



*Legacy of the
Celtic Brooch*

LUCK BE A COWBOY



STACY DAWN

Luck Be a Cowboy [Legacy of the Celtic Brooch Series]
by Stacy Dawn

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Dedication

For Ken, my very own good-luck cowboy.

Praise for Stacy Dawn

CHRISTMAS ON PAROLE: This is a great fast-paced book guaranteed to be hard to put down. Ms. Stacy Dawn has written a book which absolutely mesmerized me.

I loved this book and highly recommend it to everyone. It's a great read, holiday or not.

~Given **FIVE HEARTS** by Brenda Talley, The Romance Studio

STANDOFF AT THE WATERIN' HORSE SALOON: This is such a cute, funny story. Stacy Dawn has managed to pack the pages full of action, humor and intensity. I found myself laughing out loud in the first paragraph and I didn't stop until the very last word!

~Given **FIVE BOOKS** by Lily, The Long and Short of It Reviews

CHEATIN' HEARTS: Stacy Dawn had me laughing and completely drawn into Cheatin' Hearts at the first page. Quite a feat when you consider the story is told in eleven pages. The author has taken what could have been a predictable night looking for love and delivered a romance with refreshing wit.

~Given **FIVE ANGELS** by Amanda S., Fallen Angel Reviews

WANNA MAKE A BET?: Stacy Dawn, a master of short stories, has expanded her talent to create a sexier-than-sin hero and a sassy heroine in Wanna Make A Bet?. I was captivated from the first page, drawn into the roller-coaster

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ride of Jay and Sophie's romance, breathless from the first touch of Jay's hand. This story is guaranteed to put a smile on your face and in your heart.

~Johanna Riley, author

Chapter One

The driver's side window shattered against the onslaught of the Louisville Slugger ... and Sarah Monroe had never heard a sweeter sound.

Feet planted in her best batter's stance, she hiked the wooden club back and let it fly again at the narrower passenger window of the green pick-up.

"Take that, you son-of-a-bitch," she hissed, taking out the rear brake light. Two steps and she hauled back for another swing. The other brake light disintegrated.

"This is for sneaking around behind my back." She shattered the next rear passenger window. "This is for the *floozy* you brought to *my* home while I was on a *business trip!*" The passenger side window split with a satisfactory crash.

The insistent buzz of the Trixie Trot Honky Tonk's neon sign stuttered her forward momentum for half a second. Sarah's gaze jumped to the flickering legs strutting back and forth along the rooftop and her anger rose, heavy breaths panting out between clenched teeth.

"And to come *here* of all places." The windshield exploded into a spider web of cracks, propelling her assault back into full gear.

"I can't believe you had the gall to ask me to marry you!" Both headlights popped in fireworks of white and orange.

And I can't believe I said yes!

She laid the bat on her shoulder and contemplated the driver's side of the windshield—cracked but not enough. Gearing back in another balanced stance, she whipped her arm around over and over and over again.

"Deceitful."

"Self-centered."

"Cheating."

"Lying."

"*Scum-bastard!*"

The last stroke almost took her arm with it when the Louisville Slugger caught on a shard of glass and sunk straight through the window.

Wrenching the club out, Sarah leaned on the handle. A slow, satisfied smile curled her lips between ragged breaths. A slight ping of guilt hit as she surveyed the damage but she swiped it away along with the drops of sweat over her brow. Cort deserved every shard of glass for what he'd done.

Whistling her now favorite Carrie Underwood tune, Sarah swung the bat onto her shoulder and turned to leave. Nothing like a little closure to.... *thunk*.

Suddenly smooshed against a denim-covered chest, woodsy cologne swirled up her throbbing nose.

"Nice work there, Slugger."

Swallowing back a panic attack, Sarah raised her gaze slowly up, up, *and up* into a pair of blue—or *were they green?*—eyes glinting down in half-admiration-half-puzzlement.

She stumbled back, the head of the bat clunking on the sidewalk in her effort to fumble it behind her back.

The multi-colored lights of the Trixie Trot reflected off every muscle as bronzed arms exposed by rolled up sleeves folded across an expansive chest.

The cowboy assessed the damage with a low whistle.
"Someone sure pissed you off."

Returning anger ate away her initial panic at being caught.
"Yes, he did."

"You got everything but the back window."

Sarah turned away slowly, still unsure if this witness was friend or foe. He was right; she'd missed the back window. Satisfaction seeped away and her lips pursed at the incompleteness. *Damn.*

A solid arm brushed her shoulder, snapping her body to attention.

"What'd he do?"

The whispered words tickled her ear in erotic warmth and left her body electrified as if she should be up there sizzling with the honky tonk's sign. Disturbed by the sensation considering the events of her day, she raised the bat and grasped for the rage trickling away. "None of your business!"

The cowboy held his hands up in mock surrender.

"Hey, fine by me." He reached up to push back his Black Stetson. "But you sure caused a lot of damage there, Slugger. You could be in a lot of trouble if—"

"If the owner finds out?" she finished with a snort. She smoothed down her tailored, burgundy pinstripe skirt. "That's what makes it so great. He's such an idiot, he'll never put two and two together." Her laughter squeaked to a quick end as her heart sped up.

She'd followed Cort tonight not knowing the lying bastard would end up here of all places. Since discarding her exotic dancing life four years ago, she'd only popped in a few times for a quick visit with Roxanne so was no longer in touch with the clientele. Did this cowboy know Cort?

Oh shit. Her stomach dropped and her hands twisted around the handle of the bat as she added, "U-unless someone plans to tell him?"

A slow, easy smile broke over the strong jaw doing absolutely nothing to lessen the sudden weakness in her knees.

"If you're worried I'll tell the idiot about your batting practice, don't be."

Pure relief floated her stomach back to its proper place as his rich chuckle eased the tightness in her chest.

"He already knows."

Hands clenched over the handle of the bat once again, Sarah darted her head around, looking for Cort. "What? Where?"

"Standing right here."

Her gaze whipped back to the cowboy's tight jaw, grazed over amuse-tilted lips and roamed hesitantly up to one arched brow.

Oh. Shit.

Chapter Two

Harper Reed raked a hand over his jaw. He'd stepped out of the Trixie Trot Honky Tonk looking for the brunette Roxanne mentioned might be able to help him. Trashing his truck was not the kind of help he'd had in mind.

At first, he'd quickened his pace to find out what the lunatic was doing, only to pull up short just shy of the demolition. The muttered curses between swings and the raw pain and determination etched into her features made him think his piece-of-shit-truck—which only today had him cursing out a tantrum himself—would be worth more in insurance payout and this woman's peace of mind than risking important body parts trying to stop her.

Wide as the moon, bright blue eyes now stared at him within a suddenly ashen face. *Ah damn, she's not gonna faint, is she?*

He loosened his crossed arms and reached for her swaying form only to have her stumble back out of reach.

"Y-yours? No, no. It can't be," she stuttered.

Harper didn't know if the forced smile added to the words was to convince him or herself.

He adjusted his Stetson back to a comfortable angle. "Hate to ruin a good batting practice but last time I checked, the ownership papers had my name on them."

Arms swung wide in disbelief, she spun in a circle forcing Harper to duck out of the way of the bat and hysterical laughter.

"No, no. You're wrong. This piece of crap belongs to my lying, cheating, son-of-a-scumbag, ex-fiancé. See—" She pointed to the license plate with the bat. "K-6-8-X-1-7..."

The last half of 'seven' dripped silently from her bow lips. She stepped closer to the front of the truck, pieces of headlight crunching under low heels.

"No, that can't be right. It's supposed to be 7-1 not 1-7."

Her lips rounded as realization contorted her pretty face.

"Oh God. OhGodohGodohGod." A thin hand loosely covered her lips. "I circled the block and didn't see exactly where he parked. I just thought ... I just assumed ... What have I done?"

He chuckled. "You just killed my truck, that's what you've done."

Not that it was necessarily a bad thing. The flippin' engine had been given him trouble for the last year. Al had been on him for months now to get a new truck but there just never seemed to be enough time. *Guess I'll have to make some now.*

Hardy boots making light of the broken glass, Harper walked up to his driver's side door. "Lady, remind me never to piss you off."

"I ... uh ... you see ... oh God, I'm so sorry." She swung her arms out again raising an elfin chin to the bright stars dotting the Texas night. "Can this day get any worse?"

Harper nodded in commiseration. He didn't know what happened in her day but his luck hadn't been any better, right up to and including ten minutes ago when Roxanne canceled

on him and the concurrent destruction of his truck. "Seems we're having the same day."

The bat rose, an extension of her flailing arm. "Oh, I highly doubt that. Did you come home a day early from a business trip in Hawaii to find your fiancé—the one who proposed to you *at the airport*—playing kissy-face with a busty blond in front of *your* apartment?"

Her voice raised three octaves over the course of her rampage and Harper took a protective step away from the thrashing bat.

"You're right then. The man is an idiot."

Who the hell would run around on a beauty like this? His gaze flicked down the long length of her and back up. She sure had all the curves in just the right places and crystal-blue eyes a man could lose himself in all night long.

The head of the bat swung down to ricochet off the pavement.

Then again, that temper could leave a man minus a few important pieces of his anatomy too.

Harper reached into his pocket for his cell phone. Al was not going to believe this. He grimaced at the leftovers of his pick-up. This wasn't how he'd intended to spend the night of his mentor's birthday.

"Wh—what are you doing?"

She held her hands up, then, after spying the offensive weapon, rushed them behind her back.

He started punching in the ranch's number. "I gotta call the..."

A remarkably strong hand latched onto his bicep.

"Oh God! Please, *please* don't call the police."

