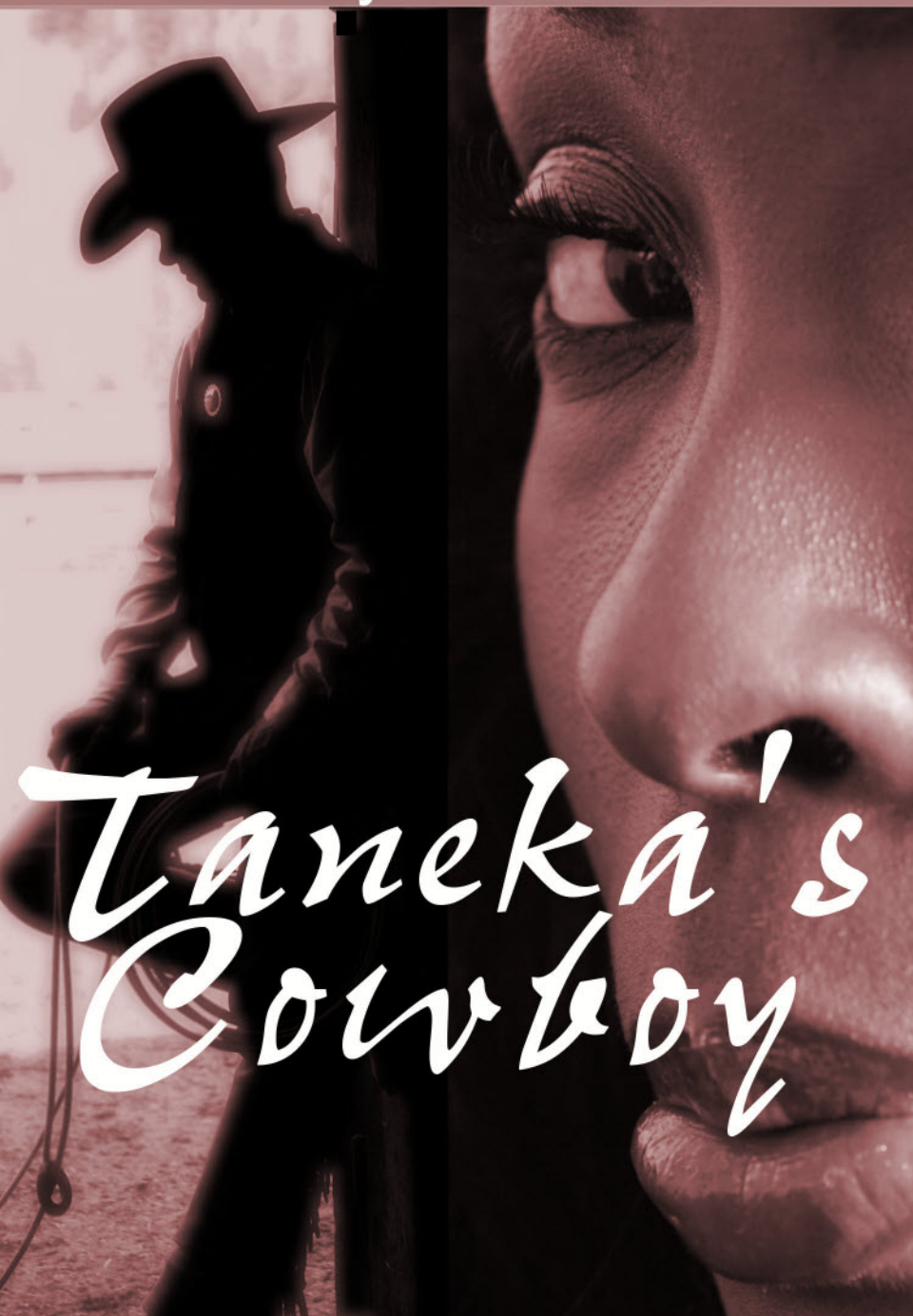


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Taneka's Cowboy

Carol McKenzie

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Fairy Tales and Love Songs

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Taneka's Cowboy
By Carol McKenzie

To Mook and Jack.

Chapter One

Light from a car's headlights moved over the darkened walls of Taneka Louise Cole's single story home in Charleston, Illinois. *Who's here? I'm in bed and ready to go to sleep.*

A car engine shut off. Taneka sat up, swung her legs over the cornflower blue spread and the side of the bed. She lowered her feet to the soft, deep blue carpeting. With small shoves, her house shoes slipped easily onto her feet. Someone knocked and drove her to pick up her pace, grasp a fleece robe, and pad quickly toward the front door.

The neon red numbers on the clock radio shone from a bookcase, reading 2:04 a.m. Taneka waited, her

anxiety high. She had a sneaking suspicion she knew who had pulled into the driveway. Maybe her intuition worked overtime, but his late arrival worried her. She put her arms into the sleeves of the pink robe and tied the belt at her waist, determined to send him home.

"Who's there?" she asked and flipped on the outdoor light.

"Taneka, it's Jeffrey," the familiar, deep voice replied through the wood.

I shouldn't open it. Nevertheless, she reached out, and with a reluctant turn of her wrist, unlocked the bolt, pulled it open and looked into Jeffrey Spence's chocolate-colored, contrite eyes. He stood five feet eleven inches tall, and wore his khaki knee shorts, white tennis shoes and a white polo top.

"Jeffrey..." she began with dismay. Her fear dissolved into anger. "What do you want?"

"Can I come in?" His shaky tone made him sound guilty.

Hot, humid air blasted her. "No, you cannot come in."

"Please. I can't sleep. I'm sorry for everything," he said. His lower lip quivered.

She looked at him; her eyes narrowed. The neighbor's front door lights shone behind him; a car passed on the wet street. *Do I smell liquor on his breath?*

His fingers curled around her upper arm and pulled her toward him. He pursed his lips. "I want you, babe. C'mere." Just the thought of having sex with him again caused her stomach to lurch. Her sexual need had vanished days ago, and she refused to make up with him. Taneka jerked her arm from his grasp, stepped back and crossed her arms at her waist.

Tears glossed his cheeks in a display of regret that was worthy of an Oscar nomination. "Don't be this way. I can't go on without your love."

"No, Jeffrey. It's over. You blew it."

The lines of repent deepened on his face. "Accept my apology, babe. It comes from my heart."

She didn't buy his sorrow, but she couldn't run up the power bill by keeping the door open either. *How can I get rid of him right away?*

"Just leave, Jeffrey," she said, pursing her lips into a thin line.

Taneka remembered words of advice she had heard on television and read in pamphlets: men who hit their wives or girlfriends often repeat their offense. Once an abuser, always an abuser. *If those words are true, I can't let him back into my life.* She thought back to the scary moments following the June annual faculty party. He had drank too much, and Taneka drove him back to her house. Once inside, behind closed doors, his speech slurring, he said, "You've got the hots for Courtney Phillips."

"I have the hots? Jeffrey —"

"You do, don't you? I saw him eyeing you!"

"That's not true."

"Don't lie to me!"

His expression twisted with rage, and he had open-handedly slapped her across the face. Her head jerked to one side from the force of the blow. She raised her hand to the smarting skin, stepped back and reeled.

"It's your fault. You shouldn't push me away." He

spun and with a livid, tense stride, walked out the door. He descended her steps, climbed into his car and sped away. Taneka came out of her thoughts and went back to the present.

She feared, and at times disliked him more than any individual she had ever known. If his sanity snapped, and he turned to violence so easily, he posed a serious threat. Reporting the incident to the proper authorities could anger and spur him into further aggression. She thought that she'd have to endure more embarrassment and humiliation if she called the police.

The day following the incident, Jeffrey approached her in the cafeteria on campus. "I had one too many scotches, and something went off in my head. I promise it won't happen again. I just don't know what got in to me."

She glared at him. In a tone dripping with disdain, she said, "You've said that before. Don't you remember?" A thoughtful pause elapsed. "And it *has* happened again. No, Jeffrey. It's over and that's final!"

Ignoring his protests, she closed and re-bolted the

door. Taneka leaned back against the wood and listened for his car engine to start and go in reverse down the driveway. Shaking with relief, she padded back to the bedroom.

Her thoughts shifted to the last time they'd made love. He had nuzzled her neck, exciting her. They sat on the couch in the living room, lounging and leaning against each other. "You smell wonderful," he murmured as he administered lingering kisses to her lips.

They watched a football game. During half time, Jeffrey wrapped his arms around her and crushed his mouth against hers. One thing led to another, and they ended up in her bedroom. With a tug to each side of the waistband, his blue jeans descended his body, revealing his briefs and soon those went down to the floor too.

His slender waist and well-muscled chest, covered with a mat of black hair, beckoned her. She slid her lips along his strong jaw until they met his devouring, hungry mouth. It lowered to her large breasts. Desire drowned all thought. He thrust his cock deep inside

her and together they came. Their coupling was beautiful, spectacular even. She felt that he treated her with respect, love and understanding, especially when they made love. Other times, he was smart, loyal and sober. He tried to please her in and out of the bedroom. Jeffrey, she had felt back then, would be her friend and lover forever.

Her thoughts returned to the present, and she lay back onto her pillow. Sunlight filtered softly through the open blinds.

The peacefulness we once shared...where has it gone? The real Jeffrey had unfortunately stepped forward. He drank, cursed, hit walls, broke vases and drove erratically and fast, scaring her. She tried to shove the entire mess out of her mind, but failed. The assortment of problems still lingered, causing her to regret ever having met him.

How did I ever fall in love with him? Taneka thought back to the day she'd met him at the art fair on the University of Illinois campus. His skin was a warm chocolate color; his eyes soft, but intense.

He stopped at her small concession stand that contained eight of her abstract works and searched for the perfect piece of art for the living room of his small apartment, but didn't have much money and asked for her help. Some works drew him more than others. He looked at one of her Impressionistic paintings, turned it upside down and asked, "Is this one of a space alien's craft landing on a mountain?"

His question floored her and made her laugh.

She learned of his reputation as one of the smartest math men on campus, smart in calculus and physics. She had often seen him striding across the grassy yard below her dorm window, tall and potent, wearing T-shirts, jeans and tennis shoes. A popular guy, coeds constantly talked to him, but he wasn't interested in them. He befriended Taneka. They began meeting each other between classes at the cafeteria. The tension between them intensified and nature took its course. Rational thinking fled and one day they made love. That was before he started drinking regularly.

Finally, I've come to my senses, though. After having

such upheaval in my life, I'm ready to recuperate before I get involved again.

* * * *

One Week Later

At nine-thirty in the morning, Taneka backed down the driveway and braked in the street. The garage door banged as it dropped to the concrete. She shifted into drive, headed toward town and passed the E.I.U.

The ivy covered brick buildings slipped by. She put on her sunglasses, relieved the spring classes had ended. The June-July session was due to start. Taneka had opted out of teaching summer school in favor of taking a vacation. She needed one.

Her cell phone tinkled. Taneka momentarily took her eyes off the windshield, looked down and retrieved the handset from the side pocket of her purse. She pecked the on button with her index finger. "Stevie?" she asked and braked at a stop sign. Waiting

for two elderly women to cross, she glanced up at the second floor window of the math and science building before returning her foot to the accelerator. Her car slowly passed the outside of the building.

"Yessss?"

The building disappeared from view. "What's going on?" asked Taneka.

"I have to go to the C.J.H.S. and give a speech," Stevie said, her tone stress-filled.

"Whatever for?"

"To talk about the importance of math in our daily lives."

"I remember when you and I attended that school."

"Oh yeah. Math was not important way back when. Boys were, though, right?"

"They were, weren't they?" Taneka laughed. Memories of their eighth grade bonding and weekend sleepovers flashed through her mind leaving her with warm feelings.

"Your godchildren wonder why you weren't at the picnic last Sunday."

"Tell the little sweeties hi, for me. I was getting ready for this upcoming trip."

Picturing Stevie's raven, short curly hair, sparkling, dark brown eyes and chocolate-colored skin, Taneka listened to her leisurely, rich tone state, "Speak to me about it."

"Okay."

"Tell me about the reasoning behind it."

Reasoning? "Of the trip you mean?"

"Yes."

She gave it a second or two of thought and said, "Well okay. So what do you want to know?"

"What does Rachel, our dear little friend out in Wyoming, have up her sleeve?"

The mention of her name brought an image of Rachel Simmond's smiling face; a friend who looked like her twin sister who had a proclivity for matchmaking. She always had a quick, white smile on her pouty lips. Her wide set eyes, expressive and dark, offset her long nose. In fact, Taneka and she were the same age — thirty-three. She too had mocha-colored skin and

was of medium weight and height, but that's where the similarities ended. Taneka hung a right, and asked, "It sounds fishy, doesn't it?"

"Yep."

"She means well, I guess."

"I'd say she wants you to meet someone, since she *loves* to arrange dates among strangers."

"You can't be saying that Rachel likes to manipulate."

"Nooooo," said Stevie, feigning innocence. "I didn't say that. Huh-uh, not me."

Taneka thought a Mickey D's coffee with four creams and six sugars sounded like a terrific idea. It was a normal part of her routine, so she mindlessly pressed the signal indicator. "Uh-huh," she said not missing a word of Stevie's opinion. She changed lanes once it was safe to do so. Ahead, she saw the yellow double arches.

"So, what's this place like?" Stevie asked in a dull, bored tone.

"Wyoming, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Last night I looked this particular ranch up on the 'net. The ad said that city people visit Rock Creek Ranch to get a taste of the old west."

"I'll bet that costs a bundle."

"Tourists do pay dearly," Taneka said. She pressed the signal indicator down and turned into a lane that led to the drive up window.

"What will you be doin' out there with all the longhorn steers and howling coyotes? Hmm?" Taneka sensed Stevie's smirk and laughed aloud.

"Hold on." Taneka ordered a coffee and returned to the conversation. "They furnish rides into the wilderness with cowboy guides."

"Oh yeah? Guides that happen to be cowboys...how nice."

"Oh yeah, and camping, out under the stars. You know, the usual cowboy stuff—roping and riding. Whatever else cowboys do." She pulled ahead and paid.

"Ohh," Stevie wailed with laughter. Sometimes her tone of superiority aggravated Taneka to no end, and

this was one of those times. Stevie quieted and said, "Tell me more about these guides. They are male, right? Under the stars with one of them sounds...nice."

Another snarky remark. Whatever am I going to do with her? "Rachel lives on the ranch. It's located too far out in the wilderness to commute."

"What about bears and critters and the like? Oh my God. What about snakes?"

"You mean the mountain lions, cougars and bears? Oh my!" A wry laugh left Taneka's lips. "I don't know. I'm afraid to ask."

"I just wonder what the big surprise is."

"You're not alone. She said she arranged for someone to meet my flight."

"Hey, Taneka. Someone's comin' in. I've got to get goin'. Crap, it's a student."

Taneka pressed the end call button, put the cell phone in her handbag, and unleashed an elongated sigh. She sipped her coffee and drove toward downtown. *Hopefully, my time at the ranch won't be a waste. Besides, I made a promise to Rachel.*

Taneka needed some R & R. At this point in her life, she felt desperate and still ached from the poisonous relationship with Jeffrey. She had to get away.

Chapter Two

Taneka shoved the negative thoughts about Jeffrey out of her mind. She turned right onto the highway and drove north past a cornfield and a farm with a red barn and silo. A few minutes before noon, on April thirteenth, she took her Taurus to the automatic car wash down the street. She steered it through the shooting water and twirling brushes while she confirmed her flight on her cell phone. The car emerged from the damp darkness the moment she hung up. She glanced

in her side mirror at the car's glistening white paint. Water dripped off the fenders and windshield.

With the wipers slap-slap-slapping, she drove another block and hung a right. She pulled into a garage and made sure the mechanic changed the oil, checked the engine and hoses, its fluid levels, and tire pressure.

Once she had paid for the services, she drove to the bank. *How much money should I get for the trip?* Taneka pulled up to the drive-up window of the First Illinois Bank, withdrew cash and put it in her wallet.

Later at home, she put the AC charger for her cell phone into her handbag. She tucked her vibrator down into the side pocket of her suitcase, hoping security officers stayed away from it. *I'll die seven deaths if they look in that pocket. Oh, and where are the extra batteries and lube?* She located and put them into her suitcase, zipped it shut and carried it outside.

While she approached her car, Jeffrey drove up and parked. Her mouth dropped open in shock. She bent at the knee and put the heavy suitcase down. A series of negative emotions played out in the back of

her mind. *If I had any sense at all, I'd run back into the house.*

With a casual air, he stepped out of his red Miata. "Taneka! Baby, you know we can work it out! I love you, girl." He spread his arms open. "You're all I ever think about...everything I want in a woman." He strode to her and grasped her fingers.

