would probably break after a few good whacks, but it was hefty and there were several others for backup.

The bottle was heavier than she expected, especially when swinging it at a solid-core door. The force sang up her arms with each thwack of the bottle, but she kept swinging away, determined to get to her brother.

The first bottle shattered in her hands. Numbly, she noted it was a Merlot as the blood-colored liquid splashed all over her clothing. Turning, she grabbed the next one and went at it again. When she heard the first splinter, she thought it was the glass breaking, but when the bottle didn't explode in her hands, she realized she'd smashed through.

For good measure, she put the Chardonnay down and grabbed another bottle and cracked at the door until a wine bottle-sized hole appeared in the door. Mary Lou reached her hand through the hole and unlocked the pantry.

Mary Lou sprinted to the foyer, only to skid to a stop when she saw her mother and brother, ten feet apart, both lying on the Italian marble. There was blood everywhere.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God."

There was a gun in her mother's hand. Mary Lou rushed over to Noah. Blood covered the entire front of his uniform. She pressed her fingers to his throat to feel for a pulse.

"Please, God. Please. Don't do this to me."

There. She felt something. His pulse was faint, and thready, but it was there. Slipping on the blood, she ran to the kitchen for the phone, but stopped at the sounds of sirens outside.

She threw open the door and saw four cruisers parked in the street. "Officer down! Officer down! Get an ambulance here now. The Sheriff's been shot."

Mary Lou returned to the foyer and looked down at her mother. Her eyes remained cold and impassive even in death. Although her mother had never been a kind woman, Mary Lou

felt the loss to the depth of her soul. How had this happened? How had it all turned out this way?

Deputy Moreno came running inside. He took one look at the carnage and said, "Oh, shit." He stuck his head out the door and yelled, "Get the medics here NOW!" Then he looked at Mary Lou. "Where's Roxanne Palmer and your husband?"

"What?"

"Roxy was abducted earlier today by your husband. He took her here. There was a mention about slaves' quarters. He and Joe Fuller came here."

Joe. Oh, dear God, not Joe.

Moreno took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Mary Lou? Can you tell us where the slaves' quarters are?"

Pushing down her fear, she said, "I can show you," just as the ambulance arrived.

* * * *

Lungs heaving, Roxy twisted around the live oaks and Georgia pines, completely lost. Preston was behind her. He would shout obscenities every couple minutes, taunting her like a child.

He was gaining on her.

Then she remembered her phone. Pulling it out of her pocket, she said, "Hello?"

"Jesus H. Christ," Joe said. "I've been screaming at you for ten minutes."

"Thank God, you got the call. I'm in the woods, but I'm lost and Preston's chasing me. Where's Noah?"

"In the house trying to find Mary Lou. I'm in the woods, too, but I can't tell you where the hell I'm at. I never found the slaves' quarters."

Her phone had an echo. Roxy pulled it away to check the bars when she heard Joe's voice.

"Joe!" she shouted. "I'm over here!"

Within seconds, he emerged from behind a live oak. Roxy had never been so grateful to see another human being in her life.

"Jesus, Roxy, your face," he said in a horrified whisper as she flung her arms around him.

"So you're fucking my wife and Kennedy's side piece?" Preston sneered from behind them. "Lucky man."

"Shit," Roxy whispered.

They turned as one to find Preston pointing the gun at them. "That's right, Miz Palmer. You are surrounded, as they say. Maybe I should fuck her right here and make you watch?"

"Go to hell," Joe ground out.

Preston brazenly moved forward until they were standing close enough to hold a quiet conversation. Keeping the gun trained on Joe, he reached out and painfully squeezed one of Roxy's breasts. "Got a set of porn star titties on you."

Joe moved to pull Preston's hand away, but Preston kicked him in the groin, dropping Joe to his knees.

"Please stop, Preston," Roxy begged. "Just ... stop. This is madness. The police are here. Noah's here. It's over."

"Bullshit."

"Why would Joe be here then?"

Instead of answering, Preston grabbed Roxy, and spun her around at the same time she heard someone shout, "Stop! Police!"