Brunette curls swung to the damaged truck and her eyes instantly winced shut. She banged her forehead off his arm in time with her words.

"Stupid, stupid. What was I thinking committing such a petty crime?"

Harper tried to keep the urge to laugh aloud under control. "Petty? Slugger, you passed petty three windows and two headlights ago."

A small groan breathed through the thin fibers of his shirt and stirred more than the sympathetic hand he raised to brush a curl from her cheek. He cleared his throat to get past a swift reaction to the intimate softness of her skin.

"I, uh, still gotta call the police though," he began quietly. "My insurance company will have to know and..."

Painful pressure sunk into his arm as her head snapped up. Her eyes shimmered in two pale-blue pools of fear.

"No, you can't! I swear I've never done anything like this before. I-I'll do anything, *please!* I travel for my job—a job I worked hard for and *love*. If you call the police, I'll be arrested—convicted!"

Her gaze dropped, voice lowering slightly as if her brain were thinking through her lips.

"Even if I get parole—which I highly doubt the way my luck's been going—they'd take away my passport. I wouldn't be able to leave the state." Slim shoulders slumped along with a clunk of wood against the pavement. "And then there's the ugly mug shot I'd have to add to my horrendously bad driver and passport photos."

Harper grinned down at the cute, puckered chin. There was no way this lady could take a bad picture; she rivaled any of the dancers on the Trixie Trot's stage. His chest tightened along with his lower regions.

The glint of neon reflected off his watch pulled his brain out of his pants and reminded him he had other obligations to deal with at the moment.

He stepped back to get his bearings. *Hmmmm*, he thought, remembering his original reason for coming out here. It suddenly evolved into a perfect solution.

Focusing, Harper sized up the lady in front of him. Maybe his luck was changing. A good head shorter than Roxanne but definitely a possible substitute.

"You're what? Five-five?" he ventured.

She stepped back, wary eyes studying him from Stetson to boots.

"Y-yes," she replied slowly, keeping her gaze on him as he circled her.

"Size four maybe? 'Bout a hundred and ten pounds?"

Her arms slapped around herself and thin brows drew down. "One-oh-three, *thank-you-very-much*. What are you, a dress designer or something?"

Harper laughed. "No way, Slugger."

A little pang of guilt at what he was about to do pinched his brows but he ignored it. A seventy-fifth birthday only came once and he owed Al a lot—not only for his years of service to his family's ranch but for his mentorship and friendship as well.

So, technically, he wasn't using the lady's guilt against her for evil purposes but for the good of a friend. At least that's what he kept telling himself as he smiled into the pessimistic gaze. "But I do have a proposition for you. I won't call the police if you'll do me a little favor tonight."

The bat shot up to hover over her ready shoulder. "I don't know you from Adam, buddy. So if you're *proposing* what I think you are"—she swiped the bat back and forth between them—"then you take one step closer and I'll happily make sure you match your truck."

Harper held his hands up, retreating said step for safety. "Whoa there, Slugger. I swear it's not what you're thinking. I have a friend—"

He jerked back, feeling the breeze from the bat cross his chest.

"What do you think I am! Some bimchette to pass around?" She wielded the bat in front of him. "You bastard! I would rather rot in jail than be some ... some prostitute for a slimeball cowboy! God, I've had enough of arrogant men."

"Now hold up, there!" Harper snagged the end of the bat, stalling her tirade. "I. Am. *Not* asking you to do me any of *those* kinds of favors." He took a deep breath and held tightly to the solid wood viciously jerking his hands. "Roxanne said..."

The violence ebbed from the other end of the bat.

"You know Roxanne?"

He nodded. "Can I let go without you taking my head off, now?"

The brows narrowed. "You have two minutes to explain yourself before I make sure you're singing soprano for the rest of your life." She motioned a quick jab just below his buckle.

Harper gulped and kept his hands at the ready just in case. "Roxanne said you might be able to help me out. The way I see it, you don't want a criminal record and I really need a girl for my friend's birthday party tonight."

The bat jabbed towards his groin in warning.

"To jump out of a cake! That's all!" he clarified quickly. "No hanky-panky, I swear."

The jabbing halted and a smile crooked her lips. "Did you just say *hanky-panky*?"

The growing sparkle in her eyes hit Harper right at the head of the slightly lower than waist-level bat. His own smile grew. "Yes, ma'am. I believe I did." He relaxed his stance. "Look, I know I'm saying this all wrong but Al's one of the best men I know and it's his seventy-fifth birthday. He's a lifelong bachelor with an eye for the old-school pin-up girls—you know, Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth. Well, my dad and I arranged for a pin-up girl in a cake but"—he hiked a thumb to the honky-tonk behind him—"Roxanne just cancelled out on me on account of her boyfriend proposed to her tonight."

A snide snort escaped the ruby lips, but at least the bat lowered.

"She doesn't think it'd be appropriate now and mentioned you might be willing to take her place."

"You should've told her she'd be far better off being in the cake."

He widened his arms and chuckled. "Well, now that's a very good point. *You* would be much better in the cake than with the idiot who made you do that." Harper purposefully led her attention with his hand towards the smashed truck. "Fifteen minutes of your time jumping out of a cake to make an old man happy is surely better than a criminal record." For emphasis, he waved his cell phone.

Her face cringed in guilt and he felt a pang of the emotion himself at his little manipulation.

"But I'm not Roxanne. I haven't danced ... in a long time."

Harper clenched his jaw tight to prevent himself from ruining the momentum by taking another gander at her lovely curves. He seriously doubted her hesitant denial. A body like hers was made for dancing.

Her head tilted and he could almost see the weighed scale in her head ... *cake or criminal record?*

"I swear, I'm not a stalker, a criminal, or some crazy lunatic," he added for good measure.

He willed his body to stay slack as she eyed him up and down. *Come on, Slugger.*

A slow, wicked smile curled her generous lips nearly taking him out at the knees without a single swing.

"Isn't that exactly what a crazy lunatic would say?"

Chapter Three

Sarah weighed the bat in her hands. "What guarantee do I have that you won't turn around and turn me in tomorrow?"

A grin tilted the corners of her victim's lips as three long fingers wiggled together next to his Stetson. "Something tells me Scout's honor won't work?"

She snorted. "Nope."

This sweet-eyed cowboy was too cute for her own good. Sarah tapped the bat hard against her hand to get her mind back on target. Who did he think he was anyway, propositioning her out of the blue like that?

The front doors of the Trixie Trot banged open, releasing a blast of country music and a pitchy-keen giggle.

Only one person laughed like that.

Sarah raised on tiptoes to peer over the massive, denim-clad shoulders blocking her view of all but the top of the open door. "Roxanne!"

The shoulders swung to the side, leaving her a clear view of the tall blonde's obnoxiously happy grin.

"Hey, hon? Did you hear the news?" Roxanne tugged on the arm of a smaller man, his receding hairline glaring in the club's orange-neon lights. "Me and Henry just got *engaged!*"

Sarah winced at the offending word but accepted her friend's pounced hug. "Yeah, I heard. How, uh, great for you." *Let's hope your engagement lasts longer than four days.*

She pulled Roxanne to the side, away from the reedy fiancé and the cowboy's smug, toe-curling smile.

Trying to keep her voice down, Sarah spoke through clenched teeth. "I. Trashed. The. Wrong. Truck."

"What?" Heavily mascaraed, brown eyes widened in disbelief.

She turned them away from the curious gaze of her victim.

"I got the license plates mixed up. *This* is the cowboy's truck."

Sarah did not appreciate the sudden squeal of pitchy-laughter. *Could this day get any worse?* She groaned as she remembered the 'proposition' of a moment ago. It already had.

She jerked on a slender arm. "*And* he expects me to *dance* for him tonight. What did you do, Roxy?" Sarah kept her temper down to a hissed whisper. "That guy thinks I'm still a stripper!"

"Mmm-hmm," Roxanne agreed, innocently.

Sarah stamped the end of the bat on the ground. "You know I'm not in the business anymore. What do you think all those college course books were for?"

"I thought you were just passing time between sets?"

Roxanne turned to blow a kiss to her fiancé and Sarah choked on a gag reflex.

"I was *studying*." She tugged on the thin arm again. "Focus here! I buried all"—she waved her hand up and down the silver sequins sparkling off her friend's tight dress—"this years ago. Cort didn't even know about it."

"Well, dig it back up for a night," Roxy snickered as if the answer was that simple.

"Why?" Sarah dug a fingernail into a deep chink in the club's handle. "I obviously don't have it anymore if Cort was looking elsewhere."

An angry, "Harrumph," pulled her gaze back up. Roxanne's painted brow dropped down as she plunked her hand on a kicked out hip.

"Girl, don't let that dirt bag rob you of your womanhood." Slender fingers curved sensually over her body as she smiled. "You never lose the moves, Sarah. All you need is a little reminder of the power your femininity really has. Fill in for me with Harper tonight and I *guarantee* your confidence will be shouting hallelujahs from the rafters."

Embarrassed at the volume of her friend's encouragement, Sarah slid her eyes to the cowboy standing a good two feet taller than the fidgeting fiancé next to him. He tipped his hat in gentlemanly fashion. Too bad she no longer believed true gentlemen existed.

Roxanne's hand landed light as a butterfly on her shoulder.

"Harper's a good guy." The fingers squeezed. "I mean a *good* one. I figured it was about time you saw what one of those looked like."

Shiny strands of blonde hair swept in a billow of pungent perfume between them as she nodded to the trashed truck.

"Besides, you sort of owe him now," she added.

Damn. Roxy was right; she owed this Harper, *big time.*

"Fine," she finally clipped out.