Uncomfortable with his sudden presence, she withdrew her hand. "Jeffrey...you're not supposed to be here."

He peered down at her suitcase. His line of vision rose and stopped on the second suitcase that sat ready just inside the door. He glanced over his shoulder and frowned at the nosey neighbor who peeked over the hedge. His eyes turned back and gazed at Taneka accusingly. "Where the hell 're you going? You didn't tell me you were leavin' town."

Dread blanketed her like a black veil. "Listen, Jeffrey – "

"You can't go."

Who in the hell does he think he is? Angry heat rose

in her chest, throat, and face. *Will he hurt me?*

He grabbed her other wrist. "You hear me!"

"Go, damn it." *Why can't he take a hint?* His wanting to get her back bordered on obsession. "I'll call the police and I mean it."

His livid expression scared her. "You wouldn't dare..."

"I'll scream and the neighbor lady will call them!"

He let her wrist go and stalked back to his shiny car. "Fine!"

Relieved, she watched his car back down the driveway and speed toward town. Trying again to shove the problem out of her mind, she carried the two suitcases to the car and locked them in the trunk.

* * * *

Taneka walked down the street to her landlady's house. She paid Mrs. Carter a month's rent in advance and exchanged a few mundane pleasantries with her as cars drove by on the street. They discussed the hot,

humid weather. "I'll see you later then." Taneka turned and walked home. Another neighbor, Mrs. Jones, spoke to her upon arrival in her yard. She stopped and chatted with her for a few minutes, killing time and being neighborly.

Mrs. Jones wore red Bermuda shorts, natural colored sandals and a straw hat. In her hand, she held pruning shears. "Forgive me for watching a while back. I was afraid he was going to attack you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jones. We broke up and he's having a hard time accepting it."

"If he comes around when you're not here, what should I do?"

"Call the cops. Tell them I don't want him around."

Mrs. Jones raised a hand to her white hair and drew a few strands behind her ear. "You know, Taneka, you should really get an order of protection taken out against him."

"I'm thinking about doing just that," Taneka murmured.

Mrs. Jones narrowed her eyes and changed the

subject. "I still want to take care of your plants."

"Oh, great." Taneka took a key off the keychain and handed her the brass sliver. "Here's the key."

"Okay," she said and slipped it into her pocket.

"Hold on. I'll go ahead and give you your money now." Paying ahead for her service, Taneka reached into her pocket, located two tens and counted the money into Mrs. Jones hand.

* * * *

Thinking she should leave earlier than planned since security checks at the airport had become more time consuming, Taneka drove to her mother's small, white one-story house. A neighbor girl sat on the grass petting her mom's eight year-old cat. Taneka's mother would throw an absolute fit if she left without saying goodbye. She parked outside the white picket fence that surrounded her mother's yard. Brushing past the long line of fragrant pink and white primroses, she hurried up the sidewalk, the steps and went inside

where her mother waited.

She wrapped her arms around her mother and gave her a peck on the lips. "Well, I'm leaving. I'll be back in a couple of weeks, tops. Maybe I'll be home earlier, I dunno. I promise to bring you a souvenir."

"Just bring yourself back home safely is all I ask."

"Okay, Mom."

They hugged. Her mother's eyes narrowed on her face and she said in an accusing tone, "There's something different about you. What is it?"

Taneka drew a hand up to her heart. "What do you mean?"

"Why're you all of a sudden hurryin' to get away from town?" she asked with suspicion.

"I'm not, Mom." Taneka's mouth dropped open. "Jeez."

Her mother's dark eyes returned and she frowned broadly. Medium-tall, Marsha Thomas carried her weight well for a large woman. Her skin, a shade of dark chocolate, was smooth and soft. Fine lines outlined her lips and the corners of her eyes. In Marsha's

spare time, she sang in the church choir and ran a free food pantry for the poor in town, making Taneka very proud, but sometimes, in other ways, she drove her insane. As much as she loved her mother, she had to admit that Marsha liked to get overly involved in her life. She tried to undermine her diets by cooking her fattening foods that she loved. Marsha gossiped about people she did not even know. Her mother's voice carried even when she was not singing; sometimes Taneka caught herself cringing.

She chatted with her mother about money, telephone numbers and the woman who watched her house. The inquisition ended and Taneka ambled out of the house. She left before her mother had a chance to ask a question about the split up with Jeffrey.

Her mother followed until they reached the porch. She stopped, crossed her heavy arms at her waist and watched Taneka approach her car.

I am not about to tell Mom anything about my trouble with Jeffrey. The less she knows, the better it is for me. She'd hound me. I have my life under control, I believe...most of the time, at least.

"Taneka?" Marsha asked.

Her mother's voice stopped her. Taneka rolled her eyes and sighed. "What, Mom?" she asked with a smile and turned.

"I just don't know about you goin' all the way out there to cowboy country."

"I'll be fine."

"Somethin's goin' on with you, and for some reason you're holdin' back from your mom."

Shaking her head and looking toward the blue heavens Taneka said, "Mom, please. I'm not holding anything back. Jeez." *For God's sakes, I've just finished teaching two semesters and deserve some time away from home and some privacy with my life, that's all.*

She rolled her eyes again, rounded the front end of the Taurus and climbed into the driver's side.

"That car of yours is eleven years old. St. Louis Airport is a two hour drive."

"I've got a cell phone."

"One other thing..."

"Oh my God, Mom, what?" *Will she ever quit lectur-*

ing? Buying a new car right away is out of the question. Christ, I paid off my student loans; it cost a truckload of money to earn a doctorate degree. My God, I'm a college professor! I deserve some privacy, time away from home and some credit for being an intelligent woman who makes intelligent decisions.

"I just don't know about flying off cross country either. A woman traveling alone this day and age? Huh-uh. There are terrorists. You need to get yourself a real man. By a man, I sure don't mean one like that jerk, Jeffrey. He's about as poor an excuse...well, you just never mind. You just go on!"

"Thank you, I love you, Mom," said Taneka. She fastened the seatbelt and located the ignition key. *She means well and loves me.*

Marsha came down from the porch and ambled toward the Taurus while Taneka started the engine. She leaned over, looked inside and said, "I'll see you soon. Love ya."

"I know. Me too you." She threw her mother an air kiss, muttered an incoherent curse word, and slipped her designer sunglasses down from the top of her head

to the bridge of her nose.

"Your car, seriously, is it okay?" Her mom's face loomed outside the window; her eyes roved over the interior.

"Mom, I had the mechanic look it over from top to bottom and he gave it a clean bill of health. That guy you had do yours. He said it could easily take me to St. Louis."

Her mother's upturned smile resembled an odd frown and her eyes closed to slits. "I dunno. He probably doesn't even know where that is, St. Louis. I don't have him work on my car any more. I was stranded once. He said there was nothing wrong with it. I got smart and switched mechanics."

"Good grief! I'm going to be just fine."

Taneka told her mom goodbye again and left the city of Charleston on the route to the airport. Words rolled in her head and flashed like a Las Vegas marquee: *Let the heat begin.*

Chapter Three

Carrying her purse, she left the plane and entered the bright, air-conditioned Sheridan Wyoming terminal, wishing she had taken more care with her hair.

The small town airport bustled with activity. People chattered and hugged and kissed each other nearby. One group whisked past, brushing her clothes, so she stepped out of the way. A voice announced from a

speaker, "Flight sixty-four is boarding at gate three."

A cowboy who looked as rugged as the Rockies met Taneka. He greeted her with a white smile and a deep western drawl that rolled easily off his tongue. "Welcome to Wyomin', ma'am."

Six feet tall, maybe weighing two hundred pounds or so, he raised his white hat and ran his fingers through his short, dark brown hair. Sunburn reddened his nose and cheeks and his chest appeared hard as granite. His tight blue jeans, boots and western shirt looked sexy on his well-muscled body. His eyes roamed down her curves, and he tapped the hat onto his head.

Shaken, she tore her gaze off him. *Just what is he thinking giving me the once over?* Embarrassed by his obvious approval, her gaze dropped like an anvil to the shiny marble floor. Inwardly, she cursed her weakness. *How did he recognize me? I should look behind me. Or pinch myself. I may be having a dream...an x-rated one.*

"I'm Denzel Keach. Rachel Simmonds sent me. I know you by your picture."

The man's greeting left her speechless. *Eyes don't fail me and stray down his magnificent body. I sure don't want to be rude and not speak.* She closed her mouth and peered up at him unflinchingly and uttered a casual, "Denzel? Oh, hi." She spoke as though every day a white, super-hunk cowboy met her flight at the airport. "Yes, I'm Rachel's friend."

"Taneka, right?" His penetrating gaze stirred her soul for an answer.

He grasped the rim of his hat and bowed a couple of inches. With his other hand, he gave hers a firm gentleman's shake.

Nice. The corners of his eyes crinkled and he offered her a big, warm smile.

Taneka's cell phone tinkled in her purse, and she pulled her eyes away from his gorgeous face. Shaken, she breathed, "Excuse me a second." She turned and stepped away to gain a little privacy, reaching down into her handbag. *Surely to God, Jeffrey wouldn't call at such an inopportune time. Then again, it could be my mother. Maybe something happened to my sister. I'll never*

forgive myself if I don't take the call. She answered before it went to voice mail.

"Hi, Taneka. What do you think?"

Good, it wasn't him. It was a female's voice. "Uh, about what? Who is this?"

"Me...Rachel."

"Oh, you mean about this cowboy you sent to the airport?" *Surely he isn't a gigolo.*

Rachel chuckled. "Nice huh? I handpicked him just for you."

Taneka glimpsed Denzel and turned away. She didn't want him to hear her comments. Under her breath, she said, "Rachel. What are you sending a man who looks like him here for? Just what are you up to?" She had told her to expect an old man named George.

"You don't like him, Taneka?"

"I need to talk to you when I get there," she said in a forced, upbeat manner.

Rachel laughed. "I *knew* you'd like him. Remember when I forgot your birthday present that time? Well, I'm paying you back."

"You don't have to — "

A man's voice boomed from a speaker overhead, effectively stopping her words mid-sentence. She peeked at Denzel again, biting her lip.

Ten feet away, he leaned against a wall with his thumbs caught in his pockets. *God, he fills those jeans so well.* A twinge curled low in her belly. *He would definitely make a great shaving cream commercial. Gillette would run out of cream!* Heat rose up her body and she stammered, "Don't you dare tell me you...that he...ohhhh...nooooo way, Rachel."

"Relax and enjoy him, girlfriend." Rachel laughed. "You said you needed some spice, right Taneka? Come on...level with your old friend."

"Mm-mm, just you wait."

"The days I'm working, he's going to take you around." Her voice lowered. "Like in Vegas, what goes on here, stays here."

"I'm not that kind of woman. What do you mean, take me around?"

"I don't want to give it away. It's a secret."

"Rachel!"

"See you at the ranch in a few." The line went quiet.

She has to be kidding!

Slowly shaking her head, she pressed the end call button and put the phone back into her purse. *Now I understand what Rachel meant by surprise. Man is it ever a surprise! I've never even seen a real cowboy up close, especially like this one. Darn that Rachel! How many nights did she lay awake dreaming up this scheme? What did she tell him about me?*

"Beg your pardon, ma'am?" Denzel asked, interrupting her thoughts. She looked down at the hat he held by the rim. She raised her line of vision and gazed into his blue pools. The eye action dizzied her; her knees weakened.

"Ma'am? You okay?" Showing an abundance of patience, he blinked, waiting for her response.

"Oh. Sorry. Jeez." She felt like a blathering idiot. "Um, yes." She lowered eyes and head until she regained her composure. "Uh, my name, yes is, uh, Taneke Louise Cole." *Surely he isn't a real cowboy.*

"The pleasure's mine." He let go of her hand and

slid his fingers to the curve in her lower back. His calloused fingers moved on her soft skin; tingles shot and spiraled. Without taking his hand off her back, he flashed another smile.

Boarders shuffled past and disappeared through the doorway leading to a waiting plane.

"This way please," he said, taking her arm. He escorted her from the entryway of the terminal and to the baggage claims center.

Denzel's eyes moved stealthily over her white knit top.

In surveying his appreciation, she recalled how she had debated on whether she should buy the top, because clearly it revealed too much cleavage. *Then, today I made the worst mistake – I wore it.*

Do I see an appreciative smirk? Oh my God, his eyes are moving down to my bellybutton ring. Is it showing below the hem? Her body shivered in reaction to his southward search mission. It didn't stop until it took in her slender feet encased by natural-colored sandals.

She managed to keep walking with her chin tipped

upward, hiding her sweltering discomfort. *Such blatant scrutiny! Should I turn away and chastise him for eyeing me so intensely? No, no. He has a cowboy charm that sucks me right in. Actually, he's irresistible. I like the attention.*

A few sprigs of chest hair rose above the V neckline of his shirt: the kind a woman liked to thread her fingers through. With effort, she kept her eyes off his backside while he located and retrieved her luggage from the rotating rack.

Taneka noticed other women scanning his body and casting appreciative, fleeting smiles.

She pointed out her suitcases. "There's one. Oh, and there's the other. Thank you so much."

"No problem, ma'am." He turned to her. "Are there any more?"

She raised a finger to her temple. "Just the two."

He slipped on a pair of designer sunglasses, and Taneka noticed a glimmering diamond ring on his ring finger. *How can a cowboy guide be able to afford such an impressive, expensive ring?*

He carried her bags toward the parking lot and said, "You probably already figured that Rachel sent

me to escort you around the ranch while she works. She wants to make sure you have a good time while you're in Wyomin.'"

"Oh? And you're just the man to do it, right?"

"That I am," he said confidently. "I can show you a damned good time. Oh, it's the car on the right, the black one."

Betting he could do just that, Taneka cleared her throat on the walk to a sleek, onyx Cadillac. "As soon as we get to the ranch, I'd like to speak to Rachel."

"Yes, ma'am. It's an hour drive from here. I plan on takin' you to a bar and grill one night. How about campin' and horseback ridin' out into the wilderness? We have to get you outfitted, though."

"Oh really?" They loaded the two bags into the trunk. *What in the world does he mean by that?*

He fitted the second suitcase into the trunk and pushed the lid down. "Yes, ma'am."

A logo of a tall, slender pine tree and the words ROCK CREEK painted in gold decorated the passenger door.

What is this? A scene out of Have Heat Will Travel starring me, Taneka, with a good ol' boy? She clucked her tongue. How much did Rachel pay him? That will be among the first of a long series of questions I'll ask her.

She rolled her eyes and waited for the door to click and unlock. *How many women has he greeted just as lavishly?* Denzel opened the door for her and she climbed in and pressed her stiffened spine to the seat. She arranged her purse on her lap. "Thanks."

Just wait until I get my hands on Rachel! I'll keep my awe of this man hidden, but it'll be difficult.

Denzel climbed into the driver's side and pulled the door closed. The soft beige leather crunched under him. The car hummed, and the AC vent blew hot air. She whiffed a new car scent and traces of his citrusy aftershave. He pulled the seatbelt around his upper torso and fastened it at his hip. It sounded with a click that drew her back to reality.

He peered her way and flashed a perfect white smile that caused her to dampen her panties. "I plan on taking good care of you." He reached over her. "May

I?"

Her mouth dropped open. *What was he about to do?*

"May you do what?"

"This."

Inwardly, she shuddered, seeing but not seeing the cars leaving and entering the short-term parking lot. He was about to do something, but she didn't know what. *Why am I so nervous around him? My first impressions are sometimes fickle. I don't know him too well, but if I'm not mistaken, Denzel seems to be the rare type of guy who has it within his ability to sweep me off my feet. If he tries and I give in, I'll be opening myself up to getting hurt again.*

He leaned her way and stretched his seat belt to its limit. His hand whispered across her lap and grasped a silver, metal square. "This." She smelled his sinfully luscious, masculine cologne and her heart palpitated. His nearness stirred passion in diver's places. His powerful hands buckled her securely to the seat. His taut lips hovered mere inches from hers. Her seatbelt clicked and he moved back behind the steering wheel.

Moments later, they rode toward the ranch. She

managed to maintain some semblance of composure, but still felt antsy. Taneka peered outside at the passing tall pine trees and the majestic mountains in the distance, thinking they certainly were going to the wilderness. Trails of fluffy clouds hovered in the pristine blue sky. Rolling down the window, she breathed in the crystal clean air of Wyoming.

What the hell did Denzel mean? He said he'd take good care of me? I need to read the fine print. One possible x-rated answer entered her mind. *No way!* She tried to shove all naughty thoughts about him out of her mind, but failed.

Ten minutes into the trip he said, "Have you ever been to Wyomin' before?"

"Nope. This is my first trip."

He rolled the window down an inch or two and again put both hands on the steering wheel. "Where we're goin' is out in the wilderness...way out in the wilderness."