Preston wrapped his arm around Roxy's throat and pressed the gun to her temple. He shoved her forward a few steps and fear coursed through her along with regret that she could possibly die with Noah hating her. She shook like she had palsy, but stood tall, refusing to back down. Roxy wasn't going to cower.

Mary Lou emerged from behind a live oak. "Preston, no!"

It happened so fast, yet the moment was conversely slow, as if she were watching a movie from underwater. Preston removed the gun from her temple and pointed it at Mary Lou. Roxy bit down on his forearm until he howled and released her, and then dove for the ground. Joe tackled Mary Lou as Preston pulled the trigger.

All at once, shots fired around them, and Preston dropped to pine needle covered floor of the forest, his lifeless eyes staring at her. Roxy turned away and buried her head in her arms.

The terror and tears came rushing at her in an instant, as Roxy lay there shaking.

She felt hands lifting her arms to pull her into a sitting position. Mary Lou looked into her eyes and burst out crying. She wrapped her arms around Roxy and rocked her. "Oh, God. I was so scared, Roxy. I never knew she'd go this far. I thought you were dead." She held her back and looked at her face. "That bastard. Did he do this to you?"

"I want Noah," Roxy whispered. "Where's Noah?"

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

When Mary Lou's face paled, fear pierced Roxy's heart in a way that not even Preston Abbot could touch. "Mama shot him, Rox. She shot him."

Roxy dropped head onto her friend's shoulder and sobbed.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Ask Paula

Dear Readers:

My name is not Paula Rockwell. You may know me as the former librarian at the Thorton City Library. My name is Roxanne Palmer. I began penning this new format when an event in my life triggered a reaction that had less than stellar results. I ended up doing more harm than good. Worst of all, I lost a very dear friend. I would like to apologize to all those I've insulted or hurt, most especially, Sheriff Noah Kennedy.

Noah, I know I hurt you. And I'm sorry. It was never my intention. I want you to know that I love you, that I will always love you, until the day they lower me into the ground. I understand if you never want to speak to me again, but know that I will always be here for you. I truly am sorry.

I love you, Rox

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twenty-One

Even though nothing was wrong with Roxy, the doctor made her stay overnight for observation. Which was fine with her. She spent most of the time in the ICU watching over Noah anyway.

The medics had nearly lost him on the way to the hospital, and then again on the operating table. So, far there was no infection, but his condition was still critical.

His pallor was a sickly pale beneath his normally bronzed skin. Features slack, he looked like a shadow of the man she loved.

The doctor said it was possible for him to remain unconscious for weeks given the extent of his injury. Although the bullet had been a .22, it had pierced a major artery near his heart, and he had required five pints of blood to replace what he had lost.

Roxy had offered to donate. Which was when they gave her the shock of her life.

"Pregnant?" Roxy had asked in disbelief.

"Yep," the nurse said. "From the blood test it looks like you're about three weeks along. It's actually a miracle you didn't miscarry given the trauma you went through." She'd smiled at Roxy. "Sorry, hon. I know you want to help the Sheriff, but we can't take blood from pregnant woman."

Mary Lou had donated instead. She, of course, hardly ever left Roxy's side, once she'd learned there was a baby growing

in Roxy's belly. "That's my niece or nephew in there," she'd said.

They released Roxy on the day following the attack, giving her a bottle of prenatal vitamins and ensuring she made an OB appointment with the clinic on the third floor of the hospital.

Mary Lou and Joe drove her home, but the minute they left, she packed a small bag, got into her Honda and went right back to the hospital.

"I thought they released you," Noah's daytime nurse, Patsy said when she saw Roxy.

"They did. But that's not going to keep me away."

"You do know this is against regulations, Roxy."

"I know, but I feel better being here with him. Maybe on some level he knows I'm here. It might help him."

Patsy didn't look convinced, but she shrugged and walked off. There were some benefits of living in a small town.

Noah's color hadn't changed in the two hours since Roxy had seen him last. After thoroughly scrubbing her hands, she ran a fingertip across his cheek. His five o'clock shadow had turned into a forty-eight-hour one; coarse hair dusted his cheeks, chin and upper lip.