Roxanne's face brightened. "I knew you'd see it my way!" Another blown kiss to her fiancé came before she asked, "Are you done with my bat then?"

Sarah squared her shoulders in resignation and hefted the bat over one. "Nope. I think I'll keep it just in case," she said and headed towards Harper.

"Suit yourself." Roxanne sashayed up and entwined her hands in Henry's arm. "We're gonna get going then. We have some celebrating to do," she added on a squeaky titter of laughter.

Probably for the best. Sarah grimaced. *Anymore of the smoochfest and I'm liable to hurl.*

The odd couple departed, leaving her alone with fate's twisted sense of humor.

"So, whatdayasay, Slugger?"

Sarah studied the cowboy. Though she had no bad feeling telling her he was a psycho, her ability to read the opposite sex right now was in serious question given her abominable error in judgment about Cort.

Letting the bat roll off her shoulder, she used it to lean on. "All I have to do is jump out of a cake, give a little Marilyn Monroe 'Happy Birthday' tune and I'm out of there, free and clear?"

His eyes sparkled like sea-green stars twinkling on a moonlit sea. "Well, I wasn't planning on the Marilyn Monroe bit, but, now that you mention it..."

"Very funny. I'm serious, what about your truck?" She glanced around the parking lot until her gaze narrowed on another green pick-up in the back corner. "Or his," she muttered. *Geez, now I don't even have closure.*

She glanced from Cort's truck to Harper and back again. Was this cowboy really any better, using her own stupidity

against her? She raised a brow at the intact truck. *Or should I just say screw it all and get in some more batting practice?*

Sarah never realized she'd raised the bat until it halted against a firm hand.

Harper was so close she could feel his heat seep into her back as she slowly turned her head and raised her chin. She couldn't stop her rebellious gaze from roaming over a shock of thick dark hair beneath his Stetson, down along strong cheeks and a stubbled jaw, across temptingly chiseled lips, and back up to sexy eyes crinkled in concern.

"By the sounds of it," he began in a low, intimate voice. "The guy deserves your vengeance, but I don't think now's the best time."

A nod of his head broke the hazy moment and the world blinked back in a buzz of neon lights.

"They might have something to say about another go round."

She followed his motion to the black and white car slowing down on the street before them, the honky-tonk's illuminated neon reflecting off the long roof lights.

A gasp strangled in her throat.

"Shhh. Keep cool there, Slugger," Harper whispered next to her ear. Gentle pressure lowered the bat between them. "If you have a car, I suggest we get the hell out of here unless you want to compare a suspended passport picture to a numbered mug shot."

Chapter Four

"G-good idea."

The whispered words grazed against his cheek and Harper molded his arm around her waist.

"Keep it simple, Slugger. We're just a nice, normal couple leaving the Trixie Trot."

She offered a barely perceptible nod as a hand slid up his backside and clenched the denim above his belt. It was so natural, he almost believed his own fabricated story.

Considering the current uselessness of his truck, he let her lead between cars, as he kept his eye on the creeping police car less than a foot away from the honky tonk's entrance.

"Here it is," she whispered.

Harper reached around her for the silver Envoy's door handle.

"No, not that one. *This* one."

He turned just as the door she swung open hit him in the kneecap.

"What the—? You can't be serious?"

"Get in quick," she hissed loudly, tossing the bat behind the narrow driver's seat

Get in? My foot won't even fit in that thing!

Limping, he hobbled around the ancient Volkswagen Rabbit and opened the passenger door.

"Come on. *Hurry!*"

The panicked flap of her hands quickened his movements and in turn, added more bruises to his anatomy—on his butt

where he dropped three feet onto rock-hard vinyl, the side of his skull where it banged against the doorframe, his left ankle where it bent at an odd angle to allow enough room for both boots on the dollar-sized floor, and his chin where his knees almost knocked his teeth through his lip as he squished himself into the passenger seat.

"Shit, Slugger. This isn't an escape vehicle, it's a Tinker Toy."

"*My name* is Sarah."

She banged on the steering column three times, kicked the clutch twice, turned the key, thumped the parking break, did a Riverdance on the pedals—clutch-accelerator-clutch-clutch-accelerator-clutch-accelerator-both—cranked the gearshift back then rammed it forward into first.

"And there is nothing wrong with my car."

His chair rumbled like an old rollercoaster's bucket seat as the engine roared, hiccupped and hopped out of the parking spot. If not for being wedged in tighter than a springed snake in a peanut can, Harper would've been kissing the windshield.

"And I thought my truck was in bad shape," he grumbled, wedging out a hand to push his squashed Stetson back an inch so he could see death slam into them.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, never mind," he covered quickly, thankful for her firm focus on her mission to get them out of the parking lot. The Rabbit skittered onto the road in hippity-hop, whiplash fashion. "Is this thing gonna get us out of here?"

"Of course."

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The doubt lacing her words didn't give him much comfort. One more leap and the motion evened out to a rickety roll, almost matching the speed of the surrounding vehicles.

Had he really thought his luck was changing?

Shit.

Lady Luck was sure a fickle mistress to leave him stuck in this claustrophobic nightmare on wheels.

Chapter Five

What the hell am I doing? How did a travel consultant suddenly become a fugitive running from the police—and with a tall, dark, stranger?

Sarah's gaze darted from the dotted red lights in the distance ahead to the man filling up three quarters of her car.

Her mind kept returning to the psychopath scenario—a stranger all but propositions her in the parking lot and now she was shut up in a car with him, alone on a long, deserted road heading out of town. *Come on, Sarah. Didn't you learn anything from the lunatic-escapee horror movies?* All the claws and chainsaws? All the don't-go-down-in-the-basement-alone, don't-open-that-closet-door, *don't-get-in-the-car* screams at the movie screen.

Yet it wasn't her brain's horror movie scenarios that bothered her as much as her body's hormone induced ones.

This Harper was masculinity personified.

God, my luck truly sucks today!

Just when she'd given up on men, fate brought her a sexy-as-hell, make-your-knees-sweat, take-me-now kind of cowboy. And then made him no better than Cort in his manipulations ... a favor in exchange for a get out of jail free card.

Worse, what choice do I have? She didn't have the money to replace a truck, nor could she afford the criminal record if she wanted to keep her job.

The steering wheel dug into her twisting palms. *When did my day—my life—go so wrong?*

Her thoughts slowed, picking and choosing moments from the past eight hours like a rewinding movie: Panic at the police cruiser ... handsome cowboy ... smashing the truck ... Cort kissing the blonde bimbo ... her suitcase exploding open off the luggage turnstile ... missing the first flight after a lung-clenching sprint from the wrong terminal ... a purple muumuu ... the Hawaiian taxi driver playing road race to the airport ... *whoa, back up!*

That was it! While waiting in line at the airport, an older woman in a purple muumuu had started choking. Without thinking, Sarah Heimliched a large piece of donut from the lady's throat. After a breast-crunching hug of repeated thanks, her blind companion had shoved a small brooch into her hand. In return for saving his darling Beatrice, he'd said. She could still visualize in clarity the blind wink and chink of the man's teeth when he closed her hand around the cool metal and added, "*Lani hana aloha—lucky love magic.*"

Repeated assurances that no thanks were needed and her love life was going great hadn't dampened the man's determination. She'd ended up accepting the tarnished piece of silver, slipping it into the pocket of her carry-on bag as she raced to catch her flight—at the wrong terminal.

And there it began.

"Lucky love brooch my ass," Sarah mumbled, squinting into the glare of an oncoming car.

"What was that?"

The deep voice breaking into her thoughts made her jump and she afforded the cowboy a quick glance and grimace.

"Nothing. Just something stupid, that's all."

He shifted awkwardly, the low ceiling pushing his Stetson over his eyes.

The rush of adrenaline from the night's events released in a giggle.

"Don't even start," he warned.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a finger wiggle up to tip the hat back and another snorted chuckle fell through her lips.

After a long-suffering sigh, he joined her delusional merriment with a chuckle of his own, "Sometimes you've just got to make the best of it."

"The best of it? That's a good one," she replied on the tail end of a hysterical laugh. "Not of my choosing, I'm suddenly single again, not to mention running from the police with a possible serial rapist for all I know." Her hands flew up off the steering wheel. "And you're telling me to make the best of it."

The rumbling laughter from the passenger side didn't help.

"I already told you, I'm not a serial rapist, a psychopath, stalker, or any other fanatical misfit you can think up." His laughter eased to a confident chuckle. "I'll have you know, the Reed name has been an honorable one for generations in both business and social circles. And, unless you count the disturbing claustrophobia I'm currently experiencing, I don't have any plans to mar my family's name with psychopathic tendencies any time soon."

Her gaze left the road to stare wide-eyed at her companion. "Reed? As in the Reed Valley Ranch?"

His brow dropped beneath the already low Stetson. "Yes."

Sarah ignored the suspicious tone to give a low whistle.

"From working ranch to one of the most popular dude ranches in the state in less than five years." She returned her gaze to the darkened road reciting, "Rated as a four star resort welcoming individuals, couples, families and small business groups. Renovations last year included another ten private cabins, bringing the total to twenty along with the original six guest bunkhouses. While the city slickers play cowboys, go on overnight excursions and twice-a-year cattle drives, their spouses can be pampered in the new spa facilities. All of which recently led to fifty new in-house positions and an additional twenty-three ranch hands. An impressive place especially if you include the highest state-approved vacation rating received last year." She lifted a hand and tapped her forehead. "*Harper* Reed. I should've clued in."

The silence thickening the interior of the Rabbit pulled her attention away from the road. Oncoming traffic highlighted narrowed eyes implying *she* was now the psychopath stalker.