"I can't wait to see it."

"We pick up people all the time and drive 'em out

to the ranch."

"I'm sure I'll have a good time."

Nodding, he turned his head her way for a moment. "I intend to make sure that you do."

Her insides quivered in response to his words. "Does your family live around here?" She rifled through her handbag searching for a Kleenex to clean her sunglasses.

"What do you need?"

"Oh, just a tissue."

"Here, let me get you one."

"Thank you."

He pulled a tissue from a holder that occupied a space in the center console and handed it to her. "My parents are dead." His tone sounded sad. "My dad not too long ago. My mom died when I was young. I have cousins but they live in Great Falls."

"Wyoming?" She put her sunglasses on and stuffed the used tissue into the side pocket of her purse.

"No, Great Falls is in Montana – up north a ways."

"Oh, of course."

"The ranch is up ahead, ma'am." A few minutes later, he interrupted her thoughts and said, "I'll have George carry your bags to your quarters. Rachel is in the office if you want to go say hi."

"I think I will, Denzel."

Chapter Four

Denzel let Taneka out near the front of the office building and drove toward the garage located behind the ranch. Out of the corner of his eye, he recognized George by his gleaming bald spot. Like clockwork, he came out of his room to assist her. A flight of stairs led them to her suite.

George, crippled with arthritis, bent over and limped on his way. He wore his usual attire, jeans and a blue plaid shirt.

Denzel re-directed his line of vision out the windshield, drove past a corral and witnessed an average sized group of tenderfoot tourists learn to rope a wooden cow. His mind elsewhere, he vaguely realized that a heavyset woman learned to ride with one of his guides.

With a lazy hand on the wheel, Denzel steered and removed his Stetson, placing the hat on the passenger seat. Thirty or forty feet away, a cowhand strummed a guitar and appeared to be singing. Denzel didn't hear the words, the tires crunching in the gravel, or the people who screeched with pleasure as a cowhand performed a rope trick, because Taneka filled his thoughts. In short, the new tenderfoot bothered him big time. Admittedly, he didn't know her well, but he sensed good chemistry that he had not experienced with any of the women in his past.

Maybe I'll take two or three days off; I need it anyway. It's been months since I took a vacation.

Once in his room, Denzel called his main office in Cheyenne, struggling against the urge see Taneka

again soon. "Cody. What's happenin'?" He unbuttoned his shirt and managed to hold the handset to his ear.

"Nothin' much. I talked to the contractor who's takin' care of the Alamosa project," said Cody.

Carrying the cordless hand piece, Denzel went to the small refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water. "Did Bruce figure it out?"

"Don't worry, Denzel. The road's goin' around to the back past the parkin' lot just like you originally wanted."

"Good." Denzel wedged the phone under his chin, unscrewed the bottle cap and took a long sip. "How about the Albuquerque project?"

Cody answered. "Um, they said they're two weeks from completion."

"I figure I'll be here through the weekend."

"What about your CG & I stocks? Sell?"

"Hold on to them. Maybe they'll come up next week. If they don't move in a week, sell." Denzel strolled into the bedroom, crossed to the window and peered in the direction of Taneka's room, unable to see

it. Will she go with me to the campfire? The walk isn't far; down a dusty trail just beyond the corral, only a quarter of a mile. We can have a nice talk and just be together.

"You still with me?" asked Cody, puzzlement in his voice.

His thoughts returned to business. "I'm here."

"I thought I lost you."

"I was thinking. Next week I have to fly to Chicago. Call me if anything comes up. Meanwhile, I'm helpin' Rachel out this week."

"Oh?" he asked with suspicion.

"Ol' Rachel baby saved me a lot of money in '06, so I owe her." He failed to mention how much he looked forward to the job. "Hold the fort down for me, will you?"

"Will do."

After a moment of hesitation, Denzel finally revealed, "I—uh just met a gal named Taneka."

"I figured that."

"She's nice."

"Good. But just remember, you don't need another

gold-digger in your life."

He appreciated that Cody managed and worried about his welfare. Peering through the window at a section of the Sheridan spread, which cost six million to build, he said, "She's definitely not one of those. I've had my share. Call it my sixth sense at work, but she's not one." *I sure as hell don't want another relationship that'll crash and burn early, either.*

"Go for it, if you're attracted."

"Maybe I will."

Denzel stepped back in time and recalled a woman from his recent past. Carrie, a curvaceous twenty-three year old blonde, owned a home near Cheyenne. He'd heard that she was a spoiled rich brat, the 2005 reigning beauty of a county fair, who wanted to marry money.

One night, she called him to her home. "I need help, cowboy."

Wondering how she found his number he asked, "What kind of help?"

"I heard you were in town."

He hadn't seen or talked to her since they'd attended a cocktail party the previous month. "What do you need?"

Her tone sounded serious on the phone line. "Denzel, I need financial advice. I don't want to do what Daddy says. I want *your* advice."

Like a cloddish schoolboy, tongue-tied, he thought of a meeting he had the next morning at the bank in downtown Cheyenne. "It's eleven and —"

"Please, Denzel. The man who usually takes care of this stuff is in Europe."

He remembered the silken splendor of her hair and the way she slanted a look at him that made his heart nearly stop beating. Many well-to-do bachelors had told of her spoiled brat reputation and avoided her. Nevertheless, knowing the rumors, he had weakened and said, "Okay. I'll be right there."

Forty minutes later, standing at Carrie's door, he gazed into her blue eyes. She showed him a plate of finger food she'd made and asked him to come in and join her. "I have some wine. Or, if you'd prefer some-

thing a little stronger, I have vodka and whisky."

Carrie wore a black voile thigh length short shirt that left almost nothing to the imagination. She turned and walked farther into the house, luring him inside. His eyes couldn't leave her rounded derriere and he cursed his hardening dick. He went to her, held her close and kissed her mouth. Tipping forward on her toes she searched for more kisses. Her body pressed into his rigid erection. In a whirlwind of desire and lust, her cheeks blushed with need. Their breathing increased and she asked, "Why don't you come with me upstairs?"

Knowing the downside of his action, Denzel failed to resist. Dragging a ragged breath into his lungs, he climbed the stairs and went into her bedroom with her. Just inside the door, he took in her round breasts with prominent nipples and succumbed to lust.

A few weeks later, she thought they had established a relationship, and badgered Denzel for an engagement ring. She even announced tentative wedding plans to her father, a Texas oil baron, and her

mother who lived in a swanky New York apartment. All this was done without an iota of Denzel's input. He hadn't given her an engagement ring. She spread the news, and gossip traveled like wildfire in an August wind in their part of Texas.

Unfortunately, the chemistry for love was non-existent. A month of playing house passed and his need for solitude grew. The air between them acidified.

Three short months passed, and he realized he disliked everything she stood for: elitism, privilege and snobbery. Their problems came to a head and he bit at her, "You need to grow up, Carrie! The only thing you like about me is my money. It's like I'm your arm candy."

He knew he'd stunned her by his comment. She jumped like a startled rabbit and spat out with an iciness he'd not seen in her before, "Get out, then! Who needs you? And who the hell do you think you are anyway? Your family is a bunch of nobodies."

He backed away and hurried to pack.

The unfortunate engagement emerged as one of life's

lessons I'll never forget. Maybe the horrible experience made me a stronger man and helped me to differentiate sincere and insincere women.

I was lucky to have escaped that manipulating bitch before vows were exchanged. Remembering her as a speck in his rearview mirror and his whoop of joy, he shook his head. He'd wanted to kick up his heels and celebrate. He'd grinned and hummed all the way to his buddy Cody's house.

* * * *

Outside the large, log style ranch home, amidst the pine lodgepoles, Taneka peered at the man Denzel asked to carry her bags in. "I can get them. I'm fine."

"George is the name if'n yer in'trested."

"It's okay, George. I'll get them."

"That's what he pays me for," said the elderly, bandy-legged white man.

"I'll bet it snows a lot here in the winter time," said Taneka. She relented and let George take her bags.

"It gets ass deep to a ten feet tall grizzly around these parts, ma'am."

"Oh, really?"

As they approached the log building, he pointed up a flight of steps. "Your room's up the stairs and to the right. Here's this," he said pulling a brass key from his front shirt pocket.

"Thanks." She took it and pointed at the door located near the base of the stairs. "Okay, so this is Rachel's office."

"Yep." He turned and carried her luggage upstairs.

"You need the key back?"

"No, ma'am. I've got a key of my own, thank you anyway."

"Well, okay. Thanks. Should I go on in?"

On the second step, he stopped and turned. "Sure. Rachel probably saw you driving up. Just holler and go on in."

"Great. Thanks again."

Rachel was not her only friend back in college, but she was her best friend. In fact, she shared the number

one slot with Stevie. Occasionally on weekends, Rachel and Taneka had double dated. They attended matinees on Sundays, and played volleyball with other girls while on break from studying. One had a test, and the other would drill with questions. They met their junior year, hit it off and corresponded by e-mail. They called each other often once they graduated from the University of Illinois. Rachel loved to visit her during summer vacation.

Taneka opened the door and stepped inside. "Hey, Rachel? Hello?"

She made her way inside a plush reception room that contained several overstuffed chairs and western paintings on the wall. Three offices sat adjacent to the reception area. Two of the doors were closed and one stood open. Sunlight shone out the third open door, so Taneka looked inside, and found Rachel behind a large, mahogany desk.

Alone in the office, Rachel glanced Taneka's way and smiled between sentences as she talked on the phone. She looked stunning; her mocha-colored, skin

appeared clear.

Taneka's heart jumped in her chest. She waved, not wanting to interrupt her work. It took a moment to realize that she looked thinner than the last time they were together. Was something wrong with her friend's dark eyes? *Is she crying?*

Rachel mumbled a hurried goodbye and hung up. "Oh, great. You've arrived." She rounded the desk and made her way toward Taneka and folded her arms around her in a heartfelt hug. Taneka realized just how much she missed her.

"Should I come back later?"

"No, no. You're fine."

The summer sun streamed through west windows, making the room appear bright and ethereal. Airplane plants with their stringy, hanging fronds hung in the picture windows that overlooked the dense lake, the pebbled parking lot and tree-lined horizon.

Taneka turned in place. "I like your office."

"Thanks. I do too."

Taneka paused, taking a good look at Rachel. *Does she have tears her eyes? What happened that's so awful that it would make her cry?* "Oh, honey, honey. What's wrong?" She nabbed a box off a counter and handed her a tissue from it. She put the box down and wrapped her arms around Rachel's shoulders while Rachel daubed her eyes.

"Oh dear, Taneka," she said in a sad tone. "I just got word that my sister's been in a car wreck."

The news took the wind out of her, like a hard fist connecting to her stomach. Taken aback, Taneka continued to hug and pat her friend. Several bleak scenarios played in her mind. *I wish I knew her sister.* "Is she going to be okay?" she asked, trying to keep her voice calm but aching for Rachel in the same instance.

She sniffed, blew her nose, and patted dry her glossy cheeks, being careful not to ruin her eye make-up, inadvertently showing off her rings and perfect manicured nails.

She stopped crying and wiped the tears away. "Oh, hell, Taneka. She's broken a few bones. It was a

head on collision. The people in the other car were killed. They passed in a no passing zone. I guess Mom's a friggin' basket case. Aunt Tess said my mom needs me. So, damn it, I have to go home for a while. What a bad time, right?"

"Don't you dare worry about me."

"I got you out here so we could talk and have some fun. You and that cowboy. Damn it, I wanted to see that...now this."

Taneka stepped back and allowed her to regain her composure. The moment Rachel seemed more at ease, Taneka said, "You have to take care of your sister and mother. Maybe I should just fly back home and come next year."

"No, no. I insist. You stay, if you want. You'll have fun. Please just stay. It's on me, the whole she-bang, so just have fun. You may really enjoy all this cowboy business. And ooo-lah-lah...Denzel's fine, isn't he?"

"I can't do that..."

"I insist. Please. Besides, they gave me a major discount to give to you. I just know you'll have fun

with Denzel. You know I'm a matchmaker, but I thought he might add some spice to your life."

Taneka did not want to argue with Rachel at this time for obvious reasons. "I'm sure. But I don't know..."

"I'm just so sorry this had to happen."

"It is not your fault!" She sniffed and wiped away tears with her fingers. "Life sucks sometimes, that's for sure. You go ahead. Relax. Don't bother yourself with me," said Taneka. She didn't want to upset Rachel further or worse, insult her by not taking the expensive gift. "I don't want you to spend a lot of money to..."

"It isn't costing me very much. Not at all." Once Rachel's tears stopped welling, she went behind her desk.

Taneka decided to ask, "Is he for real?"

"Who?" Rachel asked. Her voice had taken on a nasal quality from crying. "Denzel?"

"Yeah, is he a real cowboy?"

"He knows all about it, hon. He can ride, shoot and brand cows with the best of them. He's eye candy, too."

That's for sure. Taneka nodded and smiled, running

a finger along the edge of the desk. "I noticed that."

They giggled together. "He's wonderful. You'll see. My boyfriend, who's a deputy, well, he says he's good as gold. He said he would've heard otherwise. I wouldn't have him being your guide if he wasn't a good man."

"You paid him to —"

Rachel stopped her mid-sentence and lowered her voice to a whisper even though no one stood nearby. "Just between you and me, he jumped at the chance. I showed him your picture and told him about you, and he seemed to fall head over heels."

Taneka switched the long strap of her handbag to her other arm during a bout of nervousness. "What did you tell him?"

"The truth."

"Oh, dear God."

"Everything is cool, girlfriend. He's not one to sleep around. He doesn't date dozens of women. Don't ever think that."

Rachel chattered as she gathered papers from a file

cabinet. "You just have to sign these. They're legal papers in case of an accident, etcetera. Everyone who comes here signs them. Turn them in to my secretary before six. Tomorrow, you are to meet down at the kitchen at eight-thirty sharp and you'll begin your itinerary."

"With Denzel?" *She has to be joking.*

"Yes."

Taneka's stomach lurched at the thought. They chatted about mundane matters, and later that afternoon, they hugged. Rachel walked Taneka back to her room. She stopped and grabbed Rachel's hand. "If there is anything I can do to help you, just let me know," she said, giving it a gentle squeeze for reassurance.

"There's nothing anyone can do. I just have to fly back tonight. I'm not sure how long I'll be gone." Rachel stopped and faced Taneka, her gaze boring into her. "You *have* to promise me that you'll stay and have a good time. Promise me, Taneka!"

An image of Denzel filled every corner of her

mind. She bowed her head and nodded in muted silence. *How can I not?*

Chapter Five

Supper started at five in the evening, and guests had a two-hour window in which to eat. Her stomach growled, and she unzipped one of the suitcases to begin the preparation to go down to the mess hall. A western motif decorated her room...mostly in beiges and browns. The ecru bedspread had knobby, soft tufts popping up every three inches. The bathroom was done in white tile with gold fixtures. Between the bath and the bedroom, a dressing room occupied a

wide hall; it had a large mirror. Underfoot, soft brown carpet tickled her bare feet. A TV occupied the top of a new style dresser, beside it stood a desk.

Undressing, Taneka pulled her shirt over her head and slipped out of her bra. For some inexplicable reason, Denzel entered her mind. *He turns me on.*

Taneka sat on the edge of the bed. A white business card lay on top of a beige flyer. Both of them bore a pine lodgepole graphic and drew her attention, so she picked the brochure up and read it. *Welcome to Rock Creek.* It gave the main telephone number. The center page had a small picture. The faces of people were difficult to discern, so she snapped on a light. A man on the right resembled Denzel but there were no names listed. *No, surely it's not him.* She put the brochure down and yearned for something different to read. She spotted a newspaper, took it off the bed stand, and unfolded it. Still thoughts of Denzel plagued her. *It's so silly of me to react to him this way; he's a total stranger!*

* * * *

Thirty minutes later, she put the newspaper down. She had to go eat. Taneka located the plastic bottle of bath gel, a pink sponge and makeup bag. Maybe her needs awakened because she'd been thinking about Denzel, nature called.

Where's the hot pink wonder? She looked toward the opened suitcase. *It'll take care of me for now...to get me over the needy spots.* Then again, she'd forgo her time with the wonder and mess with it later. She took her jeans down and her thong off, readying to shower. *There's an unexplainable something... a vibe between us. He's interested and so am I. Maybe my hormones are working overtime, but the long, tall cowboy stirs me in unimaginable ways. His face stays in my mind, though I don't know him. Maybe it's silly but I shouldn't believe in love at first sight. I won't – I can't, tell anyone about my attraction for the man.*

Taneka hung three pairs of jeans, one dress and four shirts in the closet. The old familiar gnawing reared its erotic head. *What the hell?* She reached down

into the side pocket and brought out the vibrator and its charging base. Carrying it, she crossed to an outlet, plugged in the base and took the vibrator to the bed.

