

ELLORA'S CAVE **LAWLESS**



*Bottoms Up*

*Rein Me In*

Larissa Lyons

Alyssa Brooks

## **Rein Me In**

*Larissa Lyons & Alyssa Brooks*

*Bottoms Up, Book Two*

Suzy likes her men tough and her sex rough—and for two weeks a year, she indulges in both. On the agenda this vacation? Untamed cowboy, straight from the source—a hoppin’ bar in rural West Texas named Bottoms Up. But tough turns to trouble when she picks the wrong cowboy—an ex-con fresh from the slammer who won’t take no for an answer...

Jonah McKenzie rides to the rescue, clueless the fiery redhead who tempts him into the wildest night of his life is actually a blast from his past. It’ll take a firm hand indeed once he discovers the tattooed firecracker in his bed is none other than the soft-spoken sweetheart he once finagled a date with—only to stand her up when unexpected tragedy struck.

At six-foot-four Jonah’s one long, tall Texan, and he’s hell-bent on reining in the “lady” claiming he’s too tame to satisfy her naughty side. He’ll be happy to prove she’s wrong—with that western belt of his that she so admires.

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Rein Me In

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# *REIN ME IN*

**Larissa Lyons & Alyssa Brooks**

## *Dedication*

This story is dedicated to anyone who's ever felt the need to hide their true self from the world. We hope you find a fun, safe way to express the "real" you.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## Prologue

Cornell University

*Many moons and many miles from the present day.*

Journal entry written approximately one month after moving on campus and entering the big, fascinating world of college life...marking the day eighteen-year-old Susannah Miller decided dating wasn't for her.

*Men! Didn't I already know better after that prom-cheating fiasco last May?*

*But no...I didn't. I thought Richard liked me. Me! That his attentiveness meant he was...I don't know, smitten with me. I mean, the ~~toad~~ turd said all the right things, did all the right things, made me feel wanted and desired and not quite so out of place.*

*So I slept with him – BIGGEST MISTAKE OF THE CENTURY! – only to learn I was nothing more than body count. This little revelation came three hours ago when I visited his dorm room after he failed to call as promised – and offered! Lucky me, I arrived just in time to see the “sex chart” he and his roommate were snickering over. My name scrawled on line number nine. And yes, ten and eleven were already filled in too.*

*Bastards! After running out of things to cry on, I decided I'd take mad over sad, so I'll say it again – BASTARDS!*

*That'll teach me to trust my instincts when it comes to guys.*

*That'll teach me to trust guys.*

An entry written sixteen months—or thereabouts—later, shortly before the night Susannah Miller decided she *wasn't* too scared to try to trust.

*Dear Diary,*

*Tex asked me out again today, darn him, offered his “escort” to the acrobatic comedy troupe performing on campus Thursday. Part of me really wanted to say yes.*

*The rest of me knows better. I'm not up for any more male-induced heartache. Why couldn't I have met him last year? Before I fell victim to Richard and his stupid contest?*

*Emphasizing my stupid judgment.*

*Drat those darn-fine Texas cowboys. Okay. That one specific Texas cowboy because, really, how many could there be in upstate New York?*

*Jonah + Susannah = ??????*

*The joke's on me for continuing to crush on him!*

*I've turned him down I don't know how many times yet...yet he keeps asking me out. Ice*

*cream, miniature golf, acrobats... Brave me (stupid me?) I tell him no every time.*

*What is it about Jonah that makes me want to forget that self-made promise not to date anyone this year? That tempts me to say yes?*

*That courtly manner of his? The almost quaint words that roll off his tongue? All those tips of his hat when we pass in the quad? Or is it just that tall, strong body and hot butt showcased in sexy cowboy jeans?*

*All of the above, I'm afraid.*

*I want to go out with him so bad. I'm just too chicken to try.*

*But dang it, I can't stop dreaming about him or wondering what he looks like beneath that fancy Western belt he wears – especially beneath that shiny belt buckle! Oh Lord, now I'm blushing.*

And one written that very night...the night she decided to go for it, to trust her instincts where *this* particular guy was concerned.

*Dear Diary,*

*He kissed me tonight! Jonah kissed me! Called me sweet little Suzy.*

*Suzy! – and for once I didn't absolutely hate it. I don't remember half of what he said, just how he looked, waiting for my answer – again! – so confident. So dependable.*

*So dang – his word! – adorable that I melted and said yes. YES! I'll go out with you, Jonah. Because I trust you.*

*God, I'm scared. But I'm more excited.*

*Can't wait 'til he calls!*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Broken Spur Dancehall  
New York State*

If his relatives back in the Lone Star State could see him now, Jonah McKenzie would *never* live it down. But he wouldn't change a thing. Some deep-seated longing told him she was worth it, and his dogged persistence wouldn't let him quit.

Yet that didn't change the facts...

His self-respect? Gettin' stomped under every boot scootin' a boogie across the dance floor.

Latest grades? Sinking quicker than rain on the parched West Texas ground.

Interest in Susannah Miller? Skyrocketing faster than a space shuttle after countdown.

Ten...nine...eight—



“Hey! Watch it!” the cowboy in front of him yelled.

Seven...six...five—

“Learn to dance, asshole!” the one behind him hollered.

Four...three...

“Get off the floor, jerk,” someone else muttered.

Two...one...

Light, feminine laughter cascaded past his ears, trickled down his neck and curled his hands into fists.

*Lift off!*

“Hey, Tex, you forget how to dance?” Aw, hell...he loved it when she did that—called him “Tex”. Scrambled his brains more than they already were.

Jonah had it *bad* and he knew it.

Tripping over line dance moves long-since memorized, he scuffed left then right then stepped to the side, nearly colliding with the wannabe cowboy who *should've* been beside him.

“Watch out, buster!”

Tipping the brim of his beloved, white Resistol in apology, he hurried to catch up, red-faced and well aware of the fool he was making of himself.

But it was worth it—every stolen glance at that tight, perky ass molded in clinging brick red denim and sashaying to the honky-tonk sounds of Brooks and Dunn. Every mouthwatering instance the *owner* of the tight and tempting ass glided close enough he caught a whiff of her faint, almost sugary scent, so at odds with the stale cigarette ash and heavy smoke clogging the perimeter of the dance floor.

So damn alluring...

And it'd only taken three weeks of tossing his Texan cowboy pride out the door—God save him if his brothers ever found out—and *willingly* subjecting himself to Tuesday night's *FREE Line Dance Lessons*—hell, he was mortified just thinking it—to identify exactly what her scent reminded him of... His ma's home-baked sugar cookies. Lighter than air and melting on the tongue, just the way he liked 'em.

What else he liked—*really* liked—was how the huge hazel eyes of the gal currently shaking her thing next to him sparked mischievously under the dance hall's glowing, multi-hued rays, laughing at him every time he botched steps. Steps he should've known by heart, just like he did the roads back home.

Tonight's lesson officially finished, the place already boasted a good-sized crowd, the advertised complimentary Mexican buffet lining one wall likely having contributed to its popularity. The influx of attractive females certainly didn't hurt, but he only had eyes for one.

The DJ cued the next song and Jonah tried to concentrate on the steps, if only to stay near her. It didn't work because apparently dancing on starry water wasn't as easy as it sounded. Didn't matter though...

It was official—Jonah was addicted. To little Susannah Miller.

Just under a month ago he'd first run into her here, a good-sized joint about thirty miles from campus. Two and a half years ago during his first semester, he'd taken to driving out to the Broken Spur Dancehall & Saloon for the nostalgia of it—the raucous noise that rumbled from the speakers reminded him of the Texas two-step music he'd grown up with. The crowd masquerading as “authentic country”, comprised of all these copycat cowfolk, somehow made him feel closer to home. But he never expected to run into anyone from Cornell, not that he knew at least.

No sooner than he pushed through the heavy double doors into the subtle glow of the parking lights did he draw her in front of him, taking her by the elbows to stare down—way down—into those big, beautiful eyes. A warm, breezy wind cascaded through her unusually thick-looking hair, dispersing the scent of sugary vanilla throughout the night.

Admittedly, if it weren't for all the time he'd spent staring at—and flirting with—her in Dr. Lambert's public speaking class, Jonah might not've recognized her. Contrary to her plain, almost winsome daytime appearance, Susannah at night surprised him. She didn't quite go beyond naughty, but his thoughts sure did, contemplatin' those body-hugging jeans and skimpy halter. One that exposed slim shoulders and a heck of a lot of naked back.

Aw, hell. He needed a bigger pair of jeans—zipper was eating into him again.

But he couldn't stop admiring—okay, salivating—over her normally smooth, straight, honey blonde hair now defying gravity and fluffed out to the max, giving her petite stature another well-needed two or three inches. Those smiling lips covered in a dark apricot shine, glistening with gloss that highlighted a come-and-get-me-cowboy smile if he ever saw one. A smile she seemed to direct more at him each week as she stomped and kicked to the rhythm in a respectable pair of kickin' black cowboy boots. One he couldn't help but think would look mighty fine *off* her feet, arranged next to his...

And that was where the problems started. And ended.

For what he and his grandparents were paying to fly his carcass across the country and to such a renowned school, for the quality education that meant the world to him, he'd promised himself and his parents—especially his ma, who'd dropped out of school to get married and never returned, disappointing Gram to no end—he'd focus on his grades and academic scores. Not on *scoring*.

Tell that to his yearning heart. The heart Susannah had trampled every time he'd worked up the courage to ask her out last semester. For a man who typically wasn't interested in the female persuasion much beyond a dance or two and occasional—make that *rare*—physical encounter, he sure did obsess over this one.

But even though she'd turned him down four times, each more reluctantly than the last, or so it seemed to Jonah, he hadn't been able to purge her from his mind.

On campus, she vacillated between friendly and outgoing and abnormally quiet, almost as if she were afraid to fully be herself. And though they'd shared a few conversations and several laughs—mostly at Dr. Lambert's expense—Jonah felt as though he hardly knew her at all.

Crossing paths, here of all places, well hell...it almost seemed ordained, didn't it? Fate—or God—steppin' in and encouraging him to ask her out again.

Studying and grades taking a backseat, she'd kept *him* coming back week after week, just hoping to see her. Dance with her.

The only thing that'd kept him from approaching her before tonight was the man she always came with. The man she danced with and left with. The man who was noticeably absent tonight.

Green light, far as Jonah was concerned. A green light to ask her out again and maybe beg if needed. What was pride, or even family promises, compared to fostering a chance at true love? Lust, at the least.

Hadn't his continual obsession with her already cost him? A few slaps to his self-esteem and the first B on his college record?

In public speaking, a class that should've been a walk in the park—a puny B! From Jonah McKenzie, the man who'd scored highest his graduating year in all of Sweetwater County on the SATs, a B. As in Buffoon.

But as he bumped boots with yet another annoyed line dancer, Jonah was beginning to think in regards to Susannah...totally worth it.

"How you all doin' tonight, folks?" the DJ asked with an exaggerated twang. "Ready to pump it up and get this *par-tay* started?" Amid equally exaggerated cheers from the too-early-to-be-drunk crowd on the dance floor, the first techno-pop notes of the *Electric Boogie* blasted from the speakers.

Before Susannah, the energetic ball of life who inexplicably adored the song, could drag him into it, given her usual partner was MIA, Jonah looped his arm around her shoulders.

Time to make some sort of official claim. Ask again and not take no for an answer. If she was willing to date that other yahoo—who looked way too damn old for her—then why not him? "Let's step outside. Take a breather."

He was done with casual flirting. He wanted the real thing with sweet, sultry Susannah. Needed to know where he stood and he wasn't about to ask her out under the blinking, multicolored disco lights and be-bopping dance moves associated with the Electric Slide.

"Leave? *Now*? But I—"

"Come on, darlin'." Jonah only had to wink and that apricot-colored mouth pursed into a pouty smile...ever so sexy. "It's loud and I'm bound to get crushed."

"I don't get it, Tex. You usually rock it out. What's going on tonight? You don't have two left feet but two left legs."

"Guess my talent's waned with the moon." Jonah couldn't help but chuckle as he guided her around the dance floor. Odds were, he was the only *real* cowboy present and here he was unable to put two intelligent steps together all because the hot little number at his side really fizzed his soda. "Suppose I'm somewhat distracted."

"Is everything okay? Your gram and her husband? Doing all right?" God, she was a doll. How she remembered to ask about his grandmother and step-granddad – his ma's folks – who lived forty miles in the opposite direction from campus was beyond him.

"They're doing fine, thanks. Everythin's...great." Or would be, once he finally garnered that *yes*.

No sooner than he pushed through the heavy double doors into the subtle glow of the parking lights did he draw her in front of him, taking her by the elbows to stare down – way down – into those big, beautiful eyes. A warm, fall wind cascaded through her unusually thick-looking hair, dispersing the scent of sugary vanilla throughout the night.

"What'd you do," he pointed to her head and whipped his finger around in a circle, indicating her entire look, "to get your hair so...big?"

So *big*? Where was an extra size-fourteen shoe when a man needed one?

"Open mouth, insert boot." He made a lame attempt at humor, miming taking off one boot and shoving it in his mouth. "Can't believe I asked that out loud."

She grinned. "I think it's cute."

"Cute?" he groaned. He did not want her thinking *him* cute. Manly. Handsome. Lust-inspiring. *Tough*. That's what he wanted to be. That and on a date with her. "Your hair – it looks so different from in class. I just wondered how you got it to poof out like that."

Taking a lead from his earlier motions, she bent at the waist, hung her head low and mimed hair-dryer motions with her arms. When she stood and flipped her hair back, the sugary scent about knocked him off his feet. "That's how. But you didn't bring me out here to talk about my hair. What's up?"

"Where's that ol –" he hesitated, not wanting to say *older* and possibly offend her, "um, guy you're usually with?"

"Guy?" She grinned so big, it was a wonder her face didn't split. "You want to know about that guy?"

"It's none of my business, I know," he confessed, intentionally loosening his fingers on her arms. Tiny thing like her, if he wasn't careful he'd leave bruises or scare her off. "But I want to know, all the same. Who is he? Are you two...?"

"You want to know if we're *dating*?" She giggled then threw a hand over her mouth, unsuccessfully attempting to mask it.

When he gave a decisive nod, her entire body shook with laughter. "That's my dad! The lessons were his idea. We're bonding supposedly."

"Your dad?" Her dad! So relieved he wanted to dance a jig, Jonah instinctively bent and tightened his arms around her waist, hauling her around the side of the building with a few quick strides, giving them a modicum of privacy. It wasn't until her heady fragrance filled his nostrils that Jonah realized what he'd done. Releasing her body but snagging her hand, he kept her close and repeated, "Your dad. Huh. I thought..."

While not as bright, the reflected lights still revealed her blush, emphasized her jerky nod. "That's right," she confirmed, rolling her eyes so hard he thought they'd pop out and spin around the parking lot. "We're spending some real 'quality time' together, you know."

"Oh." Jonah couldn't stop his brows from arching as he glanced at her bare shoulders, her elevated hair. "You just look—"

More laughter burst into the night. "You thought because of this," she motioned to her outfit, "I was on a *date*?"

"Wouldn't be a stretch."

"No, I guess not." She sighed, all the humor deflating right out of her. "Truth is, my dad hates it when I dress like this. I'm trying to get on his nerves so he'll back off. I mean, *dancing lessons*? Really? And this after three months of timed chess matches!" She snorted. "You're not allowed to talk when the timer's going, and here it's too loud to talk about anything worthwhile. I'd been hoping he'd ease up some, stop trying so hard..." She gave him a sad, brave smile. "Guess my plan's working too well."

"Because of tonight? You're alone because...?"

"He dropped me off and booked for some meeting."

"Ah, I see what you mean...doesn't seem very 'quality' to me."

"Said he couldn't get out of it, that it was important, but still..." Pure disillusionment shone through.

"Hey, you don't have to make excuses for him. Not to me." Jonah rested an arm against the building and towered over her, pleased when she didn't so much as flinch. Or move away an inch. If anything, she weaved a tad closer. He leaned toward her ear and lowered his voice. "I'm sorry for what you're going through. You deserve better."

Susannah shrugged, blinked those questioning hazel eyes and remained silent. What was she thinking? If he asked her again, would tonight be any different?

Behind the rough-planked wall that throbbed and pounded from the loud bass emanating on the other side, a slew of smoking, drinking good-time club-hoppers were hopping to the final beats of the DJ's choice. Certainly wasn't Jonah's. If he had his druthers, he'd take her back inside and they'd *Waltz Across Texas* all night long. No more of this line-dancing business. He wanted to hold her in his arms but didn't know if he had the right.

“So, little Suzy...” She shifted beneath him and Jonah’s temperature spiked ten degrees. “How’s your vocabulary been doing lately?”

“My vocabulary?” Did she sound all breathy? Or were his ears just stopped up from the loud music?

“Practiced saying ‘yes’ anytime recently?”

She bit her bottom lip against the smile that threatened. “Not lately. But...”

“But?” Jonah dropped his hand to smooth the hair behind one of her ears, inhaling her sweetness all over again.

“But maybe...maybe...”

Yep. Definitely breathy.

One hand snagged his cowboy hat free so he could slant down and press his face near the skin he’d exposed. He sniffed below her ear. “What are you wearing? Ode to Slathering Idiot?”

She laughed then squirmed when he teased her with a quick lick. Amazing. She even tasted sweet.

Tempted to go back for seconds, Jonah reined himself in and straightened. That way lay gluttony.

*Put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony.* Terrific. Just what he needed—echoes of Nana, his Texan grandmother, and her Bible-thumpin’ teachings interrupting this moment. “You smell so dam-dang sweet. My sweet lil’ Suzy.”

“Susannah,” she instantly corrected, but if anything, arched her neck for more of his gluttonous attention. “I really hate it when people shorten my name. I’m already short enough!”

She *was* petite, but then compared to his six-foot-four-inch frame, most women were. He replaced his hat and tipped her face up with a finger beneath her chin. “Susannah,” he tested. “Nah. Too much of a mouthful for a tiny thing like you, Suzy Q.”

“I like your mouth,” she nearly shocked the shit out of him by saying. “You remind me of Danny Zuko.” Just when Jonah felt a surge of irrational jealousy, she defused it completely by adding, “You know, from *Grease*—leader of the T-Birds.”

Oh hell, did he know! *Grease* and its sequel had to be his cousins’ favorite movies. Ever since they came out on video, the girls watched them annually—at least. And *he*—Jonah, the “studious” one of the McKenzie bunch—was being compared to the eminently cool, leather-jacket-wearing leader? Oh, his stock in *needing* Susannah Miller in his life just ratcheted up fifty points.

“Goin’ out on a limb here, *Susannah*,” he stressed her full name, hoping to entice that *yes*, “given your reception to my past overtures.”

“Overtures?” She laughed up at him, one of those tiny hands playing with the design on his belt buckle. “You sound so old-fashioned.”

Jonah just shrugged. He was what he was. A cowboy with a crush. “Yeah, well...I like you. A lot.”

In the distance, a horn blared. The breeze kicked up and renegade leaves skidded across the parking lot. But for Jonah, as that tempting mouth played into another sumptuous smile, time stood still.

“Wow. You sound so confident saying that, almost cocky.”

And she sounded as though *she* didn't quite believe him. So he said it again. With as much self-assurance as he could muster. “I-really-like-you-Susannah-Miller.”

“I like you too.” She took a deep breath and gazed up at him with those dazzling, golden green eyes that spoke more than her hushed, reciprocal words. “And I'd like to spend time with you outside of school – and that includes *dance* school.”

She said that last part a little louder, causing that cockiness she'd accused him of to soar.

Every man has a weakness or two and he'd wager Susannah was his. Keeping his mind *off* her body and *on* his coursework proved another. And that Economics III exam tomorrow wasn't going to sprout an A+ all by itself.

Determined to remain a gentleman – and retain his 4.3 GPA – Jonah resisted the urge to lose himself against her body right then and there. He straightened then had to duck his head in order to capture her gaze. “That means you'll go out with me tomorrow night?”

“Yaaap,” she playfully mocked his relaxed drawl. “I guess it does at that, cowboy.”

“Really? You're not bammin' me?”

“Bamming? There you go again, sounding so old-fashioned. Maybe that's why I'm tossing caution out the window.” Her eyes slid from his then returned in a blink. “But on one condition.”

“Name it.”

Susannah rose slowly on tiptoes, bringing luscious lips a hairsbreadth from his, then hesitated. Waited there...letting him inhale her warm breath, tempting him. So sweet, so seductive. “Show me how much you like me, Tex.”

Jonah had no idea what took him so long. Why he wasted precious seconds just breathing her in rather than kissing her senseless.

His hands caressed up her arms, around her shoulders, to her fluffed-out hair. He threaded fingers through the strands and he made *her* wait while he savored the moment.

Their first real kiss, not counting the ones he'd dreamed of while ignoring Dr. Lambert. It should probably cap off their first date, but given how hard he'd worked for it, Jonah knew he was taking this one early.

Only when she started to sink back to her heels did he make his move, tilting his for once cumbersome hat way back and sweeping her into his embrace. Then slowly...indulgently...taking his first taste of her mouth. His tongue hesitantly slipped out and edged the seam of her lips.

She held still as stone.

Were they even breathing?

He heard a slight moan, thought it was hers, then used his tongue to part her mouth. At that first tentative touch of her tongue against his, combined with the fingers she coiled around his neck, Jonah spun in place and planted his back against the club wall, hauling her closer, thrusting his tongue deeper. His hat fell off, following the way of his common sense.

And Jonah kissed her as he'd never kissed a woman before.

Proved beyond a shadow of a doubt just how much he liked her, *wanted* her as he explored every nuance of her mouth hungrily, afraid he couldn't stop. Afraid he would.

But he *had* to.

Three strokes of his tongue later, somehow Jonah found the strength to release her.

"Tomorrow night then." There was something he was forgetting. What was it? "Uh... Phone number. Yours. Need." Fabulous. Now he was doing Tarzan. From cool leader of a greaser gang to jungle idiot.

Licking her lips, Susannah stepped away, looking woefully uncertain. Was she always going to swing from outgoing to shy or had their kiss knocked her for a loop as it had him? "Can I trust you to call?"

"Like you even have to ask. Of course I'll call. Tonight even." *Careful, Jonah. Don't want the little gal thinkin' you're a stalker.* "If you want me to."

"I do!" Her gaze dropped to the vicinity of his belt buckle again. "But I don't have my purse or a pen or—"

"No need. I've got a good head for numbers and I definitely won't be forgetting yours."

"578-6789. So...see you tomorrow?"

"578-6789. Got it." Jonah was anything but ready for the night's end. Aw, hell, what was a B in economics? "Can I see you home safely?"

*Walk you to your door? Kiss you good night...all night long?* But Jonah kept those over-eager hopes to himself.

"No need. My dad's coming back after his meeting. I'm supposed to teach him any new dance moves he missed." Walking backward, Susannah slowly sauntered the way they'd come, pressing two fingers to pursed lips and blowing him a kiss. "But I'll be home around eleven or soon after. You can call me then..."

"Bank on it."

Once around the corner, the hazy glow of the dance hall swallowed her inside and Jonah fought the goofy urge to Electric Slide the night away.

Instead he scooped up the white-straw cowboy hat he'd somehow lost to the dirty ground, righted it on his head, and drove—practically zoomed—to his dorm. Flew home on air.



No, not air. Gravity no longer existed. Tonight, he'd blasted into outer space. Was seeing stars, dancing on them – no water needed.

He'd kissed her. Actually *kissed* sweet-sultry hazel-eyed, pouty-lipped Susannah Miller and they had a date. He'd get to kiss her *again*.

Mentally, he chanted her number. 578...6789. 578...6789.

\* \* \* \* \*

The new cordless phone his cousins had bought him as a going-away present was ringing off the hook when Jonah entered his room. Leaving the door hanging behind him, he rushed to answer, noting with surprise the *sixteen* blinking messages on his machine as he idiotically answered, "Happiest man alive!"

"Jonah." His brother Bo said nothing more than his name. Two measly syllables he'd heard a million times before.

But never like this. The heavy intonation gave them grave meaning. "What happened?"

"Jonah." The second time, Bo's voice cracked.

"Yeah, bro?" Despair seeping in like a choking fog, Jonah moved to close the door. But he never made it that far.

"It's Mom and Dad. There's been an accident."

Jonah's hand fell from the knob. Unable to stop, he kept walking right into the hall. Trying to avoid the inevitable?

"They're hurt?" How could he ask that and sound so hopeful?

"No...Jonah." A heavy sigh. "Shit, man. I don't know how to say this except to just – They were killed this morning –"

*Killed! Killed.* Killed... Booming in his head like thunder, the word rolled through him.

"Skydiving in Brazil. From what the instructor explained..." Bo's voice faltered. Then he rushed to get the rest out. "Mom's parachute was faulty. Dad must've realized it because he didn't deploy his."

Jonah's blood froze. His heart slowed to a dull thump as he paced the hallway, starting to hyperventilate, aware his dorm-mates were beginning to stare.

"You're wrong!" He gulped past the sick knot in his throat. "There's a backup. There's *always* a backup."

Jonah knew a thing or ten about skydiving – Ma had promised she'd take him, just as soon as he graduated – and being the research-the-heck-out-of-everything type, he'd done his homework.

"There would've been a backup!" He heard himself howl, the cry muffled by the murmur of onlookers. His throat felt tight, his head heavy. His hatband was strangling him – the hat he'd bought at the feed store *with his dad* just before the semester began.

Seizing the offensive reminder, he hurled it to the floor. Stared at the snowy Resistol as if it were a viper he expected to strike. He jumped back.

"This is a sick prank, Bo, *sick*. Go to hell!"

"Hey...Jonah?" One of the guys stepped into the hall—Joey? Jimmy?—hand outstretched. "You okay?"

Jonah knocked his arm down and wrenched away. Kicked his hat as hard as he could. "D... De..."

He couldn't say it, couldn't repeat it, but he could hear it—*Dead!* Dead! Dead... Echoing down the silent hallway.

"God, no!" he choked out, his skull splitting in two.

"Man, I know." He heard Bo sniff and try to cover it. "S-something went real wrong. Mom, she-sh—" Bo lost whatever he was going to say.

Nooooo! His dad? His mom? *Ma?*

Oh God!

*Have you called Gram an' Stuart?* he tried to ask, but it came out a garbled, "Alledgramanurt?"

"Af-After you." A snuffled curse then, "You first. Had to tell you fir—"

"Don't," his lips somehow formed though his mind continued to grapple. "Don't call 'em. I'll tell. In person. I'll..."

"Good idea. *Gram*. Can't imagine how she'll—" Bo broke off and swore. "The kids are a wreck," he referred to their four younger brothers and three cousins. "I'm not...not much better."

Jonah's hand contracted. Against his ear, plastic creaked a protest. "'Ere s-soon." *I'll be there soon.*

"Just get home. Quick as you can catch a—"

*Catch a plane? Act normal?*

Jonah dropped the phone, plummeted to his knees. Rock-hard tile catapulted the jarring landing straight up his legs to his numb brain.

"Scho-nah? *Scho-nah!*" Bo's voice sounded tinny.

Funny...there was part of the phone three feet away from the rest of it.

Fists ready to pummel something, cold tile pressed to his cheek, he just laid there, empty. Uncomprehending. *Denying* with his every jagged breath.

578...6...78? His mind chanted, trying to grab hold of something real. Something sane.

57...9...? 5...7...

But it was gone. Everything was.

Suzy's number. The memory of her smile. Her kiss...

*His parents.*

“Oh God, no...” Their faces flashed through his mind. Riding range on the ranch. Passing biscuits across the dinner table. Sharing a smile over a sermonic tidbit at church. The time Ma crashed their men-only campout, surprising Dad with a pup tent for two...

God, it hurt. But he couldn't stop seeing them...always laughing and happy and *together*.

“Jonah?” Joey-Jimmy asked again, daring to touch his shoulder. “You okay? Hey, bud, talk to me.”

But Jonah didn't answer, didn't move. Didn't breathe.

Just remembered...

Couldn't stop. Not until he heard the wail of sirens screech to a halt outside.

He realized some idiot had called an ambulance. Moving by rote, he scraped himself off the floor. Someone handed him his hat. Jonah crammed it on his head and without pausing or looking back, he stormed from the building.

Had to talk to his grandparents. Hug Gram. Get to the airport. No time for anything else.

His family. They had to be together. Had to make it all...go...away...

## Chapter One

*Rustlers Junction, Texas*

*Present day*

*The Book of Men*—a veritable catalog of available, living, breathing sex “toys”, compliments of the Lucky Lady Dude Ranch, an upscale West Texas resort that caters to women and provides all sorts of studly entertainment, whether vacationing ladies prefer to ride horses...or men.

Suzy’s first night in town, she poured over the unexpected bonanza, pink pen and yellow stickies in hand...

*Meet: Cody*

*Height: 6’ 2”*

*Hair: Light brown*

*Eyes: Green*

*Weight: 190#*

*Enjoys: Bull-dogging, dogs, playing Frisbee, playing Frisbee with his dogs – when not bull-dogging – but not as much as he enjoys spending time with the right lady.*

*Fee: Negotiable, willing to take it out in trade.*

*Note from management: Not available during rodeo season.*

Plastered below the picture of a dimpled, razor-stubbled, smiling sweetheart of a hunk, Suzy’s handwritten note on a yellow square—*Rodeo season? Is that anything like football season? Pity. He’s a cutie.*

Having no idea if early October fell into that criteria, Suzy sighed and flipped the page. Sure, Cody was attractive. Almost...adorable. But not quite the tall, dark-haired, full-lipped drink of cowboy she craved.

After a solid year of celibacy, Suzy was one thirsty woman. Had an itch that’d gone too long without scratching. So yes, she had a yearning for cowboy, but just the right cowboy. One who could compare, even remotely, to the one who still danced in her memory at odd times. Like now...

With that realization, Suzy slammed the book shut. Pathetic! Look at her, ages later, still boasting a silly thing for some guy who never called!

Then again, she reasoned as she flung the book back open, this was her vacation. A time for fantasies and fun and most of all, forgetting. And Suzy had a lot worse heartbreak to banish than the fond memory of that Texan drawl and the sultriest lips in existence.

Out with the bad, in with the stud service.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Several days later*

*Lucky little bitch.*

Hardly able to believe Sommer's good fortune, Suzy watched her friend exit under the clanging cow bell of Bottoms Up Bar & Grille with what had to be the dreamiest cowboy in all of Rustlers Junction glued to her side.

Also vacationing alone at the Lucky Lady for the first time, Sommer was as straitlaced as white cotton panties. Maybe that's why such an instant affinity had sprung up between them—Sommer reminded Suzy of her "real" life back in New York where Suzy, a.k.a. Susannah, was smart, self-sufficient and most importantly, *constrained*.

But not here! Not on *vacation*.

Suzy'd had to goad Sommer into cutting loose and embracing her inner vixen a hundred-billion times it seemed before they'd made that little bet, which resulted in Sommer bravely approaching the next cowboy who had walked in the door. And now they were gone, *together*.

*Lucky little bitch.*

Suzy glanced at her watch, tapped the dainty gold face and laughed out loud. Not even two hours? That's all it'd been?

An excruciatingly *slooooooowww* hundred minutes, riddled with excuses from Sommer while Suzy traded heated, silent exchanges across the bar with her own damn sexy cowboy. At one point, the randy bastard had even licked his lips at her.

Suzy had returned the gesture, hoping he'd still be around when Sommer *finally* hooked up.

And there he was...shooting pool solo in the opposite corner, having temporarily abandoned their long-distance flirting. Maybe he'd concluded she wasn't interested, but boy was he off-base.

Time to earn the outfit—and attitude—she was wearing.

Swishing back her last chug of beer—she'd switched to something a bit tamer after that last tequila shot—Suzy decided maybe an unexpected dose of patience wasn't so

bad. It did give time for anticipation to simmer. And it had certainly given her time to savor the view.

Her cowboy-to-be was black-haired and blue-eyed, with weatherworn, russet skin and a scuffed leather jacket Suzy would wager had seen its fair share of motorcycle mishaps.

Tall, dark and dangerous. Every time he bent to take a shot, Suzy enjoyed a glimpse of steel ass muscles flexing beneath dark denim. Not quite the gentleman who had first gotten her started on cowboys, but these days Suzy enjoyed a healthy dose of edgy excitement with her vacation treats.

A thrill zinged between her legs. She'd yet to know his name, but Suzy had already labeled him *Mine*. A man like that, he'd have what she needed...

Tonight Suzy wanted it rough and randy. Hard and fast. Down and dirty. Slick...and satisfying.

In a zooming-by-too-damn-fast handful of days, she'd have to return to New York and the proper behavior required of the governor's head publicity advisor. She loved her job, but sometimes...just sometimes...all the effort required to be polite and pretty and all things perfect just made her want to puke.

She was *good*.

Damn good at her job. *Morally* good while in the state of New York. Boringly good three hundred fifty-one days out of the year.

And even more, single. *Sexlessly* single. After the train wreck her dating life had become—since the cheat in high school straight through hoping she'd found *the one* a few years back—Suzy finally had the good sense to cry off relationships permanently.

Who needed the heartache undependable men doled out like candy on Halloween?

But come vacation time? The measly two weeks of freedom she gifted herself with after being so good the prior fifty? After stifling urges to let her hair down, burn her bras and run naked down Wall Street...

Suzy *needed* her wicked escape. Hence her annual tradition, sans election years of course. She booked a trip somewhere far, far away, dyed her naturally blonde hair a brilliant shade of whatever struck her fancy—this year it was a vivid blood-red—donned henna tattoos and contacts and cussed to her rebel heart's content.

During these precious fourteen days, her emotions were still off-limits but her body was up for grabs. This year she was stocking up on cowboy, straight from the source. Fantasies to keep her company on long, lonely winter nights.

The muscles between her thighs clenched in celebration. Time to get up off her ass and claim *his*.

Slinging both her purse and Sommer's—which she was babysitting—over her right shoulder, Suzy scooted from the booth and wiggled her black, über-short denim skirt into place. Topped off with her favorite belly-barer, a sleeveless, slinky leopard print

that covered her breasts—just barely—and grazed her ribs, showcasing her exercised-to-the-max abs, Suzy knew that tonight she defined “hot pussy”.

The sweating along her upper thighs told her she had one and she was ready to be one for her rough cowboy in the corner.

The old-fashioned jukebox clicked over to a hard-pounding Brooks and Dunn hit and her step faltered. Damn song. The familiar tune never failed to rouse buried memories. As usual—before they could put her off her game—she stuffed them deeper and concentrated on the noise instead of the notes.

The sound easily blasted over the hum of the crowd. Suzy liked it loud, made her heart drum all the faster. Made it easier to blare out her sensible side—whenever it should threaten to surface. Which wasn’t too often now, thanks to the three drinks—four if one counted the beer, which Suzy didn’t.

Concentrating on her moves, she sauntered one swishy, sexy step at a time across the smoky bar—the art of walking in four-inch slingbacks was a fine one—and slipped up behind him.

Far as she was concerned, they needn’t waste time on frivolities such as flirting—they’d been doing that long enough, even if words weren’t involved—so Suzy bumped her crotch into his well-formed ass and looped both arms around his hips to cup the bulge in his jeans.

It was all the introduction she required.

“Hello, cowboy.” She massaged a good handful of cock and felt it swell beneath her touch. “I’m looking to take a ride on a stallion. You primed?”

“Lady, that’s some fucking nerve you’ve got.” He tossed the stick down and calloused hands captured her wrists in an intimidating grasp and drew her fingers upward. Letting go of one wrist but keeping the other locked in steel, he slowly turned to face her.

Aggressive, wasn’t he? A thrill—or was that a chill?—skittered over Suzy’s skin as she attempted to tug her hand free.

He wasn’t letting go. Maybe she’d misread him.

Or maybe she’d pegged him perfectly. Rough and tough and all hers.

Ice blue eyes peered down from beneath the brim of his black cowboy hat, reminding her of another time, another cocky cowboy, and somewhere deep inside herself...utter longing.

Strangely, thoughts of him had been plaguing her lately, which might explain her single-minded determination to bed the one before her. Black hair. Blue eyes. Big as sin. He reminded her—ever so slightly—of another man. Another lifetime.

Another Suzy.

Resisting the memory because she had to—and because the *other* cowboy, the one she was determined to avoid comparisons with, had worn a *white* hat—Suzy batted thick, mascara-enhanced eyelashes. “Nerve? Who, me? And who’re *you*, cowboy?”

A grin broke and his concrete hold transformed into him kissing her hand. "It's Darin, ma'am. Pleasure to meet you."

"Pleased indeed." She leaned forward just a smidge, winked and whispered, "And I'm no 'ma'am', cowboy. That would imply I'm a lady."

"You're not?"

"Not tonight, I'm not."

He made a sound of pure, primal satisfaction and Suzy found her shoulders imprisoned under one heavy arm and her body rapidly being ushered toward the door. The jangle above chimed her victory as they stepped into the dark, damp night lit only by the glowing red Bottoms Up brands that marched along the roofline overhead. Something about them, the whole bar really, seemed frustratingly familiar, but she hadn't been able to place it and hadn't cared enough to try.

Several yards into the gravel-paved parking lot, the two purses bumping between their hips reminded her of Sommer. "I just need to stop by my car, drop this off."

She pointed to the rented midsize sedan, shiny with mist, parked mere feet to their right, but the heavy arm lassoed around her only clamped tighter when she started to veer that direction.

Darin guided her to the left. "We'll take my truck."

"Hold your horses, cowboy. I won't be long."

"Fine. Go." Relinquishing his claim, he thrust his hands in the air. "But get a move on. Let's get to it."

He was that annoyed over a thirty-second pit stop?

Warning bells clanged as Suzy thought of the forceful, almost punishing grip he'd taken on her wrists. The possessive way he'd hooked that arm around her and quit the bar. No smile, no sexy innuendos. Just pure "Let's get to it". Something was off.

Her judgment maybe?

Suzy liked putting herself at the mercy of a strong, hot man—but not one who didn't know the difference between fun and games, and fear. In chorus with her inner alarm, adrenaline rushed through her, electrifying every muscle and reminding Suzy exactly why she was doing this. Forget murmured sweet nothings and all things romantic—she'd experienced enough bullshit to last a lifetime. She wanted dangerous, right? Wanted a rough and tough cowboy who'd plow her thoroughly. Give her body extreme satisfaction and her mind hours of replay during the year to come.

So the asshole was no hero. It wasn't as though she were *marrying* him. Just getting in a good, hard screw.

Exactly the point, right?

Grinning with wicked intent, Suzy explored her purse for the keys. A second later the car chirped and her trunk popped open.

Darin hovered, walking directly behind her like a creepy shadow. His every step echoed impatience.



Guess she had that coming, riling his cock as she had.

"This'll just take a sec," she assured him, tucking Sommer's purse in the trunk.

"You a cop?"

Where'd *that* come from? "Of course not."

"You better not be. You know you have to tell me if you are an' I ask."

"Okay..." Over her shoulder, she shot him a weird look then returned to digging in the trunk. Stalling. "Well, I'm not."

Silence reigned several tense seconds and then—*boom!*—it hit Suzy. Oh shit, was this what she'd reduced herself to? "You think I'm a whore!" Scrunching her nose, she whirled around, battling the urge to punch him square in face. "You do!"

"Hardly." In an instant his voice went from sardonic to silky smooth. Fingers caressed her shoulders, soothing yet somehow awkward. "Look, I promise, darlin'...it's not that. I'm just not used to being picked up so...assertively. And I'm not exactly Darin Poppins, you capeesh?"

"Oh. Okay..." Despite soaring reservations, and mainly because she needed the think time, Suzy stayed bent over her trunk, checking her purse for essentials. Who knew? She might need more than two condoms!

Yep, she had this vacation-sex thing down to an art.

Except when it came to picking a questionable guy. Which in all honesty had never happened before. Not like this.

Ignoring the increasing twinges of her internal radar, Suzy remained hunkered down, scanning her purse's contents while she considered her options. The handful of condoms of course, and also her license with her blood type on it because Suzy had no desire to end up a Jane Doe. The business cards she never left home without. Then there was a tube of tonight's lipstick, her contact case so she didn't wake up with her green eyes glued in place and—most importantly—a can of pepper spray.

Just seeing it, a small reminder of the huge risk she was taking—and Suzy was suddenly certain she'd landed herself the wrong cowboy.

"Hey, Darin..." Slamming the trunk shut and standing tall with confidence now that her decision was made, she flashed a big smile. "Maybe we should go inside, shoot a game of pool, dance a little." Was there even a dance floor? She didn't think so...but surely someone had been swaying vertically near the jukebox. Uncharacteristic, her being so uncertain—about anything. Fortifying herself, Suzy took a step toward the bar and motioned for him to follow. "To be blunt, you're making me nervous and—"

"Don't be, babe." Already he had his arm around her waist and was steering her across the lot. "You're in good hands. I'll take care of you."

Yeah, she bet. "I mean it. Let me go."

When he didn't, Suzy ducked past him and attempted to circle toward the bar's warm lights—and safety—but Darin snatched her arm, hauling her back. "This about that cop question?"

Well, duh. “Ya think?”

“Look, let me explain. I just got out of County this morning. My PO’s an asshole, with a hard-on to violate me. I’m a lil’ nervous. Lil’ off my game, that’s all...” He jerked her closer, so they were face-to-face as he whispered hotly, “But you’re going to help me celebrate.” Then he nuzzled her neck and gave an ironic laugh. “Time done for bad behavior.”

Suzy choked on her shock. “County? Like in *jail*?”

PO, as in parole officer? As in *felon*?

As in C-R-E-E-P!

Not that someone can’t do their time, atone for their wrongs and be better for it—she would like to hope—but somehow, Suzy didn’t think Darin Poppins here had learned a thing.

“I was tucked away a hard thirty-six months, so I need a good woman tonight. Warm and willin’.” His grip on her arm loosened ever so slightly and he snaked a tight circle around her, dragging a spread palm across her ass. “You’re *willin’*, aren’t ya?”

In warning—or maybe promise—he squeezed with both hands and Suzy blanched at the way his manhandling turned her on. The way she wanted it like this. Out of control. Dangerous.

Dammit, she was too smart to be so stupid.

“What were you in for?” Good grief, was she actually considering this?

But consider she did, for just a second, a very *stupid* split second. After all, she couldn’t get much more dangerous than an ex-con.

“Let’s go, babe.” He ushered her toward an old truck that had seen better days and Suzy knew full well he was avoiding her question for a reason.

“No.” Contrary to his obstinate determination to propel her toward his pathetic truck, Suzy locked her knees, planted her feet and threw his arm off her. “Sorry, but this just isn’t happening.”

Her tone was firm. She meant it.

“You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me.” He was in her face, breathing fire. Shooting icy daggers with his cold blue eyes.

She stood her ground, wishing she’d never set foot on it, but still...“Well, I’m not.” She edged one tiny sideways step toward the bar. “Look, Darin, I *do* apologize but I made a mistake.” Another step, a bit faster, a bit farther. “I’m sorry if—”

“You grab my cock like you did and now this *just isn’t happening*?” He advanced. “You’re *sorry*? And that’s supposed to be the end of it? Not on your life, you little cock-tease!”

“*You pushy assface jerk.*” Never one to back down, Suzy inhaled to her full height, still a pathetic foot shorter than he was—even in heels. She aimed her middle finger high. “Fuck you.”

She expected a lot of things. More vulgar insults, him attempting to grab her again. Even sweet-talking.

But Suzy never saw the slap coming. Out of nowhere, his palm flew through the air, smacking hard into her cheek and whipping her face to the right.

Gasping at the sting, Suzy stumbled back. One glance revealed he followed, no longer a hot, dangerous cowboy, but an angry, incensed man. A monster. "You really think I'm gonna let you get away? Uh-uh, you dumb whore."

Oh God, dumb was right!

"Help!" Suzy took off in a mad dash toward the bar. "Help me!"

Oh God, where was a Samaritan when she needed one? And damn Bottoms Up! Did they have to play their damn jukebox so ridiculously loud? Where were the requisite bouncers? Other bar patrons?

Her heart battered her ribs. His boots pounded behind her, closing in as she fumbled with the purse at her hip, hunting for her pepper spray. Encountering a tube, she snatched it free only to send her lipstick clattering to the pavement. Shit, no!

But she didn't hit the gym five days a week for nothing! She might be short but she packed a powerful punch, and Doofus Darin was about to get one to the jaw – another to the jollies – if he didn't back off immediately. Hardening her voice, ratcheting her volume, Suzy hoped she popped his eardrum. "Leave me alone!"

"For the rest of tonight, babe, we got plans, you and me." His hand caught her upper arm, arresting her escape just as she managed to dip back inside her purse and wrap fingers around precious cold metal. She yanked the can free and shoved it in his face, jamming her finger on the sprayer.

Nothing came out.

Shit! She fumbled with the safety but the damn thing was stuck. *Stupid import! Spray, dammit!*

His evil, triumphant laugh echoed in her brain as she jabbed at the trigger again. Still nothing.

A micro-second later, Suzy ricocheted in place when the bastard jerked her so hard it was a wonder her neck didn't snap. "Nooooo!" everything in her protested on a scream as he backhanded the useless can from her grasp. "No!"

It wasn't supposed to happen this way! She was tough, she carried pepper spray! Allowing herself to be naughty only two weeks out of the year... Shouldn't that minimize any risk – internally *and* externally. She was supposed to be *fine!*

"Time to learn a little lesson." His clutch a vise, he dragged her toward his truck. "You don't tease Darin Burns. Not without payback."

"Damn you..." Her wobbly heels skidded over the slick gravel. God, she'd been an idiot tonight. But now a determined one.

Damn bastard must've worked out in the pokey, his grip was that strong. Clawing at his arm, she went limp. A dead weight.

Her thoughts raced, seeking options just as her gaze lit upon those glowing brands circling the roofline of the building, her mind grappling for something it seemed she should remember...

“Help! Somebody...” What was that she’d learned in grade school? Cry *fire*? Maybe that was it. “Fire!”

Her only answer was Darin’s panting, gruff and sexual as he succeeded in shutting her inside the cab of his corroded excuse of a truck.

Her throat burned from screaming as did her arm from his grip. Her slightly buzzed brain refused to accept the reality of what was happening. *No!*

But as she was forcibly scootched over the trash and empty beer cans littering the bench seat, Suzy realized no one was coming to her aid. She quit expending energy on screams and invested totally in fighting.

Rocking herself backward, faking him out, she thrust her feet forward, hitting him square in his chest, praying the pointy points of her heels stabbed a hole straight through his heart.

Darin rebounded into the door. “Bitch!”

In a whirl of kicking legs and throwing trash, she twisted onto her stomach and scrambled across the seat—arm outstretched, aiming for the passenger door.

For a split second she glimpsed headlights cropping the dark horizon of the highway.

Oh God, please...

But she didn’t have the opportunity to see if the vehicle turned. Steel hands grasped her ankles, yanking her flat on her stomach, and Suzy flailed with all her might as he lugged her back. “Let go! I mean it!”

On her side now, she raked her nails toward him. The tips collided with his cheekbone. Scratching for his eyes, she lunged again. The swine bellowed, which only gave her strength. Clawing at his scraped face, she broke free, scuttled to the door and hoisted it open—just in time to see a vehicle pulling into the parking lot.

Thank God. Help had arrived.

And he rode a white truck.

## Chapter Two

He could see it now...

*Here Lies Jonah "Nana's Boy" McKenzie  
Too good for his own good.  
He died after falling on his ~~sword~~ letter opener.*

"No, too damn dramatic."

Maybe a number two pencil? Still too dramatic.

"Though maybe I am too damn *good* in general..." He was muttering, for once not enjoying the music – nor the drive from the ranch as he headed hell-bent toward town. "Maybe I do try too hard to keep the peace and please everyone. Shit, if tonight's any indication – talking to myself – I'm definitely too good for my own peace of mind."

*Here Lies Jonah "His Own Man" McKenzie  
He died, a #2 pencil in each hand...  
From lead poisoning.*

"God. I need to get a life."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Back at the ranch, earlier that evening.*

Five hundred, plus another seven hundred twenty-three...plus six hundred seventy...

Another three hundred eighty...

Oh, and his favorite? Four hundred eighteen dollars and twenty-three cents on lettuce. *Lettuce!*

*Organic* lettuce, Sheba would've corrected. As if that justified every penny. Not in his account book it didn't.

A stunning total of two thousand, six hundred, ninety-one dollars and change. Who did Sheba think she was cooking for? Texan royalty? Or had the queen of England flown into Rustlers Junction without anyone informing him?

Jonah ran his finger down the columns again, mentally tabulating the numbers against the receipts. Nope...no mistakes. As always, the girls had done a great job keeping records. An even better job spending money. Between them, Jezzy and Sheba had spent *double* the restaurant's monthly expense budget. And these numbers didn't come close to reflecting the bar's side of the tab Tamar was responsible for.

His head whirled, trying to take in all the zeros. No wonder Nana saw the need to appoint Evan the Asshole to manage the place. Someone had to control those girls!

At once, the traitorous thought propelled a brand new wave of anger through Jonah, powerful enough to slam him backward in his office chair.

He rammed a balled fist against the armrest and the sound of wood splintering cracked through the air.

*Real nice, Jonah. Bust up a hundred-and-twenty-dollar chair. That'll make things better.*

Unfuckingbelievable! This whole lousy situation really scuffed his boots and for once, numbers weren't helping, not like they usually did.

Granted, he did most of the family's accounting by computer, but electronic spreadsheets and preprogrammed input forms couldn't hold a candle to brandishing a .7mm mechanical pencil full of high quality HB lead and tallying a good old-fashioned ledger sheet.

Fired up over the day's events, he'd sentenced himself to an evening of bookkeeping, hoping to cool down, but after what Nana had done...

Shot his Wednesday all to hell and in the worst way imaginable.

After making his overnight weekly trek to Lubbock for "supplies" – which was in actuality attending graduate classes at Texas Tech *on the q.t.* – Jonah had arrived home earlier today to find his office barred and his grandmother summoning everyone back to the main house for one of her infamous Family Meetings.

Of its own accord, his fist ripped through the air again, finishing off the armrest. Dammit!

Bad enough that she'd gone behind their backs to Rustlers Junction's slimiest – and okay...*only* – lawyer Evan Diamond to obtain Grandpa's power of attorney and alter his will, hanging her grandchildren out to dry with a truckload of asinine new rules. All their lives she'd made no secret of what she considered immoral, improper and indecent behavior, regaling them with sermons and scriptures and hard, wooden pews against their behinds on Sunday morning – Sunday nights too, if they were fool enough to be within wrangling distance.

According to Nana, it was all for naught and her sinful grandchildren needed to be brought to heel. If the good Lord and the Good Book couldn't do it, she decided holding their trust funds in her hands would, ordering them all to move back home within forty-eight hours *and* explicitly defining the "Christian"-type behavior they were expected to exhibit from here on out – if they didn't want to be expelled from the family.

*Expelled?* She'd gone and lost her marbles completely, the little blue-haired lady he'd grown up loving like a mother. The feisty, unreasonable Nazi overlord was now requiring—in writing—each of them to marry, as in join their lives to another's until death do they part, before they saw another cent of the trust funds that were rightfully theirs.

As if that wasn't enough, she was holding their—nonexistent—"first child" hostage as well!

So without a ring on some random woman's finger and a new baby McKenzie fresh from his loins, his grandmother was threatening to wreck holy havoc in his life. And for what?

All that drinking and partying and wild sexing Nana objected to? Wasn't him.

His three female triplet cousins—the ones who ran the local watering hole? Likely so. His rodeoing youngest three brothers? No *maybe* about it.

But he and his oldest brother Bo and the one right after him—Isaiah—the three of them worked the ranch and little else. The only thing—and he did mean *only*—Jonah indulged in was college. Schooling, dammit—as if that were some sort of crime! He may have felt too much allegiance to Nana and his family to return to Cornell after his parents' death, but whether Nana liked it or not—or even knew, which she didn't—he *was* finishing his master's degree.

Though Nana'd failed to stipulate—her little meeting had become rather heated, therefore ending abruptly—Jonah was certain she *also* expected each of them to attend church every time the doors were open, apply themselves with calloused knees to twice-daily bouts of prayer and commit to memory all thirty-one thousand, one hundred—give or take seventy, depending upon the version—verses the Bible boasted. Not gonna happen.

*Then* there was Evan. Evan "The Dipshit" Diamond, Nana's new buddy and cohort in crime. It was no secret the bastard had hurt cousin Jezzy bad, spreading awful rumors during their high school years. So what'd Nana go and do? Effective tonight, she installed Mr. Diamond-Don't-Shine as manager-in-charge of Bottoms Up Bar & Grille. In charge of Sheba, Tamar and Jezzy.

In doing so, Nana might as well've given Jonah the finger.

But the thing that really fried his bacon—was that because *he* handled most of the ranch's paperwork and the combined Bottoms Up financials come tax time, his brothers and cousins blamed *him*.

As if he'd known a damn thing! Made him want to spit—right on Nana's freshly mopped floor. If he'd pushed their grandmother to make changes in the will—which he hadn't—Jonah sure as hell wouldn't have involved that leech Evan Diamond!

It was enough to make a calm, rational, even-tempered guy break chairs and his opposite fist proved it a third time, crashing into the remaining armrest until it too moaned and broke. Met the floor in a shower of sawdust and wood splinters and cheap particleboard filler.

Jonah didn't care about the money – another few months and the culmination of his plans ensured he'd have plenty of his own because he wouldn't be spending every last cent he saved on tuition and travel anymore. Didn't rightly give a fig about the rules either because it wasn't as though *he* did anything but work and study.

But his family? Their love was gold to Jonah. *Gold*. Even if – at the moment – they all seemed like expensive roses jamming thorns into his side.

And wouldn't his brothers adore being compared to flowers?

Jonah snorted at the idea, imagining Zack's laugh, Ezra's silent grimace.

But the thought of roses tempered his temper. They always did.

He hardly knew a buttercup from a bluebonnet – well, that one he did know, being the Texas state flower and all – but the roses...ones with fancy names like Mr. Lincoln and White Lightnin' and Orange Ruffles...he'd heard his ma mention each and every one as she lovingly tended them, Jonah trailing after her and dragging the garden hose as soon as he was big enough to lug it over the uneven ground. He might not distinguish a Lincoln from a Washington, White Lightning from Blue when it came to flowers, but he did know how to keep them groomed and fed and watered just right until they gave up their fragrant blooms for him and anyone else who cared to look. And if he got pricked, if one drew blood every once in a while?

Then that only made him savor their soft, sweet beauty all the more. Reminders of Ma...

A quick knock on his office door evaporated the reverie and Nana bustled in from the living area, her diminutive form made rounder by the housecoat layered over the robe wrapped around her flannel nightgown. Never ceased to amaze him how much clothing she wore to bed. "Knew I'd find you here. Jonah, that rump of yours is likely to go numb, what with all the time you spend at that desk." Good thing she couldn't see the condition of his chair. "When you spy him next, tell Isaiah I want to speak with him. There's a caveat in the will Evan forgot to mention. Can't blame the poor fellow, the way you hooligans were in his face, forcing him to call a halt to our nice proceedings so hastily."

She *tsked* and *tutted* while Jonah's attention jubilantly seized on *possibility* – and hope. The first glimmer of either all night. "A caveat? What do you mean?"

Nana paused and looked him over. Just when Jonah was sure she wasn't going to answer – or was gonna question him about the sawdust on his desk – she gave one last *tsk* and the expression in her eyes became misty, indulgent almost. "It's something for Isaiah. Meant for his ears only."

Then she smiled and nodded and went on her way, like a puffed-up, lavender-topped marshmallow bound for bed.

Marshmallow? Appearances could be so deceiving.

A caveat though. *Well what do you know*. Jonah felt the first grin coming on since this evenin's debacle began.



Everyone might suspect—or accuse—*him* of being Nana’s favorite, but they *all* had a soft spot for Isaiah, no doubt about it. After finding true love and losing it so tragically, no one ever gave ‘Saiah any undeserved grief. And if Nana had granted Isaiah a loophole, then maybe his brother could get through to their grandmother where Jonah had failed.

“Sure thing, Nana,” he called after her retreating form, hearing a noise behind him. “You can count on me to—”

“I’ll bet she can count on you—you wrinkled-ass-kisser.” Joe staggered inside from the back door, his words quiet but fierce.

It took Jonah a few seconds to pull his mind from the latest development and register what Joe’d just said. Using his palm to sweep the sawdust to the floor without looking up, Jonah told him, “Watch your mouth. That’s our grandmother you’re talkin’ about.”

“No, asswipe, it’s *you*.” Precisely enunciated, anything but slurred, his speech was a testament to how very sloshed he was. He must’ve started guzzling the second their meeting was over.

Joe leaned against the open doorframe, narrowed his gaze and said loftily, “I on-ly speak-est the truth. Of course her ass is wrin-kled—she’s app-app-*pro*-chin’ ninety. An-dd,” the dope tacked on an extra D, “her skin’s not the on-ly thing ‘bout the old bat that’s shrivel’d. Her brain—”

Jonah might *think* similar things about his grandmother—not about her...um, *rump*...some topics were totally off-limits—and there was no doubt the lady had been acting batty lately, certifiably so. But he’d never, *never* speak such abuse out loud.

Joe kept spouting insults, barely taking a breath in between, his words coming faster and louder with each syllable he spat.

Blood starting to boil, Jonah tamped it down. They didn’t both need to lose their heads. Right now, his was the only sane one in the house. “Godd—*dang it*, Josiah, don’t speak that way in her home. It’s disrespectful in the extreme.”

Scowling and bare-chested—not to mention reeking of the open beer he fisted—his younger brother stomped all the way into the office as if he owned it, slammed a palm to the paper-covered desk and leaned in, gesturing toward Jonah with the beer can. “Well, well, well...Nana’s lackey is still hard at work, I see.”

When Jonah didn’t respond, Joe swore under his breath and slugged back a few swallows.

Jonah wished Joe’d slugged *him*. Though everyone considered him more sedate than the typical rowdy McKenzies, after the day he’d suffered, he was spoiling for a fight. Regardless, Jonah resolved to take the high road, shuffling a pile of receipts, straightening the edges then stapling them inside a folder. The blatant mistrust from one of his own stung, but there was no point arguing with a drunk Joe.

Let him think whatever he wanted. Jonah had exhausted himself earlier trying to prove his loyalty when Bo had likewise indicated doubts.

Ignoring the glaring man hovering over his desk, Jonah flicked the manila folder of financial mayhem shut and focused his annoyance on the stack of unopened mail, tearing his letter opener through the top envelope. The Grille's latest electric bill...oh, this ought to be good.

"Nothin' to say, huh?" Joe slid farther across the desk, looking like a coyote about to spring on unsuspecting prey and tear 'em to bits. "You ignorin' me, you closed-mouth *son of a bitch*?"

Jonah's brows shot skyward. Wow, as if that were called for.

Good ole Josiah had yet to accept it, but beer wasn't a smart vent for him. Turned him nasty. Verbal vitriol—exactly the kind of behavior Nana wanted to stem with her new rules. Too bad they were absurd beyond belief. And if Joe's actions were anything to go by, his behavior only predicted an increase of what she'd hoped to abolish.

Hell. A plague on them both—locusts and flies and roaches. That's what Jonah imagined came at him, swarmed about his office, jumped in his blood, riling his normally reserved self, goading him to—

But no. Taking in a looooooong, deeeeeeeep breath, his mind won out. Pushed those incendiary impulses down. And out.

Cockroaches hadn't even been a plague, had they? His inability to remember basic knowledge drummed into him from an early age just went to show how irritated the whole situation made him.

A coil of sultry wind blew in from the open door, a humid reminder of the unusual rains that had blanketed the region the past several days, nourishing ground starved too long with drought. Inhaling again and tasting the rare muggy night on his tongue, Jonah intentionally relaxed. "This chair's already ruined if you're lookin' for something to bust," he offered, rising with a flourish to display the damage then plunking back down. "Just so happens you're not the only one upset with Nana."

Lips twisted, eyes fairly smoked, but Joe stayed his ground. A silent, steaming, snorting bull...about to charge.

Great, just what Jonah didn't need. Joe the Jackass, at his service.

Jackass. Bull. Coyote. Any which way around it, drinking turned his already volatile brother into an animal. So much for Nana's new edicts—a couple hours out and already Joe had consumed enough alcohol to become flammable. Real mature way for a twenty-seven-year-old man to cope.

Josiah was the fifth McKenzie brother, only good-natured, always joking Zack being younger. Maybe that was the problem—Isaac ended up with every humorous funny bone to be had; Joe ended up the cantankerous grouch.

Fact was, Jonah often felt sorry for his second-to-youngest brother. He was a good guy when he wanted to be—when he was sober—and a damn talented bull rider. He was just born without a self-control gene. Or maybe he'd lost it when their parents—

Jonah wheeled his mind from that thought, did a one-eighty and stared at Josiah. “You know, you keep scowling like that, an’ your face is likely to freeze that way,” he kidded, hoping to crack the thick layer of tension between them. “Seriously, man, you gotta start thinkin’ about the creases you’re causing.”

Or the heart attack he was gonna give himself.

“Okay, Ma,” Joe spit out.

Instantly Jonah’s jaw clenched so hard his back teeth squeaked. Shit, he’d spoken without thinking.

*You keep frowning like that your face is likely to freeze in place.*

Ma’s line, spouted whenever one of them got the grumps—Joe more than any of them.

Of course his ears would never hear that warning again except in bittersweet memories. The stinging reminder only served to make the day’s events harder to stomach.

“Sorry, man. Wasn’t intentional.” He dropped the letter opener before he made use of it in a manner meant to draw blood. Whose...he wasn’t certain.

“Right, not in-intentional. Unlike you helping Nana with this little s-scheme of hers.” With that, his brother straightened, all muscle and swag, as he destructively swigged back more beer. Shaking the remnant drops into his mouth, Joe collapsed empty aluminum between two steel palms. Thin metal cracked and popped...pancaked. “Yup. You always were a momma’s boy. Now a *Nana’s* boy.”

Electric bill in hand, Jonah saw red at the blatant accusation, the harsh *intended* comment that bruised deeper than a right hook from Joe ever could. “Don’t go there, bro.” He nodded toward the metal pancake. “Toss it out and hit the hay before you do something you can’t take back.” Hell, he’d already *said* a mouthful he likely wouldn’t remember come dawn.

Needing to clamp his hands around something, Jonah reached for armrests that weren’t there. He heard the weakened chair rollers scrape across the floor, focused on the sound and attempted to think rationally. One of them had to. Joe and Zack rented a house in town, about forty minutes from the ranch, but his brother was in no shape to get behind the wheel. Cringing at the thought, Jonah said, “Come on. I’ll drive you home—”

“Trying to toss *me* out because I hit a nerve?” Mighty proud of his low blow, Joe cocked a knowing eyebrow and smacked the crushed can to the desk with enough force to leave a dent. “What I’m wonderin’, Jonah boy, what we’re *all* wonderin’, is exactly what you’re getting out of this. What’d Nana promise to have you turn traitor? Huh, Benedict?”

Fury gnawed at Jonah’s gut, clawing for release more fiercely than he’d ever experienced. Of their own accord, his lips compressed, nostrils flared, and his eyes slanted to slits. But he couldn’t squeeze out the sight of Joe—or his unwarranted accusations. “I’m curious about that as well. Just *why* would I rob myself of my own

trust fund? Convince Nana that the rest of you bas—*yokels*,” he caught himself before calling every member of his family a bastard, “should be coerced into moving back in? Huh? Tell me *why* I’d want to share the house with more than our controlling nana, sick granddad and his goddamn nurses!”

Jonah’s ears perked up at the sound of his yelling. He never yelled. And as the only grandchild still living in the main house—at thirty-four!—he was used to refereeing outlandish arguments between his Bible-quoting nana and ribald-comment-spewing granddad. He was *not* used to losing his cool!

“You tell me, *Nana’s boy*.” So smug...so cocky. So sloshed on his ass. As if Joe had a clue.

“Try using your brain, idiot. I had nothing to do with Nana’s machinations. So get lost.”

“Ma-ka—? Quit throwin’ ’round those eighteen-syllable words and ’fess up.”

“This conversation is over.” He’d been unjustly accused and attacked for the last time. Hell, maybe *he* ought to hightail it out of there and get drunk as a skunk himself—pull a Joe and find the sluttiest little lady in Rustlers Junction, invite her to ride and writhe over a wild cowboy all night long, and in the morning, be the first to tell Nana where she could shove her damn will and the rules outlined within. Tell Evan “The Dipshit” Diamond he and all his legalese bullshit could take a hike off the nearest cliff.

Maybe then his family would show a little respect.

Except he’d no longer be part of it—a gamble Joe was already taking, drinking as he was. And in *Nana’s* house. “Go home, Joe. Sleep it off.”

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere ’til you ’fess up.”

Well, shit. Eyeing the discarded letter opener, Jonah wondered if maybe he’d been too hasty to lay down his only weapon.

Needing the distraction of numbers, he whipped the electric bill from its tattered envelope and shook the folded sheets open. Before his eyes could connect with the month’s total, Zack popped his head in the open back door. Good. Maybe their youngest sibling was up for a little babysitting—namely Joe.

“Hey, guys. Back from my place. Brought that keg of Tanner beer I scored last week. Had it packed to finish off in Arizona,” he mentioned the rodeo destination the three youngest had been heading to before being recalled for Nana’s meeting, “but figured as long as we’re grounded, might as well enjoy it tonight. Tapped it yesterday, so it needs drinkin’. It’s on ice in the barn.”

So much for babysitting.

“*Tanner* beer? Don’t let Bo catch you drinking that swill. It’ll eat him up more than he already is.” Made by neighboring ranchers, ones they had a long-standing feud with—longer than Jonah’d been alive—the prized stuff was lethally potent and expensive to come by. As if Joe hadn’t had enough booze the past hour! Did Zack *want* Nana to wake up and find them both pukin’ up guts in the toilet or passed out beneath?

Jonah shot his youngest brother a pointed glare as Joe shuddered and turned as red as a volcano about to erupt.

"Um, everything okay?" Zack ventured a step into the room.

"I was just chatting with Joanie-gal here, 'bout his biz'ness conduct."

That did it! Now Joe was calling him a sissy?

Of all the stupid, childish—

"Get him out of here, Zack," Jonah ground out, barreling to his feet and knocking over the wrecked chair in the process. "Or I swear—"

Quick on the draw, Zack practically shot into the room between them, grabbing Joe by two stiff arms before Jonah could pounce.

"Lemme go!" Joe demanded.

All their lives, Zack had been the only one with enough finesse and patience to deal with the hothead. Joe was fire, Zack easy flowing like spring water. "No way. Save your anger for Nana and Diamond. They deserve it—Jonah doesn't. Come on, bud," Zack cajoled. "Let's go slam 'em back and piss on Nana's flowerbeds."

That splintered Joe's hostile expression, if only slightly.

"She deserves it, don't you think? Calling us back here after we'd almost made the New Mexico line?" Zack grinned, tugging on his flame-breathing brother's stone shoulder. "I've got my eyes on that chamomile she loves to boil into tea."

Jonah almost cracked a smile at that—especially on the heels of Zack's support—but smartly refrained.

"Get off me!" Joe shook free, pointed threateningly at Jonah and all but tripped on his way out of the room. "See ya, *momma's* boy."

Zack stood there, gawking after him. "Jonah, man... Listen—he doesn't mean it. Jonah?"

But Jonah was no longer looking at Zack. He was looking at the electric bill. At the total. Which had nearly tripled from last month. Humor fled faster than Joe. Rage roared in to take its place. "Get out."

"But I know he didn't—"

"Get. Out. Out! Go piss on the flowerbeds. Piss on Joe, but stay outta my sight. Both of you. *All of you. And stay the hell away from Ma's roses!*"

Jonah'd had it up to his eyeballs. He was mad to start, Joe had rubbed him raw, but this...

This went above and beyond. Or rather, below the belt.

His brothers and cousins had the nerve to point fingers at *him* while they pissed money away as if it were wind? Money he put his every waking moment into saving, growing...

Not for himself. For them, dammit! Them!

Jonah crumpled the bill in his fist and grabbed his truck keys.

Jezzy, Sheba and Tamar were going to answer for this. Or so help him God, he wouldn't just sit idly by and *allow* Nana to shut down Bottoms Up Bar & Grille—he'd do it himself.

### Chapter Three

*When it comes to Studs in Spurs...  
Can you trust your judgment?*

*Sophisticated Woman*, special Western-themed issue left poolside...now damp and a bit soggy. Quiz to be taken several days after Suzy's terrifying run-in with Darin.

*Powerfully Impaired There, Pardner.*

*Whoa nelly, dear Sophi reader. Did you really answer honestly? We didn't expect anyone to mosey this far down the path of poor judgment. Time to shore up your defenses, your decision-making and – just possibly – your moral compass. When deciding upon bed partners, brass and bossy don't always make the best bedfellows.*

"Dumb-ass quiz! This is what I get for answering honestly?" But she hadn't, not really. She'd answered as Suzy, not Susannah.

New result when she picked the waterlogged magazine off the ground where she'd dropped it and answered how she thought Little Miss Proper – meaning Sommer and, okay, herself back at home – would.

*Prudently Perfect, Partner.*

*Experience has shown you can rely on your gut to give you the accurate lowdown on people and situations, including those that veer toward the seductive and satin sheets. Just don't spend so much time analyzing your intuition you forget to have some fun along the trail.*

Well crap. Was there no middle ground?

\* \* \* \* \*

Suzy always suspected her vacationing libido might eventually land her in trouble. Why had she let her sex drive trump her common sense?

Darin came roaring at her but Suzy knew it would be okay – it had to. Help had arrived.

And he rode a white truck. A *huge* white pickup.

Pristine, polished paint glowed pink beneath the bar's reflective red lights. Never had Suzy seen anything more glorious.

The beautiful truck her destination, she fought like a maniac and tumbled free of Darin's rust bucket, running and waving frantically.

"Get back here!" Hot on her heels, Darin captured her arm, plowing her against the nearest vehicle. Cold metal blasted up her spine and air *whooshed* from her lungs.

Boy she'd found herself a determined sicko. Too angry to be frightened—he'd hauled her across *trash*, for God's sake—Suzy kicked and squirmed with renewed vigor, noting the blood she'd drawn from his face. It oozed from twin scratches, provoking her. *Satisfying* her. He wasn't so tough. "Get off me!" Aiming her vocals toward the newcomer, Suzy freed the loudest "HELP ME!" yet.

Only it came out a muffled, puny "*Helmmmm*" because Darin covered her mouth from behind.

"Shut up, bitch. You wanted this, remember?"

No, she hadn't. Not *this*. Never this. *Asshole*.

Never more thankful for the strong, sharp nails she possessed, she whipped her free arm high and aimed. *This time, buddy, you're losing an eye*. She slashed out and he ducked. Then again. His hand slid below her lips...

"Help!"

From the depths of the rain-slicked parking lot, the engine hummed then died. The door thunked open. Another muted "Help!" escaped before Darin could stop it. A second later the engine resumed life.

Tires spun across loose gravel...screached to a stop nearby.

To the background static of an idling engine, boot heels thumped swiftly closer. "Get your hands off the lady, Burns. Do it now."

At once she was thrown from time. The command echoed in her mind...hauntingly familiar, like some sort of *déjà vu*.

Darin ventured a glance over his shoulder, his grip punishing but tone confident. "Mind your own, McKenzie. I knew you were gonna be trouble the moment you pulled in." His momentary distraction gave Suzy the advantage she needed. "But this here's my woman—least for tonight—and she'll—"

She gasped deeply, fortified herself now that she had an ally and powered her knee high, hitting the bastard dead center in the groin. "Like *hell* I'm your woman, you no-good fucking prick!"

"Oof!" Darin doubled over, only to be jerked back up by her cowboy hero and shoved toward his truck, just as Doofus Darin'd been shoving her only moments ago. But with a whole lot less fight.

Suzy cleared the area, a little disappointed Darin was being sent on his way without receiving the thorough beating he so deserved. What a souvenir his eyeball would've made.

Wait a minute. Her mind backtracked. Had Darin said *McKenzie*? Noooo...

Impossible, right?



Of course it was! Shock was simply making her hear things.

“Get out of here now, you sorry-ass SOB!” her hero grated out in a hard voice, cramming Darin inside without further ado. “And stay off the property. From now on consider yourself banned from Bottoms Up.” For good measure, Hero smacked the son of a bitch on the shoulder then flung the door shut. “Get on! Now!”

As if he considered his word law, he bravely turned his back on his foe and sauntered over to Suzy. His voice changed, mellowed. “You all right, ma’am? He didn’t...?”

Stunned, starting to shake now that she was out of danger, Suzy stared at the unmoving pitiful truck behind him then brought one hand to her red-hot cheek where Darin had slapped her. Slack-jawed, speechless for once in her life, she nodded. *Fine*. She was fine.

It was *over*.

Which was confirmed by the pathetic *rrr-rrr-rrrr* and sick garble of Darin’s engine as it choked protests before sputtering to a rattling roar over Hero’s purring engine and limping off into the night. Suzy watched the man she’d ingeniously – stupidly – labeled *her* cowboy only minutes prior disappear from her life. Her shock and fear receded with him, replaced by pure outrage. Of all the nerve!

Why, if Hero hadn’t chased him off, she’d gladly given Darin Poopins what for. Somewhere around this parking lot was a can of pepper spray with his name stamped all over it.

“No-good coward,” her hero drawled in that haunting Texas-hued voice of his, melting the starch from her spine in one sentence flat. “Doesn’t exactly butter my biscuits to see the likes of him back in town.”

While her sluggish mind grasped to make sense of the oddly familiar, yummy-sounding syllables, her eyes drank him in. Standing with hands on hips, tall – extremely so – and imposing, her hero appeared every bit the role of the cavalier knight who’d just ridden up on his white horse – or truck – to save a distressed maiden.

Only she was no maiden. Distressed? Um...yes.

And his glossy white truck? Certainly no steed. But skimming her eyes over his form, from the well-buffed cowboy boots that reflected a burnished shine in the glow of his headlights – really *big* boots, she couldn’t help but notice – past jeans, perfectly pressed with a definite crease running straight up either leg, to a cream-colored shirt buttoned practically to his neck, he radiated down-home hospitality. Goodness and decency.

He even wore the requisite snow-colored hat tipped forward in true cowboy fashion, shadowing all but that strong jaw.

A valiant white knight.

Exactly the sort of man she *should* want—and certainly did, in those dead-of-night dreams she never admitted in daylight—but instead, she was spending her vacation tempting the devil himself. Rolling dangerous dice—all for the thrill.

“Um, thank you,” Suzy choked out. The words humiliated her, an acknowledgement of her stupidity. Her weakness. Her blatantly incompetent judgment. Which usually *wasn't* the case.

“Lucky I stopped by.” He tipped his hat in the direction of the noisy bar. “I’m not exactly a regular here.”

Oh, a goody-two-shoes. Figured.

Though she couldn’t make out Mr. Perfect’s face in the shadows made darker by the cast of his hat, she knew he was handsome. She could see it in that squared-off jaw, hear it in his voice, a voice that niggled her memory in the most bothersome way.

She knew she hadn’t met him this trip—before tonight’s dubious attempt at being wild, she’d only been this close with one other cowboy. And until this week she’d never been in this part of Texas. But still, it was as though she knew him. Wanted him, with a longing so... *Nonsensical*.

He wasn’t her type. Not even close.

“You sure you’re okay?” He took a step closer, infusing her with his flawlessness. His white hat. Chivalry she didn’t need or want. At least that’s what she kept telling herself. “Looked like he was roughing you up pretty bad. I’m guessin’ you’d like to go back inside, call the sheriff and file a report?”

Heat invaded her face. Total embarrassment, her soul. “No. Not at all.” Her throat felt strained from all the yelling. “Things just got a little out of hand.”

“Lady, you kidding me?”

Maybe it was because he was right that she became so annoyed. It was humiliating—being caught acting loose, and with a loser. Worse, having it backfire in her face. Not to mention, she hated feeling helpless.

And needing a man, other than for his cock? Not her style.