Sarah bit her lip and gave him a half-smile. "Sorry, hazard of the job."

His gaze lessened from accusation to amusement. "Something to do with travel, right?"

"Yes. I'm a travel consultant for Branch Enterprises. I visit and research various resorts and 'get-away' excursions for

the company then put the results through to all their associated travel agencies."

This time Harper gave an impressed whistle.

"Then I've gotta hand it to you, Slugger. You sure know your job. Guess I can see why you were a little anxious about the criminal record."

Guilt choked her reply to a simple nod.

His chuckle replaced the guilt with another tightness altogether and she reflexively hit the clutch and geared into fourth in a subconscious—or not so subconscious—effort to outrun the intimate sensation.

The Rabbit leapt, jarring her into the steering wheel. She heard a simultaneous smack against the glove compartment and the dead radio blared to life.

A jazz band blasted into the small space and she reached over to turn down the volume, her hand tangling in large, warm fingers over the button.

"Sorry," she mumbled, pulling her hand back.

"What was that?" Harper yelled out over the crooning notes of the Dean Martin classic.

"I said, sorry," she hollered back. "It only gets one oldies channel and the volume is hit and miss."

Harper's head shook as he continued to fumble with the dials. "Ever think about getting a new car?"

The louder volume of his voice only vibrated the sexy timbre deeper into her chest.

"I-uh..." she stuttered, before taking a second to regroup. "It's sentimental," she finally called back, watching him fiddle with the dials. "Belonged to my grandmother. Besides, the

agency provides rentals when I trav ... el..." The radio's sudden reduction to a moderate level left her voice the only thing raised in the cramped compartment.

The tips of her cheeks heated and she had to turn away from the potency of the cowboy's smile.

"Like I said," she began again when she found her voice. "It's stuck on the one channel so I hope you like the hits of the Forties, Fifties and Sixties.

"Doesn't bother me. Al—he's the one having the birthday—listens to this stuff all the time."

She didn't know if he was telling the truth or just trying to make her feel better. Either way, she appreciated the gesture.

The song switched to Frank Sinatra crooning *Luck be a Lady* and Sarah couldn't help but roll her eyes. "If *Luck be a Lady*, then she sure ain't this one," she snorted.

The cowboy's assessing gaze strolled over her—like a chocolate bar being unwrapped slowly to savor every delicious piece. Goosebumps curled up from her toes.

"Maybe your luck is about to change?"

The low, promising tone stole the air from her lungs and sizzled ever nerve ending. *Oh God, I hope s...*

A sudden *clunk-kerthunk* jarred the engine followed by a large, glistening billow of smoke rolling up the windshield.

Chapter Six

Sarah rolled the smoking Rabbit into a small divit on the side of the road lit by a single, flickering streetlamp. Her head swiveled slowly to glare at the cowboy. "*My luck is about to change, is it?*"

He cocked a grin and winked. "Maybe not yours but mine has. I get to get the hell out of this compact suitcase." The door opened and he disentangled one leg with a hiss of relief. "Pop the hood and I'll take a look."

Sarah huffed and shook her head. *What choice do I have?* She detested this new motto.

Her grumblings halted along with her breath as she caught a glimpse of fitted Wranglers made all the more snug as Harper unfolded himself from the Volkswagen.

Stop, Sarah! Men can't be trusted, especially ones looking that good.

By the time she got the drool wiped off her chin and stepped out onto the darkened highway, the hood was up. She turned from the distraction of the same tight derriere sticking out from underneath. Folding her hands across her chest, she slumped back against the driver's door.

"Damn." The mumbled word filtered out from below the hood.

Her hands lowered to cover the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. "We're stuck here aren't we?"

Harper stood, brushing his hands against each other. "Well, that depends."

What little light there was from the streetlamp lit his interested gaze as it roamed down to linger on her legs. She shifted her hands back up to cover her hardened nipples. "D-depends on what?"

"On if you have a pair of nylons stashed in your purse."
Holy shit! He really is a stalker ... maybe even a rapist!
Sarah edged backwards. "W-what do you need nylons for?"

I've already seen his face so it can't be to hide his identity. Maybe he's going to tie me up and...

The thought should have freaked her out but instead of images of painful torture, her mind produced ones of personal pleasure involving a big bed and the cowboy on top.

She shook her head again and tried to focus. The biceps bulging from crossed arms below strong, broad shoulders didn't help either image one iota.

"You blew a belt," he said, hiking a thumb to the raised hood. "The ranch house isn't too far away. I should be able to tinker with the nylon as a replacement. Hopefully it'll hold long enough to get us there."

"I really did fall into a bad B-movie." Sarah flung her hands up helplessly then turned to look under the hood. What she was looking for, she had no clue. "A nylon? Are you serious? That doesn't really work."

His baritone laughter filled the empty highway as he came around to lean back against the same spot she'd vacated.

"True, but, as I said earlier—" He raised a smug brow. "Your luck might be changing. If you had any other modern-

day car then no, it wouldn't work. But on this old piece of sh—I mean, *retro vehicle*, the deed, in theory, should."

Sarah straightened. "You're serious."

A few fingers flipped casually off his arm and he shrugged. "It's either that or we start walking."

She whipped up her own finger. "I have nylons. Give me a minute."

She stepped forward and grabbed the handle of the door near his hip. The deep woodsy cologne infused her senses as his close proximity radiated a stream of seductive warmth through his shirt and out to caress her chin.

"I, uh, need in."

The green of his eyes deepened the blue to a husky turquoise as a grin slid up the corners of his lips. She didn't miss—didn't even actually mind—the long moment he stared before pushing his hips from the door and stepping away.

The door handle quivered beneath her palm. It could have been her hand quivering but then that would mean he affected her and she refused to believe any man could ever affect her again.

She yanked the door open and reached in for the trunk release all the while berating her mixed-up hormones and their loose connection to her brain.

Sarah frowned and headed to the rear of the car. Raising the hatchback, she hauled her carry-on overtop of the matching suitcase. A low chuckle pulled her gaze back up to where the cowboy grinned down into the trunk.

"You might not have picked a good escape vehicle but I have to hand it to you for being prepared for a quick exit."

Not amused, Sarah growled. "I just returned from a business trip," she spat. "I haven't been home yet. No wait, that's not true." She tapped the palm of her hand to her forehead in mock innocence. "I was home because that's where I found *my fiancé glued to someone else's lips!*"

She much preferred Harper's amused expressions to the understanding frown drawing his brows down.

"Yeah," she groaned. "They never saw me so I stayed in the car and followed them to the Trixie Trot." She didn't need to see her own stupidity reflected in his eyes so she returned her attention back to the suitcase. "I *thought* he'd be my world." She yanked repeatedly on the jammed zipper in front. "But I guess I wasn't anywhere near his."

Why won't this damn zipper open?

A large hand wrapped gently around her wrist, halting her useless efforts. Her anger deflated along with stiff shoulders and an insistent burning stung her eyes. She could deal with the anger, snide remarks, and even a stranger's humor but this unexpected compassion was her undoing.

Sarah pulled her hand away from the searing touch and hooked it onto her hip; the other she used to squeeze the bridge of her nose. She cleared the tears from her throat. No way was she going to cry in front of this cowboy. "Could you, uh, give me a minute here? I know I have nylons somewhere."

The zipper slid easily beneath his fingers before the sexy smile returned to his face. "Sure."

Sarah blew out a heavy breath as Harper kindly returned to the front of the Rabbit.

A few deep breaths and sheer determination corralled the raw tears back to their holding pen. Satisfied they were under control, she jabbed her hand into the pocket, digging around for the pair of nylons she knew hid there, all the while wondering where men like Harper were back when she wanted them—unlike now when she'd already called it quits with the useless gender.

"Ahhhck!" Sarah whipped her finger out of the pocket and into her mouth. The copper taste of blood coated her tongue. She pulled the injured digit out, a bead of blood forming on the pad.

"Everything okay back there?"

She stuck it back in her mouth with a muffled, "Mmm-hmm."

The zipper gaped, offering her a view of the deep cavern pocket. Carefully, Sarah reached in and dragged out the offensive brooch, the tip of its pin tainted a shiny red.

"Some good luck you've been," she mumbled around her finger.

Her thumb brushed over a rough patch on the back. Turning it over, faint lines shadowed the brooch's thin surface. Squinting in the darkness, she raised the metal closer to the trunk's light, revealing a series of etched numbers. 783219?

Sarah cursed under her breath. "Lucky my ass! You're just a piece of yard sale junk," she muttered. *So much for saving the blind guy's ladylove. She'd probably been choking on the bad luck and they only gave this jinxed jewelry to me in order to pawn the misfortune onto some other shmuck.*

Just as she was about to toss the evil thing back into the pocket, the sharp pin glinted in the light. *Hmmm.* Sarah snuck a peek around the corner of the trunk at the cowboy still leaning against the car. Though her breath caught at the moonlight kissing his strong jaw, Sarah forced her head to prevail over her hormones. Might be bad luck but, aimed in the right spot, the thick pin could also be a weapon should Harper, his friend, or any one of the partygoers decide to dive into the cake early.

A shudder crawled down her spine. One of the reasons she'd gotten out of the business as fast as she could were the drunk, groping hands. Of course the savage stage fright was the other, but at least it had disappeared the moment she'd felt the music. The hands, however, would only be just beginning.

Maybe stripping had paid the bills and the student loans, but she'd known early on it wasn't the life she wanted for herself. That's why she'd studied so hard and gotten out.

Then what the hell are you doing here again?