All the thoughts about Denzel toyed with her system and she needed relief. Taneka laid back, turned it on and slipped it into her pussy. The muscles of her inner walls creamed and clenched.

His chiseled jaw line, sensual lips, cute tight ass and obvious rock hard body holds my attention. I see him now...eye candy.

The quivering stick agitated her super-sensitive clitoris, hurling her to the threshold of an orgasm. Several moments passed and she experienced no waves of pleasure or satisfaction. She couldn't come.

Frustrated, she turned it off, washed, sanitized and returned it to the base. A climax was not in the cards, and she realized the problem. *My body doesn't want a lifeless piece of plastic; it wants a good man, up close and personal.*

Later, supper hour ended and dusk neared. Taneka peered out the window toward the parking lot. About to close the drapes, she reached for the drapery

cord. Music and the scent of burning wood filtered into the room. A wisp of cool air fluffed the hair at her temples.

She listened to the song's words; they moved her. Someone picked a guitar to the tune. The lyrics said, "Yipee-ti-yi-yo-oo, get a-long little doggies. You know that Wyomin' will be your new home?"

Below and to the right, movement caught her attention. Rachel left the building. She followed George who carried two suitcases just a few steps ahead of her. Looking fresh, she wore sea green slacks and a shirt. She'd swept hair to the top of her head. Her friend slipped the long strap of what looked like a flight bag over her shoulder and walked with her head down.

Taneka sighed with sadness, her eyes fixed on Rachel's departure. *Goodbye, Rachel. I hope your sister heals swiftly and your mother stays calm during such a difficult time.*

The two of them trekked toward a black Cadillac parked at the end of the walkway. The trunk lid opened and a small light came on. George put her

luggage inside and closed the lid with a thump. They climbed into the car. Within the minute, the car drove away. Its taillights shrunk to a speck and disappeared.

Still sitting at the window five minutes later, she turned her attention to the yard below again, and to the open area beyond a big gray barn, where the cowboy and cowgirl wannabees sang. The sun sunk on the horizon and fifteen to twenty minutes passed. More tenderfeet left the ranch house; she counted ten of them. They trekked down the sidewalk toward a campfire in the distance where a Native American dance took place. Fifteen minutes passed. Indians danced around the bonfire, giving thanks and celebration to their God for their many blessings, just as the Rock Creek website promised. The urge to join the onlookers came over her.

She listened and watched entranced, caught up by the beat of tom-toms. The phone rang, startling her. *Mom?* She crossed to the dresser, plucked the handset off the base and put it to her ear. She expected her mother to chew her out for not calling the moment the

plane's tires touched the airstrip.

"Taneka?" Jeffrey's voice asked.

Flabbergasted by his brazen tone, her spine stiffened. *How in Hades did he get this number?*

I won't speak. Maybe he'll hang up and quit trying to call. Please hang up. Please! He'll think the line is out of order.

"I know you're there." Another lengthy pause lapsed. *His voice sounded threatening.* "One of your friends gave this number to me, so speak, Taneka." An elongated silence held her captive. "Ta-neeeeeka," he repeated.

His strange tone is freaking me out. I can't imagine a professor acting so crazy! Didn't he realize I meant my words? Finally, she said calmly, "Don't call me anymore, Jeffrey. I'll call the police if you—" With gentle handling, she placed the handset on the base.

A shrill ring sounded and, with a jerk, she snatched it to her ear. "Jeffrey, quit hassling me!"

A short silence followed and a man's voice said, "Taneka, this is Denzel, your guide for tomorrow."

Oh my God, I've yelled at the wrong person. Heat rose

to her face, blood rushed in her ears. "Oh. I, uh, oh okay. Sorry," she said with relief.

"Are you okay?"

Shaken, she looked up at the ceiling and nodded.

"Yes, I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"I was wondering...are you up to going down by the campfire? It's fun for tenderfoots to watch the Indians dance around the fire. Sometimes it soothes frayed nerves."

"That's nice of you to ask." *I don't want to sit around and wait for him to call again.* She gave it a moment's thought and said, "Sure."

"I'll stop by your room in say...twenty minutes. Is that too soon?"

His friendliness calmed her. "That's fine."

"If you want your room calls blocked, tell me and I'll arrange it tomorrow."

"Sure, if you want to block it, that's good. Oh, and I'm looking forward to going to the campfire."

* * * *

Denzel hung up and flipped on the bathroom light. Peering into the mirror, he shaved. All the while, Taneka occupied his thoughts. He drew the razor down his cheek and mentally pictured the sexy woman from Illinois. *The tempting tenderfoot is having trouble with an ex named Jeffrey. If that jerk ever bothers her while I'm around, I'll make him wish he'd never been born. Is it because her presence haunts me and I want to see her again? How long has it been since I accompanied a classy, pretty lady to an outing? Life's short. I need to make a move before she leaves. Under normal circumstances, I would give a possible relationship time.*

Denzel washed his face and swabbed it dry with a terry towel. He dressed in his favorite, dark blue western shirt. He had purchased it at the Rusty Spur in Sheridan, an hour's drive away. Cobalt piping and hand stitching lined the collar, yoke and shoulder seams. To perfection, he combed his hair back and dabbed a scant amount of Obsession cologne behind each ear. He wore his sexiest blue jeans and best black leather boots in hopes of catching her eye. On the way

out, he nabbed his Stetson and left the suite, not forgetting to lock up.

Within three minutes, he raised a hand, knocked twice and waited for ten seconds. The moment he raised his knuckles to the wood to knock again, the door opened.

Taneka peered out smiling and said, "Just a second. I'll lock up and we can go."

She looked good enough to eat in her tight blue jeans and spaghetti strap red halter top that showed a little of her slender mid-section and belly button ring. She had the type of ass he could slip his hands under and draw tight into himself.

"You look nice, ma'am." The complement came straight from the heart. He leaned and smelled her perfume. *Heavenly*. "You smell good too."

Her glistening, doe eyes rose, met and held with his for a couple of seconds. "Thanks." His heart hammered.

"So we're off to join the cowgirls and buckaroos around the campfire." Feeling a bit protective since the

phone call, he offered his arm and they strolled down the walk, past the corral and big gray barn, their trek lit by halogen lamps.

* * * *

A hint of cool mist refreshed the air. Flaming red-orange tongues licked up to the blackened heavens while the Indians chanted and danced. The smell of burning pine wood scented the night air. Despite the dance and nature around them, it was the man beside her who gave her inner peace. Scattered about, twelve to thirteen couples sat on the ground while the drums thump-thump-thumped in the warm night air. The experience enlightened her to the ways of the American Indian. In the distance, a coyote howled.

"I think one day I'd like to come here to paint a picture of this," Taneka said.

"Oh, really? You paint pictures, then? What type of medium do you use?"

"Oils."

"I'd like to see some of them."

"They're nothing, really. I like to do it occasionally. And I teach it."

"I'd love to take a class, if you'd be the teacher."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, from you I would. Seriously."

Taneka smiled and turned her gaze back to the dance. She wondered if she could maintain a cool exterior if he took one of her classes. *He lives too far west to attend.* Nervously, she located a stick and drew a figure eight in the dirt. *It would cost a fortune to travel in a long distance relationship, in the unlikely event one would evolve.*

"Did you attend college?" she said.

"I'm afraid not. I graduated from high school, though." He raised his hand to her arm.

"That's good." Her eyes followed the movement of his fingers to her neck. "Wha —"

"A bug."

Dropping the stick she said, "Eww, get it off me." A large bug falling into her bra would cause shock-

waves to reverberate through her body and send her running to the shower in her suite.

"Hold still," he said softly, his voice tinged with amusement.

"Hurry," she said, trying her best not to squirm.

He touched her neck and clucked his tongue.

Did Denzel get it off me? "What kind is it?" she asked, her tummy turning flip-flops.

"I don't know, but he's off."

"Good. I don't like insects."

A silence stretched between them until the dance ended and the couples walked back to their rooms.

"Ready to call it a night?"

"I am."

"You're probably tired from traveling all day."

"I'm not too tired."

"How about meeting in the dining room?" he asked and rose to his feet.

"In the morning, right?"

"Yep. Unless you want to sleep in..."

"The time on the itinerary is fine," she said.

He extended a hand to help her up. "All right."

She took his hand and rose to a standing position.

"Thank you."

"I'll walk you back."

"I appreciate it." As they began the trek back to the ranch she added, "And...I appreciate you helping out Rachel."

"After meeting you, I want to do it, well, because ma'am, you're interesting..." He laughed. "I'd better be quiet now."

She couldn't look him in the eyes, so she dropped her gaze. "Oh? Thanks." *How much is Rachel paying him to do the guide work?*

They strolled lazily back to her suite. Upon arrival at her door, Denzel waited while she located the key. The phone began ringing. Vaguely aware that Denzel followed, she hurried to answer it. Picking up the handset, she asked, "Hello?"

No one spoke on the other end of the line.

"Hello? Mom? Stevie?"

Jeffrey's voice resonated like nails being dragged

across a blackboard. "No. It's me."

"Quit calling, Jeffrey. If you don't...I swear I'm going to call the police."

He hung up.

Surprised, she turned to Denzel and shook her head. "I can't believe this."

His eyes narrowed. "I'll take care of blocking his call. The number will be captured on caller ID."

"I appreciate it."

"Sounds like you ought to call the cops and get a restraining order on him when you get back."

"I didn't want to, but I guess I'm going to have to. It's hard to believe that an educated man like him would act this way.

Denzel handed her a card that had three phone numbers printed on it. "If you ever need me to come right away, here are my numbers. The bottom number is my cell. I have it on me most of the time, except here. Half the time cell phones don't work in this area."

"Thank you," said Taneka, holding out her hand for a shake. "I will. I'll be fine. I don't think he'll come

out here." *I hope.*

He took her hand and gave it a squeeze. His tone soft as down, he said, "You never can tell."

"Thanks." She took her hand from his. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He neared the door and asked, "How would you like to learn to ride?"

She giggled and said, "That ought to be interesting. Don't laugh too hard when I do it."

"Yes, ma'am. Cowboy's honor." He grinned and paused before he added, "At least I'll *try* not to."

Taneka shook her head. "And please don't call me ma'am. Taneka's fine." *I can think of one instance that I'd like him to call me ma'am.*

"Yes, ma-sorry, Taneka."

Chapter Six

The next morning Taneka showered and dressed in an ivory thong and bra. She picked up a towel and wiped the wet mist off the mirror. While singing a country-western tune off key, in a fake cowboy accent, she blow-dried her hair. The dryer made a great pretend gun. Ending the song, she put it down and drew her mane to the top of her head and shoved two combs into it, holding it in place.

With a light touch, she daubed a tiny bit of per-

fume onto her pulse points feeling all a-tingle. *Come to think of it, what a devilish, delightful idea of matching me up with him. It sends tingles up my spine. I feel like a teenager again. I want to look sexy, with a capital "S" for him.*

"Come 'ere big boy," she said in a throaty, jesting voice, playing the role of a seductress. "Bring yourself to Taneka. B'cause I have something for ya."

Feeling silly as a schoolgirl at a pajama party, she crossed to the bed and dropped onto it. She grabbed her jeans and fell back onto the soft, blue print spread. "Damn it." Taneka struggled to pull them on, zip them up and fasten the button.

Her mind returned to Rachel's sneaky plan to match her with the cowboy.

What would friends back home think, especially Stevie? She cringed at what her mother would say about her dropping Jeffrey to go with a cowboy—a white one at that. Taneka burst out laughing at the thought. *The juicy bit of gossip most assuredly would get around campus soon, if it hadn't already. Rachel probably already told Stevie. Come to think of it, telling Stevie's was not dissimilar to printing it in a newspaper.*

She laughed to herself, remembering Rachel's infamous words. "Honey, you only live once."

* * * *

Taneka lined up with a dozen other hungry cowboy-cowgirl aspirants a little before seven-thirty. The aroma of cinnamon, coffee, bacon, sausage and eggs filled the air. *Grub*, she mused inwardly; her stomach growled. She could eat a plate full of it.

A cheery saddle and spur theme decorated the walls. The beige speckled tiled floor shone. The morning sun peeked through the blinds on the picture windows and caused the light wood tabletops to glisten. Round, barrel-shaped tables matched the chairs.

A few people had dressed in cowboy clothes, except the guides, she noticed. They wore jeans and tee shirts. Two sported hats. Six servers tied chest high aprons around their midsections. They stood behind the silver counter ready to assist customers while they chose food items.

Denzel, looking perky, and oh, so cowboyish, approached and stepped in line behind her. His nearness caused the hair on her arms to stand. It seemed electricity crackled between them. A Garth Brooks look-alike, he wore his sunglasses on top of his head, instead of his hat.

"Ready to ride, cowgirl?" he asked, winked once and smiled in a flirty manner. Her knees weakened.

A dual, sexual meaning regarding 'riding' sprang to mind. *Another new image to plague my needs. What would it be like to be the dominant person...no, I shouldn't think about that so soon. Any woman with eyes to see this man, this virile force of nature, would dream up erotic scenarios that include him, just like I'm doing now. Mm, baby yes.* Clucking her tongue, she chastised herself. Tingles shot up her belly from her core. *I need to get my mind out of the frigging gutter!*

"Sure." She smiled, poured a glass of orange juice and placed it on her tray.

"What, may I ask, is wrong?" he asked with an intense curiousness. "Why are you smiling so big at this early hour?"

"No reason. I just am." Taneka hoped she effectively hid her inner upheaval.

"Are you sure? Your smile's awfully big this morning."

"Nope. Nothing at all. Really."

Denzel shook his head and let out an elongated sigh of amusement. "I'm glad you're in a good mood. Evidently you slept well."

"That I did, cowboy."

"Good. You have a lot to learn about horsemanship."

He reached for silverware and a napkin and poured himself a glass of grapefruit juice. She leaned in front of him, grasped a salt packet and gazed at the cinnamon rolls. With a sigh, and her tummy growling, she slid her tray farther down the line.

"You really think you can teach me?" *He probably has me labeled as a lost cause.*

He chuckled as he reached for a packet of butter.

"Hand me one of those, please. This one's empty," she said while motioning to the napkin in his hands.

He gave her one and she said, "Thanks."

"There's no doubt in my mind I can teach you. Really, it is a lot of fun."

I bet he could teach me that and a few other things too.

"I don't know." My attempt to ride will probably make him double over with laughter. I can see myself trying to climb up onto the back of a poor horse. He'll rush to my aid and try to help by placing his hands on my butt cheeks and pushing me up. Then again, that part may not be so bad. How can I think such wicked things? I barely know him. And if anyone takes my picture, I'll chase them down and...I don't want to think about it.

She frowned, picked up a small plate of toast and glimpsed him. *Learning to ride, with him as my instructor, makes me nervous.*

"I'll give you Bugger."

"Who?" A laugh left her lips and she dropped a small container of jelly. "Darn it."

"Here..." He retrieved it and placed it on her tray.

"Oh, thanks." *What a name...Bugger.* "Why give me him...or is it her?"

"A her. She's a mare. A good starter horse...gentle,

and will hold still while you learn to mount."

"Oh really?" *The horse has to hold still.* "How did you know I've never ridden?"

In place, he turned away. "Rachel told me."

"I see." *How much and what did Rachel tell him anyway? Loose lips sink ships. In this situation, Rachel's loose lips could embarrass me beyond belief.*

"So let's meet about eight-thirty, if it's all right with you. You *are* going to stay at Rock Creek, aren't you?"

Before they went to different tables she visualized Jeffrey coming over the night she drove home from the St. Louis airport. The image didn't sit well.

"Uh, yes. I'll stay."

"Good. See you in an hour."

"The horse barn, right?"

"You've got it."

Discreetly, she glanced at his ass in tight blue jeans as he walked away—a long, tall and strong Wyoming man. *Yes indeedy. Mm-hm. Oh yeah. Maybe my stay won't be so bad after all.*

* * * *

At eight-thirty sharp, Taneka met Denzel in the horse barn where her cowboy training commenced. The first lesson he gave her was that not every rider who came to the ranch could win or even participate in a championship show following the training. In fact, very few could even ride well. Most people learned enough to take a leisurely ride around and near Rock Creek Ranch. Prize winning riders rode horses all their lives.

Learning how to ride ought to be interesting...or maybe not, maybe it will be embarrassing as hell.

"I just want to teach you basic horsemanship," Denzel explained, "...and hope you enjoy it well enough to take a ride with me."

A phone in the barn rang.

"Well, damn," he said. "Excuse me."