Truth be told, all she wanted was a great big hug. To step forward and wrap herself in his strong embrace and forget Darin in the deep drawl of her hero’s Texan accent. In the secure, reassuring touch she somehow knew he’d possess.

But even with her wrist still aching, her body flushed with lingering adrenaline, Suzy didn’t want to acknowledge the danger she’d just placed herself in. Didn’t want to actually admit she could’ve been raped or...maybe worse. Not out loud, not to herself and especially not to him. “Nice of you to stop by, cowboy, but I had it under control.”

To that, he full-out laughed, not a bark of actual humor but one of irony. Of disapproval. “What were you doing with scum like Darin Burns anyway?”

“Uh, what do you think?” Spinning her back to him, Suzy mentally rejected the surprising comfort his presence provided *and* the maddening desire to throw herself at him, curve her arms around his neck and hold on for dear life.

Needing a task, she scanned the parking lot for her lost lipstick and pepper spray, instead finding two scattered condoms she hadn't realized she'd dropped.

"You know, he was in County three years or something." Hero followed her, as if she hadn't already thanked him, as if any of this were his business. "Bad dude. Add in the liquor and I doubt he was looking for a Sunday picnic."

"And you think I was?" Bravado, she could fake. Suzy ignored the foil packets and moved on in her hunt, unwilling to draw attention to them and make a bigger fool of herself.

"Yeah," she muttered, accepting he wasn't going to leave without an answer. "He mentioned doing time. I rather found it a turn-on."

Take that, Mr. Protective. She —

There! Ten feet ahead, his headlights reflected metal and shadow in tow, and Suzy rushed to gather the rest of her lost items. He strolled after her.

She'd stooped to retrieve the lipstick and pepper spray just when he asked, "Did you know he was in for statutory rape? Whether it was consensual or not is still up for debate."

"I know now." Kneeling, Suzy sealed the little canister in her grip. "But like I said, I had it under wraps. Really."

Her voice cracked, revealing emotion, proclaiming her lie, and Suzy hated herself for it. Tonight she'd lost control of herself and the situation, and the most pathetic part was, she feared it might not be the last time. Not the way she liked her physical itch scratched.

No matter how long she held off back in New York, for the sake of her job, her reputation...her heart... No matter any of that, she couldn't live off dildos alone. What woman could?

Admittedly, part of her *wanted* the rough sex. The thrill. The danger.

She liked it.

Had even, naïvely, thought she'd found it in a complete package once — emotional connection *and* physical satisfaction the way she craved it. Then she'd stumbled across condemning proof that men weren't to be trusted, not with a woman's heart. And she'd come up with her fifty-week-good-girl routine, two-week-sexual-bonanza reward concept.

Now...after Darin Dickhead? He had her thinking maybe she should scratch this vacation sex-scheme rather than her itch and rethink her plans. Take to sex clubs or hiring gigolos or...she didn't know. *Something* safer.

"Under wraps, huh?" Hero broke in, halting her mental tirade. "Why don't I believe you?" Fingers hooked in his belt loops, Hero circled her, seemingly determined to talk some sense into her, those huge boots of his making barely a sound yet she heard the incriminating thuds nevertheless. "Man's a total skank, but you know that too — now."

Crouched there, paralyzed by his concern, Suzy could only answer him with silence. Two couples exited the bar with an unexpected blast of noise. *Where had they been five minutes ago?* Exchanging raucous laughter and shouts about their next destination, they climbed into separate vehicles and zoomed off.

The silence lengthened.

"So...Ms. Got-it-Under-Wraps, what're you plannin' on doin' now? Got any other grand ideas?"

Again something about the way he spoke niggled her brain.

Suzy glanced past him toward the bar, certain she'd had enough excitement for one evening but too stubborn to admit it. An odd shape caught her attention and she realized she'd dropped her contact case as well. Leaning forward to pick it up, she braved it out. "Look, don't worry about me. Just because you helped me doesn't automatically mean I'm your problem."

She really should go back to the dude ranch where she was staying. But Suzy knew she didn't want to be alone, not now. And considering she'd been drinking, she was hardly legal at the moment.

"Lady, if you wanna get laid that bad..."

"*What?*" Her eyes flashed up to his shadowy face.

She thought he muttered something about tired of being good. But his next words came loud and clear. "I'd be happy to be of assistance."

He was *offering*? Stud service? Or was she misunderstanding? Her fried brain frying her ears?

Intentionally dirtying her mouth, Suzy asked, "So, if I want to fuck you, hot an' hard all night long, all I gotta do is say the word?"

"Appears that way."

As if all she needed was to be serviced by his cock and then she'd be safe and sound? The evening's nightmarish events vanished in the bliss of orgasm?

How inviting it sounded—especially when he added in that relaxed drawl, "I can guarantee we'll both get what we want without any of...Burns' brand of foreplay."

Was she galled or intrigued? Flattered or...fuckin' pissed?

That cream shirt decided it for her. Too tame. She opened her mouth to refuse then paused. Did she really want to turn down a slick an' sweaty ride on this tall, brawny specimen?

"That is, if you're still hankerin' for it. Ma'am."

How gallant of him. Truly...er, *polite* to offer himself up as her stud. But that last, tacked-on "ma'am" sealed it, especially since she caught an undercurrent of sarcasm. So she'd been trying to score and he'd caught her at it. Bully for him. "Sorry, cowboy. Not interested. You're too tame for the likes of me. Too damn polished. Way too polite."

Which sucked because there was still something about him... That voice. The way he walked. Or strutted actually.

Yep, total *déjà vu*.

“Too damn...*tame*? Too polite? That’s why you don’t wanna be fucked by me? But you’d have taken it from Burns? Along with the bruises? Are you damn nuts?” Anger coated his shock and he advanced and claimed her firmly under the arm. “Then how’s this for you? Get up. You, *ma’am*, are headed home.”

As he hefted her to her feet, Suzy saw it up close for the first time. His belt buckle—a combination of silver and gold tones in the shape of the letter B, with a U below that ended with an arrow curving upward to the right. The Bottoms Up brand—just like the ones marching around the perimeter of the building behind her. Why hadn’t she made the connection? She doubted there was another brand—or belt buckle—like it anywhere but...

*Jonah?*

And hadn’t Dickhead called him McKenzie? Oh God...

Almost giggling at the ludicrousness—Jonah, right here, right now, clutched to her arm...her hero?—she brought up her free hand, the one still clasped around pepper spray, lipstick and contact case, and tipped his hat off his head.

The white Resistol—even after all this time, she remembered him calling it that—sailed to the ground behind him, revealing a pelt of short, minky brown hair.

“Hey!” But he made no move to let her go in order to retrieve it, and sure enough, there, in the beam of the truck’s headlights, those unforgettably lush lips formed the demand, “Where’s your car? Aw, shit. You probably can’t drive. How much’ve you had to drink?”

This changed everything. *Everything*.

When she didn’t immediately respond, he had the audacity to reach for the purse at her hip, rooting inside. “Hey! What’re you doing? And I only had three. Or four. I can hold twice that and still walk a straight line.”

Really, she could. But Suzy *did* know better—which was why she’d intended to sit down in a dark lonely corner and have a soda and wait it out. But those plans just flung off the radar, along with thoughts of anything else.

This was Jonah. *Her* Jonah.

“Well, ma’am, your steps may not be skewed but I’ve just decided your brain is, an’ I’m sending you home.”

“On whose authority?” Not that she planned on leaving or going anywhere *without* him. Not now.

Knocking another condom free and ignoring her question, he tugged out her keys. The car beeped rudely in the night, headlights flashing and revealing the location of her boring rental.

For she’d much rather be riding shotgun in a big ol’ truck.

Better yet, a snazzy white one.

“Come on. I’ll follow behind you, make sure you get home okay.” Next thing Suzy knew, he’d affixed his hat firmly on his head and she was once again being lugged across the parking lot. “Don’t try to come back again either, sweetheart, because I’ll be here all night and if you show your face inside, I’ll have you banned and we *will* be calling the sheriff.”

Oh, the cocky ass! What...she wouldn’t screw him, so he sends her home?

That’s what it felt like, but underneath it all, Suzy grasped that this was his way of protecting her.

Didn’t he realize *he* was more a danger to her than Darin any day? The one screw in all of Texas that *would* matter.

Time had changed nothing. She wanted him instantly but detested him entirely. One look, one touch, and he affected her in ways that ought to be illegal—talk about *dangerous*! When she thought of how she’d hung on his every word, anticipated his every smile...

The sensation of his lips brushing hers, teasing, tempting...

Disappointing.

The son of a gun had never called, never taken her on that date he’d promised. He’d never even shown back up at the dance hall.

Had her kiss really been that bad? Last she remembered, he’d been in charge!

What nerve, casually offering a stranger sex after playing with her heart like that...

And she was going to turn him down?

What about that thrill she needed? What about closure?

“Hold up!” She tugged on her arm, digging in her heels, but he propelled her onward. “Whoa there, cowboy. Give a girl a minute to change her mind. Maybe you aren’t too tame after all.”

Granting him even the slightest edge smarted, but still, her flirting stopped his feet. Tempered his purpose.

“What’s your name?” She needed to hear him confirm it. Needed to *know* she wasn’t crazy. That after all this time, now that she was done with men—save hot and sweaty sex—fate had seen fit to thrust them together.

“Jonah.” Looking confused, he released her arm and stared down at her with eyes she knew to be the truest shade of blue, even if she couldn’t register their hue in the dim light. “Jonah McKenzie, ma’am.”

The bastard actually offered his hand.

Deliberately, she said, “Suzy.”

Fingers folded over hers, gripping tight. He shook her arm twice. “So...are we starting over, Suzy? We kinda got off on the wrong foot there.”

The wrong foot? Is that what he called leaving her to foolishly hang by the phone for a week?

“So...fresh start?” the man before her asked again.

And that’s when Suzy realized. He was talking about *now*. Tonight. Here he was, dragging her off and he didn’t even recognize her, not in the slightest.

Sure, she was in disguise. Sexual-come-hither attire, red hair, contacts that changed her eyes from boring hazel to rich emerald green. But still...didn’t she smell the same, talk the same...or something? *She’d* recognized him, after all – and that was after four drinks and quite the scare.

“Suzy,” she repeated.

Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

*Hello...* Just how long would it take him?

Or maybe he didn’t even *remember* her. How insulting...disheartening in the extreme.

“Suzy.” On a whisper, she revealed her name one more time, her insides flooding with despair and then determination.

Dammit, one way or another, he *would* remember her. And she refused to spell it out.

She did intend, however, to prove she knew how to kiss and *where*.

Then *she’d* promptly ditch him, just as he’d done to her. Maybe she’d even ask for his number first, swear to call. Then not. Oops.

She was probably fooling herself thinking he’d care at all. But then, Suzy was pretty certain with the right moves, she could make him care. At the very least, about where the next fabulous orgasm was coming from. Because it wouldn’t be from her!

He deserved no less – show him the stars then land him in shit.

And why shouldn’t she have a little fun of her own? Get her cowboy itch scratched by the very man who gave her the damn rash in the first place. In any case, with *this* particular cowboy, there was no concern about ending up a Jane Doe.

“Well, big, bad Jonah McKenzie, why don’t you whisk me off on that white steed of yours?”

Beneath the hat, he cocked a dark brow. “What’s that?”

She patted his shoulder consolingly. Poor man was clueless. Absolutely clueless. “Your truck, hero. I want you to take me for a ride.”

## Chapter Four

3.1415926535897932384626433...

“Oh honey, you’re going for a ride all right. A wild one.”

Electric bill long forgotten, Nana and her nonsense the very least of his concerns, Jonah tucked an arm around the hellcat’s exposed waist and drew her flush against his body, blood rushing to his cock.

Given his rebellious thoughts from earlier, he was well primed to be—for once—anything but *good*. Ready to head down a path of sin, and it appeared this feisty, tattooed gal was prepared to light the way.

Images of taking her hard and fast a hundred different, dirty ways flitted through his mind, maximizing the tension that had been building in him all damn evening, especially since setting eyes on the gorgeous, fighting female at his side.

“Ah, Reckless Red...” A warning was only fair. “You’re about to find out just how *untame* I can be.”

“Mmmm...” Crimson nails traced along his shoulder, generating tingles through his shirt, and Jonah had half a mind to go all Incredible Hulk and rip it off. “So he does have a beastly side he’s ready to release. I like it.”

Woman could read his mind, couldn’t she?

“I’ve got a beast in my pants, I know that.”

“Rweeow!” Her hips jounced and gyrated against his groin with the fluency of a born dancer. “Oh yeah, I can feel that nice big cock. And I want it.” Her tongue teased glossy, ruby lips he ached to taste. “In my mouth.”

Those caressing, sharp-nailed fingers trailed south, cupping his cock, and Jonah hoped like hell he hadn’t just squeaked out loud. Just in case, he growled to cover the snafu and glared down at the petite lady petting the length of his cock through thick denim.

Could he keep her? Take her home to Nana? Flaunt her to his brothers?

Flaming blood-red hair. Lush, kissable lips that matched. Lashes thick and long with mascara.

A tight little body on blatant display in the sexiest getup he’d ever seen in conservative West Texas. Tattoos up and down her arms. Dangling silver earrings sparking through the strands of that unnatural—yet flaming his interest—hair. Fancy heels that could poke a man’s eyes out.

Speaking of eyes, his went back to her bare arms. Bare except for the intricate designs inked over toned muscle—starting just above her elbows then disappearing beneath the sleeveless scrap of nothing she wore. It was trashy as all get out.



It was fucking hot.

She was so far removed from the typical gals in the area. Completely different from anyone he'd ever noticed. One glimpse of her at his side would drive Nana ballistic. She was perfect! Perfect...

Perfectly reckless and wonderfully good at being bad—he'd bet his *can't-have-it-until-you-marry* trust fund on it. Which was exactly what he wanted to be, at least tonight—*bad*. Bad to the bone—or *boner*, he thought with an evil grin. The anti-Jonah.

Spunky Suzy was *exactly* what the nana ordered. Plus, bumping bodies with her would keep her off the streets, out of some other man's arms—where she was likely to land herself in real trouble. Well hell, when he looked at it like that, it was practically his Christian duty to keep her entertained and safe for the night. Thank you, Nana! And that was the last thought he wanted to expend on family for many, many hours.

Jonah bowed his head, burying it in the crook of her neck, and inhaled as sensations chased her fingers, shooting up and down his shaft.

Damn, she smelled nice, sweet almost.

A faint stirring swirled in his mind. One of...recollection? Nah. This little chili pepper was anything but nice. A total rebel. A bad ass in need of a banging.

So, as the humid breeze skidded little foil packets across the parking lot, there was only one thing left for Jonah to say. "Your steed awaits, ma'am."

"Can't wait to get mounted."

Those fiery words did it.

Jonah ducked low and lunged forward, in one fleet motion catapulting Suzy over his shoulder. There was no cry of surprise nor one of protest, only her throaty giggle of delight, and with her hands clutching at his ass, her legs pinned to his chest, her purse bumping into his calf, he galloped full speed across the parking lot, opened his truck door and dumped her in. "We all set?"

At her tongue-swiped, lip-glistening smile and subsequent nod, he was around the truck and in the driver's seat in a flash. What sheer pleasure to find Suzy on hands and knees facing him—a cat ready to pounce. And pounce she did, going straight for his crotch as Jonah pounded the gas of the running engine.

She said one thing and one thing only. "Don't come in my mouth, 'kay?"

Tires squealed in chorus with his howl of pure elation as Suzy tore open the fastenings of his jeans, dug in with deft fingers and brought him out in the open.

"No wonder your boots are so big!"

Though her warm, exploring fingers threatened to end his control, Jonah couldn't stop the surge of pride that flared through him. "Noticed that, did you?"

"Mmmm. Couldn't help it."

And then, to keep himself from blowing before she did, he shared, "They were my dad's. I'm the only one with feet big enough to wear 'em."

She made an approving noise in the back of her throat and explored his cock head with her thumb. His balls tightened, his entire pelvis lurched forward and his big booted foot slid right off the gas pedal. He tried to find his brain while his foot felt for the accelerator. "While a couple of my brothers come close, I'm the only one as tall as dad – six four and a half."

"You men..." she said with a chuckle as her fingers tightened at his base. Her head lowered, earrings clinked. "Always have to claim that extra...half...inch."

The next second she was swallowing his cock as if she'd medaled in the event. The whole damn thing, no nursing for her.

He'd only seen it done in porn – not that he watched a lot – but he'd never dreamed of experiencing such an...an...

Jonah hit Highway 271 but hadn't a clue where he was headed. His thoughts narrowed to one track, only able to think about her tongue, licking and loving and driving him insane. That mouth, its fierce drawing suction, sliding all the way over and across his shaft, moist and wet and wonderful.

So intense, so incredible, blowing his cock...blowing his mind.

"Damn, Reckless..." Up and down, round and round, those lips and hot, wet tongue pleasuring him, taking him higher, winding him tighter, like a rubber band stretched to the max and about to snap. "You're good," he ground out.

Good? More like heaven-sent. And devil trained.

And it wasn't just the sheer perfection with which she performed. It was the position she did so in, shadowy moonlight his only guide to that perky ass in the air, practically hanging out of that short black skirt...back bowed in total submission and creamy waist exposed. As if to prove her every desire belonged to him.

How easily Jonah pictured himself behind her, plowing into her tight pussy. Spanking that firm, deserving ass. A bead of sweat rolled from his forehead and he lit up the pavement in a blazing rush to nowhere, fighting hard between watching her and watching the long stretch of road. Clutching the wheel with one hand, he used the other to thread her hair.

The buttery-soft scent of vanilla dispersed as he grasped red strands firmly, guiding her up and down. Measuring. Controlling.

Taking such a lead only made him hungry for more, for the chance to play Sexy Suzy's body like a fiddle. To command her every pleasure, one sweet lick at a time.

Lost in the moment, his fingers wound tighter, tugging on her scalp. Jonah was certain should this woman dare attempt to end their little "date" anytime in the next...oh say ten hours – or maybe ten days – he'd tie her up and lash her down. Right to the bed of his truck where he'd take her until she could scream no more.

Entertaining that fantasy, his cock filled to an unbearable state – one he hadn't experienced in a month of paydays, that being how he clocked time in lieu of Sundays.

Through a ledger full of debits and credits...through numerous entries of accounts receivable and payable...through two whole erasers...

God, had he *ever* received such fierce penile devotion?

*Too soon!* he wanted to shout when she slurped off him. But then her hand was there, priming his cock while her mouth ventured beneath.

His vision went funny, his breath haywire. Those lips collided with his balls, tongue teasing and sweeping down the middle of the sensitized sac then slowly retreating. Drawing the life from him with a suction that put the vacuum to shame.

*Not* that he'd ever tried that. At least not after the age of twelve.

"Damn," he choked out when she replaced her hand with her mouth, sank down on his shaft and consumed his cock as if she'd been born to it. "Reckless... *Damn.*"

He was going to blow like a whale.

The truck swerved, running off the road and onto the gravel shoulder. Jonah barely pulled it back before taking out a road sign. Speed limit forty-five.

He'd topped seventy ten licks back.

Talk about being *reckless*. Never had he felt more alive, more exhilarated. But Jonah still had some sense about him.

Okay, very little. But enough to know two things mattered at the moment—coming and coming *without* killing them both.

Slamming on his brakes, he skidded to a wobbly halt. Stupid thing to do on damp pavement. But even that knowledge couldn't slow his pending release. And Jonah wanted it to last. Wanted the hot haven her mouth created, the magic her fingers brought to last until dawn. Only one way he knew how to delay the inevitable... *Three point one four one five nine two –*

She lifted off him but kept her hand anchored firmly, sliding enticingly over his hardened length. "What's that?"

*Nine two – then what? – oh yeah, six five three –*

"Huh?" He hadn't said anything. Not out loud.

She repeated several numbers back to him but her slick fingers drew all his brain power. His hips lurched. Cock strained toward her mouth.

For once she ignored the invitation, though her thumb did graze right over the tip of his penis. "What're you saying?" Then again. "No more until you spill."

Jonah swallowed hard. Thrust into her impossibly tight grasp. "Bout to spill all right." All his secrets and his dick. "Was reciting pi, dammit. Trying to maintain control."

A cascade of soft laughter met his ears and tickled something in his brain just before she said, "Time to lose it, cowboy," and with a vengeance replaced her hand with her mouth, wrapping it snugly around his shaft.

Teeth grazed. Lips loved. His balls tightened, drawing higher.

*Don't come in my mouth...*

The world outside spun through the shimmering glass of his windshield. Behind the bluish wisps of clouds, the stars were out in full force. Twinkling at him beyond the jagged black triangles of the Victorio mountain range.

And victory was almost his...

Right there, stopped dead in the center of remote 271, Jonah fisted her hair and yanked her off him. He erupted like a geyser. His hips rode the air, his cock yearning for her mouth as he bucked and semen spurted, spraying the wheel and spilling down onto his jeans.

Breath rasping, he collapsed in his seat. Ten, maybe twenty heartbeats later Jonah realized he still had a painful hold on her hair – suspending her head just above his lap.

*Great way to show gratitude, asshole.*

“Sorry,” he panted, loosening his grip and sliding his hand through the silky strands, hearing the earrings chime recrimination. He patted her head tenderly, as if that were some sort of consolation. “Didn’t mean to be so rough.”

Feeling like a world-class jerk, Jonah flicked on the interior light to better gauge her reaction. Because somehow part of him questioned the concept of her truly minding.

Just as he suspected, her wide, impertinent gaze rolled toward him, coupled with an impish smile. “Don’t go tame me on now, cowboy.”

Huge, shadowed emerald green eyes dazzled him in the pale glow. For a moment her oval-shaped face just stared, as if searching. Waiting, still on hands and knees...expectant.

Something about her...that sweet scent, that feminine laugh... Jonah would swear they’d met before. He’d seen her somewhere, known her somehow.

The wide, porcelain forehead, the way it moved in smooth accord with surprisingly pale eyebrows. That nose, long and sleek and totally kissable. Those high cheekbones, emphasizing a delectable mouth.

Vaguely familiar. Yet so very new.

Her sugary scent, reminiscent of home-baked goodness seemed ingrained on his very soul and started to trigger –

She huffed a breath, jerked her head to sharp *clinks* that derailed his train of thought.

One long coil of blood-red hair swept in and bisected her flushed face.

Jonah transferred his gaze back to her eyes, studying that majestic shade of emerald green. Maybe it was just that sucking-fucking fantastic way she blew a man.

“Like what you see?” Honey-colored brows furrowed. “Jonah?”

Pulling himself out of his sexually sated stupor, Jonah leisurely strolled one hand along her arched, oh-so-sexy back as he leaned over and kissed her square on the nose, murmuring, “That was something else. *You’re* something else. Thanks.”

"Thanks? Something else, am I?" She echoed his compliment with such insinuating force, pulling away and sitting upright in the passenger seat, Jonah had to wonder if he'd offended her. Then she tossed off, "Best two hundred bucks I ever spent then."

For a second, he thought she meant she'd paid *for* him. He certainly didn't recall cash entering the equation. "Pardon?"

"I took lessons, you know."

Okay, he was lost.

"Lessons on...?" Angling backward, Jonah retrieved several tissues from the box on the backseat and attempted to salvage his jeans. "I'm a man, you know. Got to spell it out."

"Don't I know it." Laughter like music trembled down his still shaking legs. "Lessons on giving great BJ's. I took them down in Florida, on vacation a few years ago and—"

"Holy smokes." They had those? And she took them? And *paid* two hundred bucks for them? Two hundred bucks to know how to properly pleasure a man? An act she personally received nothing out of?

Or did she?

Jonah gawked at Reckless, lipstick smeared— all over his cock— practically preening with pride, and debated if she actually *enjoyed* blowing him.

From that iridescent glow beaming about her to the impudent grin fanning her cheeks, it would appear she had. "So...you've practiced?"

"Oh sure, plenty on dildos. Ain't half as fun as the real thing though."

Cleanup forgotten, Jonah cracked a window. His lungs were frantic for fresh air. Beads of sweat drizzled from his temples and the cool breeze slapped his hot skin, ice battling fire.

*Best two hundred bucks I ever spent.*

Oh yeah, this was his kind of woman. The kind a man was crazy to let go and even crazier to keep, if her brash behavior indicated anything.

None of which mattered to Jonah right now. The all-consuming anticipation of sheathing himself in her hot, tight pussy reigned. His already firming cock— ready to score a second time— protested his efforts to stuff an' zip. He had a willing, wild woman at his disposal who was game for more and they'd be stuck going at it in the backseat of his crew cab if he didn't think of a better plan.

He refused to go to her place, where she'd no doubt considered entertaining Darin the Dickweed, and he wasn't about to drive the forty-plus miles back up the mountain to the ranch. To his bed— just upstairs from Nana's and doors away from Grandpa's.

*Think, man!*

Twin beams of light shimmered in the cab for an instant, announcing the vehicle coming up a few curves and hills behind them. Dammit. What now? This time of

night—hours after work and before closing time at the bar—a body could usually drive twenty miles without meeting another car. Of course not tonight.

*Think!*

Rounding a closer hilltop, the increased blaze of headlights illuminated the sign ahead. *Lucky Lady Dude Ranch, 8 miles.*

Bingo!

Having worked at the Lucky Lady Ranch on occasion as a kid—back when it was still the Triple H and ran cattle instead of socialites lookin’ to play country cowgirl—he knew just the spot to finish this.

“Darlin’, your wild ass is about to get its wild ride. Put on your seat belt,” he commanded, latching his into place and flicking off the dome light.

But Suzy made no move to obey. “Can’t you tell by now,” she giggled, as if it weren’t obvious, “I much prefer living without restraints.”

“Restraint, you mean, Reckless?”

She only laughed more freely.

The headlights flashed through the cab, a steady beam now, reminding him it was time to get moving, and Jonah let the idling truck drift forward. So much gas he’d wasted tonight. Oh well.

Ignoring the reality that he’d just spent the past ten—or had it been a lifetime’s worth?—minutes defying the speed limit while she pivoted on hands and knees across his bench seat, Jonah stretched across the cab and snapped her belt into place when she refused to comply. “Not in my truck, you don’t.”

A horn bellowed behind him just as he eased the pedal down, promising, “But you can be reckless all you like, you little spitfire, the second we’re parked somewhere private.”

## Chapter Five

*Do you let men define your worth?*

*Sophisticated Woman*, one of several issues intentionally left at the Lucky Lady for Suzy by Sommer, who was positively infatuated with the magazine. Especially its quizzes, insisting Suzy could gain insight into her psyche.

Suzy had her doubts.

*Can You Purr Louder, Kitty-cat?*

*Oh me, oh my! Dear Sophi reader, we fear for your feminist gene – it's sadly gone lacking. Don't you realize by now you need no man to substantiate your very worthy presence on this big rock we all inhabit? Whether your actions show it or not, you've come to depend upon men – more specifically, how you interact and react to those big sexy brutes we all know and usually love. Take heart, dear reader! In this issue we provide several articles on learning to Own Yourself (see *Balancing Your Feminine Side With Your Feminist Side* on page 72 and *Being Strong and Sexy in a Man's World* on page 119).*

As the above result only served to piss Suzy off and further confirm her distaste of all things both feminine *and* feminist, because—dammit—these chick mags were so inaccurate and besides, *so what* if she liked the feel of hanging off a strong man's arms...and a good sound spanking? So the fuck what? Who cared if they *liked* her? She didn't, not given her very warranted disgust in the male species.

Even though she thought she'd answered appropriately—and accurately—as her frustration mounted, Suzy decided to take a page from Sommer's book and look at the quiz with fresh eyes.

The outcome when Suzy thought, *Damn the torpedoes, full sperm ahead*, and answered how she really wanted to.

*Listen to You Roar!*

*Now you, dear reader, are talking – and in a loud and proud voice! Not one to hide your thoughts under the veneer of polite restraint, you speak your mind and walk your walk regardless of whose masculine presence you're in. From making executive boardroom decisions to baking sweets for your sweetie, you know how to balance your own important needs, better still how to voice those needs without cowering or stifling others'. You are a true Sophi gal through and through!*

“Hmmm. Might be something to these silly quizzes after all.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Belted into place, Suzy stared at this man who didn't know her. Who hadn't a clue *who* she was.

*Son of a bitch.* He could at least *remember* her.

She knew *her* mouth would never forget the taste of his satin-encased steel rod pumping past her tongue.

Who cared if he hadn't called her all those years ago? She was wet, her clit pulsing and ready. Far too gone to turn back now.

She wanted this man, craved him and always had. Maybe always would.

Maybe – unless she rid herself of the plaguing ache. Cured herself completely, once and for all.

Scattered trees zipped past the window as Jonah zoomed confidently around curves she'd navigated with more care during the daytime. "So, Suzy, a.k.a. Exemplary Blowjob Proficiency Expert, where're you from? Around here?"

Suzy tugged at the belt confining her and squirmed in her seat, thong roiling within her dripping pussy, granting her clit with much needed attention.

"No, uh..." She chose not to provide him with undeserved details. Let him figure it out on his own and feel the fool. "I'm staying at the Lucky Lady."

"Oh..." He trailed off, tapping fingers against the steering wheel to the beat of the music he'd punched on. So cool. Calm and collected. And here she was, trying to wriggle her way to orgasm. Yeah, like that was gonna happen. "I was kinda thinkin' you were local."

"Do I sound like it, cowboy?" Her lips tweaked with the urge to laugh. Come on, she was a Yank if he'd ever heard one.

But obviously he was wondering if he knew her, at least remotely.

Good grief, just how long would it take him? *What* would it take?

His cock up her cunt? Her screaming his name?

She sure hoped so – and soon.

"No, I don't rightly imagine you do," he drawled in that long, slow way of his, and glanced over, his expression hidden under the shadowing rim of his cowboy hat. "So, the Lucky Lady, huh?"

Oh! How she wanted to toss that damn Resistol out the window, punch on the interior light and stare him down until he clued in.

*Men!*

"Flew in Saturday. Just in time for all the rain." Suzy looked out over the midnight scenery, clueless where they were. All these lonely, dark stretches looked the same to her.

She clenched her legs and rocked her pelvis back and forth, riding her soaked thong as discreetly as possible. "This is my first night out."



"Huh. Go figure." A long arm eased across the seat. "You look a little uncomfortable there, sweetheart."

"Uncomfortable?" That was putting it mildly. "You came. I didn't."

"That so?" Warm fingers skimmed over her bare arms, wandered over her biceps, lingered at the crease of her elbow...then moseyed on down her forearm. "Turned yourself on, did you?"

"Licking all over that big cock of yours... Yeah, I did." She pouted, lower lip exaggerated and toes crossed he'd buy into her pity show, pull over and park it. Between her legs. Ease the throbbing desire that drummed through her. "I'm all hot and horny and feeling naughty and you've got me strapped in like a misbehaving kid."

"Now what're we gonna do about that?" His deliberate caress abandoned her wrist and a scant second later her seat belt popped free, zipping upward across her chest. "Scoot closer, darlin'. Cuddle up alongside me."

About damn time.

Suzy hauled ass across the seat, sliding her butt until there wasn't an inch between them. His heavy arm draped her shoulders and squeezed. Now this was more like it. Hip to hip. Thigh to thigh. Shoulder to armpit. His heat seeped into her, his presence all-consuming. At least to her body.

Next thing she knew, Mr. Safety-Hall-Monitor Man balanced the steering wheel on his knee, tunneled his hand between them, and drew out a long length of seat belt. Tossing it over her thighs, he angled across her lap and clicked the latch into place, tugging the excess securely. "There now. That's better."

"If you say so." She'd more important matters on her mind. Like her pussy. Her –

From underneath her arm, Jonah captured her right breast, weighing it, flicking the pebbled nipple. Thumb and finger claimed the bud, clamping. Twisting at her moan of encouragement. Rough – just right.

"You like that, Reckless?"

Holy cow, did she ever.

He plucked the tortured nipple ruthlessly, squeezing and tugging and imprinting lace patterns.

"Hell yes," she moaned through clenched teeth, wondering how the heck this man could come across so polite and polished yet prove to be anything but once flesh met flesh. Suzy couldn't wait to put his inner bad boy to the ultimate test.

"It's not too much?" Then, as if to test *her*, he delivered a punishing pinch that sent quivers of searing pleasure-pain straight to the source, forcing Suzy to dig her heels into the floorboard and arch her tensed butt off the seat.

"Again!" she encouraged. Distantly, Suzy wondered if his eyes were even remotely on the glistening road. And why were *they*, still? It wasn't as if there weren't a hundred spots to pull off, plenty of trees to do her against. Surely the dirt wasn't pure mud everywhere. He could do her on the ground. Trample her senseless.

But no, he had to make her wait. Well, Suzy wanted "More!"

"Ah, my little masochist." He tweaked to the left, to the right. Her arousal soared. Her pussy creaming...needy...clenching...

"Nothing too soft for Suzy."

Her whimper confirmed the unspoken, *Hell yes.*

Five days into her vacation...about time she'd found a cowboy who got it, got *her*, and would deliver, forcing her to the brink. Own her, control her. Make her his, completely at his mercy.

Tonight she belonged to Jonah. *Finally.*

That notion alone was enough to send her soaring. But her body resisted.

"You've no idea." Really, he didn't, not when it came to her, and she had to wonder what he'd think if he did. Would he still want her, knowing she was the "sweet lil' Suzy" he'd decided to stand up?

Who cared?

"You could always let me drive," she gasped. "Return the favor." *With your cock!*

He gave his head an amplified shake. "No can do. I'm mighty particular about who drives my truck."

He was about to drive her to the loony bin. *Pfft!* As if she didn't belong there already!

Suzy propped her right foot on the dash, her left on the bench seat near his thigh and opened her legs wide, ready to take him any way she could get him and craving him *there*, on her clit, applying the same demanding treatment he'd showered on her breasts. "Please, Jonah."

"My pleasure, ma'am." He lifted his arm from around her and leaned forward then flew under her skirt. Thick, smooth fingers tugged aside her thong and V'd the nerve-infused bud, squeezing and coaxing it in tiny, milking motions.

Pulling. Plucking. Powering her sane self straight round the bend.

Suzy threw her head back and howled with happiness as she rode those delving fingers plunging into her cunt several at a time and surging deep. "Oh yeah!"

The truck swerved and slowed to a crawl, but she didn't dare point out how dangerous this was, didn't care if he looked at the road again or not. At the moment she just wanted to get off! She humped his hand, needing more.

Needing him buried inside her. Fucking her hard. Fast. Now.

Just *where* were they going?

Another finger surged alongside the others, spreading her wide. Massaging from within as his thumbnail grazed her clit. Tortured unmercifully.

"Pull over," she begged, scrambling to get her trembling legs down. She had to have him inside her. Immediately. "Please."

Two seconds more and she was climbing aboard his lap, whether he was driving or not. And talk about dangerous...now *that* would be hot! Him, trying to see over her shoulder, her ass bumping the steering wheel. Swerving all over as they came.

Suzy yanked open the flap of his jeans, just now noticing he'd never fastened the top button, and plied his cock from his boxers. With a growl, he pushed her away. "We're almost there."

He sped up a little, but his hand-fucking had slowed.

"I don't care!"

"Hang on, baby."

"Where?" she half moaned, mostly didn't give a rat's patooty. Disappointed but not swayed, she made another attempt to free his cock and succeeded.

As if in answer, they rumbled over a cattle gate and zoomed under the ornate, scrolled black iron Lucky Lady gates she knew so well. Why had he brought her here? She hadn't *invited* him to her cabin! "But—"

His hand thrust deep, twisting her protest into a cry of passion. "Almost there, darlin'."

Damn right she was.

"But I..." Fingers coiled, he rubbed harder and Suzy gasped in delight. Despair. "Turn back. Please."

"You crazy?"

"It's just...oh gosh...just I'm not in the habit taking my men back to my place." Harder to get rid of them that way. "Too personal."

But here they were, headed to her cabin, where panties lay scattered amongst proof of her identity.

Her heart rate accelerated, adrenaline rushing, making her anxious, but not in the same wonderful, pussy-wetting way the prospect of cock cruising did, which seemed mightily more safe at the moment.

As if he could read her thoughts, Jonah barked with laughter. "That so? Your *men*, huh?"

He would hang on that plural. "So?"

Abruptly he veered left, winding past a big horse barn, down a worn dirt lane, away from her cabin. Her eyes flashed to his. The heated glare he shot her said it all—he was laying claim. Or at least fancying the notion.

Not that it would happen.

"I'm not one to share," he warned, flexing four fingers possessively inside her core then pulling his hand free to cup her there. "Far as Rustlers Junction is concerned, consider yourself McKenzie property."

"Good luck on that, Blowhard." Bossy, presumptuous man! Only one place Suzy could appreciate that—in the bedroom.

And to deliver the message, she moaned and laid her hand over his, pushing, pulling, *writhing*...needing him inside her again. So badly. Anyway she could get it.

Jonah, however, resisted, clasping her pussy domineeringly as they rumbled up the narrowing path in oddly tense silence, only their harsh breathing to be heard.

Finally they drifted to a stop in front of an old, run-down barn and Jonah patted her pussy goodbye. "Stay put."

As if she'd any intention of up and disappearing before she got her orgasm. Or his cock.

He hopped out, dashed in front of the truck and swung the barn doors wide then returned, not even bothering to close the truck as he idled forward into the shadowy interior. Bales of hay glittered golden in the beam of his headlights. He shoved it into park and jumped out again, vanishing somewhere behind them.

Suzy craned her neck, anxious. Never more ready in her life. She was so wet. Hot and pulsing. Every cell in her body on fire.

The subtle glow of a lantern soon illuminated his form and she watched as he hooked it on a beam overhead. His boots thudded across the straw-strewn floor when he drew the doors shut, barring them with a two-by-four.

"Should be condoms in the dash," he called out, strutting to the tailgate and lowering it with a well-greased clank. Suzy lunged for the glove box. Papers, papers, stupid papers. Calculator. Papers. Where were they? Why hadn't she picked hers up?

*Should be* in the dash? Was he even sure?

She didn't need this, not now. Please don't let her be rarin' to go with no pony to ride! No stallion at stud!

Argh! Suzy started tossing feed leaflets and stray notes to the floorboard, eventually encountering three little foil wrappers buried at the bottom. Sighing in relief, she scooped them into her evil, cock-hungry clutches.

Then he was back, looming in the doorway, those cobalt blue eyes intense and on her. "Easy there, darlin'," he drawled, nodding to the mess she'd made. "You in a rush or something?"

It seemed he *never* was.

"Uh...*yeah*. Found them." Suzy waved her loot in defense, and before his quick grin registered, he was reaching into the cab and hauling her out, mouth crushing down upon hers in a furious show of need. God, yes! Those lush, sexualicious lips adhered flawlessly to hers. He sucked her tongue into his warm, moist depths as he lugged her from the truck, her feet dragging behind her.

He was kissing her, carrying her, his tongue in an aggressive struggle with hers. Hands tangling in her hair, teeth nipping whenever she dared attempt to break away. To the back of his truck he towed her and the next thing she knew, he tore his mouth free and used the hand knotted in her hair to force her facedown over the tailgate.

She cried out in surprise. "Easy there, cowboy!"

Not that she wasn't loving every second. Cold metal seared the hot skin of her flattened cheek and exposed belly. The unexpected chill exploded through her thin clothes to knot sensitive nipples.

Jonah choked back a bark of laughter, peeling the condoms from her grasp. "Like you'd tolerate that, Reckless."

Hands forced hers above her head, followed by the warning, "Don't move now, darlin'. I've got an ass to claim."

How was she not to move? Her feet couldn't touch the ground—not unless she pointed her toes and strained. What was the use in that? The only thing she strained for was his cock in her pussy. Jonah. She still couldn't believe it. Still wanted it—him—more than she'd ever admit. So she did what she always did when a man dared to come too close.

Turned off her mind, turned on her body and played the siren to the hilt.

Savoring the strange sensation of his ridged tailgate beneath her torso, truck bed beneath her cheek, Suzy stretched for all she was worth and spread her legs. "What're you waiting for?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Never had there been a more glorious sight than the one splayed before him, that rounded, barely covered ass bent over his tailgate in complete submission. Wriggling enticingly and inviting him to do things—to take her in a manner—Jonah only ever dreamed about.

Make that *many* manners. And he would too because he had this barn, plenty of condoms at his disposal and hours of freedom. The night was his. *She* was his...this wild, almost sugary-scented creature of his fantasies.

"Oh Jonah, honey..." The soft, sultry way she beckoned, calling his name. The way she twitched that sweet ass. All the while looking like a fiery little devil. Suzy was temptation personified. "I'm tired of waiting. Come on, Jonah, *fuck me.*"

And naughtier than he could handle. "Watch that mouth," he warned, though he didn't mean it a lick. Being bossy in the bedroom—er, barn—was more enticing than he ever could've imagined. Compelling even.

"Watch my mouth, my ass," she flipped off. Beneath black denim, butt cheeks flexed, inviting.

"Woman." The word ended on a growl. "You know what you're doin' to me?"

"Sure hope so. Fuck me, cowboy." One sexy, spiked heel rose up toward him...tauntingly.

Self-control a thin thread, Jonah slid one last glance to the barred wooden doors, ensuring their total privacy, then quickly shucked his boots and jeans—no mean feat given the wood *he* sported. All the while, she stretched and moaned, arched temptingly against his tailgate. He'd never look at the bed of his truck the same way again.

Eyes straying to that tempting backside, he rolled on a condom, took a deep breath for patience—pi hadn't worked worth a shit—and hiked her skirt around her waist. Exposing her. So soft and round and innocent. And so *not* innocent, split with naughty black lace, reminding him appearances could be so deceiving.

Hell, he was surprised she didn't have a flaming heart tattooed on her butt. Because she was about to singe him, no doubt about it. And Jonah wanted to return the favor.

His fingers flexed with the urge to inflict redness, to make her truly scream his name. To ride her hard, spank her even harder...

His breathing turned ragged. Jonah scraped his nails over and off the tempting flesh, stamping out the renegade desire. There was such a thing as going too far.

With Suzy, he had no idea where that line was drawn. Not yet.

Jerking down her sodden scrap of panty, he arranged those toned, dangling legs wide and delved between her ass cheeks, searching out her pussy. "Damn, you're wet."

Despite his rock-hard, rarin'-to-go cock, he took immense pleasure in exploring the silky essence of her arousal, spreading her juices all about, daring to venture up her crack, caressing a line to and around that flexing, tight bud. Teasing and delighting in her every whimper.

And how she cried, pleading with him to take her. To end the torture and drive into her. Allow her to come.

"Jonah, please...*please*..."

But she was at his mercy. On his timetable.

He enjoyed every plea. Relished each whiff of her strong desire, the stroke of his fingers alternating between teasing and tweaking, granting pleasure among nips of pain. Exploring his boundaries. Hers.

Only once did she dare move, angling her elbows and drawing her hands down from where he'd placed them. That earned a well-deserved, spontaneous *smack!* to her ass.

Immediately, Jonah tensed with concern he'd stepped over the line. Suzy was a strong, independent woman. *With questionable judgment*, his mind offered.

*She picked you*, his conscience argued.

Yeah, but only after first rejecting him. Too *tame*, hadn't she said?

Hmm. Maybe she liked pain, playing a submissive role, but for heaven's sake, he couldn't spank her.

Could he?

To his astonishment, her moan of delight filled the air, encouraging him. Her arms immediately returned to their rightful place.

Light dawned.

"You want it like this." He meant to ask but the words came out a statement. Damn, she really did.

“You don’t have it in you,” she goaded. *Sorry, cowboy. Not interested, her earlier accusation floated through his mind. You’re too tame for the likes of me. Too damn polished.*

As if she knew him. Right.

Seemed everybody all of a sudden thought they knew everything about Jonah and they were *all* fucking wrong.

Time and patience would prove it to his family.

But he wasn’t giving Sexy Suzy that luxury. “You don’t think so, Reckless? Well, babe, you aren’t the only one with a desire to act out.” And he slapped her flank.

She jumped. Even screamed before she could muffle it, turn it into a fake moan.

Which only made him smile. “Didn’t expect it, huh? Not quite that rough?” He started to add, *If you push me far enough, I can’t promise the consequences* but decided no need to scare her off the first jump out the gate.

But he did test himself—and her—by delivering another fierce smack to one thigh, and when she didn’t respond as he wanted, popped it again just to prove he could.

Yep. Definitely a moan that time.

Not about to give absolute free rein to the brutish urges rolling through him, Jonah nevertheless edged the gate open to the new horizons and let ‘em start easin’ through.

He smacked both sides of her butt then latched on, delivering a deep massage just as he’d seen it done in one of his brother’s porn vids. Never realized how that extensive collection might come in so handy. That was when the dull pain in his hand registered. Slapping her hot flesh brought it to the surface—residual soreness from demolishing the chair.

Purposefully, he smacked one side of her thigh with the side of his palm, causing his own ache to intensify. Damn. Foreign feelings rushed through him, centered in his cock. Who was this man she’d released? And would he stay around once she left?

At that, his hands gripped the sides of her hips and angled her pussy toward him. He saw her desire. Smelled it more.

She squirmed against his hold and groaned. “I need it rough, cowboy, as rough as you can dish it out.”

That was when he lost it.

Unable to hold back a second more, Jonah clasped both thighs, digging into firm muscle, and wrenched her soft, sweet ass inches into the air, nudging her entrance with his cock. So silky. So ready. His for the taking.

He plunged in, plowed to the hilt, and Suzy moaned deeply, clenching his shaft higher within her.

It was like being buried in a tropical paradise...he never wanted to leave.

Jonah began rocking inside her, his tempo increasing with every heartbeat...harder, faster, becoming more intense with every cock stroke until he’d laid her flat on the tailgate and was ramming into her, slapping that ass with his groin.

Even as he gave himself over to the physical oblivion, spanking her with punishing strokes of his shaft then duplicating the rhythm with his palms, his mind was still in awe. Or maybe disbelief.

“You like this, Reckless?” He had to hear her say it, to declare it out loud. He wasn’t going too far. She wanted this, just as she’d wanted to suck his cock earlier. “You enjoying my hand beatin’ this sweet, soft ass of yours?”

He followed that demand with the harshest smack yet, stilling deep inside her, his heart a runaway freight train, clacking with the need to know...

Long nails scraped his truck bed and Suzy wept his name over and over, crying for more, screaming *Yes, yes, yes!* Her anus blinked up at him, the flushed rosette proclaiming its agreement. “God, yes!”

The woman was incredible. Damn straight McKenzie property, at least for the remainder of her vacation.

At the thought of her going away, of being with other men, the muscles in his arm tensed and he spanked her harder. He rode a fine line between maintaining control and abandoning it as his palm thwacked her flanks, branding them. Loving the feel of the heat he created, the friction between their bodies. So intense. All-consuming. His cock surged uncontrollably, plowing her pelvis from the truck bed, lifting her to and fro with the power of his thrusts. His thighs strained, feet carved a hole into the dirt floor and still he thrust. Pummeled...

All at once, he felt the change in her as powerfully as if he were the one about to orgasm. The hitch to her breathing, the gasp to her cries. Every muscle in her body tightened beneath him, shuddered with pleasure as she began trembling from deep within.

Needing it to be good for her – no, better than good, *great* – he ceased his spanking and slipped his pinky between her claspings butt cheeks, easing the small digit into her anus a fraction at a time. Just he as suspected, she went wilder than wild, thrashing beneath him, banging fists to his truck. Coming hard, coming loudly.

With finger and cock, Jonah rocked her steadily, milking every last cry and ripple from her body until she lay replete, sinking against the corrugated bed in sublime satisfaction. Only then did he relinquish what pathetic string of control he still hung onto, driving into her and letting loose, cum pulsing through his cock in a series of jerks and twitches and finally blasting free.

Jonah swore he melted then and there, nestled deep inside her warmth, so damn content... He’d never known such raw, utter passion. Had never known such completion from a woman. Certainly not his fist—his weekly bed partner of late. Definitely not a vacuum.

Twice in one night he’d come, after months of drought.

Damn, she clenched – and quenched – him unlike any other.

How he remained standing was beyond him, but Jonah never wanted to leave her body. The odds of finding another woman as sexy as Suzy, as raunchy and willing



was...oh say...one in a million. If that. Add in the variables of how paradoxically sweet she smelled, how powerful she made him feel and all bets were off.

His fingers molded her beautifully flushed butt, massaging, soothing. "Sweetheart, you just rocked my world."

Red hair flipped, emerald eyes dazzled him from over her shoulder, blinking against the disarrayed strands. He could stare at her forever.

"So tell me, Suzy, what do you do?"

She stared up at him in sheer confusion. "You mean my job?"

"Uh-huh." Tailgate talk. Jonah was really proving his prowess, wasn't he?

"I make a living with my mouth."

*I'll bet you do*, he thought, discomfited by the notion she did this all the time, with anyone who –

"But not the way you're thinking."

Relief spurring his reaction, he faked a surprised laugh. "What? You're *not* a food tester?"

"Only in my kitchen. Outside of that..." She kept looking at him as though she expected something. Found him wanting in some area. Then she blinked again and the look was gone, replaced with pure taunting temptress. "I earn the big bucks with my lips and tongue. That and my organizational abilities."

She made a show of checking her watch. "Think you could get it up for seconds? Maybe thirds? It's not like I'm charging by the hour."

That soured his mood fast. Seemed too close to how their encounter originated, with her in Burns' clutches. The thought of where that might've gone, had he not shown up when he did, had Jonah lashing out. "Oh that's right. You're charging by the *night*. What was I thinking?"

She turned over and sat up, tugging that miniscule skirt down over fiery butt cheeks. Jonah knew because he saw how they blushed – how she blushed at his avid gaze. "I don't know what you're thinking, cowboy, but you keep *acting* like you think I'm a hooker. Keep that up and you'll be the one paying – through the nose. To get my foot out of your ass."

"What things you promise, little lady."

"That's better." She *was* a lady. Just not for fourteen nights a year. "Clock's a-ticking, cowboy. Do you plan on blathering all night or –"

With a growl, Jonah jumped on the tailgate. Not giving her time to finish, he wrapped his arms around her, plastered both their still-clothed torsos tightly together and claimed her lips. Thrusting his tongue deep, he rolled to his back and hauled her on top.

His unexpected slap to the outside of one thigh had her groaning and moaning with gusto in no time. And to think—she'd thought him *tame*.

Asshole. Should've remembered her by now.

Suzy had half a mind to lodge her foot between his tight ass cheeks as threatened. Toe him a little tickle.

But then she couldn't think or be mad—not when such sexual bliss was on the horizon and closing in fast.

## Chapter Six

*In his worst dreams nightmare...*

*Here lies Jonah "Balled & Chained" McKenzie...well, parts of him anyway.*

*His limbs were wrenched asunder when chain-wielding, monkey-headed goons dragged him to the altar while his gloating grandmother watched in satisfied silence.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Brilliant streams of morning sunlight filtered through the barn slats, glinting off his sable brown hair and highlighting renegade strands. Individual strands every bit as golden as the hay scattered beneath their intertwined bodies.

On his side in their makeshift bed, one strong arm snug across her chest, imprisoning her, Jonah had captured more than her torso in the last few hours with his enduring charm—coupled with his heavy hand. And Suzy had no idea what she was going to do about it.

For now, she couldn't stop staring at his face. Older, more defined. Lined just a bit around his eyes. But still the sexiest sight a girl could hope for. Long for. Wait for...

But *that* was past. *This* was present.

His spiky lashes fluttered at the distant bird trills then settled, stilled. His full lips twitched with unspoken dreams...happy, cloud-nine kind of dreams, evidence that he remained oblivious to the stray pieces of straw that pricked his shadowed jaw and nipped at his skin.

Every once in a while he'd murmur something ineligious and fortify his hold on her. "Not yet," he'd mutter. "Gimme more, Reckless."

How comfortable he seemed. Right at home, as if there were no morning after to fear. Funny thing was, Suzy could almost convince herself of the same thing. Could almost stay there 'til noon, studying the sparks in his hair, feeling satisfied and sated and so much like that girl she'd been three-plus betrayals ago, carefree and willing to trust, back *before* she became so jaded.

Could almost sense those ol' scales tipping...just slightly...just a fraction...toward falling in like.

And that would never do.

Because Suzy was nothing if not practical.

Yes...her, *practical*. After all, she did have a day job—one she excelled at—and a good life back in New York. *Good*, just the way it was. No need to mess with that, even for him.

Back in college they might've stood a chance. But that opportunity was long gone. Most likely he'd found someone else, a girl who hadn't turned him down multiple times. Now? Suzy was too jaded to entertain any such hope.

Her mind a whirl of confusion, she lay there, unsure how to escape. Worried that maybe she didn't want to. Worried that he'd catch her when she tried.

More worried that he wouldn't make the effort. Worse, that part of her *needed* him to.

Worried, because somehow, while being pummeled by his cock, she'd forgotten all about the dangers of dating and just plain wanted to stay. Go dancing with him again, finally have that milkshake.

*Stay?* As in his arms? In Texas? Patently ridiculous!

Determined not to waste another thought on him or their past—distant or recent—she ignored the lingering protest from well-used muscles and tried to gingerly push his arm off her, moaning silently as her bare skin suffered the textured glide of his arm hair. Just when she dragged his forearm over the tip of one breast, he groaned and her efforts ground to a halt.

After watching the beams of sunlight track another inch over his body, she mustered the will to try again and made a valiant attempt to scoot free. He choked out a snore-snort combination and collected her closer.

This was not going well. Especially not when his darn *snores* gave her goose bumps. She was not supposed to find his snores sexy. Not in the least.

*Just go, girlfriend! Bada boom, bada bang! Sex-filled vacation, remember?*

No emotional shit. Touchy-feely crap likely to land her another dose of long-suffering heartache.

Been there, beat that. No plans to repeat another unintentional married-man disaster.

So Suzy made like a snake, back pressed flat to the hay, and limboed under his heavy arm one painstaking, silent second at a time.

A mere finger's length from his body, Suzy braved sitting. A board creaked, making her wince.

"No more! Not wearin' no monkey suit...down the aisle...no preacher man..." Jonah mumbled, hands swinging through the air, causing Suzy to duck as he exhaled and landed in a sprawl on his back. "Chains! Go 'way, Nana. I do, *I do!*"

Okay then. He wasn't talking to her. And hopefully, no longer dreaming about her. That sounded like wedding gibberish.

Weird dream for a man, wasn't it?

She didn't dare breathe as she graduated to standing, heart in her throat, legs shaking from quivering thigh muscles. Didn't dare look back as she tiptoed around the big, gleaming truck, the odd splash of mud near the base doing nothing to mar its pristine impression, gathering her clothes piece by piece.





Good grief, he was a grown man not even allowed to own a television! A slave to a family who resented him.

It was asinine, all of it! Let Nana give him the boot! He was finished with these dumb games! Finished with silently enduring Joe's unwarranted criticism. "Now you look here, Joe, I—"

"I don't give a goddamn fuck what—"

Rustling noises on the other end then a hushed, "Joe, man, pipe down!"

More shuffling and a tense exchange of muted words, then Isaiah's composed voice came on the line. "Hey, Jonah. Sorry about that. Joe's hungover—"

"That's no excuse!" Jonah exploded, fist punching the air. Why was everyone always makin' excuses for Joe—yet condemning Jonah an' accusing him of siding with Nana?

They weren't. Not always, his rational side protested. But Bo *was* always shooting down Jonah's ideas and suggestions for diversifying and broadening their income streams. Between that and Nana going major pain-in-the-ass on them all, and his misunderstood treks to Lubbock, everything had just come to a head in the last twenty-four hours. *And he'd come inside Suzy.*

Over and over and—

"Hey, man, don't shoot the messenger."

"Ah, God." He scrubbed at his eyes. How late was it, anyway? "Yeah, Isaiah, sorry. What's up?"

"Now he's gonna be okay, but Grandpa hijacked Bo's tractor and—"

"Hold up. Did you say Bo's tractor?" The old tractor had been around the ranch longer than any of them, and Bo and their dad had worked at refinishing and refurbishing the rusted relic back to tip-top shape. How in the hell had Grandpa gotten behind the controls?

"I did indeed. Seems he ran a red light and crashed the tractor—an' wait until you get a load of *that*. Turned colors overnight."

Huh?

"Anyway, you might wanna get down here to Sweetwater General."

*This is unreal.* Jonah was startin' to wonder if he was still sleeping. "He's in the hospital? They admitted him?"

"They did indeed. There was talk of the psych ward when he first came in, ranting and raving, but he's back in x-ray now."

The psych ward? *X-ray?* Damn, an accident warranting x-rays could be dangerous at his age. At any age! But ninety-year-old bones were more brittle than most. "What's broken?"

"Nothing that I've heard. I think that's what they're confirmin'."

"How's he acting?"

“Ornery as ever. Nana Dori keeps threatening to have him committed if he doesn’t stop propositioning nurses.”

That was a good sign, right? “What in the hell was he doing *driving*?”

The man lounged by his bedroom window most days or sat in a wheelchair pushed by a long-suffering nurse. The rest of the time he oversaw the goings-on at the McKenzie Homestead while throwing around ribald comments rivaling anything one might find on the George Carlin show. Hmm...maybe why Nana outlawed television?

“That’s the million-dollar question. He’s puttin’ up a righteous fit of course, complaining about every new test.”

“Damn.” Of all the nights for him to be away from home. “Just damn. Why wasn’t Bo there to stop him?” Jonah mused aloud. He hadn’t seen his oldest brother since he’d stormed out after Nana’s little meeting the night before. But just like Jonah, Bo was *always* around.

“I haven’t had a chance to speak to him. He wasn’t around until a while ago, sending Nana into another fit. He’s back there now with Grandpa, talkin’ with the doctors.” How ironic – the two of them picking the same night to go AWOL.

His grandmother’s plan seemed to be backfiring in a big way.

“I’m doing my best to corral the restless natives here in the waiting area,” Isaiah continued. “But it just isn’t happening, know what I mean? Between Joe’s rampages, Nana’s sermons and Grandpa’s jokes, the place is a madhouse. And you should see what Tamar just showed up wearing. Fuel to the fire.”

The ominous tone, coming from the one brother who hadn’t ever insinuated, insulted or accused Jonah, made him take more notice –

“Aw, shit. *Sweetwater* General?” Isaiah hardly set foot in a doctor’s office, much less the hospital. Not since his wife died there several years back. “How’re you holding up?”

“The smell, man. You never forget it.”

He heard Isaiah swallow. Heard all he *hadn’t* said, and knew ‘Saiah deserved a reprieve and quick. “I’m on my way. The second I get there, I’ll hold down the fort and you can beat a fast exit.”

“Thanks, Jonah, for...remembering.” Indicating no one else had.

Damn.

The line clicked off and Jonah snapped his phone shut, speeding into action at the underlying pain in Isaiah’s last words.

He circled in place, oddly stymied. What next? His feet were clumsy; his mind too. Where was she? The disconcerting feeling of sleeping all night long with a woman – then waking alone – clawed his calm him to shreds. Why had she left? And without a word?



*Grandpa!* his conscience shouted. *Focus!* To keep from worrying until he had more facts, he ticked off his schedule. Clothes first. A quick whizz out the back. Then make tracks to town.

Plan set, he started with his clothes. Jeans and boxers were in place. Shirt came to light after a quick kick. But what about the rest? He looked around and around. Too much goddamn hay!

“Boots? Socks? Come on, come on...” He spied three of the four and turned into a tornado, searching for the holdout. “Where the hell are you little buggers? Truck!”

Under his tailgate! Final sock in hand, heart pounding like a jackhammer, he reached for his shirt and popped a button in his hurry to dress. Then *another*. “Dammit!”

Where the hell was his calm? His characteristic composure?

Evaporated in a storm of desire the last few hours.

Just because he’d acted out of character didn’t mean his whole world had changed. “Yeah, in what universe does a night like that *not* change your life?”

Pulling pant legs down over his boots, ready to avoid further contemplations down *that* road—given how the lady of the evening was gone, gone, *gone*—a few stray numbers flashed through his mind. *One-two-four-nine-sixteen* –

But his rushing blood didn’t slow a fraction. Neither did his mental deliberations. Another four and Jonah realized – “Hell, that’s not working.”

As he always did when he needed to cool down, Jonah counted on numbers—literally. Problem was, speeding through square roots wasn’t helping any more than pi. So he got creative, decided to start at a hundred *and* go backward, try to stem the tide of guilt and regret. Guilt that he hadn’t been there for his family; regret that he’d awoken alone. One hundred, eighty-one, sixty-four, forty-nine...

“Aw, shit. Still too easy.” Abandoning the effort, hands shaking as he threaded his belt, he stole one last glance at the spot where he’d cuddled and made love to Sexy Suzy repeatedly during the night and that’s when he saw it—the small white rectangle, conspicuous against the hay, and sporting a very obvious number eight scrawled in red.

“Definitely don’t want to forget that.”

Three strides later, he retrieved what turned out to be a business card, the eight written in lipstick that smeared across his fingers when he turned it over to scan the neatly organized information.

*Susannah Miller, Communications Director  
Public & Media Relations Department  
Governor’s Office  
State Capitol, Albany, NY 12224  
susannahmiller@ny.gov  
518.555.2384*

“Sonofabitch!”

Jonah’s heart stopped then blasted off.

Susannah Miller...

“Miller, Susannah,” he voiced through a tight throat as a well of memories rushed in. Memories blocked for years. *Too much of a mouthful for a tiny little thing like you. I really hate it when people shorten my name.* Then a short while later... *It’s Mom and Dad. There’s been an accident.*

Jonah put the brakes on that line of thinking and shifted into reverse. Susannah. He still couldn’t believe it.

His sweet lil’ Suzy...line dance lover from Cornell.

And he hadn’t recognized her.

But then, he had, hadn’t he? Her scent. Her laugh. One sweet as sugar, the other refreshing as a waterfall. The familiar longing she energized in him. All evening, there’d been something about her...

No damn wonder.

Grandpa—and breathing—temporarily forgotten, Jonah stared at the card and reexamined the whole night in his head. Every word spoken. Every kiss exchanged.

Glossy, brilliant red hair. Tattoos. Emerald eyes glittering at him in dim lantern light. Rescuing her ass from Darin Dickweed Burns.

“Son. Of. A. Bitch!”

At first Jonah was pissed at her, changing her damn appearance so much. Associating with dangerous felons and nearly getting herself raped. Then he was pissed at himself because she was still Susannah...Suzy, just not the *same* Suzy.

*“Like what you see?” Honey-colored brows furrowed. “Jonah?”*

Honey-colored brows—whoosh, right over his head! Wasn’t he a world-class idiot? A clueless schmuck. If not from the get-go then definitely once she’d agreed to go with him, she’d known who he was. Waited for him to recognize her. Given him chances, innuendos. Invitations.

Countless times his mouth had plastered across hers, tasting. Three earth-shattering times he’d fucked her. A man couldn’t get any closer than that!

If only he’d known. If only she’d *told* him... Dammit, he might’ve been more of a gentleman. Treated her better than a piece of meat!

For hell’s sake, he’d spanked her! His little Suzy! No wonder she’d hauled ass at the break of dawn...

Knowing he’d best get a move on, Jonah stormed to the cracked open barn doors and threw them wide with a wailing creak of rusty hinges, daytime bursting in. Blinding him. All night long, he’d been blind... But no more!

A minute later, the barn was shut tight and *he* was hauling ass down the dirt drive, winding past cabins. The overwhelming temptation to stop and search her out was unbearable, but Grandpa was in the hospital...Isaiah needed to be liberated.

Well, he'd be back. She could bank her sweet spankable ass on that!

Just as soon as he set things right with his family, he had himself a date. And it was about damn time.

## Chapter Seven

*The Book of Men, page 33*

The one who caught more than her eye that first night in town...

Meet: ~~THE MYSTERIOUS MASTER~~ – which someone had decidedly crossed out and handwritten in *Cowboy X*

*Height: 6' 3"*

*Hair: Gray-blond*

*Eyes: Blue*

*Weight: 198#*

*Enjoys: Winemaking and making you whine.*

*Fee: Total submission*

*Quote: "My wish is your command."*

Now this was one of the more intriguing photographs. It featured a lounging cowboy with only the hint of a hard-worn face showing beneath a black cowboy hat. *Hint* because most of his features were disguised by the bandanna he wore like a bank robber of old. But the eyes above the faded cloth? They spoke of experience and pain.

Pain that had Suzy reaching for the in-house phone to order up before she took the time to scribble – *Ta da! My ride for tonight.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Wow. This trip, she'd really let herself go, hadn't she?

And that included her room.

After opening the door to her cabin and metaphorically shutting it on the man snoring in the barn, Suzy surveyed her messy quarters. Weighed her next step. On the walk over, she'd considered her options, including using the book to order in a little entertainment because *waiting* around for Jonah's knock wasn't going to cut it.

But really, how many orgasms could one woman handle? The tender flesh between her thighs protested the thought of another too soon, but not nearly as fiercely as her heart protested the idea of *anyone* else giving them to her.

Crap on that! Soft, vulnerable feelings never got her anything but a hearty dose of heartache and she was done waiting! She needed to be out and about, living it up.

But ew, she'd really trashed the place. Hadn't realized quite how much until just this second. Maybe she should lift the *Do not disturb* sign, let the maids do their job. But the thought of anyone going through her stuff? Picking up after her? Double ew.

The mess was hers and she'd clean it up.

Or not...

Whenever guilt started pressing in—though this time she wasn't sure whether it was over the state of her cabin or the thought of another man—Suzy steeled her always reliable, rebellious resolve. Wasn't the joy of acting contrary the entire purpose of this vacation? That and orgasms, multiple, plentiful orgasms. *Not* being her normal, boring self.

With that reminder, Suzy was promptly dropping and tossing her stuff, playing hoops with the lamp shade and letting her clothes and belongings land where they may. Surrounding herself with intentional chaos in direct opposition to her always neat environment.

A defense mechanism perhaps?

A subconscious effort to keep herself from acting out? From fulfilling her vacation fantasies?

Create a pigsty so she wouldn't be tempted to invite anyone over? Wouldn't be tempted to browse through that delectable book of studs—or use the in-room phone again? The one that went straight to the front office where they then rang—minus any titters or snide sighs, she'd been pleased to note—whichever man she politely requested.

"Well shit on that," she muttered aloud, more determined than ever to get laid and enjoy every inch—er, second—of it.

Yup! Later today, for sure. After a soak in the hot tub and a few hours' rest, her body should be raring to go again. Her libido, it seemed, didn't need to rest, still primed from how she'd just returned from the best sex of—

Uh-uh. *Not* going to think about him.

Snagging her swimsuit off the footboard, Suzy decided to seek out Sommer and start enjoying the first truly sunny day since she'd arrived. Constant rain was hell on her hair color. Her shiny face? Sans makeup, a disaster.

This morning was the most pleasant yet and Suzy aimed to enjoy it—outside. Besides, she told herself as she slid on sunglasses to hide her lack of sleep, she needed to see if her friend was an orgasm or two richer and Suzy fifty bucks poorer.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You've got your nose buried in there again?" Suzy had never known anyone who read a magazine so constantly. *Sophisticated Woman* – the hippest magazine on the racks for the professional woman, or so Sommer claimed.

"It's a different one," Sommer protested, her eyes devouring the page under the shade of her floppy sun hat. "I'm catching up on a couple back issues."

She gestured to a stack beneath her. Had to be fifteen at least.

"A couple? With that pen in your hand," Suzy snarked, plopping down on the nearest lounge chair, "I *know* what you're doing. You're doing those stupid quizzes again."

The first day they'd met, while both catching a rare few sunny minutes in between rainclouds, Suzy caught Sommer answering the quiz *Can he tell if you're faking it?* Suzy didn't need a lame magazine to tell her men hadn't a clue when it came to women and orgasms. At least not hers. She liked cocks. She liked sex. And yeah, she liked orgasms, but that didn't mean she had one every single time a cock breached her cunt. Didn't mean that she wanted to be pounded raw when a few grunts, groans and well-placed breathy screams would put an end to the lusty thrusts whenever *she* chose. So Suzy had perfected the art of quick seduction as well as that of *When Harry Met Sally*-caliber faked orgasms.

Though it didn't escape her memory that she hadn't faked a single one last night. No, the heat and moisture revving her insides had been as authentic as any woman could wish for.

Returning to the matter at hand, Suzy took stock of their surroundings. Humid air clung around them, trapped by the glass dome encompassing the semi-indoor pool. The scent of chlorine washed out any subtle whiffs of the remaining bacon and eggs set out on the nearby terrace. Fortunately, though other women lounged nearby, their corner was secluded by a profusion of ferns and potted greenery. So much for enjoying the dry climate.

Clearing her throat in a manner meant to command attention, Suzy tossed a fifty-dollar bill on top of the glossy magazine.

Through the UV protection of her sunglasses, she watched a mega-watt smile curve Sommer's lips when she reached for it.

Suzy slapped her fingers down. "Not so fast, doll. Did you fuck him?"

"Fuck him?" Sommer murmured so gently the damn word was a whisper of silk sliding across taut muscle, a caress...

The hard stroke of a warm palm upon –

Suzy shuddered. *Damn him!* One night! That's all they'd had. Would she never be free?

"No."

“No?” Suzy reiterated on a laugh, snatching the fifty back into her possession. “You had that hot-looking specimen enslaved by your wiles and you didn’t use the opportunity to screw his brains out?”

Summer’s whole demeanor turned dreamy. “No. We made *love* – all night long.”

She put her head down on the magazine and kicked one foot in the air. On a sigh that could’ve flown a jet, Sommer finished, “Don’t think anything could’ve been better. I’m sure no other man could.”

At that, inexplicably, Suzy’s mind flashed to the last man she’d been with. The one *before* Jonah. The one – like all of them in recent years – she didn’t know beyond a brief introduction, or in his case *description*, and a flash of attraction.

Her thighs sizzled at the reminder, at the feel of his punishing strokes and yet...and yet...though sharp, they hadn’t come close to touching her as Jonah had.

And that realization nearly caused her to asphyxiate, all those oxygen-producing ferns be damned. Not because she liked Jonah’s brand of lovin’ better – but because she even thought to compare him with Cowboy X. She *never* compared. Never.

For her, the act of sex was like...like...a great chocolate milkshake.

Each one was savor worthy in its own way. Delicious. Some milkshakes just...warmed the belly and tantalized the taste buds a bit longer than others, that’s all.

A body didn’t *compare* from yummy milkshake to milkshake. At least she never had. But now Suzy couldn’t expunge from her mind how Jonah’s supple-fingered hand spanked harder, slapped louder than any other. How his words goaded her. Shook her to the core.

Her lips tingled at the memory of sliding over his shaft. How the taste of his salty essence seeping from the tip had tempted her to suck longer, to pull him deeper, consider swallow – *Oh hell no!*

She needed a diversion – and fast.

“Hey, want to go on a trail ride?” Sommer asked before Suzy had time to think of anything better, nervous excitement coloring her voice. “I didn’t get back in time for the one I’d registered for but maybe they’d do another – if we both signed up.”

There was her diversion. Then why did Suzy just say, “Maybe later. I want to lay out first – you know – vitamin D. Good for hangovers.” She didn’t have one, but she could fake it.

Seemed like she faked everything else these days, Suzy admitted silently, lying back, just as Jonah had been in the hay this morn –

Ugh! Out! Out, damn memory! Why wouldn’t he get out of her head for two seconds? Was that too much to ask?

“Well, I’m not hungover,” Sommer protested, arms flopping to the left in a blind search for her orange juice.

“Okay. How ‘bout this?” Suzy stretched to her right, picking up the glass and presenting the drink to her friend, who sucked through the straw. “You’re already paying an arm and a leg to stay here and the price doesn’t include cowboy rides.”

Shit! She meant *horse* rides.

“Oh, you paid extra for him?” Sommer’s giggle lit the air and Suzy slammed the cup back down. “Tell me, did your stud from the other night get a good tip?”

“Shut up.” Visions of her first evening in town flashed through her mind, parking themselves right alongside enduring thoughts of Jonah...of both men pinching her nipples, slapping her ass...as if the two were going head-to-head in some sort of competition for First Place Sex Machine.

Hands down, Jonah took the trophy. Not that she was complaining about Cowboy X. After all, she’d come then come again. And tipped well for the service.

Heat crept up Suzy’s neck, washing her face with embarrassment. Her stomach knotted tight.

“Well?” Sommer prodded. “Was your *Book of Men* man worth it?”

“Let’s just say he earned his tip.” *Why* was she suddenly overrun with guilt? Her – Miss Bold and Brassy and *on vacation*?

Okay yes, the first day she’d indulged. It’d been raining and she’d been exhausted from a late night of packing and a long day of travel. Suzy hadn’t felt like strapping on heels and going out for a hot night on the town. Just hot sex. She’d complained a little about the unfortunate weather when she’d checked in – after all, this was the *desert*. The heavy, persistent rains were an aberration, the gal had explained, thanks to some tropical storm that’d blown in from the Gulf, and the next thing Suzy knew, she’d been presented with a fancy binder full of willing men and all their stats – no association with the Lucky Lady of course. Freelancers, according to the desk clerk, or so she’d claimed with a wink.

Who wouldn’t take advantage of such a splendid service?

Suzy would say it again – she was on vacation, dammit! No being good for her, not for a solid two weeks. Not for a single night!

*That* was the whole purpose of her annual out-of-state bonanza, was it not? Sex. Sex. Glorious sex. Then why, after indulging with Cowboy X, had she *willingly* stayed in the next three nights? And notably avoided calling another?

As if she could hear her thoughts, Sommer snickered again.

“I think you’re just jealous,” Suzy accused. “Should I bring the binder over? Let you peruse it at your leisure?” Although “binder” was a misnomer, the actual book resembling a scrapbook – one neatly designed and arranged. So much more than a few shoddy pieces of paper, hole-punched and snapped in place. It was a work of art.

So why did the thought of it and what it represented – her lounging in her bed, waiting to be serviced by some sexy stud – only fill her with dread?

“I’m not wasting money like that, not after my free ride last night. Rides, plural.”



Sommer angled as if she was going to sit up.

"Wait!" Suzy pounced to keep her there, not wanting to be stuck alone. With Jonah in her head.

Jonah then.

Jonah now.

Jonah touching her, teasing her...testing her...

Jonah in the morning, murmuring in his sleep, sunlight sparking off his mink hair...

Ack!

"Here, you don't have to move." Suzy again positioned the straw. "I've got it."

"It's midmorning and I've never known anyone to get a suntan through a glass ceiling. Trying to spoil me into staying, aren't you?" Sommer said before a long draw. But remain she did, melting into the thick, canvas cushion. "What happened after I left? How'd things go with you and Mr. Leather?"

"Hit the skids." Suzy set the glass down and cranked her head to the right, sighing. "And stay put! I'm sure some UV is getting through."

In the worst display of timing, Mother Nature blew a cloud directly overhead. "Oh come on," Sommer groaned. "Suzy, what's this really about? Because you're prevaricating. We may not have known each other long but *you* don't mince words. Until now. What's up? Was he so yummy you don't want to share?"

He? As in Mr. Leather? Dufus Darin?

"Hardly." She was that *troubled* right now. Because *Jonah* and his sexy butt slapping, combined with his verbal provocation had done a real number on the brick wall she'd mounted between her heart and the concept of a one-night stand. She wasn't supposed to *feel* anything, not for a man she'd never see again.

*Feel?* Where'd that come from?

Time to change the subject. *To* Sommer. "Forget about me. Girl, all my effort to get you laid last night and I don't get dished the dirt? The scoop. The skinny. Details, pronto!"

"That's what you want? Why didn't you say so? His name is Boaz. Bo McKenzie."

Red flags flared and Suzy bolted upright.

Boaz...Jonah... What were the odds?

"Nuh-uh." She must've misheard. "Bo *what?*"

"McKenzie. *McKenzie...*" Sommer chimed, as if it was her new favorite word. "*Bo-azzzz. Ma...ken...zee.*"

Well, shit. Talk about a damn small town. Suzy hoped the two hailed from different stock because she'd hate to see Sommer hurt. Did being undependable and standing girls up run in one's blood?

Suzy considered issuing a much-needed reminder on the danger of getting too wrapped up, too emotional, over what could never be more than a fling. But the advice

weighed on her tongue, felt too hypocritical and the shimmer in Sommer's eyes halted any lingering thoughts of warning her.