Sarah carefully pinned the brooch onto her blouse then dug into the suitcase's pocket again for the nylons. Slamming down the hatchback, her answer stared back at her in the form of a stranded cowboy. Teeth bit into her lip. *I'm here because payback really is a bitch.*

Reluctantly, she returned to Harper's side. "Here you go."

The material grazed her palm, snaking seductively through her fingers as he pulled it towards him.

"This oughtta do it." A husky rasp laced his words and he held her gaze for a moment longer than comfortable before turning to burrow under the hood.

Breathe. That was it. For a half a second she'd forgotten to breathe altogether.

After a few minutes of slow deep breaths to curb the spinning, she heard the lid clunk back into place.

"Give 'er a try."

Sarah slid into the driver's seat, banged on the steering column three times, kicked the clutch twice, turned the key, thumped the parking break, did a quickstep on the pedals, cranked the gearshift back then rammed it forward into first.

The bunny hopped back to life on the first try.

Next to the car, Harper wore a grin to melt any sane woman. She couldn't stop the return smile from forming as he wedged himself back into the passenger seat.

"You're a handy man to have around, Harper Reed."

"Don't be praising me yet," he groaned, tucking a leg under his chin. "I don't know how long that sucker's gonna hold, so take 'er easy. Luckily, we're not far from our destination."

Jabbing the clutch with her toe, Sarah decided she could happily live with all forms of the word 'luck' being obliterated from the English *and* Hawaiian language—or any other for that matter.

Chapter Seven

The front porch lights glistened off auburn-gold highlights and softened the line of her face so Harper could almost see the image like a faded photograph in his mind, clicked the moment she tuned crystal-blue eyes upon him.

His gaze caught on slender fingers worrying a brooch on her blouse. Was she wearing the pin earlier? Unsure, all he did know was that she looked a little peaked, panicked even.

For the first time, Harper started thinking with the head on his shoulders instead of the one in his pants. He'd taken Roxanne's suggestion of a replacement at face value, never once questioning her judgment. Was Sarah really a stripper or simply a travel consultant? Or both—travel agent by day, stripper by night?

"Hey." He tapped the top of the car to get her attention. "Slugger? You okay?"

Wide eyes shifted from his home to him. "Mmm-hmm. Where's the uh, birthday boy?"

"They're all out in the bunkhouse out back but I planned for Roxanne to use the guest room in the main house to change."

Her fingers continued to fiddle with the brooch on her blouse. "Sounds good. Lead on."

Harper didn't buy the bright smile as he waited for her to join him around the front of the matchbox car. He rested a hand at the small of her back. The slight curve fit perfectly

against his palm as he led her up the porch and through the main entrance to a back bedroom.

Her spine stiffened beneath his hand as strains of masculine merriment and music filtered in from the bunkhouse behind the house.

Harper's gut told him something was way wrong with this situation but damned if he could figure out what. "Might be a little late here, but you sure you're okay with this? I mean, you do"—he twirled his finger up and down her dress—"do this kinda thing?" Even low cut as it was, no stripper he'd ever seen wore a starched blouse, tailored skirt and conventional pumps. "Just say the word and..."

She raised a hand to his lips and her smile softened, transforming her face into an angelic glow. He had to lock his knees to ward off the sudden weakness the touch of pure beauty caused.

Her soft laughter trilled between them. "Thanks but yes, I've done this before." She dropped her hand and her shoulders straightened. "Paid for my degree in travel and tourism."

Relief washed through him, along with admiration. Took guts and a lot of hard work to follow your dreams. He knew that first hand.

He didn't realize he was still staring until his chest scalded beneath her hand.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. Just tell me where and when."

Her chuckled echoed through her hand, rebounding off his ribs and arrowing straight through his vital organs.

He stumbled a step back with the intensity. "Uh, okay then." Harper cleared his throat and his wayward thoughts. "Everything you need is in here," he said with a frown as she walked further into the room. "The outfit is hanging in the closet." He glanced at his watch. "I'm going to go see how things are going. I'll be back to let you know when they'll, uh, be ready for you."

A tight smile stretched her face as she swung her arms into a clap. "Right-o." She hiked a finger over her shoulder to the closet. "I'll just get ready then."

Sarah waited until the door closed and Harper's footsteps receded before she let out her breath.

If he didn't stop pulling those little gentlemanly moments, she'd start believing there were good men left in this world.

Shaking off the residual tremors from his hand on her lower back, she opened the closet and bit the smile from her lips. *You've got to be kidding me.*

Yep, her luck was holding true. It was one thing to slip on a sequined bra and panty set to dance around in but this thing would require a bit more agility. The retro pink, playboy bunnyish outfit swung a mocking jig on its hanger when she touched the satiny fabric. Good thing airplane food is so crummy and she hadn't eaten the rubber lasagna they'd offered. She'd probably have to suck in a few ribs as it was.

A distinct throbbing started in her left temple. Not yet prepared to show all her *attributes*, she scrounged in her purse, fisted two tablets and headed out of the room. A glass of water and aspirins were in order first if she were to make it through the show.

Music filtered into the expansive country kitchen. Through a large window over the sink, lights glistened from an outbuilding and, by all the cars it illuminated, she figured it must be the party grounds. The music changed and she instantly recognized her new favorite song. Her lips quirked. *Maybe the truck incident didn't work but I'll think up something to make sure Cort'll think before he cheats next time too.*

Hips swaying to the muffled music, Sarah started to think that maybe Roxanne was right. What better way to recapture her womanhood than by acquiring the admiration of a party full of men?

Of course, she'd have to get over this headache and the familiar rising nausea of stage-fright first.

The first cupboard she opened not only provided her with the sought after glass but a few various bottles of whiskey.

Hmmm, maybe a little fortitude couldn't hurt...

A roar of boisterous laughter changed her hesitancy to concrete action and she reached for the Jack Daniels.

Sarah poured a finger in the glass and choked it down. The burnished liquid burned all the way to her empty stomach. She heard two more car doors slam and the music escalate. The liquid winked at her and she agreed; this was definitely a two-glass situation.

Medicinal fortitude taken, she rinsed and dried the glass, returning it and the bottle back to their shelf.

With the alcohol warm in her belly, Sarah returned to the room and stared at the little pink-satin outfit. For the first

time she saw the matching four-inch spikes sitting quietly at the bottom of the closet.

Fate truly hates me.

Come on, Sarah. Buck up! This is for you and no one else. Screw Cort, screw the truck mishap, and screw fate. Dance because you know you can, because you know you're good.

With the few obvious changes, she repeated the same mantra she'd used to pep herself up before a show and stepped out of her sensible pumps.

Ten minutes, four swear words, three failed attempts, two rug burns and a wedgie later, she'd stuffed herself into the pink-corseted torture device. For the moment, she could almost breathe normally but only because she couldn't perform the necessary acrobatics to do up the zipper in the back.

Sarah wedged her feet into the half-a-size too small matching heels and stepped over to the dresser's mirror.

Not bad.

Even the brooch, which she'd attached to the center of the bustier, added an extra bit of vintage flare. The metal trinket scraped against her hand as she hiked up her breasts to sit better in the form-fitted cups. One hand held the outfit secure to keep them in position while she used the other to gather up thick curls from her shoulders.

Not bad at all. She smirked. *If only Cort could see me now.*

A knock rapped on the door and she startled, hair falling back to her shoulders as both hands clasped to her chest.

"Yes?"

"It's Harper. Are you decent?"

Sarah glanced back in the mirror. *Not by a long shot.* "Yes, I'm dressed."

She turned at the click of the door to find Harper holding a glass of red wine. He stopped cold at the door, staring at her with darkening eyes until her nipples budded beneath her hands.

Her cheeks threatened to erupt into flames—not to mention the rest of her. "Uh, Harper?"

His head shook almost imperceptibly as if coming out of a dream. She only hoped he wasn't thinking it was a nightmare.

"Sorry. Here, this is for you." He held out the glass. "You seemed a little out of sorts and I thought this might help."

My hero! "Thank you," she sighed before taking a sip. Her favorite merlot teased her tongue and she grinned in surprise.

He leaned back against the door, his soft smile doing funny things to her stomach—or was that the wine?

"So, uh, how's the party going?" she asked distractedly.

"A few more guys just arrived so I'd say we're almost ready." He stared at her for a long moment before adding, "Are you?"

She took another sip and turned to produce her back. "Not quite." Awkwardly, she switched hands so the one holding the wine also held her breasts in place as she used the other to gather her hair out of the way. "I couldn't get the zipper done up."

A quiet shift of denim was all she heard of his movements before the heat of his hands whispered across her bare back.

Unexpected shivers of need followed the slow draw of his finger skimming just ahead of the closing zipper. The motion

left her warmer than the Jack Daniels had. By the time the last pegs connected, Sarah didn't know if her lack of breath was due to the constricting outfit or the total electrification of her body. His fingers, made all the more erotic for their callused caress, eased up the remainder of her back to rest warm and solid on her shoulders. Her gaze turned to one strong hand then slowly rose.

The moment was akin to being cast adrift on a midnight ocean. The sheer intensity of his eyes held her captured, willing, wanting. The muscles in his stubble-roughen jaw tightened beneath her palm and she frowned, wondering when she had placed her hand there.

She drew it back hesitantly and the moment was broken. Chills filled in the absence of his body and Sarah shivered. "I'll uh, go get you a coat for the walk to the bunkhouse." And he was gone. Just like her sanity.

Chapter Eight

"They're all in the common room at the back," Harper told her as he held open the bunkhouse door. "The cake is in there."

Sarah tightened her grip on the wineglass and hugged the coat closer around herself as she followed him into a side room where a chest high, three tiered, white cardboard cake sat on a rolling tray in the middle of the floor.

"Hey, Harp? That you?"