Taneka stared hard at Bugger as Denzel left her side and answered. It sounded like a business conversation. *Why would a cowhand talk business?*

She whispered to the mare, "Me and you are going to come to some kind of understanding." She ran her hand down the horse's mane thinking the horse seemed friendly. "I teach art and I don't plan on riding you very much. So just be easy on Taneka and for God's sake, don't move."

Denzel finished his call, re-entered the barn and resumed the horsemanship class. "I'm going to help you have a safe, enjoyable ride. Okay?"

"All right," she said, crossing her arms at her waist, still preferring the horse route to flying home to listen to Jeffrey. Maybe it would change when Bugger threw her onto the ground or into a fence.

His authoritative voice caught and held her attention. "I'll teach you basic maneuvering."

Basic maneuvering training from a guy like Denzel couldn't be too bad. She looked at him a moment too long and unwrapped a piece of Juicy Fruit gum that she pulled from her pocket. *In fact, I look forward to learning some maneuvers from him. It's a good thing he can't read my mind.* Amused, she said, "All right."

He paused and his brow rumped. "Did I say something funny?"

She drew her shoulders up in an almost unnoticeable shrug. "About what?"

"I don't know. You have a sheepish grin..."

"You didn't say anything funny at all," she lied. "Maybe it's the gum. I chew it, and it makes me smile."

Denzel jokingly shook his head and resumed the lesson. With skill and ease, he raised his strong leg and inserted his left boot into the stirrup. With the reins and horn in his grip, he rose, raised his other leg and swung it over. Pure artistry. He sat atop the horse and looked down at her.

"Okay, now you try it."

"You are a regular prince."

"C'mon."

"Okay, okay." *Darn, it's crunch time.* She looked at the seemingly disinterested horse and whispered, "Sweetie, remember what I said. Hang loose. Don't be scared of me at all, Bugger. Above all, do not buck."

Looking on, Denzel laughed while she frowned.

"Okay...let's get busy."

The training continued and the morning slid by swiftly. She gained proficiency and in fact, enjoyed riding.

They ate lunch, then the two of them rode down a winding trail in the nearby forest. Denzel led the way, explaining that the land belonged to Rock Creek. She wondered why she received such special treatment. Then she remembered that Rachel knew the mysterious owner well, whoever he may be. The entire situation seemed so...odd.

Denzel cut into her thoughts. "You're doing great." He looked better than a Hollywood star who played in a western movie.

"Thanks." The horse hooves clopped on the dirt below and she rode like a pro...almost. Upon gaining a few hours' training, she rode with comfort and a modest amount of skill.

Along the trail, they stopped to peer out at a majestic mountain view. To one side wound a blue, white-water creek. Lodge pole pines seemed to stretch to the

blue heavens. The area smelled of pine and in places, needles littered the ground. *I love it here.*

Suddenly, her cell phone rang. Out of habit, she had brought it with her that morning. Frowning, she spat her gum into her hand and tossed it into tall weeds before she answered. "I thought cell phones didn't—"

He answered quickly. "Sometimes they do." Denzel looked her way as she bewilderedly greeted the caller...Jeffrey.

She cursed and rolled her eyes. *Jeez.* Her mouth dropped open.

"Taneka. I'm..." His voice faded out.

Great, just fine and dandy.

His voice returned. "Are you there?"

I have to end his little game once and for all. "Listen, Jeffrey..." Her phone went dead. "Jeffrey?" *Damn him all to hell.*

Denzel turned in his saddle and stopped his horse. He held onto the horn and reins with one hand and shoved up the nosepiece of his sunglasses with fingers

on the other hand.

"Shoot."

"What is it?"

Unable to hide her displeasure, she sighed and stopped her horse. "It's my ex...again."

Shifting his weight to the other leg, his disdain showed in the frown lines on his forehead. His eyes narrowed and focused on her expression. "If you want to talk...I've got broad shoulders..."

"Thanks, Denzel. I appreciate that." *Am I ready to tell him all about Jeffrey hitting me? I think not.*

"I'm serious. I want to help if I can."

Chapter Seven

Both sat astride saddles, and rode through a clearing. Taneka pulled on the reins. Denzel dismounted, hooked his thumbs in his pockets and sauntered back to her. He took his hat off and mopped his brow with his shirtsleeve.

"Well, ma'am, would you like to talk a bit?" Raising a finger, he pointed at the nearby tree.

The question took her aback. She tried reading his face, but failed. She turned her eyes to the cooling

shade.

Jeffrey's call tore her up. *The grass below the leafy tree looks inviting. Does my angst show? Maybe the horses need a break...and I want to talk to Denzel.*

White fuzzies floated in the still air. She smelled warm mud that baked under the hot summer sun and heard the buzz of green flies spiraling over their next meal. His gaze lay gentle upon hers, waiting for her answer, warming her more than the afternoon sunshine.

How can I tell a man 'no' who has such a shocking blue, penetrating gaze? I can't. Not that I would want to turn him down. "Sure."

Taneka dismounted and let him take the reins.

"Thank you." He let the horses loose so they could drink and eat grass nearby. He escorted her to the leafy tree where they took a seat, side by side, among the craggy roots. The refreshing air temperature seemed twenty degrees cooler in the shade.

They sat comfortably close and chatted while the horses drank from the cool shallows, a little over ten feet away and kept the small talk impersonal and

general. Several minutes evolved into an hour as they discussed mundane, innocuous matters about their backgrounds while getting acquainted. She discussed her job – that the coming fall she would teach Graphic Design I on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Graphic Design II on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Nights, she planned to teach Drawing I.

He seemed interested and asked all the pertinent questions, but he held back facts about himself. *Why isn't he more forthcoming about his background? Is he embarrassed of it? Poor guy. He probably doesn't think he makes enough money to please me. I need to put him at ease, because he's a charming man. Money does not make the man. Far from it.*

"I have two close girlfriends and one is Rachel" She could tell by his positive body language that her life interested and intrigued him.

"Where does your other friend live?" he asked while scooting closer, cozying up to her. He placed his hat aside on a fallen tree limb and crossed his long, jean-clad legs in front of himself.

"Charleston." Taneka ran a nervous, extended fin-

ger along the rough bark of a piece of deadwood.

He picked a long-stemmed weed and placed it in his mouth. "In Illinois?"

"That's right. I was born and raised there. I went to school there ummm, for four years and then attended U of I to get my PhD."

"I know." A noise sounded up in the blue sky, so they both looked up at a jet passing overhead; a white stream trailed. "Your education's damned impressive."

"Thank you. Let me guess...Rachel told you."

He laughed, removed his line of vision off the sky and centered it onto her face. "How'd you know?"

Heat rose up her cheeks. She brought a hand to her lips and dropped it to her other arm. "It truly amazes me what she's said."

Languidly, his bold gaze skimmed down her clothed chest and moved onto the horses that stood in the water and drank. *Does he want to touch me, to console me?* The thought peaked her intrigue. His interest seemed more than a passing fancy and affected her in secret ways.

"Tell me about the friend you mentioned earlier."

What would be interesting enough to tell Denzel? "Do you mean Stevie?"

"Stevie? Is that her name?"

"Yes. She's a woman." *I don't want him to think I'm too self-absorbed by monopolizing the conversation with my life. It seems obvious that he wants to have one of those bare-your-soul conversations. How much do I want to tell him? A little? Or, a lot?*

"Oh."

"She's a professor at E.I.U. Stevie teaches English I. I have more professor friends there, but she's one of my best friends. Besides Rachel, of course, who is here."

"You're tight, with Stevie, I take it."

"Right." She nodded. "She thinks I've gone bonkers."

He peered at her in what seemed amused fascination. "Why?"

"I came here. To a dude ranch."

He drew his sunglasses down, his lips quirked into a half smile and he asked, "You're not the cowboyin' type, I take it?"

With a twig, Taneka drew lines in loose dirt. "For some reason, you don't seem the type either, Denzel," she said pointedly. "I mean you do, but...I dunno."

"I love cowboyin'."

By his questions and the way he listens so intently, I sense that he's interested. I just imagine if we got along so well that we ended up living together, I could help him out financially until he found a better job. I make such big and early assumptions. I detest jumping ahead like that hypothesizing and speculating, but it's prudent to plan.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw two horses that carried riders and trotted toward them.

Taneka and Denzel leaned away from each other, quit talking, and a moment later, two more riders appeared.

The guide looked in their direction and smiled as he passed. His white smile contrasted against his sun-burned forehead and cheeks. He tipped his Stetson to Denzel and her and greeted them with respectful words. "Hello, Mr. Keach, ma'am."

How odd! Mr.? Wouldn't he address Denzel by his first name if they worked together as guides?

"Hi ya, Tad," said Denzel.

*In turn, Denzel spoke to Tad using his first name?
Weird.*

The riders disappeared behind a thicket. A moment or two passed. She still failed to hide her mesmerized enchantment of him. She noticed a lot of things about him – where his hands rested, what they touched, his eyes...

He raised a finger and caressed her cheek. Her gaze followed the movement. Sensation shot like fireworks down her legs and up through her chest.

"You have something on your..." Suddenly, he grasped her chin and tilted her face up. "Kiss me," he requested.

The new prospects caused her heart to flutter.

"Come here," he insisted, his voice soft and inviting, yet rough and needy-sexy as sin.

Taneka drew a deep breath, knowing what would come next. *Maybe I'm experiencing more than the heat of this summer day...yes, mm-hm.* She allowed herself to lean his way.

"That's it," he whispered, his warm breath tickling her lips.

Their bodies met and touched, and it felt wonderful — nothing at all like it had been with Jeffrey.

"Mm," he said, his muffled voice rising from his throat even before their lips touched.

I love hearing his voice and feeling his finger move down the line of my chin.

Their lips met and he gave her mouth a series of slow, sensuous nibbles and licks, so she closed her eyes. *I don't want this to end. It's heavenly.* Taneka breathed in the minty scent of his mouth, while feeling his tongue sliding back over her tongue. *Damn, he's a great kisser! No man can be his equal. So intoxicating! It's soft, delicious and passionate.*

Taneka gave in and let herself fall gloriously into the moment. Her toes curled and blood rushed to her head, melting away her shyness toward him. *I could so easily drop back, lie down for him and in the moment of wanton need, let him have me this sunny, bright afternoon. But no. I'll behave.*

It would be nice if he would shift his kisses to my throat.

Wanting the situation to escalate into hot passion, she moved her head to encourage him. He pulled her closer and stroked his hands down her back. She felt her shirt being pulled from under the waistband of her jeans and her breasts compressing under his weight.

Gaining courage, she raised her hands to his shoulders and let them move over him. He felt so good.

His hands moved down her back and located and cupped her ass cheeks. A low moan escaped her throat. His takeover, reminded her of an explorer acquiring new land.

Call it a hunch, but she could tell he was capable of delivering great sex. She trembled and sucked in a long, deep breath, wanting him to continue.

Denzel drew back. His mouth lifted from hers, and his hands left her bottom. She opened her eyes and he said, "This is not the right place or time. If we do it, I want it to be perfect."

Grasping her hand, he pulled her to her feet and asked, "Would you like to leave Rock Creek for a while, so we can get better acquainted?"

Chapter Eight

Taneka bathed in scented bubbles and afterward lavished her body with soothing, scented cream. She considered a dress that she brought out of the closet. *It's a good thing I packed this.* It was her slinkiest, sexiest outfit, a red spaghetti strap number that showed cleavage. She slipped it on and took a critical gander in the mirror. *Should I wear it? If God gives a woman nice cleavage, she should flaunt it for her man. It makes me feel so good when his eyes feast on me.* Considering the slinkiness of

the garment, she bit her lip.

Stevie called and asked, "So, what's happenin'?"

"Nothin'."

"Now, I know you. You usually tell me all kinds of stuff. Suddenly, today it's nothin'?"

Taneka pictured her snarky friend. "Yes. Absolutely nothin' except..." She stopped to pull up her panties.

"Hello? Are we still here?"

"Sorry. I'm getting dressed."

"For what?"

"Dinner."

"With...oh hell...the long, tall Texan?"

"He's a Wyoming man. We're goin' to get ourselves some grub."

Stevie laughed hysterically. "Lord, God. You're gettin' it bad."

"Gettin' what bad?"

"The love bug."

"Oh?" Taneka held the phone under her chin and located a shoe in the closet, stretching the cord to its limit. "So that's what you think."

"Girl, I know it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I know when you're bored. You're out there where the coyotes molest the grizzly bears. Under normal circumstances, you'd be bitching, because you were bored. I'd say the cowboy's got your full attention. Right?"

Silence followed. *Sometimes Stevie ticks me off, the nosey damned woman.*

"Hello? Do we have a bad connection?"

"Okay..."

"Yes?"

"I think...Denzel...that's his name you know, that if I got to know him better, he'd make a good...life partner."

Stevie howled while Taneka seethed. She quieted and Taneka continued. "So if you're going to listen, I'll finish."

"I'm listening."

"If he agreed, he could come to Illinois to live while he landed a job. I could help him out until he got on his

feet. Then again, perhaps he'd tell me no, that he enjoys being a cowboy guide for Rock Creek...that he wants to stay in Wyoming." The idea lingered. She considered the possible implications of what she had just said and frowned. Her voice grew dismal. "A long distance relationship would be impossible."

"I knew it! I'm going to be attending your wedding here shortly. You seem to have *it* bad."

In the background small children began squalling at each other. "Hold that thought 'til tomorrow. I have to go. Cynthia just whacked Josh in the head with a box of foil wrap. Bye."

Taneka placed the phone back onto the receiver and crossed the suite to the bathroom where she drew her long, dark mane up and secured it with red, rhinestone hair clamps. *That's a good idea, helping him out.* She paused. *Do I look okay?*

Underneath, she wore her most provocative lingerie. In fact, the shiny scarlet thong barely covered the lips of her neatly trimmed pussy. It made her feel so sexy. She sat on the bed and drew panty hose up her

slender feet and legs. She located the second of her patent peep-toes that she'd bought at Dillard's – slinky red high heels designed to capture men's attention the clerk had said – all that for ninety-six dollars. Re-checking her appearance in the mirror, she ached to mercilessly turn him on. *Thank God, I packed my sexiest dress.*

If they separated and she didn't see him again, she envisioned herself suffering from bouts of yearning nightly. Taneka touched up her manicured fingernails. *Yes, I want this cowboy just about more than air to breathe. I want him just once if I can't have him long term.*

At seven o'clock, Denzel picked her up and whisked her off in one of the Rock Creek Cadillacs to a fancy Sheridan Restaurant, Robin's Nest, a red brick building about a quarter the size of a gymnasium. People waited in line for the white jacketed hostess to seat them.

Denzel wore hand tooled boots, a belt and a white cowboy hat. His western suit looked expensive, too. As though he had the world on a string, he requested the

wine steward to bring out a bottle of their most costly champagne.

Something doesn't seem right with the picture he paints of himself, but I can't put my finger on it. I hate dishonesty in a man. I won't say anything...yet, because I'm having too much fun.

The darkened restaurant seemed to be a sea of turquoise candles. Waiters wore dark teal vests and black pants. They served large trays of swordfish, chops, lobster and steaks. Cocktail waitresses put fancy, colorful drinks before them. Blue-green cloths covered the tabletops. Large oil paintings decorated the walls. The lobster thermidor, char-broiled steaks and homemade bread smelled heavenly. Color, liquid and flowing piano notes tinkled, and voices rose and fell.

How can he afford it? I'm sure I'll foot the bill, but can I afford it?

"I don't like tourist traps," he murmured as he touched her arm.

He scooted to her side of the silver and teal booth. His thigh touched hers and their lips met. They laughed, talked and touched throughout the meal.

She'd always remember them this way.

They finished eating and a cocktail waitress went for Brandy Alexanders. The phone jingled and Taneka fished her cell phone from her handbag and answered.

Rachel called. "Hey kiddo, whatcha doin'?"

Taneka swallowed a sip of red wine, before she said hello. She switched the phone to her other ear as Denzel winked, sat back and let the busboy take his dirty plate. A pianist began playing a rather loud song.

"Rachel? Where are you?" She felt Denzel's hand sliding up her thigh and she turned hot and humid as a late July, Illinois evening.

"Still at Mom's. My sister is in the hospital. They've got her in traction and she's not happy about it at all. Her leg's broken."

She felt his breath on her throat. "I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"Nothing."

"Guess what?" Taneka asked and laughed.

"What?"

"Guess who I'm with?"

Denzel smiled and grasped Taneka's hand under the table.

"Let me guess...Denzel?"

"Yes," said Taneka. "He's becoming my obsession."

"So tell me, Taneka, did I do a good job?"

"You did. Uh-huh. Hold on." The piano music started playing louder and she noticed that they sat in close proximity to a baby grand. She covered the mouthpiece of the phone and said, "Will you excuse me? I'm having trouble hearing."