"Oh Suz..." Sommer all but sang. "You saw him. Talk, dark and scrumptious. But none of that compares to the rest of him... Of what he..." She sighed, a great heaving breath that practically lifted her body off the ground.

"That good?"

"*Good* seems such an inadequate description. More like..." Sommer was so lost in her thoughts, she actually moaned aloud. "Earth-shattering. Mind-altering."

"At least you didn't say heart altering."

The lack of response echoed around them. *Uh-oh*.

The decision to keep her mouth shut went *poof!* "Sommer? This is a fling, remember? Vacation sex." Her friend remained frighteningly quiet. "Oh straitlaced Sommer, don't tell me. You didn't..."

Sommer slapped an arm over her face like a little girl who wanted to hide. "I know... I *know*. But I couldn't help myself. I only agreed to see him again tonight. Well, kind of..."

"How do you *kinda* agree?"

"His cousins asked for him and –"

"*Cousins?*" Maybe hope *did* exist.

"Never mind, er...don't ask." Dropping her arm, Sommer met Suzy's gaze. Her expression was writ with *fool* every which way.

Suzy swung sideways and planted bare feet on the textured concrete, hoping this wasn't as serious as it sounded. "Sweetheart, the point in a one-night stand is that it lasts *one* night. No commitment. No expectations." Was she telling Sommer or herself?

"We'll call this a two-nighter then. After all, I leave tomorrow afternoon. It's not like anything's going to come of it."

"You aren't hoping for more?"

"Course not."

That was a relief. "In that case, you might as well enjoy, I suppose."

"Enjoy." Sommer's lips quirked impishly. "And so I shall—every hard-muscled inch."

"Atta girl. Congratulations, you won." Suzy grinned, rolling to her back after tossing the rumpled fifty on top of the magazine stack. Relaxing for the first time since she'd skulked home. "See? You're learning."

"What about you? Any plans tonight?" After leaning over and tucking the money between issues, Sommer picked up her glass on her own, sipping until the straw gurgled air. "I hate leaving you alone. Or worse, to your book of call-in cowboys."

By now, *The Book of Men* sounded about ten times more like *vacation* than facing Jonah. In the light of day. Now that he knew who she was...

Waking up to the cryptic business card, would he be mad? Upset? Embarrassed?

Hell, shouldn't *she* be?

What if he didn't want her? What if he never showed, didn't call? What if he ignored her forever – like last time?

Dammit! She'd left herself open for that very thing.

Oh, *why* had she left him her card, blatantly advertised their history – with her cabin number, for God's sake?

Shit!

After a whole night of fuckin'-fantastic sex, this vacation had nosedived into Suckville.

Why the hell did she care if he ignored her? If she were half as smart as she claimed, she'd flip open that binder and find herself an easy ride. No strings attached, no old baggage to lug into great sex. No *feelings*.

But her brains must've gone to mush because her qualms didn't matter. In the end, Jonah was the trophy holder. And, as her subconscious cruelly reminded her, she was currently McKenzie property. Would be until she could get thoughts of him out of her head and *off* her body.

"I'll be back." Suzy flew from the lounge chair and cannonballed into the pool. A few hundred laps ought to purge his touch from her skin.

A mere fourteen lengths later, she was breathing hard and her blood-red hair had muted to fuchsia. Just great – what if someone thought she'd gotten her period in the pool? *Ugh!*

Suzy hauled herself out of the water and plunked back on her lounge, no closer to washing off thoughts of her past.

Sommer watched her blot dripping water with her towel, and Suzy had the distinct – and distinctly uncomfortable – sensation her friend felt *sorry* for her. "Suzy, I'm not expected back at the bar until late this afternoon. If you want, we can go out together for lunch. See some sights after –"

Suzy pasted on her practiced "go out and get 'em" smile, the one that said "don't fuck with me; I'm better off without you". The one she'd perfected after Vance's unexpected treachery made her feel more of a loser than either her high school boyfriend's cheating or that college jerk's game playing ever had.

Talking marriage with a "married" man? She'd been a total dupe and Vance's betrayal had buried dreams of happily ever after six feet under – and Suzy refused to resurrect them now. "Don't worry about me, girlfriend. I've got plans."

At least, she hoped she did. Maybe. Sort of.

Who the hell knew?

Fate, she reminded herself. Leave it up to fate. If he came by...or if her fingers happened to dial for Cowboy X... Fate, dammit.

Her mouth drooped.

“So...wait a sec!” Beneath her floppy hat brim, Sommer’s shaded eyes jumped open. “You still haven’t spilled about you and that guy you were flirting with.”

“Mr. Leather so totally did not work out. Instead, I scored myself a real knight in rusted armor.”

Sommer flipped to her side, as did Suzy, the sun’s nonexistent rays forgotten. “Rusted. What’s that mean?”

What *did* she mean?

The fear, the danger, even Jonah saving her, meant little as Suzy’s mind hurtled past last night and into eyes so blue. Into another time, another place. To a kiss, so soft, so sweet, so full of broken promises...

It meant nothing.

It meant *a lot*.

“Suz? You all right?”

Heckfire, she must look like she’d tangled with a ghost...and maybe she had.

Not wanting to worry her new friend—especially not after daring to issue the split-tongue warnings she had—Suzy repasted her smile. How fake it felt. “Of course. I’m great.”

“Great?” Doubt danced in her friend’s gaze as she took off the useless sun hat and brushed away dangling bangs. “Are you sure? Because I can—”

“No, no.” At least one of them should be having the time of her life. “Just so happens I found myself a two-nighter as well.”

“Oh yeah? After I left? With someone else at the bar?”

“Yep.”

Summer flicked her OJ-splattered straw toward Suzy. “Why didn’t you say so, you turkey? Pumping me for details without sharing any of your own! Which one? What did he look like? Who was he?”

“Names are irrelevant, doll. Only thing that matters is the size of his cock and if he knows how to use it. That and what the wrapping paper looks like.” Suzy told them both, hoping at least one of them believed it. “Not that the wrapping really matters, if they rock it like they mean it. But who wants to fuck an ugly?”

Sommer worked her mouth like a dog chomping peanut butter but no sound came out.

Suzy knew she’d shocked her yet again. Well good. She was supposed to do this sort of thing. That’s what Vacation Sex Bonanza was all about.

Suzy stretched, thrust out her breasts and felt them slide against the snug material of her swimsuit, felt her nipples knot at the thought of the man she *didn’t* want to be thinking about. And perversely, described him with everything in her. “But this one definitely wasn’t. Ugly, I mean. Not even close.” Damning her sensitive nipples, she

stopped stretching and gave Sommer that practiced smile again. “Think Danny Zuko if you want a visual. Pretty sure I went back in time and found him.”

“Uh...who?”

“Danny Zuko. You know, from *Grease*. Leader of the T-birds.” Suzy was practically purring now. From the first time she’d seen it, *Grease* had been one of her favorites. As a teenager, she’d worn out the original VHS tape her mom bought her. As an adult, it became one of her comfort movies.

Half a bottle of wine, a big bowl of popcorn and her special edition DVD made for one of her most looked forward to weekend escapes a couple times a year. She’d never realized until just now how much Jonah reminded her of that first teenage crush.

No wonder he’d always had such command over her. The asshole.

“Huh?”

Suzy couldn’t help but laugh at the picture Sommer made. “You didn’t look this disconcerted last night when you were bitching about that new thong you ditched. Didn’t you ever watch *Grease*? With John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John?”

Sommer appeared more than a little bit lost, her lips compressing into a self-directed frown. “Can’t say that I have. My mother was...um...always into more refined-type entertainments.”

“Refined? What did she do—make you get a facial while you watched *Die Hard*? A mani-pedi during *Rambo*?”

Sommer mumbled something about not being allowed to watch war movies or ones with shirtless men. At the idea of not getting her frequent dose of naked celluloid hunks, of *never* watching a sweaty, dirt-dusted Sylvester Stallone steaming up the big screen—or the flat screen in her living room—Suzy thought that was a sure way to *die hard*. Before she could comment, Sommer added, “Refined as in things like the opera and museums. Broadway, but not musicals. She claimed they were pedestrian. Mainstream movies weren’t...encouraged either.”

“God, girl, are you for real? *I’d* shrivel and die without my Netflix account and daily dose of pop-culture big-screen studs.” Lord knew it was the only action she saw at home. “Anyway, let me enlighten you. My cowboy stud from last night *and* later today,” she hoped with all her heart...the intact parts at least, “has lips like John Travolta and the most gorgeous pair of baby blues you’d ever want to drown in. Trust me—I almost did. When he came all over my face.” Thinking of that near moment enticed Suzy to lick her lips, providing a little film-worthy entertainment of her own. “A blue-eyed cowboy with curved, sexualicious lips...and mind-shattering moves.”

“Good thing *you* didn’t say heart shattering.”

No, Suzy hadn’t *said* it...

## Chapter Eight

*The Book of Men, page 24*

Suzy, still reading her “find” that first night, meets Riley...

*Height: 5’11”*

*Hair: Brown*

*Eyes: Changeable*

*Weight: 187#*

*Enjoys: eating vegetarian and shooting pool*

*Fee: negotiable*

*Extras: negotiable*

*Quote: “I’m willing to escort you out to Crystal City or stay in and entertain if you prefer. I aim to please.”*

Beneath a picture of a classically handsome stoic type with a sandy-haired goatee and piercing amber eyes languished a blank yellow sticky...

Because Suzy couldn’t think of a single thing to write. She was too busy wiping the drool off her jaw.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Julie? Hold up!” En route to her cabin to shower and change, Suzy caught sight of her favorite Lucky Lady employee—the adorably pregnant and talented masseuse Julie. Without her help, Suzy didn’t think she’d ever have convinced Sommer to doll up and participate in their ill-fated night on the town yesterday.

Come to think on it, maybe that hadn’t been a good thing. Oh well.

A large tote slung over one shoulder, the pregnant Julie paused in the parking lot across from the main building—actually, it was nothing more than a giant cleared patch of pebbled ground, *pavement* being something she hadn’t seen a whole lot of in Rustlers Junction. “Hi there! You ready to schedule that massage yet? Scoop me all the dirt on how ladies’ night went for you gals?”

So far, Suzy’d seen her for three facials and a pedicure but she hadn’t wanted to chance the massage oil messing up the henna tats. Screw that. “I definitely want a massage—need a massage, in fact. But first I need a ride into town. Any chance that’s where you’re heading?”

“Sure.” Julie pointed toward an older model SUV. “Hop in.”

Suzy gestured at her towel-wrapped body and mostly dry swimsuit. “Umm. Maybe I should—”

“You’re fine. After these downpours, everything needs a scrubbing and that includes my muddy vehicle.” She opened the driver’s door—without using a key. Wow, a place safe enough people left their cars unlocked? In this day and age? “But where in the world are you headed, dressed like that?”

Climbing in, Suzy answered, “The Bottoms Up Bar. I left my car there last night.” And Sommer’s purse inside, which the two had just realized, hence Suzy’s single-minded determination to retrieve both car and purse. Turned out, when Sommer arrived home from her morning-after, she’d had to borrow a key from the front desk.

“Good for you!” Julie chortled. “Left with someone, huh? I’ll assume that means at least one of you girls had a good time.”

“Sommer thinks she’s *in love*.”

Suzy said that more sarcastically than intended and silence reigned until, with a decisive nod, Julie started the engine and put it into drive. “Since you don’t comment on yourself, I won’t ask.”

“Smart lady.”

“But I will offer up my services as local gossip know-it-all, if you’re interested in questioning *me* about anything. Or anyone.”

Suzy figured that was practically an engraved invitation to get the dirt on whichever man she might’ve met last night. Not in this lifetime. Yet a scant thirty seconds into the ten-minute drive, Suzy was pumping Julie for information. “Bottoms Up. It’s a catchy name—any reason why it sounds so familiar?”

Hey, she could be subtle.

“That’s no surprise. The family owns a good chunk of Sweetwater County. Their ranch is also called Bottoms Up.” Julie pointed over her shoulder in the opposite direction. “It’s straight up that road a ways, announced by the custom gate work. Beautiful place.”

“Know much about the folks who run it?”

Okay, maybe not so subtle.

“The McKenzies?” Jennie said with a sideways smile as if *everyone* knew about them. “Went to school with half of ’em, heard enough rumors about the other half to keep my ears buzzing. Any particular one you’re interested in?”

Suzy liked Julie. She was fun, vivacious and outgoing. All things Suzy could be but as a media consultant, she also knew when to keep her mouth shut. She wasn’t about to express interest in any *particular* McKenzie to a self-confessed gossip, no matter how friendly. Instead she turned her questioning to the fancy scrapbook of available studs lounging in her cabin.

Where she would be, if she wasn't so chicken. If it weren't for the particular male she couldn't expunge from her mind.

The thought of waiting around—once again—for the man of the hour to show, or not, depending on his preference, tied her in absolute knots. After all but inviting him back into her life—inviting *rejection*—Suzy was berating herself up one side and down the other for not staying put last night and simply picking another stud to order in. “Tell me more about this smorgasbord of cowboys you let guests dine on. Isn't management afraid of word getting out, someone taking legal action against you?”

Once a guest decided upon their honey for the evening, they rang the front desk and gave the man's page number. If he was available—and agreeable—they gave an ETA. She assumed the cloak-and-dagger measures—routing all calls through the Lucky Lady “switchboard”—were in place to protect both guests' privacy, and the mens'. But still, she couldn't help but wonder. They were talking about a very *explicit* form of prostitution, weren't they?

“Trust me,” Julie said confidently, “only a small, elite percentage of Lucky Lady guests are told about *The BoM*. As for the employees, we're rewarded for our loyalty come payday.”

“Um...sounds like you just said 'the bomb'.”

“*B-o-M, Book of Men. The BoM*. Simply shorthand.” Julie smiled, efficiently navigating the curving road. “Management keeps close tabs on who's allowed in the listings and who stays. Just like we had you sign a confidentiality agreement when you received the book...”

Ahh, Suzy did remember when the gal at the front desk handed it over, no one else was around and she'd been given a sheet that she quickly read before signing, pledging to keep what she found in the book—and any experiences springing from such—private. She nodded affirmative and Julie continued. “Well, the men are bound as well. They agree to testing, the use of condoms, etcetera. One of the owners hails from Nevada, where prostitution is legalized in licensed rural brothels.”

Oh, the things she was learning on this vacation!

“Now,” Julie continued, “not *all* our guests fit the criteria she stipulated before we share *The BoM*, but if you remember the questionnaire we sent when you made your reservation, the one intended to 'help us better accommodate you'...?”

The forms she'd previously thought nothing more than a pain in the butt made total sense now. Suzy chuckled, recalling how the survey asked about her preferences on everything from crafts and art classes to the local nightlife to attending Sunday church, whether she was married or in a serious relationship and— “Oh my God, I had to rate my vacation interests! Meeting sexy cowboys was my number one!”

“And we made it happen. Our way of keeping you happy and earning the big bucks you've shelled out to stay here. When a single woman books a vacation with us nine months out—alone—it isn't too hard to discern where you might want part of your, ah...entertainment to come from.”



“Kind of gives new meaning to the term *trail ride*?”

“No kidding! We find the luxurious accommodations combined with the total lack of technology really appeals to a certain class of female. Since we don’t cater to children or families, we typically get groups of ladies visiting from all over. You know – old high school girlfriends, writers groups, that sort of thing. We’re usually filled months ahead, with a waiting list as long as my arm. The owner skims over incoming guests and flags the ones who, upon meeting in person, we’re permitted to mention *The BoM* to.”

No vacancy. Long waiting list. Neither was a shocker. Nor was realizing a number of women had a yen for cowboy cock. If their needs weren’t being met any other way, it wouldn’t surprise Suzy to learn some ladies had a standing reservation once a month – both in a cabin and with a hunk.

But somehow...regaling the intimate experiences she’d had the prior night with Jonah College-Crush McKenzie to the category of *entertainment* didn’t sit well. Not at all. So Suzy changed the subject. “Aren’t *you* ever tempted to indulge? All those hot cowboys – especially after poring over their stats? How long have you been married?”

Julie whipped around a sharp curve and laughed. “Temptation comes in many forms, my dear. For me, it’s eating chocolate morsels stirred into peanut butter and trying not to finish off the whole bag and jar in one sitting. As for wanting other men...” She laughed again, louder. “Don’t forget, I *know* most of these guys. Not a one of them ever’s tempted me beyond a ‘Howdy’.”

“And your husband?”

“Greg and I have been a couple as long as I can remember. Umm...” Julie did a quick calculation, alternating her fingers on the wheel. “I’m not even sure when we started dating. Sometime after mud pies and before prom. We’ve been engaged and living together for twelve years but finally decided to make it official when junior here came knocking.” She jerked her chin toward her lap. “He’s our first and Greg and I couldn’t be more delighted.”

Twelve years? And here Suzy couldn’t fathom going twelve dates. “But how’d you know Greg was *the* one? Don’t you find it boring – being with the same guy?” *Aren’t you afraid of being hurt?*

“Greg’s my best friend *and* he’s fun in the sack! Good thing too. It took two years of concentrated trying before this one took root.” She patted her protruding belly beneath the steering wheel and a dreamy smile lit her features. “Hey, no man’s perfect, not if you don’t build ‘em yourself and until that technology’s available, I’ll take Greg and his inability to tell the difference between a dish rag and a dinosaur any day – or night – over being by myself or scouting for someone else who wouldn’t fit me near as well. Even if I do have to wash *all* the dishes!”

“So you’re not...bored?” Suzy asked again.

“Bored? Miss Suzy, marriage isn’t boring. Being with the man you love isn’t boring. Not if you *both* bring the spark.” Julie winked then turned serious just as she pulled into Bottoms Up and parked alongside Suzy’s lone sedan. “Now I’m not a hairdresser or a

shrink, so I don't have qualifications to dispense advice, but that's the second time you've brought up concerns about life being boring with the same man. This coming from the gal with brazen hair, a bold attitude and inked skin to match."

"They're all fake," Suzy blurted. "The hair, the tattoos." *Me.*

Julie nodded sagely, as if she'd suspected all along. Then understanding lit her eyes. "Boring? I don't think that's what's bothering you. Give it some thought, hmmm? I'm only in town to run by the post office and the Chamber. I'll be back at the ranch in twenty minutes tops." She consulted her watch. "If you can be facedown on the table when I get back, I'll give you that massage, *gratis*. And no more advice. Promise."

Hand on the door, Suzy paused. She cocked a brow. "A free massage? You're not in the business for—"

"Hon, for what you've tipped me so far this week, I owe you two massages!"

\* \* \* \* \*

If Jonah could pay time to move, he'd be one broke son of a bitch.

Talk about having a fire lit under one's ass. Hell, Jonah had one blazing under his cock.

And a woman waiting for it.

Didn't matter that he was speeding, sans seat belt, as he roared down Highway 271. Didn't matter as he crossed under the timber-arched entrance of the Lucky Lady with his tires grumbling a protest, kicking up splatters of mud and stones to soil his meticulously maintained truck.

Didn't matter. Nothing did, except finally catching up with Suzy.

Still, he had enough sense to realize if he went gunning through the dude ranch, running down beautiful ladies in beachwear and other skimpy attire, he was likely to be tossed out on his ass, no Suzy at all. So Jonah forced his foot off the pedal and let the truck drift to five miles per hour, every extended second twisting his gut.

He had to see her. If nothing else, to prove he hadn't imagined last night. That the business card searing a hole in his back pocket was real.

Susannah Miller. He still couldn't believe it.

Of all the damn, rotten timing. Of all the wonderful, fabulous luck.

Of all the nights for Grandpa to sleepwalk straight into town—on a tractor!—and into an accident.

Jonah's patience was shredded from having to exude his normal, controlled and quiet calm all damn frustrating morning.

After a wasted hour of driving in the direction of Sweetwater General, Isaiah'd called to inform him their grandfather was being discharged. Clean bill of health—physical, not mental, but they'd take what they could get.

So Jonah had swung around and headed back to the ranch with every intention of putting in an appearance, showering and booking it back to Suzy. They had some things to straighten out...so many he couldn't count.

But *no...*

Nothing was ever that easy with his family. For the first time in his life, Jonah would've traded them—not for the world, but for this woman?

Maybe. Just maybe.

Especially after the run-in with his cousin, just one of the reasons why *he* was running so late today...

"Jonah!" Tamar had caught him just out of the shower and freshly dressed, snapping his belt into place and reaching for his boots. "Need you to do a big favor for me."

How could she stand there—not a speck of guilt anywhere—beaming and swinging some silver chain at him like a hypnotist? Right. A hypnotist wearing a black t-shirt with the sparkly *Spank Me* flashing everyone within eyesight. No wonder Nana'd sent her home from the hospital.

"You want a favor? Fine." He dropped a boot back to the floor with a clunk and stood, so he could stare her down. She wasn't tiny, not like Suzy, but even in his socks, he towered over her. "I want answers about your electric bill. Do you have any idea how astronomical—"

*Tutting* at him as if she knew the punch line and he hadn't even heard the joke, Tamar sauntered in. "Jonah, Jonah, Jonah. Life isn't all debits and credits, don't you know?"

Hell yes, he knew. That's why he was on his way—which reminded him. "Can't help you with any favor. Sorry." Sitting back down, he took up his boot once again. Who cared about money? He didn't. Not today. Today he had a fiery redhead to... Well, he didn't know what he was going to do with—or to—her, but he couldn't wait to get started. "I'm in a hurry. I've got plans and—"

"Jonah. This is important. *Really.*"

One boot on, he paused. Tamar implored him with her heavily made-up eyes. Raccoon eyes. Which only made him think of slutty, sexy Suzy. What happened to the sweet little gal...? Never mind about that now. The sooner he agreed, the sooner he'd be rid of his cousin. "What is it?"

She held out the chain. "Here. We need—"

"We?" he taunted, hauling the other boot into place and straightening his denim pant leg over it. "You and that mouse in your pocket? Or is this more mayhem you and your sisters dreamed up?"

"Every time you interrupt me, this is only going to take longer."

He could tell whatever this favor was, he wasn't getting out of it. Not today. He walked over to his dresser, cramming stuff in his jeans. Wallet, keys, pocket knife. Condoms. Condoms. Condoms. "So speak. Fast."

"Bo brought a woman to our place last night—"

He spun around at that, only to see her still holding out that damn chain. "Bo? With a woman? At your loft?"

The girls lived above the bar and grille they collectively ran.

Tamar nodded. Reaching for his arm, she turned his palm up and pooled the delicate silver chain in the center. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. She left this. Bo had to light out this morning because of Grandpa." Jonah coiled his fingers around the chain and fought back a twinge of guilt that he hadn't been reachable. "But we've secured her promise to come to the bar again tonight. Now all you have to do is make sure Bo shows. Give this to him. That should do the trick."

"That's it? Hand off the chain, prod him into showing up?"

"That's it."

After stuffing the chain in his emptiest pocket, Jonah crossed his arms and made his face as stern as he could. "The electric bill?"

Tamar's gaze was everywhere but on his. "So now that Bo's found someone, guess that means we can start fixing you up, huh?"

"Over your dead body."

"Come on, Jonah, why don't you let—"

"I don't see a ring on your finger or a new truck parked outside your door."

"Keep comin' round then," Sheba quipped from the doorway in an aside that had Tamar hushing her fiercely.

"Oh-ho...any secrets you care to share?"

Pure red suffused Tamar's features. "Guarantee you'll see that Bo shows tonight and I'll explain the electric bill."

So he had.

Then she did.

A Jacuzzi? The girls were nuts.

Inventive. But loony.

Apparently, after Nana confiscated everyone's televisions, they chipped in and bought a Jacuzzi for their living room. Hence the sky-high electric bill—round-the-clock heating and lighting. "Set dressing," she'd called it with an unrepentant grin.

So Jonah expected he'd pass off the chain, mutter a few bad sex jokes. Give Bo a bit of what for over the grief he'd caused Jonah after Nana's will rubbish last night. Then *chop-chop*...he'd be outta there.

Wrong.

Always the workhorse, Bo had nothing more than hay on his mind. Not Grandpa, not that woman, but *hay*. Before Jonah could so much as dangle that pretty silver chain and accompanying charm in Bo's face, he'd been sideswiped into unloading a trailer.

After his second shower? An unplanned confrontation with Nana, and all because Jonah was trying to do what was right.

He knew part of Joe's anger stemmed from his current rankings in the bull-riding world—they were fantastic. And missing rodeos was going to screw with that royally. Didn't excuse his abysmal behavior, but Jonah really thought she should ease off and allow the boys to go back to their upcoming rodeo. At least finish the season. An opinion Jonah foolishly voiced when he should've remained silent because Nana wasn't having any of it, reiterating again her whole new set of rules, mentioning how everyone had one more day to move back home if they didn't want to suffer expulsion from the family.

Insane! Jonah already lived at home—what did he care about everything else? Especially when a reckless redhead awaited? God he hoped she still waited! Jonah pointedly refused to listen or be a party to any more of Nana's legal dictates, barely managing to maintain his cool at the repeated delays then making up some bullshit about a bank error that needed immediate attention in Crystal City.

They didn't even bank in Crystal City, but by some stroke of luck, the old bird bought it, thanked him for taking such good care of their financial situation and sent him off with a packed lunch so he could avoid the evils of fast food—God, he loved the crazy goat. When she wasn't quoting scripture or trying to control him.

But here he was—finally—after more than half the day wasted, *this close* to Suzy.

Winding through the densely treed dirt road that curved past the common bunkhouses, a few duplexes and then the larger, individual cabins, he tempered his foot pressure yet again as his anticipation zoomed...

Cabin one.

Two.

Three. Four.

Five. Then seven. Huh. That's weird—no six.

He kept driving, slower than his watch ticked during Sunday-morning sermons, telling himself it was silly to be so excited. Intentionally thinking about the ass-chewing he no doubt had coming *if* she would even speak to him.

But then he thought about *her* ass and sped up again. Passed seven in a blur...

And then...

*Eight!*

No idea whether she was "home" or not, Jonah winged his truck past the dedicated *empty* space beside the recently built log cabin and drove more slowly around the back. Huh, nothing here either. Contemplating options, he killed his engine.

Assuming she'd retrieved her car from the bar, she might've parked by the main complex, but that vacant spot didn't bode well...

Of course she was home! he told himself. She'd requested he call – that red eight the most blatant invitation a man could wake up to. When he woke alone, that was.

His heart was a speeding train. Sweat dampened his palms. Though the ground was a bit soft, several quick strides delivered him around to the front porch. Masking his eagerness took a backseat and he covered the stairs all at once, bounding up to the door where his fist collided with hard wood. "Susannah! Suzy?"

Silence was his only answer.

He knocked again, only what should've been a politely eager *rap, rap, rap* came out an enthusiastic *bang, bang, bang!* "Suzy, darlin', come on – open up."

Nothing. Absolute, irritating *nothing*. Just the gently swaying *Do not disturb* sign hanging on the knob.

Even the birds mocked him, their sweet song cutting off at the racket he made. *She's not here, Jonah-the-Jerk*, the silence accused. That or she was hiding from him. Had changed her mind, angry that it'd taken her spelling it out for him to recognize her.

Dammit. He was an idiot.

He really shouldn't have spanked her. Goaded her so and acted the brute. That's what this was about.

But damn, he'd enjoyed himself. Pushing them both, exploring his limits. But somehow staying in control. It'd felt oddly...liberating.

But that didn't automatically mean he expected all their encounters to go that way. Follow that pattern.

*All their encounters? A mite tough to plan another when there wasn't a body around to be countered.*

At this rate, his lonely lips didn't have a shot at garnering another kiss.

"Suzy, please." His entire body hitched closer to the plank door, and his knocking transformed into impatient finger drumming, dull and persistent. "Hey, Reckless, you gotta let me in. I know I've got a lot to apologize for. To make up for."

*Nada.*

"Suzy, come on! We need to talk, babe. You know we do or you wouldn't have given me your cabin number." His head plonked against the wood, his fingers still tapping. Voice pleading as if there were no tomorrow. And if she didn't open the door, he was starting to realize there just might not be one with her. "If that wasn't an invitation, what was it?"

He thought he heard a board creak...or had that been under his own impatient feet?

"Suuu-zan-nahhhhh?"

If she *was* in there, she wasn't opening up. What now?

He could leave or...leave her a message at the front desk? Maybe try again later. But another solution—a more immediate one—presented itself as he scoured the porch for ideas and zeroed in on the windows.

Forgoing the steps, Jonah catapulted over the rail. Flying over the large stones recessed into the spiky grass then the muddier ground once the stones ended, he inspected every window he came to until finding one on the backside cracked a few inches. He pushed his nose to the screen. “Yo... Suzy? I’m coming in!”

Until the words were out, he didn’t realize the thought was in his head, but once the intent was spoken, all Jonah could think was, *So shall it be! Amen.*

Prying the screen loose and leaning it against the log wall at his feet required little effort. Hoisting his almost six-and-a-half-foot body up to the window *and* through the limited space? Not exactly a piece a cake.

But a hungry man became determined to eat when faced with such a delicacy, and somehow, now that he was this close, his salivating mouth sought Suzy’s taste more than any tempting dessert.

She’d licked and caressed him with her mouth last night, but *his* lips and tongue hadn’t reciprocated the pleasure.

*Surely the patient shall be rewarded...* And if he didn’t stop thinking of Nana and her butchered Bible quotes, he was going to howl.

Or maybe it was smashing his Resistol on the window frame that made him want to howl. So Jonah retreated to his feet, took off the hat and sailed it toward the bed before trying again. A couple of kicks, scrapes and deeply indrawn breaths later, he landed in some sort of a handstand and walked his upper body inside, until his boots finally thumped across the sill and plummeted to the heated floor. “Uff!”

Heated floor? Yep, the warmth against his palms was unmistakable. No doubt expensive too. And overkill—the day was balmy. A mite humid for his tastes, but with the extra heat, her room was approaching sauna status.

Long limbs scrambling, he righted himself, returned his hat to its rightful place and looked about. Messy lady, his Suzy. The quilted bed was in disarray, red-and-blue-plaid patches tangled with crisp white sheets. Clothes scattered across the room, abandoned inside out, here and there and everywhere. A pair of wispy panties hung off a lamp.

But looking past the mess, inspecting the construction, the furnishings...

A whistle escaped his lips. *Impressive.*

When he’d done a bit of part-time work at the Triple H during high school—before it became home to the Lucky Lady and hadn’t yet been duded up to appeal to tourists—the place was a decent working ranch. But this defied the concept of working ranch and instead epitomized one of luxury.

Beyond the chaos, only focusing on the building and furnishings, proved an arresting juxtaposition of rustic wood and iron accents alongside plush pillows, thick

rugs and granite counters. The remote impression of escaping without television or radio contradicted by the modern convenience of an in-room refrigerator and microwave.

But the bed drew his attention the most. High, way off the floor, the heavy wooden frame and wrought iron headboard screamed W-E-L-C-O-M-E despite the rumpled covers.

*Soon*, he told himself, his analytical side kicking in.

Jonah ignored the pings coming from his conscience and the sweat beading on his brow and gave a thorough inspection to the personal items strewn about. There was info to be gleaned if he was man enough to search for it.

Deciding the lipstick #8 constituted a *written* invitation—not that he expected any trouble from the law in town—Jonah strolled around the room, intent on looking his fill, but he found himself bypassing every single thing until he was back at the lamp.

Staring at those panties.

Hooking the gold lace on one finger and feeling like a hound, he delivered the crotch to his nose and sniffed.

The heady, thick scent of sweetness and salt enveloped him...the essence of Suzy. Drool pooled in his mouth and he swallowed, imagining he drank her down. Damn, so delicious. Jonah smothered the fragrant fabric against his nose and mouth, breathing deeply, his cock rebelling against restrictive jeans.

More. He needed more. More Suzy. Needed to touch what she'd touched, to feel what she'd felt... To smell and taste and discover the woman she'd become.

Sweet college-age Susannah did *not* mesh with last night's Reckless Red.

Unable to stop with just the panties—now that they were in his possession—Jonah prowled the rest of the room, taking in every detail, picking up each item of clothing littered about the floor, inhaling her perfume or personal scent or whatever it was that wafted faintly of sweet, sweet sugar cookies. A sexy, turquoise silk nightgown he'd love to see her in. Bras of lace. Bras of satin. More panties. The black mini skirt and scant animal print top she'd worn last night. The smell of him on her. Proof of their sex.

Moving to the end table, he spied several brilliant shades of nail polish. Two pairs of earrings removed before bedtime—the things looked as if they weighed a pound each. Ouch.

The alarm clock. A pen with a big pink feather plume atop. A pad of pale yellow sticky notes. A thick journal.

Jonah skimmed his fingers over each, still clutching those original panties, starting to sweat in earnest now. So damn hard he could no longer stand the strain against denim. Kicking off his boots, he whipped his belt free and shirked his pants and socks. Then figured why not? It wasn't as though the fiery female he'd met last night had any modesty or inhibitions of note.



Audaciously, Jonah stripped off his shirt and boxers too, leaving them where they fell, interspersed with hers. Comingled. As he expected their loins to be, and soon.

One last glance at her closed journal and he walked on, though his fingers itched with the compulsion to open, his eyes to devour.

Nope. Broken lock or not, he wasn't about to cross that line, even to satisfy his insatiable curiosity about Susannah Sugar Cookie Miller.

When he passed the wall controls, his arm reached up automatically and scooted the heater tab to *Off*. No sense wasting money, even if it wasn't his. On second thought... Jonah backtracked and set the a/c on high. Blessed, cold air started humming through the overhead vents in seconds.

Naked, he drifted into the spacious bathroom. Maybe he'd bathe where she'd bathed. In the recessed, jetted tub that boasted room enough to hold a horse. Or maybe in the angular shower in the opposite corner. It looked big enough to hold half a football team. For someone who used a bathroom for nothing more than to wash off the labors of the day and fall into bed clean, the unexpected grandeur—and how he couldn't quit imagining Reckless splayed in her nude glory—boggled the mind.

Though the glazed window high above the tub provided some illumination, he wanted more. Jonah turned the dimmer switch all the way, setting the globes over the room-long mirror ablaze. He grinned at the reflection of his naked self—realized he wore his hat and nothing else—flexed his pecs then biceps, and avoided staring at his semi-rigid cock, giving his attention over to the vast array of informational evidence littering the countertop.

Makeup galore. Lipsticks. Lotions. Bottles. Tubes. Things that sprayed. Squirted. Spritzed.

A veritable five-and-dime for the well-groomed lady. Never more curious, Jonah picked through her toiletry bag, a fancy pink-and-purple-plaid combination, finding unopened disposable contacts. Emerald green, no prescription. A big bottle of Hangover Helper—so, she'd *planned* on getting drunk?

The revelations never ceased.

"What's this?" He brought forth a card with tiny print. *Instructions on Caring for Henna Tattoos*. So those weren't real either.

The more he searched, the more the real "Suzy" came clean.

A bag from a local Midland store—the closest commercial airport—was shoved in a corner. Stifling increasing twinges of guilt, Jonah reached for the crinkly plastic and unearthed several sticks of beef jerky, a few protein bars and two unopened boxes of red hair dye.

He'd wondered about that.

Box in hand, he read, *VROOM! in Rocket Red. Temporary hair dye that'll rock your world from bland to blast off in under 30 minutes. Lasts up to 10 washes.*

And isn't that what she'd always done to him?

Sent him into orbit? From the moment they'd met.

First day of public speaking the old-school professor actually seated them alphabetically. "Miller, Susannah," Loony Lambert had intoned, directing her to sit next to Jonah. One whiff and his traitorous vocal cords murmured, "Mmm," causing her to turn then smile reluctantly and lift one golden-hued eyebrow in inquiry.

He was a goner. Had been from the moment she came within sniffing distance.

Broke his own rule—the one about saving women for *post*-graduate study. The rule he'd adhered to with nary a blink his first two-plus years at Cornell, having little thought about anything but his accelerated course load, his 4.3 GPA and his goal to be the first McKenzie on record to earn several letters after his name. SOB didn't count, or so he'd laughingly told his dad and granddad at the last campout just before heading back to Cornell for the new semester. He'd leave the wild reputations to his younger siblings.

Triggered by those thoughts, his mind slipped back in time to that college class and their first conversation... "Did you want something?" she'd inquired so sweetly when he continued to stare. If her scent hadn't done him in, her cultured, upstate New York accent—so reminiscent of his ma's—would have.

"Any chance you...might want to...go out for—" he stopped. Everyone always inserted "coffee" but Jonah didn't like coffee. Never had. "Milkshakes?"

Oh Lord! *The mouth of a fool invites ruin.*

*Milkshakes?* His face grew hot. Might as well bury him now and be done with it.

"Milkshakes?" She grinned, the prettiest hazel eyes he'd ever seen sparkling with delight, and he'd relaxed. Too soon. "Great idea, and I'm flattered you asked, but I don't date."

"Me either." He forced a shrug.

Jonah looked over his shoulder, confirmed Dr. Lambert was still arranging people somewhere in the "R" range. Hell, this was college not kindergarten. He turned back to "Miller, Susannah".

"You do realize a chocolate milkshake isn't a date," he'd told her. "It's a mouth full of frozen bliss."

*Gawd.* When had he gone all stupid?

And then—to his mortification—the sparkling eyes dimmed. The smiling mouth flattened. Her gaze cut to the floor. "I can't—really can't. I-I have a boyfriend," she mumbled-jumbled together then jumped up and scooted to the vacant seat on her left as if he'd lit a firecracker under her ass.

Leaving him stumped. And overwhelmingly disappointed. And milkshakeless.

Well, by God, she *had* finally agreed to go out with him and he was gonna hold her to it. A different decade be damned.

Sheer determination guiding his actions, Jonah returned the box of hair dye and noticed a receipt peeking from behind the other. He plucked it free and scanned the entries. Lipsticks. Lip gloss. Lip pencils.

Three boxes of hair dye. Too many eye shadows to count. Eye liners. Nail polishes.

Less than a week ago, Suzy had blown a gross amount of money on creating her current appearance, cost of the tattoos not accounted for.

The question was, why?

None of this equaled up. Had she tracked him down? Come to Rustlers Junction intent on tricking him? Again, *why*? What could possibly be motivating her actions?

Disguising herself made absolutely no sense.

How could she have known he'd come along, at the exact moment he had, to save her? Was *that* fake too?

No. Couldn't be. That scared-shitless-turned-I'm-safe-now look shining from those glimmering emerald eyes had been real. Too real, even for someone with counterfeit irises.

Dirtbag Darin's determination had been real too.

Jonah's hard-on wilted at the memory.

And then there was the business card from this morning. Someone who worked as the governor's communications director didn't wear slutty clothes or don blatant tattoos.

Flicking the receipt onto the counter, Jonah forfeited exploring the huge garden tub and strode from the room, annoyed. He didn't want to see any more, only wanted to hear from her own lips why she was putting herself in danger...acting the hussy.

For him? Or what?

His head spun trying to grasp it all. Transported him back to that night—when he learned his parents were gone. Dead. The pain. The confusion. Losing his mind to the numbness of grief while trying to stay sane and still function. The panic. Gotta get to Gram, Stu. Losing life as he knew it, because after that, there'd been no going back.

And now, after all these years, Suzy showed up out of nowhere. No warning, no discernible reason, just a disguise and an attitude. She slept with him. Encouraged him to spank her.

And if she didn't damn well explain herself soon, Jonah might spank her again. She'd deserve it this time. Hell, she'd *deserved* it last night. Darin Burns. *Blech*. The notion turned his stomach.

His temples pulsed as he headed for the bed, thinking he'd wait with his eyes closed. Maybe his nose pinned, to keep from inhaling the all-consuming scent of Sugar Cookie Suzy.

He launched toward the middle of the mattress. When he landed, a hard point spiked into his thigh.

Whoa! *Ouch.*

Shuffling through disarrayed covers, Jonah fished out a big, old-fashioned scrapbook-lookin' thing. On the front, written in fancy calligraphy in glittering letters was the title *The Book of Men.*

Book of *Men?*

Huh? Suzy's bedpost notches? No. Freaking. Way...

With fingers gone clumsy, Jonah opened the book in the middle. It landed on "Donner" – or as Jonah knew him, Lee Jennings, occasional ranch hand at Bottoms Up. A real pretty boy with a tendency to slack off, more worried about his tan than the time he was wasting.

But the question remained, what was he doing in this fancy book? In Suzy's possession?

Jonah scanned the page, snagging on the fine print at the bottom. *Property of LL. Does not leave the premises.*

Okay. So it wasn't Suzy's personal book, but...

His eyes zipped back to the top for a more thorough appraisal because comprehension eluded him. Or maybe he was simply in denial.

Next to Lee's picture, typed into a chart, Jonah read the data, astonished dread increasing with every word his rapt gaze sped over...

*Meet: Donner*

*Height: 6'0"*

*Hair: Blond*

*Eyes: Blue*

*Weight: 180#*

One eighty? That scrawny kid? And what was this? Some sort of pick-up book?

*Enjoys: surfing and being a part-time model*

Surfing? Modeling? Yeah right, because Rustlers Junction was such a fine place for those hobbies being located smack-dab in the remote West Texas desert mountains. Bullshit! The kid was crazy.

*Fee: Depends on the lady. Please me, I might please you.*

Fee? Whoa there... Wait a sec...

Unable to do anything else, Jonah kept reading, stomach cramping and cock shriveling more every second. In commiseration, hairs on his nude body wilted in protest as each sentence slowly brought more unwanted comprehension. With every word he took in, Jonah prayed he was wrong, wrong, wro – Oh Lord!

*Extras: I got a long, agile tongue!*

Didn't take a genius to guess what "Donner" wanted to do with it either. Jonah's eyes widened painfully.

*Quote: "A cock well worth the money!"*

Holy smokes! There was no way around it—Lee was offering sex for payment. Right there in Rustlers Junction!

In a *Customer Comments* section someone had neatly penciled in *Not bad, but not great either. More cocky than cock.* That might've caused a smile, a loosening of the knot slowly strangling off Jonah's air supply, but the yellow sticky note—filled with pretty pink cursive writing—gracing the bottom corner of the section put to rest any thoughts of humor. *A surfer? Ha! Because there are so many oceans in West Texas. Tool.*

He could agree with that, had thought the very same thing, but...

Hesitantly, Jonah's eyes shifted to the nightstand, confirming one feather-plumed pen, pink ink. Suzy's words.

Oh God. *What* was this?

Curiosity seared, confusion reigned, and Jonah rearranged the pillows behind his back, got comfortable—like hell!—against the headboard and turned page after page with the utmost concentration, consuming every detail. Some men he knew. A few he didn't. All stunned him. Because one after the other, cowboys for hire. Adorned with comments from Suzy, some funny, but mostly criticisms, as if she were trying to select the perfect one. As if none of them quite measured up to her skewed standards, judging by the humorous critiques.

And then...

Then...

*Cowboy X.* Steve Hansen, part owner of the Lucky Lady. Recognizable—even above the bank-robber-style bandit disguise, his upper face and sun-lined pale eyes framed by early graying hair, topped with that black cowboy hat he always wore. The one with the rattlesnake hatband, made from the snake he'd killed in Ag during Bo's sophomore year.

Steve's "fee"? *Total submission.*

Jonah swallowed hard.

No sticky from Suzy this time, but there, in the customer comments section, printed in blue ink—*Worth the cost of the room and then some. I'll be back for more, count on it.*

But that wasn't what made Jonah sick to his gut. Not the block printing in blue. But the pink flowing cursive beneath. *Had him twice in one night. Might have him again. This one knows how to use his hands...and his belt! Two of the best rides I've had in a long, long while.*

God no!

As his mind grappled, his body hardened. Traitorously but emphatically.

His *belt*? So she *did* like it rough.

Liked it with anyone she happened to stumble across. Certainly hadn't come *looking* for him.

Jonah swore. Then swore again. Didn't know exactly what to make of the revelation there was a black-market sex ring operating practically under his nose, and Suzy had partaken—twice!

While he was trying to decide what to do with the knowledge, what to do with Suzy, feminine footsteps fluttered up the stairs and across the porch, making the decision for him.

He was in it for the long haul, wasn't he? Whether that meant the rest of today, the rest of her vacation...or longer. They had things to settle, he and this reckless renegade communications director from New York. This spicy blast from his past.

Things to learn about each other, things to explore, and boy did he have some things to punish. *Cowboy X*. Just the thought chapped his hide all over again. Made his heart burn, his cock throb—that she'd slept with another and loved it. *Two of the best rides I've had.*

So, as a key turned the lock, he anchored his hat firmly in place and drew up his knees, settling for the show to come...

Let the fireworks begin.

## Chapter Nine

Entry written during her third year of sex-for-Suzy vacations, directly after doing the deed and returning to her room. Alone.

*Whew wee! Things are starting off smoking this year!*

*His name was Deuce. Or Ace. Not sure, and not sure I care. A year or two younger than me, but God did he have a hard edge. And a harder cock.*

*Good thing I stocked up on that jumbo pack of condoms. After eleven and a half months of celibacy, this is just the stress reliever I needed.*

*Sometimes I can't believe I gave up dating. But with a few more nights like the last, I should be good to go until next year.*

*Ace-Deuce wasn't into spanking or anything really raunchy, but man, did he plow into me hard. Bruised my mons, the bastard.*

*But I liked it. Made me feel.*

\* \* \* \* \*

A fast trip into town. A quick returning of Sommer's purse. A long, thorough massage.

And thoughts of Jonah plagued her still.

He had her mind – no, she meant *body* – tied up in so many knots, it'd be a wonder if she could ever think straight again. She meant *walk* straight.

Of course she could think. No mere man had the power to muddle *her* mind.

Desperate for distraction – even after the limb-noodling touch of Julie – Suzy had submersed herself in eye-burning chlorine for another dip in the pool and more laps than she dared count.

Now her contacts were lost, her hair dripped fuchsia once again – in dire need of re-dying – and the artsy tattoos lining her arms had faded beyond redemption. If anyone should catch sight of her dashing in flip-flops across the dirt path, wet and wrapped in a stained towel, well...

Color her busted. A total hazel-eyed phony.

And the swim hadn't been worth it. Hadn't drowned the images crowding her mind – not a speck. Jonah...tall, tempting cowboy. Jonah, kissing her outside the dance hall in the recesses of her memory. Jonah, rescuing her last night. Jonah, taking her from behind. Hard, fast, *unforgettable*.

Suzy all but tripped up the stairs to her cabin, her mind dangerously obsessed. Focused totally on Jonah rather than her own two feet.

What was running through *his* head after waking up to her enlightening – or so she hoped – business card hours ago? Was he mad? Disgusted? Elated?

Did her name even matter to him? Had he finally clued in?

Or would this day pass with increasing monotony and tedious thoughts? Jonah, Jonah, Jonah...

Ugh!

Towel clutched at her waist, Suzy kicked off the squishy flip-flops and twisted the key in the knob, shoving the door open. Maybe she needed to call in the troops. Put Jonah out of her mind once and for all. Cowboy X would do nicely. Or she could always try another –

“Can’t decide which part about you is more fake,” the epitome of Texan cowboy drawled, stopping her short. “The sweet side. Or the slutty one.”

Hellfire. *Jonah.*

In her bed.

*Naked.*

Paging through *The Book of Men.*

*Naked.* Except for his white Resistol.

Holy smokes, she was going up in flames. Only her body did the opposite – blood rushing from her face so fast, Suzy felt herself go pale. And her towel receded with it, crashing to the floor. Her only defense, gone.

Here she was, indeed *fake* Suzy, undeniably exposed. Well crap.

“Nice tattoos,” he mocked. “Love the hair.”

“I, um...” She sputtered like a landed fish choking on an emerald contact. Hard muscle...huge cock... Bitter edge.

In her bed. Looking like a cowboy Adonis.

“Just what are you hiding from?” Jonah accused harshly.

Humiliation found her voice, turned it defensive. “Like it matters to you?”

“After *last night*, you can ask? After *college*?”

He had the gall to bring that up? “Doesn’t seem to me like anything that happened in college meant much. Not to you, Mr. I’ll-Remember-Your-Number!”

Her barb found its target. So why didn’t she take more pleasure when he winced?

He raised the big scrapbook with one arm, sculpted muscles holding it overhead as he spat, “So let’s talk about now. About *this*.”

Then it hit her. He’d called her a slut, hadn’t he?



Completely taken aback, Suzy crossed her arms to keep from chucking something at him—words or a grenade, she didn't much care which. *The sweet side. Or the slutty one.* Was that really how he saw her?

It wasn't as if she had a one-night stand every weekend! Just a few a year...so what if they were all at once?

But no amount of justifying seemed to ease the sting of his words.

Wet swimsuit and air-conditioning. The combination chilled her soul—or maybe that was being found out. *By him.* The look of hurt he wasn't trying to hide. Those muscles she couldn't stop admiring when he lowered his arm and just waited, patiently. Not saying a word.

So it was a confrontation he wanted? Suzy was happy to oblige. "And I can't decide what part of *you* is more fake. Good-natured, gentle cowboy or degenerate womanizer."

"Womanizer?" Blue eyes sparked fire and he pulled his upper body away from the headboard, still not abandoning her bed. As if he had some right there. "I've never seduced a woman in my life!"

"Oh, what do you call last night? 'I'd be happy to be of assistance, ma'am,'" she mocked. Restraint forgotten, Suzy whipped her hands free, dipped down and snatched the first thing her fingers came into contact with. One spiked sandal with panties snared around the toe hurled toward his head. "What do you call stealing a kiss and promising to call? Then not! Not ever!"

Jonah ducked as footwear rebounded off the wall, casting panties directly into his lap. A lacy red pair she'd taken off yesterday.

The corner of his mouth quirked. With desire? Disgust? She couldn't tell as he hooked them on his little finger and raised the crotch to his nose for a sniff. "Smells like sex. Tell me, did you wear these for Steve?"

"Who?"

"Cowboy X!" he all but snarled, one eyebrow raised. Daring her to deny it.

Well, why would she?

So he knew. Of all the damn pages in that book, he had to read that one.

Fiery shame heated her face, rousing Suzy's indignation. Arrogant man! Breaking into her cabin. Nosing through her business—nosing her *panties!* Her sex life was none of his concern!

None! *Unless,* some imp in the back of her brain nagged, *it was him she was fucking...*

Not likely to happen again, so heaven only knew why she retreated back against the wooden door and pointed out, "You sound jealous, Jonah dear. What? Don't like the idea of me riding another?"

He didn't answer, just shot her a look to kill. One that made her feel lower than an ant's ass. Like a cheat. Like total *shit.*

Damn him, there wasn't anything between them!

Jonah had no claim on her—he'd seen to that himself! What nerve, acting as if he did.

Suzy glanced around, hoping for another weapon. Jeans, dirty socks...not a rock or hard book in sight. Except the one in his lap—the one he'd opened wide.

She could throw the microwave but that might do real damage. "Yup, Cowboy X. Think I'll call him now. See if he's available."

Take that, asshole.

Suzy eyed the telephone across the room, wishing she had the nerve. Would serve Jonah right. "It's fucking freezing in here," she complained for good measure. "Bet *he* could warm me up!"

One thick finger tapped the page. "You like getting the belt, huh?"

"I..." Her response hitched in her throat. But her gaze darted to the floor where it settled upon the thick leather belt coiled near his boots and jeans.

Her eyes shot back to his only to find his gaze had shadowed hers. He focused intently on the Bottoms Up brand that adorned the buckle. "You'd deserve it, Reckless."

Maybe...

After all, last night he'd told her she was McKenzie property. And what a way for him to make it so.

"Oh yeah, cowboy?" Suzy had no idea what possessed her to saunter forward, nudging the belt with bare toes. "Ya think?"

His intense stare locked with hers and something unspoken, unnamable, passed between them.

Her heart drummed in her ears. Heat flushed her dampened skin, replacing pool water with sweat. Her foot petted smooth leather. "Is that what you want, Jonah? To punish me?"

"I ought to." The book clapped shut, resonating with finality. "Careful though, pushing me too far. You've no idea how very *jealous* you do make me."

"I'm shaking in my swimsuit." Suzy shrugged past the flutter in her stomach, easing wet straps over her shoulders and gradually revealing white skin. "Guess I better get it off then."

What was she doing? Stripping? Provoking him...for sex? For a spanking? *Punishment?*

She wanted a spanking from the man who'd just called her a slut?

Great way to let him have it. *Real fight productive, Suzy. Real feminist.*

What was wrong with her?

Sure, she loved her sex rough and randy. Preferred a man who'd take charge—and take her—completely. Aggressively. Consume her body and blot her mind.

But dammit, she was supposed to be pissed off! Not *horny*! Not thinking maybe he had a small point...she had let herself slip a peg or two this vacation.

She *shouldn't* be sliding her swimsuit over her breasts, exposing hardened nipples, the plane of her belly...

And he...he shouldn't be salivating, licking his full lips, narrowed eyes darting from that belt to the bared juncture between her legs. Thinking what she was thinking.

No, no, no! He was supposed to be a good guy! Mild-mannered and easygoing.

But he was no exception to the rule. Beneath his sexy exterior and Texan charm, he was still a guy – and she'd learned her lesson about those the hard way.

That reminder gave her the strength to do the right thing. *Turn it into a game.* Because in the end, that's all sex and relationships were – a joke the universe played on the unsuspecting. But Suzy was smarter now. She knew the rules. Running into Jonah had almost made her forget. But she remembered now.

The more she fortified her emotions against any entanglement, the more her body flooded with desire. "What? Cat got your tongue?" she goaded. "You're a fine specimen, you West Texas cowboys. All brawny muscle...even have that farmer's tan thing going on. You know, that tan line across your biceps only makes them look broader. Do you do that on purpose, I wonder? Hike your shirt sleeves up to that very spot?"

Her lips could practically taste the hard muscle. *It's a game*, she repeated in her mind. Nothing but.

When he remained silent, she began stroking the sides of her thighs, across her abdomen and up her stomach until she was cupping her breasts, flicking her thumbs across her nipples. Moaning a little – to add to his torment...and vocalize hers.

Jonah watched but made no move to join her – or take her. Just lifted *The Book of Men* and set it aside.

"Yep, Jonah McKenzie is one damn fine cowboy specimen, but you know that. What you might not know is how I can't wait to crawl over that cock again." She felt the sinuous glide of leather beneath her restless foot. It gave her courage in spite of his lack of response. "And in the light of day no less."

Giving her breasts one last squeeze, Suzy hooked her toes under the belt and slid her foot solidly under the strip of leather. Then she kicked it straight up and caught it. Ran her tongue along one narrow edge, eyes locked on his.

"You just can't stop playing with fire," Jonah warned in that slow drawl, but she saw how his body tensed, "can you, Red? Or should I say *Pink*? Told you last night, in this town consider yourself McKenzie property. That doesn't mean flaunting what you've got to every Tom, Dick and Darin in town."

"Think you can rein me in that easily? Issue an order and I jump to obey? I doubt it."

His only response was a smirk.

Whatever. He wouldn't do it. She knew he wouldn't. Couldn't.

Yet part of her wanted him to. Needed him to be that guy – the one who really *could* tame her – despite all reasoning to the contrary. Needed him to be the one who saw through her every disguise, whether in bed or out, even if it meant destroying her remaining resistance to him...puny though it was.

The odds of that happening were greater than her winning the lottery. So Suzy felt completely safe continuing the game.

“If you think you have the balls, cowboy...I would so like to see you try.”

She tossed him the belt, whirled around and brandished her bare butt.

Oh, he had the balls all right.

Balls of steel – tense an’ ridin’ high. A lethally hard-forged cock. And a little lady – he used the term loosely – with her inviting ass swinging left then right, taunting him. Goadin’.

Jonah’s hand whipped overhead and caught the belt before the buckle could clank into the wall.

Shoving the sinful scrapbook across the bed and having it thud to the floor resulted in great satisfaction. Hearing a couple pages crinkle in the process, even more.

Jonah stood and stepped over the book that had ironically fallen open at his nemesis’s page and photograph. He’d never look at the guy with the same respect again.

As for Suzy...

Suzy with the pathetic pink dribbles that’d dripped then dried over her forehead and shoulders, a couple down her back...what did he make of her?

Damn, she had some nerve, flaunting that ass as if *she* had something to prove. If anyone had a point to make, it was him – and he would. With his belt.

Suzy had no idea what she was asking for, but Jonah promised himself by the end of this afternoon, she’d know who she belonged to.

The hard way or the easy way, before they were through he’d see her scratch out that customer comment for Cowboy X and replace it with *cannot compare to Jonah* in that beautiful pink penmanship of hers.

“Well? Where the fuck you at, cowboy?” Wag, wag, wag. “Come on. Thought you could rein me in?” *Tsk, tsk* clacked her flashy mouth. Her butt twitched simultaneously with her tongue. “What a shame...”

After an exaggerated shrug, she abandoned her pose and swept one arm to the floor, scooping up her bathing suit. “Guess I’ll just get showered and ready for another night on the town.” She glanced over her shoulder defiantly. “Unless I decide to *order in*.”

“Like hell you are.”

Why wait? She needed to learn he wasn't to be toyed with, not like this. Not about something so important. He might not know what she was hiding—or why—but he sure had an inkling how to go about earning her respect and eventually her confidence.

Jonah firmed his stance like some avenging centaur, planted his bare feet firmly on the rug next to the bed. Belt in hand, he flexed his shoulders and coiled fingers around the leather. His eyes never left Suzy's. "Drop the swimsuit."

With a light cascade of laughter, she did then stood, awaiting his next order. Oh yeah, this was exactly what the feisty tart wanted.

Orders, he could give.

Intentionally avoiding looking at the scrapbook in question, he commanded, "Walk over here." She did, exaggerating the sway of her hips as she came to stand before him, eager for whatever punishment he wanted to mete out. Crazy Susannah! "Pick up the book."

She hesitated at that, but Jonah was having none of it. "Pick up your asinine book of indiscriminate men!"

Haughty posture faltering just a speck, she did.

Before she could close it, Jonah's arm shot out—the hand holding the belt—and his palm slammed against Steve's bandannaed face. "Lay the book on the bed, open, just like it is."

Pure bravado now, she quipped, "Sure thing, cowboy. Getting kinky, are we? Wanting to read my reviews for some tips? Needing some ideas—"

His free hand smacked her butt, causing her to swallow the rest of her sentence. A surge of male pride roiled through him. "Pick up the pen."

Moving in slow motion, her eyes darting to his face as though she couldn't quite fathom where this might be going, Suzy retrieved the pink-plumed monstrosity and proceeded to run figure eights over his bare chest and up his neck with the feathery top.

"What now?" She stepped so close heat seared along his front while she flipped the pen around and began drawing pink hearts over his pectorals. "Is this what you want? My heart? Too bad, cowboy..." Her voice had a hard edge he hated. "It's not for sale. But the rest of me? You can have that for the ask—"

Jonah snared her wrist in a fierce grip and spun her to face the bed and open book. Shoving her down, he pointed to the compliment she'd written. "Scratch it out."

"No."

He was glad she defied him. Gave him an excuse to thwack her ass a second time.

"Scratch. It. Out."

When she hesitated again, he didn't, laying a bare palm to her butt. Twice in quick succession. Then he loomed above her naked back and forced her fingers to comply. "Scratch it out, dammit."

He zigzagged her wrist so fast and hard, directing the pen over the spot, the ballpoint ripped into the page. When nothing remained but a zillion pink lines, Jonah

stood, breathing fast. The belt in his hand weighed a ton. "Now write what I tell you. 'Cannot compare—'"

"No." But she hovered there, above the page, *still* bent halfway over the mattress and so high off the floor she balanced on her toes.

He knew what she wanted. But men like him—they did *not* beat women with belts.

Jonah squeezed the wedge of stiff leather within his grasp, considering. Contemplating. Calculating exactly what result the sum of his decisions—and her responses—might produce. Needing everything to equal one hundred percent. His actions, her heart.

Why did it matter so?

Jonah couldn't have explained it to save his life, but it did. It mattered so goddamn much.

And oh how she deserved it. How he wanted it.

"Write it."

"Nuh-uh."

"Do you want me to fuck you?" He knew she did—had smelled her cunt cream when the swimsuit came off, witnessed the hard nipples long before. Felt it—deep in his gut.

She wanted *him*. And it scared her.

She dropped the pen and stretched her arms across the mattress, snuggling into the sheets. "I want a cock. Doesn't matter whose."

Rage unlike anything he'd ever experienced blasted through him. "You don't respect yourself very much, do you?"

She ignored that to retrieve the pen and start her damn heart doodling on the page.

Paying no heed to the leather cutting into his palm, he pinched her thigh, pleased when she yelped. "You want a cock, huh? Mine?"

Still concentrating on the page, she ran one foot up his leg. "Maybe...a bit. Maybe I don't care if it's yours or not."

He growled. The belt beckoned.

Why did part of him still hesitate? His arm was itching to let fly. His pride needed to be soothed. His wayward gal taught a lesson. Had he known her at all? She was a stranger now—a wild and sexy one he couldn't get enough of. She had this way about her, this keep-him-on-his-toes-while-bringing-him-to-his-knees kind of sexy manner Jonah had craved forever without realizing it.

Sure, he'd been with women. Had the occasional warm body tucked up next to his, but never until the cold light of dawn. Never all through the night. Never anyone who really broadened *his* horizons or touched him. Not inside.

Always too damn driven to be sidetracked by a female. His goals too important. But with Suzy here...

*Susannah.* One look at the wildcat holding her own with Burns and he'd been impressed. A second look, spying those tattoo-covered arms and brassy-bold hair, big, gaudy earrings, and he'd been intrigued.

She embodied the antithesis of what anyone would expect *him* to want, but want her he did. Though the thought of how she'd likely drive his nana bonkers only increased her stock in his eyes, Jonah had known he wanted her wildness all for himself.

But not to cover it up or extinguish it. No he wanted her to flaunt it. Wanted to say, "Lookee here, this good ole 'momma's boy' can tempt and satisfy a firecracker in bed."

He liked who he was when he was with her. But he had *no idea* who she was.

Not anymore.

When he'd reluctantly awakened that morning? *Involved.* The only word to describe how he felt. Which had been inexplicable until he'd found that business card and his mind finally computed all the facts and figures his body had added up during the night.

Sexy Suzy and her sexy body made Jonah one very happy man.

Even with all the goings-on with his family right now, he couldn't stop obsessing over her.

*Grandpa crashes the tractor...and Jonah's thinkin' about Suzy.*

*Bo says, "Unload hay" ... and still, he's thinkin' about Suzy.*

*Electric bill burns a hole in his pocket, screaming, "High enough for ya?!" – thoughts of Suzy tell it to shut the hell up.*

At his continued stillness, her feet slid to the floor. She stood and faced him. A shadow crossed her eyes, darkening the soft hazel with a wounded cast even as she pasted on a phony smile and sashayed around him. "Time's up, Tex. I've got a shower to catch. A *real* cowboy to call."

*Tex.* She'd called him Tex. First time since college, which only confirmed what he'd suspected. He did matter and more than she wanted to admit.

The belt didn't feel so heavy after all. In fact, it felt just right.

Jonah said nothing, simply folded fine, smooth leather in his hands, leaned forward, and let it rip. His belt hissed. Connected with creamy-white skin. *Snap!*

She hadn't been expecting it, not by then.

"Jonah!" High-pitched with surprise, her cry rang out and Suzy all but jumped from her skin, the shower – and phone – forgotten.

She swung around, those hazel eyes now wide and burning gold, all hint of sadness wiped clear. As if she really never thought *he* had what it took. But he did and now she knew it. Frozen in place, she stood there. Waiting for more?

For a moment, Jonah was smacked – so hard he couldn't breathe – with regret. He'd just hit a lady – with his belt. And he'd done it intentionally.

Good grief, what was wrong with him? “Suzy, I...” Despite the instant guilt, an apology eluded him. He balanced on that fine line of right and wrong, of desire and denial.

Of *wanting* to hit her again. Until she screamed. Really screamed. *His* name, by God.

Wasn't there some verse in Ezekiel that fit their situation...something about the wicked whose time had come, whose punishment had reached its climax?

He was likely butchering that one, but somehow he didn't care. It seemed appropriate.

His chest burned, lips thrummed. Adrenaline surged through his naked limbs, hardening muscle. Firming resolve.

“I don't know who the hell you are anymore or what you're hiding from, Susannah Miller. Not too sure who I am at the moment either, but I aim to find out.” The belt now felt like an extension of his hand. Jonah tightened his grip, gettin' comfortable. “Thinkin' maybe we're meant to find out together.”

His voice was low. Unusually clipped. Tension held him rigid but he could no more drop that belt or turn away – or lose his erection – any more than he could change his mind. But still, he forced himself to warn her. “Unless you cry uncle now and we stop this here –”

“God no! Please, no...” Her voice was ragged. Pleading evident.

“You're sure?”

In slow motion, she touched one finger to the red welt lining the outside of her thigh, holding his gaze all the while. “Just so you know, Tex, I'm thinking it's going to take a lot more than that to rein me in.”

“Dammit, Reckless.”

All hesitation flew the way of her panties. Snagging her at the waist, he hauled her ass closer and snaked the belt through the air, acutely aware of it slashing between them then snapping against her soft skin.

She sucked in a breath but made no move to evade the strike. That one nor the three that followed, his arm slicing figure eights in the space that separated them before pelting against her flesh. Not that she'd anywhere to go, not with the way he had her pinned at his side.

Flush with the powerful feeling that came over him, Jonah knew nothing but her absolute surrender would satisfy the beast she'd raised.

When he saw how she tensed for the next strike, he paused.

Filled his lungs... His heart... His nose with her scent – chlorine and strong arousal. That underlying hint of softness, sweetness. The one that confused him to hell and back. Because *this* Susannah – the firecracker – *wasn't* sweet. More like blazing – pure sultry sin – and how Jonah wanted to burn.



“Damn you!” Releasing her, Jonah seized her head, fingers locking around washed-out red hair, and he hauled her to the bed. “If it’s a lesson you want, it’s a lesson you’ll get.”

Instinct took over, strangely compelling. Jonah didn’t understand it, this dark side that *wanted* to punish her, didn’t understand why she would *want* him to. Why both of them were so turned-on, his cock aching hard, her pussy glistening wet as he forced her to bend over the mattress again. Why she moaned submissively, as if he were doing everything right, when in any other arena, this would be so wrong.

Deciding he no longer cared, Jonah kicked her legs apart—the point of no return was staring him in the face and he was walking on through. Not looking back.

Her ass wasn’t angled enough, so he grabbed two pillows from the headboard, inadvertently revealing a stash of condoms. He stuffed the pillows beneath her hips, causing her butt to arch enticingly then he plucked a foil packet from the ready stash, thinking he had full intention of using every last one so she couldn’t use them with anyone else. He’d buy up every condom in town if he had to.

Quickly, he rolled it on, only cussing once, fumbling twice...all the while studying her perfectly round right cheek and thigh, the crimson marks slashing flawless white.

“Cowboy X...” He strengthened his grip on the belt and brushed the leather over her hip, pausing at the red streaks, swiping over them as though they could be erased, then he wandered down her thigh, caressing her as she didn’t deserve. Didn’t want. With both fingers and leather. Intentionally taunting her. Punishing himself with his question. “Did he make you feel like this too? Were you this wet for him? *This* exposed?”

The leather danced from one leg to the next, stroking, exploring creamy ass muscle. How he wanted to draw back, to deliver a sharp smack that would prevent her from answering, but he maintained a gentle hand. For now.

“Oh Jonah...” Her butt cheeks clenched and the muscles of her back and shoulders flexed as well, as though she drew on inner strength. “Don’t you know...no one could feel like this. Not to me...not ever.”

Her answer moved him as he’d never expected. “Then why...” The belt shifted, traced faded tattoo designs on one arm. “Why, dammit?”

“Why not?” Her sassy edge returned and she kicked one foot out, connected solidly with his thigh, all hot sauce and jalapeño pepper. “What was I supposed to do, wait around for you to finally call?”

Torn away by tragedy...but only then did it occur that she didn’t know. Had no clue why he’d ditched her. Only that he had.

“Why shouldn’t I play to my body’s content?” she added. “I’ve learned better than you can imagine what comes from getting serious. I much prefer *sexual* pain.”

Oh sweet, Sugar Cookie Suzy. Crazy, mixed-up Susannah. Hiding from the world and herself, and it all could’ve been so different...

The urge to punish her good for being so bad warred with the compelling need to go all soft on her, to gather her into his arms and make sweet, slow love. L-O-V-E. To erase the years, the indifference between them with something other than outright hard fucking.

But as she moaned and spread her legs wider, exposing dripping, salty-sweet pussy and cream that saturated the air around them, Jonah knew better than to weaken now.

“Fuck me, asshole,” she blurted roughly, making herself fair game. “I’m tired of waiting.”

“From here on, you’ll talk to me with respect or you won’t talk at all!” Hadn’t he heard something in some random porn flick? “That’s ‘Mister’ to you!”

Huh. Didn’t sound right.

Irritated with them both, Jonah rescinded his teasing leather caresses and yanked the belt back, whipping the strap across the unmarked cheek. “Say it anyway!”

But the blow was far too playful to be punishing—and her giggled, “Mr. Asshole,” proved it.

“I mean it, woman.” He made up for his initial weakness the second time, sending the belt crashing across taut muscle.

“Jonah!” Her wail contained mixed pleasure and pain but her pelvis lifted off the pillows, inviting more. “Fuck me, Mr. Jonah!”

Once again he delivered. She cheered as if her team had just hit a homerun.

Little hellion.

It was a good, hard spanking she wanted. And exactly what she’d get.

Jonah still had Cowboy X to best after all and *himself* to prove. That dirty mouth of hers to cure. And claim.

When he drew back his belt and she flinched forward, a seductive laugh playing past his ears, Jonah decided that it was high time Suzy learned Lesson *Numero Uno* in *total* submission.

*Whap!*

She moaned.

So he did it again, with more intensity. *Whap!* “This is for choosing Darin Burns!”

“But I didn’t! I changed my mind!”

*Whack!* Again. Harder. “*This* is for saying ‘yes’ before you said ‘no’! For choosing Darin Dickweed *before* you chose me!” *Thwack! Whack! Whap!* “For *choosing* Steve before me!”

“And this...” On fire for her, Jonah held the belt high, allowed the tip to dangle along her exposed crack while he savored the surge of power rolling through him. From his bare feet on the floor, tingling up along every particle of his body before exploding out his belt-wielding arm. “This is for me—*all* for me!”

And he rained blows across her ass and thighs, over every bit of creamy skin *not* already blazing.

*The edge.* So this is what it felt like.

All those times, all those other men... She'd never been precisely *here* before, not like this. Sure, it wasn't the first time she'd been spanked. Or taken roughly and used thoroughly. Wasn't the first time bossy foreplay had entered the bedroom either.

But this...this wasn't like those other times. The anticipation was deeper, stronger, more painful than ever before. And she *loved* it. Loved how she'd been bent—literally—to his will. Had to admit to herself there was only one thing that could make this time so different. *Him.*

Jonah "Tex" McKenzie, cowboy extraordinaire.

For once she could almost be glad he'd abandoned her that night in college. Never called or explained. Because right this second Suzy couldn't imagine anything comparing to the fiery surge of pain mixed with need scalding her insides, creaming her outsides...preparing her body for the ride of its life.

Preparing her heart...for his?

She didn't know but couldn't help but wonder. Neither did she flinch from the belt that sliced toward her, descending with the cut of a knife on her ass... The blade sharp, carving through to a reality she wanted to resist but which kept slashing through her brain. Well-mannered, sweet-talkin', dependable Jonah.

Who hadn't quite turned out so reliable.

*He* made this different. *He* made this what she'd been searching for all those years, with all these vacations from herself. That thought did what all the others hadn't—scared the crap out of her. Suzy shied from him, scrambling for freedom.

He wouldn't allow it. His broad hand caught the angle of her hip, forcing her to the pillows.

"Where're you headed, Reckless?" Pinning her in place, Jonah leaned close, his breath hot over the back of her head as he issued a warning. "I didn't give you permission to crawl away." The belt lovingly swept over searing skin...teasing...threatening. His voice was hard when he added, "If you want me to stop, you beg me. Tell me everything I want to hear and *beg me.*"

Strong fingers delved between her thighs, plied her pussy lips apart and searched out her opening then pushed deep. Pushing her. "Beg me real nice, darlin'. Though I'm not at all sure what I'll do then."

His fingers hiked higher, pushed deeper, then began pumping. A third joined the fun then a fourth, each addition spreading her wider.

Suzy whimpered, unable to help herself and rammed against him. "No...don't." For once in her life, she had no idea what she wanted. What she needed. Except...

"Don't what?" he demanded, his fingers pulsing furiously.

*Jonah.* That's what she needed. Who she needed. "Jonah! Stop. Don't stop. Please."

Leather cascaded once then crashed down, stroking such wonderful, necessary pain across her bottom. She arched upward. She rode his hand. And how Suzy loved it. Loved the blows, loved every deep thrust inside her cunt. Crying out in sheer delight, she buried her face in the sheets. It was too much. Too good. Too perfect and weird and weirdly confusing how she wanted it to stop as much as she wanted it to continue. She teetered at the edge again, danced along the precipice, and her lunge forward was pure instinct, the product of years of holding herself apart, distant from everyone and anyone. Alone. Separated by cheap dye and cheaper morals.

This time, Jonah didn't catch her. Didn't haul her back into place. Didn't rasp another command.

Without a word his belt dropped to the pillow and he abandoned her completely, withdrawing those long, thick fingers. Disappearing and leaving her with pure, pulsing ache. Fierce need. Bereft and sick inside – hollow.

"Jonah?" She heard his bare feet pad across the floor but she couldn't look. Couldn't expose herself – moisture had gathered on her lashes. "Jo – Jonah?"

Damn his silence!

The bastard meant it. He'd make her beg. What measures this man could wring from her...

The heavy closet door creaked open, hangers shuffled. What was he doing? "Jonah, pl-please..."

Please? What was she doing?

"Please, I need you. Please... I'm b-begging..." The words were sludge in a throat strangling to clamp shut. To keep her strong. Aloof.

"On your knees would be better."

How was it the terse command only made her heart leap?

Suzy's traitorous body sprang to life, scrambling around to comply. "Oh please, *Mr. McKenzie, Sir,*" her disloyal tongue added. "I need your cock, your body over mine, under mine. I need –"

"Enough!" Then she saw what he was about. He fingered two sashes – one to her colorful terrycloth robe as well as the satin one from her sexier nightwear. And since belts of fabric were useless in spanking, he could only mean to do one thing with those – tie her up.

*That* she hadn't done before. Her stomach hurtled to the floor. Totally at another's mercy? Suzy didn't think so. She pushed to her knees. "Uh-uh. I didn't say you could tie –"

"And I don't recall askin'. Get back where I want you. Now."

"But..."

"No damn 'buts'!" Jonah pointed one steely finger her direction. "I'm bigger than you and stronger than you and we both know I can overcome any defense –"

“But I didn’t say you could –”

“Dammit, Suzy!” He lunged forward and slammed one hand against her back, keeping her in place.

A strange sort of panicky hope bubbled in her as she willingly fell forward onto her hands. To be held immobile, completely at his mercy...

Amazed that he was still playing this far, Suzy marveled. He knew, *knew* about the others and yet he still wanted *her*.

*You want a cock, huh? Mine? Wanted her to need him. Oh God.*

“You seem to have the mistaken impression that you’re the one in charge, that you’re *choosing* to give up control. Well you’re not. Not right now.” His voice was harder than his hand, flexing with barely leashed strength over her spine. “As of this moment, I’m wresting it from you and, darlin’,” his drawl was more pronounced, more intense than ever, “get it through your dyed head, I mean business.” Tossing the makeshift rope on the bed, he challenged, “You want this the easy way?”

She wasn’t sure how to answer. Nothing but a pathetic squeak emerged when he shoved her face to the mattress and clapped her palms together at the small of her back.

“Well, Suzy, not a chance. You prefer things the hard way, I’m learning.” Satin encompassed her wrists, wrapping round and round. “By the time,” he knotted it securely, “I’m done with you,” he shoved the pillows beneath her pelvis, plumping each, so her butt was positioned high, “there’ll be no doubt in your mind who masters you.”