"Yeah, be right there," he called back in answer to the question yelled out behind them. He reached around and helped her off with the trench coat. "Give me a minute and I'll be back to help you into the cake."

She nodded, which might not have been the best thing the way her head spun. *Weird, I've only had a few sips of the wine.* Holding the goblet up in front of her, Sarah retracted the thought, surprised to find it almost empty. *Oh, and probably not a good thing on top of the aspirin and Jack Daniels.*

"You okay?"

Harper stood staring at her with the same concerned expression he wore when they first got here.

Sarah waved a hand between them. "Sure, shuure. No problems here." Actually, she was feeling rather light and bouncy at the moment.

He hesitated a moment before finally leaving. Good, the frown had begun to grate on her happy place.

Kinda like that incessant squeak of the door slinging back slowly.

"Slinging back slowly," she sang with a giggle, stumbling forward in the too-small spikes. She grabbed the door for support but stopped short of closing it fully when an out-of-place and all too familiar voice permeated her pleasant haze.

"So this is where you and my old man met?"

No. It can't be!

Sticking one eye into the slit between the door and the doorframe, Sarah watched an older man, a salt-and-pepper mustache hiding his upper lip, chuckle and use his beer bottle to point across the room.

"Yep, back when we were greenhorns. He and I used to have our bunks over there."

As soon as he turned to the side, her worst fears were confirmed—Cort, in all his fashionable G.Q. faux glory stood not fifteen feet away.

"Must have been some wild times," her ex-fiancé replied with a wink. The large ice cubes clinked in his glass as he shouldered the man with his infamous good ol' boy smile. "I hear you're getting a *special* cake. Maybe the little filly inside could try one of these bunks out with me."

What a two-faced bastard! He doesn't even know I dumped his ass and he's still looking for another piece!

Sarah held back her snort of audacity and raised her eyes to the ceiling. "You hate me. Is that it?" she accused the Heavens. "You seriously hate me." There could be no other explanation for this disastrous luck.

"Last time I talked to your daddy, he said you'd just started dating a little travel lady."

The older man's words froze her hand above the knob just as she was about to swing the door open and shove Cort's audacity up his *wazoo*.

Gaze glued to the crack, her breath held for an answer.

"Sarah?" Cort hiked back a sip from his tumbler then stared at the lack of auburn liquid with a smug smile. "Asked her to marry me."

"What?" Grey brows rose so high they created the illusion of hair on the balding head. "You, king of the lady-killers, settling down? I don't believe it."

"Hell no."

The resounding laughter she once coveted left an empty hole in her chest.

"I see it as giving me the best of both worlds," Cort continued. "Sarah may be a little uptight but she looks great on my arm at company functions."

Uptight? *Uptight!* The hole filled with burning pitch.

"And the fact she's often away on business lets me pursue my wilder side, if you know what I mean?" Wink-wink, nudge-nudge.

Heart pounding through her chest, Sarah shut the door without a sound.

Laying her heated forehead on the cool panel, she rolled it back and forth. The past three years had been spent making something of herself—and the past year of that suppressing her questionable past so Cort would accept her as a smart businesswoman and potential wife.

Well, Sarah girl, you succeeded ... obviously a little too well.

Shoving herself from the door, she gulped down the last mouthful of the wine and stepped up onto the cake's platform.

"Uptight?" she muttered to herself. "You think I'm uptight, Cort? You want wanton and wild? Well, hold onto your boxers there, buster. 'Cause you're about to get them blown *right off*."

Chapter Nine

"Whoa there, Slugger."

The soft body thunked into his arms, back to his chest as rose scented curls fanned his face. For a moment, Harper relived the moment in the back bedroom, her hair grazing his cheek, her soft skin tingling beneath his hands. The moment was seared into his body, charging it to life the moment he touched her.

Unfortunately, her squirming to untwist a spiked heel from the platform broke into the pleasant memory.

He shifted her to one arm in order to reach down and unhook the errant heel. "You could have broken your neck," he said in a gentle reprimand as he helped her to stand. "I told you I'd be back to help."

Her gaze darted over his shoulder and out the open door. "Yeah, well, I think I've had just about enough help from men lately." She poked a finger in his chest. "God is a man, isn't he? Well, doesn't that just explain *everything*."

"O-okay." Harper wasn't about to delve into a cryptic retort like that and instead sized up the slight pinch of her brows and the haze fading her blue eyes to grey. "You sure you're all right?"

"Yep, great. No problem." She averted her eyes and turned with one spiked heel rising to the cake's platform. "Now, help me up. This is gonna be one show you're not likely to forget."

And how, he thought as his hands slipped to the round, firm ass. All in the name of assistance of course, but man...

Haul it in there, Reed.

Easier said than done as he shifted his own hips to relieve the growing strain in his jeans.

"Okay, I'm in. What do you think?"

Sarah popped around, sultry arms raised in a very 1940's pin-up pose.

Harper's lips twitched. "Perfect."

Her smile grew, eyes dancing like diamonds in the spotlight. His body instantly reacted with a tight chest and even tighter pants. Harper cleared his throat and sidestepped behind the opened lid, hinged as the top of the cake. He knew his reaction wasn't anything more than being in the company of a gorgeous woman. But if that were true, then why did his gut feel like a big old rock had been dropped to the bottom.

He watched her shimmy to her own music. If it didn't bother her, why should it bother him?

Harper shook off the bad feeling and tapped the inside of the container. "Skitter down there and I'll roll you in. Give the music to the count of..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've done this before."

One raised hand followed her in a snake-like wave as she lowered herself down into the large container.

Harper couldn't help but smile. The guy who gave up this fireball was definitely a loser.

He laid a hand on either side of the middle tier. "Hold on, here we go."

Out in the bunk area, his father held the main doors closed behind him.

"I can't get the CD to work," he said in a loud whisper.

"What do you mean?" Harper frowned. "I was just in there and it was playing fine."

His father rubbed his forehead with two fingers. "Gerry, the drunken idiot, knocked it off the bar."

Expelling a frustrated breath, Harper lifted the lid and glanced down at Sarah. She raised her head slowly, brows raised in question.

"Small change of plans, Slugger. I've gotta go get the music working. My dad'll roll you in when I give him the signal."

He chuckled at her overt wink and wobbly salute.

Lowering the lid, Harper slipped into the common room. The party was in full swing to say the least.

He slapped Al's back at the makeshift bar. "How's the birthday boy?"

"Ya done good, kid." His mentor slugged back a draft of beer and wiped his overlong, salt-and-pepper mustache with the back of his hand. "Haven't seen some of these boys since they were greenhorns."

Harper laughed with him then focused on the dented CD player next to Al as the old coot rambled on.

"Can you believe little Jicky is a daddy now? How did that happen?"

"You should know," Harper chuckled as he lifted the lid. "As I recall, *you* were the one who lectured me about the birds and the bees way back when."

Al's hardy laughter split his ear as a heavy hand fell on his back.

"You're right there, kid. Hey, speaking of horny buggers, have you met Darrin's boy? Randy found him down at the honky tonk tonight and brought him along."

Harper stopped fiddling with the broken lid for a moment to look up. "Nope, don't think I have."

He followed Al's arm pointing towards a few men in the center of the room.

"The blond-haired one in the fancy shirt. Nothin' like his old man though."

"You can say that again." Harper smirked and returned his attention back to the CD player. "Darrin wouldn't have been caught dead in a pink shirt," he snorted, remembering the cantankerous old man from his boyhood.

"Don'tcha know anything, kid? That there is *salmon*."

Al guffawed, winding him with another slap to the back.

"Nah, like I said, nothin' like his old man that's for sure. Poor Darrin couldn't keep a woman and his boy can't keep them away. He's got two fillies on a rope as we speak."

The stereo lid finally snapped into place and the disc began to spin. *Yes. Show-time, Slugger.*

Harper hit the dimmer switch behind the palm plant and picked up the conversation. "Probably just yankin' your chain on that one, Al," he chuckled as he turned to watch the show.

The doorway's light slit the darkened room as his father rolled the cake inside.

Behind him, the CD player burst into a sultry tune and Al nudged him on the shoulder.

"Nope. Apparently it's true."

"How's that?" he asked absently, glancing around the room at the overly eager expressions fixated on the cake.

A slow burn expanded in his gut. Suddenly he wasn't too sure he wanted Slugger to jump out of that...

"Got some pretty little travel girl on one side and a blonde bombshell on the other."

Al's laughter only intensified the burning as it turned to full-fledged flames engulfing his entire chest. Harper turned his head slowly towards the older man.

It had to be coincidence. There's no way ... "He doesn't by any chance drive a green pick-up, does he?"

"As a matter of fact he does. Says he was luckier than some fool tonight who had one smashed to pieces at the honky tonk." Bushy, salt and pepper brows dipped over one eye. "Thought you said you'd never met him?"

Harper fixed his narrowed gaze on the pink shirted idiot at the front of the action. "I haven't," he gritted through clenched teeth. "But I'm about to..."

Cold dread snuffed out the angry flames as a slender arm flipped back the lid of the cake.

Chapter Ten

This is for you and no one else. Dance because you know you can, because you know you're good.

Sarah eased herself up slowly, swaying her shoulders to the slow music as she lifted the lid. The beat set her hips rolling and she closed her eyes, letting the music carry her to a standing position. She ignored the hoots and hollers and the queasiness in her stomach, focusing only on the glorious rhythm invading her body.

Fluttering her eyes open, she painted on her most invitingly wicked smile and aimed it straight into the crowd of men until she found the one she sought.

"Sarah?"

Feminine power sizzled through her veins as the wide-eyed, slack-jawed Cort stood paralyzed before her.