"Sure, go ahead."

Once alone in the quiet hallway of the restaurant, Taneka said, "I'm back. What I was going to say...Rachel, I'm wanting to help Denzel find a better job. I think he has personality plus. He can find a great job. I'm not sure he'd want to do it though. He can stay with me until he gets on his —"

Rachel burst out laughing.

What could she possibly be laughing at? "Rachel?"

She continued like a hyena.

Taneka blinked in frustration. "Rachel, did I say

something funny?"

"Honey, honey, honey. He hasn't told you yet?"

"Told me what, for God's sake?" Taneka rasped.

"I'm glad you're hitting it off, girlfriend. It's just that...he's my boss. He's a business man too."

"Your boss? You and he told me he's a cowboy guide!"

A long pause followed.

"Rachel! Damn you!" *This is not funny!*

"He called me earlier and told me he was going to tell you."

"Why did you two do this to me?"

"Oh, to give you a real cowboy experience on your vacation. I thought you'd have some fun. I did it because you needed to get away from Jeffrey. I told you that part."

"I'll be—" Taneka brought the heel of her palm to her now aching head.

"He saw your picture and jumped at the chance. I told him all about you."

"You're kidding."

"No. I made him promise he'd make you think he was just a cowboy guide."

"You manipulated....you..."

"He owed me a favor. I wanted you to have the full experience."

"I had the full experience all right. Well, almost."

"And spice. Did you get that? You wanted some."

Taneka remembered their sweltering first kiss. "I got that...oh yeah."

"Is he a good kisser?"

"Rachel Simmonds! Aw you....mmm...."

She couldn't wait to get her claws around Rachel's throat.

"Just what and who the hell is he?" She paced up and down the long hall like a mad woman, while people filtered in and out of the restrooms.

"Next time you see a March '07 *Fortune* magazine lying around, pick it up and look on page 87. You'll see Denzel's handsome picture. He's number eleven on a list of prominent bachelors of the U.S." She laughed again. "He's my boss and he owed me one."

She shook her head in aggravation. "Well, I think I like him...a lot."

"You do?" Rachel asked hopefully.

Taneka frowned and sidestepped for a housemaid who carried a waste can past. "But, I thought he was a cowboy. He sure sounded convincing."

"He grew up cowboyin'. That's why he started up several dude ranches."

"Oh damn it all to hell." She dropped her red rhinestone clutch bag and peered out into the dining room.

"Like I said, I talked to him earlier."

"And?"

"He's impressed with you. You like him, not for his money, but for little ol' him. He's wanting to try out a relationship. Said he now believes in love at first sight. Woo hoo. Sizzle, sizzle."

Another call beeped the line. "Rachel. I've got another call."

"I'll talk to you later."

"See you."

Taneka pressed the end call button.

"Taneka?"

Jeffrey's voice sent shivers through her. "I'm out in the parking lot at Robin's Nest. The lady at the desk at Rock Creek told me where—" His voice faded out.

"Hello?"

Anger, like a hot river rushed through her. She carried her cell phone and strode into the dining room, switched her phone to silent ring and put it back into her clutch bag. She took a seat at the table with Denzel, wondering what Jeffrey was doing in Wyoming. She didn't want him to ruin any more of their evening, but it seemed he came to cause trouble.

She propped her elbows onto the tabletop and laid her forehead into her hands.

"Is everything okay?" Denzel murmured.

Suddenly, she became very aware again that their thighs touched under the table and every movement made sent tingles shooting like bottle rockets through her body.

Not wanting to ruin his evening, she took her

hands down from her forehead, sat back and regained her composure. Damn it, she never had been good at hiding her emotions.

During a few moments of thoughtful silence, they sipped their Brandy Alexanders. She had the urge to clear the air. "We need to talk, Denzel."

"About..." He nodded. "I think I already know."

She took a deep breath and began. "There are two things, really, that I want to say."

"Okay."

"One problem is that my ex is or was out in the parking lot of this restaurant, waiting to make an ass out of himself, and I just hope that he's gone when we get outside. And two, you are not who you said you were. That bothers me."

"I'm not worried about him." He blinked and a deep sigh left his lips. "And for the other, Rachel told you, right? Just now?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"Yes."

A harsh breath of what seemed pain left his lungs. "I was going to tell you later. How do you feel about that? That I'm not who I said I was?"

A sense of loss and a bit of anger filled her. *How much was and was not the truth now that I think about it? Can I overcome my disdain? Originally, I fell in lust with a poor cowboy. Darn it! I hadn't expected to experience so much angst regarding Denzel.*

"I don't know," she said.

"I feel bad. I didn't expect anything to evolve...I care about — "

"Don't. Please don't." She placed her hand on top of his.

He grasped her chin and turned her head his way. He looked her in the eye, revealing nothing short of complete reverence. Almost in a whisper, he said, "Look, Taneka. The bottom line is I do want to see you again and see you often."

"I don't know now." *If he lives and works at his gigantic Wyoming business, a relationship with me in Illinois is impossible, isn't it?* "Denzel, I live hundreds of miles away. I'm leaving. Tomorrow, in fact. You live

and work here."

"I have business interests in Illinois. A relationship is possible. I can make it happen. I've got a plane. We could see each other four days out of the week. So yes. Getting to know each other is possible."

"Maybe for now we should..." She caught sight of the emotions that played in his face—bewilderment and pain. Words that would separate them forever caught in her throat.

* * * *

They left the restaurant; the sulking silence hung heavy between them. Five minutes passed during the wait for the valet driver to retrieve Denzel's Cadillac.

I wish I could turn back time and meet Taneka under different circumstances...not using false pretenses. Though, for the life of me, I can't understand how my fortune could be held against me. The fact remains that I withheld the truth to appease Rachel. I thoroughly understand why Taneka is having trouble with believing me now.

"Is there anything else I should know?"

"Everything else is true." His gaze met hers. "We just didn't tell you the truth about my occupation."

"I see."

"I'm sorry." Denzel stood beside Taneka with his hands stuffed in his pockets, puzzled at the outcome of the evening. "You don't want to see me anymore?"

"Denzel, I'm sure everything's okay. I just need time."

Without warning, a man stepped out of the shadows. "You lowlife, two-timin' bitch!" He walked up to Denzel, pulled a fist back and slugged him in the eye. "What're you doin' fuckin' my girlfriend?" Denzel's head snapped back with the impact.

His eye ached like fire, and he watched the stranger raise his fist. *I'll be damned if he punches me again.*

Denzel, quick on his feet, blocked the move and punched him in the mouth first. He wrestled his attacker down on the herringbone-patterned driveway to end the fight. The instinct of survival kicked in and a scuffle ensued.

"We need help! Get security," Taneka screeched at

a doorman as he dialed a number on his cell phone.

"Hurry!"

Security rushed to the scene to separate them. Jeffrey cried out, "Why did you do this to me, Taneka?"

"Do what, Jeffery? I didn't do anything!" With her fingers, she wiped wetness off her cheek.

He unleashed a crazy laugh. Two security officers held him back. "You went out with a lowlife son of a bitch cowboy?"

Another officer stood in front of Denzel, keeping him at bay, although he was not trying to continue the fight.

Denzel, tense as stone, comprehended and understood Taneka's look of aggravation and dislike.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "I told you it was over. What part of it didn't you understand?"

"Let go of my arm, you idiot!" Jeffrey screamed at a uniformed man who ran to the scene. Security soon subdued and walked him back to what looked like his rental car. "You led me on!" he shouted over his shoulder to Taneka. "Lyin' bitch."

His wayward possessiveness bordered on craziness. Blood surged through Denzel's veins.

"I did not! You didn't listen! And you hit me. Don't you forget that!"

The security officer unhandled him. Jeffrey made a dismissive hand gesture to her and told the security guards, "She's lying."

Her jaw clenched in what seemed aggravation. Under her breath she muttered, "No, I'm not."

Minutes later, Denzel drove them back to Rock Creek Ranch. Within a mile of their destination, he asked in a gentle tone, "Is it over between us?"

She peered his way, beyond the dark divide, smiled and said, "No, it's not. Not unless *you* want it to be."

"No."

During a long pause at a stop light, he turned his attention to her. His gaze roamed over her face and sought to make sure she was not mad. He had deceived her. Relieved, he found her love intact, he said, "Good." He stepped on the accelerator the moment the

traffic light changed.

He parked in front of Rock Creek Ranch, turned off the ignition, leaned over and embraced her. The leather seat crunched under his movement. His finger found her throat and drew lazy eights on her skin. Words needed to be said, but neither of them spoke. His desire and lust for her raged like a lion. He felt himself getting hard, longing knotted like a rope within.

"I'll walk you to your room." He grasped the door handle.

Taneka drew an anxious breath and cleared her throat. "Why don't you...stay..."

He turned his head and leaned her way. "What did you say?"

"Stay...the night, with me? Would you like to do that?" she asked with caution. Denzel stopped the rest of her words with his mouth, sliding his splayed fingers to each side of her head. He dragged his lips from hers. "You sure?" he asked, his words prodding gently.

"Absolutely." She smoothed her flattened hands

up his chest and brushed his lips with hers, proving she wanted him.

Chapter Nine

During a kiss, they stepped inside her suite and left the hot night air. "We don't want any intrusions," Denzel said. They went inside. He leaned and pushed the door. It closed with a dull thump. "Oh yeah," he murmured and his lips returned to hers.

Longing stabbed through her. Her pussy tingled and her nipples hardened during her thoughts of taking Denzel as her lover.

He put his Stetson on the dresser, and relieved her

of her clutch bag. Crossing to the bed with it, he softly swung to his side, and put it on the nightstand.

He returned. His movement and actions reminded her of a cowboy who tried to break in a mare.

Together again, their eyes and hands met. *Have your way. Do it quick and hard or gentle and meaningful. Do it any way you want.*

She saw the harsh side of him during the fight, and now she witnessed his gentle nature. With care, he undressed her and pulled the red garment up and over her head. She stood before him wearing a revealing bra and thong. He stepped back and snapped on a lamp. His eyes ran the length of her body, and he nodded with approval.

Their torsos touched and his hand settled on Taneka's slender waist. "It just so happens I brought condoms."

She envisioned his lips going down on her clitoris. "I'm on birth control."

"Mm, that's good," he said. They shared another kiss.

She felt the first touch. Sensation pulled in her tummy.

He bent over her and licked the soft skin between her breasts using the tip of his tongue. Moving up her body, he administered a light brush of his mouth to her neck. He nibbled, dazzled and aroused her. He paused to nip and graze on her collarbone. *With the skill of a seasoned lover, he's readying me for a hot union.*

Drive me up the wall in ecstasy, Denzel.

He raised his head, and she ran a manicured nail down his clothed chest, during a state of extreme anticipation. She ran her tongue over his still lips, and her hand over the bulge in his pants in a blatant invitation. *It turns me on to turn you on.*

"I knew this was coming," she said, breathing her words.

"I did too. From the first moment I saw you, I knew."

A tremor ran through her, because she knew the effects she had on him.

Their sex seemed natural and inevitable.

"I haven't had good sex in years."

"Tonight, I intend to change all that." He feathered kisses around the rim of her ear and blazed a path down to her throat. "I'll make it up to you. You deserve better than for me to mislead you like I did."

"It's all right. That's settled and in our past."

A scintilla of light from a street lamp stole between the drapery panels and lit the spread. Denzel's coloring seemed a silverfish blue.

Vaguely, she could see the face of her travel clock: 9:18 p.m., the neon red digits read. The air conditioner kicked on and the drapes jiggled.

Her heart beat double time as his hands slid down her curves, went around and cupped her hips, and held her to his hard body.

It wasn't cold, but goose bumps spread and rose on her skin. Like experiencing a fever, out of her head, she clung to him and her body quivered. He pulled her to him even more tightly, if that was possible, and she allowed him to take control. She wanted him more than she remembered wanting anything in recent his-

tory.

Inch by maddening inch, he staked claims to patches of tingling skin and kissed the side of her mouth and her throat. His lips worked down her body and moved over her full breasts. In response, she thrust them out. With a determined touch, Denzel awakened her breasts, pussy, the curve of her throat and other patches of skin that were known to rapidly turn women on. The eroticism continued until she responded with a heedless, "It's been so long. God, what you're doing to me." *Don't stop.*

The kiss ended. "I intend to please, Taneka. Tell me what you want; what keeps you hot and bothered during moments of sleeplessness...if we don't get to it tonight, believe me, we will soon. I want to see you often."

"And I feel the same." She thought of her ideas about control. *Would he like me in an aggressive role? I've not tried it but I want to try it.*

Denzel worked awesome magic, wreaking unimaginable havoc, an unexplainable inward distur-

bance she would remember for years, if not a lifetime.

A guttural laugh escaped his throat. "Taneka, you're so hot."

His touches shoved her deeper into arousal. Her breath caught and suspended for a moment. Upon continuing, he released her breast, bent down and covered her mouth with his.

"Mm," she murmured. His attention struck her as tender and respectful, yet primitive and raw.

"Let's get more comfortable and make a night of it. What do you say?"

"Mm-hm."

"Your eye," she said. "It's swollen and bruised." With a gentle touch, she caressed the inflamed tissue.

"It's okay." He turned his head and pressed a kiss to her palm.

"It looks sore."

"It's okay."

Denzel released her hand, reached around and unfastened her bra with deliberate slowness, freeing her heavy breasts. He grasped the waistband of her

thong and drew it down her hips, thighs and lower legs. She stepped from the tiny garment.

In record time, Denzel undressed, tossing his clothes onto a nearby chair.

She saw his formidable erection, and excitement thrummed through her veins. It would feel tight in her pussy.

He leaned and snapped the light back off.

"I want to taste you," he said. He took her hand and led her to the bed. "Come here." His hands curled around her waist. "That's it. Mm."

He slipped his tongue between her teeth, sliding it back toward her throat, and she felt him lowering her onto the bed. *I'll do whatever....hard, fast, slow...fuck, and suck.*

Taneka lay back on the pillows while he licked her breasts with enkindling flicks. He abandoned her peaking nipples and stroked the skin down in the valley between her breasts. *My body no longer belongs to me. It exists for Denzel; he fuels my lust. I am his and he is mine. His clever mouth is moving on me; I'll beg for it if he quits.*

Playing her like a Stradivarius, he worked down her writhing body. He drew circles around the gold ring in her bellybutton. For a moment, he stopped. She drew her breath and raised her head. *He rocked my world and now he's stopping?*

"I'll get pleasure out of giving you pleasure." With his rough hands, he grabbed her ass and pulled her close to the edge of the bed, toward his stiff cock.

Breathlessly she said, "Do it more." *I plan to accommodate you in the most hardcore ways I can think up.* Her legs splayed wide as the surging blood roared in her ears.

On the floor, he positioned himself before her. Leaning her way, he pressed his lips to her inner upper thighs. Denzel kissed her labia and plunged his devilish tongue into her throbbing, wet pussy. The primitive assault took the breath from her lungs and left her hungry for more.

Whimpering, she squirmed, trying to get used to his luscious invasion. She raised her buttocks from the bed as best she could and gave him full access to the

most intimate spot on her body. *I'll live each day in hopes of seeing his face, feeling his touch, or simply hearing his voice. I have no idea what I'll do if I can't see him again.*

His lips pressed against her flesh and he fed on her juices. White heat streaked low, her body arched and she met the point of his pleasurable ministrations. *Do it cowboy, eat me and then ride me.* Each long flick of the tongue, bite and nip to her sensitive center caused her to cry out in sheer ecstasy. "Denzel!" she sobbed. He punished her bud, until she groaned aloud words from an indecipherable language. *Never in my life have I had such a passionate lover! He knows what to do and how to do it. I'm putty in his hands.* She moaned with need; she neared release. *Yes, he can break horses, but he's also breaking me. Denzel, you're driving me to the brink of not only an orgasm but happily toward madness.*

He lifted his mouth from her pubic curls and murmured, "You're delicious." He resumed supping.

From this day forward, I want only you as my lover. No other man can please me the way you can.

The moment she began to peak, he buried his face deeply; she cried out with delight and gasped for

breath.

During the state of mindless pleasure, his name tore from her lips. "Damn it, Denzel. I'm coming! Ahh-hhh!" Her pussy clenched. She floated along the mesa of an orgasm.

A soft, erotic laugh left his lips; his voice rasped, "I'm not finished." She barely noticed him reach for a foil packet in his wallet.

Denzel repositioned himself. He rose over her and sheathed himself. Effortlessly, he flipped her over and lifted her hips so her pussy could accommodate his engorged shaft. The mushroom head pressed against her slit. He pushed inside a half inch and paused.