To prove it, he smacked her ass sharply then faded behind her, leaving her aching and wanting. Wondering. What the hell was he doing? Would he ever bury that cock deep inside her and end this?

Or was this some payback from hell? Was he going to just *leave*? Really punish her – in the worst way imaginable – for running out on him this morning? For Cowboy X? Darin? Other one-night sins too numerous to name? “Jonah? I’m sorry, okay? Sorry about the –”

Out of nowhere, he smacked her ass and she swallowed wrong then choked out, “Sorry about the others. But we... You –”

“Did I say you could talk?” *Pop!* His warm hand left hot pain, followed by searing pleasure.

Oh God, would this ever end? In her heart? Her head? A forbidden, unbidden thought surely, but she couldn’t help remembering how bad it hurt when he hadn’t called, no matter that no real relationship existed between them. Couldn’t stop recalling every thought she’d had of him through countless times with other men, countless other cowboys during other vacations – Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico. What? Had she unknowingly been working her way back to him all this time?

The longer he made her wait, the more memories of the past rushed in. The present painting them with knowledge and certainty.

All along, it'd always been Jonah. Something about him—his persistence, his courtliness, his six-foot-four sexy body—had grabbed hold and hadn't let go. Stalking her, a dreadful apparition who wouldn't die, now very much alive. And claiming her.

If only that part were real. Real and not some sex game—

At the sound of ripping fabric, she craned her neck. Before she could make sense of anything, Jonah seized one ankle and tossed a pocket knife to the mattress beside her—cluing her in.

“Did you just slice my robe? You bastard!”

He chuckled with twisted delight, knotting tie-dyed terrycloth around the captured ankle then drawing her left leg wide. “In several pieces,” he gloated. “And I'd appreciate some manners when you speak to me.” With a yank, he secured her to one of the ornate bedposts. “And no more red hair either, not this week. I miss the sunlit blonde. Or was that fake too?”

Instead of grabbing her right foot, he bent over and placed a kiss to each shoulder blade, running his fingertips gently between. “The tats I like. Cute.” His mouth wandered down her spine, licking all over, nipping here and there, making her ass clench. Her pussy gush.

Part of her smiled, but most of her refused. She wouldn't give him the total submission he demanded—he didn't deserve it. “Like I care what you—”

Teeth dug into her ass, proving her wrong and she cried out.

Suzy mangled her fingers together, wishing to God she had something to hold on to. Something to punch. His face, maybe? His sexy chest?

“No. More. *Book of Men*,” he enunciated with a swipe of wet tongue, followed by fingers that spread her folds wide, sweeping up and down her wet pussy, securing the moisture gathered between. “No more bars.” Slowly, tortuously, his fingertips meandered upward, circling her anus. Without warning, he forced a thick finger deep. Her gasp ricocheted off the walls.

No sooner than the tight bud loosened to accommodate his presence, he invaded her with a second finger. “No more convicts.” He thrust the words inside her with his hand. Pressing hard. Driving his meaning into her. “No more being stupid. Or dangerous. *Reckless*.”

The intensity made sparks blast all over her body and her bottom jumped in rhythm with each demand. Jonah—so much more than she could handle. Everything and anything she'd ever fantasized about.

Come to life, finally. *In him*, dammit.

He was convincing. With any other cowboy, any other man at all, he'd have her surrender by now. But with Jonah, Suzy refused to whimper and whine. Refused to admit defeat because to do so was to cross an intimate line she considered out-of-bounds. “Reckless is who I am.”

"We'll see about that." Those fingers sank into her butt one last time then retreated, sliding across her flank, swatting it goodbye.

He took the other ankle in hand, knotted the makeshift belt around it, and Suzy decided to call him on his demands. "How you doth protest... Seems to me you *like*, Reckless."

A low chuckle vibrated through him as he tied her last limb to the opposite bedpost. Officially immobile.

"And now..." Unanticipated, leather bit into the skin of one thigh and a cry strangled from her throat. "For your spanking."

Hadn't he already done that? There was *more*?

Once again the leather punished hot flesh. *Smack, smack, smack!*

Every muscle went rigid. Desire drenched her pussy. Suzy went a little crazy inside. *Crazier* to be more accurate, for she hadn't exactly been acting sane.

With each slicing *thwack* of the belt, she clamped down harder on her lip, knowing she shouldn't be enjoying this nearly as much as she was. She needed his cock! Needed therapy, most likely.

*Head shrink later, cock now!* her body urged.

*Smack, smack, smack!*

"You just let me know, Suzy." *Pop! Thwack!* "When you're ready..."

What'd that mean? But she didn't have to wonder long...

"Say it," he ground out, his breath rasping the words. "Say it, babe."

"Say what?" But she knew. Deep down inside, the words screamed for release...driven not by the belt. Rather, by *his* need...

"Give me what I want, Suzy. I won't settle for less." The belt came down twice more, stinging fire over her outer thighs. "And I don't think you can handle much more."

*T-H-W-A-C-K!*

"Don't you go forgettin', darlin', in Sweetwater County this ass is stamped *Jonah McKenzie's*." He emphasized the sentiment with another sharp slap, this one with his palm. His hand remained on her flank, fingers pressing in, nails gouging skin. "Don't let another man touch you, not again." It felt as though one of his blunt fingernails pierced through when he amended, "Not while you're here."

Just when Suzy couldn't decide if she was mollified or disappointed by that last part, he tacked on, "Or there'll be hell to pay, that I promise."

As if to erase everything that came before, he lowered his body and licked the spot he'd just punished. Kissed her, gently bit. Drove her desire through the roof.

Funny thing was, she believed him. Believed there'd be dire consequences should she so much as look at another man, resident of Sweetwater County or not.

And the knowledge only made that dead, cold part in the center of her being flare to life. But it was his continued determination that nurtured the embers, drat him.

*Smack, smack, smack!* Each blow came harder yet irrationally, not hard enough. She wanted more, needed the sting, the pain. Needed to drown her mind out, any way possible.

But then he did the unthinkable. He drew back. And *nothing*. Another blow failed to follow.

While she fought for breath, he stole it all – taking the narrowed end of his belt, he dipped it in her pussy, sliding high and catching her clit, rubbing her with the leather. Her lungs hitched when he pressed it deeper, finding her slit, working the tip fully inside her.

With excruciating slowness, Jonah eased the stiff leather inside several inches. He twisted it. Rocked it. Pushed her *off* the edge. The belt that had spanked her...now it owned her. There was no holding back. No refusing him. Never again.

She'd just leapt from a five-story building and was flying toward the ground. *Kaboom!* An orgasm thundered through her. She whirled with pleasure, her sex convulsing, weeping as the words he wanted flew from her. "Yours!" Jonah didn't stop torturing her with the belt, throbbing it in rhythm with her tensing pussy. "You damn devil... I'm yours! All yours!"

McKenzie property. In Rustlers Junction...or out.

She gasped with finality. Finished.

Or so she thought.

But as Jonah relieved her body of the belt and climbed on the bed behind her, she knew he'd have none of it.

He leaned down 'til their faces almost touched. Her eyelids fluttered open to see him lift the leather to his nose and inhale. "I'll never wash this, you know. You're gonna be on there forever."

Holding her shattered gaze, he deliberately ran his tongue over the pussy-drenched leather, laving off her juices. Her release. Her desire.

He cast the belt aside and his sheathed cock nudged her swollen flesh and burrowed deep. Just like being sucked into a tornado, Suzy found herself hurtled back on top of that building. Wobbling along the edge and falling off all over again as he rammed full force into her, one thrust, two...three...

His guttural words echoed her thoughts, "Four...five...six..."

Her pussy clenched at his shaft as if it belonged there, the rest of her body shaking with spent need, growing need...with sheer sexual exhaustion.

"Eight...nine...ten," he chanted hoarsely, losing count as his pelvis surged against her buttocks.

"Ten. Ten! *Ten!*" he roared, and she shuddered, cresting again when he slammed deep one final time and nestled there, jerking and exploding.



And then they were *both* finished.

And Suzy knew nothing would ever be the same.

*Nada, zip, zilch.*

## Chapter Ten

Susannah, age eleven, first diary entry ever written.

*Dear Diary,*

*My name is Susannah Kimberlyn Miller.*

*I turned 11 years old today. I wanted a dog for my birthday.*

*I got you.*

*And a stupid turtle.*

*And a Madonna CD. But not even a new one. Like a Prayer has to be, like, several years old. I'm listening to Express Yourself on my sister's CD player. I need to take it out before she gets home and catches me in her room.*

*But you have a lock, so that's cool.*

*I can tell you anything and you won't blab to my parents.*

*Not like that head doctor they want me to talk to.*

*Who cares how I feel about my parents' divorce? I can't say anything to stop it. Or stop me and Mom and Beth from moving to a dumb apartment.*

*That's why I can't have a dog. We won't have a yard for him to poop in. My dad said shit in. But Mom shhhhhhed him and whispered how they didn't need me repeating any more words at school. Since that's a Go To The Principles Office no-no at Gardenvale Elementary. (Saying dirty, grown-up words.)*

*Shit. SHIT!*

*Ha-ha! I can cuss to you and not get in trouble.*

*Maybe you will be better than a dog!*

*So long for now. Love, Susannah*

*PS. Now don't think that I think a dog would tell Mom I said a swear word. I'm not stupid. Just ~~mad~~ pissed.*

*PSS. That's what I heard the school counselor tell Mom – that I'm acting out because I have pressed feelings or something.*

*PPSS. I'm writing under the covers with a flashlight because it's way past my bedtime.*

*It's cool.*

\* \* \* \* \*

After what he'd just experienced, Jonah was so damn replete—so damn content—even the promise of an eternally positive net worth wouldn't induce him to change a

second of the sex they'd shared. But he doubted "replete" and "content" described Suzy at present. More like "repelled" and "contempt".

And it was all his fault. Not only had he fed into her twisted concept of what constituted foreplay, but he'd embraced it. Literally beat her. All in the name of incredible sex?

Hell, he was more twisted than she was, enjoying the living daylights out of the past hour.

This was so far from the behavior of a man reared to be a gentleman in all things, Jonah knew he should berate himself further—but he couldn't. Not when his body shook like a well-sated virgin's, electric charges pummeling his skin from the inside out, encouraging him to remember how she'd craved what he did *and* begged for it.

Yet that reminder didn't ease his apprehension. Shouldn't shame be coming down on him hard right about now?

Muscles protesting, he eased from her body. Having her restrained and beneath him, for even a second more, wouldn't do. He needed to hold her in his arms, kiss that beautifully wide forehead, finger those unnaturally pinkish locks. Make sure this was all really happening...

First one foot then the next landed unsteadily on the floor. Jonah chucked the condom, not caring where it landed—the room was a disaster anyway.

"You okay, Reckless?"

She groaned and shame loomed closer.

Not so much because he truly *felt* guilty—because he didn't. And *that* he felt guilty about. Sort of. Knew he should. God, what a turn-on—letting go as he had, knowing she'd needed it more than he did.

It'd been so damn liberating.

And so fucking weird.

Never, *never* had he struck a woman, never even thought it. Couldn't deny how powerful it'd been, knowing he had the ability to rip her in half but the restraint to avoid harming a hair on her head—not unless she wanted it. Begged for it.

*Which she had*, his conscience reminded.

Still didn't erase the guilt. "I don't hear you calling the sheriff," he muttered into the silence, "so...um...that mean you don't plan on seein' *me* banished behind bars?"

"Stu...pid...ques...tion...Tex," she murmured so painfully slow that for a moment Jonah had to push down the panic that threatened. Then she sighed and added, "I'm fab...u...lous. Fuck...ing fab-u-lous!"

*Fabulous...right.*

He would've laughed but he was too spent.

"'Bout...you?" she uttered only marginally faster.

Yeah, what about him?

Ordering his body to evolve beyond his current satisfaction-induced stupor, Jonah made quick work freeing her, both frowning and grinning to himself at the chafe marks encircling her ankles, at the red slashes streaked across her adorable ass and taut thighs.

He'd done that to her.

Had enjoyed it.

And more importantly, *she'd* goaded him into it. Had wanted it. Was "fabulously" appreciative of him for doing so.

Twisted? Weird? Oh yeah. As in twenty-four-karat gold-plated shit weird. And suddenly predictable, does-everything-by-the-book Jonah was in the market for shiny poop.

God, what was he thinking? "I think your pussy sucked my brains out because I can't imagine an encounter being more fabulous."

The confession came as he gingerly skimmed fingers over the welted flesh, undecided whether the silent woman beneath the marred skin should be labeled incredible or insane. Maybe a little of both.

Him as well. A vision of his tombstone epitaph rose in his mind.

*Here lies Incredibly Insane Jonah Michael McKenzie.  
He died wearing a shit-eating grin, twenty-four karat of course.*

His laugh turned into a groan. "Damn, Suzy – you're as messy and mixed-up as this cabin an' I'm startin' to think I'm not far behind."

Tugging the pillows from under her relaxed pelvis, he tossed them toward the headboard and crawled over her. She stiffened when he cupped the skin under her arms and lugged her into his embrace. When he tried to settle, she moaned a protest and resisted with all the remaining energy she possessed – a pathetic effort.

When he easily subdued her escape attempts, she muttered a grouchy, "Just leave, okay?"

"Leave?" he barked, incredulous.

"Let's not make this harder."

"Uh-uh. Don't make *me* hard," he warned, raking blunt nails over her hot-to-the-touch ass. "Fight me and I might have to punish you again, little lady."

Was that really him speaking?

Really him tightening his arms, forcing this woman closer when she obviously wanted her space, wanted him off her bed and out the door?

Really him growling, "You're mine now, so behave," then punctuating it with a sharp pinch to her side?

"Fine," she grumbled. "Only because I'm tired."

It wasn't exhaustion convincing her to melt against his chest and burrow beneath his jaw. Whether she'd admit it or not, she *wanted* to be there, next to him.

When he heard a little sigh, felt her finger trace over his pec while her toes dug into his leg, Jonah turned his head and rested his lips on her forehead, not kissing...simply lingering. Realizing she wasn't going to fight further, not now, he breathed her in and took his own sweet time doing it. Inhaling the mixed-up combo of sugar cookies and sex.

Nutty, nasty and oh so nice... That's how this woman made him feel.

Sugar Cookie Suzy. His very favorite treat. But the batches Nana infrequently made him had nothing on *this* recipe – the one in his arms.

With that thought came another – it was time to share. Time to talk about things he'd only spoken of with family. Certainly not anything he'd ever discussed with the women he'd slept with. But then, he'd never spanked or flailed on any of those few females.

But this one?

She had him wrapped around her mottled-pink hair and *not* wanting to come free. Not anytime soon. Had him wanting to take that belt of his she had such a fixation on and hook it around her waist. Strap them both together so she couldn't be free of him. Not until they saw where this was heading.

Another tombstone popped into his head.

*Susannah Miller McKenzie. Slutty and sweet. Nutty and nasty, and all Jonah's.*

She'd think he belonged in the loony bin with Grandpa if she got a load of that. Hell, maybe she'd join him. "Suz...I need to tell you about my family. Explain why I disappeared all those years ago."

She went rigid – from the top of her head that bumped his chin, causing his teeth to clack together, to the tips of her toes that gouged into his shinbone.

*Okay...* So he'd captured her attention. "Suzy...I –"

"Shut up." Her voice was steel. Toenails sharp as a blade.

His shin? Suffering the indignity of being wounded by this scrap of a woman.

Though his words faltered, Jonah refused to wince. When he took a deep breath, ready to try again, she jerked her head into his chin a second time, ramming his mouth shut. As if nothing he could say would make things right. Nothing.

He tightened his hold on her upper body. "Look, this isn't something I talk about. Ever. But I want *you* to know. Need to –"

"Just great, Jonah the Jerk." She scored him with her toenails then kicked both legs free, creating distance between them. "You're ruining this already. So don't. Don't talk or pretend I matter. Just don't!"

Her physical resistance mounted. He held tight.

“Let me go, damn you! I bite, you know.”

“Fine!” he echoed, part of the old hurt surfacing before he could stop it. He hated thinking about that time in his life. Most of it had become a blur and he preferred it that way. Dredging it up wasn’t easy. “Then bite—because I’m not letting go until you hear me out.” Before she could draw blood, he blurted, “My parents—they died. *Died*. That...day.”

At once her struggles did the same.

She sank into the mattress and whispered, “What did you say?”

His chest expanded as his breath heaved, and Jonah took solace in the comfortable weight of her body next to his. He propped on one forearm and angled over until he could catch her gaze. “That last night—when we danced together and you finally said yes—yes to a date—when I got back to the dorm, the phone was ringing. It was my older brother...calling to—”

His voice broke.

Hesitantly she ran one palm across his chest, stopping when it hovered over his heart. He reached up and clamped it there, breathing deep and counting backward to ease the agony. Tears weren’t manly. But even after all this time, he couldn’t blink them away. Just the act of thinking about that night brought all the pain and denial, disbelief and anguish rushing to the surface.

*Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen...*

One renegade bead rolled across his nose, plopped on her forehead.

*Sixteen, fourteen – no fifteen!*

*Fifteen, sixteen...*

Shit—he couldn’t even count basic damn integers. If he intended to maintain any shred of masculinity, he’d best tamp down the emotions. Crying and carrying on—this new Suzy was too tough for it. Hell—hadn’t she *rejected* him last night for being too “tame”?

His nose sniffed without permission. Aw, shit—why now?

“Jonah?” She clasped his hand and scooted until she was directly beneath him, gazing up at him with shimmering golden-green eyes. How he loved those eyes. Always had. Dream after dream they’d danced in his memory, but after a while he’d forgotten who they belonged to. Everything had faded in the shadow of his parents’ deaths. Even Suzy.

And for that, he deserved to hurt. He *never* should’ve let her go, let things drop between them. At the least, he should’ve called. Not left her hanging.

“Your *dad*? The one whose boots you wear.” She said it reverently. “Oh Jonah...”

“They...” He’d no idea how he spoke without croaking like a frog or bawling like a baby, but somehow he managed. “They were killed in—”

“Don’t. You’re crying.” She withdrew her hand to bring tender fingers to his cheek and wipe away shameful trails. “You don’t have to talk anymore. Really.”

But *really*, she deserved an explanation.

“Yeah I do.” Again, he trapped her fingers, this time holding them captive on his cheek. Her long nails pressed into his skin and even they seemed comforting. Acutely feminine. Acutely *hers*. “It was a sk-skydiving accident. Some two-bit company in Brazil. Ma should’ve had a spare ‘chute. She didn’t. And when hers malfunctioned, Dad simply didn’t deploy his.” Every word came out strangled, as if the act of saying it made it more final.

As if it could get any more final than death.

Determined, he cleared a burgeoning lump from his throat, feeling a little better now that the worst was out. Relieved she hadn’t called him a liar—or a blubbing baby.

He closed his eyes against the understanding emanating from hers, fell back against the bed and rested his head deep into the pillow, holding tight to her hand. His other twisted so fiercely in the sheet he thought he heard it rip. Good. Steve deserved the extra expense. “I left that night, told my grandparents the news—that their daughter was dead—then caught a plane home. Never went back to New York. Dropped everything—school, you, my goals. For a while, I was dead inside. Ma and I were so close, Dad and all us boys. With them gone, it was like losing my best friends and parents at once.”

Suzy snuggled against him. “Oh Jonah.” She slipped her hand free, and those nails meandered down, stroked softly—lovingly, he could delude himself into thinking with his eyes closed—over the thin sheen of hair covering his torso. “I can’t imagine... How did you manage?”

“Time and...” Lots and lots of numbers. Staying on course and eventually remembering his goals and reaching for them with everything in him. And love from his family—when they weren’t treating him like a pariah. “I’m okay now, I guess. I mean, I *know* they’re together, Ma and Dad. I know they’d want us to be happy.”

“But...” Suzy hesitated. Her caressing fingers skid to a stop. “But why didn’t you come back to school at some point? A year later? The Jonah I remember was set on making the dean’s list every semester.”

Jonah shrugged. Still was, just not at Cornell.

“By the time I pulled myself together enough to return, Nana wouldn’t have it. Her son’s death turned her a mite...protective. Overly protective.” *Fanatical* was more like it, but in spite of the way she rode their asses, Nana deserved respect. Her age commanded a little understanding and patience. Well okay, a lot of both. But she was only acting out of love and—as with the rest of them—part of her had been broken the day her only son died. Coming after her only daughter had run off, well...Nana had confided once she’d failed her children and was determined not to fail her grandchildren.

“For her sake and that of my brothers and our cousins—who considered our parents their own—I stayed home.” Jonah shared how Aunt Naomi took off after the triplets’ birth, how getting pregnant as a teen hadn’t exactly caused Nana to treat her daughter with *more* leniency. And his aunt rebelled by disappearing. Something Jonah could never do.

“At first I didn’t have a choice. Everyone needed me an’ I needed them just as much. There was so much love and pain going around, I couldn’t abandon them so I...abandoned my dreams instead, even you. Bo and Grandpa had their hands full running the ranch without Dad. Isaiah’d just lost his wife too.” She gasped but didn’t interrupt. “Some of the younger ones were acting out—or withdrawing. And Nana made such a stink any time I so much as hinted at going back to school. I just couldn’t do anything to worry her further. Not after all that’d happened.”

“God, Tex, you sorry bastard...” She said it so sweetly he nearly smiled. “I always told myself there was no reason, *no* excuse for what you did...but there is. Here I assumed you were just another untrustworthy man in my life when in fact you weren’t there because you *were* being responsible. Dependable. Take me to your nana. I’ll slap her around a bit for you.”

One side of his mouth inched higher at that image. “I bet you would too.”

“I surely would.” She shifted and warm lips grazed his cheek where tears had left a trail in their wake. “Because Cornell may not’ve mattered to her, but I know it mattered to you.”

“Yeah. Very much.” Jonah did smile then. A sad smile, thinking of how much it’d meant to Ma too—his going to her alma mater. He took comfort in Suzy’s observation. Spoken like a true friend. One of the few who “got” it, because his family sure didn’t.

Earning his master’s was so much more than a piece of paper.

It was his mother’s joy when he decided to go—her support, all those years through. Her pride.

It was his heritage. His papaw on his mother’s side and a long line of family before him had all graduated from Cornell. Out of six McKenzie boys, Jonah would’ve been the only one to follow in their footsteps rather than solely embrace his ranching blood. Not to belittle the honor he felt in his McKenzie heritage—because that ran deep as well—but it seemed he was the only one who’d ever looked beyond Rustlers Junction. Ever wondered *what else, who else...*

Most importantly though, going to college was *his*. His dream. His way in life. Keeping the Bottoms Up enterprises solvent and dabbling in the stock market, which he’d been doing before he was old enough to drive might not require a degree, but *he* did. Jonah McKenzie, college graduate.

He blinked open watery eyes and spoke to the ceiling. “I dreamed of going to Cornell forever it seems. Gram and Papaw’s annual visits fed the yearning. While my brothers dragged Gram all over the ranch on the back of the hay wagon—she refused to



mount even our gentlest mare no matter how much we teased her, claimin' her cultured sensibilities would shrivel if she so much as *touched* sweaty horseflesh."

He chuckled at the old memory, one that'd lain dormant for years. "In hindsight, I bet she did it knowing how much fun we all had calling her a sissified city girl. But I'd stay in, hanging out with Ma and Papaw, devouring every tale he spun about buildings so tall they touched clouds and taxicabs so thick they made a solid yellow, honking road..." Jonah trailed off, lost in the visions.

"Both my grandfathers were gone before I was old enough to remember them. Your papaw sounds wonderful." Suzy sounded wistful.

"He was. That man told yarns that could rival any collection of fables or fairytales, always putting a unique spin on each. A financial spin. You know – the first time I flew out and visited, I actually expected Wall Street to be just that – a wall as high as the sky, dividing the common man from those who made the money. While I was young, he had me believin' it did grow on trees. 'You just need the right seeds, Jonah, my boy.'"

"So what'd you do – get a paper route and start saving?"

That brought another smile – the idea of delivering the weekly *Rustlers Round Up Review* to all two hundred or so houses in town. On horseback. "Hardly. But I stated my intention to go there. Ma was thrilled. Dad backed me in front of everyone then pulled me aside for a man-to-man on college tuition. Out-of-state tuition."

"Private tuition."

"Exactly. I didn't know what all the numbers meant – my twenty-dollar monthly allowance worked fine for the occasional video game when I split it with Isaiah. So Dad and Grandpa started showing me the books, teaching me how to record debits and credits, how to make it all add up at the end of the week, the month, even the year once tax time rolled around. They taught me how to stay in the black, and by the time I was fourteen, I was doing most of it."

"A mathematical genius," she complimented. "Any chance I can pay you to balance my checkbook? I hate that chore."

"Bounce a few checks, do you?"

"Never! You rat, for thinking so. I don't like living in the red either."

He tugged on her hair. "Oh no?"

Suzy leaned into his line of sight and stuck out her tongue.

He tugged more fiercely.

She ducked and nipped his shoulder. A spark zoomed toward his groin and he fisted her hair, brought her head up and kissed her hard on the mouth.

She was gasping when he pulled her head back, eyes alight. "So how'd you McScrooge enough for Cornell? Earn accounting scholarships out the wazoo?"

Jonah tightened his hold on her scalp and rolled over until she was beneath him, his heavier body pushing hers into the mattress. "Papaw died when I was fifteen. He left most of the tuition money for me in his will."

“Wow.” Her eyebrows arched appreciatively.

“I know. I worked odd jobs around town as soon as I could drive, stashing away all I made for airfare and travel, living expenses and books, and to help cover inflation. Gram and her new husband Stuart chipped in as well.”

Suzy scored one sharp-nailed hand down his back, dug in to his flank and squirmed that tightly muscled body beneath him. “I get all horny when you talk numbers.”

“From what I’ve seen, you get all horny when a man comes within talking distance—”  
Aw shit! Jonah knew he’d just stepped in it.

Didn’t take the wounded look she shuttered and quickly turned to ice to tell him he sorely lacked any wooing skills.

*Wooing skills?*

While his brain reeled from that, Suzy shrilled, “What would you know about me? Harsh judgment after forty-eight hours reacquaint—” She wrenched his arm sideways to look at his watch. “Wait! Not even twenty-four! Damn you, Jonah McKenzie!”

She tried to scramble off the mattress, but Jonah wouldn’t have it. “I apologize! That was way out of line.” While she refused to look at him and kept batting at his arms, Jonah anchored his chest over hers, effectively locking her into place. With his thumbs, he tilted her chin until their eyes met. “Sincerely, Susannah...” Using her full name captured her attention. “I didn’t mean it. Just breaking the tension, I guess. It’s not every day I let a woman see me cry—not every day I cry. But you’re right,” he rushed to add when she started to look away. His fingers firmed on her face. “I don’t know anything about you, not anymore and not the real you. But I want to.” His heart spasmed. “God how I want to.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Then you’ll have to put in more time and be on your best seductive behavior. I don’t make confessions to men who call me sluts.”

“But I didn’t—”

“Came pretty darn close, I’d say.”

“Fair enough.” Least now she wasn’t tryin’ to leave—or kick him out of bed. In fact, seemed to Jonah he was getting off easy, after that major *faux pas*.

Assuming the tone of a drill sergeant, Suzy commanded, “Now reverse our positions, cowboy.”

“Yes ma’am.” He could be the bigger man—was, no two ways around it, knowing he could subdue her whether he was on top or not—so Jonah gracefully ceded “control” back to Suzy, sensing she needed to think she was the one in power. She should know better. And if she didn’t, well...she’d just granted him additional time to prove it.

Once he was on his back, she climbed across his torso, straddling her legs over his stomach and toying with the muscles cording his chest. “So you didn’t return to Cornell because your family needed you and your grandmother forbade it.”

“You want to return to *that* subject?”

Her nails raked through the fine hairs on his chest. “Yep. Doesn’t feel finished. What aren’t you telling me?”

Surprised by her perception and just as much by his willingness to share the rest, Jonah admitted, “It wasn’t just Nana though...not entirely.”

He’d never confided this part to anyone. He was different from his brothers, poles apart from his cousins. Now it was just him and his numbers—and Suzy. “Ma was supposed to take *me* skydiving, as a graduation present. We’d joked about it before I left for my first semester, how jumping out a plane wouldn’t be as scary as anticipating that first day of classes I couldn’t wait to start but dreaded too—leaving home and being so far from my rowdy family...that was the one thing I wasn’t excited about. Know it sounds stupid, but losing Ma like that... *More* than just my parents died in that accident. My dreams—they...”

“S’okay. I get what you’re saying. And it isn’t stupid.” Eyes glinting with compassion, Suzy rested her forehead to his so their noses were tip to tip. His arms went around her back and Jonah had never felt closer to any human being than the one above him, looking oddly innocent and vulnerable for a woman with washed-out red hair who wore his fading belt marks on her ass.

After a few silent moments, Suzy pushed herself up and started stroking his bare shoulders. “I have a coworker who’s addicted to skydiving,” she said very matter-of-factly. “Karin goes once a month, sometimes twice. She’s been bugging me to try it—says it’s a rush beyond compare. I thought it sounded like a kick. But knowing now what happened, what you’ve gone through...well, I just mentally inked the sport off my to-do list.”

“Replace it with getting real tat,” he teased, expecting a laugh. Instead, thick eyelashes curtained her expression and the fingers caressing him tensed.

Apparently that subject wasn’t a go. Jonah cleared his throat and captured both her hands in one of his and began his own exploration up the silken skin of one thigh. “I did return, you know. Not to Cornell but to Sul Ross for my bachelor’s. I’m at Texas Tech now. Only a few more hours and I’ll have my master’s.”

“Really? Jonah, that’s terrific!” she exclaimed with a brilliant smile—toothy and beautiful. Something he always wanted to see on her face rather than the indifference she’d displayed earlier. “I’m so glad your nana let up.”

Not quite. “She doesn’t know. Not about the master’s.” He’d gotten a fair amount of support while making the hour and a half commute so he could finish the degree he’d started at Cornell. But other than a slap on the back when he’d finished, no one had a clue how much it meant to Jonah. How much more he still had to prove. When he’d decided on Lubbock and Texas Tech for the next one, he’d found it easier to keep mum. “No one does, ’cept you and my professors.”

“What?” She laughed then turned incredulous. “You *snuck* back to college?”

Put that way, it did sound mighty ridiculous. Hell, it *was* mighty ridiculous. “What Nana doesn’t know can’t hurt her.”

But Jonah wondered if it did. Maybe it was worse, letting her delude herself into thinking she was right. Hiding such a large part of himself. Deceiving her as they all did about one thing or another – though with him, it was school and not sex or booze.

Although *now* it was sex too, he thought with a rebellious grin. Fabulous sex. Lots of sex. *Kinky sex.*

Nana would croak. Likely get that new will bronzed or something, that power of attorney framed and hung on the wall.

But the school stuff...why hadn't he ever owned up to it? Shared how important it was instead of letting Nana's outdated, often erroneous, notions rule his actions – or the appearance thereof?

Her head only grew bigger, her demands more outrageous. What was that scripture she'd revised and spouted the other day when Zack dared enter her kitchen with mud on his boots? *Nevertheless, Isaac, the righteous hold to their ways, and those with clean hands and feet grow stronger.*

More and more Jonah was thinking it was time to take a stand on his own feet, to set some ground rules. Show his grandmother – and entire family – just how strong he could be. It was either that or Jonah feared Nana was about to find herself abandoned on an island. One made of quicksand.

Any more whacked-out stipulations and some of his brothers were likely to start using Nana's favorite church dress for target practice. And he didn't think they'd be tossing water balloons this time.

"So you sneak off to classes how often?"

"Once a week. You won't believe what my brother said today – he thinks I've got a piece in Lubbock. A filly I ride every Tuesday. Preposterous, isn't it? When all I'm doing is driving up for the graduate classes I can't take online."

"Why not finish closer? Like you did with your bachelor's?"

He realized her hands had relaxed against his heart and he brought both of his to her hips, thumbs digging in the soft muscle of her abdomen. His eyes stayed focused there. "If I'm going to do it, I want to do it right. In the academic community, it's just...I don't know...more *respected* if your degrees aren't all from the same institution of higher learning. God, I sound pompous," he added shooting her a quick look, then aiming his thumbs toward the indentation of her bellybutton. "I think it has to do with a broader-based education. You know, a wider variety of teachers and coursework to learn from. Completely different experiences, if that makes sense."

"Makes perfect sense." Suzy squirmed, tightened her legs the higher his fingers traveled. "That's really important to you, isn't it? Respect? Whether in the academic world or your family."

"You've got me pegged." Curious why he wasn't more uncomfortable at the notion, Jonah grasped one swaying breast and traced the designs on her opposite arm. "Can't say the same about you. Yet."

What would his family say when he brought this one home? But then, *this* wasn't the real Suzy, was it?

*Who* was this woman? How could he feel as if he knew her so well, when he didn't, not at all?

Sometimes she reminded him of his mother—bold, brassy, full of life. Passionate. She'd say anything, try anything, do anything. And smart as a whip at the same time. No getting one over on her.

But then, Ma would *never* have been so reckless—so pea-brained—as to take up with Burns, and fresh out of the slammer to boot. Or Cowboy X. She'd just never!

Stifling the growl that thought brought on, Jonah abandoned Suzy's breast to reach toward a clump of reddish silk. Tangling his finger around a strand, he asked, "So, Reckless, what's with the red hair? It's not permanent. I saw your stuff in the bathroom."

He hoped the sluttish attire wasn't permanent either, but he bit his tongue on that.

This time she didn't miss a beat, not even calling him on snooping, no acknowledgement whatsoever, as she promptly returned the subject to him.

"I really feel terrible, you know. Blaming you all those years. If I'd known, had any idea..." She scooted lower, centering her crotch over his, and in direct opposition to her provocative actions, spoke sincerely. "Jonah, I would've been there for you. Waited—"

"I know. I wish now you could've been." Directing his free hand to clamp firmly at her waist and still her motions, Jonah willed his tongue—and brain—to work. "But that still doesn't explain—"

"You want to know what I'm doing here." Sighing in defeat, the hip gyrations stalling, she motioned to her head. "Like this."

*Paying for sex...picking up strangers*, he wanted to add but refrained, unable to miss the shade of red her face turned, twice as bright as her hair. Sweet Suzy, so full of bravado.

Or was she?

Damning his hardening cock, Jonah insisted, "I want to know what you're doing picking men from a book—when you're not brawling with convicts." He tugged the hair he wound, maybe a little too sharply, but she didn't show it. "This isn't you, is it? It certainly isn't the look I'd expect for a governor's publicity coordinator."

Her eyelids fluttered then flattened a full second. When she raised them, all the openness and sharing of the past hour was gone. "Let's just say I have a wild streak, cowboy, and leave it at that, shall we?"

*Poof!* The brazen siren returneth and Jonah knew that was all he'd get from her right now. So he folded, ready to wait for another hand before upping the honesty ante further. Casually, he flicked a drying curl off her shoulder. "A wild streak, huh?"

One Jonah couldn't subdue the urge to tame.

The question was—should he try? To subdue the urge? Or tame her?

He wasn't sure about either...

While Jonah was convincing himself his best course of action involved eliciting the truth by means of indirect questioning if a full-on frontal assault would be met with continued resistance, Suzy scooted lower and applied herself to assaulting *his* front.

Sometime later, after two unintelligible grunts, Jonah managed, "That's one talented mouth you've got there, lady."

"Mmmm."

His hips arched off the bed, fingers fisted. Gut twisted. "Sure am glad I...found you last night," he strangled out. She slurped off his reddened, straining cock and flashed a grin, one that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"*Rescued* me," she corrected then returned to torturing him with her lips and tongue, teeth and nails. And that's when Jonah knew his purpose—he *would* rescue Suzy.

From herself and whatever reckless behavior that entailed—and his revved libido and soothed pride could thank him every lick of the way.

## Chapter Eleven

*The Book of Men, page 12*

Delighting in the unexpected possibilities now facing her the next fourteen days of her West Texas adventure, Suzy turned another page and “met” Harrison...

*Height: 6' 5"*

*Hair: Brown*

*Eyes: Blue*

*Weight: 235#*

*Enjoys: I'm a self-admitted computer geek who enjoys weightlifting and all-night chats that include significant cyber-foreplay.*

*Fee: Let's not spoil this moment with talk of finances. We'll save that for after I satisfy you.*

*Extras: negotiable*

*Quote: "If you appreciate intelligence with your intercourse, a mind with your muscle, I'm your man."*

A surprisingly attractive brawny, baby-faced man grinned at the camera, staring at Suzy shortly after she hunkered down in her new cabin – the drive from the airport had been a bitch. Once it started, the rain hadn't stopped and she was wet and cranky and wanting to get horny. The unexpected *Book of Men* bonanza the front desk had placed in her lap was quickly taking care of the last problem and creating more of the first.

Shirtless, arms crossed beneath pecs worthy of any gym ad, the page captured her interest more than the others that'd gone before. Suzy was thinking this one just might do the trick – the references to intellectual pursuits and appreciation intrigued her.

But then she read the customer comment at the bottom. *Whoa! This one's magnificent, every bit as good as he appears, but, ladies, be warned...he's sensitive about you cutting out and spitting. And when he comes, it's a tide!*

Suzy then slapped a sticky over Harrison's tempting chin dimple and quickly turned the page. *Too bad, so sad, Harry my man. It might've been a fun ride but I guess we'll never know.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Where did they go from here?

Jonah could think of only one place, after having spent the better part of the afternoon exploring Suzy's body and her mind, and thinking he still had a lot to learn about both.

"Dancing," he murmured, nuzzling his nose against her cheek. "I think we should go dancing. How 'bout it?"

"You *do* owe me a date," she pointed out, "but typically don't they include dinner?"

The low rumble of her stomach emphasized the question.

Jonah chuckled, and if it were possible, hugged her tighter. "Worked up an appetite, did you?"

"You made me miss lunch."

"Made you, huh?" Dragging his arm from under her neck, Jonah rolled over her, pinning her hands flat to the mattress on either side of her head then sweeping his lips over hers. Not kissing, just teasing. "Wasn't it worth it?"

"You bet."

"Atta gal." He smacked her mouth with his—hard, fast and full of heat. Chin arching, arms struggling against his hold, she ground her pelvis up into his, her lips searching for more.

"Jonah." His name was a plea. Pure need.

Instantly, his cock swelled. Desire flared between them.

And her belly rumbled out its impatience. Enough said.

Jonah knew he could make love to her straight through the night and never tire so before this spiraled out of hand, he hefted himself off with a growl.

Her disappointment was a whimper.

"Later," he promised, refusing to be *that* man. The type who put his desire above his lady. She needed a good meal and they *both* needed some time to assimilate all they'd shared. All *he'd* shared, Jonah amended. Suzy still owed him but he could be patient. And determined.

"But I want you." Slim fingers pressed into the bulge of his biceps, trying to draw him back. "And I mean now, cowboy."

"Ah, Reckless." Jonah tugged free, daring to bend low and plant a tender kiss at her hairline before his bare feet smacked the smooth floor and he made tracks toward the bathroom. "We have a date—a *dinner*—to get to."

And he had pink hearts to wash off his chest.

Suzy followed in hot pursuit. "I'm not hungry anymore."

"Yeah you are." Jonah stepped inside the corner shower and cranked on the hot water then faced her, running a hand through the short hair covering his head. "No more sex until you eat."

With a wink—he more than liked this bossy side she'd brought out—he snapped the textured glass door shut behind him.



“That’s what you think.”

Not thirty seconds later, a square packet sailed over the glass and landed at his feet. He was smiling when Suzy cracked the door and slid inside—his wild woman, circling his waist, pressing her warm body to his. Taking his cock in hand.

Making him weak in a way only she could. Making him hard.

If for nothing more than to stand his ground, Jonah meant to tell her no. Thoroughly intended to stick to his guns, to see this little filly fed and flattered, spun about and sweetly seduced, so she could never claim there was nothing more than sex between them.

But those fingers played his shaft like an expert flutist who’d memorized his tune, and Jonah lost himself to that feathery-soft touch she possessed.

In no time, Suzy was facing him, wrapped in his arms, feet encircling his waist. He took her against the granite wall of the shower, steam filling the air, water raining down, washing more dye from the pinkish strands.

Despite his previous rush, Jonah took her slowly, thoroughly, listening to his heart and not his cock. This time, as the ever-fading crimson trail spun circles around the drain and disappeared, he made love. His cock swept lazily in and out of her slick tunnel, his mouth kissing everywhere as Suzy whimpered his name over and over and they both gave themselves up to glorious ecstasy.

*Weak for her.* How he was as his knees shook and he slid with her in his arms to the cool floor. Entwined, they sat there, the hot water drowning out their heavy breathing, the fierce pounding in his chest.

Blinking water from his eyes, Jonah reached for the shampoo, squirting the vanilla-scented gel atop her head. Sugar cookies enveloped them as he scrubbed and lathered, rinsed and repeated, exposing more and more of the succulent Susannah he’d known.

Aha! So that’s where her sweet scent came from—but no. On the third squirt, Jonah noticed it was the Lucky Lady house brand. So her scent—the one that first tantalized him more than a decade earlier—was still a mystery, as was her past.

Smothered in the bouquet, Jonah could’ve remained there, entwined in her embrace forever, washing her hair, making slow, sensual love under the waterfall.

He could’ve but— *Sorry, cowboy, you’re too tame for the likes of me. Too polished.*

The reminder wrenched something loose within him, wrung it into the need to prove he wasn’t. Wasn’t tame or polished. Not with her. He needed to take this feisty, judgment-challenged woman in hand, as he had previously. Only harder. Faster. Angrier...

But as it was, her stomach chimed in and Jonah recalled his original purpose. Not sex, *food*. Dancing. Again he lassoed his strength. It was an hour into Crystal City and by the time they arrived, this little lady would likely faint from depletion.

Not on his watch, dammit. Ma had taught him better.

She growled a complaint when he shifted her weight to the side and reluctantly gained his feet. "Did you have breakfast?"

Eyes still closed, she answered from the bottom of the big shower. "Nope. Too keyed up to eat. I did watch a friend drink some OJ."

"Nutritive osmosis? I don't think so." Jonah eyed the house shampoo with distaste. Shrugging, he glopped some on his palm and began sudsing. "What about dinner last night?"

Suzy cleared water from her lashes and gazed up at him, running one red-nailed fingertip over his foot. "You mean *before* I dined on your cock?"

He grinned at the comeback then did her one better. "Yeah, but you didn't swallow, so it doesn't count."

"For dinner? I had three tequila shots and a beer chaser."

"Susannah!"

Jonah finished scrubbing his body and rinsed everything off. It'd only taken three swipes of the washrag to clear his skin of the pink ink. Too bad he couldn't erase it from the book or those sticky notes – or her memory – as fast. *Give yourself time. Her too.*

*You've got what she wants. Now you just gotta make her need it. From you.*

When he finished ducking his head under, he stepped out of the shower, leaving Suzy with the command, "Finish up, woman. We're leaving in ten!"

She wanted bossy? Rough? Domineering? He could handle that. Easily.

"But I can't do my hair and makeup in ten minutes!" she wailed from behind the door.

"No makeup." In fact, he was tempted to trash her entire supply. But there wasn't time for that argument. "And wear your hair down. It can dry on the road."

"But without mascara I look like a ghost," she griped as she stood.

"With it, you look like a tart."

"Tart?" she laughed from beneath the spraying water. "Jonah, you're so old-fashioned."

But he wasn't listening, already busy drying off and pulling back on the clothes he'd worn so briefly before discarding them upon his arrival. Fortuitous, that decision.

When Jonah came to drawing his belt through the loops, he hesitated then grinned, remembering exactly where it'd been. By the time he'd donned his boots and kicked *The Book of Men* across the floor no less than four times – it currently resided half under the bed – Suzy emerged wrapped in a towel, hair dripping.

Jonah checked his watch. "You're down to three minutes, sweetheart."

"You're such a funny guy if you think I'm going to be ready in that amount –"

He snagged her wrist and hauled her toward the closet. "Here. I'll help."

Suzy waited, dripping and cold, watching Jonah rifle through her closet. She was relieved to see the carefree and commanding side return.

God! What he'd gone through. The details Jonah had shared blurred beneath the emotional pain emanating from his memories. Pain he'd briefly let her see – no hiding for him.

So much close family – brothers, cousins, cranky grandparents – so many names and people to remember. Susie didn't try to keep them all straight. Not yet. Time enough for that later – *if* she decided to stick around. To let Jonah see the real her.

The jury was still out on that.

"Well?" she gave a good show of a huffy, impatient woman. "I'm not getting any warmer, cowboy."

Though he'd razed through everything twice, apparently Jonah hadn't seen anything he liked. Not remotely, if the ferocity with which he clacked the fancy brass and wood hangers together was any indication. "Damn, Red. Where do you buy this stuff? Tramps-R-Us?"

Suzy felt as if she'd been slapped. That's what he thought of her sexy-wear? "No, Sluts-R-Us – they're popping up in every mall across the country, or hadn't you heard?"

At her bitter edge, he stopped rummaging long enough to fix her with a glare. "Thought we weren't using 'slut' anymore, doll face, not in relation to you." Then he resumed his search and destroy through her closet.

*We. God, why'd that have to sound so damn...nice?*

"Didn't you bring anything normal?"

"You mean boring?"

Closet finished, he moved over to her suitcases. She cringed, knowing what assortment he'd find stuffed in there, and bit her lip against the urge that hadn't left – the one that had begun earlier when Jonah complained about one of his brothers thinking he had a Tuesday filly. The urge that had her wanting to offer to be his "filly" – his Tuesday ride. His any-time-you-want-me-I'm-your-gal type of ride.

Beyond silly! She wasn't cut out to commit to any man, not for the long haul. And speaking of long, it didn't take Jonah any time at all to locate her stash of grubbies – the comfortable mish-mash of tops and shorts she pulled on after work. At home. *Alone*. Clothes she'd only brought for relaxing in – after her fun was done. "Jonah, I don't –"

He whistled appreciatively and tugged free her favorite pair of denim shorts. "Bingo!" He held them up. "Folks, we have a winner!"

She froze. "You're kidding, right?"

*He had to be kidding.*

"Put 'em on – wait!" Forehead creased in concentration, he dug around some more and liberated a pair of lime green and hot pink tie-dye cotton panties. *Cotton* panties. Tie-dye ones. "Over these."

*God no!*

But the look in his eyes screamed an emphatic *Yes!* and at the hot thrill that spiked through her stomach at being *told* what to wear, Suzy hesitantly dropped the towel and reached for the panties.

No thong for her tonight. Nothing black, slinky or see-through. Nothing reckless.

She could've argued, informed him he was out of line, taking such liberties, as if she were his puppet or something.

But she *was* his puppet. Rather liked the thought of him being her puppet *master*. For tonight at least. Maybe for eternity.

"I'll agree to these but you cannot mean for me to wear *those* shorts in public..."

Suzy obediently slipped the panties on with nary a protest because she much preferred seeing that cute, cocky grin on his face than knowing the empty feeling his absence created.

But more because Jonah knew exactly who she was—both the naughty *and* nice parts—and he still wanted her. Would be a gentleman over dinner yet be rough and tough with her later tonight, hopefully all night...

With Jonah, it wasn't about appearances. It was something deeper.

She'd yet to put her finger on just what yet, and while she debated internally about whether or not she really wanted to search deep enough to find out, he waved the shorts in her face.

"You're balking at these? Whatever for?" He ran his thumb across the faded, bedraggled denim that had to be twelve years old if a day. Each worn cheek boasted a colorful butterfly patch, covering areas where the fabric had split clean in two. Also screaming for attention were the decorative seams...the swirls, stars, zigs and zags, all in multi-colored thread where she'd shored up the cuffs, pockets, crotch and about seven other places the shorts were falling apart.

"I can't wear those! They're hideous!" But she loved them. Adored them. Couldn't bear to part with them, which is why she'd spent so much time keeping a run-down, worn-out pair of fifteen-dollar shorts wearable.

Heckfire, the only thing they lacked was lace around the edges.

"Here. Put 'em on." He dangled the denim in front of her like a tempting chocolate bar...with almonds. "I think they're cute and they'll show off your legs."

She'd never be caught dead in New York wearing them outside her apartment. *You're not in Kansas – er...New York – anymore, now are you, Dorothy?*

The glint in his eyes turned to steel. "Put...em...on."

"They're too short."

"No, they're not. Put 'em on. If your ass falls out, I'll find something else."

*Little did he know.*

When she continued to stall—standing there in lime and pink panties, dripping hair, faded tats and nothing else—*exposed* as never before, Jonah hardened his tone. “Put. Them. On. *Now.*”

That rebellious thrill sparked hotter.

Suzy wasn't sure if she liked the sensation or not, that of giving up control *outside* the bedroom. She wasn't used to being around any man long enough to consider anything beyond the sexual, not for ages.

Time would tell whether she liked it and if Jonah really could master her. All eight and a half remaining days of it. She couldn't stop the pang at that thought. Only now it was higher than her belly. More like her...heart.

So, she went along meekly, pulling on the shorts while unfamiliar guilt nagged at her for faking it in the shower. A woman didn't *always* have to come to enjoy having sex, but in Suzy's experience, a *man* always had to think his lady did—or he believed he failed. Either that or he would pound away until she was raw.

It'd been easier to moan and writhe—she *had* been enjoying herself, after all...thoroughly!—than to tell him she needed some pain with her sweet, sweet lovin' to make her body blast to the moon. Interestingly, in the aftermath, sitting on the cold shower floor, warm water streaming over them, Jonah's hard arms surrounding her, Suzy'd felt as though part of her *had* blasted off.

Some of that armor she'd become so used to, maybe?

“And here we go, to top it off...” Jonah held out the cotton eyelet top she'd planned to wear on the plane ride home. A satin ribbon wove down the front.

She was too overcome to battle further. “Fine. Just let me grab my bra—”

“No need.” When he said that, she figured he'd already found the turquoise tie-dye underwire during his suitcase search. She held her hand out, but his remained empty. An evil smirk tilted those sensuous lips. “Go without.”

She pointed to the thin cotton top. “It's white! I can't go without—”

His eyes flicked to her chest. “Your nipples are pale, so yes you can.”

God!

Under his scrutiny, Suzy crammed her arms through the sleeves and fastened the blouse. Jonah's booted foot tapped the entire time.

After tugging on the only pair of cowboy boots she owned to his “*White* boots, Red? Wouldn't have thought you'd own something so...tame,” she headed for the bathroom, Jonah hot on her heels.

“Just let me put my face on and—”

He pushed her out of the way and scooped up a handful of items straight off the counter. “Here. I can compromise. Lipstick, blush, mascara and this pencil thing. Pick one.”

“*One?* There's no concealer! No foundation— And how do you know what all this is?”

“Angling for a kinky confession? Not even close. Thanks to growing up with female cousins and their truckloads of grooming paraphernalia, I probably know more than most men want to admit.” He patted her bare thigh. “Get a move on, babe. Clock’s a-ticking.”

Suzy just stood there, glaring. She wasn’t about to roll over meekly, not *again*. That wasn’t her style.

“Either you choose or—” He hefted the items still in his hand and made a motion like he was pitching a baseball.

“But I need my concealer and eye shadow and—”

“Reckless, I’m pretty damn certain you’ve been concealing way too much as it is.”

“Jonah...” She felt thrilled and irritated all at once. How was it he saw so much? And after such a short time? “Please?”

Eyes narrowed, he caved to her pleading. Partially. “Fine. Pick two of ‘em and let’s go. You can finish up in the car.”

“I’ll pick as many as I want!”

“*Two* and get a move on.” He dropped everything on the counter, and without stopping to see what she chose, hauled her butt to the car.

\* \* \* \* \*

The ride started off in tense silence, which shouldn’t have surprised her but did. Suzy could just imagine all that might be flitting through Jonah’s mind. Had he finally realized she played loose-and-ready a little too well? Decided he wasn’t so sure he wanted to flaunt her in public?

As if giving voice to her fears, once they reached the pavement beyond the arched entrance to the Lucky Lady, Jonah hunched over the wheel, punched his foot to the gas and said gravely, “Not that you owe me an accounting of your sex life, but I’m askin’ anyway—this *one* time. Anyone else I need to know about? Am I gonna run into any more ‘friends’ who partied naked with your body?”

“Friends? *You* and Darin? Somehow, I don’t see it.”

“Me and Hansen.”

“Hansen?” Her brow creased then cleared when it dawned. Insides churning with a buffet of regret and remorse—and a side helping of embarrassment seasoned with humiliation—Suzy clarified, “Cowboy X is a...friend of yours?”

“He *was*.”

She turned her head away in order to give him the answer he needed. Fortunately, it was the truth. “No one else. I, uh, asked for one of the other guys first but he was unavailable.”

“Then you requested Steve?”

She gave a reluctant nod and swung her eyes back to his, tried not to notice how her voice had gone unusually quiet. “Jonah, I’m sorry. Really. If I’d known you were here... But it never clicked. Not until I heard your voice, saw your belt buckle—”

Jonah shot her a quick wink then returned his attention to the curving road. “Shhh. Don’t apologize. What’s done is done. Milk’s gone sour and there ain’t no turning it back, so don’t waste time frettin’. Long as you flush that book and promise I’m all you need while you’re here then—”

“You are!”

“Then I’m good. We’re good. At least it wasn’t a Tanner hand. Thank God for small favors.”

“Who?”

“Neighboring spread, the TNT, owned by the Tanners. Mortal enemies and all that. But with Hansen...”

Jonah paused and Suzy would’ve given her lipstick and the face powder secreted in her pocket to know what went through his mind. Lucky for her bare lips and shiny nose, she didn’t need to offer either. “Steve’s had a rough go of it. I won’t begrudge him a few hours of forgettin’. But *not* anymore with my woman.”

She smiled at the exaggerated way he said it but didn’t confirm or deny his claim. Though it warmed her from her toes up, it smacked too much of a commitment she wasn’t ready to grant any man. “I won’t trash the book. It’s not mine to toss. I will, however, return it first thing tomorrow.”

“Fair enough.”

Ready to steer the subject away from the serious, Suzy grasped the first thing that came to mind. “Wow—we’re up high. It’s like the nosebleed section of Yankee Stadium.”

“Hold on. You’ve gone to see the Yankees play? Live?”

“Not so much now that I’m in Albany, but when I was a kid—and before he turned to pond scum—my dad and I went all the time. I love a good ballgame, still turn them on when I’m at home. Does that surprise you?”

“Yeah, Red, it does. In a really good way. Wouldn’t have pegged you for a sports enthusiast, not with your high-powered glam job. And not...” He paused a second then forged ahead. “With your penchant for dressing...”

“Up?” she ventured, propping one booted foot on his dash and waving the toe toward him.

“Down,” he said with a frown, clearly thinking of the contents of her closet. “How you combine that smart mouth and sassy spirit with gothic tramp, I’ll never know.” But before she could realize that was *hurt feelings* settling in her gut, he added under his breath, “Who knew I’d find the combination so alluring?”

Who knew indeed?

In the companionable silence that followed, Suzy looked out the wide expanse of windshield, scanning the cactus-covered mountains flying by. Seemed as though she could see the whole world from here. Or at least this starkly beautiful corner of it. She took in the custom dash cover, the immaculate interior, and noticed again how very polished and clean the hood was. "Love your shiny new truck, cowboy."

"You think she's new?" The tall cab easily allowed for the slight shake of his cowboy hat. "I've had Ezzy here going on four years. Made the last payment in June, six months early." He beamed.

His obvious pride in his truck wasn't what arrested her attention. "Ezzy? *Four* years?" She was impressed—both at how quickly he'd paid off what had to have been a substantial car note and, even more, how the truck, both inside and out, looked as if he'd driven it off the lot yesterday. Even on these dusty, backwoods roads. "You really take care of what's yours, don't you?"

"Didn't I tell you that earlier? With my hand on your ass? My lips there shortly after? And my cock..." He trailed off with a naughty smile when she strangled on her own spit. "I see you get the idea. I know I disappointed you once. I also know you understand the reasons why. Doesn't necessarily justify everything but at least explains it. One thing you need to know about me, Susannah Reckless Miller, I don't make idle threats *or* false promises. You can count on me to follow through. On whatever I say."

"And that's what's giving me pause, Tex." Was it ever. "But you still haven't explained 'Ezzy'."

"Esmeralda," he said as if she should have known. "After the Steve Earle song."

"If you say so." He named his truck *Esmeralda*? After a song? The oddly touching gesture took her aback. So did his arm, when he abruptly reached across the seat and flipped open the glove box to fish out several CDs, which he thumbed through until finding the one he sought. Plugging it in and clicking through the songs faster than Suzy could gather her scattered wits, Jonah leaned back with a satisfied sigh.

"Just listen." She did, and as the strains of the song filled the cab—a hard-rocking, fast-hitting, boot-stomping song, the kind made to forget one's cares and woes in—waves of pure nostalgia took her back to that one time they'd almost danced *together*, when her naïve self believed it might be okay to trust. Darn cowboy, he was reminding her of things she'd thought long forgotten.

"I was so damn excited to finally get this truck," Jonah enthused when the woeful strains of the violin sang out the end of the song, "and not one of Dad's or Grandpa's cast-offs, some third-hand set of wheels but *this* truck. Exactly what I wanted, from the four-wheel drive and V-8 engine, down to the dual CD-cassette deck."

"Cassette?" Her foot plopped to the floorboard so she could lean forward to confirm the truth of that. "Who in the world listens to cassettes anymore?"

"So I can enjoy my old tunes without having to transfer them over."



“You’re a relic, you know that?” Heck, any minute now she expected him to start whistling *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. At his perplexed look, she hastened to add, “In a good way! Old-fashioned. Chivalrous... Not consumed with consumerism.”

His brows rose in surprise when she spouted that. Suzy beamed unrepentantly and gestured to the duds he’d chosen for her. “Sure, I go all out once a year, but at home I’m a regular green-living recycler. Sedate ol’ Susannah. Borrrrrr-rinnng.”

“You – boring? Tell me something I’ll believe.”

He’d believe her if she confessed all, which Suzy wasn’t about to do. Just the idea almost had her jumping for the nearest bed of prickly pear.

Plucking a few hundred cactus spikes out of her flesh ought to prove an appropriate distraction *away* from thoughts of airing her dirty past and soiled laundry. Cactus spikes or confession? Pah on both! She settled on something much more pleasurable-sounding. “I love seeing this gallant side of you – how you take such good care of and honor your things.” She left off stating whether she considered *herself* one of them. “So when can I drive it? Your truck.”

“In your dreams.”

“My, my, Mr. Jonah McKenzie, you sound possessive.” So why did she like it when it pertained to his truck, love it when it pertained to her, but still shied away from confiding the truth – or rather, truths, plural – to him?

“No offense, Red, but nobody drives my truck. Nobody.”

*We’ll just see about that.*

When Jonah noticed how quiet she’d gone, he slid his gaze her direction only to see her fumbling with applying mascara on the road. “Damn female, you’re going to poke your eye out,” he muttered under his breath, slowing and pulling over to the shoulder. “Tell me when you’re finished.”

She flashed him a snarky eye roll. “You’re such a Boy Scout.”

“Eagle Scout, ma’am, and proud of it.” He waited patiently while she finished the single coat of mascara – confiscating the tube when she attempted a second – and waited patiently through a detailed lipstick application that had his cock perking up and his hands gripping the wheel. “Now you’re just doing that on purpose.”

Suzy only smacked her lips, recapped the lipstick and pulled out a third item she’d stuffed in her pocket.

Patience snapped. He didn’t want to see her all made up...he wanted to see *her* for once! Jonah’s fingers unclenched and swiftly snatched the circle from her. “Geez, gal, can’t you count?”

He pulled back onto the pavement and tossed the plastic case out the window.

“Jonah! That’s a sixty-dollar compact and you just littered! Isn’t that against the Texas state motto or something?”

“Huh?”

"Isn't your state motto 'Don't Mess with Texas'?"

"Nope. That's just an anti-litter campaign."

"Doesn't appear to be working, now does it?" She glared at him.

He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "I threw it in the bed of the truck. You can get it later."

"Yeah, if it didn't crack."

"For sixty bucks that case ought to be made of steel." When she growled, Jonah offered, "Officially it's 'Friendship'."

Batting those pretty eyes, she crawled two fingers over his thigh. "What's 'Friendship'? How I make you feel?"

Among a hundred other things. "Our state motto." He clamped one hand over her wandering fingers, the better to keep his mind on the road. "Not that I don't yearn for a repeat of last night's introductory performance, but we'll be hitting the outskirts of Crystal City in about ten miles, which means more traffic."

She squeezed the muscles beneath her hand. "And more traffic means no blowjob?"

Little did she know it, but Suzy had just given him one of the openings he sought—to learn more about her. If he could go about it the right way... "So tell me about this blowjob class you took."

"What do you want to know?"

"Details. Like...who taught it. Who took it. How many students there were." He attempted to casually sneak in what he really, really wanted to know. "What you practiced on, how often you met. That sort of thing."

"Don't you mean *who* we practiced on?"

Damn. "That's what I was afraid of."

"Fear not, gallant knight, there weren't any men there, penises in hand. Well...except for the two taking the class. As for practicing, it was strictly hands-off the real thing and mouths on the usual assortment of inanimate objects."

"Usual assortment?" His face heated. "You mean, uh...like carrots?"

There was a burst of laughter. "Carrots? Oh, like Phoebe Cates in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*? Not hardly—how many men do you know with erect penises the size of a carrot?"

"Wouldn't the more pertinent question be just how many *erect* penises have I taken the time to study? None but my own, that I can promise."

"Vegetables—but definitely not carrots. Glass dildos. Veined, real-sized vibrators..." She rattled off a list that helped his respiration return to normal. "The instructor gave a sheet of suitable items when we signed up and each participant brought what we wanted to practice with."

"And your favorite was...?" he fished.

"The cucumber, by far—it gave a little if I got too excited and bit down. Are you trying to get me all juiced up again?"

"Why—is it working?"

She shot him a raspberry.

"But you don't like to swallow?" This was surprisingly fun—a casual conversation about fellatio. Certainly not something Jonah had ever discussed with another.

"Nope. Never have."

"Liked it or done it?"

"Neither. It'll be a special man indeed who gets *that* from me."

"I'm beginning to think I'm pretty special."

"Oh-ho, Mr. Ain't-*Never-Gonna-Come-In-My-Mouth*, you think so?"

Jonah fairly felt his eyes sparkle when he took them off the road long enough to admit, "Uh-huh, I do. When I'm with you."

"Aw, Jonah, that's the sweetest thing I've heard a guy say in ages and the *last* chance you have to comment on this particular subject. Because I am starting to get juiced up and I really don't want to. After the last few hours, I am completely and truly physically sated and—not too proud to admit—a bit sore."

Oops. He grunted in self-derision, thinking of her flaming ass—thanks to him. "Good sore or bad?"

Suzy practically purred. "Good sore, yon grasshopper. Very, very good."

"Ah, so I finally satisfied the wild vacationing side?"

"That you did. Now talk about something else, please. Like how soon I can drive your truck."

"Very funny."

## Chapter Twelve

*Can he tell if you're faking it?*

*Sophisticated Woman*, issue picked up on a whim by Suzy then discarded just as fast once she read the first possible result.

*Not on Your Life!*

*Well...we aren't sure whether to offer congratulations – you're the Queen of the Faked Orgasm – or ask if you're interested in some oceanfront property in Oklahoma. Dear Sophi reader, do you find yourself faking it so frequently you consider yourself an expert? Maybe your man needs some verbal instruction? Maybe you need a different man? Consider sharing what really turns you on instead of hiding behind a few false wails and whimpers, hmmm?*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Table for two," Jonah requested in that low timbre Suzy never tired of, passing off a twenty. "Somewhere out of the way if you've got it."

While the hostess made a notation on the podium in front of her, Suzy evaluated the "classy club" that Jonah had assured her awaited at the end of the long drive, the single dance hall for miles and miles around—Crystal City's one and only Crystal Cowboy.

Back in New York, when a man combined the words *classy* and *club*, she would've expected exotically mixed drinks and painfully loud music. Art- and fashion-inspired gimmicks, such as tables that were really beds, or plates that were actually the food. Women who were in fact men and vice versa. Cars raucously honking, never-ending crowds and fierce competition for taxis.

But not here. Just like the Bottoms Up Bar, the sprawling cabin-style Crystals was the only joint on the road for miles.

Unlike Bottoms Up, there was no smoke to inhale, no jukebox blaring, and this place boasted a football field-sized dance floor. At least that's what it looked like awaited on the far end of the building, past the checkered red-and-white-vinyl-covered tables and a floor-to-timbered-ceiling glass wall.

"Wow. Country to a T." Against walls of rough-cut oak paneling, the lighting was subdued, the décor southwestern. Metal cutouts of longhorns and cacti alternated with cedar-framed windows that looked out into the darkness, the sun having set on the way, and every table boasted cute little cowboy boot salt-and-pepper shakers.

"Crystals," Jonah noted, lifting her hand to point to the ceiling where glittering glass was suspended from countless chandeliers. The effect was dazzling, creating

flickering shadows on the dance floor and walls. Never had she seen anything more...totally Texan. Casual yet sparkling.

As the hostess led them to a table along one wall, Suzy saw the just-arriving band—guitar cases, drums and amps in hand—winding their way through the tables toward the dance floor. The evening's live entertainment was comprised of several hot cowboys, checking out the venue and, Suzy couldn't help but notice, checking out *her*.

The familiar thrill she usually felt when a man noticed the tarted-up Suzy—died hair, seductive attire, fake tats—was completely absent. More than a little intrigued by the realization, both that she—Susannah Miller, dressed down, golden-haired and hazel-eyed—would garner such attention, and at how easily it was to turn her own gaze away from theirs, no curious reciprocal spark, no interest.

Why?

Because for once she was taken.

God, she loved Texas. Hadn't realized how much until Jonah pulled a chair out and seated her with a quick kiss to the head, announcing his claim to one and all.

Now *that* was a feeling! A tingly, not-quite-hot feeling that started at the top of her head and spiraled downward. But instead of leaving desire in its wake, it left pure contentment. That and something more.

Too much more and she'd be sick to her stomach. Warm, fuzzy feelings were one thing—one thing guaranteed to lead straight to disaster and heartache. So she blurted, "Damn, I'm hungry. I hope the cook isn't drunk."

Sliding into place across from her, Jonah lifted his hat off, laid it on an empty chair and motioned to a passing waitress no sooner than the hostess faded from view. "Let's get you fed."

As if her hunger was the top priority in the whole wide world. Fuzzy feelings threatened to make her puke. Argghh!

Suzy flipped open the menu, started perusing the choices. "Think I'll go for..."

Then she realized Jonah was already ordering. For them both.

"The lady and I will have the house special," which was a sixteen-ounce steak, she saw with no little surprise, "medium-well. A double order of onion rings, double order of Christmas toothpicks, your delicious sweet potato fries..." He actually paused and looked at her then nodded to himself before adding, "And bring some cinnamon sugar on the side with those fries. Add two sides of baked beans, and for starters, we'll each have a Caesar salad. Extra croutons."

From under her grasp, he retrieved her menu and handed it to the indulgently smiling waitress. Real funny. "And we want a bottle of your best white wine."

"*With* the food, not before," Suzy clarified. Tempting as it was, she didn't want to dumb down their conversation with the buzz of alcohol on an empty stomach.

"One more thing," Jonah added, his eyes telling her he was getting in the last word. "Bring out your Texas Fire! sauce with the steak."

Suzy really hated when a guy did that—ordered for her. Made decisions for her. Overrode what she planned to wear...

But not, according to the little line-dancing butterflies in her stomach, the ones fairly thriving in all that warm gooey fuzziness, when *he* did it. Then it was almost...flattering.

Lucky for him—and her—she liked his choices. Had been about to order steak herself. But not that big of one. The second the waitress was out of earshot, Suzy demanded, “*Sixteen ounces? Really, Tex? Really?*”

He winked. “You need some red meat.”

“I could be a vegetarian.”

“You’re not.”

His certainty was astounding. “But what if I am?”

“Then I would’ve given you my salad and taken your steak home for later in the week. But we’d still split the fries and rings and toothpicks. Those I’m *not* relinquishing entirely.”

“That’s a lot of fried food. You always eat like this?”

“Tonight’s a special occasion.”

“Is it?” Her look asked questions she wasn’t ready to voice.

“It is indeed.” His eyes answered them all.

To keep from buying the hype she knew couldn’t last, Suzy told him, “The last man who did that—ordered without asking my preference—ate two meals. All by his lonesome.”

“Must’ve been a real chump.” Chandelier-induced crystals glittered in those ice blue eyes. They looked anything but cold.

Suzy cocked one brow. She stared intently.

An impish grin played at the corners of his full mouth. “Too much?”

“Maybe just a little.” She held up finger and thumb, a smidge apart. “Give ‘em an inch, they take a mile.”

“You bring out the beast in me, Suzy, you know that?”

“Yeah, well...keep it in the bedroom.” Under the table, she playfully kicked the tip of her cowboy boot against his.

“And let you go wild out of it?” Those big feet captured her teasing one, holding it prisoner.

“Oh-ho...” Suzy insinuated her other foot into the game, running a pointed toe up and down the denim covering his shin. “So you think you’ll tame *me*?”

With his enormous clodhoppers, she should’ve known their under-the-table tussle wasn’t one she could win. Emphasizing the words, “Rein you in,” he caught her other foot, stretching her legs straight as he drew both under his chair and kept them there. “I think I can handle that.”

So he thought he could use her own words against her? “Go ahead and try.”

The little devil that’d long ago taken up residence on her right shoulder laughed.

This from her, the woman currently wearing white lace, eyelet and ribbon? Allowing a man to order for her? Hey – a good, sexy spanking was one thing – but talk about being whipped in the literal sense.

The angel on the other side reminded her she had indeed spoken those words, taunted him with the dare. *Rein me in.*

And meant them too, in a roundabout way.

But only for sex, nothing more.

Yeah, maybe she did need someone who would take control, keep her in line. But only because she *wanted* him to. *Allowed* him to.

A fantasy man. Maybe that was why she so enjoyed Jonah selecting her clothes. Deciding on her meal. Holding her feet hostage.

Thus far, he was doing a mighty good job of filling a tall order – satisfying her while still making her yearn for more.

Uncomfortable with her thoughts, Suzy jerked her legs – his hold didn’t budge.

“I saw the beef jerky in your room, that’s how I knew you weren’t a vegetarian.”

“Went through my things, did you?” Was she piqued or flattered? Discordant notes from a recently plugged-in electric guitar matched those strumming disturbingly through her conscience, because Suzy knew she should be piqued at the invasion of privacy. Then why did she only marvel that he was still interested?

“Thoroughly.”

“So now you think you know me?”

His confident expression answered for him.

“Okay, Sherlock. What other conclusions did you deduce?”

“You really want to hear this?”

“Blow me away. I’m ready for it.”

But she wasn’t, not even close, when he started with, “You like raunchy sex, the raunchier the better because you’re uncomfortable with all things soft and sweet. All things intimate.”

*Well, crap.*

“I haven’t figured out why yet, but...” He leaned toward her and his voice went all low and smoky. “In fact, I suspect you didn’t really get off in the shower, at least not like you did before –”

“*You knew?*” she practically shrieked. *He knew?* Guys *never* knew – they were clueless! But Jonah so...wasn’t. “Then why...?”

“Didn’t I say something then?”

Suzy thought she nodded but wasn't sure. Her head appeared to be floating ten feet above her body, crashing into those chandeliers. Sparks flying through her brain. Slicing into her reality. Jonah knew! Appeared to know her better than any man on the planet. And for all intents and purposes, they'd just met!

"Because *I* was getting off on it, just as much as before. And 'cause I realized I don't have to decipher *everything* about you in one day. There's time."

*Huh.* Time for a bluff, a redirect, anything... "Sounding mighty confident there, cowboy."

But he wasn't finished, not by a long shot. "You crave a little spice, some sharp flavor in everything you do, you just haven't figured out yet how to balance it—working within the parameters you *think* you need to." Her frown must've tipped him off because he added, "Don't forget, sweetheart, I've seen all that makeup and hair dye. The recent purchases. I saw the clothes in your suitcase—the ones you really wear—versus the tramp show in your closet." She made some sort of strangling noise. "The problem is you're goin' from one extreme to the other, but at heart, you're neither—not the bland surface exterior you present to the world or the tart you've been portraying. I think you've been hiding the real you so long that maybe you've lost her."

*Too close to home!* Her eyes looked over his shoulder. "Where's our damn food?"

The band members finally stopped tuning and started playing, introducing themselves to the crowd gathered on the dance floor, waving to the diners still eating behind the glass partition that muted their every word and note. Suzy tried to focus beyond her table. Thought about how many more days she had here in West Texas, and how—at this moment—she wasn't sure whether she was ecstatic or despondent at the way her vacation was going.

Attuned to her more than she wanted to admit, as though he sensed her attention trying to wander—which hadn't done a bit of good because she was still totally focused on the man across from her—Jonah reached under the table to stroke the skin above one captured boot. His touch felt oddly soothing for a man whose words were anything but. "You love big, dangling earrings. I didn't see any other jewelry of note, so I think you ought to wear 'em all the time. Make that your bold fashion statement to the world, your trademark, until you feel comfortable showing the real you."

"But my job—" The protest sprang to her lips, just as her gaze zoomed back to his. "I'm in the media daily, the public eye. I'm paid to present an outwardly conservative presence and I can't jeopardize that." Then she thought of the excruciatingly boring diamond studs she'd worn to work every day for the past three years—they'd replaced equally boring pearl studs which had replaced boring gold hoops—and she cringed.

"I'm not saying go crazy—except maybe on the weekends—but find some larger-than-average gold or silver circles, or some classy fourteen karat danglers." His eyes lit up and he started talking faster, eager to share whatever had caused the spark. "Ma had a beautiful teardrop pair Dad bought her from James Avery for their twentieth anniversary. Those would—"



“Bought from who?”

“James Avery—a Texas-based craftsman. The stores are concentrated in the south so I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of him. They make really nice, classy designs but they aren’t boring. I saw the receipt—Dad spent a pretty penny on them. I don’t think she ever loved a pair more.”

Suzy leaned back in her chair, crossed her arms over her protesting stomach—hearing so much of the truth at one time was making her nauseous—and huffed. “If I wanted to be psychoanalyzed, I could’ve hired a shrink.”

Jonah’s hand roamed higher on her bare skin, tickled the back of one knee while his muscular legs shifted, firming the vise around hers. “Don’t you see? With you there’s no middle ground. I’m just pointing out you have options.”

Suzy caught the eye of their busy waitress who gave her the thumbs-up, indicating their food would be out shortly. About damn time. She glared back at Jonah. “Are you finished yet?”

“We can’t end this conversation without my crowning triumph, can we? My observation to end all observations...”

Arching one eyebrow, she dared, “Impress the hell out of me. I’m waiting.”

He gloated back with, “You have piss-poor judgment when it comes to men.”

“Ya think?” The sarcasm was thick as concrete—she couldn’t mask it and didn’t try. “Can’t chance messing up my career—my life—and after the last one I learned to avoid men fifty weeks out of the year.” She stiffened and shot him an eminently hard look, peeved he wouldn’t release her feet. Peeved more how he had her pegged.

“Last one?”

He wanted the truth? “Last man to betray me. This one, like my dad—before I knew better—I *loved*.” Or thought she had. “Thanks to him, I decided to save up my decadence and spend it all at once while on vacation. So what if I get with three or four guys? Most people do that in a year, easy. I just get mine all at once.”

“What about the rest of the time? Are you tellin’ me you don’t go out at all? Not to bars, no parties? No...real dates? *Zero sex?*”

“And he hits it in one, ladies and germs. Go out? Date? Not anymore, I don’t. Don’t want to chance meeting anyone who might start causing me to rethink—” She stopped herself, fearing she’d revealed too much. “As for what I do, my daily routine consists of working out at the office gym each morning, going to work, doing my job, coming home and watching movies. Lots and lots of movies.”

“What about friends?”

“I have several. My older sister for one. She’s married with two-point-four kids and a dog—”

“I won’t ask about the point four. But isn’t that an example that men *can* be trusted?”