Roxy placed her hand on his forehead. It was cool and clammy, but without infection, chances were he would recover fully.

She hoped.

He still may never forgive her, but she would do her damndest to change his mind. Settling into the padded chair sitting next to his bed, she pulled out Noah's favorite book,

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

The Lonely Silver Rain, by John D. MacDonald, and began to read aloud.

* * * *

Noah felt like he was trapped underwater, but with the ability to breathe. Everything around him was murky, he couldn't see, could barely make out voices. There were lots of beeps, and though they were particularly annoying, he got used to them. Unfortunately, when he tried to order someone to turn the damn things off, he found he couldn't open his mouth.

He didn't know how long he drifted in and out like this; for a few moments, it was that cloudy space and then darkness. There was one constant through the whole thing: Roxy. Her soft, lilting voice spoke to him, to others. When he thought he felt her lips touch his brow, he desperately struggled to reach and grab her, but it was as if all of the strength had been leeched from his body.

In the beginning, he'd been frightened, for he didn't know where or how he'd ended up in this alternate universe. But, with Roxy by his side, he felt safe, cherished.

And he knew that he belonged to her. Body, heart and soul.

* * * *

By Friday morning, Roxy had gone through three novels. It might have been her imagination, but Noah seemed ... better-off when she was there, as though he could hear her.

It didn't matter; it made her feel better, at least, even if Noah couldn't hear her voice or feel her touch.

When she was sure no one was looking, she would stand over the bed and take the hand that wasn't attached to tubes and needles and place it over her lower abdomen, where their child grew inside her womb.

Roxy spoke to him about it; what they would name it, whose features it would have. She decided it definitely would be tall. Of course, there was a lot of uncertainty revolving around this baby. Neither she nor Noah had been expecting it. But, Roxy knew with a ferociousness that was foreign to her that she wanted this baby. The only foreseeable problem was Noah. Hell, she didn't even know if he wanted kids, given his childhood.

Especially since his own mother had tried to kill him.

She wasn't feeling many symptoms yet, although her period was now a day late. Occasionally, her tummy dipped strangely if she smelled something odd. Her breasts—now, they had changed. They ached all the time, and she had already outgrown her bra, which didn't seem possible.

"Hey."

Roxy looked up from *The Stand* at Bobbie and smiled. "Hi."

"Any change?"

Roxy shook her head. "I think his color's better, though."

"Have you been home at all this week?"

"No. I borrowed one of the nurse's laptops for the article. I'm assuming you received it."

Bobbie held up a copy of this week's Gazette. "It was good. I think it'll go a long way towards mending fences, Roxy."

Roxy stared at Noah. "There's only one fence I'm interested in mending right now."

"Do you want this copy?" Bobbie asked.

Roxy nodded. "I want him to read it when he wakes up."

Bobbie placed it on Roxy's lap and gave her a hug. "Hang in there, kiddo."

Roxy blinked back tears. "I am. Thanks, Bobbie."

"Call if you need anything."

Roxy turned back to Noah and checked his machines, noting the heart monitor was suddenly beeping faster. She felt him squeeze her hand gently, and her heart soared. Roxy reached over and hit the call button for the nurse. Two nurses and his doctor came rushing in seconds later.

"His heart rate went up, and he squeezed my hand," Roxy said.

Dr. Carmichael moved to the other side of the bed while the nurses checked his vitals. "Looks like he's coming out of it," the doctor said, moments before Noah's eyes drifted open slowly.

Roxy placed a hand at her mouth, trembling with anticipation and joy. She hadn't realized she was crying until she felt the tears drop onto her hand.

"Where am I?" Noah asked. His voice was hoarse and scratchy from the intubator tube they'd inserted during his ride to the hospital.

Dr. Carmichael peeled open each eyelid and shined a penlight into them. "You're at County General. You were shot."

"Shot?" he asked, obviously confused.

"In the chest with a .22 Derringer, which pierced a major artery in your heart. Congratulations, Sheriff. We nearly lost you twice."

"I ... I don't remember."

"That's not uncommon," Dr. Carmichael told him as he moved around the bed, checking this and that. "Sometimes trauma victims have difficulty remembering the incident. It'll come eventually, I imagine."