Is he intentionally teasing me? Mm, I love it! More!

In an inch, an inch and a half, then he pushed his member into her pussy, stretching the opening, until his scrotum touched the lower part of her lips. With care, he pushed a finger into her ass, giving her even more pleasure. With his other hand, he reached for and massaged her breast. His hips stilled, though his cock still impaled her.

"You feel so soft." He waited like a gentleman for her to accustom herself to his size.

"That's it," he said, talking to her like one of his mares, gently and with all the patience of a benevolent god. Using a light touch, he continued to stroke and knead her breast and lightly pinch her nipple, adding a dash of pain.

Denzel pushed in deeper, until he'd pressed himself all the way up inside her, riding her doggy style. A cry escaped her lips. The jolt subsided and he slid his velvety shaft in and out of her damp pussy. She pressed the rear entrance hard against his loins. His balls slapped her weeping cleft. Breath rasped from their lungs and their bodies moistened with perspiration.

The bed squeaked with each depression. Taneka's muscles knotted and she rode the waves of their mutual, massive orgasmic explosion. Her squeezing pussy milked his cock dry.

Reality returned; the neon red digits on the clock starkly contrasted to the blackness of the room. Voices

of people passing the window cut into the silence.

"You're so beautiful," Denzel said under his breath.

Drained, his sheathed cock left her. He moved to her side, turned her to him gently, as though he treasured her, a precious commodity. She relaxed in his arms and they fell asleep.

* * * *

The next morning they showered. Taneka wanted him again, but didn't have to say a word.

Kneeling before her in the bathtub, Denzel's cock rose high. Engorged with blood, it stood to just under his navel.

As the pummeling water jetted down their bodies in streams, his fingers curled around her ankle and drew it up. Skillfully, he wedged her foot on the edge of the tub, opening her pussy. The puffy lips separated and exposed her rosy pink clitoris and canal for his exploitation. To give him the "go ahead" signal, she slipped her fingers into his hair.

Taneka felt one finger enter, then two. Air expelled from her lungs.

Hot water ran down her deep-rose, taut nipples, belly, pubic mound and onto his cheeks and mouth. His lips replaced his fingers and he began to lick her slit. She cried out in ecstasy because his potent oral magic affected her so greatly. Her mouth opened, her eyes closed and her head dropped back.

Lovingly he supped, leaving her breathlessly aroused. Lingering there, he suckled and licked for an indeterminable amount of time. She was so turned on, she wanted to climb the wall. Her moist body broke into a paroxysm of unadulterated pleasure. The bathroom around her hazed, and she was vaguely aware of the moans that emerged from deep within her.

He slid his long tongue into and out of her canal, fucking her. Her insides quivered with need, but she dared not move, fearing he'd quit the erotic quest. If he withdrew, she'd demand he continue. She parted her legs more, in an attempt to give him adequate access.

She neared the precipice, and he seemed instinc-

tively to realize the moment it happened.

Taneka screamed and cried, "Oh my God, Denzel."

An earth-shaking orgasm wracked her body and hurtled her onto a plateau of unspeakably titillating sensations.

A replenishing pause followed. "It's my turn," he murmured. "Be right back."

He reached for a foil packet from the shelf and sheathed himself. "Ah, it's just where I put it." He slipped his hands under her bottom, lifted and sat her on a shelf. He positioned himself between her spread legs. In one fluid movement, he pushed his cock into her. She put her arms around his shoulders. Tears welled and slid down her cheeks. Her spine pressed against the white, dripping tile. He pounded her until he again shot his hot, potent seed, bringing her to a massive orgasm.

* * * *

They recuperated, shared more endearments and

showered. Taneka felt sated and speechless. Ten minutes later, she changed into traveling clothes and located her tickets. She loved how he touched his lips to her forehead in a heartfelt kiss, before he left to go to his suite to change clothes.

They met at the dining hall for breakfast a half hour later. Taneka had to catch a flight at noon in Sheridan, and needed to return to the room and pack in short order.

"I'll drive you to the airport," Denzel said and raised a mug of coffee to his lips.

She nodded, smiled and peered outside at a new group of tenderfeet who just arrived. "I appreciate it."

A sad pause followed. "I'd like to see you next weekend." He placed his mug carefully down on the table as though waiting for her response.

"In Illinois?"

"Yeah."

Taneka swallowed, nodded and drank the rest of her orange juice. "I'd like that." She had the distinct feeling she would be seeing a lot of him in the very

near future. Rachel's matchmaking worked. *Oh my God. What will Mom and Stevie say?*

At the first opportunity, Taneka had to tell them about her new, cowboy lover. *How will this go over? Time will tell.*

Chapter Ten

Taneka and Denzel had met three times in Charleston and the third visit had ended; he had just flown out of Illinois. She summoned the nerve to let her mother and Stevie meet him. Telling her mother that her love life had taken a turn for the better would be a difficult task. The biggest surprise would be Denzel's skin color. *God, should I take earplugs? She'll rant like a...I don't want to think about it. Stevie knows the whole story, and is keeping her lips zipped, not betraying my*

confidence. She's a wonderful friend.

No one could escape or reject his congeniality and warmth of character. I won't deal with it well if they don't give Denzel and me their blessing. Of course, Rachel handled it with radiance, grace and a smidgen of gloating, because she brought us together.

She quit pacing and stopped near the picture window of her living room. The phone occupied an end table, within her reach. Mrs. Jones watered a flower-bed. To gain the courage needed to tell her mother the news, Taneka sucked in a deep breath. *Am I in love, or what? I have to go through with this.*

She raised the phone and tapped her mother's number, cursing under her breath. On the third ring, Marsha answered.

"Hello, Mom."

"What's goin' on?"

"I just called Stevie. And uh, Saturday someone is coming into town."

"Hold on. I can't hear." Taneka heard her mother covering the mouthpiece and yelling into the next room. "Can you all be quiet for a second? My daugh-

ter's goin' to tell me somethin'!" Her attention returned to Taneka. "Damn, what a noisy bunch, Tuesday card players."

During a short silence, she heard her mom walk into a quieter room. She asked, "Now what's this? Saturday? Who?"

"It's a secret."

"Are we being evasive, Taneka?"

"Stevie will come over too."

"What for?"

Mom can't stand it. Inwardly, Taneka giggled. "I have an announcement to make."

She could almost see her mother's scrunched up expression. "What are you talkin' about...an announcement?"

To add drama to the situation, Taneka said, "An important announcement."

"And, this a good bit of news. Or should I stock up on some Kleenex?"

"It's good. Maybe you'll want to stock up on the tissues anyway."

"Oh hell, Taneka. I already knew you broke up with the jerk of the year, Jeffrey. Happy days are here again in those regards. But now what's goin' on with you?"

"Well, you'll find out Saturday."

"Okay. I'll bake some cookies. You say Stevie's comin' over?"

"Yeah." *Cookies?* "You don't have to go to any trouble."

A few seconds before Taneka hung up Marsha said, "Baking something special is no problem at all. Besides, Stevie and I like my peanut butter cookies."

* * * *

Later, she fell back crosswise on bed while talking to Denzel, minutes before bedtime.

Sex didn't comprise the entire reason why she loved him. He was a kind, decent man who showed genuine concern for her. Nevertheless, she had to admit that at night her thoughts turned to him. Taneka

dreamt that he licked and gently plied her sex between her legs. Against the point of pleasure, she would arch and awaken to find he had vanished. She wanted to see him again and often.

"Do you have any fantasies?" his resonant voice asked, taking her back to the conversation.

Silence hung heavy on the line. She leaned and snapped off the bedside lamp. He'd asked a difficult, intimate question.

"Hello? I asked you a — " His voice fell away.

"I dunno...are you kidding or serious?"

His rich laugh reverberated in the earpiece of the phone. "I'm dead serious."

"Well..."

"I aim to please. And this is Denzel, so don't hold back. You don't have to be shy about what you want," he drawled. "Didn't you once mention you'd like to be the aggressor?"

Did I tell him that? Oh God. "I dunno." Heat flowed through her veins at the mention of it. *I'd love to try that! No man gave me the option before.*

Planting a seed he said, "Well, you think about it."

* * * *

On Saturday, Denzel flew to Charleston on a twin-prop passenger jet, after switching planes in St. Louis, Missouri. They planned to make a weekend of it—dinner then dancing. He would meet her friends and family. She was to teach the fall and winter session, and she needed to see him beforehand.

Taneka wore a thigh-length, short, pale blue dress, beige sandals and a smile the day Denzel was due. She swung by the airport near Charleston, went inside to his gate and watched him step out of the small jet and cross the tarmac.

The separation had ended, and he leaned and administered a light peck to her lips, greeting her. They exchanged a few moments of small talk, while waiting for his luggage. Two uniformed men brought a wagonload of bags to the terminal and unloaded them onto the belt. Denzel located and nabbed his bag.

They headed out to the parking lot. He carried the large suitcase, and she draped the strap of his carryon over her shoulder.

Light, masculine cologne tempted her sense of smell.

He took the Stetson off his head. With a quick movement of the hand, he ran splayed fingers through his thick, black hair. Frowning, he set the hat back on his head. "Damn, I hate flyin' in those small jets. Do you know what time I had to get my ass out of the sack to catch that friggin' hedgehopper?"

A small Cessna no longer held his attention and he turned his gaze to her. His voice softened considerably. "I can't wait."

"You're wantin' it, huh?"

"Actually 'want' is not the right word. 'Need' is better, as in needin' some of that tight pussy of yours."

A sexual twinge enlivened her core. Maybe they could be a little late to her mom's house. "Mm, big boy. Think you can handle something I've planned?"

"What'd you have in mind?"

In a tone that dripped with innuendo, she said, "A little bit of this and a little bit of that."

Grinning, he nodded. "You're not as bashful as you once were. That's good."

"You're bringing it out in me."

"Like a blossoming flower."

"Oh wow. I've never been compared to a flower." A tender moment passed and she asked, "So, you don't mind the change?"

"Actually, my dick just got harder, if that's possible. But I liked you the other way too."

"Equally?"

"Yeah."

Passengers neared and walked alongside them, ending their conversation. Big sliding doors opened. Outside, the stark blue morning sky, a noisy jet engine and hot humidity greeted them. Vehicles zipped by on the highway two hundred feet away. Several groups of people carried luggage toward the terminal they'd just left. Sets of admiring female gazes slid down Denzel's body as they waited for a cab to pass.

During the walk to the car, she found the opportunity and nerve to get something off her chest. The potential problem troubled her deeply. Taneka slipped on her sunglasses and asked, "Are you sure you want to meet them?" *The idea of him meeting my mother and Stevie makes me uneasy, if not nauseous. Nothing good can come of it. They are two women who don't hold back with their words or their ideas. What a conundrum!* "We can postpone —"

In a confident tone, he interrupted. "I'm sure. I want to meet them. I can't wait, in fact." He paused thoughtfully. "But there is something I need first."

She raised a hand and pressed the auto-unlock button on her key chain. "Hmm. I wonder what that 'need' is?" He wore his usual jeans, boots, and western shirt: a dominant, likeable presence in any circle. *My body is reacting. I've seen him just a few minutes and need is thrumming through my veins.*

Scavenger birds dotted the lot and flew skyward with a *whoosh* as they neared. In her mind, she hummed a song: I've got sunshine on a cloudy day...oh yes I do...

Obviously not interested in the types of local birds, he said, "C'mere baby and I'll show you first hand this mystical need I've been talking about. It'll perk your butt right up."

"You mean we'd brighten up someone else's day?" A cab drove by and the passenger in the back seat gazed their way.

"I know it would mine."

A short, evil laugh left her lips. "Kinky...but I don't want to spend the rest of the day in jail for doing a lewd and licentious act in a public place."

"If we talk dirty, and do it loudly enough that's what could happen. But I'm thinking about what it'd be like in the car in broad daylight."

God, I would love some kink in my life, but not at the airport in broad daylight for God's sake! He was kidding around, of course. The idea was too funny. "Promises, promises."

He held up a hand and stopped her from stepping in front of a shuttle bus.

Taneka sucked in a sharp breath. "Oh my God!"

"But then again, we wouldn't want to draw a crowd. Nah. I can hear it now. They'd say 'there is a cowguy gettin' it on with a cowgal out in the parking lot. Can you call security? Oh, and call the press, too.'" They resumed the hike toward her car and smiled the whole way.

"This way. My wheels are over there." Taneka giggled as they walked in a different direction. "I guess they would say 'they can't make it home, they're so hot.'"

This sensitive, caring man's need and words are turning me on. I should let him experience some of my oral skills this morning.

"On a more serious note, like right now, I *really* feel like I can't wait. A kid again. But I will. Never fear. But just between you and me, I'm hard as that jet over there."

She tsk-tsked. "Aw. You need some TLC. Poor, poor baby."

With a grin, he muttered, "Yes."

Taneka opened the trunk and put the carryon bag

inside. "I think you flew in to the right airport and I'm just the person to see."

"Great." While he hoisted the black leather suitcase into her trunk, she waited. He wedged it in among three primed canvases, a bucket of paintbrushes and a satchel of art supplies.

"Let's hurry on over to your house," he murmured, as he pulled the keys from trunk's lock, "...before we get ourselves arrested. I've thought up a way we can see each other more often. You'll be able to deep six that damned hot pink vibrator of yours."

In shock, her jaw dropped. *Oh hell no!* Even though they'd had sex several times, the idea of him knowing about the hot pink wonder embarrassed her down to her bones. "How did you know about that?"

"Remember that night I came in after we went back to your suite...we had just watched the Indians dance around the fire?"

"Yeah."

"I saw it that night. It's the brightest color of pink I think I ever saw in my entire life."

Heat rose up her chest and neck. Taneka clucked her tongue and pretended to hit his upper arm, once he had pushed the trunk lid down. *Unreal.*

Chapter Eleven

She parked in her driveway, climbed out and shut the door. They left the luggage in the trunk. They held hands as they walked to the steps. Mail bulged out of the mailbox, but she didn't take it inside. On the steps, he stole a playful kiss before she unlocked and opened the door. She saw Mrs. Jones peek through the bushes, spying. Indoors they laughed, talked and felt very much in love.

With the door locked, in the darkened interior of

the house, his tongue conquered her mouth, just as he had conquered other aspects of her life. Each time he had stayed for the weekend, their love grew. Each of his visits had evolved a new adventure filled with jokes, teases, great food and stolen kisses.

Taneka responded hotly. She awarded his kisses with kisses of her own. The action was analogous to adding gasoline to a fire. Ardently, he took her back against the wall, thrust his hips and pushed his clothed cock against her. He rimmed her ear with his tongue and massaged her breasts.

Her head touched a frame; a small picture fell from the wall. *This man is turning my world upside down, and I'm loving it!* Denzel kept her hemmed into the corner behind the door and kissed her long and hard, leaving her breathless. His lips abandoned hers; his gaze dropped to her lips.

"I need to take off my boots."

For the moment, they parted company. She pulled the drapes closed and locked the door.

Look at me! Already I'm breathing heavily.

Denzel took his boots off and arranged them neatly beside the door a second before he backed her to the wall. He looked down at her and said, "Let's explore this possibility of doing a lewd and licentious act...in private."

Come here and let's start.

With a firm grasp of his lower arms, she turned him so that *his* back was to the wall. He looked at her with curiosity.

"What are you — " he started to say, but quieted.

"I don't know." Her shyness threatened to stop her sexy plans. Being the aggressor during lovemaking sounded so exciting and bold...in novels. "I'm thinking about doing something." *Maybe I can ease myself into this, bit by bit. I know I'd love to try it. He seems open to anything regarding sex, except unfaithfulness. He's a one woman man.*

Urging her on he said, "Try it."

"How do you know what I'm thinking?"

His arms rose into a shrug. "I just do."

Should I? What if he laughs? I'll die of embarrassment.

Moving tentatively, she slipped her hands around

his strong shoulders, leaned forward and, with gentleness, bit a nipple through his shirt, all the while smelling his masculine cologne.

He began to take her in his arms but she stopped him by saying, "Wait..." Gaining courage, she swallowed hard and gazed up, blinking into those big, sapphire pools. "Do you mind if I go on?" she asked, making a simple rolling motion with her hand.

"Mind? Doing what?"

Surprising herself, she cleared her throat and swallowed hard. "I'm going to tie you up." She let the audacity of it sink in. "Are you up to it?"

His mouth dropped open, he recuperated, and his voice softened. "Are you?"

She considered his question, bit her lip for a second or two and answered with a hesitant, "I think so. Of course."

"It'd put me in heaven, if I'm not already there." Denzel's head dropped back against the wall and he murmured, "I'm at your mercy. Tie me up. Have fun."

My heart is about to beat out of my chest.