Looks good on you, loser.

Sea-green eyes, sexy as sin, suddenly filled her vision and a firm hand cupped her elbow.

"Change of plans again there, Slugger. I'm getting you out of here."

The whispered words tingled along her spine. Added to the highs of the alcohol in her blood and the sweet taste of revenge on her smiling lips, Sarah felt giddy.

Swirling her hips, she laid a hand on Harper's shoulder, the muscles tensing beneath her hand creating a burning tightness low in her belly.

Hmm, I sure know of a few places I'd like you to take me. She let out a giggle at her own audacious thoughts. *Hell, but why not. I'm single again. I just won't give my heart away this time.*

She draped her arms over his shoulders. "Oh no, cowboy. The party's just begun."

"That's it. We're out of here."

Before Sarah could say, 'Ride'em cowboy,' she was propelled into the air and out of the cake.

Her head spun and when feet finally touched back on solid ground, only a strong arm around her waist stopped her from adding the rest of her body to the floor.

"Hey, get your hands off my fiancée, buddy."

She spun her head around a little too fast, causing her eyes to cross as the room tilted. Still, she didn't miss the leer of feral excitement from Cort as he gave her the once over ... and again. A cringing shiver of disgust crawled up her spine. The arm around her tightened.

"You don't want to get into this here, *buddy*."

She didn't think anyone could miss the warning tone in Harper's voice.

Cort stepped into their space. "Yeah, I do. Now, I'm not going to say it again. Get your hands off my *fiancée*."

He always had been a little on the slow side. Sarah slapped two fingers to her chin in contemplation. *Funny what sticks out when the rose-colored glasses are shattered.*

She pushed out of Harper's hold to poke a finger into the pink chest. "*Ex-fianccée*," she slurred.

The shock on Cort's face made her grin. Then he smiled and she wanted to vomit.

"Baby? What are you talking about?" He waved his glass up and down in front of her. "If you mean all this, well, sure, it's a surprise but a great one if you ask me. I don't mind your side job one bit." His fingers dragged down her arm. "Hell, you can give me a private show when we get home."

One minute Cort was ogling her and the next he was laying on the floor, nose pouring blood all over the ugly pink shirt.

Sarah glared up at Harper, his fist lowering to his side. "I was getting ready to aim a lost ... loshts ... lots I-lower," she scolded, for some reason having a hard time getting her tongue to form around the words. She glanced down at Cort then back up and grinned. "But I guess that'll do for now ... *S-s-shlugger.*"

Harper's chuckle did funny things to her breathing and made her head spin. She held her temples to hold her head still.

Gentle fingers brushed a tendril of hair from her cheek.

"Come on. Let's get you out of here."

Still unable to control the air in her lungs enough for speech, she simply nodded and accepted the secure hands turning her shoulders towards the door.

"Hey, *Sarah?*"

Cort's nasal-muffled voice screeched like shards of broken glass scraping across her temples.

"What about me? *Us?* You can't..."

The spin cost her a bit of equilibrium but her foot connecting with his groin was so worth the dizzy spell.

"Whoa, there."

Harper's hands gently squeezed her shoulders. She had no doubt he would hold her up while she got rid of the garbage. The thought itself seeped warmth into her chest and she stood taller.

"We're through, Cort. You can take your lousy truck that s-should be shmashed into a million pieces—" She pressed a finger to her lips and glanced up to Harper. "Sorry 'bout that again by the way."

"Not a problem, Slugger."

God, I could get used to a smile like that. Maybe he's right.... maybe my luck is changing. Luck be a lady ... no, no ... Luck be a Cowboy, her wine-fuzzy brain sang. Wait, wasn't that a gamblin' song? Or was it a cheatin' song? Cheaters? No. Cheater ... Cort, right.

She shifted her fuddled mind back on track and stared down at Cort, who now sat back against a chair, a towel stuck to his face.

"What was I s-saying? Oh yeah." Sarah swirled a finger towards his frowning eyes. "We. Are. *Through*. Go cry on your other girlfriend's shoulder. Oh *don't even go there*," she added when his head snapped up and forced denial widened his eyes. "I know all about your little side bimchette. So takes a good look, *baby*." She jutted out her chest and did her best leg pose, staring down her nose at him. "You just lost the best thing you're ever gonna get."

Damn, that felt good!

Now, if only she could get the room to stop spinning enough to enjoy the moment.

Chapter Eleven

Damn, what a woman, Harper thought with a low whistle. He chuckled. *And by the way she's swaying, she's gonna be a hurtin' woman in the morning.* He never would've offered the wine if he'd known she'd get this tipsy on one glass.

Harper turned her into his side and led her out of the common room, much to the chagrin of the partygoers. After helping her on with the trench coat, she latched onto his arm and he supported her back to the house.

"How could I have not seen what a los-s-ser he was?" she questioned as they returned to the bedroom in the main house. "I mean, we were together for like, over a year, and it never once dawned on me that he was a scum-s-sucking s-s-slimeball."

She attempted to shrug the coat from her shoulders, tugging and pulling the long sleeves inside. When the wrestling match ended, she frowned into the mirror. "How could you have missed that part of him, Sarah?" she accused her reflection. Her gaze rose to look back at him through the glass. "Am I really that blind?"

There's no way eyes that blue should ever be that sad.

Harper was before her in two strides. "Hey, it is *not* your fault." He turned her gently and raised a pouted chin with the tip of his finger. "You only saw what he allowed you to see."

Delicate fingers walked up his chest and played with the button closest to the V opening of his shirt.

"You seem an honorable sort, coming to my aid and all, so what about you? Was Roxy right? Are you a good one, Harper? Or am I only seeing what you want me to see?"

The finger grazed his bared skin, twirling in the dark hair and killing him slowly.

"What you see is what you get, Slugger," he croaked out.

Brilliant eyes shone up at him as ruby lips quirked in a seductive grin.

Honorable, hell.

Her lips beneath his were sweeter than he could have ever imagined. Their pliant surface opened and he was gone, obliterated on the erotic sensation of her ardent response.

Denim material tightened against his back as she fisted handfuls of his shirt, pulling him down, closer. Harper took the invitation and ran with it, weaving his fingers through silky curls to tilt her head for a better angle. When a begging moan stole through his lips, he groaned and gathered her up in his arms, raising her to his level.

She released his shirt long enough to wedge her arms out and around his neck as their tongues batted out a nine inning stretch. Long legs folded around him, loosening a low growl from his throat and he fell to the bed, maneuvering her beneath him.

Harper reclaimed her willing lips as eager hands tore the front of his shirt open, zinging a couple snaps right off. His groan echoed in the cavern of their mouths when she molded needy fingers over his abs, up around his ribs and spread them possessively over his back.

Unwilling to release her lips, his hand grazed up the side of the satin outfit to rounded peaks and caressed across their heated, velvet skin. He captured her guttural sigh with his lips, using the further parting of hers to delve deeper into her succulent depths. Hands instantly clamped to his shoulders forcing him closer still, her breasts burning holes in his chest wall. The funny, gutsy, sensually responsive woman herself burned a hole far deeper.

That unexpected reality jerked him back with the same result as a pin in a voodoo doll.

"Pin, pin, pin!"

Harper's brows snapped up, shocked at the way she'd read his mind so perfectly. He was only half-relieved when her frantically waving hands latched onto the brooch at the front of her sexy outfit.

"Ow," she mouthed, pulling it from the outfit. "Damn thing was sticking me." Her lips drew up in a wicked grin. "Speaking of which—" She tossed the brooch on the bed and slid her hands around his neck. "Where were we?"

Damn, she was going to be the death of him, he just knew it. *But oh, what a way to go.*

Harper frowned down into the passion-hooded eyes. He wanted her, no doubt about that. But not like this, rebounding on the tail end of a bad day and worse night. If he took advantage of the situation now, he'd be no better than her idiot ex.

His lips softened to a smile as he brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. *Sometimes honor sucks.*

With one hand, Harper unlatched her fingers from his nape, drawing them down to hold at his chest. "Uh, Sarah, maybe this isn't such a go—*oomph*."

He grunted when her knee hit a little too close to home as she skittered backwards on the bed quick as a mouse from a rattlesnake.

Back braced against the headboard, slender brows slanted painfully over wary eyes.

"You've never used my name before."

"What?"

Not understanding her sudden defensiveness, he pushed himself off the bed.

She curled her knees up, further pulling herself away and grappled with the quilt to cover herself. Tangled curls shook slowly. She hugged a pillow to her chest and dropped her forehead to roll over the billowed material.

"You're right. We shouldn't have.... *I* shouldn't have," she stuttered into the material. Turning her head slowly, she cradled her cheek in the well and stared at him. "What is it about me that drives men away?"

The whispered words hit him harder than any Louisville Slugger could have.

"No, it isn't like that." Helplessly, he scrubbed his hands over his face. *Couldn't be further from the truth, Slugger.*

Slugger. He clenched his eyes shut as her earlier point hit home and he wished he'd had the bat to beat himself over the head with.

"You've got this all wrong."

Luck Be a Cowboy [Legacy of the Celtic Brooch Series]
by Stacy Dawn

His plea fell on deaf ears as he opened his eyes to find long lashes sleeping against tear-reddened cheeks.

"You've got this all wrong, Slugger," he whispered. But how was he going to prove it to her?

Harper blew out a deep breath. If anyone needed a bit of luck right now, it was him.

Chapter Twelve

Sara twirled the little pearl snap in her fingers. *It was all true.*

For half a second when she opened her eyes this morning her mind was blissfully empty. Then the shards of sunlight attacked her temples. The first avoiding shift of her head caused it to explode and the memories flooded in with the ferocity of a cyclone roller coaster.