“Certainly.” Suzy gave him the smile of a piranha. “This is husband number three. The first one decided he didn’t want to be married after fourteen months and booked. The second one ran off with a male coworker. The current one? They’ve been together a long time, and yeah, I’ll give him credit. He seems like something other than a total toad. Beth’s happy and that’s what counts. But that still leaves two for three that sucked. And who knows what’ll happen? Point four, by the way, is in the cooker.” Suzy stared at the musicians, twanging out a mournful melody that matched her mood. “My other friends are from work and we visit in the morning while on the treadmill or at lunch. I don’t lock myself away and have some sterile existence. Get that out of your mind. I *do* have a full life—”

“Just one empty of men.”

“Except—”

“Except for two weeks out of the year. Men who have no chance of getting anything from you but your body.”

“I was *going* to say except for you.”

The hand near her knee squeezed once then he brought it to the table and captured hers, silent now, but gazing at her with such confidence, he stole her breath. Amazing. That after making all those wildly accurate assessments, he wasn’t backing off. Appeared, in fact, more interested than ever.

Just when Suzy was ready to call the had-to-be soused chef on the carpet—um, make that plank floor—the waitress glided over with part of their order, balancing salad plates and water glasses on a large tray.

Suzy leaned back, trying to free her feet—again—but Jonah still wasn’t letting go of anything except her hand. “Persistent bastard,” she whispered.

He only smirked. Then exhibited his dominance by tightening his grip.

*Tug, tug.* Her ass slipped a fraction on the smooth wood of the seat and her comfy, scraggly denim shorts hiked straight up her crack. “*Umpf!*”

“Problem?”

“No, um...a reminder,” Suzy said through clamped teeth and yanked back. Without success.

“I hope you two are enjoyin’ the band. They’re just getting warmed up, but they’re here through Saturday and they’ll have some good belt-polishing numbers before the night’s through. Sorry about the wait. We had a wedding rehearsal in here earlier, about filled the place to overflowing and the kitchen’s having trouble gettin’ caught back up.”

“No problem,” Jonah confirmed briefly, as if to say, *Less talk, more food.*

“Here you go—to getya started.” Textured water glasses clanked on the table, and with a flourish, the plates slid in front of them, huge ovals filled with hunks of beautiful romaine lettuce dotted with Parmesan cheese and big, crunchy-looking croutons, dressing on the side.

“Lemme know if y’all need anything else. Your food’ll be ready in about fifteen, ten if we’re lucky.”

“Thanks.”

“Big salad,” she said after the waitress left, stabbing a forkful.

“Mmm,” Jonah agreed, and they both enjoyed a few crunchy bites of quiet.

It was a comfortable silence. She’d heard once—in some movie maybe—that’s how a person knows when they’ve really found someone. When saying *nothing* feels as natural as sharing heartfelt confidences.

How’d she end up so damn lucky? All those years ago Jonah evaporated into thin air. And now, out of nowhere, he reappeared, a guardian angel in the flesh, just in the nick of time to save her and whisk her off her feet.

Her feet—that he still claimed. It was easier to let him keep ‘em. Wasn’t as though she planned on walking—or running—away anytime soon. Not tonight.

“Jonah...” *How?* How was it possible he wasn’t already taken? Come on—he was drop-dead sexy. Smart as a whip. Strong as an ox. So freaking perceptive if she didn’t take the focus off her and stick it on him, Suzy was half afraid he’d out-shrink every psychiatrist with a framed degree on their wall. “Why haven’t you ever fallen in love? Gotten married? Had a handful of kids? *Or have you?*”

*Gulp.* She hadn’t thought he might have an ex in the fringes. Didn’t like how the possibility unnerved her. “Anything like that?” she couldn’t help but mutter when he didn’t answer right away. She shoved a big hunk of lettuce in her mouth to stop from babbling.

Jonah set his fork down and Suzy realized he’d already devoured his salad. Hungry man. Maybe she could use that to her advantage. She swallowed and proposed a deal. “You give me back my lower limbs and half this yummy salad has your name on it.”

As though he’d forgotten he still held them so snugly, his legs tensed then shifted, loosened. Freeing her.

Suzy reluctantly brought her feet back under her side of the table and hiked up in her chair, immediately scooping half her remaining lettuce onto his plate. The croutons she kept for herself.

“You ever gonna answer?” she prodded when he made no move to do so, reaching for her water glass.

“Ah... This is embarrassing.” The flush to his face confirmed it. He looked at her then his eyes flicked away. “This is my first date. My first *real* date,” he clarified.

She choked on an ice cube, sputtering, “Ever?”

He couldn’t expect her to actually believe that, could he?

“Ever,” he confirmed. “Go ahead, laugh.”

That she did, even though she didn’t really buy it.

“But...but you’re no virgin.” Soon as she said it, she wished it back. Showed where her mind was.

It was his turn to chuckle and those deep vibrations winnowed through and brightened her darkest, loneliest places. “Yeah, had a few... encounters—”

“Encounters?” She had to question based on the odd way he said it.

The pink on his cheekbones intensified.

“One-night stands,” he said succinctly, though his discomfort was evident. And surprising. Which she found adorable—that a man, one who looked and acted like Jonah, would be uncomfortable copping to meaningless sex. Said a lot for his values.

Hers too, she thought with a twinge of remorse.

“Not many,” he continued, “just a few. Here and there, when I was at my lowest. Or blitzed at some party. Which didn’t happen often. Truth is, I was mainly too drunk to remember them much.”

Oh good.

Wait, was it? Her instant relief at not having to share him turned to sorrow. It was sad—depressing, really. He was too good a guy for blackout sex. That was her, not him. “There was never anyone special...at all?”

He shrugged. “Sort of, I guess. Since you’re asking. Lost my virginity to LeAnn Farnley our twelfth-grade year. Pretty girl I suppose, in a quiet sort of way. Glasses. Braces. Always wore this muddy shade of purple and she had orange hair. Didn’t mix well, you know? But it was board straight and past her butt. A guy past puberty couldn’t help but notice. Anyway, we were both such dorks, didn’t get a lot of attention from the opposite sex.”

“Looking at you, I find that hard to believe.”

He ducked his head, as if uncomfortable with her comment. That or he doubted it. “High school isn’t about that. It’s all who’s cool.”

It was hard to imagine Jonah as anything but cool. Cool *and* hot.

“Besides, I had to grow into my nose. Gained six inches and a good forty pounds between high school graduation and the beginning of my sophomore year at Cornell. So anyway, we used to study together a lot—me and LeAnn. She confided that she was worried about going off to college a virgin, so when she asked me if I would, uh, take care of matters... Hey, at the time, I thought I’d won the lottery.”

His nose—the one she’d always thought fit perfectly on his handsome face—scrunched at the memory.

“Not that great?”

“More like that scary. I’m not sure how I stayed hard long as I did, what with her acting like I was killing her. Never even finished the deed.” He winced at the recollection, and Suzy hummed with suppressed laughter. Now *that* was impossible to believe of her sexy stud muffin. “Afterward I went and talked to Ma. She was nice like that. Open. She...er...corrected my misgivings, but she was worried too. Made me

promise, 'no relationships, dating or that sort of thing', not until I graduated college. She wanted me to wait to fall in love because she hadn't. Met my dad and ended up dropping out. So I knew that promise meant a lot to her. And it made sense too. I wasn't about to screw up my degree given all it represented, you know?"

"So you haven't dated? Asked a woman out? Picked her up, ordered for her, paid the bill, made out afterward?" She still found it hard to believe.

"You're the only exception." His honesty shone like a beacon. "Worth it then, worth it now."

"Awww."

"I think, long as I'm baring my soul, my psyche somehow twisted up that night and the excitement over you finally saying yes to a date with the desolation about my parents. It's like the two got all tangled up in my mind, you know, and maybe...it was just easier, not to try with anyone else."

"Jonah..." Did men like him really exist?

"It's all good—now." He flashed her a grin. "I'll graduate soon anyway—that's worth celebrating." He paused a beat, looked away again. The lights over the dance floor changed when the band started wailing a low ballad. Iridescent flashes danced across one side of his face and shoulder. "Maybe... Maybe you could fly into town for that. I won't have anyone else there."

"Maybe." Put like that, she could hardly tell him no. But how could she tell him yes? There was so much distance between them—*geographically* speaking...she wasn't about to compare the rest of their differences—too much to attempt any sort of real relationship. She wasn't cut out for that anyway.

One night and one day in his company hadn't "cured" her distrust of men. Though hearing about *his* life sure did make her wonder... Contemplate the possibilities.

New York. Texas.

Jets. Cowboys.

*Worlds* apart.

Nah. It would sting when this vacation ended but to plan a return trip? Suzy had a feeling that'd be like slowly tearing in two. She braved reaching across the table for the last bite of lettuce he'd left on his plate and shook the green romaine hanging off her fork at him. "But you really should invite your family. Tell them what you've been doing and give them a chance to celebrate on your behalf. They'll be proud of you."

## Chapter Thirteen

*Here lies Jonah "Disrespected at Every Turn" McKenzie*

Yeah, that about summed it up.

\* \* \* \* \*

His brothers? Proud of him? Maybe if he lassoed a bucking bronco. Rode a bull. Made a fool of himself as a rodeo clown. Sucker punched a Tanner hand.

Well, Jonah *had* punched Evan Diamond back in high school when he smeared Jezzy's name. But that was then. Now?

Proud of him for graduating?

Jonah grunted. "Who are you kidding? They'd just as soon spit as put that on my grave marker."

"You're what?"

"Never mind." He wasn't about to tell her his penchant for contemplatin' how he'd be remembered in the end.

Their meal arrived just then, the waitress rushing the piping tray of food from the kitchen.

"Careful, these babies are mighty hot. Might give 'em a minute." Tossing a checkered potholder in front of each of them, she gripped the handles of the cast iron plates and lowered them to the table. Next came beans, onion rings, the toothpicks and pumpkin-colored fries. Dual dessert-sized bowls of melted butter and cinnamon sugar skidded into place, followed by a big jar of Texas Fire! barbeque sauce. After refilling their water glasses, she placed the bottle of wine and two wineglasses on the only available corner and inquired, "Anythin' else?"

"Let's see..." Jonah carved into his meat, checking—grill-seared skin, slightly pink on the inside. "Perfection. Worth the wait."

"I'll tell Toby you said so." With a bright smile, the waitress hurried off and Jonah noticed Crystals had filled up fast. Thank God for their twenty-dollar corner. He probably hadn't needed to tip—asking likely would've sufficed. But where was the valor in that?

"Why?" Suzy demanded, globbing barbeque sauce on her plate.

"Careful, they call it 'fire' for a reason," he warned, waiting his turn. "And why what?"

"Why not invite them? Your accomplishments are totally worth being proud of. I can't imagine they wouldn't want to be there for you."

Jonah snorted at the idea of handing out graduation announcements. “Let me count the reasons...”

Instead he concentrated on chopping his steak into bite-sized bits. The knife slid through the meat like butter—too easily for a man who was trying to busy his hands...and his thoughts.

This wasn’t exactly his favorite subject. “Enough about me. Since you’ve enough sauce there to bomb a hole in your throat—why don’t you try a bite? I want to watch the smoke shoot out of your ears.”

“Very funny.” Handing over the bottle, Suzy retrieved her knife and fork. “Oh, come on. Is your nana really *that* mean? Your brothers really so indifferent?”

“No,” he sighed, thumping the glass bottom with his hand. Thick sauce plopped atop his butchered steak. “My brothers aren’t like me. We’re...” Oil and flame. Cash versus credit. “From different planets.”

“Different doesn’t mean they won’t support you.”

Jonah had cut his meat so small, he staked his fork through three pieces and shoved them all in his mouth. “Well, trust me, they don’t,” he muttered over chewing. “Lesson finally learned after all these years. There’s a reason I haven’t bothered to tell them I’m going to college. They don’t care. And my suggestions for the ranch? Diversifying our operations? Won’t consider ‘em. ‘Crazy Jonah and his ideas.’ I’m done trying to help.”

“Ideas? Like what?”

“I’d like to offer up part of our ranch—Lord knows we’ve no shortage of spectacular views or acreage—as a set location. Films, photography, what have you. There’s money to be made functioning as a backdrop. Would give us a little something to work on besides busting our knuckles trying to fatten steers on vegetation that grows sparser every year, what with the drought and all.”

“Drought? It’s poured the last four days. Who needs snow? I could rustle up enough mud to build a three-tiered mudman with the right incentive.”

“Could you now? I’d like to see that. But all this rain—that’s just because of that leftover tropical storm. Precious indeed and we want every drop we can get it, but the land just won’t support the number of beefs it would twenty, thirty years ago. Some ranchers out here either narrowed their focus, turning their herds organic or free range, or expanded it by bringin’ in exotic game for private hunts or specialty meats. I’ve mentioned these ideas and a host of others to my older brother—and Grandpa back when he still took a hand in runnin’ things.”

“And?” she questioned when he finally came up for air and another bite of steak.

Jonah chewed and swallowed, pausing before asking, “Am I boring you?”

“No! Really!” She tapped the toe of her boot to his then quickly retracted—likely afraid he’d capture her again. “I’m surprised to find how much you’re not. Prior to this week, my only association with Texas ranching was renting *Dallas* from Netflix.”

"Dallas? Are you for real?" Jonah couldn't keep from performing his French horn imitation of the show's theme. Halfway through, he stopped and grimaced, noticing a few heads had turned their way and Suzy stared at him wide-eyed.

"Bravo!" She clapped.

He ducked his head, speared another three-bite piece of steak and muttered, "Spare me – Dallas is *not* an example of West Texas ranching."

"Of course not! But it is an example of prime entertainment. USDC Certified."

"Huh?"

"United States Department of Gubernatorial Communications," she deadpanned.

"You just made that up."

"And you know that how, Mr. Smarty-Pants?"

"You forgot the 'G'."

"USD... Well, shit. You caught me." She shrugged as if she hadn't a care in the world and reached for the fire sauce, pouring a hefty dollop right in her spoon.

"You're not gonna eat that straight, are you?"

"Watch me, cowboy." And she did just that, licking the spoon clean and shuddering as the horribly hot sauce went down.

"Wow. I'm impressed. You really do like it spicy."

"Don't you know by now, Jonah..." Very methodically, as though she knew he couldn't look away, she poured a second helping, staring at him, her eyes loaded with meaning, as she swallowed before saying, "I like it to *burn*."

Her tone, her actions, the way she stripped him with her gaze...stealed his cock right back to bursting. Then she went and popped a pin in his happy balloon by asking, "So what happened with your brother and Grandpa McKenzie? They poop on your parade of new ideas?"

"Til it stunk up the barn. Guest cottages? Out. Overnight trail rides? Shot down before I finished the sentence. About two years back, a producer was scouting locations from helicopter for a music video he was set to shoot. A section of our spread fit what he had in mind – out in the backcountry, we've got some real pretty springs and natural pools. You just don't find this kind of country inside a movie studio. Brother Dearest took the call and wouldn't consider it. Told the guy to find some other sucker to proposition."

"Your older brother sounds like a hard-ass. What a jerk, not even listening to your suggestions."

Jonah found himself in the unusual position of defending Bo. "Not really. I mean, he's strong and opinionated, but he has a really good heart. He's solid. It's just that..." *That ever since our parents died, he takes everything too seriously. Between that and Nana's latest scheme...* "Just that my ideas haven't clicked with how he thinks he has to run the place. Old school and all that." Seeing her watering eyes, Jonah took pity on her. "I notice a few flames shooting off your tongue. Might want to try the fries."



“Your-ideas-all-sound-smart-to-me.” Faster than lightning the words were out and Suzy’d plucked up an orange fry and delivered it to her mouth. He watched her practically melt in her chair. “Oh gosh, these are good.”

“Yeah, that one had potential. And so was my plan to check into solar panels and wind generators to supply electricity to the bunkhouse and barns and as backup for the main house. But *nooooo...*” Now he was just on a rampage, thinking of all the suggestions discarded without consideration. “Shoot, I tell them to turn out a light, they think it’s a bad idea.”

Around another fry, she insisted, “Maybe you’ve given up too easily. Seems I recall a certain confident cowboy who wouldn’t take *no* for an answer. You’re brilliant, Jonah. No two ways around it. Whether your brother agrees with all your suggestions or not, he should at least give them some thought. You ought to *make* him listen, tie him up if he refuses. Stick a hypnosis tape under his pillow. Force him to give your ideas the consideration they deserve.”

“Yeah, maybe.” But Jonah was no longer thinking about the food he was shoveling in, good as it was. He’d gone on autopilot, thinking of all the ventures he’d suggested. All shot down.

“You’re just trying to help the ranch make money. Stay solvent during difficult times. I think you’re to be commended.” She took up several fries and dunked them in butter sauce and cinnamon-sugar before popping them in her mouth, chewing that statement over. “Doesn’t sound to me like they respect you very much.”

“You nailed it. I need them to but they don’t. Because they think I’m Nana’s wingman or something. Just because I handle the books and remind them to watch the spending.”

Suzy *hmmmed* and stretched her left hand across the table, nudging her pinky to his. “Well, are you?”

*Stab, stab, stab.* His fork lanced meat. “If I were, would I be lying to her about college?”

“No, I’d think not.” She tugged at his hand, folding her fingers into his. “Sorry I asked. Dumb question.”

“No prob. Directness I can deal with. It’s all their drunken innuendos and sidelong glances that really fry my peppers. Don’t get me wrong. Mostly, they’re a great bunch. I guess you kinda have to know my family to get them.

“Now Nana...I love her to death, but she’s off her rocker. Just yesterday she announced to the family that she changed the will. She’s demanding everyone move back home and behave like monkish angels. It’s either that or get kicked out of the family. And until we marry and produce a child, she’s suspended access to our trust funds.”

“Oh.” Her mouth formed a cinnamon-sugar coated O, those beautiful hazel eyes peeled wide. “That’s...outdated. Outlandish. And a whole lot of pressure.”

Was it?

What was?

God she was cute.

Whatever they'd been talking about skipped his mind and all that existed, all he could see, were those sweet, candy-coated lips. Just waiting to be kissed.

Hovering there.

Tasty. Tempting. Too good to resist.

How could he stop himself?

Jonah's legs tensed and his butt lurched off the chair, sending it crashing backward with a reverberating *thwack!* as he ducked across the table, taking advantage of their hand holding to yank her forward and off her seat, making her meet him in the middle. A little squeak of surprise escaped her lips, cut off abruptly by the pressure of his when he seized her mouth and devoured her spicy-sweet flavor, kissing her deep and hard, plunging his tongue inside to sweep and dance with hers, until he licked clean every speck of spice or sugar to be had.

Until his cock was steel, straining against denim. Swollen with need and taking over his mind.

*Take her, it compelled, overriding all else. Now. Take her. Go outside, spread her against your truck and take her!*

Encouraged by his newly roused nasty side, Jonah sucked her lower lip into his mouth, grazing teeth to succulent flesh, considering his next move.

"Jonah..." came her muffled whisper cry.

His hands flew to the sides of her face, covered her ears, and anchored her head within his grasp. His fingers tightened. Her tongue slid over his.

*Take her, demanded his cock. Take her!*

He bit down, pulled and tugged then licked. Caressed. Kissed her deeper.

She whimpered and Jonah realized he *could*. If he so desired—she was his. Actions spoke louder than words—she was his to command. All he had to do was "take" her. Forget the truck. He could do it here.

Here, over the table, with her moaning and crying his name for all to hear.

Or he could drag her off somewhere more private. The stockroom. *Under* the table. Or... His truck. The thought beckoned again.

Other than the spectacular blowjob she'd performed the night before, the inside of his truck hadn't seen any action. Jonah caught fire at the thought of initiating it with Suzy.

*Sex with Suzy.*

He'd get those little white decals. Spell it out on his back windshield for all to see—*Suzy. She's mine. Any time.*

She belonged to him, wouldn't deny him now. She couldn't.

Knowing that with a deep-down certainty somehow calmed the blood roaring in his ears. Fortified his common sense. Allowed Jonah the strength to release that swollen mouth and slowly back away.

“Easy there, cowboy. Don’t want to get us banned from the only dance spot in the county.”

The separation splashed cold water over his face, his groin, and Jonah fell back to his heels, realizing his chair had vanished. Realizing more, he’d put on a show for the other diners and the bulge in his jeans was coated with barbeque sauce.

Female titters abounded. Eyes slid away. Men smirked knowingly. Nodded. Even sent a couple thumbs-up his way.

He’d really crunched his numbers now. “Guess I kinda lost control there.”

“My, my...” Those luscious lips beamed brilliantly as, never taking her eyes off his, Suzy scrambled down into her chair so hard it scraped backward. She fluffed her flattened hair then loudly scooted forward. “That was fun. Outrageously so.”

Jonah quickly righted his seat, situating it at an angle to give his properly basted crotch a little privacy. As he cleaned—more like smeared—the mess with his napkin, heat crawled up his neck. Yet still he wanted nothing more than to lug her to the bed of his truck like some caveman and search out the only solace in existence right now—her body. His heart thrummed as if a Blue-throated hummingbird had taken up residence in his chest. “Don’t know what got into me.”

When Suzy arrested his efforts with those red nails stroking down one forearm and murmured, “But I know what wanted to get into *me*,” something told him she’d love every second.

*But...* Whatever meager, sensible part of his brain remained staunchly reminded him, *This isn’t all about sex and your physical connection.*

At least, he didn’t want it to be. Not for him. Not for her.

Blotted and smeared beyond obvious recognition, he abandoned the stain and busied himself pouring the forgotten wine for them each, gulping his down in two swallows. The alcohol burned, warming him all over.

Just what he needed. Jonah shoved the bottle aside. “Um...so...what *were* we talking about?”

Her eyebrows rose as if to say, *Who’s talking?*

“Before *that*.”

“Oh, don’t remember.” Dainty shoulders shrugged and he could hear it in her tone. She never sounded that innocent.

Suzy was a bad liar, he surmised, just then recalling what they’d been discussing. Nana’s mandate—that he, and all his brothers and cousins, marry to retain control of their money.

“Ugh.” Acting as if nothing had happened, Suzy laid a palm to her stomach and relaxed back in her chair. Half her plate remained untouched. “I’m too full to dance. Maybe we should head out. Turn in early?”

Her saucy wink declared she was putting up walls again.

And he wouldn’t have that. Sex was too easy for her.

He wanted the intimacy she always held at bay.

“No...no, let’s talk a little more. You haven’t told me spit about yourself.” Jonah recaptured those lost feet, entwining them and holding them hostage. “Just so you know – Nana’s will changes mean *nada* to me.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I’m not solely dependent on the ranch for my living. I made investments, planned beyond the here and now. As for her latest stupid-ass dictates, I’m officially over being told what to do. I’m my own man and I’m still a hungry one. You done?” At her nod Jonah traded plates with her, finishing off what she hadn’t. “Now relax. And talk. An’ try a Christmas toothpick while you’re at it.”

He nudged the bowl of jagged-looking fried “toothpicks” her direction.

She eyed the contents with curiosity and – or so it seemed to him – attempted to sound remarkably casual when she inquired, “So I don’t have to worry about any half-hatched plans to snag a bride?”

“Nary a one. But, Suzy, darlin’...” Jonah leaned forward, his gaze as intent as his warning. “You might need to concern yourself with the spanking you’ll get – or *not* get – if you don’t give me what I want. Out with it. Tell me about yourself and quit directing the conversation to me.”

“Or else?” Her smile spread easily and she separated two toothpicks, both fried to a crispy golden brown with the underlying color showing through – one red, one green. “Hmmm. Tempting. So you really want me to spill?”

“Bingo. Bore me to tears, babe, I’m up for it.” Whatever she chose to share, he needed to hear. Anything. Everything.

But once Suzy’s mouth opened, it didn’t close, not for a while. She told him about her parents divorcing when she was a kid, about her job and what it was like having the political giant for a boss. About her friends.

She told him the type of toilet paper she preferred. How she hated gum and glam rock but loved butterscotch candies and new wave music.

But not one word about why she liked her sex hard and fast. Spiked with strangers and pain.

Enjoying the relaxed camaraderie between them too much to press, Jonah forbore asking directly. But he did intend to discover why eventually.

In between her litany of – mostly – superficial revelations, she polished off every single toothpick, leaving Jonah to enjoy the onion rings. Only on her last bite did she

think to confirm, "Hey, are these fried bell pepper strips?" He nodded, still amazed she'd eaten the entire bowl. "Cool!"

The lateness of the hour dawned on him when his butt turned numb from sitting and his throat raw from conversing and laughing, which coincided with the band wrapping it up for the night, replaced by an invisible DJ.

Again and again the waitress returned, asking if they needed anything. At one point Jonah ordered two slices of pecan pie and again ate half of Suzy's. Eventually, the waitress left the bill and two peppermints behind. The kitchen was closed, the bar hopping.

And still he and Suzy talked. About everything—except the deep, personal stuff. But beyond that, anything went. One conversation flowed into the next and then into another, slowly reversing the time, the distance between them, until they arrived back at Cornell, at that dim, crowded hall where Jonah often made a fool of himself.

"So," he wanted to know now, "do you still line dance?"

"Ah...with you was the last time."

"Really?"

"The last time I count." Her eyes cut away from his. "The others have only been with my dad and even then not since last century." Her smile was sad, hesitant, shocking Jonah when it suddenly flipped over and she leapt from her seat. "Be right back."

Moments later she returned, practically skipping to her chair. Those eyes glittered with pride—and maybe a little guilt. "You aren't the only one who can flash twenties, you know?" And then the current song skidded to a halt and the *Electric Boogie* switched on. The crowd murmured, quickly reassembling. "You owe me this, you know?"

She had him there.

*And you owe me the truth.* But Jonah was confident after the day they'd spent together, after the past several hours, that she was worth waiting for, worth coaxing out like a skittish colt not yet used to a bridle.

Suzy might not've clued completely in but she'd met the man meant to tame—and claim—her. Of that Jonah was certain.

"You want to line dance? Now?" He protested, but he was already on his feet, pocketing his peppermint for later, grabbing his hat and following his feisty Red out onto the dance floor.

He'd forgotten how downright addictive stepping in tune with her at his side could feel. Jonah gave himself over to the moment, hands clapping, heart pounding as he slid back and forth, the song controlling his motions. He hadn't forgotten a single move—they were engrained on his brain like riding a bicycle—but just like before, his eyes remained on her, making him trip up, bump into other dancers.

The song went on forever. Then ended all too quickly.

Suzy hurled her arms around his neck, gleeful with excitement. "I'm going to bribe them again," she threatened.

"Don't start a mob."

She almost did. By the third line-dance song, a few of the natives were gettin' restless. The DJ promised a waltz next but said he wanted *everyone* out on the floor and shakin' their *thang*.

Just as Jonah was about to take his first step, his cell thrummed, demanding attention. His first instinct was to ignore it, to dance on.

His second was reluctant concern. Between Nana's family meeting debacle, Grandpa's accident and Bo's tractor turning *hot pink* overnight, the family didn't need any more disasters.

Given that Bo was off with Chain Lady and Jonah'd promised—seeing as how it was her last night in town—to cover for him as best he could, Jonah didn't have a choice. Weren't that many people who called a man on his cell after midnight. And who knew what Grandpa was up to. Or off to.

Jonah slipped from his place in line, indicating Suzy should step and shuffle on. One glance at his caller ID confirmed his worries. It was Nana. "Yeah," he answered, having to shout over the music. "Everything okay?"

Nana shouted right back—louder than him. "Where in hell's burnin' fires're you at, young man? Sun went down ages ago!"

Oh crud. Like a kid caught with his hands in the cookie jar, Jonah's stomach cranked into a knot.

Why hadn't he stepped outside before answering? Or into the bathroom?

*What happened to being your own man?* the rebel streak in him demanded. *Hang up. Or tell her the truth.*

Easier said than done. Talk about a rock and a hard place. Or rather, a rockin' Suzy and a hard-ass Nana.

Too bad he cared so much about the grumpy old fart.

"Jonah! Where're you at, I said?"

"Attemptin' to secure that bride you're insistin' on," he quickly lied, grinning at the thought of what Suzy would say if she overheard.

"Hmph..." There was a thump, the slam of a screen door, and Nana flat-out screamed, "You best not leave this yard! Jim! JimmyMac! I'm gettin' the broom!" More noise, some banging, then Nana complained in a almost reasonable tone, "Darned mud on my floors."

"Grandpa again?" As if he had to ask.

"Old fool's headed for the sheep pens," she grumbled. "And you're the only body answerin' his celltalker or what have you. Foolish contraptions."

*Dammit.*

Jonah stared longingly at Suzy, shimmying the night away, keepin' tabs on him over her shoulder...but he knew what he had to do. He might be his own man, but he was one who loved his family to the core. Loopy Grandpa, controlling Nana, insult-first-accuse-afterward hothead brother...

He could stand on his own, but he wouldn't turn his back.

"I'm in Crystal City, but I'll leave now and be home soon as I can," he assured her. "Sit tight."

The promised waltz – one of Jonah's longtime favorite Texas tunes – came on. Suzy emerged from the thick crowd, sauntering toward him, finger beckoning.

Instead of answering the siren call, Jonah leaned down and broke the bad news. "We gotta go. Trouble at home." He straightened and his eyes veered toward the dance floor and intertwined couples. "Damn. I love this song, have been lookin' forward to dancing to it with you all night long."

Suzy grabbed his arm and took off for the exit. "Then we will, just not tonight. Tell me what happened. Who was on the phone?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Shit, Reckless." Jonah had one hand planted next to the metal eight outside her cabin door just beneath the yellow bug light, pinning her to the wall. His words came as a rasp. "I don't want to leave you."

In the dirt parking spot next to the cabin, his truck engine rumbled impatiently.

"So don't. Don't go, please." Was that really her, pleading? All but begging? What this man did to her...*could* do to her – if he'd stay. Snagging the pockets of his jeans, she tugged him forward against her belly and all her good intentions of being Supportive Susannah drowned in impending desire. "Tell your nana your own emergency came up."

He barked a chuckle. "That it has."

"See? You can't go."

Cupping the denim ridge beneath dried barbeque sauce, she traced and measured the length of his poor, clothing-restricted cock and batted eyelashes that felt absurdly naked without their usual triple coating of mascara.

"Let it out, baby," she pouted, fingers teasing around the zipper. "Just for a little bit. Please. For me."

"Sweetheart, what I intend to do to you is gonna take more than a little bit." There was a beastly edge to his voice...savage, but restrained. Annoyingly in control. "I *have* to go."

"Oh come on. Lambs aren't dangerous," she reasoned, knowing she was being miserably selfish. "Or I could come with you. I'm all-around good with men, even old men, you know..."

“You *wanna* come with me?”

Why did he sound so surprised? Was he ashamed of her? Embarrassed to be seen with her? *No of course not!* her rational side protested, *he certainly wouldn't have dragged you to Crystal City and showed off his claim if he was...ashamed...*

Dragged her to *Crystal City*. He hadn't exactly offered to take her to his cousins' restaurant *in town*, now had he?

Uncharacteristic worries rolled through her and she flicked her hands up, abandoning his jeans. She tried to push him away. “But you obviously don't want me to, cowboy, so no big deal, righ—”

He gripped her chin hard enough to cut off speech. “Listen to yourself. I tell you I don't date—I doubt anyone in my family's ever seen me with a single woman—and you want to come *home* with me? Meet my grandparents? When Nana's just demanded we marry?”

“Oh.” Put like that...

“I thought not,” he growled.

She just didn't want to be stuck here, alone, horny. And yeah...missing him. Thinking of all they'd shared. He'd shared, more accurately. All she hadn't.

Jonah didn't respond right off, which meant he must be considering it.

“I know you want me bad...” Suzy ditched her pride and returned to his zipper, attempting to edge it down. “And I can prove it.”

“You already have.” The fingers on her jaw tightened while his other hand caught her in the act, halting her progress. “Another night. All night. Tomorrow. I'll play hooky again, just for you, baby.”

Never had she wanted to stomp her feet more. Their day had been going so wonderfully. Perfectly...

Too perfectly, apparently. Nothing good ever lasted, not with a man. Not in her life.

After their several-hour reprieve and companionable dinner combined with that kiss he'd stolen over the table—the one that'd seared her soul—she'd been anticipating sex, dammit! Hot, dirty and yeah, *all night long*. Expecting to wake up next to him in the morning—with him knowing who she was. She hadn't been expecting to be walked to the door and kissed good night. Fucking *good night!*

*Adios. Arrivederci. See you later, sucker.*

Jonah loosened the fingers on her jaw and raised them to her lips, tracing their outline. He brushed the smooth skin with his blunt fingertips like a painter creating art. At the innocent contact, Suzy only felt more wanton. She lifted her chin, desperation knotting in her throat. “Jonah.”

“Susannah.” Those paintbrush fingers drifted to her cheek and secured her head while he held her gaze in the yellow glow. Those brilliant blue eyes bored down, evaluating her very soul. “I can't kiss you. I won't stop.”



Oh great, she wasn't even going to get that? Now she did stomp her foot. Right on top of his. Then again with more force.

"Ow!"

Served him right! "If you won't even kiss me, what the fuck are you still standing here for?"

He moved back a step, his jaw clenched as he motioned to the knob. "Unlock the door."

Crossing her arms, Suzy stood her ground and glared right back. "No need for me to go inside. I believe I'm leaving," her tingling mouth falsely threatened without permission from her brain. What was she thinking? "With you. Or without."

"Fine." After taking his time unwrapping the peppermint he fished from his pocket and placing it blatantly on his tongue, the grinning bastard nabbed the purse dangling at her side and wrenched it open.

"Hey!" She reached for it but he whirled his back to her, fishing for her keys. As if it were no one's business but his, he pushed her to the side, unlocked the door and boldly strode into her private space.

"Hey!"

"Hay's for horses." So what...she shouldn't have a cow when he barged into her room—for the second time that day?

"What are you up to? I know it's something." And that something wasn't fucking her.

He stalked straight to the bed, swept down and confiscated *The Book of Men*, tucking it under one muscled arm. Popping her ass on the way by, he headed for the open door.

"Hey!" Couldn't she come up with anything better? Suzy stormed after him, attempting to block his path. "You can't take that. It's not mine."

"Watch me." The peppermint clacked against his teeth, the frosty sensation blasting over her face when he continued, smiling down on her possessively and issuing a less-than-subtle warning, "Now don't go getting into trouble, sweet Suzy mine. I'd hear about it, you know. Word gets around in this town..."

With that, he winked and was gone.

The door remained open long after his truck backed out and disappeared. A surprisingly cool breeze blew in. Downright cold, now that her hot man was gone.

Bemused, Suzy clicked the heat on with the middle finger she'd been flipping Jonah off with. Lot of good that had done. Sorry ass, leaving her as he had—wanting, yearning. Missing him already.

Like a roaring gust of wind, she blew across the room and hurled the door shut. Its bang resonated through her heart, trapping her inside, and she fell against the hard wood, sinking to the floor.

Bemused? She wasn't! She was bedeviled! Beset! Besieged by hormonal urges and they all centered around Jonah. Throbbled mockingly. *He left you again. Left you again. Left you...*

*But he'll be back*, that angelic, usually silent part of her psyche insisted with a sure, calm confidence that only spiked her temper further. Coming back or not, he was gone now!

"Of all the nerve!" Her wail rent the air, the gentle hum of the mini-refrigerator her only reply.

The butt-ugly bastard! The son of a fucking *bitch!*

Oh God. She couldn't malign his mother that way, even unintentionally.

"Ugggh!"

Suzy drew her legs up, hugging her calves to thighs, and resting her chin on the hard bone of her bare knee. That was when she remembered how she was dressed—all for him. *By him*. Tears threatened and she blinked them back, refusing to let any man get to her like this.

But come on. Had any part of that last bit been necessary? What'd he think she was going to do, call in the troops during his absence? That what they had meant so little?

Right, what they had...

What *did* they have? A few days together. *Two* days. Oh hell. One night and one partial day. One date...that revealed sexual compatibility beyond compare and a few emotional connections. At least on her stupid part.

And hot sex...okay, *extremely* hot sex, she thought again, just to be perverse and remind herself how very *physical* and therefore meaningless the whole thing really was.

Meaningless? It didn't feel meaningless, not this amazing, perplexing, intense *feeling*. But in reality, they had nothing! Absolutely nothing substantial. Other than what her silly mind persisted in conjuring.

He didn't trust her—or he wouldn't have snagged the book. And really, she couldn't blame him. Maybe he shouldn't. She didn't trust him either. Damn Y-chromosome-carrying cowboy.

But even angry, Suzy knew that was just her emotions speaking. Her fear. She wanted Jonah, wanted him in a way she'd never wanted a man in all her life. And that scared the shit out of her. Their lives were worlds apart. Literally, they had an entire country between them. Besides she wasn't the settle-down, wifey type. Not even close.

And he needed to marry to appease his Nana. Which he would—and soon.

Jonah was the dependable, dutiful sort. A family man. No matter what he said.

She could tell. Damn him!

So where'd that leave her?

Heartache or change—those were the choices left. To love Jonah, she'd have to become a new woman...allow part of the old Susannah to creep back in, to temper the brash Suzy she'd taught herself to become around men and in intimate situations.

Yet *Susannah* seemed to hand men an engraved invitation to cause pain...

Like a time bomb, the huge wagon wheel clock on the wall ticked down the silence. It was Thursday evening, okay...Friday morning if she wanted to be technical. This was her sexapalooza vacation. Supposedly.

Hell, he'd ditched her. He could've taken her with him, but no.

Right now, good girl Sommer was off having a blast doing who knew what sexual acrobatics with her cowboy. And Suzy was stuck at home. *Why?* Why should she sit here, counting the seconds that passed—longer than ever—without him?

Shoot, she *ought* to go out. Ought to stop letting this man get to her. Ought to hunt down Cowboy X or hit up the local bar again—it *would* have to be owned by *his* family—and slam back a few drinks, a few men... Be real about matters. *Be Suzy.* Sexaholic Suzy.

Jonah and her...it wasn't going to work.

But as much as she warned herself, as much as her inner wild child rebelled, she didn't budge. Didn't stand up, dust herself off, apply another coat of mascara and leave. She didn't want another man. Didn't want to party. Didn't want to go anywhere, not without him.

Huddled in a ball, she sat there, staring at the walls, no true desire to go anywhere. Maybe she'd paint her nails. Strip off the red and replace it with pink. He'd like that.

Change. Huh.

## Chapter Fourteen

*Here Lies Jonah Michael McKenzie...*

*Trampled to death by a herd of sheep.*

No. Too implausible. The lazy sheep sparsely populating West Texas hardly had enough motivation to trample a grasshopper, much less a man in his prime.

Might as well stick with the truth.

*Here Lies Sleep-and-Suzy-deprived, responsible "good" boy Jonah McKenzie...  
Tragically, he died of neglect and exhaustion while saving Grandpa from the treacherous  
perils of sleepwalking.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Right at that moment, the mucky, crumpled quilt abandoned in the mud represented heaven to Jonah. If it weren't for needing to get this whole affair done and over with faster than a fly farted, he'd crawl over and curl up on the cold ground and happily drift away...

"Boaz McKenzie—you unappreciative wretch!" Nana's shriek resounded through his head, putting a swift end to any dreams. *Daydreams* or otherwise. Dull pain ratcheted as she yelled again, her ire easily blasting beyond the intended occupants inside the line shack where she'd demanded his escort to.

"Young woman! Out of that bed! Show thy face!" Cringing at the excessive volume Nana used verbally attacking Bo and his "young woman", Jonah was startin' to comprehend why his older brother tended to be such a grump. It was called sleep deprivation—topped off with Nana-induced headaches.

*Thud, thud, thud!*

Hell and tarnation, would she never stop banging the butt of the rifle on the floor?

*Tarnation?* Great, now he was even talking—rather, thinking—like her. She'd turned him into a blathering idiot, keeping him up all hours "frettin'" over where dear Boaz could've gotten off to—for the *second* night in a row.

Guess Nana didn't appreciate not having them all on a short string and answering her calls whenever they beeped or buzzed—or in his case, vibrated. More fool he for even answering during his date.

Another night or two like the last and Nana would turn him into a zombie.

A vision of him and his brothers—completely lobotomized—arms extended and wandering blindly around the ranch, bumping into fences, crying for “Brains...brains...” flitted through his mind.

“I’ll feed you, Tex.” Suzy sashayed forth wearing nothing but a pair of his cowboy boots—a modern-day West Texas Lady Godiva. She sauntered toward him in all her naked, tattooed glory, golden hair long and gleaming—ends brushing the wide leather belt of his that magically appeared around her tiny waist, the textured leather riding low on her hips, drawing his attention toward—

Jonah’s chin bobbed and he jerked alert when his head walloped against the side of the cabin. Had to steady his hat to keep it from falling off and himself to keep from falling face-first into that mud-spattered quilt. Crap. He’d just zonked out while standing.

But hell, that’d been a great dream, especially compared to this...nightmare. One that just wouldn’t end.

By the time he’d dropped Suzy off last night and rushed to the sheep pens, Grandpa had done a fine job disguising himself as one of the herd. There he’d been, on hands and knees, crawling through dirt and sheep shit, searching for heaven knew what.

What’s more, Grandpa hadn’t returned to the house willingly. Every poop-scented step of the way, Jonah’d had to fight him. Back to the house. Out of his clothes. Into the bath. To bed. All the while, listening to complaints and questions about why *Bo* wasn’t there—tucking him in, singin’ him to sleep...

By the time Jonah stripped and washed up, Grandpa had disappeared from his bed again. And so the whole process repeated. This time, he’d stayed with Grandpa until he was certain he was asleep.

Jonah finally managed to catch a few winks—a very few—before nabbing Grandpa sneaking down the hall. Then later, creeping down the stairs. Lord almighty, the old man hadn’t been this restless since right after the death of Jonah’s parents—Grandpa’s son and daughter-in-law. But then, it’d *just* been sleepwalking—his mind hadn’t been a sieve holding some memories while leakin’ others.

Lately he’d been spending more and more time in his wheelchair, harassing his nurse, pissing off Nana and generally entertaining the troops. Jonah didn’t know why the sudden change.

Granted, since he lived in the main house, Jonah’d done his fair share of midnight rescues, but it was apparent things had worsened. So Jonah stayed in the old man’s room—parked in a chair in front of the door—only to catch Grandpa attempting to open the second-floor window.

There’d been nothing left to do after that but take Grandpa—and a couple of sleeping bags—back to the damn lamb pens and sleep there with him.

Sleep? Not in this lifetime.

At the crack of dawn, Ezra'd brought his dogs over and told Nana if he was required to move in, then she'd best get to fixin' homemade kibble, then he'd left with her '62 gas guzzler—the one she refused to part with—to get it inspected, leaving behind two barking, hungry dogs.

*Shameful!* she'd complained, on the warpath by now, when she'd prodded Jonah awake from his ten-second shut-eye stint with her rifle—whining dogs at her heels—demanding to know where the rest of her confounded grandchildren were. Had they no respect? If not for the Lord's authority, then hers? The changed will mandated they all moved in today! And not a one of them was accounted for except Jonah and Ezra.

*Shameful, the lot of them. Shameful!*

Finding his youngest two brothers had been easy. After the hospital stint and helping out around the ranch, they'd rewarded themselves by gettin' liquored up. Shitheads. They were unconscious in the barn, passed out from consuming the remaining half keg of Tanner homebrewed beer all on their own.

The girls were in town, no doubt packing, and Isaiah and Bo, Jonah had told her, were off somewhere hard at work already. He was sure of it.

She wasn't.

Nana might be in her late eighties, but her mind—her eyes, actually—were far too sharp for her own good. Way in the distance, off in the direction of one of their line cabins, smoke dissipated into the misted morning air.

He'd assured the armed woman it was simply fog. An illusion. She threatened to shoot him for the cover-up—and he kinda believed her threat—so he faked a ride out to the cabin, returning half-dead with the guarantee that what she saw was nothing. No fire lit, no Bo in sight. His brother was likely in the west pasture—

*With no breakfast?* she'd barked. *Ha! Not that vulture! He always stops by for Friday morning pancakes – always!*

Jonah had no answer to that.

*Enough of this rigmarole! Take me out there now!* the crazy old bird demanded—bumping his chest with the rifle barrel, waving it around as if who she shot and why was nobody's business. In the guise of checking the sights for her, Jonah swung around and made sure it was unloaded, pocketing the blanks he'd loaded the last time she dared pick it up for anything *other* than hunting.

No sense being stupid.

So here he was, slouched by the door of the cabin she'd just barged her way into, thinking, hell, he'd do the shooting *for* Nana if it meant he could curl up on something besides a galloping horse or the cold ground. And not having to face Bo, who was gonna be ticked to Timbuktu. Blame him.

Damn, his eye sockets felt eight times too small and gritty as a sandbox, his entire body dead to the world. He kinda hoped Bo *was* mad at him—would punch him. Knock him out. That'd feel great.

Jonah's boots thumped wearily as he stalked after Nana through the cabin's open door, the temperature change promptly shifting from cool and misty to dry and warm. More like hot as hell and spiced with sex. His body started to revive then thought better of it. Suzy wasn't nearby, so what would be the use?

He'd wanted to call his Sexy-Sweet Suzy-Susannah a dozen times but didn't want to wake her or have her think he was checking up on her, making sure she stayed in. Didn't want her thinking he didn't trust her. Jonah wasn't sure how or why, but he knew she hadn't gone anywhere. Knew it on some soul-deep level. He'd claimed her. She knew it too.

Legs straight so they wouldn't buckle, Jonah slumped against the wall, crossed his arms over his chest and appraised the beautiful blonde peeking out from under the quilt on the made-out futon, terror shimmering from big anxious eyes, inciting Jonah to feel guilty as hell and defensive all at the same time.

Bo ought to be more careful—bringing a woman here was like feeding her to the wolves. Or a shark. The shark known as Nana Dori. But no doubt it was *Jonah* who'd take the heat for the situation...if anything this made him look like Nana's right-hand man.

Just fuckin' dandy.

Jonah met his brother's dark glare and found his tongue. "I swear, Bo, I tried. Tried everything I could think of to keep her from coming out—"

"Tried! You rascal!"

Nana whirled icy eyes and the barrel of her raffle on Jonah and he chuckled at the image she presented—fire-breathing granny. Huh...the weirdest things were funny when one was too tired to count to five.

"Broke a commandment and *lied* to me, told me the smoke I saw was fog! Told me you checked this cabin and no one was here." Little did she know, but her rant was proving his innocence, so Jonah let her rave on. "Wicked, the lot of you!"

Jonah simply yawned and said nothing. Right nice of Nana to vindicate him in the eyes of his brother—assuming the guy fastening the top button on his jeans and tugging at the seam of his inside-out shirt had eyes or ears for anything but the sweetheart in his bed.

Using the rifle as a cane, Nana marched toward Jonah, jabbing the butt against the floor in a temper, poking her finger in his belly just as hard. "I should've known that you're just like the rest of them. Devil's blood, God bless you all."

Devil's blood? So now *he* was wicked too?

Mighty fine speech coming from Nana, lumping him—and his non-sinning hide—in with the rest of 'em. Practically made him cuss with pride. Because after the other night, Jonah knew he *could* be as wicked as his brothers. He was tempted to unbuckle his belt and bring the end to his nose...sniff a little Suzy flavor from the tip.

Jonah roped in the urge. Suzy wasn't there to appreciate it.

No. Only Nana and her unceasing harping...what *was* her deal anyway? She made all the rules—if one could call them that. “Rules” seemed too polite a word...more like Torture Mandates.

*No television – it’s the devil’s propaganda. Move back home. Marry or no trust fund.*

*No drinking. Stop swearing. Shave your face.*

And on and on and on...

Forget his current fatigue, he was downright *exhausted* of all the drama. Part of him yearned to open his big mouth and spill the beans—about college, about Suzy, about everything—right then and there. Let her swallow her own pill.

It sure would ease some of the attention off Bo and the blinking angel cowering in the bed. Didn’t appear as though she did this sort of thing often. At least not with a rifle-toting granny on the side.

Bo advanced. “Let’s just calm down. Talk about this.”

*That was the wrong thing for his brother to say.*

“Talk?” Nana balked. “I want your ass up at the house!”

“Not this time.”

What was this? Bo just told Nana *no*? Was disarming her? Jonah watched in amazement as Bo swiftly took control of the rifle *and* their grandmother.

Mighty interesting. Looked as if his brother had the situation well in hand.

Wondering how soon he could leave, Jonah tried to get more comfy against the wall. He could sleep standing. Horses did it. Granting a sympathetic nod toward Bo’s lady, he tipped his hat then worked his shoulders into the hard wood.

“Don’t care a whit about your inheritance, do you? Or your trust fund. Does your family mean nothing to you?” Nana all but pouted as she quoted the bible and the newly revised will, insisting her eldest grandson come to heel.

As Nana blathered on and Bo stood his ground—good for him—Jonah returned to zombie dreams with naked Lady Godiva Suzy at the fore, coming at him atop a horse this time—

“Excuse me.” The blonde interrupted, catching his attention when she stopped cowering and sat up. “Umm, Nana? Maybe this isn’t the best time for the announcement, but you should know that Boaz has asked me to marry him.”

*Huh? What? Huh!*

That had him awake—and standing straight. Nana spun round so fast Jonah felt the breeze.

Bo, *engaged*? Couldn’t be. Jonah was certain he was hallucinating as he drank in the sight of the big, glistening diamond overpowering the woman’s finger. Just how much had he blown on that thing?

And *really*? Bo... Engaged? Out of the blue? Just. Like. That?

Uh-huh, and his name was Ishmael.



Jonah mentally commanded himself to wake the hell up because he didn't believe that story, not for a millisecond.

"I know it's wrong, the way we succumbed to temptation..." The lady poured out her story like honey over heart-shaped pancakes, and Nana, from the look of her softening eyes, was watering at the mouth. "But we love each other so much—and I must return to California this very afternoon. At the thought of being apart...we fell apart."

For a second there, Jonah thought the old bat was about to collapse. She fell against Bo, weak, looking every bit as surprised as Bo himself. "California, you say?"

Yeah, straight from Hollywood, if that act proved anything. What had Bo done? Hired himself a wife-to-be? Guess that was easier than obtaining one the old-fashioned way.

An actress? Now *that* Jonah could believe. So the engagement wasn't real.

The show played on a while, Bo and his Academy Award winner bolstering their story to a sickening level. The lady quilted. Was thrifty. Attended church passionately. Wanted a zillion kids. Perfect Nana material all around.

It was nauseating.

It was hilarious.

It was *brilliant*.

Right up to the point where Nana turned her attention on him—that glare. Cold blue determination. Lips pursed yet again. Then it wasn't funny anymore.

And Jonah couldn't believe the words tempting the tip of his tongue.

*The trust fund doesn't mean spit*, he reminded himself. *No need to marry*.

But the family *did* matter—dammit—Nana included. And he wasn't ready to be cast out, not quite yet.

"Jonah." That quiet, pointed tone threatened like none other. She wagged an arthritic finger. "You see how your brother listens to me? I say marry, two days later a suitable bride is lined up."

Oh come on. Jonah snorted. "You mean, nude and in his bed."

"With a ring on her finger! You should be so obedient."

His son-of-a-bitch brother just shit-grinned. *Motherfucker!*

Bo was about as engaged as Jonah was...and the way Jonah figured, two could play at that game. Shoot, if it earned him some sleep...some time alone with Suzy...

Maybe it was his exhaustion thinking, but why not? "If you call getting engaged to someone you hardly know obedience, then I can boast my own—"

"No boasting, Jonah," Nana chastised, cutting him off before he could forge the rest of his lie. "There's no need to steal your brother's thunder, though Lord knows we all have our weaknesses. Your grandpa was mine."

Those piercing eyes now glowing with pride, Nana patted Bo's hand tenderly, all the while chewing into Jonah as if he was a hunk of tough venison she had to wear down. "You'd do well to heed Bo's action and bring home a fiancée of your own. After your lies, I'm sorely tempted to rout you from the will willy-nilly...but at the moment I'm feeling generous and will grant you forgiveness."

"Forgiveness my ass," he couldn't stop himself from muttering.

*Tsking* at his language, Nana released Bo and latched on to his arm, tugging with strength she'd no right to. "Well, now. Let's be off. These two love birds need to be alone."

The cabin door came within inches of slamming into his rear as he led Nana outside. The clang of Bo securing the metal latch cut through the air and—*voilà*—his brother and his new lover were left alone.

That lucky SOB.

*Alone.* Bo'd just been granted complete and total privacy. He could make slow, sweet love to his "fiancée" all afternoon if he wanted. Could snuggle up to her and sleep the day away if it suited. Because of that little "announcement", Bo could do whatever he damn well wanted to.

Whereas Jonah likely had a long, sleepless, Suzy-less day ahead. After a long, sleepless, Suzy-less night.

That was all the incentive he needed and what the hell... He was already lying about college, might as well lie about Suzy too. She wouldn't be in town much longer. Time was wasting.

"Ahhhhhh," Nana sighed. "All this commotion's got my heart in a tizzy. Think I'll mosey home an' bake up a cake. Two tiered," she mused. "Chocolate? No, strawberry. That's Bo's favorite, you know."

Jonah wanted cake. Cake and Suzy too.

More and more tempted, Jonah guided them to the side where they'd tied the horses. His muscles twitched under her finger-pinching hold. If he weren't here to support her, she'd likely crumble to the ground, faint from glee.

And why was that so wrong? To grant his Nana some peace, some happiness?

Sure, he'd have to let her have her way. Give her what she wanted. But long as he got what he wanted too...

Now he called that splitting the difference.

It was far more merciful than hitting her with the truth. The woman would likely have a conniption if she knew what he'd been up to behind her back all these years.

Yeah. In her case, ignorance was bliss. On both counts.

The gelding he'd saddled alongside one of his face-in-the-hay brothers neighed a greeting when he approached with Nana.

"My, my... You should take an example from that fine brother of yours." Her just-dyed flyaway hair wisped around her face in the early morning light as Nana pinched

his forearm a little too hard then released him and gripped the saddle horn. "On second thought, I think I'll make brownies. With my special frosting. Save cake for the wedding."

"Actually, my heart's set on sugar cookies."

She harrumphed. The horse snorted.

Rather than assist Nana into the saddle, he leaned against the horse's flank and guided her to face him. "Before we go, I need a minute." A yawn threatened his too-wide smile and Jonah tamped them both, sobering his cheek muscles. He needed to keep a straight face, look honest. Not laugh. "Uh...Nana Dori." He bit the inside of his cheeks. This was marvelous. "There's something I need to come clean about. Tell you the truth."

"Well..." Blue eyes flashed. Purple hair bobbed. "Well, ain't it about time? *If* I can believe you."

She would. Because she wanted to.

Jonah drew a short breath. Here went nothing.

"You see, Nana, remember last night when I said I was attemptin' to secure that bride you're so insistent on?"

"You mean when I called? Caught you down in Crystal City? Sinning at a noisy nightclub?"

*Unlike Bo, with my pants up*, he wanted to smirk. But refrained. Nodded soberly. "I wanted to tell you earlier, but well... Wish me happy, because it seems I'm engaged too."

Sugar cookies it was.

Sugar cookies and sleep, and later, sex, sex, sex with Suzy.

## Chapter Fifteen

*Do you think before you act?*

*Sophisticated Woman*, several-year-old issue in pristine condition—until Suzy got hold of it.

*Rash and Brash...*

*Is the name of your game. All of the facts? Patience? Wasting time on needless explanations? Who needs those?*

*When new information crosses your desk, you're not one to let grass grow or concrete harden under your sling-backed, tricked-out feet! Oh no, dear Sophi reader, you act first and sort things out after. Not always the right course of action.*

*Maybe consider pausing...deliberating...then powering through a bit later? Once the edge is off. Who wants –*

Stupid advice! Who *wants* to lose their edge?

“Dumb, dumb magazine!” A loud sound ripped through the air after she read over the other two result possibilities and realized how reasonable—she meant insipid—*they* sounded and tore the magazine clear in half.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ugh! I’m going to miss my flight.” Sommer flipped scraggly bangs from her eyes, glancing frantically about the bare cabin where Suzy had just joined her. Early afternoon and still not a word from Jonah. *He’ll be in touch*, that pesky angelic voice assured her.

Sommer groaned. It was a tired but happy sound. “I can’t believe I’m going home looking like this. What else...”

Suzy plopped on the bed, bouncing. “Stay then.” Her mantra the past twenty minutes. “You *are* a mess. Besides, what’s another week?”

Sommer shot her the evil-eye for confirming the truth—Sommer looked like hell. As if she’d spent the entire night up—partying. Or having wild sex—lucky dog. She was in sweats, the most dressed down Suzy had seen her. Sommer’s hair was flattened and unwashed, her mascara smeared. And she smelled like cowboy.

Oddly, she also sported an unexplained hitch to her steps—a limp, almost. One she refused to explain. One that required her to lord over her remaining suitcase, issuing

Suzy orders. *Get this, grab that. Fold it smaller. It's never going to fit!* For her friend's sake, Suzy hoped the funny walk was caused by orgasm-generated muscle failure.

"Speaking of looking bad—or in your case, good—I cannot get over your transformation," Sommer said for what had to have been the fourth time. "Garish red curls replaced by pure gold—not that I didn't like the red! It was...um, ballsy. *You* pulled it off. I'm sorry, that just slipped out. It's just that..."

While Sommer backpedaled and attempted to smooth over what she thought was an insult, Suzy coiled a slept-on, bedraggled blonde curl around one finger and considered it objectively. It really was a pretty color. She sure did her best to disguise it once a year though. Too soft. "Quit apologizing. No harm, no foul—I wasn't offended. Promise. But I might be...if you don't explain that rock you're now sporting on your *left* hand."

Suzy'd noticed the switch one suitcase and the toiletry bag ago but hadn't been able to pry anything more than a blush from Sommer.

"Oh!" As if a light bulb had just exploded in her head, she pointed at Suzy, completely ignoring the latest inquiry. "My bikini top!" Sommer waved her finger toward the bathroom. "It's hanging in the shower. Hurry! He'll be here any minute!"

Apparently, her friend was borderline head-over-heels for her two-night stand. The rugged cowboy had dropped her off so she could pack while he picked them up something to eat before he took her to the airport a couple hundred miles away. Suzy had heard the engine and sprinted over once he'd left.

"Must've been one helluva ride you gave him," she'd grumbled earlier, impressed that any man would go so far out of his way for a gal he'd just met—especially given that the Lucky Lady provided shuttle service to the airport. Service Sommer had already paid for.

This Boaz character better have a lead foot, was all Suzy knew. The drive took over three hours and Sommer's plane left in two and a half. And Suzy still hadn't figured out his exact familial connection to her cowboy. Cousin or brother or other, but what did it matter? It wasn't as if either of them expected anything to really come of a couple sessions of vacation sex. Just because—

"My razor! I forgot that too!"

"I'll get it. That and your top. Ill-chay out-ay, Ommer-Say." The words droned from Suzy as she peeled herself off the mattress and navigated the barren room, wishing her friend didn't have to leave. Now it was just her, alone in this small town for the next week...with both her body and mind a certifiable mess. "You know, I could tar and feather you for leaving me," she called, hooking the dry suit on her forefinger and swinging it round and round, gauging her shot as she returned. "I should have made friends with someone who was sticking around longer."

Sommer caught the flying bikini. "Oh you'll be fine. I'm sure your cowboy will keep you plenty occupied. You know..." Sommer slammed the last suitcase shut,

leaning forward to apply her weight as she struggled with the zipper. "I almost thought I saw him this morning. Your cowboy."

Glad someone had. Because Suzy hadn't heard a lick from him all day. And she was starting to worry. Seriously. More with every minute that passed. What if he didn't show up?

*He would*, something within her answered. *He will.*

It's *Jonah*. Dependable, trustworthy Jonah.

"*Very* good-looking, strapping cowboy." The zipper edged slowly around a corner and Suzy wanted to shake more information from her friend. Instead, she kept reminding herself he'd be there when he could. Too bad with every inch the zipper crawled, she started to doubt him – them – a little more.

Damn this feeling...as if a black hole were sucking her in while she waited for a simple phone call. Or for him to show his face. Or his muscled ass. His defined chest. Oh God...

"Good enough." Sommer straightened, again tossing those long bangs from her face. Tired or not, she looked like a million bucks, eyes sparking, teeth flashing when she grinned. "Yeah. 'Lips like John Travolta. Blue, blue eyes.' Just plain gorgeous. But they must just grow like that out here, because it couldn't have been him." Sommer lugged the biggest suitcase to the floor, wincing. "Help me with these?"

Suzy claimed the handle, dragging it to the door while Sommer grabbed the smaller two. "What's in here, girl? Your cowboy?"

"Wish I could pack him up and take him home. But no...this guy – Bo's brother Jonah – he just got engaged."

"Engaged?" Suzy somehow whispered through the fog, her world crumbling after all. A chasm in her chest cratered open like a fault line, telling her what she didn't need to know – that she *had* started trusting him. Believing him.

Believing in them.

She had, dammit, or an elephant wouldn't have crushed the breath from her lungs at Sommer's words.

"Yeah. Really did look like who you described though. Wouldn't that have been neat? Us falling for brothers?"

The world lurched to a painful stop. Her mind cracked around the information pouring in.

But Sommer kept talking. "We found out when Bo's grandmother – he calls her Nana Dori, isn't that cute? – met us at the barn. That's one reason I'm running so late. She insisted on a coffee-and-cookie toast, wanted to celebrate both her grandsons getting – Suzy? Suzy! Are you okay?"

Nonsensical questions stormed her brain, attempting to override the devastating truth. Why hadn't she asked more about him? Paid attention when Jonah mentioned his

family? So many names, so many people. The only one who'd stood out was Isaiah. The brother who lost his wife.

Her splitting head snagged on that thought...

*Brothers.* They were brothers. Boaz and Jonah. How quaint.

*Newly engaged.* Of course he was. Why should she be surprised? Didn't she claim he was a great catch?

That very first morning, hadn't he been mumbling in his sleep? *Not wearin' no monkey suit...down the aisle...preacher man. I do, I do!*

His nana's mandate. Marry or else.

But maybe...maybe she'd heard wrong...

"Jonah, you said?" But Suzy didn't need to hear Sommer voice the truth again. It was painted in Sommer's own beautiful blues. Pity. Regret that she'd spoken.

*The bastard. The bastard. The self-serving bastard!*

"Oh Suzy," Sommer cried, rushing to hug her. "I'm so sorry. So sorry..."

While her friend apologized for shit that wasn't her fault, Suzy thought of all the ways to dismember a man. Of how many different jagged, rusted tools she could use to sever Jonah's balls from his body.

Sommer hugged her tighter, apologized louder, and Suzy became stronger—stuffed the irrational hurt down so deep it was a brick of dynamite with a short fuse—and then she *performed*.

"Hey, hey, hey, Silly Sommer..." Hardening her resolve, Suzy disengaged from the embrace. "It's just sex, you know? That's all. For both of us, right?"

"Right..." Sommer's lips formed the word but her gaze didn't buy into it.

Suzy intentionally brightened. "Engaged or not, he's got a great cock. Think of all I saved on batteries the last couple of days! Now wipe that pitiful expression off your face or the vacation police'll stick you in the slammer." Like she was gonna slam two metal plates around his dick, flatten it to a pulp, then wrench it off and feed it to hyenas. "Really—it's been fun. Just don't go back home and turn all prissy on me, got it?"

Nodding, her eyes brimming with the moisture Suzy refused to let form, Sommer gave her one more hug. "I promise— Hey look!" She pointed out the curtained window. "There's Bo now! Let's ask him. Maybe there's been a mistake—"

Suzy's voice hardened to flint. "Don't say a word. A good fuck or two isn't worth all this drama. I'm fine. *Fine.* Now go, you don't want to miss your flight."

Smiling like a painted clown, Suzy practically pushed Sommer and her suitcases out the door and waved at the cowboy pulling up, barely restraining herself from shooting him the finger. Guilty by association.

Nodding as if she couldn't wait when Sommer told her to check with the front office—that she'd left her a little something—Suzy stormed from the cabin, each step

she took banging into the porch, the stairs. Echoing wood, echoing her anger. Because that's *all* she allowed to surface. Rage gave one power. Focus.

Engaged! The bald-faced, piece-of-shit liar. How could he?

She marched back to her place ready to throw the tantrum of a lifetime, blasting the door open, not even bothering to slam it shut behind her as she stripped off her sedate grubbies and kicked them to the ceiling.

Attacking the closet with a vengeance, she flung the fancy brass and wood hangers aside and pitched clothes until she found the "sluttiest" dress she owned. That's how he saw her? Then that's how she'd act! The stretchy little black number barely covered her ass—or kept in her tits. The sheer, nearly see-through fabric featured fashionable little rips and tears all over it, exposing skin and loads of it. *Perfect.*

That son of a bitch was getting married? Then *she* was getting laid.

Rebelliously, she ignored the need for bra and panties, knowing that a two-inch hole at the small of her back revealed the shadowed crease of her ass. She slipped on sky-high leopard-print heels, fastened the ankle straps and flexed her toes—*pink?*

Aw, fuck!

Making a beeline for her black polish, she practically poured the sparkly goo over the tips of her feet.

Take that, *Mr. I Own You In This Town.*

She grabbed the biggest, gaudiest earrings from her jewelry bag—the ones she never wore because they hurt—and hooked them in her ears.

Mind reeling, she marched into the bathroom. She didn't have the patience to re-dye her hair. Or reapply the tattoos. But Suzy deftly inserted her contacts and painted on enough eyeliner and mascara to coat the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders—all of them. Followed that up with a dark lip pencil that plumped her lips all the way to Mexico and back and a thick, glossy coating of crimson lipstick.

Flipping off her trashy image in the mirror, Suzy was set to go.

No sense waiting for the anger to fade, for mind-numbing, body-paralyzing despair to take its place...

With a handful of condoms and her keys, she was out the door.

Only thing was, once she revved the engine and started driving, it wasn't toward Bottoms Up Bar & Grille. Wasn't toward Crystals. Yet mindlessly, she drove. Didn't realize until halfway up the mountain where she was headed—his ranch.

Now that she thought on it, the black-hearted scoundrel deserved to know what she was up to. And so did his no doubt wholesome fiancée, the bitch.

So the bastard had never been on a real date? Yeah and she'd be naïve enough to swallow more of his lies...like *never!*

Not his lies or his cum!

Not in this lifetime.



\* \* \* \* \*

“Come on, idiot,” Joe spat at Jonah, his grip slipping when Jonah dared take more than a baby step, “when you gonna start pulling your weight around here? Huh?”

Jonah ignored Joe’s latest taunt, just as he had the prior three.

How he’d been wrangled into juggling a tanning bed up the stairs that led to the triplets’ new room in the main ranch house, Jonah had no idea.

And how the hell had Tamar ever afforded one? Soused cowboys sure must tip.

“Answer me that, you fuckin’ idiot.”

*Don’t let him get to you.* Tightening his own precarious handhold on the heavy piece of equipment, Jonah strove to keep his tone even. “You’re the idiot, *idiot.*”

“Real great comeback, Einstein. They made *you* valedictorian?” Poor Joe—the guy had no clue how to act when unable to form a fist around a bottle.

And poor Jonah—he’d cratered into bed the moment he and Nana arrived home, asking her to wake him when that first batch of cookies was ready. He’d slept the deep, dreamless sleep of the innocent...but only after imagining how he’d surprise Suzy later that morning at her cabin with a hand-picked bouquet of whichever roses he could find in bloom. Wouldn’t that surprise her? Take the sting out of him having to leave last night?

Only the surprise had been on him, his dear nana leaving him to “Catch up on your sleep, you wonderful, obedient man” and only waking him after lunch when her other grandchildren began arriving, moving truck in tow.

So instead of a quick shower and rose clipping, Jonah was condemned to helping his siblings and cousins unload. Oh, and lucky him—he got to smile and remain blissfully stoic through any number of back slaps from his brothers and hugs from the girls over his newly engaged status. And not once had he corrected anyone’s assumption that his “little gal” hailed from Lubbock.

Because while the rest of them were grumbling about being forced to move back home, Jonah was enjoying the singular experience of Nana swooning all over him while harping all over them. What a balm, after the unjust accusations thrown his way since her latest edicts.

It was heaven—except for this damn tanning bed. Jonah’s end lunged into his chest and he stumbled on a step.

“It’s not gonna fit around this corner, I’m telling you!” Joe grunted, heaving the long, heavy piece of junk too far to the right, almost toppling the whole thing over.

Wallpaper scuffed. A picture clattered down the steps. Ezra’s dogs barked encouragement. “What have we here?” Jonah had asked with a laugh, surprised to see the boisterous dogs *inside* when he’d first come down. “I thought Nana banished your mongrels to the barn.”

Casual as always, Ezra had raised one shoulder then dropped it. “Like I told Nana—where I go, they go. Just because I’m going along with your plan to humor her

and pretend to move in for real until you and Bo figure something out..." Here, Ezra had brandished a blatantly evil grin. "Well, doesn't mean I gotta make it easy on her."

Recalling that now, especially the revelation that at least one of his brothers *did* trust him, lent strength to his overtaxed muscles and he hefted his end of the monstrous tanning bed.

"Asshole!" Joe complained, reeling backward. "Are you tryin' to make me drop this thing?"

Jonah's arms burned, his palms sweated, the slippery grip his fingers maintained threatening to give, and all he wanted was to get this over with. Go climb in bed with Suzy and find a way to convince her to participate in his charade. Find a way to reach through all that camouflage she wore like war paint. "Just lift your side higher!"

"It's heavy!"

"No shit!"

"Trouble, boys?" Returning from the room she'd commandeered for her and her sisters, Tamar leaned against the rail post at the top of the stairs, sucking a grape freeze pop as if she'd no care in the world. She smacked purple-stained lips. "Just take it back down if it won't go up. We'll park it in the foyer. Right there, in front of that ugly plant of Nana's. It could use some more light anyway."

"Tamar..." The girls, damn their spending hides, had gone all out today, not sparing a single expense renting that stupid moving truck, *buying* boxes, even paying a couple of the grille's waitresses to help them pack and offering free drinks to anyone who drove out and helped unload—judging from the number of extra hands who hadn't shown up, that ploy had bombed—using the excuse they could never do it in time given Nana's forty-eight-hour mandate. And they couldn't have. Not with all they'd hauled out here.

Come sundown, Nana's house would be the most jam-packed, unpleasant place in existence. So much so, she'd offer up the trust fund as bribes to get rid of them all. And if that's what the girls thought, they didn't know their grandmother a quarter as much as they thought they did.

"Might not want to ruffle her feathers." *That* out of Joe's mouth. "Things are bad enough."

"What's she going to do? Lug it out of here herself?" The freeze pop stick ground between her front teeth. "Don't recall anything in the will about tanning beds."

"Or meditation chairs," Sheba said, parking the squatty, wicker contraption on the tiled entry below. "How long you fellas plan on blockin' the way, hmmm? I need to head back to town pretty soon. Start on tonight's specials."

"Yeah, can you hurry it up?" This from Zack who stood in the open doorway. "There's still a shitload of boxes to go."

Afraid he was about to bust a vein, Jonah shoved up two more stairs, ramming Joe backward. His brother's cussing was drowned out by the screech of plastic against the railing.

"Careful with that!" Tamar flinched and covered her eyes. "Geez! Any idea how long it took me to save for that thing?"

That was a relief – at least it hadn't come easy.

"Long enough to fry your brain cells," Jonah muttered, wondering if he'd have any strength left when this was over. Wondering more how soon this *would* be over. "Any idea how bad using this is?"

"Says you. I've got research stats out the wazoo. Used properly, tanning beds are an environmentally controlled healthy way to get your daily dose of vitamin D."

Even Joe snorted at that. "Healthy?"

"Improves bone density, bonehead."

Losing interest in waiting, Zack dropped two boxes and yelled over his shoulder, "Just give a holler when you're finished with that thing and the way's clear. Meanwhile, we'll keep emptying out the truck."

"Hey-uh!" Jonah grunted under his half of the hunk of UV tubes and plastic and glass and who knew what else. "A little less talk, more action. I've got a date."

Damn. That felt good to say.

"You?" Joe gave a snide nod, the muscles in his neck straining with exertion. "How much did ya have to pay her?"

Jonah smiled wide. "Just used my dick, Dickhead."

"Boys! Down!" Sheba called laughingly up the stairs. He thought she was chiding them 'til he realized the dogs had made themselves at home in her lap – and one of them had to weigh twice what she did.

"How sweet!" Tamar all but crooned. "A date with your fiancée."

"Bet she's fake," Joe snarled. Smarter than Jonah had given him credit for.

"Fake?" Tamar said with a frown. "What do you mean?"

"He probably made her up – the date and the fi-an-cée – to make *him* look good."

"Josiah!" Sheba came to his quick defense. "That's a rotten thing to say."

So what if he had made her up? Only the engagement part. *She* wasn't fake.

Well, okay...she was.

In some respects, Suzy was as phony as a three-dollar bill, but they were working on that. And he couldn't wait to work on it some more. Exploring her exterior, delving into her anterior...oops! He meant *interior*!

Jonah stifled his body's instant reaction to that thought, knowing he craved something more than her body – understanding better what made her tick, what drove reckless Susannah Miller to take the chances and make the judgment-impaired choices she did.

“What?” Joe was all innocence. Though his face and neck were straining red. “We all know sissy-boy here isn’t man enough—”

Jonah heaved his end of the tanning bed, crammed the opposite end into Joe’s midsection with as much force as he could. “She’s *real*, man. Bank on it!”

“The only thing I’m bankin’ on these days is how much of a Nana’s pussy you’ve become an’—”

“Josiah Aaron McKenzie!” Sheba practically shrieked as everyone else within earshot gasped. The dogs howled, thinking all the yelling great fun. “When did *you* become so uncouth?”

Lungs on fire, arms gone numb, Jonah just froze. It was either that or shove the tanning bed—along with Joe—straight out the upstairs window.

Joe stared him down. Jonah glared right back. The two daring each other for a showdown that was bound to happen.

Even the dogs stopped panting as the silence lengthened...and his burden grew heavier. Both the one in his hands and the one on his heart. “Is that really, really what you think, Joe? That I’d trade out my family—my pride—for what? Another tick in the debit column? Because if it is—”

Jonah broke off when he heard Nana come in through the back door, her errand in town complete.

“I’m pleased as peach punch to see that movin’ truck!” his grandmother sang from the kitchen. “Nice to see you modernized young’uns still know how to mind your elders.”

She bustled about, clanging a couple of pots, but no one in the living room moved a muscle—except for the one twitching in Joe’s jaw.

“Y’all hang tight!” Nana hollered. “I’ll get some food on right quick, keep those bodies nourished for movin’ day.”

Jonah didn’t know whether to be thankful for her interruption or ticked as a clock.

“If it is, *what?*” Joe hissed. His entire body shaking with the effort of holding the bed aloft, Joe made no effort to lower his voice. “You think you can fuckin’ take me? You know I’ll bash those bitch-controlled brains of yours—”

That tore it. Ignoring the shocked cries from the girls, Jonah dropped his end and jumped over the listing tanning bed. He scrambled up the stairs and took Joe by the throat. His brother might be more muscled than the rest of them put together, might have honed his reflexes from bull riding, might have—erroneous—righteous indignation on his side, but Jonah had six inches of height on him and a world of *right* on his.

To the jumbled symphony of the tanning bed crashing down the stairs, Jonah jammed Joe into the nearest wall and spoke for his ears only. “You watch your mouth when you’re in this house! Cousins or no, the triplets are still women and you show

them some respect. The same goes for your grandmother – do you want her hearin’ you talk like a drunken dockworker? Does it make you feel all big and powerful?”

“What’s with all the ruckus?” Grandpa hollered from down the hall. “Russians attacking?”

“*The Lord is peace*, so sayeth someone or another. By all that’s holy, what’s going on in – Oh my!” Nana had come running at the noise, brandishing a soup spoon and a mouthful of biblical platitudes. Her startled gaze didn’t know where to settle – on Jonah strangling Joe or the abandoned tanning bed that’d tumbled into her plant.

