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Chicken Fried

Beefcake

Carolyn Gregg

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By

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Chapter One

“Aww, *damn* it!”

Elizabeth Runnels pulled over onto the grassy shoulder and put her car into park before reaching for the map on the passenger seat. She also grabbed the step-by-step instructions Susan had emailed her and compared them with the route marked with a highlighter.

“I should be on Route 16. I know I took the Route 16 exit off the interstate, but did I miss a turn somewhere?”

A glance out her windshield didn’t reveal any sort of signpost. Not in front, not in back, and not for the last ten or so miles. Here it was, nearly six-thirty on a Friday evening and she was in the middle of nowhere on a two-lane blacktop. And not a frigging car anywhere in sight that she could flag down and ask for directions. At least it wouldn’t be dark for another couple of hours, which was to her advantage. It might take her that long to get to the Flying B ranch.

Growling a little in anger, Beth reached for her cell phone. It showed one bar of signal strength. “So much for west Texas,” she muttered to herself, and hit five on the speed dial, praying the phone would work. Miraculously, the call went through.

“Hello?”

“Susan! Oh, thank goodness! I’m lost as a goose! Help me?”

Susan’s familiar giggle answered her. “Girl, I knew it! I swear, you’d get lost in your own bathroom. Where are you?”

“Hell, if I knew, would I be calling you?” Beth snapped, and immediately regretted it. “Sorry, girlfriend. I think I’m getting a headache from trying to follow this stupid map.”

“Are you on Route 16?”

“I think I am. At least I took that cutoff like your instructions say.”

“Did you go under the overpass?”

“Yes.”

“Did you go through a dinky town called Myler?”

Beth thought back. “I went through some little town, but I didn’t catch the name.”

Susan giggled again. “That was Myler. Right outside of town you came to an intersection. That was where you were supposed to take a right onto 16.”

“Yeah. There was a gas station at the corner. I took a right.”

There was a pause. “There’s no gas station at the intersection.”

“Yeah, there was,” Beth insisted. She could even see the white stucco building in her mind’s eye.

“No, Bethie,” came Susan’s patience-thinned reply. “Oh, geeze. I think you

took a right on FM 144. There's an old Sunoco gas station there. Good grief, Beth! You've done it again!"

"Aww, shit!" Beth tossed the printout and map back into the passenger seat. Putting the car into gear, she prepared to turn around and go back the way she'd come.

"How far did you go?" Susan asked.

"I don't know. Fifteen miles? I kept looking for the mailbox and the entrance like you told me to, but I never saw it. That's why I called."

"Go back until you reach the gas station again," her best friend instructed. "I'm sending Billy to meet you."

Billy. He was Wyatt's younger brother, but older than Susan, making him the middle child. Beth had never met Billy Byrd. In fact, for the longest time, she never knew Wyatt and Susan had another sibling until Susan mentioned him one day.

"How will I know when I see him?" Beth asked.

"He drives a beat up old red truck," Susan said. "Even you can't miss it. I swear, Beth. Look for an old red truck with the Flying B logo on the doors."

"All right. See you in a bit." Beth hung up, tossed the phone on top of the map, and gripped the steering wheel with both hands.

Some things never changed, and being jinxed was her biggest bone of

contention. It was as if Murphy had written his famous Law with Elizabeth Runnels in mind. If something could break, get lost, or in some way end up in a way it was never originally intended to be, at some point Beth had to have had a hand in it.

Even while growing up, the kids at school called her Bad Luck Beth. The moniker had stuck, just like her never-ending string of happenstances.

“How could I have missed that intersection?” she kept repeating to herself. She had tried to follow Susan’s instructions to the letter, and thought she had done herself proud. But, no, it was not meant to be.