"I remember going to the bank."

"It's all right, Noah. Don't push it. You've had one hell of a traumatic week." Dr. Carmichael looked at Roxy. "You want to get him a cup of water?"

Roxy went out into the hall to fill a cup, inserting a straw so he could drink it with ease.

"And she sat here by your side the whole time," Dr. Carmichael was saying when she returned. "Read you..." He looked at Roxy. "Two novels?"

"Three," Roxy confirmed. She pointed at the book on the table. "Going on four."

"Never left," the doctor continued. "Just laid here on this chair and held your hand. If that's not love, I don't know what is." He winked at Noah. "Good thing you broke things off with my Missy, huh? Or it might be her in here tending to you like a fallen soldier."

Heart tripping in her chest, Roxy moved to the bed and looked down at Noah. He didn't remember anything. Which meant one of his last memories was of him cutting her to pieces in the library parking lot.

Noah stared up at her, expressionless, and Roxy's heart sank. "Hey," she said.

He said nothing.

Roxy pursed her lips and blinked back the tears that threatened. He would remember, Dr. Carmichael had said, eventually. Hopefully before the baby was born.

Noah put up a finger and motioned nurse Patsy. She bent down as he whispered to her, and Patsy's eyes widened as they cut over to Roxy. Patsy nodded and walked over to Roxy, gently leading her out of the ICU.

"I'm sorry, hon. He says he doesn't want you here. I have to follow the patient's wishes. I'll grab your bag."

Roxy's heart broke all over again as Patsy grabbed her things. Dr. Carmichael moved the hospital bed into a sitting position, and Noah stared at her, his blue eyes cold.

Patsy handed Roxy her bag and this week's Gazette. Roxy started to turn away, but stopped. "Patsy? Can you give this to him? When he's ready, have him read the Paula Rockwell column."

The nurse's shrewd eyes took in Roxy's face. "I never would've guessed it was you. You got guts, girl. Don't give up, you hear?"

"Thanks."

Refusing to run off like coward, Roxy held her head high and walked out of the hospital.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

* * * *

They kept him in the hospital for another five days, moving him out of the ICU the night after he woke. Thanks to Mary Lou, Joe and his deputies, he now knew what had happened, but he still hadn't regained his memory.

The Gazette lay like a curse on one of the tables.

Despite what Joe had told him, he still felt nothing but a deep anger and hurt towards Roxy. If a part of his heart softened at the idea of her at his bedside, well, that made him twice the fool.

On the day of his discharge, he folded up the newspaper and shoved it in the bag Mary Lou had brought for him. His sister and Joe came at noon to drive him home. He grumbled when the nurse made him ride in a wheelchair down to the front entrance like he was some invalid.

"Well," Mary Lou said, "I can see you still haven't gotten rid of that nasty disposition you suddenly acquired."

"Shut up, Lou," Noah said.

She beamed up at Joe. "See? I told you."

"What the hell are you so damn happy about?" Noah asked as he got into Mary Lou's Mercedes. Mary Lou shoved her left hand under Noah's nose where a two-carat princess-cut diamond sparkled like ice on her finger.

"Oh. Congratulations," he mumbled.

Joe started the car while Mary Lou got into the passenger seat. "Wedding's in three weeks," Joe said.

"Awfully fast."

Mary Lou turned around in her seat. "Noah, I understand that you're bitter and angry about Roxy, but Joe and I know what we're doing. We love each other, and we don't want to wait." She turned back around, but Noah heard her grumble, "Boneheaded, stubborn man."

"So, Noah," Joe said. "I was hoping you would stand beside me as my best man."

His sister was right. He was being an asshole. Just because his love life had disintegrated didn't mean he had to take it out on happy couples everywhere. He cleared his throat and tried for a brighter tone. "I'd be honored, Joe."

They kept the conversation light during the drive to Noah's, but he was painfully aware that Joe and Mary Lou were purposely avoiding the topic of Roxy.

"Thanks for the ride, guys," Noah said when they pulled the Benz into his driveway. "I'll see you on Monday, Lou."