“Leave, Nana,” Jonah said tightly, and he meant it. If there was ever a time when her well-meaning but manipulative interference wasn’t needed, it was now.

Joe slid his eyes to the side where the tanning bed had gone knocking and thumping to the entryway amid the girls’ surprised yells and the dogs’ excited barks, then back to Jonah. Forestalling any protest, Jonah shoved Joe’s back harder into the wall. He remained silent. Red-faced but silent. His eyes spoke volumes though.

“Boys! What in blazes is go –”

“Nana Dori,” Jonah used her full name, which he rarely did. “Get back in the kitchen. *Now*.” When she started to sputter, Sheba made eye contact with Jonah and raised her brows in inquiry. “Get her out of here.”

Nodding, Sheba grabbed Nana’s arm. “Come on, let’s go outside for a bit. We’ll check on your herb garden, see how everything fared with all the rain.”

She forcibly led their cantankerous, still-complaining grandmother away.

Once the women were out of sight, Joe started to speak. Jonah twisted his hand, tightening the shirt around Joe’s larynx, then used his other hand to ram his brother’s shoulder into the wall. “Nuh-uh. I don’t want to hear another word, not out of that filthy hole you call a mouth.” Jonah lowered his voice and tightened his fist another quarter turn. “I’ve had enough of your complainin’. Now heed me and heed me well – if you wanna couple rounds to prove you can ‘take me’, then fine. You just name the time. But it’ll just be the two of us – no audience and no performance. From now on, you behave like you were raised when you’re in this house – or on this ranch property. No more tying one on in the barn, no more speaking filth in front of Nana or the girls. You got me?”

Joe’s gaze hardened.

Hell, Jonah didn’t know how his brother was still standing – he couldn’t have taken a breath in the last minute and his face was as red as a Macintosh. “I said, are you –”

“Jonah?” For once, Tamar’s voice was tentative. He’d forgotten she was up here. “I checked on Grandpa. Told him everythin’s okay. Is it?”

He responded without loosening his hold. “It’s under control. Go downstairs.”

Another first – she did as told, edging past them both, eyes downcast, that damned wooden stick splintered in her hands.

When he heard her feet hit the tile, he zeroed in on his brother. “You hear me?”

“Yeah, I got you.” Joe strangled out then weakly knocked Jonah’s hands away. Jonah allowed the move, stepping back but keeping tabs on his brother.

Jonah wouldn’t put it past Joe to take a swing at his back and that’s when he realized how bad things had become. Instead of turning away and pounding down the stairs to pick up his end of that blasted tanning bed, which is what his head told him to do, he abruptly leaned forward and took Joe into his arms, hugging him tight. Against his ear, he murmured, “I love you, bro. Hate what’s happened between us.” Just as quick, he released him. “Hate it, man.”

Joe blinked fast and licked dry lips. “I—”

Jezy’s laughing voice came from just beyond the open front door. “Ahoy in there! Somebody’s got company! Little gold sedan.”

“Whoeee!” Zack echoed, elbowing past Jezy, a stack of boxes in his arms. “Laying on the horn and racing up the drive like she’s outrunning a tornado.”

Oh shit. His “fiancée” – without a ring or a clue.

Jonah spun around, about knocking Joe off his feet.

“Hey, watch it!”

He took the stairs at a flying leap, skidded over the tanning bed and jumped over Sheba’s weird-ass chair. Leaving the rest of them grumbling and wondering, Jonah pushed past Jezy and Zack and burst outside into the sunny, breezy day.

As if the altercation between brothers hadn’t just stunned them all, Nana was yelling at the dogs to stay back while she picked through her flowerbed, nose crinkling as she sniffed white flowers. Tamar stood at the open end of the moving truck, motioning to different boxes while Isaiah and Ezra loitered around, poking fun at the colorful assortment of crap the girls *thought* they were moving in.

And there she was—his Suzy, rolling in like a storm of her own. Jonah’s heart blasted into his throat. She was driving too fast, kicking up rocks and dirt and coming in as if the road behind her were sinking quicksand.

Attempting to moderate his excitement and surprise—this wasn’t how he’d expected their next meeting to go—Jonah ground his back teeth and waited impatiently as she swerved to a halt directly in front of the house.

“Hey there, Red.” He rushed toward the driver’s side door just as it swung wide, nearly knocking him down. Suzy leapt out.

Looking like a slut to the max.

Skin-tight black dress full of holes. Gaping holes. Coupled with deathly heels. Killer calves he couldn’t help but notice before his neck wrenched his eyes up to her face. Damn. Enough makeup to stock a store. Glistening, deep-set emerald eyes. And a glare to K-I-L-L.

Good God. She was back. Badder than ever.

## Chapter Sixteen

Entry in Suzy's diary, written in agitated, extremely messy writing after years of disuse.

*Fucking slime dog pile of cow shit!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

*How could he?*

*How could I?*

*Dating for four months – sleeping together for three – and now I find out Vance is married? That his pretty little wife and three daughters look like something out of a Rockwell print?*

*Cretin asshole of crusty flem and snotty sin! He'd hinted at marriage to me! Mentioned shopping for rings! I'd like to wring his lying, cheating neck until –*

*AAGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!*

*Words do not exist to express how murderous I feel.*

*Where's that shrink when you need him?*

*I need a man in front of me right now – so I can kick him in the nuts and lodge his prick in his small intestine.*

*Men! They're all cheaters and liars. Undependable creeps from the snotty planet Creepazoid.*

*I'm never having another thing to do with one as long as I live. I swear!*

*P.S. Damn lock just broke off. What I get for using a decades-old journal as a confidant.*

Ten minutes later. After two unsatisfying glasses of wine and one shattered wineglass...

*Married jerkfuck! I'll never trust a man again. NEVER! Never give one the power to hurt me – unless he's doing it at my command.*

Twelve minutes later, having swept up the glass and guzzled the rest of the bottle...

*Forget that! I've got a hand and battery-operated toys. I'll never let one touch me again. Period!*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Suzy? What –"

“You bastard!” Her purse swung through the air and collided with the side of his head, knocking him back a step. Caught off guard, Jonah had no chance to react, to defend himself. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out about her? Well, I did!” *Whack, whack!* “You puke-face piece of shit!”

*Whack, whack, whack!*

The blows came hard and angry and he had no idea why. Only that his stomach had collapsed, his eager anticipation dwindling right along with it. “Suzy! Stop!” Jonah caught the swinging missile. “Hey, calm down!”

“Like hell I will.” She tugged and jerked the leather strap, fighting for her weapon. “I hate you!”

“Jonah? Who is this...this vulgar...*person?*” Nana demanded, reminding him of her presence. Hell, his brothers. His cousins. No need for any carousing around for entertainment—he was putting on a one-man-under-attack show right here.

“Cool it, Red.” Face flaming, Jonah caught Suzy’s wrist, yanking her to his chest. If she’d just give him a minute, a chance to set things straight, whatever the problem was—

Instead Suzy stomped his boot with her heel. Damn! When had she taken to wearing railroad spikes?

Wincing, Jonah lugged her closer. He spoke quickly, ready to get out of the limelight and explain. “I don’t know what your deal is but I’m warning you—it’s time to stop.” She kept fighting, so he said with more heat, “*Stop.*”

Suzy spit. Right at his face. The spittle flew through the air and he ducked just in time.

Behind him, a loud gasp. His poor Nana, probably in slut shock.

In front of him, smothered giggles from his cousins. Grunts and mutters from his brothers. The only ones not witnessing the spectacle were Bo—off to the airport—and Grandpa, likely off in Lala Land.

Embarrassment boiled along with the fear that he’d somehow lost her, that she truly did *hate* him—when he was just beginning to think he loved who he became when he was with her, was starting to think he might...might...be part way toward falling in love with her. Knew he liked her, liked being with her, liked how strong and sexual he felt around her. *Knew* he wanted them to have a chance for more.

Then *this!*

At a cleared throat, he glanced up to realize the whole gang was closing in. Great.

“So...” Tamar interjected and he wanted to scream at her to stay out of this. “This is the Lubbock *lady?* The one you’re...” Her laughter ruffled through the sentence. “Marrying?”

“You motherfucker!” Suzy’s screams echoing off the mountains, she hauled back and kicked him in knee. Pain exploded up his leg. “You cheating, no account sonuvabitch! Fuck you! *Fuck—*”



That did it.

Pinching both shoulders in a punishing grasp, Jonah shook her. The purse he still held flailed between them. "You will *not* use that sort of language in front of my nana! Do you hear me?"

The reprimand came out much louder, much *meaner* than he'd expected. When she opened her mouth to protest—likely with more cursing and accusations—Jonah's temper snapped. "And stop kicking me, goddammit! I'm going to *college* in Lubbock," he roared. "Not seeing a goddamn woman! You know that!"

"But—"

"College?" Nana piped in shrilly, her voice a strange combination of venom and righteousness. "College?"

"Damn. It. To. Hell. And back!" Temper fired beyond anything he could imagine, he dropped her purse and grabbed Suzy under one arm, dragging the petite woman off her feet. "This stops now!"

She started to spit at him again and Jonah yanked on her arm. "Stop it, Susannah!" Glaring poison-tipped daggers at his kinfolk, Jonah snarled, "Anyone follows and they'll be eating their teeth for dinner. Got it?"

He actually thought he heard Joe whistle appreciatively. "Didn't know he had it in him."

"Shut up, Joe," one of the girls said over Nana's ongoing tirade.

In the stunned hush that followed, Jonah marshaled Suzy around the corner of the house. Only then did one of his cousins dare whisper, "Any idea who she is?"

But he listened no longer, his arms full of incensed woman.

By the time Jonah corralled Suzy against the stone wall, it finally reached him how quiet she'd gone, how still—a first for her. She didn't look scared...just small. Sad.

"T-Tex." Her low whisper ached with pain and Jonah felt lower than sheep shit, being the cause of whatever had her so up-in-arms—and for dragging her about like a bag of feed. Though *that* she'd deserved.

"You have to stop screaming," he reminded her sternly. "And cussing." When she acknowledged his words with a jerk of her head, Jonah loosened his grip on her arm.

She slumped, staring at the ground. "So...you're getting married."

Jonah almost blurted *Yeah, to you*, but a glance to the side revealed his meddling family, silent finally—but only to hide the fact they were creeping closer. Damn busybodies. He raised his fist, made a jabbing motion and most of 'em ducked out of sight. Not out of hearing, he'd bet.

Tamar, blast her hide, just stared.

What? He couldn't get angry on occasion? Couldn't show his emotions as the rest of them did? Stand up for himself?

*The hell he couldn't.* Jonah opened his mouth to tell her to back off when someone yanked her behind the corner, her long ponytail waving at the abrupt exodus.

Shaking off his cousin's surprisingly...wounded?...look, Jonah turned back to Suzy, hunched his body over hers, hoping to protect her and their conversation from his interfering family. "Listen, sweetheart, I—"

"Jonah? That you..." Above them, a bump, a scrape, then *whoosh* and *thump*, the screen went flying and Grandpa stuck his head out the window. "With a *woman*?"

"Dammit, I'm not a monk!"

He wanted to scream. Especially when he heard snickers from the front yard. Suzy, bless her heart, was looking between him and Grandpa, those garish, Gothic eyes both confused and accusatory.

Grandpa whooped. "I'd say you're not! She's a real firebrand! We never saw 'em dressed like that in my day. Bring her on up so I can get a better look at her!"

"Grandpa..." he sighed, knocking his own noggin against the stone brick. Futile. Explanations, trying to please his family, trying to appease Suzy. He'd never convince her of his sincerity now, not with the ringmaster of the three-ring circus he called home lording directly overhead.

"Got him!" a new, sure voice came from the open window just before Ezra poked his head out, gave Jonah a thumbs-up then towed a grumbling Grandpa inside over his grouched protests, which sounded suspiciously like, "Aw...Ez, let an old man get his jollies where he can. I ain't seen a body that flashy since Cher pranced around that ship in that fishnet thing."

Ezra hushed him and secured the window after clamping it shut.

The sudden silence made his ears throb.

Suzy sniffed. Jonah ran one hesitant finger over her cheek.

"Don't touch me." She wrenched her face away. "You're engaged, *remember*?"

"Me, *supposedly* gettin' married? Is *that* what this is about?" Jonah swore under his breath, damning this small town and his cousins' gossiping tendencies. "It's not what you think, I swear."

"Then what else could it be? Sommer told me." She said it flatly, no emotion.

Okay...so he owed the triplets a mental apology.

Those counterfeit emerald eyes shot up, ablaze with questions—and more accusations. "She said it just now, just before she left with your brother—that she met you earlier and that you're...en-gaged." She choked on the last word.

How he wanted to blurt out the answer, dump white truth over her black ire. Even more, Jonah wanted to sling sticky tar the way of his intruding, approaching family. Because Sommer had to have heard it from *someone*.

He pressed his entire side against the house, blocking their view, and drank her in. "God, you look like a tramp." A sexy, slutty tramp he found as arousing as he did tacky. Amazing. "What you do to me, woman. I—"

“Don’t think I did this for you! I’m on my way out for –”

He gripped that lie-spouting jaw. “We both know you did this for me and only me – else why come by here? You wanted me to see you. To *stop* you.”

“Stop me? *Stop me?* From –”

“From being stupid. More than that, you plain *want* me. So lie to yourself all you want, sweetheart, we both know the truth.”

Rage burned from her glittering eyes.

“Jealous, doll?” he dared softly, no longer needing to pelt her with words. Not when they both knew she was his – her actions had just proved it. “The green eyes are quite appropriate then. Ever thought of trying violet? I kinda fancy spanking me a purple-eyed hellion.”

Suzy gasped. Or maybe that was his nana. Who knew anymore? Who cared?

Suzy thought he was getting married and it’d been enough to fair send her round the bend – and after him.

Jonah was over the moon. But if he didn’t get her out of the line of fire and fast, he’d be the one shot. By Nana and that rifle she always kept close at hand. She’d told him during his late breakfast she’d reloaded it. Taken him to task for daring to unload it in the first place.

*Whomp. Whomp.*

Gentling his hold to a caress, he indicated the house with a nod of his head. “We need to go inside, Suzy Q, somewhere private, and I’ll explain. Everything. I promise.”

*Whomp. Whomp. Whomp. Whomp!*

*What was that?*

“No.” Suddenly Suzy was ten feet tall and stiff as an oak. She jabbed a hard finger to his chest, punctuating each word. “Uh-uh. Tell me now.”

*I can’t, not now,* he mouthed, jerking his head behind him just as Isaiah called out, “Everything okay over there?”

*Whomp! Whomp! Whomp! Whomp! Whomp-whomp-whomp-whomp!*

“What in the hell?” Suzy vocalized his very thought.

In bewilderment, Jonah watched a helicopter fly over the house and aim for a flat patch alongside the dirt drive. Seemed everyone else had heard it too because they all slow-motion walked past the corner and toward the landing ‘copter.

The dogs, no longer content to sit on the sidelines, started yapping and howling and running in circles.

“This can’t be happening.” Too stunned to use the interruption to his full advantage, too far away to hear what was said after two men emerged, Jonah observed in silence while emphatic dialogue was exchanged and Tamar – moving as if it were her execution, rather than the most spectacular show of bravado Jonah could fathom –

reluctantly climbed inside. After several more yelled exchanges he couldn't make out, the 'copter lifted off and disappeared into the sky.

"What...? Who...? Huh?" Suzy was as confounded as he.

"Yeah, that about sums it up. No idea, now let's get back to—"

"Your sorry-ass lying hide?" she finished for him.

"Not exactly how I would've put it, but—"

Not one to be distracted for long, Nana advanced toward them, bellowing, "Get your wretched carcass over here and answer up! And get that...that call-girl floozy off my property!"

And again, Suzy's finger, poking intractably into hard muscle. "Now, Jonah. No more stalling. Explain!"

The walls were closing in from all sides.

"Lady, you all right?" Isaiah again.

"Get that foul-mouthed tart off my ranch, you rounder!"

"Out with it, Jonah! The truth — now!"

Where was a helicopter when a man needed one?

"Miss?"

"The will — you're in violation, Jonah! I'm sure I specified no floozies!"

"Tell me, now! Or I'm leaving!"

All their demands ran together, louder and louder, echoing in his head, yanking the grass from beneath his feet. The situation was completely out of control. So was Suzy. "You lying bas — jerk! Tell me the truth!"

At least she wasn't cussing... But he saw the moisture collecting in her overly green eyes. Knew then there was only one way to deal with stubborn, reckless Suzy — and it didn't involve asking nicely, as he harshly recalled. *Sorry, cowboy...you're too tame for the likes of me. Too damn polished.* Well hell, he was about to polish her behind. That'd shut her up.

Make her happy. Make her come.

"Not another word." The warning was steel — if only it'd work half as well on Nana. "Let's go." His fingers locked around her arm just above her elbow and he was off, his every determined stride twice the size of hers, forcing her to practically run to keep up. He made no allowance for those ridiculously made-him-hard-as-sin leopard-coated aphrodisiacs she wore masquerading as shoes.

"Jonahhhhhh!" Nana hollered louder than a locomotive pullin' forty dozen head into the station, those octogenarian feet devouring the distance between them just as quickly as Jonah put it behind, and wielding a fresh-plucked flower as if she held some sort of life-threatening weapon. "Don't you take that...that...filth in my house, Jonah. Jonah!"

Did he smell pee?

“Stay out of this!” Pushing past hordes of McKenzies—why were there so damn many of them? It was Friday, not long after lunchtime. Did no one in this family work?—he ramrodded Suzy up the front walk.

Isaiah barked, “Jonah! Hey, man, maybe we should pause—”

“Pause, my ass.” He stomped over the threshold and into the blessedly quiet interior. “Stay out of it.”

Not one to listen, Nana followed right after, screeching, “Filth and sin and all unholy! Stop right there, young man! You too, floozy tart.”

The dogs yipped their support. Jezzy and Sheba set about giggling again.

Real funny.

Hostage firmly tucked behind him, Jonah paused in the entryway and cast a glare meant to immobilize. “You watch *your* mouth, Nana. That’s my fiancée you’re talking about.”

“Me...?” A little squeak from behind him and Jonah knew he didn’t have much time.

“The woman I’m going to marry,” he confirmed, his announcement even. Calm. In total control as his free hand roamed the immediate area, indicating each member of their audience. “I said stay out of this. All of you. Not another word. And I mean it. If one of you so much as comes within twenty feet of us, I’ll—I’ll—” He scoured his mind, needing something dire enough to show them he meant business. “I’ll *give* Diamond the keys to the house, the safe deposit box and the family safe. Got it?”

Whirling around, he ducked and swooped, catapulting a sputtering Suzy over his shoulder. Then he booked it past the goofy chair, over the fallen tanning bed and up the stairs.

Nana of course didn’t obey.

And Suzy wasn’t about to either.

Don’t yell? Don’t cuss? Who did Jonah think he was?

Three steps up the hardwood staircase, a big fat, “Fuck!” burst from her mouth, followed by other vulgarities. “Fuck! Shit! Bitch!” Apparently, she’d developed Tourette’s. He was engaged to *her*? “Fuck! Shit! Bitch!” Was he crazy? “The whole goddamned family is!”

Arms locked around her legs, he raced onward as if the hounds of hell were barking at his feet. And Suzy let him—other than her unruly mouth, not protesting a lick. Weak. When had she become weak? Jonah simply ignored her outburst—good news for her, considering the precarious position he had her in—butt high, calves held fast, head jouncing off his back.

In that inconvenient moment, Suzy was so damnably aroused it was ridiculous.

True, this was the sort of caveman behavior that, in those fantasies she tried so hard to make real, flipped her switch. But this wasn’t a fantasy.

It was real. Very authentic. Very hot.

And so damn frustrating. Mystifying.

Engaged? Her? To him?

Five foul words later, Jonah kicked a door shut behind them and dumped her on a bed. Suzy bounced into the mattress, the wind knocked from her as he spun, locked the door then towed a heavy dresser in front of it. Nice touch.

By the time he turned back, she was hell on two feet, arms crossed and bad-ass attitude in check. Wetness sliding down her inner thighs. Oh shit—she'd skipped panties. Had she just mooned the entire McKenzie clan? "Engaged, huh? You might've asked me first! You—"

Jonah landed gentle hands on her shoulders, pulling her close and speaking low, his every word punctuated. "Now you listen to me—" *Bang, bang!* "I was—"

He blinked slowly, wearing a dangerous scowl, as he spoke toward the shuddering door over his shoulder. "Go. Away."

*Bang, knock-knock!* "Jonah Michael McKenzie! All your lies have come back to bite you. Now you open this confinkled door! Don't think I won't get through it!" *Knock-bang-bang!* "I'm goin' for my rifle."

"I'll load it for you," Suzy called over Jonah's shoulder, unable to stop herself from chiming in. "And test the trigger."

"You." Icy blue eyes swiveled her direction. "You be quiet."

Suzy tensed aching pussy muscles, thinking how hot he was when he became bossy. How badly she wanted him bossing her...into that bed.

Talk about bad timing.

"You want me quiet? *You* give me one good reason." For effect, Suzy tapped her foot impatiently. "Well? I'm waiting..."

When he didn't, Suzy made a move to push past him, but he hauled her right back into place, groaning despondently at the next *bang-knock!* What was she hitting his door with? Her iron?

"You're closer than a rabbit hair to being nixed from my will, you hear me?"

"Dammit, Nana, the will can go to hell!"

Suzy almost smiled. "Oh what language in front of your dear nana!" she mocked.

His fingers bit into her arms. "Shut up, Reckless."

There was a shuffle beyond the door, mingled with the low rumble of a reprimanding voice and Nana's squawked protests. Something about how "Bringing home a floozy isn't respecting your grandmother's house!"

"Zack, you and Ez escort Nana Dori downstairs," drawled a man's concerned yet relaxed voice. She instantly recognized him from earlier—Isaiah? There was more shuffling and receding threats from Nana, and Suzy could only imagine several grown

men physically removing that tiny, arthritic old woman too feisty for her own good. "Jonah...everything okay in there?"

"Would be, if y'all would leave a man in peace." Jonah spoke while gazing at her, his firm grip turned caressive.

There was a short pause. "Never seen you this...riled up."

"I said everythin's fine."

"All the same, I'd like to hear that from the lady."

When she opened her mouth—to respond she knew not how—Jonah slanted her a glare of both reproach and warning, a glare that made her laugh. As if the gentlemanly, old-fashioned man holding her hostage would ever do anything to truly hurt her. At least on the outside.

Now the inside...

He still hadn't explained himself, now had he? For a while there, Suzy had felt as if the heavyweight champ delivered a strong punch to her gut. The residual ache only intensified when Jonah raised one eyebrow, awaiting her response.

"I'm fine too, Isaiah," she told the half-truth, appreciating how when he'd called her a *lady* it hadn't sounded like *slut*. "Jonah and I really do need to speak alone."

"Okay then." Isaiah cleared his throat. "Grandpa's got a follow-up this afternoon. I'm taking Nana and him out of here as soon as I can round 'em up and get 'em to the car. I'll tell everyone else to find somewhere else they'd rather be for a while."

"Make it a good while," Jonah commanded.

"Sure, I'll tell 'em. We'll just dump the rest of the girls' crap in the garage and clear out. Sound all right?"

When Jonah started to growl, she pinched his forearm and answered for him. "Sounds lovely. Thank you."

"Welcome. I've left your purse here by the door. You, uh, dropped it earlier." Booted footfalls thumped steadily down the hall.

In the distance, Nana raved on. A door slammed then another. Grandpa's slower, assisted steps passed in front of the closed door accompanied by, "Leave? But I wanted another glimpse of Jonah's spitfire and that pretty white hiney of hers." Isaiah's chuckled response was lost as the men made their way downstairs.

Jonah's slow blink froze the moment. His methodical breathing. Hers.

She tensed, ready to demand explanations, but Jonah shook his head, indicated they'd wait as long as it took, the two of them listening in the immediate silence to the ever-diminishing sounds of habitation as everyone else cleared out.

Four minutes later a couple engines revved. Grumbled down the dirt drive. Then nothing. Nothing but the man before her. And her reaction to him.

"Okay. Time for us." Tall and formidable, Jonah scrubbed a hand over day-old whiskers. It dawned on her that it was the first time she'd seen him looking so rough.

As if he hadn't slept all night. Or he'd just woken up. And damn, it was sexy. "Sit down and listen up."

Suzy opened her mouth but for all her earlier anger and demands, the cat had caught her tongue. She was fresh out, so she stepped back and lowered herself to the bed, perching on the edge, flinching when her flesh came into contact with *his* quilted bedspread.

Oh God. Where were her panties? Gone with her common sense!

The not-quite stark masculine bedroom, done in a soothing mixture of blues and browns exuded confidence, power. Dependability.

The blasted air exuded Jonah's scent.

His heavy frame dipped the mattress away from her when he lay down alongside, hooking booted feet on the foot rail and crossing his arms behind his head in a pose of pure relaxation. She didn't believe that for a second—knew he was as alert as a coiled rattler. One who'd strike if she moved an inch toward the door.

His deceptively casual stance only tensed her up. "So talk already."

"It's like this. There is no *other* woman. You've got that through your thickly made-up head, right? No one but you." At her shaky nod, he continued. "Nana's givin' us hell lately. She's a pain in the ass but I love her. Can still remember the silly, singsong nursery rhymes she made up for each of us and how she was never too busy to crawl over the floor, playing racetrack or dump truck with us boys. Couldn't live without her cooking. Figure there's nothin' wrong with making an old woman happy."

"But *engaged!*" Suzy sputtered. It was outrageous! Engaged couples had to trust each other. Suzy knew better than to trust any man. "What in the world made you claim that?"

"The truth? I don't know. It just stuck in my craw this morning, seein' how Nana fawned all over Bo after that Sommer gal announced *their* engagement. Way I see it, it had to be invented on the spur—he met the lady two days ago and there's such a thing as too perfect. If Bo can do it and get Nana off his back, why not me?"

Sommer was "engaged" to Bo? *That's* what the rock on her finger meant? Between that and finally realizing there was no Lubbock competition, Suzy's mind was in permanent tilt-a-whirl mode. She knew her friend would've told her the truth had it been on the up and up, which meant Jonah's suspicions were accurate.

"I'm sorry I didn't have time to talk with you about the idea, sorry you found out like you did," he explained. "I guess my mouth just betrayed my brain, but hell, it was because I was babysitting Grandpa last night and trapped with Nana this morning that *we* weren't together." After that heartfelt admission, Suzy was melting. His final words only put the cherry on top of her sundae. "Sure would make it easy on me if you'd go along...at least for a few days. Give me some family peace. Give us free rein to be together."

"You sure that's what you want?"



"More time with you? Hell yes!"

"Um...so we're getting married?" Suzy had no idea why saying that made her stomach flip over. Her heart skip beats.

Why she'd never wanted the wrong answer more.

Or why, when he was so damn close, he'd yet to wrap an arm around her.

"Yes. No." Mouth tweaked devilishly at the corner, Jonah directed those hopeful, sky-blue eyes her direction. "Sort of."

"Wow. Uh..." Sort of? Sort of they were getting married? Suzy swept agitated fingers through her hair, *no* idea what to make out of that answer. Or her body's physical reaction. Good grief, she was getting *wetter*. "Uhh?"

Figuring she ought to say something intelligent sometime soon, Suzy stiffened her spine to keep from wiggling and pointed out, "Your nana hates me now. Don't believe you marrying *filth* would make her at all happy."

"Well then, she'll be happy when we break it off –"

"When we *what*?"

"When you leave town," he explained, grinning at her intense reaction. "Unless you'd prefer to continue a long-distance relationship. Either way, she said get married. Didn't specify to whom. I reckon you'll clean up nice...and one thing I learned this morning, Nana's a sucker for love stories."

"Since when do we have one?"

"Since that night I first kissed you, all those years ago."

But sort of *engaged*? "You really could've at least asked me first. Might've watered down the shock a little." Instead of her pussy.

Fuck, what was wrong with her? Since when did she *want* to get married? Find the idea sexy? Want to tie herself to one man and one man only? Forever?

Want to give a man the power to hurt her as never before?

But of all of them on the planet, the only one she could even fathom wanting to try with was right next to her.

"You want asked?" Never had he looked more like Danny Zuko, cool and cocky, when he winked and rolled off the bed to drop to one knee in front of her. "I can ask."

*Finally* he touched her, sliding his hand around hers, locking their gazes. A frog leapt in her throat. Fireflies stormed her body. Jonah'd turned her into a regular zoo. "Miss Susannah Reckless Miller, I'd be much obliged if you'd pretend to be my fiancée awhile."

It wasn't real, she reminded herself. Jonah didn't even act as though he wanted it to be but nevertheless, Suzy could barely manage her strangled, "Why not?"

"Great." His fingertips played with her ring finger, as if studying it. "Guess we ought to get you something for this. Make it look official."

“Official?” she squeaked, and he bounded to his feet and left her sitting there in shock as he turned to the dresser blocking the door and rummaged through the top drawer. A moment later he turned back, velvet ring box in hand.

Nervous flutters invaded – what was it? Hockey night in her stomach? – as he once again fell to his knees and cracked the lid, revealing a gorgeous, marquis-cut diamond ring. At least a carat. Beautiful. *Special* – she knew that, even before he revealed, “It was Ma’s,” in a hauntingly adoring tone.

Not knowing what to say, Suzy swallowed. Tried not to choke. Feigning an engagement was one thing. This ring was another.

This ring was *real*.

“Just hope it fits.” So nonchalant, as if he were trying on a shirt and not a priceless piece of jewelry that meant the world – to him of course – Jonah tapped her jaw shut and took her hand in his. Suzy quickly snatched it back.

“No. I can’t wear that. Shouldn’t.”

“Of course you should. You will.” Famously resilient, Jonah chased down her fleeing hand and nabbed it in a firm grasp, easing the band over her knuckle and twisting it to the base. “Hmm. What do you know? Perfect fit.”

And just like that, they were officially unofficially engaged.

He kissed the diamond in place and, damn him, Suzy never wanted to see it leave her finger.

But it would. Inevitably. Because this *wasn’t* real. Didn’t matter that everything about how she felt screamed it was. Didn’t matter that diamonds were forever. This one wasn’t. *Men weren’t*.

“I don’t know. Jonah...?”

“No one will believe we’re engaged for a second if you don’t wear it. You kinda have to, you know?” Something swam in those ocean eyes, some unspoken hope, unnamed promise, and God help her, Suzy jumped right in. Fake or real, she wanted to go along. A shaky nod was her answer. “I know you’ll take good care of it.”

An emphatic nod this time.

“Suzy.” Fingers stroked hers softly, slowly, praising her decision. “I’m sorry if I went a little overboard out there. Was a little too rough.”

“You weren’t,” she said quickly. Too quickly – if he was paying attention.

He was. Jonah glowed.

Under that heated look, she easily recalled how his earlier behavior turned her on...as did being engaged. Why waste a perfectly good fantasy come true?

Leaning forward, she whispered saucily in his ear, “I was out of control. You took command. Mmmm...” Her tongue darted out, tracing his lobe. Tasting salty flesh. Tempting the beast. “You know, Tex, it rather lit my fire.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Six months after that last, lone – vehement – entry...

*I miss sex.*

*Scratch that. Sex I can get with a vibrator. True satisfaction? In my dreams...*

*What I really miss is the taste of sweat dripping off hard muscle. The sting of firm flesh against soft. The wet glide of a lover's kiss.*

Three months after that...

*If I don't get a real cock, think I'll go insane. If I don't orgasm soon, I know I will.*

*Why did I swear off men again?*

*Oh right. They're all swine.*

*Still, sexy swine. One wonders, if they can be heartless and sex-driven, why can't a woman? Why shouldn't she?*

*That's what I need – a male attitude.*

*Right...and get fired for being a slut.*

Two weeks more and...

*EUREKA! I've had the idea to end all ideas! It'll be Sexfestapalooza for "Suzy" once a year. Oh yeah, baby. At work today I hit upon a doozy of a plan. Gotta research vacation hotspots now!*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Only Suzy. Only she would find him being so officious hot. Only she could do this to him – make him feel so totally and completely male. In charge yet utterly out of his element.*

*Primal instincts thundered through Jonah, raw and hungry. Her tongue and teeth danced along his earlobes, licking and nipping, enticing him...daring him.*

*The wetness of her tongue, the way it swirled and slid over his flesh. The plump moistness, her pouting lips as she whispered, "I needed reining in."*

*He all but bellowed at the sensations streaking straight to his groin. Making him hard.*

“Still do, don’t you think?” he growled, rising and crawling over her, pushing his prey back on the bed. *His* bed. Wedging his hard, denim-clad cock between her legs. “Are you slick for me, Susannah?” Jonah slid a finger along her thigh, stopping just short of her pussy. That digit hooked, bent unwillingly against his self-control. “Were you wet out there? Downstairs? Outside? Wanting me?”

“So very wet.” With a little whimper—something she was about to be doing an awful lot of—she arched her hips against him. “For you. Wet for *you*.”

It would be too easy to unzip, to free his straining cock and drive into her full force. To take her hard and fast and freely.

She’d let him. And then it’d be over.

Jonah never wanted it to be over.

“Prove it,” he dared, and seized her by the shoulders, clutching her as he rolled flat on his back, pulling her over him. Her legs straddled his, hot, slick pussy dampening the ridge in his jeans.

“Easy-peasy,” she claimed, wiggling, making him crazy as her fingers roamed across his chest, tracing muscle through his shirt.

Vixen.

Hungering for something far deeper than release, he grabbed her by the hair, nuzzling her face next to his. “Prove how much you want me.” His voice was low, edged with erotic threat. “Make me believe it, sweet Suzy.”

“Or else what?”

Figuring he’d show her rather than tell her, Jonah slid his free hand down her left side then hiked up her dress, prepared to deliver a sharp smack, only to encounter bare flesh.

Completely bare. No undies. *Damn*.

So that’s what Grandpa meant by the hiney crack? Jonah groaned.

His fingers, both in hair and on flesh, curled at the provocation. “You came here like this?”

The trampwear, the eyes, the attitude...they were all together bad enough. But no panties?

The devil’s mistress giggled wickedly, locking green eyes with his. “When I got dressed, I was planning on coming anywhere but here. Underclothes seemed a burden for what I intended...”

As if to show him, she ducked her head, bringing her lips to his neck, sucking on his flesh.

He flinched at the sharp suction and abandoned his hair hold to yank down the front of her holey, anything-but-holy dress. Creamy mounds fell free, unburdened by any bra.

“See what you reduce me to?” she crooned, rising up and pressing those glimpses of heaven in his face.

But *damn*.

He didn’t know whether to be turned-on or jealous as hell at the no-panties, no-bra realization, but the slap that he delivered to her thigh was anything but playful. She cried out in glee as Jonah hurled her off him and plunked her facedown on the mattress.

Straddling her legs this time, Jonah seized the back of her dress by a hole near the top and ripped. Tore the despised garment clear through to the bottom.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she screamed beneath him. “This is one of my favorites!”

Jonah ignored the urge to inform her that her entire slutty wardrobe would soon be treated with the same tender, lovin’ destruction, instead draping his body over hers to murmur low in her ear as his hand slid over her ass, “Everything goes but the shoes, doll. It’s time I claimed all of you.”

Suzy sucked in a breath, gave him that sideways green gaze hooded by thick lashes, weighing his intent. His sincerity. “Get on with it then.”

“All of you,” he warned once again and never had he meant a statement more. Fake engagement or not, by the time this was over, every nook and cranny of Suzy Miller would be his. Maybe they’d marry someday, maybe they’d break up, but she’d be *his*. Never again to so easily offer herself to another man, not and achieve what he was about to give her.

He had every intention of imprinting *his* touch on her body...her soul, and permanently. Of making it so no other man could ever or would ever compare. He and his dick weren’t interchangeable with *any* other and it was damn time she knew it.

She moaned when he climbed off her and abandoned the bed. Ripping his shirt over his head, he quickly changed his mind. “Over here, now,” he commanded. “Undress me.”

“Yes Sir,” she purred.

The game was on – and Suzy knew the right moves.

Wearing nothing but her strappy, provocative heels – as instructed – she rose from the bed, leaving behind her black dress like a crime scene outline. A shadow of who she’d become, a ghost.

Forming her every move to the tune of seduction, Suzy stood and thrust out her breasts. Sauntered, hips swishing left then right as she rounded the bed and knelt in front of him, prepared to please.

Some women may have felt humbled, on their knees, wrestling boots off then peeling socks from their man...unbuckling and freeing the belt guaranteed to spank her, surrendering the weapon of power to his large, strong hands. But not Suzy. She felt strangely privileged as she unfastened his jeans and tugged them down the long length

of his legs, fingers grazing hair-roughened skin. Kissing the tops of his feet, his toes, in a show of true submission.

She was his. As long as he wanted her, he had her.

“Susannah.” Jonah took her gently by the hair, a strange sort of commanding tenderness floating in those sky blue eyes as he drew her up. “That’s not necessary.”

But Suzy wanted it to be—a need he must’ve sensed, because he consented with a silent nod and she returned to his feet, kissing along them, up his ankles, following the hard plate of his shin. Slowly earning her way higher, to his boxers, which she edged down only to repeat the process on the other leg, kissing and licking from his foot upward, over the flat plane of his shin, his kneecap then the thick muscle and sinew of his thigh, until reaching his beautiful cock. Gloriously long and hard and ready.

*All of you, he’d promised. Damn, she hoped so.*

She’d never craved anything more than to have that cock stroking deep—everywhere...taking her as no man ever had. The one part of her she’d kept private. Mr. Right—doubtful though she’d been that he existed, for her anyway—had deserved *some* level of virginity.

Remembering her role, lips hovering at his cock, Suzy paused and asked, “May I?”

She fully expected a *yes*. Permission to take him inside her mouth, to pleasure and please him. Instead, Jonah grunted a disparaging, “No.”

Here was the part where she earned her spanking. As if she hadn’t all ready. “Please...” Despite his denial, she slid moist lips along the underside of his shaft, grazed his balls with her chin. “Please, Jonah.”

“I said no.”

Suzy’s tongue darted out, daring him.

“*Hellion.*” In two seconds, Jonah hauled her to her feet and threw her on the bed. Roughly. “You think you know what’s coming, don’t you?” His words were steel. His eyes blue flame.

A skitter of fear-laced arousal bolted through her when he snapped the belt in the air.

Of course she knew what was coming. White-hot pain and a good, hard cock. A rollicking fuck.

Exactly what she wanted. Hard and nasty. That earlier scare—where she realized he’d begun to snare her trust—had taught her a good lesson. She’d shoved her heart back where it belonged and was more than ready to expose her outer self. That he could have.

Nodding, she rolled over, climbed onto hands and knees. *Take me*, she begged silently, flashing her butt his direction. *Spank me. Take me.*

*This is what I know.*

Again, he denied her, chose another course.

Heading to the dresser, his ass muscles flexing in slow motion beneath her avid gaze, he scrounged a drawer then returned with his belt and a handful of condoms, which he tossed on a pillow, easing to the bed and rolling to his back. "You've got some proving to do, woman." He motioned to his cock with the belt. "Over me, now." As Suzy was crawling atop that luscious sword, all too eager to impale herself, he delivered a disappointing blow. "And don't you dare slip it in."

"What?" No cock? No spanking and no cock? "But—"

*Smack!* Leather sailed through the air, slicing pleasure-pain across her bottom. Once, twice...*smack, smack, smack!* Suzy folded in submission, ass in the air, face pushing against his chest as she mewled her delight.

"Now," came his thick, low command, that belt laid flat across her bottom, resting in admonition, "you will kiss me. You will show me how much you want me."

Suzy gulped. "While..."

"That's right. While I spank you, you will pleasure me. You will present that ass nicely and kiss and love on me. My lips, my neck, my chest—but not my dick—and you will not stop kissing and loving on me without my permission. Nor," he warned with a smart slap of his belt that made her jump, "will you take my cock inside your body."

Impossible.

But already she was molding her lips to his, easing her ass in the air and her tongue in his mouth, kissing him fully, deeply, as the leather slid from her flesh only to return a second later with a sting that had her tongue surging alongside his.

Another blow followed. She cried out and slid her mouth free, leaving a wet trail as she adored every inch of his neck while his spanking rained down, left cheek then right thigh then buttock.

Suzy whined and licked around one of his nipples, wanting to take him inside her so badly. To ride him, to writhe on him. Wanting to melt against him, to lie there and take it. To thrash away. Wanting, just wanting...

The belt slapped heated skin, raising fire in its wake.

She sucked hard on his nipple, pulling the skin into her mouth... Her butt burned. Her desire raged. Her kisses became weak and whimpery. Pleading with him. *Please.*

It was the hardest thing she'd ever done, steeling herself the way she was, concentrating on proving herself with her mouth, controlling herself—while giving him control.

Accordingly, she rubbed her pussy over the pubic hair covering his groin, needing friction, needing more...

*Smack, smack, smack!* he punished the action.

Suzy attempted to make up her little transgression by releasing his nipple and depositing furious kisses over his chest, by roaming her hands up his shoulders and neck, scraping nails along his scalp, concentrating on the sensation of the short, dense strands abrading every fingertip. But even then she couldn't help but smear her

weeping sex over his cock. After all, his command had been specific—not to take him inside her. He'd said nothing about rubbing...riding...

"Please, Jonah." She kissed, she licked, she loved all over his neck, begging him for relief. "Touch me."

Jonah chuckled indulgently—or maybe that was wickedly. "Turn around," he ordered. "Put your pussy in my face."

Suzy hesitated.

Not her favorite thing—to have a guy go down on her—too damn soft. Too damn *personal*.

But for Jonah? For her belt-wielding stud who'd just put a ring on her finger—however false the pretenses?

She'd suffer through it.

"Your cock?" she tested, unmoving, her mouth salivating at the thought.

"Lick it, baby. Suck it deep."

What she needed to hear. Suzy rotated in a scramble of limbs and sighs, scooting her knees backward so that her crotch angled directly over his mouth.

"Tex...my man..." She held his shaft front and center—noticing the weight of the unfamiliar ring encircling her finger, and the odd yearning it roused—letting her lips and tongue play over butter-soft skin as she murmured, "I needed this. From *you*."

To prove it, she swallowed his length, welcoming him fully as he slid down her throat and she gave a heartfelt groan. Suzy sucked fiercely. Harder still when he planted those beautiful lips to her swollen, wet folds, kissing her with devious intent...long, sure strokes up and down the sensitive crease, searching out her clit with his tongue.

She managed not to flinch away from the tender caress.

Where was his belt? a fragment of her wondered. Then wondered no more when she subconsciously matched her tongue strokes to his...her breathing to his moans...

His lips and tongue vibrating with the guttural sounds he made, he attacked her clit, rolling the bud, licking and nibbling all around it, driving her wild and Suzy bucked against him, riding his face, all the while pumping his cock past her lips. Almost in heaven as they pleased each other.

Yet heaven proved elusive.

Having his sexy lips on her, loving her in the most intimate way...it was more than just physical. No matter how she kept reminding her body to just focus on the *sensations*, her mind kept focusing on the *man*.

Jonah's nose nuzzled, his tongue swept deep, stroking her to new heights. Thrusting inside her, undulating. And then he laid a hand flat to her ass. She winced, relieved, expecting it to leave and come down again, harder. But the warm, broad palm remained, stroked slowly over and down, up and back until it cupped the edge of her left cheek, his thumb venturing between, rimming a slow circle round her anus.



She shuddered, every muscle constricting...raging.

To be wanted by a man so thoroughly, so intensely and despite her flaws—many as they were. Suzy rejoiced in the knowledge that she'd finally found someone able to make her fantasies come true...someone rough and tough in the sack, but a good guy out of it. A man she could live with, day and night.

And more importantly, one who could live with her. *One she could trust.*

Trust?

Out of self-preservation, memories from earlier bombarded from her brain—the unavoidable pain *all* men cause. *Trust* him? Pah! She so knew better.

Their “engagement” was nothing but fantasy. It would end.

As if he sensed her inner conflict, Jonah's mouth retreated, hot breath blowing against her even hotter pussy as he murmured between hard bursts of air, “Remember how much you enjoyed it when I...did this...”

And then the tip of his belt was at her entrance, teasing its way inside her slit...an inch...then another, until he was fucking her with the rigid leather slow and steady, and he was praising her, coaxing her back to him. Complimenting her beauty, her spunk, her *taste*...

At the forbidden caress, every limb strained. Every muscle contracted. Her heart swelled. And Suzy shattered into as many pieces as there were stars in the sky. Each little, glowing bit of her tingled and trembled...her moans stringing together like some primal tune she sang over his cock—her instrument.

The belt deserted her, and Jonah growled, “Damn, that feels good—the vibrations from your throat.”

Did they now?

Her spinning world steadied and her moans transformed into humming, crooning over his cock, loving his entire length, drawing his desire forth.

“I'mgonna...” His words garbled together. She hummed louder, sucked harder. “Gonna blow!”

But Suzy didn't stop. Didn't hesitate. Didn't question why either.

Because she knew—he *was* special. And he made her feel that way too. Damn him.

Renewing efforts that had never waned in the first place, Suzy heard him call her name like a benediction and kept on sucking, begging without words for his surrender, until he lunged upward one last time, groaning. His body tensed and Suzy sucked and he climaxed inside her mouth with a whoop of ecstasy.

Swallowing past the foreign texture, easily remembering this was *Jonah*, Suzy drank up his cum, her tongue instinctively searching out and licking every last drop until he relaxed beneath her with a satisfied sigh. Then another.

“Jonah?” She had to act fast. It wouldn't do, that cock going soft when she'd yet to use it properly.

“Hmmm?” The sound echoed with pure repletion.

Flipping her body, she propped a hand at either side of his head, wedging that cock in the juncture of her legs. So close...and indeed, she could still taste what it had to offer. “Do I have your permission now?” she mock pouted. “Pretty please?”

His closed-eyed grin was the most captivating thing she’d ever seen. “You surely do, Reckless. You surely do.”

Further encouragement unnecessary, Suzy plucked a condom from the pillow, tore the wrapper open and reached between her legs to sheathe him. Shifting her pelvis, so that his thick head aligned with her slit, she sank down, spearing herself with his full length.

Beneath her, Jonah came alive like the dead risen, arching from the mattress in a sudden movement that forced him high inside her. As if on automatic, the belt in his hand thrashed through the air, landed with a *thwack!* on her bottom.

*Hello, Cowboy!*

And was she ever ready for her ride.

Using her knees for leverage, Suzy rose up and plunged again and again, his belt smacking her ass in rhythm. She took him deep, hard, already edging the pinnacle.

Gasping as the belt lit a sting into her butt, as his cock seared her core with pleasure, she cupped her breasts and caught her nipples between thumb and forefinger. Rolling, pinching...

Head tossed back, she worked his cock, worked him, orgasm fast approaching. “Oh Jonah...”

With no warning, certainly no provocation far as she could tell, Suzy found herself thrown off, plopped onto her back with a resounding bounce. Capturing her ankles, he wrenched her legs and catapulted her onto her stomach. Jerked her to her knees.

“All of you,” his husky voice promised, hand splaying her butt cheeks open. Every muscle in her body tensed with anticipation. Possessively, his fingers curled, grasping flesh as if he were grasping for control, then flattened with a *smack!* “Stay put.”

And then...nothing.

Fuck!

Jonah leapt from the bed, shoved aside that heavy dresser blocking the door and disappeared from the room.

Where did he think he was going, dammit?

“Jonah!” she screamed, fisting the sheets so she wouldn’t flick her clit and get herself off because she was so damn close!

“Hold on, Reckless!” came his hearty yell. Then a thump and a curse as he bumped into something.

That brought a smile, however shaky, because she realized then what he’d gone searching for and her temperature spiked twenty degrees. Her muscles bunched as if

the room were set on fire and she was trapped in the midst of flames, unable to breathe. Nervous. Excited. Scared too, having never experienced a man this way, but not daring to disobey Jonah and budge from where he'd left her. Not now when they were so close.

Her heart pounded, sweat tickled above her lips. It seemed a lifetime later—all of one, maybe two minutes—before Jonah returned, jar of Vaseline in hand, and bounded back on the bed without bothering to shut the door.

"It's all I could find, babe, but it'll do. Ah, Reckless..." Popping the lid and tossing it the way of the floor, he again spread her cheeks, this time smearing goo up and down her crease. The slick caress sent mini-explosions along her spine. "Time to make you mine."

So possessive. Domineering. But was he saying that because it turned him on?

Or because it was true?

"Jonah...if you do this..." she croaked as a thick finger, coated with lubricant, slipped deep. "It means something to me. I've never—"

The glide of a second finger, opening her up, cut her short. Suzy clutched the sheets harder as he rolled the two digits inside her. "Means something to me too," he assured her. "You mean something to me, my little Reckless Red, my *wife-to-be*. After all, you're wearing my ring..."

*Wife*. His ring.

Had anything ever sounded more wonderful? More right?

More *impossible*?

Arousal clogged her throat, suffused her body, and with a whimper, Suzy pushed against his hand, encouraging, and Jonah stretched his fingers inside her. "That's it. Relax. You're gonna have to open up for me."

With his other hand he negotiated his way to her clit, teasing the nub while thrusting fingers into her ass. Both hands plundered freely, trying this and that, rubbing, stroking, circling, even spanking, as if testing what brought her excitement gushing forth.

Everything he did, it seemed. Because it was *him*. Jonah.

Bottom lip clamped between her teeth, she withstood the intense, mind-blowing caresses until she was sure she'd lost hers to the ecstasy of erotic exploration.

No sane thought remained in her head. The bedroom had long since begun spinning again, sparkles dotting her vision. She couldn't take another moment of this glorious torture—yet she needed more. Needed so much...

All he could give.

Flashes of Jonah blinked behind her shuttered eyelids...the easygoing young man she'd known in college. The fierce knight who rode a white truck. The tender yet powerful lover...

When he hooked a handful of fingers deep inside her cunt, fucking both ass and pussy in matching rhythm, Suzy knew she was a total goner.

An orgasm splintered her soul, crashing through like a pane of glass hurtled by a tornado as Jonah exploited her body for all it was worth, exacting a series of high-pitched squeals along with the gyrations she couldn't stop or slow. On and on, he wrung pure satisfaction from her, set her awash in a haze of sexual bliss. Then...finally...the contractions eased... She could breathe again.

Just when she thought it was over—of course not. Refusing her body any sort of real relaxation, Jonah eased free and guided one of her hands to her pussy to replace his fingers. Then he aligned his cock along her crack.

Anticipation zoomed. Skyrocketed her to the moon. *This was really it.*

Suzy had no idea how she stayed perched on that high, sharp pinnacle, but Jonah commanded her to “Play with yourself,” and he was not to be refused.

Obediently, she lowered her face to the mattress and slid several fingers past moist curls and claimed her clit, massaging the nub as he began pressing along the sensitive crevice, teasing...tempting...then nestling his cock at the entrance. Pushing. Pressing inside. Just a fraction then pausing.

Pleasure-pain pricked through her body. She tensed. Tightened against him.

He was so large, barely lodged inside of her. For the first time, the thought that he might not fit all the way in took hold. Uncertain now, she lurched forward. He followed with a grunt, the hands massaging her butt muscles firming.

“Jonah, wha—”

*Whap!* The belt bit into her butt, demanding submission. Demanding she give herself to him fully. *Smack, whap-whap!*

Suzy reeled, apprehension forgotten. For there was only that belt, now pelting hard and sharp, her fingers milking her pussy, and the powerful, primal urges he roused rolling through her. That and Jonah, slowly sinking deeper and deeper, moving his cock in time with the belt. Knowing just how to command more and more of her. *All of her.*

Her body hitched forward and his thrusts followed. Nearly flattened on the mattress—except where he'd dropped the belt to grip her hips and keep them aloft—she shook at the depth of sensations blasting through her and knew Jonah was affected too. Could sense it, feel his fervor inside her. His once-restrained movements accelerated, became faster, frenzied, until they both slammed into a brick wall.

*Boom!* She exploded into bliss.

*Bang!* His hands fell by her head and he lurched inside her, jerking rapidly as he came.

And *crash!* They collapsed to the bed, Jonah in a heap atop her, squashing her...Susannah, his fiancée.

Sort of.

## Chapter Eighteen

*How much more pleasing is your love than wine,  
and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!  
Song of Solomon 4:10*

He smelled her before he saw her. Pure sex. Pure Suzy.

In the kitchen, wearing nothing but his jeans and a couple of her scratch marks, Jonah was chowing down a sugar cookie and slapping together a late lunch for the both of them – sandwiches, which comprised the extent of his culinary skills.

Who needed to cook when their nana was a blue-ribbon baker? Way Jonah figured it, home-baked goodness on his plate was one of the perks for living at the main house, a bit of payback for all the Grandpa wrangling of late. A bonus, compensation for how well he kept up the finances and the “yard” – such as it was...mostly dirt and weeds. Except for the immaculately groomed flowerbeds, several for Nana, the others dedicated to Ma’s roses.

He hadn’t yet smeared the mayo on the bread before Suzy waltzed in, strutting straight through the adjoining room still wearing those ridiculous high heels – and absolutely nothing else.

Jonah’s jaw came unhinged and crumbs scattered to the floor. Umpteen people had a key to this house! Any one of them could walk in at any time, but damned if he didn’t find her daring a total turn-on.

He swallowed the last mouthful of cookie heaven and choked out, “*Suzy.*”

“In the flesh.” He’d say!

She twirled like a ballerina, making a show of her entrance, trailing her hands up the curved archway that separated the kitchen from the dining room, stretching her arms high and – just barely – balancing her fingertips on the molding at the top. “Hope you enjoy the view, cowboy.”

What wasn’t to enjoy? To go into ecstatic, erotic all over? Graceful curves. Delicate ankles showcased by seductive sandals. Legs long enough to knot at his back as he plowed into her...

And that ass. *All* his now.

*Ka-pow!* His cock popped up faster than a jack-in-the-box. Rebellious, demanding freedom.

Those green raccoon eyes glimmered mischievously and she posed, thrusting one supple hip to an angle as she waved to her feet. “Only thing I own, thanks to you.”

He blinked and looked a little closer. The tips of her feet were covered in black. “Good Lord, when did you bruise your toes? How?”

Her surprised laughter drew his gaze back to her face...blushing if he wasn't mistaken. "Just a bit of polish under the bridge. I'll clean it off later."

Then she struck a pose, flexed the muscles in one thigh and all confusing thoughts of polish and bridges went the way of the drain as he admired her toned limbs. She might be tiny but she packed a punch.

Like a hammer driving nails into the subject, she abandoned her posturing and danced closer, those deathly points clacking across the tile until she was leaning mouth-watering breasts over the counter at his side, squeezing the mounds together with her upper arms as she innocently—hah!—exclaimed, "Oh food. Good. I worked up a helluva appetite."

She stole a piece of cheese.

He stared at the plump and sway of breasts. At hardening nipples. One long arm reached in front of him and brushed against his stomach as she broke off a piece of crust and ate that too.

His hand shook. Mayo beckoned. So did those nipples.

Before he could act on either impulse—smearing mayo on bread or breast—Suzy made a fist and knocked lightly at his temple. "Yo, Tex—anyone there?"

"You haven't a clue what you do to me."

She grinned then commanded, "Sandwiches. Pronto. I'm hungry."

Then she pushed away and clacked through the room, exploring as he concentrated on smoothing mayo over bread and *not* being hard. Concentrated on slapping ham on bread and *not* being hard. Concentrated on snagging two pickles out of the jar. And not being hard. On not tossing her up on the counter and making a meal out of her.

Oh yes, he was concentrating hard on that. Hard?

Well, shit—his bacon was toast.

"Mind if I dig through your pantry?"

"Help yourself." She did, making a host of racket in the process. "If you tell me what you're lookin' for, I might be able to—"

"Found it!" She emerged from the walk-in pantry brandishing the vanilla extract as if it were some sort of magic elixir. Jonah stopped what he was doing and gave her his undivided attention.

When she proceeded to uncap and pour a few drops in her palm then dab those behind her ears, between her breasts—then directly on the points of both nipples, Jonah nearly blew like a geyser. "Vanilla extract! *That's* why you always smell so sweet?"

She smiled like a siren. "My secret weapon. Mom told me that girls used to wear it as perfume back in her generation. So I tried it."

He salivated, imagining licking vanilla-tipped breasts, then he cleaved a knife through each sandwich, whacking them in two. In fourths. Eights.

“Hey! These your sisters? The bartender, right—who the helicopter picked up earlier?” she asked, drawing his attention in time to see her scoop a frame from a corner shelf. “And what was up with *that*?”

Oh, to hell with it!

“No idea.” Jonah abandoned the butchered sandwiches, more interested in the topless woman he approached from behind and took into his arms, pulled against his chest. “No,” he answered, tightening his hands across her stomach and licking along her nape, twirling his tongue in sensuous circles, seeking a taste of that secret weapon of hers. “No, not sisters. Cousins. Forget about ‘em.”

“Hmmm.” She considered the snapshot of the three of them astride horses, each wearing their varied cowgirl gear. “All exactly the same. But different.” She tapped the glass above Tamar, whose black clothing and red lipstick gave her away, even though the other two faces were duplicates of hers. “But she’s the one I’d pick—I like her style.”

“Not surprised. She’d be the one to wear the leather.”

“Well now that we’re—” Suzy gave a strangled hiccup. “Engaged, maybe I can ransack her closet someday.”

“Maybe.” But his mind wasn’t on Tamar or her flashy attire. It was on the woman in his arms. The nude woman.

Despite his wandering hands, Suzy bent and returned the photo to its proper place, wiggling her rear in the process. “Vixen.”

“You *will* feed me first, you know,” she insisted, but Jonah was already kissing down one arm, rubbing his lips over faint tattoo shadows.

Steadfastly ignoring him, she plucked up another frame. “Are these your—”

“Uh-hmm.” Feeling a momentary prick of pain—all the more reason to bury himself in her and welcome the escape of passion—Jonah quickly caught the picture of his parents at a beach and replaced it on the shelf. “Enough talk.”

Spinning her in his arms, he resumed making love to her with his mouth, planting moist kisses along the hollow of her shoulder, down her arms, again tracing hungry lips to the tattoo outlines.

Throwing her head back, Suzy groaned in defeat, or so he hoped.

“You know, I think you should,” she murmured out of nowhere, lifting to her toes as he nipped punishment for the distraction.

“Should?” Faded though it was, Jonah tongued some exotic swirl encircling her arm.

“Go skydiving.” Before he could react, fingers he hadn’t realized were there pulled his hair, tugging him to face her. Their gazes locked as she whispered, “They stopped living. You didn’t.” She blinked slowly, spoke deliberately. “I promise they’d want you to continue pursuing your dreams and realizing them. Every single one.”

Suzy guided his head down and kissed his chin then the tip of his nose before recapturing his gaze. “I think you should go skydiving.”

Something welled up in him from the depths of his heart. Jonah was full to bursting and shocked by how easily his response came. "Then you come with me."

"Okay." Her smile lit the room. No hesitation. No qualms whatsoever about the notion of jumping out a plane with him. And that's when Jonah realized. This woman... She'd jump out of a plane with him! Soar with him...

It was no wonder he'd sought excuses to put a ring on her finger, to keep her from running away just yet.

Suzy breathed happiness anew in him – made him want to *live*.

And he knew exactly where they could start.

"I do graduate soon. End of next semester, assuming my thesis flies with the department head."

"It will," she said with such immediate conviction he wanted to whoop an' holler *She believes in me!*

"It sure would make a neat graduation present to myself. Especially if you were there. But you'll be in New York."

"Maybe." She shrugged. "Maybe not."

*Maybe not.* God, nothing sounded more glorious than that as he ran his hand down her arm then back up. He watched the motion, the wheels turning. Then he watched her eyes – to see what she'd think when he proposed, "I say we go get tats. Right now. A pact, to swear we'll jump one day – together. Sooner rather than later."

She shivered under his feathery touch, but the naughty grin that tweaked her cheeks was encouraging. "Tattoos?"

"Tattoos," he confirmed, "*Real* tattoos."

\* \* \* \* \*

In a lion, out a lamb.

Her face scoured clean of that Gothic-raccoon chic she'd sported all afternoon, Suzy now looked as innocent as they came. Jonah chuckled at that – he so knew better.

"Pleased with yourself?" Suzy frowned at him and swung the voluminous skirt that ended at her heel-clad ankles. The huge orange and green flowers whipped in the wind at her agitated motion. "*Ugh.*"

"Yep, very." If only Nana could see her now, in that cotton candy pink, lace-trimmed blouse of Jezy's, the skirt of Sheba's. Indeed pleased with himself, Jonah motioned to the stairs. "You're adorable and I'm *verrry* pleased."

"Ha! I still don't see why I couldn't have borrowed from the bad triplet. Or why I couldn't have chosen for myself." Clutching fabric to keep from tripping, Suzy flounced down the stairs faster than was safe. "Even when I'm the goodest of good, I'm not this...*nightmare* ensemble." She came to an abrupt halt on the midway landing. "Won't your cousins mind that I'm wearing their clothes?"



"I'll pay 'em off."

Suzy huffed something about men with more money than fashion sense and grumbled down the steps. At least she retained those sexy-as-all-get-out leopard sandals, her feet being too small to wear anything in the gigantic shoe collection the girls had already piled in the closet of their "new" room.

"Way I figure, my cousins—my pick." Jonah rushed forward and caught her elbow, slowing her descent. "I think you look pretty."

"We're going for *tattoos*. I'll look out of place. And this top was *not* meant for this skirt."

"Are you saying I can't match?" Hands catching her waist, Jonah swept her over the abandoned tanning bed.

"I'm *saying* I'm ordering dinner." A smile faker than those green contacts he'd insisted she dispose of lit her face as she glared up at him. "Hope you enjoy tofu and seaweed salad."

"Seaweed? My favorite! Absolutely love how it glides all smooshy down my throat," he played along, just to gall her. "Now where in this no-red-light town do you plan to find sushi nori on a menu?" He named something on Sheba's recent supply order—he'd seen the bill last week. For some wacky reason, she hadn't got it through her organically prioritized head that cowboys and hoity-toity grub didn't mix.

"Up yours."

Or hers, if he remembered correctly.

Grinning like a fool, Jonah nabbed his Resistol from the coat rack, slapped it on his head and swung the door open. And found himself face-to-face with Bo.

"Jonah. Hey there." Uncharacteristically fidgeting, Bo swept his hat from dark, matted hair and brushed a forearm across latent perspiration. "Just the man I wanted to talk to."

"Uh..." Jonah stepped back, tucking Suzy behind him like a kid trying to hide the bubblegum he'd lifted from the five-and-dime. "Didn't know anyone was home."

"Just arrived. Took Sommer to the airport. So much for fall. Hot as hell coming through Pecos, plenty of flat miles gives a man time to think."

"Glad you're back safe an' sound but we're on our way out." Relief washed through him when Jonah realized this was the one member of his family *not* treated to the earlier scene. Thank God for that. All the same, he wanted to duck past his brother and be on his way.

"You don't have a minute?"

"Not really, I—"

"Oh, talk to your brother, Jonah." Hell in heels peeked over his shoulder. "We've got hours before the tattoo parlor closes—they're always open late."

Bo's brows perked up. "Tattoo parlor?"

"She's joking." Jonah shot her a look to kill. Or silence, at least.

Didn't work of course.

"*She's mad she's in pink.*" Suzy situated herself atop the tanning bed, cross-legged, as if she had all the time in the world. "*And going to a macho place like a tattoo parlor in this frilly getup. Kind of ruins my tough-girl image, don't you think?*"

Oh good grief. If he'd have known it meant that much, he'd have slapped her in Tamar's *Spank Me* shirt and been done with it. He could just imagine Nana's reaction when she saw it lying on top of the dirty laundry. "Go change then," he offered, just to keep the peace. "Third door on the left, remember?"

"Uh...the girls' new room?" Bo piped in.

Suzy sighed and plucked at the nail on her ring finger, diamond shimmering, legs swinging. "No thanks, Tex dear, I'd rather pick on you."

*Spitfire.*

Jonah's blood heated, his arousal surged, and he considered gathering her up, hauling her back to his room, and sexing her into submission.

"Tex? *Dear?*" Bo coughed to cover a laugh. "So this is her, huh? It's really true? I mean, I got a wave from Miss Suzy here when I picked up Sommer earlier, but that was all—wasn't sure if there weren't maybe two of 'em."

"Two of me?" Suzy snorted. "Texas couldn't handle it."

Jonah looked back to find his brother fingering his mustache and grinning wider than ever. "What'd you hear?"

"Quite the tale. Nana Dori met us at the barn when we rode in. She wanted to apologize to Sommer for interrupting her last few hours on the ranch before—and get this, I'm quoting here—'being torn asunder from your life's mate'. Can you believe her?"

Suzy snickered behind him.

"You know what else she did?" Bo enthused, and Jonah didn't have the heart to tell his brother he knew exactly what else Nana had done. "Proceeded to regale us with *your* news. Then I crossed paths with Zack and Ez coming into town. They flagged me down...gave me an *earful* about all I missed." Bo dipped to the left, offering Suzy a casual salute with his black Stetson. "Ma'am. Nice to officially meet you."

She nudged Jonah aside with her foot. "That it is, Boaz."

Oh boy. Word was bound to fly like fleas in a circus on a rampage. Just as pesky too. But for once, there was no lie to cover the truth. This *was* her, in the flesh, and he wouldn't make as though he was anything but smitten. Jonah stepped back, bumped into the tanning bed and took her hand. "Bo, I'd like to introduce you to my fiancée," damn, saying that felt good, "Susannah R. Miller. I've known her since my days at Cornell. And the R's for Reckless, in case you're wondering."

That garnered brows raised sky high and another choked laugh. "Since your college stint? You don't say."

"I just did." Jonah firmed his resolve right along with his voice. "And I'd prefer you didn't call those three years a *stint*. I worked my tail—"

"Hey. Hey—no disrespect meant. Really..." Bo's eyes flicked between Jonah and Suzy. "To you either, ma'am. I'm just wonderin' what happened to the...uh...fire-breathing, cuss-word-spewing dragon in a singed dress I heard tale of. Why, Miss Susannah here looks as soft as sweetwater taffy."

"Soft?" Suzy about spit.

"Yep," Bo nodded. "Like a regular princess."

"A princess! Jonah, did you hear that?" She preened—regally—at the comparison. Hell, he almost expected a tiara to sprout right where he knew devil's horns better belonged.

"I heard," he said dryly. How did things with Suzy keep getting so out of hand?

"I like you, Boaz McKenzie," she told his brother as sincerely as Jonah'd ever heard her. "And just so you know—me and Sommer? We've been like this," she crossed her fingers and held them up in front of Bo, "over at the Lucky Lady this week and I can safely share she likes you a *whole* lot, if you get my drift."

Bo's mustache quirked and he let out a satisfied sigh. "Right kind of you to say so."

"My pleasure. Treat her right though." Suzy flicked a long, sharp nail as if in threat. "Get what I'm saying?"

"Wouldn't dream of anything else." Yet even after all that, Bo came right back with, "But a tattoo, huh? You sure you two've thought about what you're doin'? Zack says Nana's fit to blacken your name from the will."

"Yeah well, Nana can take that trust fund and shove it where the sun don't shine." Jonah couldn't believe the words out of his mouth.

Which, if hope of pleasing her was abandoned, left one to wonder why he was still carrying on a fake engagement. Why his stomach turned inside out at the thought of calling it off.

Anyway, a few more days couldn't hurt. Just so the family didn't label him a total liar.

"I misjudged you, Jonah. Shouldn't have been so quick to accuse the other night," Bo surprised him by admitting in that sure, low timbre of his. "I'm sorry for that."

It was an apology Jonah would readily accept. Nana might cross his name from a bunch of papers, but Jonah felt as if he'd just been readmitted to the family.

"Thanks, man. That means the world." And he meant it, but he also wanted to get started on his evening with the "princess" by his side. He extended a hand to his brother and jerked his head toward Suzy. "We ought to be going."

Bo accepted the handshake, a gesture of peace between them, but didn't let go. "One other thing before you head out."

At Jonah's nod, Bo released him and hung his hat up. Jonah left his on.

"I've been doin' some hard thinking last hundred miles or so. Gonna be some changes with the ranch. Starting with letting those rodeo yahoos we call brothers hold up a little more of their end around here."

"Zack and Ez, maybe. Good luck getting Joe to cooperate with anything that isn't spelled B-E-E-R."

"Times are changin'. The world around us hasn't sat still and, by God, it's time Bottoms Up moved to keep pace. Starting now, I'm assignin' more responsibility to those three, gonna hold them accountable, but I'm also gonna listen more," Bo added before Jonah had time to drop to the floor in a faint.

This was Bo? His older brother? Giving credence to what Jonah'd been telling him all along?

"For starters, I need you to work up a chart."

"A chart?" Now Bo was speaking at Jonah's language. "Sure thing. On what? The latest expense projections if we switch to that new feed supplier I was recommending?"

"Okay. That too. But no...a chart on who's taking care of Grandpa, because it ain't just gonna be me an' you. Not anymore. They're nine of us and only seven days in a week."

*Wow.* Just wow. Jonah swallowed. "You got it."

"Sorry about all the shop talk, Susannah." Bo leaned to the side to say.

"We're practically family. Call me Suzy!"

Bo grinned and nodded. "Just one more thing," he indicated Jonah but still spoke to her, "if you don't mind, then I'll get out of your hair."

"Be my guest." Again, she nudged Jonah's back pocket with one foot, rocking him slightly forward. Then one hand patted his waist, pink nails he was surprised to note. "He's had a rough afternoon. I'm sure he appreciates the time to catch his breath, rest his hips before we take off again."

Huh? His hips?

Needing time to assimilate Bo's about-face, Jonah gave a negative shake of his head and reached for Suzy. "No. Come on." Turning to his brother, he said, "I appreciate all you're saying, but can we finish this up another day? Suzy's only in town—"

She yanked his arm to stop his retreat. "Go on, Bo. We're in no hurry. Jonah's got all afternoon to hear whatever you want to share. It'll give his male parts a little longer to recover."

"Male parts?" Jonah sputtered. "Little longer?"

"Don't make fun, sweetcheeks, I'm moderating my language just as instructed."

While Jonah just strangled and Bo strangled a laugh, Suzy ran that hand down his hips to the outside of his thigh. Jonah captured it in his and admonished, "*Behave.*"

"I've been doing some thinkin' about how pretty this place is," Bo began. "About all the time I spend workin'. And maybe you're right on this front too—you know a way to

make us some easier money, you go right on ahead with inviting Hollywood out, or whatever you have to do. Given you find some way to appease Nana, that is.”

At first Jonah was too stunned to speak. The apology had thrown him enough. Now Bo was going for one of his ideas? “You serious?”

“A little hint with our grandmother...she’s got a real soft spot for love. But you might want to keep those tattoos under wraps.” Confirming what Jonah already knew, Bo shot Suzy a slow wink as he sauntered off. “I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone.”

Jonah just sputtered after him, thinking Nana had no idea what she’d done. Ever since obtaining that POA and signing those new will terms into effect, the entire world had upended. Started spinning the opposite way.

And maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing. Bo had himself some pretty blonde and was easing off the workload and learning to delegate before earning himself an early heart attack. Jonah had Suzy, Hollywood, an impending tattoo, and most importantly, his self-respect. And a feeling of *respect* from outside for once.

If matters worked out like this for all of them, well shit...they’d have to throw Nana a party.

Suzy bounced to her feet, claiming his belt loop and tugging him to the door. “Come on, cowboy. The needle awaits.”

## Chapter Nineteen

*Dear Diary –*

*Oh. My. God. – That hot cowboy asked me out today!*

*Showed up in my speaking class of all things and we're sitting right next to each other!*

*Jonah McKenzie.*

*Isn't that like the best name on the planet? Oh it was hard, the toughest thing you can imagine, but I stayed strong. I told him no.*

*Well actually, I lied to him! Lied! Said I have a boyfriend!*

*Said I have a boyfriend – right after telling him I didn't date! Stupid, stupid me!*

*And the crummiest part is I couldn't stop imagining him in that role for the rest of the day. How dumb is that? It's not like I haven't learned my lesson several times over.*

*Why do guys have to be so rotten?*

*Why does he have to be so tall and...adorable.*

*Milkshakes. I'll never have one again without thinking of him...*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Shit!" Suzy complained for the third—or maybe seventh—time, grateful Jonah hadn't once told her to moderate. "How the hell can it be *closed*?"

Standing outside Wayne's Tat & Piercing Shop, Suzy felt like bashing through the glass door with her high heels and flouncing past shattered glass—in her ultrafeminine ensemble—and kicking some tattoo-artist butt.

Only Wayne wasn't there. No one was, given the pitch-black interior.

"We'll come back, try again." Jonah was more understanding than she.

"What if we change our minds?"

"Who you worried about, Red? Me—or you?"

She ignored his question and started to rip the stupid *On Vacation Until the 15th* sign off the door when Jonah stopped her by pressing his big body against hers, taking her arms in hand and raising them overhead, squishing Suzy flat into the glass.

"Answer me."

Her face twisted to the side and a traitorous thrill sparked through her at his tone. It was the same one he'd used when he'd ordered her to scratch out her comments pertaining to Cowboy X. Suzy defied him and remained mute, curious what he'd do.

It was dark outside, the only illumination the occasional headlights from passing vehicles. Nearest “sizable” town or not, Crystal City was still pure hillbilly Podunk by her urban standards. By anyone’s standards.

Jonah thrust his groin firmly into her back and tugged her arms higher, forcing her breasts against the glass. “Talk to me, baby,” he breathed into her ear, running his tongue down the side of her neck in a deliberate caress that belied the sternness he projected. “I’m learning I can outlast you any time I put my mind to it.”

“Why’d Wayne have to be on vacation *now*?” she complained in lieu of any real answer, enjoying his bossy tendencies more than she would’ve thought possible. Especially given how there wasn’t a bedroom anywhere near this isolated stretch.

He stopped sucking on her shoulder to add, “Why don’t we ask him when he returns?”

Her body started to melt but Suzy wasn’t ready to release her frustration. “Darn hick! Stupid one-man operation!”

Jonah released her right arm to slide his hand between her chest and the glass, fingering her braless breast. “We’ll be sure to tell him you think so, when he’s got that needle aimed at your —”

“Isn’t there somewhere else we could go? This can’t be the only place!”

“Not without driving a couple hundred miles, which I’m not doing blindly. I’ve got a couple buddies who’ve had tats done at Wayne’s. No offense, but I’m not letting just anybody mark up my skin. What’s the problem? We can wait a few days.”

“Jonah!” she whined. In truth, it wasn’t herself she was worried about—it was him. What if he realized getting mutual tattoos was an asinine, *permanent* thing to do? What if he realized Sexual Suzy was all she knew how to portray these days? Either that or Boring Susannah. Professional and pristine and so lonely there were times she thought there weren’t enough shrinks in Albany to identify what ailed her.

Other times Suzy knew—she lacked any dreams of a personal sort. Ambitions beyond the here and now. Discounting her annual Vacation Fest, there wasn’t much she looked forward to outside her job. That was going great but besides working for the president—which wasn’t an option as she had *no* desire to move to DC—she’d reached her career goals decades ahead of schedule. Personal goals? There was the rub.

Speaking of rubbing... “If your tongue and your fingers keep that up —”

She wasn’t given a chance to make good on her threat or to even come up with something dire.

“I know what we’re doing—look!” Jonah released her and pointed to a flyer taped on the inside of the glass above her head. Before she could read the posting, he spun her around and grabbed her hand with a loud *whoop*. “This is great. Weasels is open again!”

“You’re taking me to a rodent bar?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Weasels – or more accurately Pop’s Went the Weasel! – the most popular hot spot in Crystal City, outside of the single dance hall, turned out to be an ice cream joint. The most amazing ice cream parlor Suzy had ever beheld.

Old-fashioned soda jerks wearing red-and-white-striped shirts, little folded paper hats and big smiles served everything from banana splits to towering, multiple scoops of ice cream loaded into candy-coated waffle cones. Even the humble milkshake made a chalkboard menu appearance.

The line was out the door and around the building, scads of kids and adults just waiting for creamy dairy goodness. “Now I know where all the people in West Texas must gather. Is it always this packed?”