Fortunately, the road was a straight shot back into town. She finally passed a sign identifying it as Farm to Market Road 144, just as Susan guessed. As Beth neared the small community, she could see the yellow blinking traffic signal where she’d originally taken the wrong turn. The old gas station came into view, and sitting in front of it was a faded red truck. As Susan promised, the B with wings brand was on the doors. Beth pulled up beside it.

Her jaw dropped open to see the hunky blond step out of the cab and make his way over to her window. His jeans were faded and well-worn, but they hugged his legs and butt. A huge, oval belt buckle rode on top of his zipper. He had on a stained white t-shirt underneath an unbuttoned, short-sleeved gingham shirt, and his scuffed boots were covered in dried mud.

Once he reached the driver's side, he pushed up the brim on his straw hat and gave her a polite smile. "Beth?"

She remembered to close her mouth before she nodded. "Yeah. And you're...?"

"Billy." He stuck out a hand to shake hers. Large, warm fingers curled around hers, and he pumped it once. "Nice to meet you finally. I've heard a ton of things about you."

Beth smiled back into light-brown eyes with long, dark lashes. *Oh, why were boys so blessed?*

"Yeah, well, I hope we can still be cordial in spite of what you've heard." She tried to make a joke out of it, then wondered if she'd bombed instead.

The brown eyes did a quick once-over of her and the car's interior. "How you doing for gas?"

She quickly checked and noticed the little red light on her dashboard. "Oh, crap, I'm low." Once again, she'd flunked Basic Driving 101. No telling how much farther she could have gotten before the car ran out and truly deserted her in the middle of nowhere. "Where's the nearest station where I can fill up?"

"Sorry, but all the stations close up around five," Billy apologized. "Fortunately, we have a tank at the ranch where you can fill up."

"Is it far? I don't know how much farther I can go."

“Tell you what. Follow me over to feed store. You can park there, and I’ll take you to the house. You can come back and get your car tomorrow. How’s that sound?”

“Good! Sounds perfect. Thanks!” She flashed him her best smile, which Billy returned. Beth remained frozen behind the wheel as she watched the most perfect ass she’d ever seen get back into the old red truck and pull out onto the road.

Shaking her head, she gripped the steering wheel even harder and followed right behind.

Chapter Two

“So, what kind of lies has Susan been saying about me?”

It was an inane way to start up a conversation, but Beth had to say something or else she'd spend the entire trip drooling over the man who was driving. Her eyes kept skipping over to the sight of his hands on the steering wheel. She remembered how firm and warm his handshake was. It radiated confidence and strength, and just enough masculinity to tease her femininity. Tease it enough to get her interested.

Not wise, she told herself. Not while you're still engaged to Wyatt.

Not unexpectedly, Beth felt her face grow hot. Silently, she berated herself again and remembered the purpose of this trip. And why she agreed to visit the ranch when Susan had insisted.

Courage, Beth. Courage.

Still, she couldn't help but compare the man sitting a couple of feet away with the man she almost married. Almost.

For one thing, as coloring went, Wyatt was a darker blond, plus he had the kind of baby blue eyes that inspired songs. Unfortunately, it hadn't taken Beth long to discover that the angelic face hid a less than angelic personality. But for

some reason, the vibes she was getting off this man told her he was nothing like his older brother.

For another, Wyatt would never be caught wearing the cowboyish clothing that Billy wore like a second skin. Hell, the first thing Wyatt did every morning before he even peed was to comb his hair. Appearance was everything to the firstborn Byrd son, from the rigorous tanning and workout regimes to which he adhered, to the cut and style of every piece of clothing he wore. The guy even kept a small bottle of sanitizer in his coat pocket.

Billy's hands were dirty. Not filthy dirty, Beth realized, but hard work dirty. She glanced down at the hand he'd shook, but there wasn't any discernable grunge marking her skin. If Wyatt's hands were to get as calloused and muddy as Billy's, the man would probably have a coronary. The thought made Beth smile.