Taneka's hands, as if they had minds and wills of their own, slid down his abdomen and dealt with the belt buckle and button.

He's so strong he could crush me, but I'm in control. It's odd, but it's happening, and it turns me on. I've never felt in control in my life. Is this why this turns me on?

"Hold still while I do this," said Taneka.

He listened.

"All right." With deft hands, she pulled the hem of his shirt from under the waistband of his jeans and peeled it off, revealing his sculpted abs and pecs. With love, she ran her hand through the mat of hair on his chest. *Mm, it feels like velvet.*

Much to her pleasure, his erection pressed against the zipper, so she took great care of drawing the metal tab down over his bulge. The tight garment loosened and an erotic moan escaped his throat.

"We're going to play a little game, Denzel."

"Mm."

"I'm taking control of you right now. Okay?"

"Okay," he said during a gusty exhalation.

Like putty, her resistless hostage offered no protests; his breathing rate increased. She knelt before him and pulled the denim garment and boxers down his hair-dappled legs, releasing the flesh beneath.

She could tell her actions excited him like they did her. In slight increments, he moved and moaned each time her hands neared his sex. His cock seemed to beg for her lips, and her hands held special powers. *Should I tease him more, or just do it?*

An elongated breath left his lungs and he said, "This, I like." His voice turned husky and he held his hands behind his back.

Taneka massaged his turgid shaft and upped his need another degree. She kept her touches intimate and maddeningly slow, intending to excite him more with each touch. "Do you like this?"

"Mmmm."

She felt his body tense.

"Aahh."

Even though they had made love before, the sight of his need caused her breath to catch.

"Just a sec." She rose, crossed the room and removed two long window tie-back cords and returned to him.

He took a foil wrapped square from his pants pocket before putting his hands together behind his back and saying, "Tie me."

In no time at all he stood before her naked and at her mercy. "If we're to play this game, you may not come. I'll punish you if you do."

"Yes, ma'am." Denzel's body quivered in obvious anticipation.

She gathered more nerve and asked, "Have you been faithful?"

"Oh yeah. Always."

"That's good." She reminded him, "...say ma'am, remember? This is one of those times I'd like you to say that."

"Yes, ma'am."

Carrying the torture a step further, she ran a manicured nail over the ridge and the sensitive head of his sex. Her strokes and caresses elicited a gravelly sound

from within him.

"So what do you think now, cowboy?"

"This female aggressor scenario is erotic. You're hot."

"You like it?"

"Yes I do, ma'am."

"Let's see..."

His shaft was a phallic masterpiece—a pulsing, eight inches or more that stood high from his loins—and appeared oh, so potent. He reminded her of a lightning rod.

Taneka knelt before her god, lowered her mouth to the head and sucked the pearly liquid that oozed from the tip, tasting his manly seed. Once she swallowed the milky drop, she used a light touch to run her teeth along the length, knowing the effects her explorations wreaked on him.

Her newfound courage abounded. "Stand still or I'll punish you." The heady feeling of dominance seeped into her psyche and fed her mettle, but she knew he would and could easily re-take control.

For now I have this tall, strong man ready to fulfill my deepest, darkest yearnings, and it's causing my pulse to race. I'd like to explore this aspect of our sexuality, if we stay together.

She paused to glance up in to his sapphire eyes. A simple look of lust played on his face that seemed filled with love. *Some people say that love and sex only get better between couples who loved each other. Can that be true? We are as much in love as two people can be.*

Ringling the thick base of his penis with a finger and thumb she opened her mouth near the ridge. With a flattened tongue, she licked the veined underside, from the base to the head – again and again. Enjoying the effects she had on him, she continued until he moaned and breathed her name, "Ahh, Ta-neka."

Taneka traced long lines down the front of his legs, with her manicured nails. She moved her fingers from his knee to his groin area and drove him to desperation. Not finished, she wanted to suckle his cock in a way he would not soon forget.

Denzel adjusted his stance a bit to give her better access.

She lifted her head and deliberately ran her tongue across her lower lip. "You *must* hold still," she whispered. Leaning forward, she kissed his twitching cock. Her hands replaced her lips. He visibly trembled and his balls tightened. She massaged his heavy scrotum and the enchanting private area behind it. For a few moments, she nibbled on the end.

A cry of joy left his lips. She took it in her mouth and let it slide between her teeth and allowed it to move back in her throat, over her tongue, toward her tonsils. She backed off it; her lips lingered. She fed for three or four minutes in an attempt to drive him nearly insane. He took deep breaths, filling his lungs. Taneka resituated her grasp and tightly ran her hand up and down the length intending to cause him pre-orgasmic discomfort to the extreme.

Her mouth filled with saliva, Taneka tasted his pre-come and moved her mouth off his cock as she swirled her tongue over the head. Moaning his approval, Denzel shoved his hips forward, to let her know he wanted her to continue. *I don't want to disap-*

point him.

She licked all around the base of his shaft and smoothed her hands around his hips. Taneka dipped her fingers between his cheeks, nearing his anus. Hearing his breathing rate increase, she raised a hand and smacked his ass soundly three times, punishing him, letting him experience a little pain with his pleasure. Upon relinquishing temporary control, she hoped she'd face his swift, red-hot retribution.

His bottom lip trembled. *I have never seen a more beautiful man in all my life.*

"Let me make it better." Leaning over him, she moved into position and drew a wet tongue over the spanked skin.

Experiencing obvious extreme pleasure, his body twitched. "Ahh."

Taneka brought her hands back down and caressed his tight scrotum. "That's it."

The muscles in her pussy clenched. She left him panting and desperate.

"Are you quitting?" he asked, his tone tainted with

indigence.

"Shh."

He looked at her, smiled and closed his eyes.

Upon withdrawal, she gazed up and noticed that his head had dropped back. No doubt his eyes were closed. She had taken him to the brink, her acts overwhelming him with hot sensation. This stud boyfriend of hers yearned to reach a mind-numbing orgasm.

"Ahhh."

Slowly, with provocative moves as if she stripped to music, she sensually swayed. She rotated her shoulders, shimmied in place, slipped off her dress and flung it onto an armchair. Heat swept up her neck, across her cheeks, and settled in her ears. Off came her shoes and bra. Soon naked before his feasting eyes she thought, *I need his cock now*. Her nipples tightened into deep rose buds, and her skin tingled with sensation while she massaged her breasts and tugged them for him.

Milky droplets oozed from the end of his cock.

Taneka rose to her feet, untied him and led him to

the bedroom. Sunlight filtered through the drawn shades onto the blue bedspread. His mouth crushed hers while they stood in front of the dresser. His hands slid over her body as he regained control.

His soft voice broke into the silence. "Did you enjoy torturing me?" Waiting for her answer, he kissed her ear. "My dick's going to explode."

"Poor, poor baby. I suppose you need relief?"

"It was as bad as having whips and chains." He chuckled lightly. "Remember that old cowboy saying, sticks and stones may break my bones, but whips and chains excite me?" he asked, as he leaned her way, obviously wanting more of her. "It's time for paybacks. You did have my hands tied, you know."

I cannot wait to find out how severe his retribution will be.

Chapter Twelve

Denzel felt her fingers sliding into the hairs at his nape. *Taneka makes me feel so loved and wanted. Lightness, sensuality and laughter all of which I need. Damn, I love her. I love seeing her eyes haze over with sexual desire.*

"Ever heard that old saying, 'paybacks are hell?'"

"I'm looking forward to it."

They stood near the dresser, their bare bodies reflected by the mirror. Taneka's neatly trimmed pussy beckoned his rigid arousal that rose between them.

Using two fingers, he slipped them down and up into her core. He stroked, readied and tested her wetness. He withdrew his moist fingers, knowing the right time had arrived.

Picking up the small square foil package, he flashed it before her haunting eyes and whispered hoarse words. "God, you're sweet, but you've got me in a really bad way, Taneka." He unwrapped one of the two condoms he'd brought with him.

Having her at his mercy turned him on. His fingers slowly opened her hands and he leaned forward and planted little kisses on her palms. Good things were worth waiting for, and he waited, but they needed relief. He placed the ribbed sheath on her open hand. She gazed at the slippery latex circle for a moment.

He pulled her to him with a soft chuckle against her throat. Denzel drew back, his eyes narrowed on her delicate features. "Put it on me."

Her dubiousness showed. "Okay."

She grasped his cock in one hand and used tight pressure to work the latex tube down, stretching it to

its limit around his thick shaft. An involuntary moan left his lips at the intense pleasure. The time for consummation had arrived. Desire, primitive and potent, surged through his body. He slipped his tongue between her teeth, letting it tangle with hers. Returning intoxicating kisses, she stroked his back and shoulders.

He touched her breasts. His fingers danced over her areolas. Her breath caught and his breathing rate increased. Denzel raised his lips from hers and watched erotic tension flicker across her face. For him, the situation loomed dire and urgent now. He pictured and almost felt his cock sliding into her tight, wet passage already. Their problem needed a resolution soon.

Driven by white, hot need, he slipped an arm under the crook in her legs and one across her back and under her arm. Gently, he picked her up and carried her across the cornflower blue-colored room, put her on the bed and arranged her among the pillows, spreading her thighs.

He eased himself on top of her, staying on his

knees, between her legs. He lowered his upper body until the head of his cock entered her slit. Sensation and promise of a great fuck incited his arousal to new heights. He lifted her slender hips and sunk his cock into her tight, juicy hole repeatedly, jolting her. Her breasts jiggled and her wet, tight warmth clutched and rippled around his sex. Denzel's movements slowed.

Taneka arched into him; she wanted it equally, he knew. Teasing her, as if he had all the time in the world, he stopped to plunder the spoils of her body at her mound and inner thigh.

She raised a hand as if reaching for the ceiling and said, "Don't stop. Please..."

"I don't plan on it."

Denzel's pumps remained slow but they soon picked up speed, until he hammered her. The bed tapped the wall. Erotic moans and grunts escaped their lips. She met and matched every thrust, spurred him on, and drove him closer to their mutual orgasm.

As his seed shot into her, he breathed his words. "Come for me. I need you to." Her pussy contracted.

She flew too. Her pussy drained him bone dry.

Denzel dropped to her side, and his cock slipped from her body. Gently, he pressed a warm kiss to her forehead and contemplated meeting her loved ones. He raised his arms and wrapped them around her and brought her to his chest.

* * * *

Later that morning, while going to her mother's house, Taneka turned left at the intersection while memories of the previous hot hours with Denzel swirled freshly in her mind.

She noted the bright sunlight slicing through the dense, dark green foliage above and splashing on the red brick road. Somewhere a dog barked and a newspaper boy delivered the morning paper. They drove past her work place. *Will he notice?*

Denzel gazed at the ivy covered Old Main, the university's office building. "So this is your place of business? Good ol' E.I.U?"

He's so thoughtful. "Mm-hm." The warm breeze fluffed her hair so she swept it back with her free hand. "What do you think?"

He nodded. "It's big and impressive. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks."

A three-story brick building almost hidden by trees came into view. "That's the Fine Arts Center. I teach there." She pointed to the side. "And here's where I park."

"Nice." They passed the empty asphalt lot. "You'll have to fly out to Colorado in a couple of weeks. I'll take you to see my newest dude ranch. You can meet my men...well, some of them anyway."

"Definitely, I'd like that." Taneka signaled a right and turned down her mother's narrow, tree-lined street. "This is Mom's neighborhood." Kids waved; a girl made a face. In return, Denzel crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue, causing Taneka to burst out in laughter.

They passed the staring, shocked little girl. He

turned and faced forward, smiling.

A pause followed. "I'd say, um...by January I'll move to Illinois. I'm not sure...I believe by the twentieth I can move."

Her heart fluttered at the prospect. "That's good. I'm so excited. Just think, we'll get to see one another more often."

"I'm starting a new business nearby. It'll work out fine."

She frowned as she considered the nearing possible disaster slash fiasco that awaited them at her mother's house. "I want you to remember after this is over that this was *your* idea to meet Mom."

A concerned look spread on his face. "What's wrong?"

And what a nerve-wracking experience I'll be! I'd rather get a root canal at the dentist's office. Mom is family and that's what daughters do when they find a man.

Brows rumped, he peered her way and scratched his head. "What do you expect her to say?"

I may as well be honest. "We'll soon find out.

She's...different. So is Stevie. You don't know what will come out of either of their mouths. Mom will probably have a stroke and Stevie will have a cow."

His head dropped back; his shoulders shook with laughter.

I can't believe he's reacting this way! "This is not funny."

"Don't worry about me. I can handle myself...with anyone, anywhere."

He's right.

His laugh shrunk to a pearly, dazzling smile. Dimples dented his cheeks. He winked at her.

"You can say that again," she said in a suggestive tone, thinking of their last encounter.

"So tell me what I'm up against."

"My mom, she's not right...closed-minded as the devil, sometimes. And Stevie...there is no excuse for her. She's the snark I was telling you about."

"A professor?"

"College professors come in all different packages, Denzel. Stevie is really in one of those 'different'

types...but she's one of my closest friends. Mom...well, you'd have to know her. She's a difficult person to understand. Sometimes she tries to be a tad invasive and I have to tell her to lay off. But I assure you, she'll shock your socks off by saying something out of the way. Stevie...now that woman...well, I'll let you find out."

Denzel laughed, raised his broad shoulders and slipped his hand off the back of the seat and touched her shoulder. As she drove, he ran an extended finger along the curve of her neck playing with her female sensitivity. Tingles shot throughout her body from the point of contact. *He's making me want to stop at a motel.*

Within three minutes, she parked on the road in front of her mother's house. "I'll go see if they're here."

"Want me to wait?"

"Sure, if you don't mind. I'll go in and wave the white flag."

Taneka climbed out and hurried up the fragrant, primrose-lined walk to her mother's front door. Peering inside the rose-colored ten by twelve foot living

room, she said, "Are you ready to meet him?"

As usual, her mother's house had the scent of Lysol disinfectant, but this time baking aromas also filled the air. One wide, tall window gave the room plenty of light. A short, squat window occupied the far wall. White, frilly doilies dotted the deep rose couch. Floral drapes hung on each of the windows.

"Mom? You there?"

Marsha appeared in the living room wearing a green jersey slack outfit and large gold hoop earrings. She ate a home baked peanut butter cookie, her manicured pinky extended.

"I'm here. I just took another cookie sheet out of the oven." She moseyed into the living room and peered through the front window toward the car. "Who's that out there? And I want to know why you had Stevie come over here. I mean it's nice that she came, but what is it you're about to tell us? Is it something I should dread?"

Stevie, also eating a cookie, appeared behind Marsha and peered over the woman's hefty shoulder. Her

eyes narrowed; she frowned. "This ought to be interesting."

"It's not something too bad, no." Taneka flashed them a smile and gave a nervous laugh. "Well...the news is going to knock your socks off."

Her mother gazed at Taneka in obvious suspicion. "I don't like this, Taneka. You're up to somethin' big this time. You don't call your closest friend and mother together for no reason. So spill the beans."

"I'll let him tell you. Mom, you'd better go sit down."

"Who's he?" She peered outside. "You don't mean that this is about that cowboy who's walking up the sidewalk. You don't, do you, Taneka?" She raised a hand to her wrinkled brow. "Oh, dear Lord."

Taneka turned toward Denzel who approached the front steps.

Stevie howled as he took two steps at a time. "I knew it! You and him...you're married."

Taneka shook her head, laughing. "No, no! We didn't do that." *At least not yet.*

Marsha shook her head. "You're right. I need to find a seat. Move it, Stevie."

Denzel entered the room, leaned and offered Marsha a hand before she could find a chair. "Hello there, Mrs. Cole. I'm Denzel."

"Oh..." Marsha's jaw dropped. She brought a hand to her chest. "Oh my."

"Well, Mom. Are you going to chew me out? He's white, you know."

"I can see that, Taneka. I never thought I'd see the day that I'm speechless. But now this is settin' me back a few steps." She fidgeted with her top button and asked, "Are you sure?"

"She and I...we're dating. I'm wanting your approval, I guess, and thought we could get acquainted." Denzel turned Stevie's way. "You have to be her best friend, Stevie."

"Yep. That's who I am...Stevie. It's nice to meet you." They too, shook hands.

An hour after the four of them began chatting, Denzel and Taneka rose to leave. During the walk to

the front door, Marsha motioned Taneka to step aside. Whispering, Marsha said, "It looks like you went out west and got yourself a cowboy."

"It does, Mom. But do you like him? It's important to me."

"Yes, I do. And I'm happy for you." She wrapped her arms around her daughter. "I believe you've found the right man this time."

About the Author

When Carol McKenzie is not writing, she is caring for her dog, quilting or rendering artwork. She graduated from a major university as an adult student and enjoys watching American Idol.

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