Hand at her waist, Jonah guided her forward a few inches. A miracle – after twenty minutes in line, Suzy could see the counter! That wasn’t all she’d seen either, thinking she knew the good-looking yet harassed cowboy who was shepherding three kids toward the door, ice cream and napkins in hand.

Incongruent juxtaposition, that – the addition of the knee-biters.

Thinking she knew but not caring enough to stare for positive identity. Wasn’t worth it. Only two men occupied her thoughts at present – the stalwart, sexy one behind her and the grizzled red suspender-wearing one marching back and forth behind the counter, clapping his hands and encouraging his employees to, “Scoop with a smile!”

Continuing her earlier train of thought, Suzy added, “I didn’t know this many people lived here.”

“Tonight’s special – it’s opening weekend.”

“You make it sound like deer hunting.”

“That’s not until November. Pop here takes off every year during the spring and summer to visit his grandkids and take them fishing. The place is only open from October through February.”

“Hand-scooped ice cream available only during winter? Isn’t that backward?”

“Not if you live here year-round. We get tons of tourists once it starts warming up. Spring break is a madhouse, so Pop always closes shop before the crowds hit and takes off for what he calls his annual R ’n’ R.”

Suzy rocked back on her heels and let Jonah support her weight. She took in the polished chrome accents bracketing the candy bins along one wall and the old hardwood floor that had to have been around as long as Nana. The place was a jewel.

Calliope music whistled and tooted overhead. Low conversation buzzed, creating a soothing hum, and Suzy closed her eyes, continued to rest against Jonah’s body and just let her mind wander...

She couldn’t help but contrast her annual vacation with the one enjoyed yearly by the proprietor of Weasels. Ol’ Pop. She liked the suspenders and the beard – reminded her of Santa Claus.



Pop's family oriented trip. Her orgasm-oriented one.

It was like night and day.

Naughty versus nice.

Slut versus sweet.

Suzy. Susannah.

Somehow, the more time she spent with Jonah, the more the two seemed to blend together...

"Amazing. I don't think he recognizes you."

Secure in her comfortable yet slight weight resting against him, Jonah didn't realize he'd spoken out loud until Suzy murmured, "Hmmm? Who?"

So she hadn't noticed either? Hot damn! "No one. Carry on..."

She hummed along with the piped-in organ music *ta ta da da dadada-ing* in the background and gave every indication of being content. Jonah knew he was. Able to maintain cordiality and more than a little surprised at the lack of true jealousy, but knowing both were due to the confidence he'd gained in himself as a man and a lover over the past few days thanks to the hellion in front of him, Jonah jerked his head in a semblance of a nod at Steve when their gazes briefly connected.

He had a hard time not grinning like an outright fool, given how seconds ago, not only had Steve's eyes glanced right over the woman in Jonah's arms, neither had she given any indication of recognition – or even better, interest.

Aborted tattoos aside, this was turning out to be a great night.

When it was their turn to order, Suzy went all out, requesting an extra-large Big Red soda – claiming she had to try the "Taste of Texas" as the multitude of metal signs populating the periphery of Weasels attested – and a small chocolate-dipped cone and a large chocolate milkshake, saying Jonah could have as much or as little of each as he wanted, but she was celebrating. Given how she flashed her hand when she said it, he thought she meant their successful ruse.

Jonah happily settled for a root beer freeze then settled Suzy into a just vacated red vinyl booth in the corner. He sat across from her, sweeping off his hat and tucking it beside him.

She slurped on her straw. "Never knew what I was missing!"

"Stick out your tongue." She did so without a moment's hesitation. Jonah laughed. "Your mouth's already red as a cherry. Better not let Sheba catch you drinking that – you'll get a lecture on the evils of food coloring."

Suzy slowly set the drink aside and picked up her cone, chocolate-covered vanilla ice cream hovering just below her lips. She raised one eyebrow. "Planning on introducing me to your cousin?"

“Oh,” Jonah replied glibly, pausing to take a couple swallows of freeze. “I kinda figured you met everyone this afternoon. Your grand entrance and all.”

He thought he saw her blush but that might’ve just been the glow off the red tabletop. “I meant *formally*.”

*Play it cool.* She’s relaxed, comfortable. Keep her that way. “Well...yeah. Makes sense I would, doesn’t it? A man doesn’t up an’ announce he’s engaged and not introduce the female to his family.”

“Sort of engaged, you mean.”

Dare he hope that was piqué he heard? Jonah knew better than to even hint at anything other than a fake, saving-face engagement. Not this early in the game. “As far as introducing you to Sheba and everyone else—we’ll be lucky if we aren’t tackled the moment we step foot on Bottoms Up property, be it the bar in town or the ranch. I guarantee, everyone—especially the girls—will want all the juicy details of our relationship.”

When her arm trembled, a dollop of vanilla ice cream fell off the cone “What are we going to tell them?”

“The truth.” At least as far as he was able.

“That I was almost raped by Burns and you saved me in exchange for a blowjob and a fu—*nmvshstorcl!*”

Jonah stopped that line of thinking the fastest way he could—by shoving the rest of the cone in her mouth.

Suzy’s eyes bugged and he pushed the ice cream in farther, quickly wiping off the oozing mass escaping past her lips and bringing it to his.

After licking his fingers clean, Jonah conceded, “That may be one way to describe it, and you did just remind me of something I’ve been meaning to do—thanks.” He took his cell out and punched in a text reminder for later then returned his full attention to the woman across from him, currently wiping ice cream off her jaw. “But truth or not, I don’t think of you that way and I don’t want to hear you describing our interactions as anything less than stellar. Spectacular. Sublime. Satisfying. Stunni—”

“Okay. Okay. I get you. Don’t beat a dead horse.”

Still so damn gratified that Steve hadn’t recognized the “exposed” Suzy—the one without the red hair and glaring tattoos—Jonah took her grumbling in stride. “I can’t believe I’m sitting here...” He took a napkin and cleaned a smudge of chocolate off her chin. “With you. Like this. After all these years... Tell me something. Why’d you turn me down the first few times I asked?”

“You mean out?”

“Yeah. First you said no then you claimed a boyfriend... Do you have any idea how long it took me to get the courage to try again?”

Suzy polished off her Big Red and the last bite of waffle cone before precisely situating her chocolate milkshake front and center. Hands on the table bracketing the

cup, she met his gaze and spoke distinctly. "My experience with men up to that point wasn't exactly what you'd call stellar or spectacular or *truthful*."

As that was one of the most full-out and forthright responses he'd received from her, Jonah lifted his brows but remained silent, using the action of spooning out the bottom of his freeze as an excuse to remain casual.

She scooted deeper into the booth, putting distance between them. "That was my sophomore year, you know. I'd sworn off men entirely and thought I was completely justified in doing so. My senior year in high school, I dated the same guy. For months, he bugged me for sex and while I wasn't sure I was ready, I loved having a boyfriend and so... Things at home had been..." She started picking at the paper cup in front of her. "I don't know, strained. My parents divorced when I was younger – Mom caught Dad cheating and that was the end of that. So I finally gave in and we started having sex and it was...okay. But the night of prom, when my dear date disappeared, I went looking and found him with his hand up the dress of my *former* best friend."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. My freshman year in college, I started dating this total sweet-talker. Fell for him like a fool and after a few dates we slept together. Four days later, when I went by his dorm room because he hadn't called, I learned I was freshman number *nine* on his efforts to reach thirty – he wanted to best his prior year by ten."

"At Cornell?" That had Jonah crunching the bottom of his cup – good thing it was empty – and leaning forward. "Who was it? You tell me and I'll –"

Suzy kicked him under the table. "You'll what? Be a hero a decade too late? Not needed, cowboy. You did just fine a few days ago and I'm over that now. Really."

"So that's why you kept giving me the heave-ho?"

She toyed with her straw and nodded. "I decided I had seriously impaired judgment when it came to men so it was easier to avoid them. You want to know what really sucks?"

*There was more?*

"For years I didn't see much of my dad then he decides he wants to reestablish a relationship with me and my sister. That night we were at the dance club and he wasn't, when I finally agreed to go out with you...I found out later Daddy was off screwing his secretary, which was more important to him than the quality time he'd demanded with his youngest daughter."

"Damn. No wonder you have trust issues with men."

"Congratulations Dr. McKenzie, you completed your psycho-analyzation over milkshakes and soda, and pinned it in one."

"So this is why you do your yearly vacation thing?"

For the first time, she hesitated, and Jonah knew he wasn't hearing all of it. "Right. Men aren't dependable, so why bother? Why open myself up for hurt or...or rejection?"

Rejection. "God, exactly what I did to you – abandoned you without a word."

The shuttered look left her expression and she gave him a soft, sad smile. “But not intentionally. I know that now.”

Not ready to drop the subject entirely, Jonah gave her a gentle kick under the table, to let her know he was still right there with her...as much as she’d let him be. “Wanna tell me what your friends think of your annual sexfest?”

“That I’m visiting Great Aunt Myrna in Iowa.”

“Every year?”

She made a waving motion with her hand, indicating *whatever*.

Jonah reached for her milkshake, happy to note there was plenty left to share. “Do you have a Great Aunt Myrna?”

A big sigh was her answer. Three seconds later, she confessed, “When I was a kid. It’s what I named my turtle.”

By now, the bulk of the crowd had dispersed, customers being waited upon close to the time they entered the doors. One of the hatted and suspended employees stopped by their table to see if they needed anything else. Jonah answered with a shake of his head and reached for his wallet. He couldn’t remember whether it was customary to tip at Weasels—it’d been years since he sat down to enjoy his ice cream—but for all the information he’d gleaned during the past hour, Pop and these kids deserved some monetary remuneration. After dispatching the kid with a ten, Jonah turned to Suzy. “Guess we’ve both been hiding our true selves.”

“You?” She acted surprised—and relieved—that he’d shifted the focus *from* her. “What’ve you been hiding?”

“My goals. Ambitions. *College*. But I aim to change things now, starting with you. I’m not hiding you. But there is something I’m still wanting to know...” Maintaining his voice as light as he could, he kept his gaze on the wallet in his hand, not wantin’ her to be unnerved. “Any chance you’d be able to stay longer? Stick around just to see what all might be between us?”

“Well, cowboy...” As if she’d reached her quota of confessions for the night, Suzy answered in the most flippant way possible. “Looks to me like there’s one crushed freeze cup, one partially leftover milkshake and several dirty napkins.”

## Chapter Twenty

*Message left on Asshole Evan Diamond's work phone*

“Diamond. Jonah McKenzie. Seeing as how you’re ‘in charge’ of the Bottoms Up Bar an’ Grille until we get you and your lecherous legal actions tossed on their ear where they belong, it behooves you to ensure the place is safe for anyone wanting a good time. Now listen up—a woman was almost raped in the parking lot the other night—on your watch. Did you know about that, manager-man? If you don’t start keeping the scum away and takin’ your duties seriously, guess we’ll have to do it for you. And your sorry carcass’ll be the first one evicted off the premises. *Comprende?*”

*Second message, left two minutes later*

“Oh yeah, and Darin Burns—he’s banned from ever steppin’ foot there again. You make sure he knows that and abides by it, and it’ll go a long way toward keeping my fist out of your mouth.”

\* \* \* \* \*

By the following afternoon Suzy was officially—and awkwardly—introduced to the rest of the family one by smirking one. All except Nana, whose frown could not have been any bigger. Afterward she was immediately enlisted in box carrying and engagement pretending.

Come the emptying of the last, loaded truck bed, about half of Jonah’s brothers and cousins had moved completely in as ordered. The other half, Suzy gathered, decided to go through the motions—they’d flaunt their way in, eat Nana’s fabulous, fattening cooking then sneak their way out.

It seemed only Isaiah was immune to Nana Dori’s dictates. Of him, Suzy had yet to see a hair.

It was soothing to know they weren’t all so perfect or innocent. Helped Suzy feel more at home.

Not that she was at home. Home was New York.

But for now...the casual interactions and conversation that flowed among the many McKenzies indicated all memory of her bare butt had been forgotten and forgiven.

Nana went so far as to invite Suzy to the grand dinner she’d prepared, celebrating not only her prodigal grandchildren’s return to the fold, but also the two—count ‘em, *two*—engagements as per her instructions. She’d insisted the newest family-member-to-be pile her plate higher and higher because “A scrawny lil’ thing like you needs more

meat on your bones if you intend to be a proper rancher's wife and bear him strappin' sons."

Suzy had nearly gagged, but Jonah's reassuring hand patting her knee calmed the reflex. She proceeded to choke down her meal, mentally plotting her new, intensified workout routine when she returned *home*.

Once the congratulatory meal was over, Jonah drove her to her cabin and thanked her for her all-day effort just the way she liked – with a big, brain-blowing orgasm that brought her to her knees.

Yes, it'd definitely weakened her mind, considering what she'd agreed to afterward...

Sunday morning equaled church time. Mandatory attendance and family gathering occasion, according to Nana.

With no way out, Suzy braved accompanying her "fiancé" and his relatives to their wooden pew – only three away from the pulpit. Gulp.

Jonah was gratified she joined him.

Nana was mollified she'd worn flats.

Suzy was just relieved she hadn't been smote and gone up in smoke.

After services, everyone sat down to yet another heavenly meal – except for Isaiah, who'd bailed after the sermon. Taking it upon herself to clear the mile-long table once bellies were full and plates empty, Suzy grabbed what dishes she could, shook her head – indicating Jonah should stay and visit – and made her way into the kitchen.

On her second trek, one of the triplets matched her efforts. Only two had attended church and enjoyed lunch, so she had a fifty-fifty chance... In their Sunday best, without their signature attire and neither wearing much makeup, telling them apart wasn't the breeze it was during the week. "Uh, Sheba, right?"

The natural beauty nodded, unloading her pile of dishes next to the sink. "Bull's eye. Here," Sheba reached for dish gloves, "I've got this – you go on back out there and relax."

*Relax?* Was she kidding? Suzy let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "God no. Please. Your grandmother intimidates the crap out of me – oh sorry. I mean, *crud*. Um...stuff."

"Come closer," Sheba coaxed, "I'm gonna let you in on a little secret." Yellow gloves in place, she started rinsing plates and utensils free of leftover remnants – not a single plate had anything worth scraping into the trash – and stacking them in the industrial-sized dishwasher. "Crud. Crap. Shit. Say whatever you want around me – around most all of us. Be yourself and don't look back. As for Nana Dori? She intimidates us all at one time or another and irritates us just as fast." Sheba paused to look straight at Suzy. "But you know what? I wouldn't trade her for the world."

"From what Jonah's shared, she's gone over the deep end in a free fall."

Sheba considered that then nodded with a wry smile. “True. She’s become more cantankerous and preachy in her old age, but I for one am willing to cut the ol’ gal some slack. Biblical platitudes aside, grandmothers don’t come any better. Did you know she practically raised us girls?” At Suzy’s negative shake, Sheba explained. “Our mother had us at seventeen then took off. Haven’t heard a word since.”

Suzy’s mom hadn’t exactly been Carol Brady, but... “*Nothing?*”

“Nope.”

“What about your dad?”

“She didn’t name him and no one stepped forward to claim us,” Sheba answered lightly, “well except for Nana Dori and Grandpa, Uncle Bram and Aunt Trish.”

“Oh Sheba...I can’t imagine.”

“Won’t deny it sucks, but between Nana and Aunt Trish—the boys’ mom—we had so much love and mothering, I didn’t think to miss her.”

While Sheba rinsed faster and shared a couple warm stories about being a kid in Nana’s household, Suzy thought of her own grandmother. Her dad’s mom died the year she was born so she’d only known her maternal grandmother, a frail wisp of a woman who never offered an opinion on any subject or exhibited an interest in anything other than *Wheel of Fortune*. Suzy scoured her memory, hoping to recall Grandmama showing passion about something, but all Suzy did was smell mothballs and hear *I’d like to buy a vowel*.

When the stack of dishes in the sink went down, Suzy piled in the rest. “Wow. You’re a regular speed demon at that.”

“Practice. Lots and lots of practice.”

“With this family, I can imagine.”

“That too. But I meant at the grille. We’ve been short-handed lately.”

“So you run the restaurant?”

“I don’t know if I’d say ‘run’. Jezzy’s in charge of scheduling and inventory, all that behind-the-scenes stuff, but I’m responsible for the menu and act as head chef. Hey! If you don’t already have a job lined up when you move out here...” Sheba paused, waiting for her answer and Suzy barely caught her eyeballs before they *boinged* out of their sockets. Of course his family would expect Jonah’s “fiancée” to live in Rustlers Junction.

“I, umm, haven’t really thought about what I’ll do.” *About any of this!*

“Keep me posted because there’s always work to be had waitressing or tending bar, just until you get settled—or longer if you want it.” She snapped her fingers and sprayed water a few inches in the air. “With us vacating the loft and now that you’re gonna be family, you’re *more* than welcome to move in there an’ save some bucks. I haven’t checked their rates online, but a friend told me the Lucky Lady is *pri-cee!*”

“The loft?”

"Above the bar. That's where we've lived ever since Grandpa helped us buy the place. Though I'm sure you and Jonah'll be movin' into one of the empty ranch houses after the wedding—I can't see him living more than a mile or two from Aunt Trish's roses—the loft's yours if you want it. Starting today if you're interested."

"Gosh, that's so..."

Damn *nice*. Family, with all the trappings.

So damn guilt-inspiring!

Suzy couldn't fathom the warmth this clan must suffuse each other with, given how she—a stranger and a trampy sex-pot of one to boot—had been automatically accepted. All because of the ring on her finger. The lie she was helping Jonah perpetuate. How long had she been feeling slightly queasy? All this gooey, feel-good stuff was foreign. "Thanks, that's real nice of you, really, but, um..."

"No hurries, no worries, chickadee. Just know the offers're open if you ever want to take us up on 'em."

"Your sisters won't mind?"

"Nah. We may dress like we come from opposite ends of the spectrum, but our thoughts always run parallel, especially when it comes to kinfolk."

While Sheba rinsed and loaded with an efficiency nothing short of astonishing, and using the water and noise to hopefully drown out her guilt, Suzy confessed what'd been bothering her for days. "I'm sure she hates me though—your grandmother—after all I said in front of her—to her. How I spoke."

Broaching the topic that had occupied more of her brain than she wanted to admit, Suzy's face heated and she grabbed a paper towel from over the sink. Blotting her upper lip, her forehead—hiding—she finished, "I cussed her out like a punk *kid*." Easing the paper towel down, she met Sheba's clear gaze. "I know how to behave, I do. It's just that—" Suzy started to use being on vacation as her excuse but stopped because that *wasn't* why she'd acted so badly. "That I'm falling for your cousin and it scares the shit out of me."

With a small smile, Sheba turned the water off and turned to Suzy. She held out her arms, yellow gloves and all, and Suzy found herself stepping into a Texas-sized hug. "Don't cry," Sheba said on a laugh. "Jonah's a really wonderful guy. You must know that if you agreed to marry him, right?"

She was crying? Well damned if she wasn't! Wiping at her eyes now, Suzy hugged her back and sniffed. "Sure..."

But only for pretend. Her feelings though?

Crap, they were turning real—that was the problem. But she couldn't very well tell Sheba *that*.

"Hey, Sheeb's—where's that...ap...ple...pie..." One of the men stumbled to a halt behind them. Suzy couldn't tell which. "Oh! Sorry."

"In the fridge," Sheba answered succinctly. "Eat it cold."



“Yes ma’am.”

A clank and the scrape of a pie dish, another embarrassed “Sorry” and then it was just the two of them again.

Sheba leaned back and stripped the gloves off. “Come on.”

“Where?”

After snagging two all-natural sodas from the fridge, Sheba practically pushed Suzy out the back door. “The porch—it’s where I go when I need to be alone. This time, *we* need to be alone.”

“But the dishes,” Suzy protested, staring behind her at the door Sheba’d just shut, wishing for a way out of this.

“Jezzy’ll do the rest. Likely rope Ez and Zack in to help. They’ll finish off the pie so she’ll guilt them into it. Come on, spill. I can tell somethin’s bugging you.”

“And you’re not even the bartender,” Suzy grumbled. But when she spoke, it wasn’t about the fake engagement at all. It wasn’t about the strange—soft—feelings she kept experiencing whenever she was with Jonah. Which by now was virtually all the time. It wasn’t about the guilt. Not directly anyway. “I knew Jonah before—back in college.”

“Aha! New York!” When Suzy started at Sheba’s sound of satisfaction, Sheba gave a sheepish smile. “No offense, but all you Yankees sound the same,” Sheba said with a shrug. “But this explains soooo much. Once he denied you were his Lubbock lady, I knew there had to be more than a bar pick-up to your association. That just isn’t Jonah’s style.”

“But it’s Bo’s?” Suzy asked a tad snidely, knowing that’s *exactly* how Bo and Sommer had hooked up.

“Well...no, not typically. But you’ve got to understand—Jonah doesn’t do *anything* spur of the moment. Do you get what I’m saying? For him to announce an engagement—this quickly—it’s not Jonah. It’s not. That means it’s *you*.”

“Me?” Why did Suzy suddenly feel under attack? Sommer was supposed to be the lawyer—not this speed-washing demon of a chef. “What do you mean me? I didn’t do anything to him.”

Except goad him. Blow him. Lov—

Ack! *Lust* him!

“Something special in you,” Sheba said intently. “Something special about you. Because with Jonah, everything is planned in advance. Everything.”

Hmmm. That fit with the man Suzy suspected she knew but... “That’s what I thought. But trust me,” her bottom heated at the memory, “your cousin has surprises and then some up his sleeve.”

Sheba pushed off the swing, standing with a lurch. “Damn. Some days it doesn’t pay to jump the fence.” While Suzy was deciphering that sentence, Sheba whirled

around and pointed a finger. "I can tell by your tone. What is it this week?" She planted her hands on her hips and scowled.

Suzy sat there, eyes wide, comprehension eluding her.

And then all was made clear when Sheba counted off. "First Sommer. Then Tamar. Now you. Everybody's gettin' sparked but me!"

"Sparked?" Suzy couldn't help but laugh at the old-fashioned word. Not to mention the look of woe on Sheba's face.

"One of the codes we came up with in case Nana Dori was around. God, that was ages ago. We were young enough we hoped she'd think we were talking about kissing. But I'm not. Not getting any at all. Not kissing, not sparking, not coming anywhere close to skin on skin. Not lately. Everyone around me is getting laid, but never me. But to hear our grandmother talk, you'd think we all lived in dens of iniquity. And here I am—dry as a bone for nearly a year."

"Thirstin' for a...boner?"

Sheba cracked up and plopped back down. "There. I feel better. How 'bout you?"

Oddly, though nothing had been settled, she did. "Much. And if I haven't already said so—I love your skirt."

Sheba held up the topmost, multi-tiered layer of teal gauze. "Thanks. I made this one in high school home ec."

"You made that? Cool." Suzy wanted to back the conversation up a few sentences. Ask why Sheba had left Jezzy's name off her list of ladies gettin' laid. Wanted more to dish the dirt on who Tamar was being wild and wicked with—one of those helicopter dudes had to be part of it—but some things were just too plain nosy even for her. She wondered whether the triplets were aware of *The Book of Men* and decided that wasn't a conversation for today. She'd opened up a big enough can of worms for one afternoon—spilling the beans about her coming to care for Jonah. Other topics and questions could wait.

Maybe she'd ask *after* the wedding. The fake one that wasn't supposed to happen.

The one she was starting to think about more and more... With one thought overriding most others. "But your grandmother—Nana—hates me now."

"Not at all. You're a woman who's putting a ring on her second-eldest grandson's finger! She loves you!"

"I seriously doubt that." She also felt *seriously* guilty, not 'fessing up about how they were only "sort of" engaged. How it was all just a ruse.

But every time Suzy started to tell Sheba the truth, the words clogged in her throat. So she used some others instead. "I've got an idea."

"Name it." Sheba arched her neck, spread her arms wide and kicked the swing into motion. "Sundays...glorious Sundays. After church, my time is my own."

"The restaurant isn't open for Sunday lunch? I would think you'd get a big crowd after church."

Sheba shot her a speaking glance. “Nope. I decided to listen to Nana on this one and keep the grille closed Sundays and Mondays. My days of rest, as it were. But Tamar? She’ll have the bar open and be serving nuts and beer any minute now.”

“If you think it’d be okay, let’s go see if we can rescue a piece of pie and take it up to your granddad. I’d love to meet him.”

Sheba stiffened and the porch swing came to a clanging halt. “Jonah hasn’t introduced you yet?”

“He tried. Took me up there before lunch. Mr. McKenzie was sawing logs loud enough to summon zombies.” Jonah’d shared his dream of Lady Godiva Susannah. Now Suzy had zombies on the brain.

“Mr. McKenzie?” Sheba laughed. “No need to be so formal, not around here. Come on, if the pie’s gone, we’ll grab Jonah instead.” Sheba led the way back inside. “And now I know why Grandpa wasn’t brought down for lunch. I thought Nana was pissed at him again. Least he’s gettin’ some sleep. He’s had quite the eventful few days. Have you *seen* Bo’s tractor?”

\* \* \* \* \*

After an entertaining afternoon losing at dominos to both Grandpa and Suzy—complete with his grandfather’s distracting but well-intended “compliments” on his bride-to-be and satisfying-her-in-the-sack tips Jonah could’ve done a lifetime without—he left Suzy in the capable hands of Jezzy and Sheba, who invited her to Crystal City. Seemed the girls were bent on a shopping spree to decorate their new room.

Jonah had a bad feeling their walls were going to end up black or they’d come up with some other blatant way to stick it to Nana, and he doubted Suzy and her wild tastes were going to tame the selections any.

Though he was happy to see the three of them take off, laughing and scheming, because Jonah had an errand of his own to run. Unfinished business to take care of.

A number of miles and a couple dirt roads later, Jonah was pounding on a weathered door.

He’d tracked his adversary to little more than a shack out behind the extensive stables. At a noise inside, he shifted the burden in his left hand and pounded harder with his right. “Open up! I know you’re in there!”

“Hell, man! What’s your—” came from behind the door just before it was wrenched open, “deal? Who’s th— Jonah McKenzie?” Blinking in the late afternoon sun, looking as if he’d tied one on and been sleeping off a humdinger of a hangover, Steve Hansen stood in jeans and untucked flannel shirt, barefoot and unshaven.

“Yeah, it’s me. Interesting operation you have going on here,” Jonah said with forced casualness.

“Things’re working out pretty well, I suppose. We’re staying booked, keepin’ overhead in check better now that all the new construction’s complete.” Though Steve was still blinking, the drunken-sleep haze had cleared from his eyes.

But not the confusion.

Jonah knew his abrupt presence was a surprise. Damn, Steve’s condition was too. After running into him the other day—where he’d appeared fine, escorting his niece and nephews to Weasels—Jonah thought his former boss had recovered. Now he wasn’t so sure.

The doubt dulled the edge of his anger.

Way back in high school, when the spread was the Triple H and ran Hereford-Angus crosses, Jonah had hired on as a part-time hand. That was before Steve lost his wife and two kids in a car accident. Then lost his will to go on without ’em, at least for a while according to Bo who was closer to Steve’s age and knew him better.

Steve had “sold out” to hear Bo tell it, to one of the conglomerates eager to gobble up ranches in this part of in the country and turn them into “sissified amusement parks”—a.k.a., the Lucky Lady.

Jonah didn’t hold that opinion. Way he saw it, times were a-changing and if a man didn’t change with them, he’d be left behind. But that didn’t mean turning to pimping local cowboys!

After the sale, in which Steve supposedly made a tidy profit, he’d stayed on and hunkered down somewhere nearby to grieve in private, or so Jonah’d heard. That’d been a few years back. Jonah saw him occasionally, nodded when they crossed paths at the feed store or at church on Sundays—though certainly not this one.

“Hey.” When Jonah remained silent, Steve spoke up with a nod. “I hear Joe’s riding high in the latest rodeo standings. You tell him I hope he goes all the way this year.”

“I’ll do that.” Jonah leaned against the rickety door jam, intentionally holding the book in his possession out of sight. He faked a bored yawn, keeping his gaze glued on Steve’s all the while. Then he let it drop... “But I wasn’t talking about the ranch operation. I’m talking about *The BoM*.”

A look of shock then betrayal swept over Steve’s ashen face. He sputtered, turned white then red and a haunted look came into his eyes. “You know? *Who* the hell—”

“No one told.” Not really.

Yeah, Suzy’d told him the nickname, but the rest... Jonah’s voice hardened, jaw tensed. “I snuck into the cabin of one of your guests—I believe you know her...” God, he almost choked on his own spit. “*Intimately*. Little hellion. Red hair, tattoos.”

A terse nod was Steve’s only response.

“Turns out she and I go way back. *Way* back. I’m thinkin’ there’s a chance we might go forward as well.” Though his jaw ached from clenching and his fingers ached with the urge to level Steve, Jonah used everything within him not to throw a punch.

“Uh...cabin eight?” Uttered as though Steve spanked so many he couldn’t keep them all straight.

That did it.

Control a thing of the past, Jonah chucked the book to the ground and powered a right hook that slammed into the side of Steve’s chin. The other man rocked back two steps and swore.

When Steve recovered and faced him, Jonah was breathing fire, ready for Steve’s reciprocal punch. Ready more to lay him out.

Steve stood his ground but made no move to advance. “I’m not going to fight you on this. I had that one coming.”

“Damn right you did.” Jonah shifted forward.

Steve instinctively ducked behind raised fists. “But don’t expect me to stand here and be your punching bag for another.”

Shit. Steve was right.

Jonah relaxed his stance a fraction, reality edging back in. And what was with him lately? He’d just *punched* a man—an old family friend—in a fit of jealousy. It wasn’t as if Steve had any control over Suzy’s actions...or had any inkling she and Jonah were soon to be involved at the time of the...*exchange*. How it galled though.

“Jonah?” Lowering his fists, Steve straightened. “Man, if I’d known she was a friend of yours, I *never* would’ve...you know.”

“Fair enough.” *We’ll stop with one.*

“God, what a jumble.”

What an understatement. “Look, Hansen, I need you to promise me—you’ll wipe your mind clear of that night and if you *ever* see her again, you nod politely and treat her like she’s your fuckin’ grandmother. Got it?”

Steve lifted one hand to test the skin of his jaw. He winced but gave an affirmative nod. “Yeah. Works for me.”

The book lying on the ground between them finally drew Steve’s attention. “An’ you keep this side operation to yourself and I won’t charge you with breaking and entering.”

Tension eased now that they’d reached an understanding.

A second later, Jonah couldn’t help but ask, “Steve? How in the world did you get involved in such a thing in the first place?” As always, when he thought of Steve, he thought of the horrible way he lost his family. “Is it because of Cheryl an’ —”

“Topic’s off-limits.”

“But—”

“I mean it.” The tension was back, in every line of Steve’s stance.

“Understood.” And Jonah did—to a point. Losing both parents in one swoop had affected each of the McKenzie boys differently. Who was he to step on Steve’s grieving

process? “But if you ever do want to talk—I’ve got a good ear and a mouth like a steel trap. Easy enough to forge, given the rowdy group I’ve grown up with.”

For a moment, Steve’s eyes lost their haunted cast, his posture softened. “Jonah, I...” Then a cold look entered and he firmed both his resolve and his spine. “Not needed, but thanks.” He bent and reached for the book in his weedy yard, but Jonah beat him to it.

“Hold up a minute.” Jonah flipped to page thirty-three. His eyes zeroing in on that heavy blotch of pink scratch outs—the entire page was a mess—from what he’d ordered Suzy to do that day in her cabin. *Tried* to order.

Jonah’s motivation was to keep Steve from seeing what she’d written about him. *Two of the best rides I’ve had in a long, long while.* He’d just told the man to forget her, no use stroking his ego.

But it was Jonah’s ego that got stroked. His heart—and dare he admit it, his cock—that swelled. For in that frilly, feminine writing, sometime between her resistance and joining him in the shower, the little vixen had penned the sweetest thing he’d ever read.

Wearing a grim smile, Jonah ripped the page that didn’t have his picture on it, but the one that did have a compliment worthy of soothing his pride from any manner of injuries—imagined or otherwise. “You take care of yourself, Steve. Take care of this little operation you’re running here.” Jonah aimed his thumb over his shoulder, indicating the entire spread and Steve’s unsavory activities on the side. “You ever wanna talk, I’m here. But you just remember what I said—you *don’t* know her.”

By the time he was back in his truck, Steve was inside, but Jonah didn’t notice. His eyes didn’t have interest in anything but the pretty pink words before him. *Cannot compare to my man Jonah. He’s the best I’ve ever had – or ever will.*

## Chapter Twenty-One

*What kind of Ass are you?*

*Today's Teen*, the no-holds-barred *Don't Be a Punk!* trial bonus issue Sommer received as a *Sophisticated Woman* subscriber, unread because even Sommer had her limits. Needless to say, *Today's Teen* never became a monthly.

Suzy scanned the result possibilities—*Hard ass, Smart ass, Kiss ass*—then deliberately dropped the pristine magazine in a puddle of pool water.

She was a hard-assed smartass who'd never kissed ass a day in her life.

And she didn't need a dumb chick mag—or teen mag—test to tell her she *wasn't* about to start now.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Now, Susannah, don't forget to preheat the oven, you hear? Boaz installed me a new double-stacker last month—that boy's our genius with all things mechanical." Suzy bit her lip to keep from spouting off—every time Nana referred to one of her "boys" as though they were twelve, she had a hard time not reminding Nana these were full-grown men. "It's a bit contrary, what with all those newfangled gadbuttons, but it gets the job done."

It wasn't as though Suzy hadn't been in the kitchen before...cleaning, if not helping to cook. Wasn't as though she hadn't heard odes sung to that new oven the past couple days. Blissful, Jonah-filled days in which he'd been remarkably cheerful. Downright jovial in fact—which he claimed was all on account of his "fiancée's" presence. As for Suzy, she couldn't remember spending this much time with the same man, much less scads of his family, and enjoying herself more.

"You did remember to soften the butter, I hope. An' I always gather up all my ingredients before I start. It makes everything come together faster. Cookie sheets are under the island—remember, don't spray 'em. Hot mitts in this drawer here..."

*Pre-measure this. Don't spray that.*

Did the baking Nazi that was Nana ever relax her guard?

Evidently not. "Did you sift the flour, like it says?"

She hadn't. "Yes ma'am."

"Cream the sugars and butter *first*? Then beat in the oil at a slow drizzle?"

Now *that* she actually had. "Yes ma'am."

Nana eyed her askance. “Keep sayin’ that like you really mean it, young lady, an’ one of these days, I might start believin’ you.”

It wasn’t easy but Suzy managed to maintain an innocent expression—or at least what she hoped passed as such, not having an excessive amount of practice in that regard. She pasted on a bright smile. “I really appreciate you letting me make these for Jonah.”

After she’d learned they were his favorite, it’d only taken two days of dropping hints broad enough to body slam an elephant that she sure would like to try her hand at making his mother’s sugar cookies for Nana to finally—after a look from Jonah and an elbow from Sheba, if Suzy wasn’t mistaken—dig out and share the family recipe.

Most of the McKenzies were off at work or engaged in other various pursuits. Bo and Isaiah were out in the barn, working on stripping the *pink* paint off Bo’s tractor. Apparently whoever had the asinine notion to transform Bo’s pride and joy into a Barbiemobile had gotten paint on some of the engine parts—or something. Suzy couldn’t differentiate the insides of a running vehicle from the starting lineup of the Dallas Cowboys...something Jonah’d indicated she’d learn *if* she hung around for more of football season. Exactly how he planned that was still a mystery, given no one in the family had televisions that she knew of.

“Well now,” Nana Dori huffed in a way that completely belied her attempt at supposed friendliness, “I’m sure I can make myself useful elsewhere. You go on and mix that dough. We’ll need to chill it for several hours bef—”

“Hours?!”

When those spry blue eyes jumped on her, Suzy was struck with the impression Nana was just waiting for her to mess up. “Of course *hours*. Overnight is better. You don’t want the dough being all stickawompous, do you?”

Uh... “Sticka...what?”

“*Sticky.*”

Oh. The longer this took, the more Suzy was tempted to start spooning sugar and butter straight down her gullet. She needed the sugar rush and fast—before she did something stupid, like telling Jonah’s grandmother to get out of her kitchen! Stupid because she wasn’t exactly in *her* kitchen, now was she?

When did she start feeling territorial over Jonah’s abode?

When he’d started claiming pieces of her body—and heart—she’d never let another near?

“Hours. Okay.” Her face fell. “It’s just that I was hoping to have these ready before Jo—”

Oops! She’d almost blown his cover by saying *before Jonah returned from Lubbock*. He’d left for class yesterday, was due back later this afternoon, had even encouraged Suzy to join him on the overnight trip. She’d declined, knowing she needed some time free of sexy, studly cowboy to do some thinking.



What she hadn't realized was how much she'd miss his presence, nor how much time she'd spend in his home—even with him gone. Attempting to salvage the sentence, she rushed ahead. "I really wanted to have these ready before dinner."

Her sincerity must've been apparent because Grandmother Nazi patted her shoulder once then walked away, saying under her breath, "You could always try chillin' it in the freezer."

Well, it would get colder faster. Maybe the old lady wasn't out to get her after all.

Suzy worked quickly...creaming, blending and beating—sneaking dollops of butter and sugar every step along the way. When was the last time she'd done something so...so damn old-fashioned? She felt like June Cleaver. All that was missing were the pearls. Suzy started humming the *Leave it to Beaver* theme and broke off when she realized she wanted to do something just a tad different than the recipe card.

Heading over to the pantry, she scoured the shelves where she'd found the vanilla on her last foray but to no avail. Everything had been rearranged.

"Mrs. McKenzie," she called, finally giving up, "where do you keep the spices? I can't find any cinnamon."

"Cinnamon?" the old lady squawked, running in so fast Suzy wondered if she'd been standing sentry just outside the archway. "What in tarnation do you need that for?"

*I'm going to snort it.* "I thought I'd put a little in the batter. See how —"

"You can't put cinnamon in sugar cookies!"

Oh no? *Watch me.*

Remembering this was a woman she *wanted* to like her, Suzy subdued the instant retort. Took a page from Jonah's book and recited pi—couldn't get beyond that second decimal place so it was a short pause before she asked—quite genteelly, "Whyever not?"

"You just don't! They're *sugar* cookies, for land's sakes, not spice bread."

*Boy, you're a stubborn coot.* But Suzy was equally determined and she had the new feeling of *belonging* backing her. Hadn't his family repeatedly told her to make herself at home? "Isn't that how all great new recipes are *created*," she threw in a little biblical dig, "with experimentation? By taking a chance?" Huh. Much like the one Jonah kept asking her to take with him.

The old woman *harumped* but marched over to the pantry like Joshua around Jericho. Suzy was waiting to hear the horn blow when, after knocking things around a bit and grumbling something unintelligible about *varmint grandsons*, Nana emerged with two spice jars.

How in the world had she missed them?

"Here. Ain't no arguin' with that henwankled reasonin' of yours. Might as well add in some allspice while you're at it."

"Yessum."

"You sassin' me, child?"

Hell's bells, nothing escaped the old goat, did it?

Giving up the attitude once and for all with a sigh that would've put out the burning bush, Suzy grabbed the half teaspoon. While precisely measuring, she admitted, "I was. But I won't. Not anymore."

Nana nudged her hip with one elbow and shocked Suzy to the gills when she said, "Better not give it up entirely, missy. I can spot a fake sassbucket a mile away, and when you aren't dressed like a hussy and spoutin' vulgarities, you can be right agreeable."

While Suzy sputtered and choked—and dropped the cinnamon jar smack in the batter—Nana continued. "Not to mention, I appreciate how Jonah's been behavin' with you around. Always kept his face buried in those books and that ass of his in the ranch office before. Nice to see him out and about. Smiling more. Nice to see him takin' Josiah in hand. That boy needs more guidance."

Quick as a wink, Nana pulled the spice jar out, wiped it off with a towel then nodded to the recipe card where Suzy'd slapped on a yellow sticky with her changes. "Might want to add another full teaspoon on there. I'm thinkin' that's how much spilled out."

"Yes ma'am." Her tone was perfect politeness, all the sass and starch knocked right out of her by Nana's surprising comments.

"Oh, an' once you get it rolled up tight, put the dough in the freezer and come on out to the porch so we can jaw a bit. If it's not cold enough in an hour or two, we'll roll 'em anyway."

"Sure thing, Mrs. McKenzie."

"Seems you ought to start calling me Nana Dori. After all, you're going to be family."

And while Suzy struggled with the unexpected emotion flooding her at the knowledge she'd been accepted—finally—by the McKenzie family matriarch, Nana kept the miracles coming, explaining how Jonah had told her all about *Susannah*—the gal he'd known in New York—and about his current college endeavors and, three hours later, when she tasted Suzy's sugar cookies fresh from the oven and proclaimed them worthy of the newest McKenzie, damned if Suzy didn't break down and cry.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Shhh! *Quit it!*" Practically tripping up the stairs, Suzy hushed Jonah on a giggle, twisting away from his tickling fingers. "You're going to get us caught!"

When he persisted, she jabbed an elbow in his ribs, demanding he cease teasing her—not only with his fingers but also his bold laughter.

"Ow!"

"Be quiet."

Fingers fluttered at her waist and she jabbed again, prepared to roll him down the stairs alongside that tanning bed no one had moved past shoving it against a wall if he didn't either give up this ridiculous mission and take her home, as he'd told Nana he was doing, or shut his trap long enough for them to make it to his bedroom without being busted. Instead, there was his maddeningly light touch grazing her skin yet again. "Stop!"

Tensing his heavy arm around her shoulders, he hugged her close. "Ah, Suzy darlin', you're adorable when you're piqued."

"Piqued! *Darlin'*? You—" Suzy clamped her mouth as they reached the second-floor landing and he pointed to the bathroom door, light glowing beneath.

Fearing she'd turn blue from holding her breath, Suzy crept side-by-side with Jonah down the hall toward his room, certain she was nuts to have agreed to this. Nana was no fool. Suzy had barely—just barely—started to earn his grandmother's respect today. Everyone had loved her cookies. Now Jonah was bound and determined to blacken her name for good, slinking her up to his room after dark. And he wasn't even being quiet about it!

She'd *thought* he was taking her back to the Lucky Lady where the two of them would burn up the sheets after his overnight absence. But oh no! After driving just beyond the sight of the main house, Jonah killed the engine and they'd necked—like two teenagers, hands above the waist and clothes staying *on*.

After a sufficiently fun—and frustrating—amount of time, he'd claimed everyone would assume they'd left for the night and that she was in for a real treat. Suzy hadn't expected her "treat" to involve traipsing back to the house on foot and creeping in like kids who'd stayed out past curfew.

But Jonah had known the magic word, the one thing guaranteed to keep her protests stilled and feet moving—the lure of a *movie*. Given how his grandmother had outlawed television, she still wasn't sure how he'd pull it off, but she couldn't wait to find out.

He ushered her into his dark room, locking the door behind them. Relieved, Suzy released a pent-up sigh. "We made it," she whispered. "Thank God for small favors."

"I'll say." And just like that, he was on her, smothering her body in his steel embrace, hands on her face, threading through her hair, lips attacking hers with wet kisses as he pushed her through the shadows toward the bed.

"You said a movie!" she accused under her breath, terrified to talk aloud.

He silenced her with his mouth, crushing her into a fierce kiss as he flattened her on the mattress, blanketing her with his long, muscular limbs. Then his hands and lips were everywhere, stroking adoring paths over her body. Where they might land next a total mystery in the dead of night.

Senses heightened, Suzy succumbed to the temptation of his every caress.

Molding her breasts through her bra, spreading her jean-clad thighs, lowering the zipper. Tingles and arousal followed each touch, edged with the dread of being caught, of having Nana *truly* hate her.

“Jonah, we really shouldn’t,” Suzy insisted, clamping her legs around his hands. They *really* should’ve finished this in the truck! “Oh God...” came her low moan when his hot hand edged beneath her panties and fingered her slit.

“Submit to me,” he demanded in a husky whisper. “Open those thighs back up, all the way now. Let me make love to you. Got to make up for missing out last night.”

Her muscles went weak at the demand, self-will buckling. How intriguing, how tempting he made that sound. *Submit to me.*

“It’ll be okay, we’ll be quiet,” he assured her, working her jeans and panties past her hips to plunge fingers over recently trimmed curls—she’d had to do something with him gone yesterday—stroking into her pussy with speed and surety that had her arching off the bed. “Trust me.”

But she didn’t have the kind of sex that was quiet! Not her! She...she—

And then his fingers were pumping inside her, pushing her higher. Breaking past her resistance. But...

After several days as Jonah’s fiancée and getting to know his family—and seeing how wonderful they really were—she felt like a rat lying to everyone the way she was. Now disrespecting Nana’s rules in Nana’s house.

It might all be fake—rebel Suzy *and* their tame engagement—but what his relatives thought of her mattered. Was turning very real.

Unfortunately Jonah’s fingers swirling inside of her, demanding she submit...they mattered more.

Damn this man and what he did to her. The way his touch was magic coiling through her, taking over...commanding her body. Her head.

Beyond the rustle of denim and glide of skin, a slight rap sounded at his door.

They froze.

Another tap, then, “Hey, Jonah. Suzy...” It was one of the triplets. “Heard you two giggle past while I was flossing.”

“Go away!” Jonah ordered on a pleading growl, his hand flexing on her. *In* her. “Go!”

“No can do.” The rap came again. “Open up. Unless...you two wanna talk through the door?”

“It can wait until morning!” he insisted.

“Noooo, it caa-aaan’t,” Jezzy-Tamar-Sheba sing-songed back. “Come on, guys, we could’ve already been done by now.”

As though tired of whispering through the door, the feminine voice had grown almost to full volume.

“Move!” Panicked at the thought of being found out—at not being accepted as a result—Suzy scrambled to shove his weight off her, lunging for the door and tugging her jeans in place. *Ah!* Damn, she was sensitive. Zipping up on a moan and telling her heart to settle down, Suzy stumbled toward the crack of light seeping in from the hallway and whipped the door open.

“Get in here.” Nabbing the intruder by the arm, she lugged her inside and shut the door just as fast.

Jonah flicked on the bedside light as Jezzy or Sheba crossed her arms over the front of her floral robe—Tamar wouldn’t be caught dead in such normal nightwear. She gave them both a stern look, sniffed and muttered, “Unbelievably so not fair.”

Suzy gambled. “Sheba?”

“Yep.” With a wink, she offered to the man in bed, “I’m glad you’re keeping this one around if for no other reason than she’s figured us out.” Then Sheba’s attention turned to Suzy. “I have a message for you. And based on the way I got it, someone thinks you need it tonight.”

That sounded ominous. No one but her pregnant sister knew she was in Texas, and no one knew she was with Jonah. Fear replacing earlier arousal, Suzy braced herself. “What’s happened? Something with Beth’s...” *Kids...the baby...*

Suzy couldn’t ask it.

“Hey, hey...” Sheba’s arm shot out and gripped Suzy’s shoulder. The bedsprings groaned when Jonah stood. “Don’t look like that. It’s not a family emergency, if that’s what you’re thinking. At least I don’t think so. Julie from the Lucky Lady called a while ago, wondering if I had a clue where you were. She sounded pretty annoyed, said she’d been looking for you since yesterday. I told her Jonah was taking you home as we spoke, but... Appears that ain’t so. Anyway, here’s the number she gave me in case I saw you before she did. Said she needed to speak with you immediately.” Turning the knob, Sheba backed out with a wave. “Have fun, you two.”

Heart threatening to crack a rib, Suzy clicked the door shut and snapped the lock. “That was close,” she mouthed, afraid to even whisper. “I thought for sure it was your grandmother ready to throw me out the window.” *Strip your ring from my finger, the one that traitorously felt so wonderful, and cast it to the swine.*

“Nah, I told you—Nana’s a snorer. She’s tucked away in the master on the first floor.” Jonah waved off her concern, plunking down on the mattress and reaching for the bedside phone, which he tossed her way. “Put your mind at ease, make your call. I’ll get our movie set up.”

Still a little nervous about the possibility of something being wrong with Beth, Suzy punched in the number with shaking fingers. Julie answered on the first ring.

“Julie?” she greeted loud as she dared. “It’s Suzy Miller. I just got your message. What’s up? Everything okay?”

That it wasn't.

In between quiet murmurs that didn't give much away, Jonah halted his efforts and watched Suzy's brows fuse together. The scowl that lit her eyes, cast his direction. The way she pursed her lips...tensed her entire frame, all the loving, sexual fluidity of moments before gone. He had no idea what was being said on the other end of the line but she was *pissed*, anger igniting hotter with each word shared.

By the third minute no longer monitoring her volume, Suzy apologized profusely, thanked Julie for the heads-up and clamped the off button. Phone clutched in her fist, she angled toward him and glared as if seeing a stranger, giving Jonah the distinct notion that he'd totally blown it – without giving him the slightest hint how.

The strained moment that followed lasted forever.

When she finally spoke, every syllable grated resentment. "You beat up Cowboy X?"

"Beat up?" Shit. Damn small towns! "Now I know that didn't come from his mouth because Steve would never cop to being 'beat up', particularly not in reference to one punch." One *hard* punch.

"So you admit it? You sought him out in a jealous rage and attacked him!" Fit to be tied – literally in his opinion – Suzy hurled the phone his direction.

Catching it, Jonah winced, both from her anger and the decibel at which she expressed it.

"Suzy, *shhh*, remember?" Rising off the bed, he covered the distance between them and took her by the shoulders, thumbs rolling across knotted muscle. "Look, it wasn't like that. I went –"

"Fuck *shhh*! I'll tell you what it was like! You just couldn't let it alone, could you? I told you that book wasn't *mine*. That I had to give it back. I trusted you to be discreet, to return it! Instead –" Suzy jerked her shoulders free and tromped away. "Instead a pregnant woman was chewed out and her job threatened. Like the breach in policy was her fault!"

Boy, Suzy was enraged. Over and above what the situation called for. Granted, in hindsight, maybe he'd gone a bit caveman on Steve, but he'd just wanted to make sure she'd be respected as his fiancée.

Regret heated his face. Not so much about what he'd done, but obviously keeping the confrontation from her hadn't been the right course. And poor Julie, he would've hated to have been on the receiving end of Steve's ire when he'd come strutting in sporting Jonah's fist mark.

"You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" Suzy was on a tear. "I can't believe –"

"Hey...settle down. I've no call to argue with you, darlin'. If it helps any, I didn't go there with the intent to punch or punish. I just plain lost it. We were talkin' and next thing I knew –"

Jonah cringed at the look that came over her face. This had to be about more than him and Steve, the question was—what? What was going on behind those accusing hazel eyes?

“Shut up!” she screeched. “*Just shut the fuck up!*”

Well, cue the benediction—his family would be awake and up in arms any moment now. Another soap opera showdown. Not that most of them were likely asleep, not a little after ten, but being quiet and pretending at least—that or had pillows stuffed under their blankets, creating dummies to camouflage their absence.

Sure enough, in the seconds that followed, he heard the squeak of a hinge, mutterings about sheep pens and somethin’ being lost, and the distinct thud of Grandpa’s booted footfalls as he escaped down the stairs.

Dammit! Of course this would happen now. And he hadn’t yet made that chart for Bo. What shitty timing!

Jonah wrestled between going after the old man before he woke Nana—or crashed another tractor—and the need to calm Suzy down before *she* did.

But he didn’t need to decide because just then Zack chimed in, “Not tonight, Grandpoppop!” He rattled off the ol’ nickname like a BB gun firing. “Come on, let’s be quiet and go eavesdrop on Jonah! He and his wild one are at it again!”

“Whoeeee!”

Oh great, an audience. He should’ve sold tickets. Made popcorn.

More scuffled footsteps and the reprimand of Sheba telling them both to hush down—he’d owe her a thanks come morning—as Jonah turned his full attention to the woman before him, the one who was acting totally out of character and totally beyond what the situation called for, though he still had no inkling why.

“Susannah...” He stepped forth and took hold of her upper arms, shaking ‘til she looked at him. Couldn’t decipher the emotions swimming over her expressive face but did his best to calm the storm. “I’m sorry. I’ll go over tomorrow and set things straight. Apologize to Julie myself. Steve I’ve already made amends with. Forgive me, sweetheart?”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.*

*Song of Solomon 3:5*

“Sweetheart?” When Suzy chose not to respond, Jonah looked down at her with those piercing blue eyes, practically begging, all seductive and sincere, damn him! “Come on now, talk to me. I said I’m sorry.”

Sorry? Sorry! Suzy didn’t want sorry. She wanted a fight! Yelling, screaming, stomping out and slamming the door on addictive Jonah and his damn welcoming family. That’s how it was supposed to work – yet another male feces in the toilet. *Flush.*

Just great... He was sorry. His earnest apology threatening to take the steam out of her temper. “Really, truly, darlin’,” he reiterated, stroking his hands up and down her arms.

Well, anybody could be sorry! Her dad professed to be sorry. So had her jerkfuck of a *married* ex. Didn’t change the very real fact men were egotistical, unpredictable, untrustworthy...

Even Mr. White Hat Dependable here had his flaws!

Of course he did – *duh!*

That’s what *really* got to her. In some foolish, ought-to-be-a-law-against-such-stupidity part of her mind, she’d started believing she’d found the one and only good guy out there. The *perfect* man. A true knight in a white truck. A hero. *Her* hero, one who’d save her from the perils of being alone, from these “vacations” of hers. From ever being hurt again...

Just look at him, gazing at her with those eyes, those lips – his face should be considered an illegal weapon! “Suzy, I’m just a man. I make mistakes.”

That was for sure!

Oh yes, she’d come so damn close, she could still taste the fantasy. Falling in love, being a part of his family.

What made it worse, what really stung, was that while some *reckless* part of her had begun to trust him, it was a sentiment he certainly didn’t share. Otherwise he wouldn’t have been off making threats and hammering punches, not without telling her.

It wasn’t even him she was mad at, not really. It was herself – for considering such a dumb, idiotic thing in the first place. How could she start thinking Jonah was perfect?

He was a man. Same as any.

But oh...he was sorry! *Bah!* She should slug him right now. Better yet, walk out! Tell Jonah and his stupid movie-watching temptation Gullible Suzy was gone for good! Gone the way of that sucker punch –



*Defending your honor!* her conscience insisted.

Ugh! Twisting from his enticing caresses, she swept down and snagged her bag, tossing the canvas handle over her arm, which Jonah quickly caught and trapped in his unyielding grasp.

“Hey. You are *not* getting away that easily.” Unrelenting, he took a big step backward to sit on the bed, hauling her down on the mattress next to him. “Come on now, reason with me. Let’s work this out.”

Maybe she didn’t *want* to be reasonable!

Maybe she was so messed up inside she *wanted* an excuse to cut and run. So why did she just sit there when Jonah insisted, “Now I don’t know which of you it is, but one of you gals is exaggerating.”

“What?!” Even her vehement protest sounded puny.

Though his tone was tender, the grip on her arm was anything but. “I won’t deny Julie got chewed out, that Steve’s reeling about me discoverin’ his side operation, but her job is *not* in jeopardy – that I can guarantee.”

“Oh-ho? Why is that? Because she’s pregnant and he fears a lawsuit? That doesn’t excuse –”

“Because she’s his cousin.”

“His whaaa...?”

“His deceased wife’s cousin. He loves her like a sister.”

That figured, and took the starch out of her sails. Cousins. *Related*.

So they were back to this – family.

Jonah released her arm, but Suzy didn’t bother leaping up. He’d simply catch her again and drag her where he wanted her. Pin her down maybe. Man thought he had every right to lug her about like a ragdoll...force her to talk with him, *reason* with him.

Blah, blah, blah!

So fine...maybe she was partially to blame since every time he did, she turned it into a big sex game. Talk about rewarding bad behavior.

And okay...maybe even now part of her wanted just that – for him to take control of the situation. To take her.

Better that than *talking* about things. The thought made her want to spew.

Blood boiled in her veins, rushing anger and adrenaline throughout, and Suzy decided fuck it – fuck it all – and threw herself at him, dropping her bag to swing a leg over his lap and attack his neck with furious kisses. Going at him like a wildcat in heat.

This was all there was between them. Dirty, hot sex. Who cared about *family* and all that other shit? She’d act the fool no longer.

Snaring her wrists, Jonah pushed her back, holding her at bay. “Wait a sec. What are you doing?”

God, did he not just experience her mouth all over his neck? Her hot crotch riding over the lump in his jeans? Was he really gonna stay stuck on that talking shit?

"What am I doing?" Suzy gyrated her hips, bumping and grinding her pussy across his lap. "Giving you what you want." She inclined her head toward the shut door behind them. "Giving them a show."

"No, you're not."

"Am too!" But damn him, he wasn't even hard! He would be though, if she had anything to do about it. Say about it. "Come on, cowboy! Whip that belt out! Make me submit, if you can!"

"No." The word was ground between his teeth as he hurled her off, tossing her onto the bed. In an instant, he was straddling her, locking her wrists in his steel grasp. "I know what you're trying to do. You can't just shut me out."

Suzy simply glared, determined to prove him wrong.

"You're mad at me."

No shit, Sherlock. Maddier at herself, but unwilling to admit that—out loud anyway. "Look, either fuck me or let me go."

"Or...or we can deal with this. What d'ya say, Suzy Q?" Damn those blue eyes, staring down at her, piercing her soul. So determined and sincere. "Hear me out. Whatever's going through your mind, I did not go to Steve's in a jealous rage and beat him up. I'm not that kind of guy and you know it. But I *did* go there to set him straight about you. I didn't want him looking at you like you were some sort of..." He trailed off, at a loss for the right descriptor. "Like *that*."

But they both knew what he meant.

"You mean slutty?" she filled in, wincing at the truth. Flooded by emotion. "A tramp? A whore?"

"Because you're *not*." His grip tensed on her wrists. "And we both know it. You're my fiancée, and around this town, I want folks to respect you."

"Your *pretend* fiancée," she reminded in a small voice, her rage softening at the idea of her reputation mattering so much to him.

"All the same. The lady on my arm, temporary or otherwise, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna chance some guy sneering after you like you're anything less." Releasing only one wrist, he brought a hand to her face and wiped at a wet spot—how *that* had gotten there she'd *no* idea. "Suzy, Suzy. Don't give up on us. Don't push me away. Not tonight."

Agreeing with a sniffled, "Okay," seemed somewhat surreal.

There were tears on her cheeks, dammit, *tears* that didn't belong there. Emotion that had no business in her heart.

Suzy only wanted to escape—to run, screaming her head off, arms flailing and legs powering her toward safety. But she couldn't make herself go. Couldn't deny him as he planted tiny kisses on her face, over her cheeks, drinking up those wet spots, then

moving to her jaw. Down her neck...nibbling, suckling, licking. So tender, so sweetly molding her breasts through her shirt, cupping and massaging. Sweeping big, manly hands over her torso, lifting her blouse right off. Unclasping her bra. More kisses, moist and lingering.

Slowly he stripped his shirt with one hand while pulling her jeans down with the other. Pecked and praised, whispering sweet nothings over her bare skin. Tugged her panties over her legs a fraction at a time with his teeth...licking and lathing, towing them past her ankles and feet.

Rising back up, he planted one long firm kiss to her mons. Then another.

A whimper escaped. Anxiety exploded, sending her scrambling backward.

*Love.* He intended to make love to her, she realized. Not fuck her. Not spank her to the limit.

"Hey, you all right?"

"No!" No she wasn't. This wasn't about their bodies, about lust or gratification. He was making this about something more. *More.*

No. Uh-uh. Not gonna happen!

"Trust me, babe. Relax."

Fat chance. Something in Suzy shut down, her desire flicking off like a light switch as Jonah raised up and unfastened his jeans before climbing back over her, intent obvious. Murmuring praise and encouragement as her mind screamed resistance. No part of her wanted *love*. Didn't desire a tender touch or the succulent little kisses he smeared over the mounds of her breasts.

All she wanted was that cock, still without a condom and dangling temptingly between them.

Sheath him up and let her have it. Sex. Fucking. Pure carnality. Vacation sex, dammit!

As for Nana? Sugar cookies? Family dinners? A fake engagement turning all sweet and sugary and...*real*? So not on her agenda.

It was time to set Jonah straight about exactly where they stood. Starting with those adoring kisses and worshipping hands.

"Bite me," she hissed as he licked the outline of one nipple, knowing after all the ruckus she'd just made, his belt making an appearance was out. There was such a thing as going too far—the whole damn wide-awake house would overhear. Grandpa and Zack at the least. Though she no longer heard shuffling in the hallway, it didn't mean much, given the slightest yelp of pleasure—or pain—could send them all scrambling back like a stampeding herd.

Precisely why she should put the screeching brakes on this.

But if she did? It would mean she cared about his family. What they thought about her. It'd mean she was way too involved and in over her head—and secretly hoping for something more.

And she wasn't. All she wanted—the only thing she wanted—was a good, hard orgasm. One capable of making her totally and completely forget all this bullshit—before she lit out and returned to her cabin to sleep soundly. Just the way she liked it—*alone*.

Ignoring her request, Jonah was still twining his tongue over supple flesh, ever so affectionately searching out her nipple, savoring each and every taste of her. “Ah, Red, I want to sample you everywhere. Starting here...”

He flicked the taut pebble adorning her breast, and before she could stop him with another *Bite me, you asshole* command, swept those full lips lower, across the plane of her belly to her navel, where his tongue dipped in and swirled.

Tingles shuddered through her pelvis.

“And all across your gorgeous stomach. So solid but curvy in all the right places. Then lower...mmm, mmmm...” he drawled as if about to taste the yummiest dish in the world—feast there quite a while—and it was an unspoken threat he quickly made good on, venturing past the golden hairs that guarded the apex of her thighs.

A prospect that spiraled a strange sort of panic through her. Would he not stop with this sideshow? Did he not hear her?

“Dammit, Jonah! Bite me!” Okay, whoops. That'd been loud.

But she had no intention of being thwarted. Punished maybe for noisy behavior, but *not* thwarted.

Combing her hands through his short hair, she yanked his head back to her breast, mashing her right one to his mouth. “Bite me, I said,” she grated through clenched teeth, fingers clamped on his ears.

His gaze, pure blue flame, slammed into hers, full of questions. Demanding answers. That damn lamplight wouldn't let her escape from either. “You serious, Suzy Q? Wouldn't you rather I...” She might have a firm grasp on his head, but his hand was free and it plunged between her legs, petting. Stroking fingers up the moist length of her slit. Fluttering along the edges.

All fine and well if he wanted to touch her there—thrust inside her, squeeze her clit—but not like that. All soft and quivery and nicely.

“No. Bite me. Pinch me. Make it hurt. Make me whimper,” she practically pleaded, bumping her hips to his wrist. “Quit that. You're going all sweet on me, cowboy, and I want it rough.”

“Nothing sweet for Suzy,” he scolded with a slight nip of teeth to her nipple. Far too gently. “Methinks you doth protest too much.”

An accusation he followed up with another slight grazing of teeth, a frisson of shimmery pain that tingled in her breast, inciting her to gasp, “Harder. More.” His teeth clamped down. “Like you mean it, dumbfuck!”

An animalistic growl roared from his chest as Jonah tugged those blunt teeth, drawing out the bud and shaking his head, winging her stressed nipple side to side.

And then she knew – she'd pushed him to that point. Maybe pushed him too far.

But in her book, when it came to sex, there was no such thing as too much. Only too sickly sweet. Too damn soft.

Frissons of pain intertwined with pleasure, her arousal skyrocketed. Her apprehensions faded. There was only his mouth, hurting her so good yet somehow...taking away the pain.

Locking his teeth around the bud, he sucked sharply. Forced a jagged inhale. "God yes!" she blurted then bit her tongue, mentally scolding herself for the outburst.

In response, he clasped her clit between two fingers and squeezed as though he meant business.

Twisting and turning his head, Jonah's mouth bit into the supple flesh of her breast. Traveled across the mound, venturing south to the tender skin of her abdomen then back up to her other breast, all the while testing her with his teeth, a little harder each time, to see how far he could push her. Daring her.

She'd asked for it...could she take it?

Hell yes. Muscles tensing, Suzy locked her jaw, determined to prove there was no point he could push her where she'd ask him to stop. To soften his bites.

No point of return. They'd passed that days ago.

Any other woman, any other place or time...Jonah wouldn't be caught dead pinching her clit without mercy. Digging his nails into sensitive flesh. Biting creamy, flawless skin. Leaving red marks.

But *this* wild one? Oh how she deserved it. Left him with no other choice.

His mouth clamped down, suctioning, sinking his teeth in pliable flesh. Likely – no, definitely – leaving hickeys. He felt like an animal feasting on prey. A vampire sucking the essence of life from his victim – only the opposite. With every bite, Suzy came more alive. Responded fervently, her body tensing, little cries choking and dying swift deaths in her throat, where she held her passion hostage.

Moisture engulfed the hand pummeling her pussy. His cock raged, turned to steel by nothing more than her own arousal, the way she whimpered and tightened beneath him. Needed him...this. The things he could do to her, the places he could take her. It was total free reign. All except...

His mouth watered at the thought of savoring her pussy, tongue diving inside her. How he wanted that – to enjoy her there. Pleasure her, *love* her...

That one taste she'd granted him days ago hadn't been enough. Not nearly. But every time he tried, she shied away, so instead he bit down hard, smiling as she jerked, her spine going straight. She deserved this punishment for denying him, would get nothing less. Unless, that was, she decided to spread those legs and ask nicely...

Right. As if that were happening – short of never. Not with little Miss Firecracker Suzy. True intimacy seemed beyond her.

He got the feeling – real strong like – that she was holding him at bay.

That it was his duty, his calling, to push her beyond that. Break down those walls – for both their sakes. And there was nothing more pliable, more reachable in his experience than a Suzy weak from coming and coming hard.

Drawing back, Jonah nabbed her by the thighs, roughly twisting her over into a prone position, paying no mind to how bruising his grip, to whether she received whiplash in the process. Suzy wanted it rough. Wanted it to hurt.

Let it never be said he didn't try to please the lady.

Grinning at her wicked mew of delight that followed his brutish handling – damn woman – he leaned forward, hand searching the nightstand drawer blindly. Only once he found what he sought and sheathed himself did he cup her by the shins and haul her onto her knees, clapping a hand to each butt cheek.

God, how he'd love to spank her loud and hard right now. Lay into her the way she deserved for refusing him any of the soft stuff, the loving touches *he* craved. But – happily – he'd settle for sinking his fingers deep in her ass and biting the hell out of her back. Teaching her when she asked for pain, she'd damn well better be prepared to handle it.

That or let him lick her, all sweet and savory like, as he tried.

Spreading her buttocks wide, he traced his thumbs – nails dragging along the moist, hot flesh – upward, bottom to top, swirling and collecting moisture seeping from her cunt, spreading it up and over her crack. Then he aligned the thick digits with her anus as he angled his cock at her slit, edging a bit inside. Holding there, purposely torturing her. Making her wait for it. Earn it.

Lubrication, beyond what he'd done? In her dreams! If his thumbs hurt, if they snagged against sensitive flesh, if they caused *pain*, well then...he was just doin' his job.

At her needy moan, he raised a brow. "What's that?"

"Please," she choked out. "Please, I need..."

Keeping his cock stationary, Jonah flexed his thumbs. Testing the territory. "Oh I know what you need. Question is...am I gonna give it to you?"

"Yes!"

"Yes? Just that easy? Nah..." His cock danced a fraction inside her, yearning to plunge forth but held at bay. By *his* will. The one he was now determined to bend her to.

His fingers clenched and unclenched on her butt, thumbs pressing then retracting, granting teasing forays but always stopping prior to entry.

"Jonah!" she gasped, body shaking. "I'm begging."

"Beg away. What I want is something far more concrete." He retreated a tiny bit more, applying pressure to the sides of her anus, threatening to leave all together.

"What?" she cried on a breathy whisper. Beneath his hands, her butt muscles strained. "*What?*"

“You stay tonight. No running out. No more being mad at me.”

“I stay? *All* night? But—” Her hiss rent the air as his hands withdrew, rubbing across the arch of her butt cheeks—much too soft for her liking. “Damn you, Jonah, this isn’t fair! It’s blackmail!”

All’s fair in love and war, and it wasn’t as though she’d been playing in earnest.

His nails dug into her skin, teasing her with the prospect of precisely what she wanted. What she’d demanded—*pain*. Little flecks of it he delivered in small doses now, alternating with sweeping caresses, determined to snare this elusive butterfly once and for all.

“We watch our movie and cuddle all night. Sleep glued together,” he demanded in a deep, unwavering voice, unwilling to negotiate. “In the morning, we pretend like you showed up early for one of Nana’s big breakfasts.”

At the suggestion, she groaned as if her teeth were being pulled out, not his cock—in, which was now following his thumbs’ example and ever so slowly withdrawing, whispering along her slit.

Was that really such a commitment? One would think he’d asked her to get married. For real. Not simply stay the night—a few measly hours.

“Nana will catch us!”

A point he ignored. “You stay. You promise to stay, goddammit, or else...” *His heart would break.* “You stay and I’ll drive this cock into you hard and fast, just the way you need it.”

She muttered something incomprehensible, thrust her twitching, begging behind against him. “Okay already!”

“What’s that?” Jonah couldn’t resist the lazy smile spreading across his face, seeping into his heart.

“Fine!”

“You’ll stay. Say it.” To make certain she answered just the way he pleased, Jonah instigated his thumbs back on her puckered rosette, riding there. Applying just enough pressure to make his intent known.

Her growl-screach suffocated in her throat. “I’ll stay. All...fuckin’...night.”

At that he drove into her, hips propelling him forward with all the force he could command. Cock driving to the hilt as one of his thumbs speared past the clenching ring of her anus, demanding she open for him, the other joining a second later.

And then he was thrusting to the max, grinding his pelvis to her flanks, plowing hard enough that her body bounced against his with every plunge. In and out, cock and thumbs sinking then backtracking in a rapid pace. Owing her body. Demanding she submit to him.

Give him everything...

Something he sorely knew he couldn't have. Couldn't have the sweeter, softer side of Suzy. Wasn't sure one still existed. Only this...her wild and wanton side. The side that demanded pain with her pleasure. Needed it.

And maybe deserved it too.

Yes dammit. *Deserved* it. For shutting him out. Locking up her heart and throwing away the key. Refusing to let him in, not completely. Not the way he really wanted.

Faking it—exactly what she would do if he refused to be all rough and tough. She'd shut him out and fake it. He knew it, she knew it.

And so it was, he ripped one thumb free and pinched the clasping muscles of her adorable, once-creamy, now red-marked rear and thighs, delivering punishing tweaks here and there.

Leaning down, he bit at her back viciously enough to leave dark blotches that'd remain come morning. *As would she.*

Beneath his mouth, Suzy whimpered, fists thrashing as she caught the pillow with her teeth and buried her face in cotton and down, her loud cries muffled as an orgasm took control.

The tiny convulsions around his cock that followed were pure heaven, squeezing around him. With a stifled groan of his own, Jonah felt his release mount, sperm welling up inside him, filling his shaft to the point of agony. One final thrust later, he smothered himself in her heat, cock jerking, spewing cum as his fingers curled in her flesh, holding on for dear life as if he never wanted to let go.

He didn't.

Six minutes later, despite trying to maintain some level of indifference toward him—hard to do when he was just so damn wicked and wonderful, not to mention persistent—Suzy found herself being seated on the carpet alongside his bed, Jonah stuffing a pillow behind her back. "There." He fluffed another for her head to rest on. "How's that?"

Oh puke. Wasn't he just the gentleman?

Her pussy kept doing this internal convulsion thing, as if the damn orgasm he'd given her wasn't finished yet. As if her body wanted to make sure she remembered whose brand of loving it preferred, whose lips, teeth and fingers had left their marks all over her exterior—and interior.

Damn him!

The fucking best fucks of her life just kept coming, didn't they?

"TVs aren't allowed in the house. I thought you were the 'good' grandson," she grumbled, for once taking Nana's side. Her grandson—at least this one—was completely out of control. "Don't know why I'm sitting on the *floor* staring at your stupid closet door."



God, why again had she agreed to this? Only because of her movie-loving nature. That's all. That and to save her orgasm.

"And this is one good boy who knows when—and how—to be bad." With a flourish, Jonah winged open the closet door and quietly shoved back a host of hang-ups, revealing a flat-screen television. Had to be forty inches or better. "Your movie theater, my dear..."

Now this had possibilities! "Doesn't Nazi Nana hear?"

"Nah." He grabbed some headphones, already plugged into the set via a long cord, and stuffed one bud in his ear. "Between these babies, a new P.O. box in town and a Netflix subscription, I've been good to go."

"You're more devious than I gave you credit for."

Sliding to the floor next to her, Jonah seized his own pillow. "You sound surprised. Impressed maybe?"

"No." She gave a shrug, thinking yeah, she was impressed—at just how bad this boy—er, man—could be, but not about to admit it out loud. Not in the mood she was in. "Just thinking I should tell on you. That'd serve you right, for getting Julie in trouble."

"*That* again? Still trying to shore up some distance, doll?" He plugged her right ear with the other bud—apparently he only had one pair—the short distance of the wire forcing their heads together. "Quit pouting and using excuses to push me away. And hold my hand, dammit."

Suzy let out a sigh that could rip Nana right out of her sleep. *How* this man tested her. "Fine."

His hand tangled with hers, squeezing. For good measure, Jonah plopped his leg over hers, nudged her bare toes with his. Her toenails shimmered a dark apricot, she couldn't help but notice...a color she'd let Jonah choose after she'd stripped off the black.

From her toes to her clit to her head, the man really had a knack for reading exactly what she wanted or needed, and delivering just that. Why then was she so persistent in denying him everything he wanted?

Distance. The last line of self-defense! A line it was getting harder and harder to hold...

He pressed a kiss to her cheek. "I'm glad you stayed."

"*Shhht!* It's starting."

A mere three scenes after the beginning introduction, they were laughing so hard in each other's arms, Suzy was afraid she'd wet herself. As for her resolve to end this silly affair before she got hurt? Who could hold a guy at bay when he was sharing good laughs, his headphones and his cousin's all-natural cola?

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow she'd worry about being angry, being afraid. Right now, this — *he* — just felt too damn good. What was one more night of pretending anyway?

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*The Book of Men, page 4*

Still weighing her options that first night in town...

*Meet: Slick*

*Height: 6' 2"*

*Hair: Brown*

*Eyes: Midnight blue*

*Weight: 195#*

*Enjoys: Electric guitars and making his current companion sing until dawn.*

*Fee: A Ben Franklin or two will do me right nice; even better, it'll get you done any way you like.*

*Extras: Interested in strip checkers? Strip poker? Slick is game to provide either.*

*Quote: "I appreciate the female body, in all colors, shapes and forms. Most especially the taste."*

Another definite hottie, one who had Suzy's exhausted, tired-of-traveling fingers itching to dial, especially as they traced over a long nose, darkly shadowed jaw and glittering eyes that didn't remind her of anyone. They didn't, really! But then she read a smattering of the various – and multiple – Customer Comments...

*He's a doll! In a totally masculine way. One of the best "diners" I've ever had.*

*Went down on me and stayed down. Most agile mouth I've had the fortune to "come" across.*

*His tongue wouldn't let up until my orgasm shook the roof off. Management called and told us to tone it down. Never, never had a man lick on me this good.*

Obviously this cowpoke had a thing for licking – and licking and licking – pussy. Eh...not exactly Suzy's favorite pastime. She much preferred being on the cock-slurping end, not the tongue-receiving one.

Bummer...

Another sexy cowboy bites the dust.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Yoo-hoo, Jonah...wheeeere’s Suzy?” The laughing refrain preceded Jezzy just before she skipped into his office. “We need help, a referee actually. And Suzy won the coin toss over Nana.”

Help. The triplets weren’t the only ones. Jonah had never been more badly in need of good – intimate – advice in his entire life. “Used a two-sided coin, did you?”

“How’d you guess?”

“What’s the problem?”