Billy even drove differently than Wyatt. Wyatt only kept one hand on the wheel—or rather, he drove with his wrist on the wheel—while the other hand kept a phone to his ear, or was punctuating whatever he was talking about. Wyatt couldn't talk without his hands.

“Actually, Susan left everyone with a very favorable impression of you,” Billy answered, reminding Beth of her original question.

She glanced out the back window at her suitcase sliding around in the bed. “Do you work on the ranch?” Yeah, it was a dumb question, but at the moment

appearing smart and sophisticated was the last thing on her mind. She was tired and starving.

“Yep,” he drawled with a nod. “When I’m not busy elsewhere.”

She started to ask him where elsewhere was when the truck slowed down. They were approaching a large mailbox bearing the Flying B brand and the name Byrd right above it. Across a cattle guard was a gate that was wide enough for two vehicles to pass each other. A large wrought iron arch crossed over the roadway, the same Flying B brand suspended predominantly in the center.

Not too far ahead Beth could see the large, rambling, one-story ranch home, complete with several larger structures behind it. She spotted Susan’s SUV parked in the four-car garage. The ash-blond also ran out the front door as soon as she saw the red truck turn onto the property.

“Bethie! I’m so glad you made it!” the woman squealed, hugging her before she managed to get both feet on the ground.

“Yeah. It was touch and go there for a while,” Beth admitted with a grin. She scanned the garage a second time before commenting, “I don’t see Wyatt’s car.”

“Oh, he called and said he wouldn’t arrive until tomorrow. He’s staying over to wine and dine some VIPs, hoping they’ll sign him on.”

So Wyatt phoned home to let them know he’d be late, but he didn’t have the courtesy to let his fiancé know? It was typical Wyatt, and one of the reasons why

Beth was determined to see this weekend through to the bitter end.

Billy pulled her lone piece of luggage from the bed and ambled over. “I take it she’s staying in the blue room?” he asked his sister.

“Yeah. And hurry and wash up. We’ve been holding up supper until you two got here.”

He gave a nod and headed up the stone walkway. Again, Beth couldn’t help but notice how nicely his faded jeans hugged his hips and butt. She was interrupted when Susan linked arms with her to lead her up the walk and into the house.

“I’m so glad you finally came! I must’ve asked you a hundred times,” Susan exclaimed, giving Beth’s arm an affectionate squeeze.

“Well, to be honest, it was that hundred and first attempt that made me cave in,” Beth teased, laughing.

They entered the foyer, and Beth came to a dead standstill. Staring up at the interior, she gasped. “Oh my Lord! This place is straight out of one of those western movies!”

There was no mistaking the owner’s interest in all things cowboy: wood paneling, the cowskin seats on the chairs, and the various head of longhorn cattle mounted at intervals around the main room. The chandelier suspended overhead was constructed from cow horns, and a saddle decorated with silver conchos sat

near what Beth suspected was a wet bar.

“Yeah, doesn’t it?” Susan giggled. “Just do me a favor and don’t stand too long underneath one of those mounted heads. Or the chandelier.” The woman winked. “Better safe than sorry, right?” The woman was teasing her, yet Beth knew there was also a small amount of truth to her plea.

Her friend led her through the cavernous living area with its twenty-foot-wide fireplace and vaulted ceiling, and into the back area of the house where the bedrooms were located. The second door down, Susan stopped and turned the knob.

“This is your room. Hope you like it.”

Beth blinked. What had Billy called it? The blue room? The man had not been kidding. It was like walking into one of Picasso’s blue periods. The blue ceiling, walls, carpeting were each a different shade. That also went for the patterned drapes over the windows and the quilted bedspread. If one could manage to overlook the color scheme, it was clearly a simply furnished room.

“It looks very comfortable,” Beth assured her friend, and meant it.

Susan pointed to the door directly across the hall. “That’s your bathroom. You don’t have to worry about anyone else bothering you when you use it. Plus, it’s right where you can’t miss it.”