She didn't know how long she lay there with her eyes squished shut waiting for the nausea to subside. When it did, she risked a slow rise to lean against the headboard then wondered why she bothered. The glint of the torn off snap mocked her—evidence that she'd be far better to lie down and close her eyes ... forever.

How could she have been so shameless as to throw herself at Harper like that? Memories of his heated kisses and taut muscles beneath her hands tightened her chest. She closed her eyes against the instant, keyed-up response of her mutinous body. A body that obviously forgot he'd brushed her off, just like that.

Then again, what did I expect? If she wasn't woman enough for a slimeball like Cort, what made her think she was good enough for a strong, compassionate, virile man like Harper Reed?

A groan reverberated through her temples and she put her hands up to keep her head together. Maybe, if the universe

took pity on her, she could get out of here without having to see him.

Gritting her teeth, Sarah brushed the quilt from her legs and inched off the bed, taking the subsiding dizziness as a good sign. She felt like a mess. A smeared scrape of mascara on the back of her hand and a glimpse down at the ratty tangles of hair over one breast, which had popped out of the pink-satin corset, only emphasized her disgust.

By the time she'd painfully extracted herself from the costume, gotten dressed and slipped on her shoes, she knew the Universe hated her. Why else would it be driving a sledgehammer through her head with each movement?

Desperate, Sarah grabbed her purse and downed two aspirins, dry. Unfortunately, she knew she'd never make it out of the house without tripping over her own feet if she didn't sit down and give them a few minutes to kick in.

"Yowch!" She leapt off the bed, hand rubbing the stinging prick on her left butt cheek.

That damned brooch! Nothing had gone right since the moment she touched it. "You can take your lying lucky love magic, and..." She snatched the silver pin off the bed and hurled it across the room.

"Whoa there, Slugger. Didn't know you were a pitcher too."

Mortification burned her cheeks as a smiling Harper rubbed his T-shirted chest where the brooch had hit.

He reached to the floor to pick it up. "What do you have against this thing anyway?"

Thankful he was assessing the brooch instead of her, Sarah turned away from the urge to run her hands through the thick hair of his bent head. Instead she crossed her arms over her chest. "I've had nothing but bad luck since the old Hawaiian guy gave it to me."

His chuckle rumbled through her chest, causing her heart to constrict. Why did he bother her so much? Why should she care if she threw herself at him and he refused her? What was it about him that had her body yearning to move closer?

"Why? Did you trash his truck too?"

There's my answer, right there. The smiling eyes fixed on her as if she were the only other person on earth, as if she were something special; laughing, but at the same time, eagerly waiting to hear what she had to say next. Well, she'd said enough last night, that's for sure.

Sarah winced at the memories, embarrassment making her anger flare in self-preservation.

"No I didn't trash his truck. I *saved* his wife's life," she gritted. "And the thanks I got was a piece of junk jewelry and the worst night of *my* life." She took a step forward. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I need to get out of here."

He stepped aside and she was glad to pass him, to stop staring at his amused lips. It was bad enough she still had the phantom imprint of their teasing kisses on hers.

"That might be a problem."

"What might be a problem?" she asked, pausing at the kitchen doorway trying to remember if they came through the hallway or the living room when he walked her in last night.

"Just before you yelped..."

Sarah spun on him. "I did not yelp!" Her head screamed its annoyance at the sudden move and she clenched her teeth, pointing to the brooch still in his hand. "That *thing* stuck me when I sat down."

She didn't realize her other hand rubbed the offended spot until his eyes shifted lower, following the motion. She refused to believe the interested gander was for anything but amusement's sake and clasped both arms tight across her chest. When he simply stood there smiling down at her, she let out a frustrated sigh. "You mentioned a problem?"

Harper used the brooch to point out the front window in the living room. "Your car isn't going anywhere. Sorry, Slugger, the Rabbit died."

Sure, now that she wasn't throwing herself at him, it was 'Slugger' again. Then the rest of his words hit home and she flung her arms out. *Unbe-freaking-lievable*. "You're not serious. Please tell me you're not serious."

She waited for an answer but he wasn't even looking at her. Instead, his curious smile studied the brooch as his broad shoulders leaned nonchalantly against the doorframe as if this were any other normal Saturday morning conversation and her whole life wasn't turning into one big pile of shit!

"Hello, over here," she said, waving her hand in aggravation.

His smile grew on one side. "Hey, these numbers ... 7-8-3-2-1-9. They're—"

Sanity snapped, Sarah swiped the brooch from his hand. "Nothing! Absolutely nothing." She waved the cursed thing between them. "Did you know that the man—*whose wife I*

saved—told me this was *love* magic. *Lucky* love magic." Her laughter turned a tad on the hysterical side but she didn't care. "Can you believe that? Cort, your truck, last night—lucky my ass. My life has gone downhill from the moment I touched the thing. First bridge I come to, I'm tossing the damn thing over!"

It took all her control not to throttle him when he simply stood there, relaxed against the wall, smiling down at her.

"What is wrong with you?" she accused, tired of being the only one in this conversation. "You're so damn calm all the time, doesn't anything get to you?"

You do. Cute as the temper tantrum was, Harper didn't know whether to kiss her or noggin-knock her with her own bat. If he couldn't figure out how to give her a good reality check soon, he was scared she'd walk out that door never giving life another chance. Never giving *him* another chance.

Streaming through the window, morning sun glinted off the silver in her hand and he had his answer. She might consider the thing the beginning of her bad luck, but he knew it was his *last* crumb of luck left.

This is it, Harp ... batter up!

"Bad luck? Slugger, you've had nothing but *good* luck since the moment I met you." He grinned at her stunned expression but didn't give her one second to think it over before he ticked off each point on his fingers. "The way I see it, you found out what a slimebucket your fiancé was *before* you married the creep. You *didn't* end up in jail for blatant vandalism on his truck—or mine," he reminded her pointedly. He held up the third finger and pointed out the living room

window. "And you're damn lucky that piece-of-crap tinker toy you call a car out there kicked the bucket here instead of on the highway half way to town with little traffic on a Saturday morning."

A peaked tongue darted out before teeth clamped down on a pale ruby lip. Visions from last night rocked his libido and he shifted, crossing his arms over his chest to keep himself in line a little longer. But the thoughts did bring up his final point.

"Not to mention, you lucked out meeting a guy who has a bit more honor and control than to take advantage of an intoxicated woman having a seriously bad day by *thinking* she's down on her luck."

This time she snorted, silver-blue sparks darting straight at him. "Is that right? Wow, that's the first brush off I've ever gotten that's been attributed to being a gentleman."

His own hackles rose. "Brush off? You seriously think last night was a brush off?"

He raked a hand through his hair and turned away to regroup. This wasn't going the way he hoped. *Stubborn woman*. He didn't want to piss her off, he wanted to kiss her senseless and take her back to bed.

When he turned back, she was over by the side table picking up the phone. Her finger paused over the buttons as she rolled the brooch in her other hand. After a long moment, she raised her gaze, her face contrite.

"Look, I'm not saying I believe you about the luck thing. But the other—" Her shoulder rose and fell. "Well, you're right. I owe you an apology. You've proven yourself nothing

but a gentleman from the first moment I met you, and I do appreciate that."

Harper shook his head at the way she dipped hers and turned before the last words were out of her mouth.

"I'm just going to call for a tow truck."

And that would be strike two, he chanted to himself. This wasn't looking good. With only one pitch left, Harper leaned against the lounge, arms crossed over his chest, hoping the next ball wouldn't be a sinker.

"Yes, my car died," she spoke into the receiver a few moments later. "I need a tow truck and to ride with the driver into town. The address? Just a minute." She picked a pen off the pad next to the phone and glanced back over her shoulder. "What's the address here?"

This was it. The count was full and he was in for his final pitch. Harper kept his voice steady. "Seventy-eight thirty-two..."

"Seventy-eight thirty-two," she repeated into the phone, doodling the numbers on the paper at the same time.

"Highway nineteen," he finished to the back of her head.

"Highway nineteen." She nodded at whatever the other person on the line said before reciting from the pad of paper. "Yes, that's right 7-8-3-2, Highway 19. 7-8-3-2..." Shaking hands grabbed for the brooch as saucer-sized blue eyes stared at the back then up at him in disbelief. "1.... 9."

Damn she's beautiful.

Her eyes never left him as Harper pushed off the chair and walked over. He couldn't help smiling at her fixed expression and tipped her mouth shut with a finger under her chin. With

the other hand, he took the receiver from hers and set it back in its cradle.

Her mouth worked open and closed a few times before words actually came out. "Is that seriously your address?"

He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, flipped it open to his driver's license and handed over the case.

Unable to wait one more minute to get his hands back in the glorious curls, he swept his fingers over her cheek and back around to the nape of her neck, urging her to look up at him. "Now do you believe?" he chuckled.

Silver sparkles within the blue eyes twinkled up at him and he bent down to kiss the growing smile on her lips. He heard the thunk of his wallet on the floor seconds before her hands wove around his neck pulling him closer to deepen the kiss.

Only the need for air made Harper release those sweet lips and, breathing heavy, he rested his forehead against hers.

"Now, the way I see it, we both need new vehicles." He leaned down to brush her lips again. "What do you say we go car shopping today, together. Maybe we could do lunch." He nibbled down to her chin. "Then perhaps dinner." Her sweet neck tantalized his lips. "And breakfast." He returned for another long taste of her sweet lips before leaning back slightly to read her gaze. "What do you say, Slugger?"

His answer came in a tug on his neck and her smiling lips atop his.

"I say I do believe. I believe Luck definitely be a Cowboy."

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