"You're not cleared for work!"

"I'm Sheriff. I cleared myself." He held up a hand. "Desk duty only, I promise."

His sister only grumbled as he got out of the car. His chest still hurt like a bitch, but he had some pretty heavy-duty painkillers that would take the edge off. He headed straight for the kitchen and downed three, the duffle sitting there, Roxy's article inside, beckoning him like a siren in a tumultuous sea.

"Fuck it," he said, and dug through the bag for the article.

* * * *

Two weeks had passed since Noah's discharge from the hospital. Two weeks and she had neither seen nor heard from him. By tacit agreement, Mary Lou didn't talk about him, and Roxy didn't ask.

She didn't know if he'd regained his memory, and frankly, at this point, she didn't care. Roxy didn't know if it was hormones or what, but this was ridiculous. His parents had treated him terribly his whole life, but he'd still talked to them.

Well, until his mother shot him, that is.

She'd damn well raise this baby on her own. Roxy would tell him, of course, and then he'd accuse her of keeping that from him, too. Never mind that during the first week, Roxy had called him day and night to deliver the news, but he never took any of her calls or returned them.

Well, she had other things to take care of than worrying about a thirty-three-year-old grown man who was having a hissy fit and being a big JERK.

The first being the baby, which was roasting away in her oven. Those two weeks had brought on a whole slew of symptoms including vomiting, crying jags, unending thirst, a very, very strange craving for sweet pickle and garlic sandwiches and the urge to pee every five seconds.

Secondly, she was the maid of honor for Mary Lou and Joe's wedding, which was next Saturday. The two of them had been running around like crazed bridezillas trying to get the details handled.

Lastly, with Merle in jail and Katherine Kennedy dead, the permits for the bookstore had gone through. They were now

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

trying to decide on a structure. Building would begin the week after Joe and Mary Lou returned from their honeymoon.

So what if Noah never forgave her? Big deal. She had lots of other things to handle. Right.

Roxy parked her Honda in the hospital parking lot. She had her first OB appointment today. At least she had something to look forward to.

* * * *

He remembered.

Last night, he'd woken from a nightmare in which he heard Roxy being beaten by Preston through the speakerphone of his cell while he drove like hell to get to his mother's house. He remembered instructing Joe to head to the slaves' quarters and going inside to find his mother.

Who'd shot him.

His own mother.

Most of all, he remembered the terror that had coursed through him at the thought of Roxy being hurt. He recalled the harsh words he'd spoken in anger, and then the forgiveness that had followed.

He was an asshole.

She had sat by his bedside for nearly five days. She'd never left the hospital. She'd read to him, held his hand, spoken to him. He had ignored at least ten calls she'd placed to him last week.

Noah had ruined his one chance at happiness because he couldn't let go of the fact that she'd lied. Never mind that it hadn't been a terrible lie, and she hadn't done it out of

maliciousness, but fear of his reaction. He hadn't wanted things to change. And she had brought about change by writing those articles. But, he had missed one vital point.

The only thing constant was change.

There was a knock on his office door, shaking him from his reverie. Mary Lou poked her head in. "Your check-up's in twenty. Better haul ass if you want to make it in time."

"Thanks, Lou. Oh, and thanks for making the appointment for me. I don't know where my mind's been lately."

She smiled serenely and walked out. As Mary Lou watched Noah leave, she grinned. If luck was on her side, Noah and Roxy would be done with their respective appointments at roughly the same time. She was going to make those two work it out if it killed her.

* * * *

Roxy was staring down at the ultrasound picture when she heard the elevator ding. Although there was a baby there, at six weeks, all they could see was something called a gestational sac. Still, it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

"Roxy."

Roxy's head snapped up as she stared into Noah's eyes. He was standing inside the elevator. Those gorgeous blue eyes she'd adored were no longer cold, but she wasn't risking his ire to ruin the one happy moment she'd had in weeks.

"I'll just take the stairs," she said, and turned.

"Wait!" Noah shot out of the elevator and grabbed her arm. "Why are you here? Are you hurt?" Genuine concern

crossed his fingers, but Roxy wouldn't allow her wounded heart to hope.