Beth felt a twinge of regret at the words. What wouldn’t she give for Wyatt

to show a morsel of romantic misadventure, and sneak into her shower for a little body rubbing? For that matter, if the man had shown her any creative romantic encounters in the past, maybe she would have thought twice about giving it all up— Wyatt, his family, his social standing, and a relative life of luxury.

What good is any of that if the zing isn't there?

Susan left her to freshen up before supper, and Beth took the time to take a few of her toiletries into the bathroom. After applying a bit more hairspray to tame her flyaways, Beth washed her hands and prepared herself for the inevitable.

Chapter Three

“I don’t know what’s on the menu, but it smells heavenly!”

The enormous carved table held settings for six. So far, it was just her and Susan standing around in the dining room. A perturbed look rested on her friend’s face.

“It’s gonna be just you, me, and Billy for supper, I’m afraid. Mom and Dad just called to say something’s come up. They won’t be in until tomorrow morning.”

Beth shrugged. “Hey. Things come up. Don’t worry about it. Where do I sit?”

“Over there,” Susan suggested, pointing to the chair on the other side of the table. She started to say more when she was interrupted by a sliding glass door opening and closing. Billy walked in with long strides, and Beth immediately noticed the difference in the young man’s appearance. For one thing, he looked like he’d dipped his head in a bucket of water. Droplets still rolled down the side of his face, which he swiped with a hand. The gingham shirt had been traded for a denim one, which was buttoned up and tucked in, and the long sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Otherwise, he still wore the same jeans and boots.

Susan noticed them, as well. “Fatima’s going to have your hide when she finds out you came inside with those muddy old boots on.”

“Yeah, well, who’s going to tell her?” Billy laughed. Nevertheless, he disappeared back the way he’d come, and reappeared a minute later in his stocking feet. To Beth’s surprise, he took the seat next to his sister, which happened to be directly across from her.

The meal was Mexican food, and that’s all Beth could remember of dinner. Susan kept the table conversation lively, regaling her brother with incidents she and Beth had shared over the past few months. To his credit, Billy managed to keep to himself, laughing and smiling only when it was necessary. Although he did little to contribute, it was obvious there was a clear bond of affection between siblings. Like typical brothers and sisters, Susan and Billy often traded barbs, but there wasn’t an iota of meanness in their words. Not like the snide, hurtful remarks she had witnessed pass between Wyatt and Susan.

The longer she got to know Billy Byrd, the more she found herself drawn to him. Unfortunately, there was no way she could allow herself to become emotionally attached to the man.

When they finished, Billy excused himself and left the table. Beth waited for the door to slam before she asked, “Is he always so...reclusive?”

Susan barked with laughter. “That has to be the perfect word for him.”

“Hey, I didn’t even know you had two brothers until our junior year!”

Susan played with the last spoonful of banana pudding on her plate.

“Yeah...well...Billy’s always been the quiet one. You’ve probably already guessed he’s nothing like Wyatt.”

“Yeah. I got that impression the first time I saw him,” Beth drawled. She got another giggle from Susan.

“Hey, girlfriend?”

Beth looked up from her after-dinner coffee. Susan was all serious now. In fact, Beth knew that look all too well. The woman was concerned and wanting some straight answers.

“What’s going on between you and Wyatt. No. Wait. Let me rephrase that. What’s *not* going on between you two?”

Beth let out a deep sigh and started to answer her when Susan read her mind. Or at least seemed to.

“You’re calling off the engagement, aren’t you?”

“Sue...I’m...”

“You’re not happy.” Susan made it sound like a flat statement, as if there was no arguing the truth.

Beth shook her head. “No, I’m not. I’m sorry, Susie.”

Her friend got up from her seat and came around the table to give her a hug.

“Don’t be sorry. After all, we’re talking about Wyatt here.”

“I tried to make it work out,” Beth started to tell her when Susan shushed

her.