Placing the Rubik’s Cube he’d been fiddling with on his desk, he glanced up at his cousin who perched on the corner and snagged the colorful puzzle, spinning squares. “We’re in need of an unbiased mediator regarding our room. It’s been days and we can’t agree. Tamar wants all black and Sheba’s talking about bringing in sand.”

Sand?

Would go with the tanning bed, he supposed.

“Now I like the beach theme, but sand gets in your toes, you know? Me, I was thinking something psychedelic. Trippy. Or maybe the exact opposite – peaceful and soothing, something with waterfalls. But that wouldn’t piss off Nana. Oh! Leopard print galore...”

Leaning back in his busted chair – seat still worked. Who needed armrests? – Jonah fingered a cleanly shaven jaw. “Suzy said she needed some alone time. She’s at her cabin.”

“Well that’s no fun.” Jezzy pouted then instantly perked up. “When’s she coming back?”

Soon, Jonah hoped like hell. But lately she waxed hot and cold so randomly, he had no clue if he should have Nana set a place for her at lunch or if he’d ever see her again. “Why don’t you head over to the Lucky Lady and steal her for the day? Not take no for an answer?”

“Really? You wouldn’t mind?”

“Hell no. Not so long as you bring her *here*. And convince her to bring a change of clothes. Only in case she gets paint on herself during the redecorating, right?”

A knowing smile crossed his cousin’s lips. “You got it!”

Flouncing off the desk, Jezzy started out of the room. *Dammit*. Before Jonah could bite his tongue in embarrassment, he blurted, “Wait up! Now I need your advice.”

At the admission, his face flushed hot. He didn’t know why he thought to ask Jezzy and not one of his carousing brothers. Or Tamar – she’d know, but then she’d give him

flack for asking. Only that, out of all of them, Jezzy just seemed the most...self-contained. Able to hold her own counsel.

And wasn't that what he was after—someone who knew how to keep private things private? Well, that and *private* information. Intimate information. On second thought, thank God he hadn't approached his brothers.

She swirled around. "Sure, shoot. Ask me anything."

At his silence, his damn blush, her eyes flared wide. "This isn't about *sex*, is it?"

"Actually..." Here went nothing. "The woman's body."

"Oh boy." Jezzy locked them in solitude and plopped down in a chair, her laugh nervous. "I can tell this is going to take awhile. Okay, have at it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Ez...you got a minute?" Jonah intercepted Ezra later that day before he returned outside. Bo had ordered the youngest three to help with the ranch work, explaining how he expected them to report for duty by eight o'clock sharp and work to six, and he'd graciously grant an hour-long midday break.

Knowing Nana took her duty of feedin' hungry souls seriously, Jonah'd stalled paperwork after his conversation with Jezzy until his pencil-holding fingers cramped, just waiting to catch Ezra alone. He pushed away from his desk, taking care not to further abuse his yet-to-be-repaired chair, and added, "Won't be long."

"Sure. What d'ya need?" His brother paused in the hall, scratching a full stomach. "Need some time to digest anyway before I do anything strenuous."

Jonah knew that feeling—a time or two he'd gotten up from the table so stuffed he could hardly walk. Nana had always fed them well but was going overboard in her efforts to welcome all her "prodigals" back home. At this rate, Jonah would need to find and join one of those high-powered gyms Suzy kept raving about. Either that or replace all his belts—*not* an option. "So, uh..."

"Yeah, bro?"

"It's, um..."

The most fair-haired and silent-mouthed of the McKenzie brood waited patiently for whatever Jonah wanted, digestive track grumbling from all the extra work.

How to ask? For the second time that day, Jonah was tongue-tied and glancing around covertly like a bad TV spy, making sure no one was within earshot. "You still have all those tapes?"

Ez's forehead creased in a frown. "Tapes? You mean like masking and duct?"

"No, genius, those videotapes." Hell, talking to Jezzy had been easier. "You know...the *how-to* ones."

Ezra might be the only one of them openly choosing to wait for marriage before becoming one flesh with a female—and only God knew how—but it was common

knowledge in the family that he maintained a collection of sex videos—from how-to to downright dirty—that could rival any big-city XXX sleaze joint.

“I need to borrow one of those instructional ones. You know...if you’ve got one on gettin’ between a girl’s legs.”

One pale brow lifted. “That right? Not too successful in that arena?”

“Shut up.” Jonah delivered an only half-playful punch to his brother’s shoulder. Wasn’t sure if it was his technique or his lady’s hang-ups, but she guarded that ground as if it were a Forbidden Zone. “Fact is, when I get another chance, I damn well aim to be.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Where’re you hiding this time?” Scouring shelves for Sheba’s homemade chocolate syrup by the light of the open fridge, Suzy nearly jumped from her skin when a commotion set up behind the back door.

*Busted.*

Damn, was there time to hide? Squeeze inside the freezer, maybe?

She never should’ve agreed to yet another movie night! She’d become careless and it would be just her luck Nana Dori would catch her wearing her grandson’s shirt—and little else—raiding the kitchen during the middle of the night...when she was supposed to be tucked safe and sound and *alone* in her bed at the Lucky Lady.

Dammit, she’d allowed herself to feel far too at home. Too comfortable.

When a staggering Josiah fumbled with the unlocked door then practically tripped inside, sporting a shiner that would rival one of Rocky’s, her relief vied with surprise. So *this* was the Joe that even the wind in Rustlers Junction whistled about. He barreled in and rammed the door shut with a *whump!*

“Shhhhh, you nimwit, do you want to wake up the whole house?” Abandoning her search, she let the fridge slam shut with a jangle of condiments and rushed over to him. “Alert Nana to your latest shenanigans?”

Shenanigans? Oh good lord, she was starting to talk like one of them.

“Time is it?” He straightened then stretched his head from side to side, loosening his neck, and blinked as if the pale light shining from the oven range was too bright.

“After three,” she whispered then noticed the bloodied knuckles. Buffoon or not, her heart went out at the sight. This guy was an emotional mess—she felt an odd kinship.

“Three? In the morning?”

“Yeah, dipshit. Lose your watch, along with your common sense?”

“Damn. Must’ve fallen asleep.” Unsteadily, he leaned into the back door, blinking and trying not to fall over.

“Come on,” she sighed. She couldn’t leave Joe like this, tempting as it was to run and take cover under Jonah’s blankets before the idiot woke someone up. Snagging his arm, she dragged him to the sink and ran tepid water over his scraped hand. “Well, Joe the Volcano, rough match? Who won?”

His gaze hardened, the bruised fingers beneath hers tensed and the stretched, puffy skin around his eye practically burned with indignation. “What’re you talkin’ about?”

Hushing him first and keeping her voice to a whisper – probably too late by now, but oh well – she replied, “That pretty black eye you’re wearing. Get that in town, tough guy? Or did you fall into a door?”

“Whatever.” He winced and cursed when she forced his torn knuckles back under the faucet. “You don’t like me very much, do you?”

The way he said it made her feel more sorry for him.

Seeing that the water had done all it would, she depressed the lever and tore off a couple paper towels to blot his skin dry. “I don’t really know you enough to like you or not.” She shot him a glance then returned her attention to his battered hand, her soft touch making him swear again. “Other than flashing you when I did the rest of your family, it’s not like we’ve had any heart-to-heart conversa –”

“I guess Jonah’s already tryin’ to turn you against me. Complainin’ like the sissy he is ‘cause I went off on him.” It wasn’t a question.

But Suzy recognized exactly *what* it was – anger and fury masking deep emotional pain – so she answered despite the flare of irritation. How dare he attack Jonah’s integrity! “Hope you’re not a gambling man because you’d lose. Jonah’s never said a word against you, not to me. But you –” She sharply flexed her fingers, intentionally squeezing his hand then letting go when he blanched.

“Ow!”

“Serves you right. Don’t ever insult my fiancé in my presence again.” Nodding to the hand he was swinging at the wrist, she grinned like the she-devil Jonah accused her of being. “Better get some peroxide on that. Might need an x-ray too. And for your information, the only thing Jonah’s said to me is that you’re one helluva bull rider.”

That took the starch out of his jeans, the belligerence out of his expression. Replaced it with curiosity. “Then why the volcano crack?”

“Other than the black eye? You’re stumbling in here at an hour when sane, *working* men would be in bed. Joe Volcano, honey, I’ve been in town just shy of two weeks. Your drinking and temper are legendary in them here parts.”

There she went again, purposefully flavoring up her speech with Texanisms. God, it was fun.

“Shit.”

“No. Shame.”

“Huh?”

Suzy thought a moment before sticking her foot in it but decided she had nothing to lose. It wasn't as if Joe would deck a girl. "Not 'shit'. It's a *shame*. That someone with so much promise – and such a rock-solid family – would flush it all down the crapper for nothing more than a temporary high. Might want to give it some thought before you do permanent damage to yourself," she glared at his hand then his eye, "or someone else."

Suzy left Joe griping about know-it-all women.

"Aha! No glasses," Jonah chuckled seconds later when she opened his bedroom door a crack and eased through. "I knew that chocolate milk excuse was just a ruse."

But when he realized she was completely empty-handed, his face fell. "Where's the syrup? I've been brewin' up some creative places to squirt it."

Her sexy cowboy pumped his eyebrows in a dastardly, suggestive way.

Suzy scuttled over and gave him a big, open-mouth kiss. When his tongue sought hers, she moved her hand to his neck and her mouth to his jaw. "Like the way you're thinking, Tex, but I couldn't find it. Wasn't where I saw –"

Strong fingers at her nape returned her lips to his. Only after kissing her breathless and revving up the syrup between her legs did Jonah release her. "Zack again," he said confidently.

"Huh?" Her brain was buzzing with the confrontation downstairs, especially after just hearing the creak of floorboard in the hallway. Not to mention her body was buzzing thanks to the man in the bed.

"Zack keeps moving all the stuff to different shelves. His idea of a practical joke," Jonah explained. "Not too sure it's working though. I haven't heard Nana complain once."

Suzy smiled distractedly. "I might've. Tell you what – let me go look again – but first..."

She knelt on the floor and lugged her smallest suitcase out from under Jonah's bed where she'd taken to stashing it. Her toiletry bag was inside. Suzy grabbed a bottle and headed for the door.

"What's that?" Jonah inquired.

"Peace offering."

Silent as a mouse in fur-lined slippers, Suzy slipped from the room and tiptoed to the end of the hall, to the corner bedroom the youngest two McKenzies had claimed. She heard muted voices, giving her the confidence to tap lightly.

And keep on tapping until Zack answered with a tired smile. "Hey."

Beyond him, she saw the bathroom light come on as Joe escaped inside.

"Here – give this to Josiah. I think it'll help." Suzy relinquished the tried-and-true Hangover Helper – she didn't seem to need it these days, was starting to think maybe she never would again. Joe on the other hand... "Help his headache, if not his temper."



Leaning against the doorjamb, as if he needed it to support his recently awoken body, Zack took it in hand, shrugging off a sleepy yawn. “*Har-mmm*. Thanks. He told me you really laid into him downstairs.”

Keeping her voice low as his, Suzy protested, “I wouldn’t say I laid—”

“Nah. It’s cool.” Zack waved off her concern. “I think he needed to hear it. Hold up—”

She waited in the darkened hallway as Zack aimed his ear to catch some deep rumbles from his brother. When he turned back, he was grinning. “Says to tell you it’s *Joe Versus the Volcano*. Whatever that means.”

“Correction noted.” She retreated a step. “I’ll let you guys get to sleep.”

“Suzy?” Zack halted her. “I mean it. Thanks for your help. If his hand’s broken, I’ll see he gets to the clinic. Appreciate you keepin’ him from waking up the dragon.”

“Dragon?”

“I don’t call her Nana D. for nothing.” Suzy laughed. “Knowing him, he would’ve made enough ruckus to bring the house down and she would’ve pitched a fit until dawn. Anything I can do for you,” Zack offered, “you just ask—”

“Tell me where you hid the chocolate syrup?”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Excerpt from one of several saved letters Jonah found when he went digging through his ma's jewelry box.

*Now I know I'm supposed to be focusing on school and nothing else – but my GPA was 4.3 last time I checked so I'm hoping you'll let me slide. There's this girl in my public speaking class. Her name's Susannah. Think I'm going to ask her out.*

*Well, to confess, I already did. She turned me down but I aim to ask again.*

*If you could meet her, you'd understand why. She gives really funny speeches in class – she can make you laugh about the most mundane subject. It doesn't hurt that old Loony Lambert seated us next to each other. Anyway, just thought I'd mention it so if you call on Friday night and I'm gone – don't be mad. It just means I've got a date! But don't worry – I won't forget about my grades, promise.*

*And major thanks on that last batch of cookies you sent – I wanted to scarf every one myself but decided to share with a couple of the guys who never get anything from home. They were a big hit. I'm looking forward to seeing everyone over Thanksgiving break. It can't come soon enough for me.*

*Love, Jonah*

While the letter itself brought back loads of memories...ones that had been storming in more and more of late, it was the note written on the envelope, the one in his mother's handwriting, that had him wiping his eyes.

*Mother's intuition – mark my words, we'll be meeting this girl before he graduates.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"I feel so guilty deceiving your nana like this," Suzy whispered then spoiled it with a giggle.

"Shhhh! Do you want her catchin' us?" Jonah shook the shaking bundle in his arms, hard-pressed not to laugh as well. It was funny as hell – hiding from his grandmother in broad daylight after everyone else was hard at work.

The two were pretzeled beneath his desk, in the cutout where his chair belonged, stifling laughter and sneaking kisses.

"Jonah! Where're you at? That nice Mr. Diamond says you've been threatening him!" Rapid-fire footsteps crossed in front of his office, causing them both to shimmy

with silent laughter. Nana muttered something about engaged grandsons forgettin' their responsibilities as she departed the way she'd come, still hollering, "Jo-nahhh!"

Squished beside him in the nook beneath his desk, Suzy raised her lips toward his ear. Hot breath tickling his neck, she murmured, "I've been meaning to ask you, when did you talk with her? Tell her all about me and Cornell?"

He turned his head to whisper back, "Remember when you and the girls went on your *second* of I-don't-know-how-many room-renovation recon missions?"

Unfortunately that reminder sparked off another round of suppressed snickers. The triplets had gone way out, converting their room to a disco disaster. Black walls, flashing lights, annoying music that blared any time the girls could get away with it.

Silent seconds passed with Jonah appreciating every moment of their close proximity. Just to hold Suzy near, to laugh with her...had he ever felt this complete?

More than anything, he wanted to make it last forever. To make it real.

Hearing his grandmother knocking around in the dining room adjacent to his office and knowing Suzy's return flight home was in a couple days, Jonah wasn't sure he'd have another opportunity to question his captive—he meant captive audience—as good as the one right now.

She'd become so adept at avoiding any hint of seriousness lately, he wasn't taking any chances. So before speaking, Jonah secured his arms around her contorted body, to prevent escape should she think of trying such a dastardly thing, and forged ahead. "You ever gonna tell me why you like your sex with a dash of pain? Why you don't want me to sometimes just make sweet, slow love to you? Kiss you all over?"

After that first flinch of awareness, proving she'd heard his barely whispered question, Suzy remained quiet for so long, he thought she wasn't going to answer. Was gonna keep that information all to herself. Keep rebuffing his attempts to deepen their intimacy.

Nana trotted in front of his open doorway, complaining about how many extra dishes she had to use and put away each morning, what with her son "begatting" so many of his own.

Just when the sound of her grumbling diminished, Suzy sighed loud enough to part his hair. "It's just the way I like it. Geesh, make me feel like a pariah or something."

"It's more than that. You won't let me close to you, not really. You're holding me at bay."

"Ya *think*? You already know my stellar history with men."

Jonah opened his mouth to disagree then thought better of it. He might know of one or two instances, but he certainly didn't know the full extent. Either way, she was talking and that's what he wanted. "But don't you ever want—"

"No."

"Then just tell me why." *Tell yourself.* "Please."

“No!” A reflex she uttered, but without heat. Then... “Maybe you’re right. Maybe there is a reason. Maybe that’s what having my heart broken one too many times did to me. I just turned off the softer emotions. Stuffed any vulnerable parts down where nobody could reach them or hurt me ever again. I guess...guess you could say my body reacted by becoming impervious to anything on the soft side as well.” By the time she finished, she’d burrowed halfway into his shirt. “But it doesn’t matter because that soft, weak part of me no longer exists. This is who I am.”

“Susannah?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you *ever* come without pain?”

She paused and swallowed, anchored nails in his pec. “No, I haven’t. Those first two jerks—ah, ‘boyfriends’—never had what it took. They lacked the patience or the equipment I guess. Or maybe this is just the way I was made. Maybe there isn’t an explanation.” She gave a self-directed snort of laughter. Jonah swallowed his own snort of pain when she wound several fingers tightly through his chest hair, as if holding on for dear life. “So there you have it. I haven’t. Orgasmed without something beyond the norm, that is. Don’t really think I can. But that doesn’t matter, right? I mean, why are you even bringing this up? We’re great together in bed, you and me.”

“That we are. Very much so.”

“Then quit complaining.”

“I’m not. Just wondering.”

But Jonah couldn’t help wanting something more. Something sweeter, more sincere. For her to...on occasion...let her guard down.

Nana scuttled in and plopped something on his desk. Jonah could just imagine what...seeing in his mind a note written in quarter-inch thick marker. Along the lines of, *Jonah, Be sure and ask Susannah over for dinner before she leaves. PS, don’t forget your duty – I ordered you to be nice to Mr. Diamond!*

With his luck, she put it right on top of the local classified section he’d folded just-so, hoping it caught Suzy’s eye. There was a job posting that had her name all over it.

He waited until Nana’s footsteps receded, along with the subtle waft of homemade syrup if his nose was up to par. He certainly smelled Suzy’s apprehension...fear he wasn’t about to keep pushing, not after her admission.

Jonah knew better—knew Suzy enough by now to know when to retreat, when to advance. Turning her face to his with a gentle thumb on her chin, he grinned, “Feel like playin’ hooky?”

“With you? Always.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ow, ow, ow!” Suzy wailed, face scrunched like a prune, squeezing his hand hard enough to do damage.

Just think, he was next—and now, thanks to Suzy, he was about to be in plenty of pain too. As if he wasn't already, what with her trying to break his hand.

He'd thought to reward her earlier confessions with those long-awaited tattoos, knowing the shop was open as he'd called the afternoon before. He hadn't thought to have tendons severed as a result.

Jonah'd chosen the tattoos—a mini representation of the Bottoms Up brand—gratified when she'd immediately agreed, no balking evident. He hadn't been sure she'd go for it, such a blatant, personal symbol, etched in such a permanent way. Sure made him wonder...maybe she was considering staying. Keeping *him* around in a permanent way. If he could just get her to not treat his every hint as a joke...

She'd chosen the skin location—and a damn sensitive one too. The upper inside of her thigh, where no one could spot the marking—no one but him. And vice versa.

"Hold tight, darlin'. Almost done..." Curtis, the tattoo artist announced. Anything but who Jonah'd expected, thinking they'd be greeted by some hulking bald, bearded fellow covered in tats.

No...young Curtis here—clean-shaven, with a spiky blond shock of hair and only one single visible tattoo peeking out below the sleeve of his rock band T-shirt—was *not* who Jonah thought would have his hands between his woman's legs. Especially since he'd instantly recognized Curtis—a.k.a. "Kurt"—from Suzy's *Book of Men*.

Before so graciously returning it to Steve, Jonah'd methodically thumbed through every page to learn who else might be plying such a dubious trade in their quaint little town. Not to mention he had to make damn sure none of his brothers were pictured in there. Nana would've gone ball-busting ballistic if that'd been the case.

Fortunately it wasn't.

*The Book of Men* was clear of McKenzies. But Jonah did learn a thing or two about several of the cowboys in town, including a few who had worked on their ranch or the neighboring TNT outfit. And he'd read about some intriguing ways to please his lover, thanks to the details under the "extras" heading. Who knew a couple cubes of ice placed in a very intimate location could light her fire?

Suzy wailed again, as if she'd followed his train of thought and found the idea chilling. No—that was her about to scream the house down and push away old "Kurt" here. In the book's photo, he'd been a couple years younger and sported a brown goatee.

Jonah managed not to be jealous—given where the man's hands had set up shop—only because he was certain Suzy hadn't put two and two together and ended up on page sixteen. Her eyes were all for him. Begging, pleading eyes, asking Jonah to take the pain away. He bit his tongue to keep from gloating—he'd never imagined having her at his mercy would've come so easily. "You're doing good," he praised.

Sure she was.

Turned out she had a thing about needles—hated the pointy suckers with a passion, which was all right with Jonah, given how she hadn't shown the slightest interest in the

man wielding an electric one just below her crotch. She was more worried about what color his brand would look on the skin between her legs.

She'd fixated on a shade of blue, for his eyes she'd said, and Jonah suspected he was getting the short end of the stick—a "pretty" sapphire-colored tattoo in eyeshot of his cock. *And* Suzy was ordering his dinner tonight too.

But for her scintillating company, he'd suffer through seaweed salad and a *fuchsia* tattoo if he had to.

"Holy crap," Suzy howled. "I'd rather get spanked any day."

Kurt's eyebrows shot to the ceiling and Jonah pretended she hadn't just said that. "Count," he suggested, wincing at the vise grip on his fingers. "It always distracts me."

"Count what?"

"Try backward. From a hundred. By threes."

"One hundred...ninety-seven...oh shit...ninety-four...ninety-five— Ack! What else? Give me something else!"

"Why, Suzy. *Sweetheart*. It distresses me to see you like this." Jonah stared suggestively straight in her eyes. "And to think—you've always impressed me so. With your tolerance to pain."

"I'll show you pain, Tex, just as soo— *ah!*—shit-fuck-damn!"

"Hold still," Kurt-Curtis cautioned.

"Do they always squeal like this?" Jonah asked, enjoying her reaction more by the second. Poetic justice in spades.

"Sometimes..." The tattoo artist quirked a grin, never taking his eyes off the long line the instrument in his hand inked against her soft flesh. "It's the tough, macho ones who complain the most."

"*Complain?!!*" Suzy shrieked. "Bend your head a little lower and I'll break your neck. Where's Wayne? Isn't he supposed to be doing this? It's his damn shop!"

Not losing his concentration, the man calmly replied, "Wayne's my brother. He's repairing the a/c unit on our grandma's condo."

"What? She can't stand a little sweat? What is it with you West Texas guys and your grandmothers?" she ended on a high-pitched scream.

"Is she always this feisty?" the double-named tattoo dude asked Jonah, who was almost starting to like the guy, sensing a kindred spirit. "This obnoxious?"

"Always. Suzy Q, try counting something else, why don't you?"

She was panting like one of Ez's hounds. "Uuh, uuh, uuh. *What?*"

"Count...uh..." Jonah searched for a quick answer and blurted the first thing that leapt to his tongue. "How 'bout the reasons you shouldn't go back to New York." Ever.

Suzy laughed a wail of pain. "Okay, I give! Number one. My sex life will be reduced to *nada*."

Translation—she meant to be faithful to him. *Very* nice to hear. “Mine too,” he agreed.

“I’ll be bored as hell,” she moaned, crunching his fingers.

In other words, she’d miss him. “Same here. That’s two.”

“Three,” she squeezed out. “Won’t have to dress all prim and prissy.”

Now that he would argue. “Like hell.”

“But no more mismatched snow cone outfits.” She still hadn’t let him forget his failed—according to her—attempt to dress her in his cousins’ duds.

Problem was, he liked snow-cone Suzy. Liked tramp Suzy too. “We’ll keep that one on the table for future discussion. Keep counting. Before you break bones.”

“It’s warmer here. No honking cabs. Or stuffy political gigs. You’ve got Netflix.”

“Good girl. You’re up to seven. And plane tickets aren’t cheap,” he encouraged, knowing between them they could cook up a billion nonsensical reasons. He only wished they’d actually convince her. “No sense in a lot of back and forth.”

“Finished,” Curtis announced, withdrawing the tattoo gizmo and placing it on his table.

Both of them peeked between her legs, gazes glued to the two-and-half-inch Bottoms Up emblem inked on the inside of her thigh.

Forever marked. *His*.

“Perfect,” they whispered in tandem, and Jonah couldn’t help but notice how she was thinking the same way he was. About more than the tattoo possibly? Whether she’d admit it or not...

Curtis chuckled at their quiet appreciation and went about greasing her thigh with ointment and taping on a bandage, during which Suzy only winced twice.

“One more,” she sighed when the bandage was secure, “to make it an even five.”

Jonah smiled. “That was seven.” Or maybe eight. For once, he’d lost count.

“Oh.”

“One more anyway.” Knowing how right it felt even if a glance at a calendar would tell him he’d forever mashed his potatoes and fried his wits, Jonah lifted her hand and deposited a kiss on her ring finger, murmuring because he was a little hesitant to say it out loud, “We wouldn’t have to cancel our fake engagement. We could...could make it real.”

And from her response—he shouldn’t have said anything so direct. Not yet anyway.

“Have you been grazing on locoweed, cowboy?” Suzy stood and started to hike up her jeans. “Ow!” She blinked up at him helplessly. “Oh crap. Maybe this wasn’t such a good spot after all. I can’t get my jeans zipped. If dipwad Wayne hadn’t been on vacation the first time, I would’ve had on a skirt! Local yokels, don’t know how to run a business!”

"I'm sure that's not my brother you're referring to," Curtis said lightly, busy cleaning up his work area, "given how I'm sitting right *here*."

"Yokel is a term of affection from me, isn't that right, darling?" Suzy tried to cover her slip, glancing at Jonah for confirmation.

Thankful his earlier gaffe hadn't made her run scared, that she was still looking to *him* for help, Jonah started to offer her his shirt then realized he'd be in the same predicament—jeans and all. "Haven't you heard—no pain, no gain?"

After their milkshake confessions and the Steve-slugging incident, she'd retreated in full force to her casual, nothing-fazes-me persona anytime he dared broach something serious.

This morning was the first time she'd given another inch and it appeared she was now regretting it.

*And aren't you the moron, for thinking to win her this fast?* True, not even a full two weeks in. Just because he could jump the moon when she was near didn't mean she automatically felt the same way. *So isn't it up to you to show her?*

Show her something worthwhile existed between the two of them? In effect, show her the moon?

Jonah mused...he could do that. She was still here for what—two nights, longer if he could help it. And everyone knew that West Texas moons shone brighter and bigger than anywhere else.

"No pain, no gain? *That's* your answer?" Her eyes narrowed. "That's in the beauty industry. Or maybe the gym, not this!"

If she'd taken his heartfelt avowal seriously—and agreed to take him and their engagement more seriously—he might've forfeited his shirt after all, moderated his glib tone. As it was, Jonah leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Buck up. You like pain. Think of it as foreplay."

Her grumbled, "Asshole. Yeah, I like it—in bed," did nothing to dim his smile—or assuage the ache that'd taken up residence in his chest.

So when Kurt-Curtis went to change out needles and reload on ink, Jonah hauled Suzy onto his lap, her back against his chest, and took a shameful bit of satisfaction in her squeaked yelp of pain. "So—you're really not ever gonna take me seriously, are you? Tattoos, milkshakes or movies...this is just gonna stay a vacation romance and that's it?" Over her shoulder, he fingered a strand of soft blonde hair, noticing the irony when one gentle curl coiled over the back of his wrist. She had him trapped, whether she knew it or not. "Like the red, I'm just a fading memory."

She wrenched around and stared at him. "Jonah...please don't say that. Don't think it. You're..." Seemingly at a loss, she stared off over his shoulder and swallowed. A second later she returned gaze to his. "No matter what else you think, you have to know—your color is one hundred percent permanent. Always was."

"Then why?"



“Why won’t I stay? Or why won’t I talk about it?”

He didn’t answer, only tensed his thighs, which shifted her a fraction closer.

“Jonah...” She looked crestfallen.

He saw Curtis heading their direction and quickly hugged her tight. He spoke past the curls and hoped he touched her heart. “You mean the world to me. I really want to see where this is headed. Just consider it, that’s all I’m asking.”

Brightening his expression—what man couldn’t wait to drop his drawers for another guy to shave and ply needles in one of those areas the sun don’t shine?—Jonah set her aside and reached for his belt buckle.

Suzy stayed him with two fingers on his wrist. “You might not say that if you knew the full extent of the skeletons in my closet.”

He thought he had a pretty good idea...and it didn’t matter a lick. Not to him. “So try me.”

“Maybe I’m afraid to.”

After that startling confession, Suzy hightailed it to the bare-bones bathroom in the back of the shop, complaining with every step and leaving Jonah to question whether he’d really heard that last sentence. Mere seconds later, it was his turn to go under the knife—or “gun” as Curtis corrected him—and he used the stinging distraction not to count or solve equations, but to plan his next attack on the emotional fortress known as Suzy.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

The entry she'll write later tonight—when she can't sleep because her mind—and body—keep reliving the events of the afternoon, which she blamed on Jonah and his wicked, wicked tongue.

*This might be the toughest thing I've ever done – aired my dirty laundry to the person who's so quickly come to mean ~~everything~~*

*To you – Jonah. My knight.*

*My adorable, down-home, countryfied, dependable cowboy.*

*Jonah, I ~~think~~*

*No thinking about it. I do –*

**I LOVE YOU!**

*But I don't know if it's enough or if it's too late for us. Maybe college was all we were supposed to have.*

*I don't know if you can be okay with me, with what I've done...if you can forget my checkered past, especially once you know the extent of it. I mean, you're such a Boy Scout and all (and that's meant as a compliment, in case you're wondering). I don't know. Just imagining how you might react to reading –*

*I just don't know! It's eating a ~~fat~~ hole in my gut because I'm not used to being uncertain – about anything.*

*You'll have to tell me, I guess. Tell me whether you can really accept me, no-holds-barred, no hesitations. Because if I'm ever going to trust in this thing called love, you'll need to be the strong one. The one willing to convince me it'll all work out.*

*I haven't exactly seen a lot of evidence in that department – the happy-marriage, guys-are-great arena.*

*Let's just say if you weren't who you are, I'd have already been out the door. Or on the plane.*

*For you though...I'm willing to take the biggest risk of all. But first I need to know you're surer than you've ever been. I don't want you finding out some of this stuff later on and changing your mind.*

*So take all the time you need...read over everything.*

*I've never shared this with another soul, but I want to share it with you. Ack! I'm sounding maudlin.*

*Just tell me whenever you're ready. It's a lot to process, I know.*

*I'll be here – or in New York – waiting.*

*Because I don't want to hide anymore. Don't want to pretend to be someone else. I just want...you.*

*To be with you.*

*And I hope – and will pray at church on Sunday (haha...nervous laughter) – that it's what you want too.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Halfway home Jonah could bite his tongue no longer. "I've been giving our earlier conversation some thought."

"Enlighten me, Tex. We've had so many." Her boots and jeans were off, bare legs tempting him like a new spreadsheet program did an accountant.

The second they'd closed the doors to his truck, she'd shimmied out of the snug jeans, whining and swearing with every lurch of his foot on the pedal – he couldn't help but exaggerate them – and every brush of denim against the inside of her thigh.

Sure, his leg smarted, but *come on* – she was really milking this for all it was worth. And if Jonah couldn't milk the truth out of her verbally, he was willing to angle at it from a different direction. Question was, would she call another timeout?

"The one where we discussed – or more accurately, I asked and you evaded – about your penchant for liking it rough." He could tell the topic startled her, especially once she realized what he specifically referred to – her having an orgasm without asking for pain. "Forgive me," he instantly contradicted himself. "That wasn't completely fair. You shared some stuff this morning – kudos for that, but I think we ought to jaw on it some –"

"Jonah. Please let's not go there." As though his raising the concept made her feel vulnerable, she whipped her feet off his dash where they'd been propped, cussing when she slapped them together.

"I think we need to."

"You think I haven't tried it other ways? Trust me, I *have*. Masturbating, masturbating standing, masturbating in bed. With my hand, with toys. Using the showerhead, experimenting with the water faucet in the bath tub... I have a vibrator collection that could rival Dongs R Us. Has it helped?" Her voice grew louder and shriller. "No, I tell you! Nothing's ever been enough. I know what makes me come!"

Just hearing her say it hurt him.

Jonah suspected Suzy retreated behind the pain because it was easy. It gave her something simple and concrete to concentrate on. Something far away from the *person* causing the sensations – whoever that might be. It kept the gentler, more fragile emotions protected and cocooned where she *thought* nothing would hurt her.

Jonah was convinced there wasn't anything physically standing in the way of Suzy having orgasms. Since she was capable of having them, maybe she'd convinced herself

the stimulus *needed* to sting. “Whether that’s the case or not, I just want to try. On occasion. What’s the harm—”

“Why can’t we just keep things like they are between us? It’s been great, hasn’t it? You know it has! I’ll only be here a couple more days—why spoil everything?”

How did he tell her the way he felt? The scary, mixed-up feelings that kept growing deeper and stronger with every minute they spent together? How, until she’d come along and goaded him, he’d never known how empowering it was to use his strength, his body, to bring a woman to orgasm. How she’d shown him a side of lovemaking he’d never known existed. How he couldn’t wait to have all the time in the world to explore other sides with her. If only she’d let—

“You’ll just be disappointed in me.” She spoke with such finality, such conviction that Jonah heard the death knell tolling in her mind.

“Never!”

“Frustrated with me. Get tired of—”

Jonah braked and turned the truck so fast she would’ve slammed against the dash had his arm not instinctively shot out and caught her. “Sorry. You okay?”

She looked dazed. “Yeah...but...”

But at least she’d stopped arguing.

And seeing the dirt road cutoff had given him ideas. “Didn’t mean to switch directions like that without warning, but...” But he had to, or he was gonna lose her, his feisty firecracker. Not an option.

“Trust me.” Spinning tires over the rarely used county road, Jonah had to force himself to drive on, to not stop and prove his point mere feet off the main highway. He relaxed the tensed forearm in front of Suzy’s shoulders, took advantage of her shock to run his hand down the length of her arm and twine their fingers together. “Just trust me.”

“I... Okay.” She made no move to retract her hand—or retrieve her pants.

Jonah gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, surprised she’d chosen not to balk further. Surprised but pleased. His destination—a simple place, one of his favorites on the ranch, located alongside a creek and under a giant cypress tree.

A place where the two of them would be completely alone. Where Jonah could love her for hours without fear of interruption, could make sure she knew exactly *who* was coaxing responses from her body. Whether those responses were orgasmic or not wasn’t the test that told him whether he passed or failed—whether he finally reached her heart was.

Since it seemed one of Suzy’s favorite languages was that of sensation, Jonah was prepared to make a full-text translation.

Easily maneuvering over the familiar ranch roads, though it’d been years since he’d last done so, Jonah cut across two large spreads until coming up on the southern tip of Bottoms Up property. Where he drove some more, through remote, seldom-used

sections of McKenzie land. Through beautiful reminders of his heritage...reminders of why he put up with the weird and wild antics of his wonky family and why having Suzy share all of it with him meant so much.

Miles and miles away from the main house, any other roads, or the barest hint of habitation, he rolled to an idling stop.

For once, it'd been easy for Suzy to remain silent.

She hadn't been particularly fond of the topic Jonah seemed anxious to discuss, but more than that, the sunlight highlighting the incredible scenery his truck meandered past was breath-stealing.

And she'd already been having trouble breathing.

Had he been serious? With what he said back at the tattoo studio?

*We wouldn't have to cancel our fake engagement.*

At the time, she'd been too stunned to take it in. Thought maybe she'd been hearing things. Gone delusional from the pain. Now the sentence chimed like a gong in her head.

*We wouldn't have to cancel our fake engagement.*

Not canceling equated to keeping. Keeping the engagement. A kept engagement eventually led to...

Marriage.

*Trust.*

Trusting Jonah with everything she was. Her life. Her heart. Could she?

Sometimes Suzy thought maybe she could—and that almost had her hightailing it the other way. Booking an *earlier* flight home.

Only one thing had stayed her, stopped her fingers from dialing the airline reservation desk. How Jonah—more than any other human on the planet, even Suzy herself she suspected—knew she had dirty secrets. Knew and yet remained, persisted in knowing more. He might not know everything but he was fully aware that she was no angel. Could read her like a proverbial book and he hadn't gone running the other direction yet. Always treated her with respect—even when her actions didn't warrant it.

If he could trust her—after all she'd done—then maybe it was time she started trusting herself? Realize she wasn't necessarily a bad judge of character, at least not *every* time.

After all, she'd long crushed on Jonah who had a fine character. One so bright and full of goodness he continually banished those shadows lurking inside, made her feel lighter and happier than she'd ever thought possible.

It was a feeling she could cherish forever.

But then, nothing lasts forever... And he'd proven it this afternoon with these stupid suggestions of his that were ruining everything. Ruining what they did have

with all his dumb talk of wanting more. Not just more of their relationship – which she considered just fine and dandy the way it was. But more *of her*.

More Suzy wasn't sure she could give.

When he finally braked beneath one of the biggest trees she'd seen in this sparsely vegetated region, Suzy feared it was time to pay the piper. Time to confess all – or at least be willing to. But Jonah didn't give her a chance.

"Trust me," he repeated earnestly, the sentiment echoing in how he stroked and caressed the hand he still held. "Yes, things are great between us. You're the sun in my sky. But you've put up some walls I aim to break down or at least carve a chink –"

"Jonah, listen to me. I've tried. Sweet and sappy stuff isn't me. Let's not –"

"But I haven't. *You* haven't let me. An' I have the right to try, at least once before you go. Especially considering that you still wear my ring."

What could she say to that? It fit so naturally, so easily, the thought of removing it and giving it back before her plane lifted off was unbearable. Easier to accede, likely more fun too.

Besides, if it came down to it, Suzy knew she could always end his little attempt with a few well-placed moans and screams.

"Dammit, Suzy!" His gentle touch wrenched away. The sudden loss was jarring.

"What?" Clueless, she watched his hands grip then flex on the steering wheel. Saw his leg tense on the brake. Felt the truck give a little lurch, her heart a bigger one when she noticed his eyes were no longer on her but narrowed, looking off in the distance.

"What?" she repeated.

Face stern beneath the white brim of his cowboy hat, Jonah cast a dark glance her direction. "Don't think to fake me out. I can read the intention in your eyes. Dammit, woman!" he swore again then seemed to come to some sort of resolve. His voice hardened. "Get out."

Jonah put the truck in park but kept the engine idling. Opened his door then leaned across the seat to open hers when she didn't move. "I mean it. Get out."

Stalling, she reached for her boots.

He knocked them away. "Don't need 'em. Out."

"Jeans? A blanket?" Just what was he planning? Sex in the dirt wasn't exactly her style.

"Out, Suzy. Now."

"C-Condoms?" she stammered, aiming for the glove box they'd restocked.

"Don't need them, doll. Out, dammit!"

With a shaky laugh, she finally obeyed. Just because he was on to her didn't mean it wouldn't work. She was in control. Always.

And he'd said no condoms. Which meant whatever he planned, it wasn't full-out penetration. Jonah wasn't one to take risks. Too tame, she reminded herself.

So why was she worried? She could withstand whatever he thought to deliver.

Then what was that strange tingling through her veins? It was *supposed* to be familiar. That always exciting combination of anticipation and arousal mixed with fear. Why did it cut deeper now, feel sharper?

Because this time fear outweighed the other two?

Fear that maybe he *would* break through her defenses.

Then leave her bereft.

Before that scary thought could fully take hold, before it had a chance to tamp down the rising excitement flooding her limbs, Jonah marched around the truck and met her at the passenger door where her feet had just touched down.

A man on a mission, he tossed his cowboy hat on the seat, jerked her to the side then slammed her door shut. Immediately he pushed her up against it and divested her of shirt and bra, throwing both in the truck bed. Leaving her in nothing but tie-dyed socks and panties.

“Maybe I don’t always want to be standing over you with a belt in my hand.”

Well, he’d cut right to the chase, hadn’t he?

His gaze locked on hers. “Don’t get me wrong, I like it. Love how I feel when I’m with you. But maybe I want a little variety. You got that? You listening, Suzy Q?”

“Sometimes, I just might want to hold *you* tight, hold your naked body against mine. Spread your legs wide and pierce through your reserve. Surge deep and make *slow*, sweet love to you until we both cry from the wonder of it. Have you ever thought of that?”

She had to admit—he made it sound good. Shoot, she was practically salivating over his unexpectedly poetic description. The truck, still running, thrummed along her back and Jonah’s hands floated over her breasts, not pressing, not pinching, not rolling her nipples, but barely there...a gossamer touch. Gone before she could appreciate it. Before she could ask for more.

He took her lips in a cruel kiss. Cruel because he kept his tongue away from hers. Kept the pressure light, dry. Kept it short.

Just when Suzy was about to lean forward and arch her chest against his, about to rise up on her toes, loop her arms around his neck and pull him to her, Jonah stepped back. “Your panties. Take them off.”

She might like bossy Jonah. Might like being told what to do. But she wasn’t one to lie down meekly. “You want ‘em off? Take them off your —”

He didn’t need to be told twice, slicing through one side so fast she never saw him draw his pocket knife.

“Whoa there, pardner,” she said in her best Texanese, “whar’s the fire?”

Blazing from his eyes, that’s where. Hands at her waist, he lifted her off the ground and carried her to the front of his truck where he placed her butt smack on the hood, over the idling engine, which warmed her nicely after that first surprising jolt. “Umph!”

When she propped on her elbows and raised up, Jonah was staring precisely at her face. Her *face*, not the naked – if one discounted her splash-dyed turquoise socks – body splayed before him, the body he'd taken control of, stripping both her clothes and remaining resolve. Not her exposed and now aching pussy...but her face. Prompting Suzy to blurt, "Now what?"

"You tell me," he commanded.

Hell, that was easy. Suzy started to roll over. "Go get a rubber, cowboy, and –"

One hand to her hip, Jonah halted the action. "Uh-uh. You tell me exactly how you like to be licked. *That's* what we're doing today."

Jonah took her ankles in hand and situated her feet atop his shoulders, bracing his stance and leaning in. When he decided her intimate self wasn't accessible enough, he gave a giant heave on her hips and brought her within an inch of his mouth.

"I'm waitin', Red." His eyes flicked straight to her core. One eyebrow quirked. "Or should I say, Blondie? Come on, Suz, tell me how you want it. We're here 'til we run out of gas – then we're stranded, so there's *no* hurry." That scenario was supposed to present her with no pressure? *Was he insane?* "You just share what you like, what feels good, and that's what I'll do."

The longer he breathed over her vulnerable folds, the more she sensed them dampening. The more uncomfortable she grew.

She tried to shift her legs. Jonah stopped her – each hand firm against the skin of one thigh, above her knees yet below the bandage.

The engine hummed along her spine. The nearby creek lured wildlife – a couple of birds flitted far overhead while a single squirrel chattered at Suzy from a branch, telling her to get on with it.

The man between her legs gazed at her with slumberous eyes as if he had nowhere else to be. Nothing – and no one – else on his mind.

Except her.

Facing him – and not having her mouth busy around his cock – was a new position for Suzy. Experience had taught her all she had to do was aim for a guy's pants and penis, lick her lips and *voilà* – they lost all interest in going down on her.

She hated this new situation Jonah forced on her. "Damn you, Tex!" Her hands flailed along with her words. "I'm so exposed. You're just standing there – dressed!"

His strong fingers pressed deep into the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs. The tat had gone into stealth mode – no longer did she feel the remembered burn of the needle or the constant, companionable ache since. All she felt was Jonah's fingers. His eyes locked with hers.

His sincerity. His patience. His *determination*.

"We're not moving, are we?" She spoke to the squirrel, lying back against the hood in order to avoid that look in his eyes. The one that promised so much.

The one she didn't want to disappoint.



"I am, just as soon as you tell me how you like it. And, Susannah..."

For a split second, his fingers gripped her hard—she held her breath to keep from moaning her satisfaction, not wanting it to end.

"Just feel what you feel. Don't fake it. Don't pretend, not with me. That's all I ask." When she started to instinctively protest, he shook her legs sharply. "Don't embellish. This isn't some contest to see who's stronger. It's just an...experiment, an exercise in what feels good. Got it?"

A whimpery moan of dread escaped despite her attempts to suffocate it and his touch gentled.

"Susannah," he drawled with so much serenity she knew he could outlast her any day. "Talk to me."

When she remained mute, curious to see whether he might go all caveman if she defied him, Jonah proved her suspicions correct when he only crooned in that slow, deep, seductive way, "I've got a fair idea of what to do here, but I *want* you to tell me, Reckless. I wanna hear what you like, what feels good."

One warm hand abandoned her leg and tapped on her foot. "I suppose I could always start here..." He wiggled her little toe—still camped out on his shoulder. "Lick my way up until—"

"Aren't we wasting a lot of gas?"

"Nah. We're on a scenic road trip, you and I, or didn't you know? Me? I'm lookin' at all this expanse of tan, muscular leg with a pretty pale triangle right in the center, enjoyin' the sights of a little tropical expanse, and a cavern or two I can't wait to taste. Where paradise awaits, if only my tour guide would tell me just how she likes to be explored."

Good God. Who was this man? "Jonah..."

He just kept toying with her toe, making no attempt to move onward—or upward.

How did she know what she wanted? What she liked in this regard? This was new territory. And damn! How she hated driving without a map. Though Jonah sure wasn't letting her anywhere near the driver's seat, now was he? Not Esmeralda's. But her body—*that* he wanted her to provide instructions for?

*Grrrrr.*

What the heck, why not just make up something? The sooner he started, the sooner he'd give up. Although...the way she was feeling...

"All right," she sighed. "I'll try." *Again.* But she kept the misgivings to herself.

Jonah wanted to plumb her tropical caverns? Taste paradise? Who was she to stand in his way? "Don't go straight for it. Tease me first. Dance around before—"

"Like this?" Taking her order to heart, Jonah placed his lips above the bandage and kissed a slow path down her thigh. He nibbled his way over the crease where her leg met her abdomen, the stubble on his jaw scraping against her skin.

Electric sparks zipped up her legs and centered between.

“Mmmm, just like that. Jonah!” A giggle escaped as his soft lips and raspy whiskers sent quivers racing over sensitive skin. “Use more pressure. You’re tickling me.”

Jonah took her instructions and tortured her with them, milking little sighs and mewls from her as he avoided the place she both wanted and dreaded him most.

Without his mouth ever zeroing over her center, without his hands ever traveling to moist caverns, without the nip of pain, the sharp ecstasy of a single stinging slap...her body began to respond, little tremors deep inside that...

That—

That *nothing*. Again his whiskers tickled her, making her tense her thighs. Making her self-conscious.

This wasn’t supposed to be a laughing matter!

A chill shuddered through her and it was gone. The sparks, the arousal, the feeling of wanting to come—all gone.

She cast around for something to hold on to, hating how vulnerable and alone she felt. Stupid, stupid! How could she feel alone with this wonderful man? How could she expect to ever be with him—really with him—if she couldn’t open up?

Incensed with herself, Suzy jerked to the side and loosed a scream that had Mr. Squirrel burrowing for cover.

Overriding the gentle hold Jonah had on her legs, she clamped them together then howled. The tattoo was back on her radar. The dull ache of yearning...residual, unfulfilled desire mocking her.

The sticky feel of dried desire kept her legs glued in place. An uncomfortable reminder of her failure.

“See? I told you it wouldn’t work!” Definitely easier to blame him. “Why wouldn’t you just listen to me?”

She scrambled to sit up, but Jonah was back in form, back in control.

Soothing strokes down both her legs, he coaxed them open and guided her feet to return to his shoulders. Rubbing the side of his head against one bent leg and murmuring all sorts of comforting platitudes, he worked his magic when all she wanted to do was run for the hills and hide—or better yet, jump in his truck and take off. The engine was still humming after all.

“Even the greats strike out first time up to bat. It’s okay. We’ll try again.”

As that registered, Suzy had to battle down the urge to clobber him. “It’s not my first time up to bat! It doesn’t work, I tell you. My body just shuts down.”

His blunt nails worked their way up and down her lower leg, never stopping, never staying in the same place, never letting her forget she was lying naked on a truck in the middle of the wilderness in broad daylight, sexy cowboy situated between her legs, pure humiliation pounding through her veins.

“No, baby. Your *mind* shuts down.” His strokes changed from light and feathery to deeper, like a massage.

“My mind has nothing to do with my butt liking leather.”

He chuckled and turned his head to place a kiss on her calf. His sneaky hands worked their way higher, still caressing firmly, only this time her hips...his thumbs arrowing over that trimmed and tidy ready-to-be-explored territory.

Suzy didn't want to respond. Didn't want to try again. Didn't want to fail or disappoint either of them anymore. “Let's just stop – *mpfft!*”

Jonah stopped. Stopped her words by diving straight in. Licking all the way up her cunt and juicing that area right back to where it'd been, thanks to his moist kisses.

Her thighs tensed. Toes curled. Suzy marshaled her floundering mental capabilities, ready to halt this right now – she'd tried once and that's all he asked for. She shouldn't have to –

“You know what I love about you?” He raised his face to ask and Suzy couldn't help but notice the shine around his lips, how his tongue came out and licked her once more before he answered his own question. “You remind me of Ma's roses.”

Huh?

Another lick, straight down her slit.

Another shudder through her body – this one pure adrenaline, promising ecstasy.

“I love how you're spunky and surprising and so full of pluck, I never know what you'll do next.” What Jonah did next was thrust two fingers inside her and take one side of her labia in his mouth and suck.

Oh God!

He released her and watched his fingers sliding in and out. “I love how beautiful you are but how that beauty needs to be coaxed to full bloom.”

Her toes cramped. Her legs strained. Her pussy rejoiced.

Jonah tongued the taut flesh around her clit, moved his fingers deeper and down, massaging the back of her passage. Her anus spasmed.

“I love how you come with thorns.”

Another *huh?*

“How you're so prickly, you haven't let any other man get this close to you, no man but me. Love how your nails pierce my scalp when you're excited.”

They did?

They were. Suzy couldn't help but notice when Jonah tried to lift his head and look at her and she realized she'd clamped both hands in his dense hair. Her thighs spread wider. His tongue surged deeper.

She reminded him of his mother's roses?

Aww. He'd shown her the amazing flowers he tended along one side of the house. She knew what they meant to him.

Jonah's tongue felt so exquisite. Never before had her pussy been treated to such thorough attention.

A hint of unwanted fear pricked at her brain and she blurted, "But I like the pain."

His full lips eased lower. Fingers pistoned faster. "I know you do, sweetheart, but aren't you in pain now?"

*God yes.*

"Susannah Miller, a.k.a. Reckless Red..." He withdrew his fingers, lifted his gaze to hers and said clearly, "Oh how I love you."

Then his mouth returned where his fingers had been, tongue, teeth and lips teasing and pleasing, delving and licking as if this were the last inning and Jonah needed to hit one out of the park or die trying.

And while her mind was busy absorbing his verbal declaration, her body cruised on ahead, writhing over his face, riding his tongue and jaw, until *kaboom!* Orgasmic bliss powered through her mental reserves, saturating her limbs more deeply than any climax in memory.

Minutes or hours later—who could tell time at a time like this?—Suzy was still shaking. Her body, her heart...both quivering from the magnitude of what'd just happened. She'd responded all right. Both to Jonah and his unexpected avowal.

*I love you*, he'd plainly admitted.

Jonah wasn't one to take risks? Who was she kidding? He was bravely taking the biggest one of all...on her.

*But would he still, if he knew everything?* that dreadful devil on her shoulder prompted.

Suzy wasn't sure, didn't have a chance to find out, because Jonah didn't wait for her response, didn't expect her to answer. Chin glistening, lips smiling, eyes sparkling, he only nodded and ordered, "Good girl. Now turn over."

"T-turn?" Damn. Was that her mouth trembling? Yeah, along with every other part of her.

"Uh-huh." Keeping her gaze snared with his gloating one, Jonah deliberately stepped back and made sure she could see his every action as his hands leisurely went to the belt at his waist and undid the buckle. "Don't you think my good Suzy girl deserves a reward?"

The leather hissed through the belt loops, a soft, sweet song.

**Chapter Twenty-Six**  
*Here Lies Jonah Michael McKenzie...*  
*Happiest Man in Heaven*

Forget that. He wasn't dead yet.

*Here Lies Jonah Michael McKenzie – in bed, not a grave...*  
*Happiest Man on Earth*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Have I told you I feel like the happiest, luckiest man alive?"

"Only about twenty times," Suzy answered truthfully. "But I never tire of hearing it."

After struggling with the decision for the last two hours—not to mention the last several days—Suzy commanded herself to exit the comfort of Jonah's one-armed embrace while the credits rolled.

He'd bought her a pair of headphones, rigged a few wires, and they could now enjoy movies in bed. Always a fun place to be, which was one reason she was having so much trouble abandoning her comfortable position in his.

On the count of twelve—she'd been aiming for five—Suzy surged abruptly to her feet. "Time for me to head out."

"You're not staying?"

"Not tonight." She reached for her purse, actually her poolside bag because her purse hadn't been big enough, and deliberated some more.

"Ahh...gonna run downstairs and call the airlines? Cancel your reservation once and for all?" He said it lightly, but she heard the soul-deep nuance of the question.

She smiled at his continual hints—had to turn away to keep him from seeing how broadly. The less-than-subtle reminders that he never wanted her to leave pleased her mightily. This playing hard-to-get definitely had its advantages, she thought, especially when Jonah sat up, pulled her down next to him and started inching up the two layers of gauzy skirt Sheba had given her—*made* her—when Suzy expressed surprise at how comfortable the skirts were after getting the tattoo.

Everyone but Nana knew about pretty blue brands adorning their legs. Jonah refused to drop trou and show his off, but Suzy had no such qualms, bearing her inner thigh to each of his relatives who expressed an interest, loving it when Jonah began growling under his breath each time one of his brothers came within twenty feet of her.

The novelty had worn off, so had the soreness, but the wonder was still there.

Every second of every minute of every day. Branded by a cowboy.

Her cowboy – if she was brave enough to grab him and hold on forever.

Damn, *she* was the lucky one. Possibly about to get luckier, watching how quickly his fingers grazed beneath the voluminous skirt.

At least it was black. Went great with her leopard sandals, and while *they* were completely inappropriate for West Texas, Jonah made no secret of his admiration for her flashy footwear. Nana hated them – pursing her lips and sniffing every time Suzy clacked by. The triplets had encouraged her to wear them all she liked.

“Hey, Tex,” she asked once his fingers met bare skin and slid between her legs, stroking above her knees, “are *you* thinking of getting lucky?”

His fingers stilled and patted her thigh, right over the bright blue tattoo. “I already am, baby. Already am.”

Too soon he removed his hand, crossed his arms behind his head and slanted her a quick, raised-eyebrow look. “Well, Reckless? What’ll it be? Ever gonna make that call?”

“My reservation?” she forced out casually, wanting his hand back. Wanting to delay. “Maybe I’ve already canceled it.”

She had, once. Rescheduled it at least, giving herself another week – to the consternation of her boss. Jonah knew that, had been appropriately grateful, but while he hadn’t abandoned making the occasional reminder that he wouldn’t be satisfied until her driver’s license read *Texas*, neither had he repeated his heartfelt declaration – the one that still made her head spin and her body burn every time she recalled it.

She’d officially relocated from the Lucky Lady to his cousins’ loft, given her remaining two boxes of Vroom! Rocket Red to Jezzy, was gratefully working out in Isaiah’s extra bedroom – he’d invited her to come over and use his all-in-one gym anytime! – and still she couldn’t stop imagining a future with Jonah. Or stop thinking of all the reasons why it wasn’t feasible.

“You have? For real?” He shot to his feet.

“I...ahm.” Knowing she could deliberate no longer, that it was time to go through with it and put an end to her incessant worrying – pray God, not her dreams – Suzy stood too and pulled the thick book from her bag. “Here. I’ve been meaning to give this to you for a while, but I –”

He snatched it from her and held it between them. “Your journal. I recognize it from my foray through your cabin.”

A huge wave of embarrassment swept over her, heating her face. “You’ve already read it then?”

“Hell no.” He tried to hand it back. “I dug through everything else but left this shut. Some things aren’t meant for prying eyes, even well-intentioned ones.”

She stepped toward the door, hands behind her, refusing to take the book he held out. “Well, I’m giving it to you. To read.”

When he advanced and she retreated again, Jonah paused, pure confusion in his gaze. "Why?"

"Don't think I've forgotten what you said out by the cypress tree—I haven't. That entire afternoon—"

He zoomed forward so fast, he had his hands at her waist before she realized he'd dropped the journal on his pillow. "What's this about?"

"You. Me. My past."

"Your *past*?" he almost shouted, and she shushed him. It was after one. Nana still didn't know he'd been sneaking her upstairs at night. "What's that got to do with—"

"Everything! What if you find out some sordid thing about me and change your—"

He gave her hips a shake. "I love you," he insisted with conviction. "The only reason I haven't repeated it every single hour is because you've been so skittish."

No kidding. That damn orgasm had pulsed through her for fifteen minutes, had her heart skipping beats another half an hour. Not to mention the one he gave her next. Nerves had done her in since. "You think you want to set up house with me but you don't know—"

Jonah yanked her resisting body forward and tossed her to the bed, following her down and pinning her in place. His big hands bracketed her face, his heavy body pushed her deep into the mattress. "I know I do. I *know*. Haven't you been listening to me? I love you. I want a life with you always."

Suzy's fingers scrambled over the quilt until she caught a corner of the journal. In the hallway, one of the triplets was helping Grandpa back to his room—she and Jonah'd heard him escape earlier. Jonah had checked his new chart and sent the girls after him.

Suzy poked the book into his back. "I need you to read it all. Then if you're really sure—"

"Suzy."

"I mean it!" She pushed him away and clambered from beneath his warm, tempting body. "This—us—it's moved fast—"

"It's not like we've just met or anything." He clamped one hand on her wrist, preventing further retreat.

"As adults we did. Barely three weeks ago. Just read it, please. Then we'll talk." With her free hand, she attempted to work the ring off.

"Don't you dare, Suzy Q." He raised her arm in his, the ring firmly in place. By now she was practically lying on him. "My life's never been so peaceful since you started wearing that." Jonah laughed at himself. "Maybe peaceful isn't the right word, but you get my drift. An' I don't want to hear another complaint about how long it's been. Bo flew out to see Sommer last weekend—did you know that? And they *really* just met."

She stilled her struggles. Damn he felt good beneath her. "He *flew* to California?"

"Yeah. With a ring in his pocket."

“Wow. Um...just wow.” That gave Suzy pause. If goody-two-shoes Sommer could make things work with her one-night stand—the man she never would’ve met if it hadn’t been for Suzy’s prodding...

Then why couldn’t she and Jonah have something really real?

*Sommer doesn’t have your stellar past*, the devil prompted with a snarky laugh.

“Oh hang it!” Suzy told her left shoulder.

She grappled until Jonah gave her the freedom to retrieve her diary. “Humor me. If you won’t read the whole thing, read parts of it.”

A tussle or two later, they were both sitting on the side of the bed. After Jonah read the first entry, he took her hand in his and murmured “Ah...Aunt Myrna,” referring to the turtle she’d received in lieu of a dog.

Suzy nudged his leg. “I think it’s safe to skip ahead a few years.”

He did and Suzy was surprised at the nostalgia when she saw the words she’d written about him—her college crush. Nostalgia tinged with embarrassment. “Didn’t realize I’d waxed on so much about you.”

“Hush. I’m reading.”

Jonah remained silent for several pages, which encompassed several years. He chuckled over tie-dye notes she’d jotted on stickies but didn’t comment. When he reached one of her most volatile entries—the one about the married slime—her entire body buzzed in a bad way, waiting to see what he’d make of her poor judgment.

“You misspelled phlegm.”

“That’s what you get from that...tirade?”

He threaded his hand through her hair and drew her head down to his shoulder. “I get how much pain you were in.”

And that was it. He didn’t ask anything else, not even how she found out, he just kept turning pages and skimming—wincing a time or two, if she wasn’t mistaken.

Once he reached the first of her official vacation entries—detailing sex with strangers—Jonah clapped the book shut. Spoke sternly. “I don’t need to read any more. If it’s your conscience you need to expunge, talk with a priest or practice forgiving yourself. As far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing you’ve done that will change—”

“Fine!” Suzy huffed. She’d worked up to this for days and it didn’t matter? He was going to love her regardless? Stubborn, dependable man! “If you won’t read the rest of it—and you’re *sure* you won’t change—”

“I’m sure.”

She stole the book from him and flicked past chunks of pages until reaching the last couple with writing. Seeing what she’d recently agonized over, what she’d read fifty times since, gave her courage.

“Here. Read the last entry at least.” She plopped the diary back in his lap. He had to catch it or let it crash to the floor.



He caught it.

And she started babbling. "I guess, if you're not going to read it all, I could just summarize? Maybe hit a couple of highlights?" Er...lowlights. "That way I won't ever have to worry again?" Why did everything she say sound like a question?

Jonah grunted, his gaze glued to the page.

"The whole vacation sex idea came after I found out that guy I'd been seeing—had fallen for, stupid me—turned out to be married—"

"Did you know," Jonah paused to ask, his gaze still pointed downward, "at the time?"

As he'd just read that entry, he knew she hadn't, so the question was rhetorical. Suzy answered anyway.

"Hell no! Assface had a wife *and* three daughters tucked away. I found out while scanning the state's major-market papers, which I do every morning. Bastard was pictured with his family at some fundraiser he'd—"

"Suzy." Jonah glanced up and gave her a confident smile. "It wasn't your fault, sweetheart. Let it go."

He looked back down and turned the page.

Nerves on overdrive, Suzy's mouth ran away with her. "Then there were those three in Cheyenne—"

"Whoa!" Jonah thumped the book shut and took her by the shoulders, his broad hands knocking off any residual whispers—demonic, angelic or otherwise. "Three cowboys or three corn fritters—I *don't* need to know. An' you don't need to dwell."

As she stared into his expression, Suzy felt the remaining weight of her conscience dissipate under his sincerity. He meant it. Jonah loved her as-was, and that wasn't gonna change.

A slow smile bloomed in her heart and spread across her face.

Jonah saw he'd finally convinced her. His stance relaxed though his grip on her shoulders tightened. "You like it here? In Texas?"

She told the truth. "I love it here. With you."

"Have you given any thought to your job?"

"Two weeks' notice and I'm out of it." Were they *really* discussing this? "Sheba said I could waitress at the grille. Or tend bar."

His fingers flexed. "You could."

"So..." Just testing the waters, to see how this new trust thing felt, Suzy leaned back 'til his hands dropped to hers. She picked one up and started fiddling with his fingernail. "You'd trust me to tend bar? Around hordes of..."

"Horny? Unruly?" he put in helpfully.

"Cowboys?" she finished with a nod.

"Any reason why I shouldn't?"

Suzy glanced at the ring on her finger then blatantly brought her hand to the Bottoms Up tattoo on her inner thigh. She gave him that siren's smile, the one with his name on it. "No reason at all. *This* cowgirl's claimed. In Sweetwater County and everywhere else."

"Bravo."

Still testing her newfound freedom—who knew it would come from committing herself to a man?—Suzy told him, "While I could work at the bar, I'm more interested in doing PR work for the area."

"You saw that, did you?"

Of course she'd seen it. The want ad had been blazing from the corner of his desk for over a week—the West Texas Tourist Council was hiring a media representative, applications accepted through the end of the month. Jonah'd done everything but tape the paper to her forehead to bring it to her attention.

"If I can tone down the Yankee accent, I think I'll have it in the bag."

"I like your confidence, lady. Or should I say, *ma'am*? How about...Mrs. McKenzie?"

Suzy toyed with the short hair at his nape, looked deep into those sincere eyes and remembered how often she'd claimed *he* was old-fashioned. A throwback. "Why, Jonah, Sir," she twanged, "I'm startin' to think you can call me anythin' you wanna long's this tall, sexy body's next to mine come nightfall."

"Yessum."

Several heated kisses—and discarded pieces of clothing—later, Suzy murmured, "So this is it? We're making it real?" Then because she couldn't keep from riling him on the one subject he still hadn't given an inch, "You're willing to add 'Mrs. Suzy McKenzie' to Esmeralda's title?"

"Damn!" Jonah flipped from the bed and lunged for his dresser. "I was savin' this for when I took you to the airport. Don't want to wait anymore!" Though he kept his back to her, she saw him withdraw a velvet bag from the top drawer and something else he quickly shoved into his pocket. Something clanky.

He turned to her, solemn-faced. "They're not new, but I had 'em cleaned when I was in Lubbock this week. Like her ring, they meant the world to..."

He trailed off and poured the contents into his palm.

Two lovely, textured teardrops. The most beautiful, classy pair of gold earrings she'd ever seen.

*Gold*—not gold-plated. Quality, through and through. Just like the old-fashioned man in front of her.

Reverently, Suzy touched one. "Your mom's. The ones you told me about?"

He nodded. "Yours now."

"Damn you, Jonah." That was all. Her throat was clogged with a vat of fourteen-carat amazement. "Damn you..."

Didn't matter that the carat caught her tongue, Jonah understood.

"Hallelujah! It's real!" he hollered loud enough to wake several dozen zombies, definitely the residents in the main house, given the door clicks and footfalls and curious murmurs that followed. "We're engaged! Gettin' married!"

He claimed her lips so fiercely, so tenderly, their mouths melded...meshed. Hearts and breaths entwined.

God. This *was* real now. The ring wasn't leaving her finger, nor would Jonah leave her side.

At her startled giggle, Jonah lifted his head. "Everythin' okay?"

"Marvelous!" she yelled to the rafters.

"Jonah!" Nana Dori's voice, unmistakable though subdued by recent sleep. "What's all the ruckus?"

"Come on in! Congratulate me!" he yelled back, throwing the door wide.

While Suzy hid her astonishment and tears behind a smile so bright it hurt, Nana, Zack, Grandpa and Sheba all huddled in the doorway, curious why the engagement they'd known about for two weeks had Jonah all fired up *tonight*.

Then Nana noticed the clock. "Two in the *morning*?" And Jonah's lack of a shirt. Suzy's lack of shoes. "Where're your clothes?" And the lack of grandchildren. "Sheba...where's Tamar? Jezebel? Ezra? Josiah? Where in blazes are the rest of my grandchildren?" A pause then, "*Boaz!*"

She went charging down the hall, ready to do a bed check. Zack followed, grumbling about not ever gettin' any sleep—or female companionship—and Sheba asked Grandpa, now that they were both up after having *just* fallen asleep, whether it'd be another round of dominoes or spades.

Jonah sighed, that beautiful chest of his rising and falling with the motion, then he shut and locked his bedroom door and leaned against it. "You know this is it? I'm not lettin' you go."

"Kay."

"I've got another present for you. In my pocket. Come an' get it."

Walking on clouds, Suzy floated to him. Never in a million-billion years would she have thought she'd come full circle, back to the cowboy who inspired so many dreams of home and hearth a lifetime ago.

"My *pocket*, woman," he stressed when her hands veered toward the center.

Ten seconds and another admonition later—when her fingers got a little frisky—Suzy was dangling a shiny new truck key off a chain.

"I'll add your name to the title tomorrow—and yes, you can drive."

"Hell's bells, Tex," she said when her mouth started working again. "I saw from the start how well you took care of what was yours...I just never suspected it would be this wonderful."

He brushed the hair away from one ear, saw that she'd put the earrings in during the spontaneous family reunion, and smiled with pride. "What? To be taken care of?"  
"To be yours."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Headlining the Rustlers Round Up Review some months later...*

*Local Rancher Awarded Master's Degree, Community Invited to Celebrate*

Beneath a huge double photo, one of a somber-faced Jonah trimmed in cap and gown, the other a casual shot of him standing behind and holding on to a beaming and blonde Suzy read—

*CONGRATULATIONS, JONAH!! You did it!*

*The McKenzie family proudly announces to one and all that their grandson, brother and cousin Jonah Michael McKenzie, has earned his Master of Science in Agricultural and Applied Economics from Texas Tech University.*

*After putting in all those long hours studying and on the road, who wouldn't rightly want to commemorate the event with a big blow-out?*

*Please join us in honoring the man of the hour by celebrating Bottoms Up style! This Saturday at 8 p.m., everyone's invited to the ranch for an outdoor dance and all-around good time. Live entertainment and brisket with all the fixin's make this a party you don't want to miss...*

Firming his grip on the framed newspaper clipping Suzy'd just waltzed in and handed him, Jonah blinked in disbelief. About fell out of his sturdy office chair, the more he read.

After the party details, another couple paragraphs described the educational route he'd taken, the honors he'd graduated with and, he saw, a touch of humor beginning to trump his shock, Nana'd finally found a way to get that marriage announcement she'd been clamoring for ever since he and Suzy skipped all the pre-wedding hassle and skipped out to Vegas for a quickie wedding.

"You did this," he accused, holding up his new treasure. "Kept me occupied in El Paso all day on that trumped-up shopping excursion so I wouldn't see the paper." It'd been way past eleven by the time they made it home, the house quiet and dark. Jonah'd slipped into his office to file the day's receipts, suspecting something totally different when she'd ordered him to sit tight and flounced off, all bright-eyed and *you're-in-for-it-now* smile.

"Me?" All innocence—boy, did he know better on that score!—Suzy hopped up on his desk and grinned down at him, that luscious smile framed in feathery, deep purple strands. She'd applied the new color as soon as the graduation and sundry other photos

Nana'd demanded last weekend were snapped. Matched the new amethyst contacts she sported too. His wife was really going all out, primping for their upcoming trip—graduation present and second honeymoon in one. Jonah couldn't wait.

"Told you I had a surprise for you when we got back and it wasn't in the bedroom," she said archly. "While framing it was *my* idea, the rest I can't claim. Joe started it, of all people. His suggestion to throw you a bash."

"Right," Jonah agreed, still in a daze, as his eyes skimmed the bold headline and article below a third time. "Joe wrote this?"

"Nah—the girls did the composing. They were all in cahoots, even bribed the editor to get you front and center. Sheba and I picked out a frame last week and she promised to have it ready by the time we returned."

"It'll look great," he nodded toward the wall, "right there between my diplomas."

"That it will. So you like?"

"I love." Jonah gave the glass-protected article one last look then reverently set it aside to gather the woman making a mess of his desk—and a joy of his life—in his arms. "Come here, you."

He rocked back with her against his chest, gratified when his chair barely made a peep. Damn good decision—to go with the top-of-the-line model despite the staggering price tag.

"But you *did* wrangle them into showing for the ceremony." Which explained the frown in the graduation pic—only way he could keep from bawling when he'd walked onstage and discovered his family, several with dates or spouses in tow—every single one of them, save Grandpa and the nurse hired for the day—all hooting and hollering, cheering him on, McKenzie hides filling an entire row and then some.

Even *Nana*. Yelling, "Go Jonah! You rascal, you!" when the diploma hit his palm.

Stunned stupid was what he'd been. That and touched deeply.

"I didn't have to wrangle anybody," Suzy persisted, though no amount of denial would convince him otherwise. Because of this woman, so much in his life had changed for the better.

"I remember the look on Nana's face when she learned I was going to college. Cranky, self-righteous women don't change their spots that fast without a lot of paint and prompting." Despite Suzy's blameless shrug, Jonah narrowed his gaze. "Well, I know you've been keeping in touch with Gram and had something to do with *this*." He pointed to the fancy leather pen set gracing his desk. Gram and Steve hadn't been up for making the trip, not at their age, but the gift had arrived the day before the ceremony. Jonah'd phoned to express his thanks and he and his maternal grandmother had reminisced a good long while.

"But my brothers? Getting them to haul ass all the way to Lubbock—I know that was you."

“Wrong again, you silly, silly man.” Sighing as if exasperated with him, Suzy laid her head against his chest, running her fingers over his arm. “That was all Bo, making sure everyone showed, extracting my promise to keep him apprised of your progress. All I did was name the time and place.”

“You’re pretty damn wonderful, you know that?”

She burrowed deeper into his lap. “I do. But you can tell me all you want, Tex, my man.”

After a chorus of *you’re wonderfuls* interspersed with increasingly wet kisses, Jonah slowed things down a bit and admitted he just wanted to hold her a while. Savor the moment.

For once, Suzy remained quiet, her only comeback a swift kiss to his neck before she wrapped her arms around his waist and snuggled in for the long haul.

Basking in his accomplishments, his eyes drawn to that dual graduation-marriage announcement, thinking all over again how it’d felt having his entire family show up at the ceremony, a contentment so strong it was nearly overwhelming brimmed to the surface.

But it was tinged with sadness too. Because he couldn’t help but note the two people who hadn’t been there, the two people who, until falling in love with Suzy, meant more to him than anyone on the planet. Ma and Dad.

*I wish you could’ve been there and seen me walk across that stage. I did it. I realized my goal, and it was all because your love and encouragement early on gave me the strength to go for it and not look back.*

A stark thought crossed his mind. What if he hadn’t been blessed with such great parents? What if he hadn’t bucked family tradition and gone to Cornell? Hadn’t met –

Ah God...

His arms tightened around the spunky siren who’d fallen asleep in his lap.

“Thanks, Ma and Dad,” he whispered, emotions running high. “Thanks for being you, for supporting me, and most of all, thanks for giving me my Reckless.”

A few silent minutes later, Jonah gingerly stood and, after grabbing the frame with one hand and turning off the light, he carried Suzy up to bed, unaware of her misty eyes or the soft, awed smile curving her lips.

## Epilogue

### *Slot Machine Sugar Cookies*

So renamed once Jonah cleared \$6,500 at the roulette wheel then was bested by his wife who netted almost \$11,000 in a single turn with a one-armed bandit. Deciding to quit while they were ahead, both eagerly exchanged the casino for their private honeymoon suite where they proceeded to plan another honeymoon—this one including skydiving.

Recipe card reads as follows, complete with Suzy's handwritten notes.

Cream together in a large bowl:

1 stick real butter, softened

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup powdered sugar

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup baker's sugar

*Hell's fires, just make it easy and use 1  $\frac{1}{4}$  cups of either.*

Beat in, one addition at a time:

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup safflower oil *drizzle s-l-o-w-l-y*

1 egg and 1 tablespoon vanilla *then dab a bit behind the ears and between the breasts!*

In a separate bowl, combine:

2  $\frac{1}{2}$  cups sifted flour *haven't sifted it once and they always turn out fine*

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon each, baking soda and cream of Tartar

$\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon salt

*Be daring and include 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons of cinnamon, nutmeg and-or cloves. The variety keeps Jonah guessing why they're so yummy – and different every time. (The cinnamon's my favorite!)*

Mix the wet and dry ingredients thoroughly and chill dough overnight. Or so Nana says ~~I think 30-60 minutes works fine~~. Chill overnight for easiest handling!!

Roll into 1-inch balls then roll those in a mixture of:

4 tablespoons baker's sugar and 1 teaspoon allspice

Place onto cookie sheet and flatten slightly with the bottom of a glass. Cook at 375° for 7-8 minutes, depending upon how chewy or crisp you like your sugar cookies.

*Goes great with popcorn and spankings. ;-)*



## About the Authors

Slip between the sheets with [Alyssa Brooks](#), erotic romance author...

Author of fun, flirty and contemporary erotic romance and erotica, Alyssa Brooks currently writes for several publishers including Ellora's Cave. She resides in Amish country, Pennsylvania, where every day is a little crazier and the house gets a little messier. Taming her bad-boy husband is a never-ending task, but Alyssa's become a pro at giving him plenty of incentive. Proud mom to a young daughter, two stepsons, and a puppy that has a particular taste for shoes and unrolling toilet paper, Alyssa loves her hectic existence and is ever grateful for her awesome job as an author, where with a little research she can become anyone, doing anything, and fall in love over and over and over again. The imaginary sex is great too!

[Larissa Lyons](#) loves cats, chocolate and her husband—though not necessarily in that order! She's been a clown, a tax analyst and a pig castrator >^..^<, but none of those endeavors satisfy quite like putting pen to paper and seeing her stories come to life. To learn about Larissa's quest to have brownies declared an official food group or her penchant for Roaring Rogues, visit her website.

Alyssa and Larissa welcome comments from readers. You can find their websites and email addresses on their author bio pages at [www.ellorasave.com](http://www.ellorasave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).

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Orchids and Orgasms

Restrain Me

Tied Between Two Lovers

**Also by Alyssa Brooks**

Blizzard Bound

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