She shook her head. "I have to go, Noah."

For the first time, he looked around at his surroundings. Third floor in County General was the maternity/OB/GYN floor. His gut told him something was off. "What's going on, Rox?"

She whirled on him. "Oh, now I'm 'Rox' again? You stomp on my heart, treat me like a leper and I'm supposed to be happy? Relieved?" She let out an unladylike snort. "Yeah, like that's gonna happen."

"You were right. I was being an asshole. It was a pride thing. But, I remember, Roxy. I remember what happened that day. I'll never forget that I was going to lose you. And I felt you there, in the hospital. I knew you were there. You made me feel loved and cherished. And I'm sorry."

Tears had welled up in Roxy's pretty green eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "Damn it," she whispered.

"What?"

"I wanted to be strong. To take all this on by myself, but you're making it too hard."

He had no idea what she was talking about, so he spoke his heart instead. "Roxanne Palmer, I love you. I want to marry you and make a houseful of babies with you. I want to grow old and sit in rocking chairs on the porch while you read and I polish my gun."

Now she was sobbing. Shit, what had he done? He pulled her into his arms. Noah breathed in her scent, and for the

first time in two weeks, all was right again. "What's the matter, baby?"

She lifted her head, love and happiness shining in her eyes. Bringing up her left hand, she showed him what looked like a black and white computer printout.

"What is it?"

"It's our baby."

His eyes snapped back to hers. "Baby? Ours?"

She nodded. Joy flooded him as he lifted Roxy and spun her around, her laughter infectious in the hospital corridor.

Noah put her down quickly. "Oh, God, did I hurt you or the baby?"

She shook her head and grabbed his hand, placing it low on her belly. He looked up at her and felt tears pricking the back of his eyes.

Noah knelt down on his knees and pressed a soft kiss to the spot where their child grew. Then he rose and kissed her with all of the passion and love he'd denied himself.

"You never answered my question," Noah asked, pulling away and resting his brow against hers.

"You never asked me a question."

"Will you marry me? Make a life with me and our baby?"

"Of course, I will, you idiot man. What, did you think I would say no?"

He smiled cockily. "Nah, never crossed my mind."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Epilogue

The mild late March sun shone on Roxy's face as she stared at the front entrance to the bookstore. They had named it Roxy's Place, though Roxy had fought Mary Lou to include her friend's name, too.

In the end, she had been outvoted.

The store had opened early last month, and so far, was doing exceptionally well. They were thinking of adding on a café after the babies were born. Mary Lou was about two months along. She had quit working for the SO and now did the accounting for both the bookstore and Joe's garage.

They had three employees and were looking to hire another, since Roxy and Noah's little girl was due any day.

"What in the name of Christ are you doing out here?" Noah asked, coming to stand beside her. He slipped a long arm around her waist and brought his other hand to rest on her huge stomach. "You could go into labor any second."

She smiled up at her husband. "The doctor didn't say anything about bed rest, so zip it, buster."

Mary Lou and Joe had married the week after Roxy and Noah's reconciliation. Mary Lou had desperately wanted it to be a double wedding, but Noah and Roxy figured with everything Mary Lou had gone through with Preston, she deserved her own happy-ever-after.

Roxy and Noah had been married in August, in the backyard of her home, with just a few attendees. Her parents had come home from their travels to witness the nuptials.

The Truth About Roxy
by Jenny Gilliam

Noah had sold his house and moved in with her on Tiger Lily Lane where they still had Friday movie night and rocked on the porch swing out front until the weather had turned.

Never in her wildest dreams had she ever imagined that by writing that one article, it would give her the life she had never known she'd wanted so badly.

Noah bent down to kiss Roxy.

Sometimes, life just has a way of working things out.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

About the author...

Jenny began writing at the age of twelve, when she realized the voices talking in her head were characters, not a result of pre-teen induced psychosis. She's been writing on and off for almost twenty years, but actively pursuing publication for the last two. Jenny lives in Oregon with her husband and two children.

Jenny loves to hear from her readers! Visit her at www.jennygilliam.com.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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