“Hey. Like I said, we’re talking about Wyatt.” Another hug and Susan parked herself in the next chair. Taking Beth’s hands in hers, she gave them a comforting squeeze. “Okay, give. Other than the fact that we both know he can be a total asshole, talk to me.”

Where to begin?

“Susan, I’d rather not. Not right now, anyway. Can’t we just have a nice visit and talk about this some other time? Please?”

“Okay. I understand. When you’re ready, I’ll be here. You know that, don’t you, Bethie? Yeah, Wyatt’s my brother, but I know what he’s like.” The young woman made a face. “I’d be lying if I said blood’s thicker than water in this case. Yeah, I was hoping you two would make a couple. I’d have given anything to have you as my sister-in-law, but not if being Wyatt’s wife was purgatory for you. Now, in all honesty, when are you going to call off the engagement?”

“This weekend.”

“Ah! That explains why you finally took me up on my invitation when you’d turned me down all the other times.”

A moment of silence passed between them. After another minute, Beth said, “I’m sorry, Susan. I was hoping Wyatt and I could make a go of it. I truly did, but you know it was quickly coming to a point when I couldn’t take his pompous ass

self anymore. Well, that time is now.”

“Does Wyatt know you’re dumping him?”

Shaking her head, Beth answered, “No. He thinks I’m here to visit you. That’s all.”

“Why break the news here? Why now?”

“I wanted to make a clean sweep of it in front of the whole family, including your mom and dad.”

Susan made another face. “That’s just like you, Bethie. Honest, open, considerate. You’re nothing like Wyatt, and you’re right. He doesn’t deserve you. In fact...” She gave a little half-hearted laugh. “You’re more like Billy.”

“Susan, what if it’s really my fault and not Wyatt’s?” Beth asked softly. “What if me being a jinx...”

“Oh, don’t give me that shit,” Susan cut her short. “You fall over your own two feet, you get lost with directions, and April Fool’s day uses you as its cover model, but you’re *not* a jinx. Period, end of rant.” The woman grinned mischievously.

The two friends continued to hold hands until Susan giggled softly. “Pompous ass self. Gee, Beth, if you’re ever in the need of stronger adjectives, just let me know. I have a whole diary full of them.”

Beth smiled, and the two women hugged again. Susan would wait without

further prodding until Beth was ready to give her the specifics. That was the nature of their friendship, which Beth knew without a doubt would last for many, many years to come.

“Hey, how about a glass of wine and some trash talk on the back porch?”

Susan suggested, getting to her feet.

Beth agreed, and the two of them headed for the kitchen to find a couple of wine glasses.

Chapter Four

It was pitch dark and so quiet, Beth could hear the crickets. Lying awake in her bed, she wondered what time it was. Unfortunately, there wasn't a clock or alarm in the bedroom. *But if there was, it'd probably be blue.*

Beth snickered at her own bad joke and sat up. Throwing back the top sheet and quilt, she swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her throat felt parched. Worse, she felt she had the beginnings of a headache. She needed water and an aspirin, and with any luck she'd find both in the bathroom.

When the medicine cabinet failed to cough up any painkillers, she settled for drinking several handfuls of water straight from the tap to at least alleviate her thirst. The dull throbbing persisted behind her eyes.

Air. Fresh air. Maybe if she went outside for a while, the night air might help lessen the headache. "Just make sure you don't lose your way back to the bedroom," she halfway teased herself.

Padding barefoot over the slate tile floor, she paused at the double glass door that lead out onto the patio. Someone had left the floodlight on outside, and the barn and storehouse behind the house loomed eerily like black specters in the dark.

Another light caught her eye. For an instant Beth thought a light had gone off in one of the windows at the far end of the barn, where Susan had said a few of the ranch offices were located. She held her breath, waiting to see if it came on again. But when it didn't, she opened the sliding glass door and stepped onto the patio.

The night's humidity hit her with a wall of cloying dampness. The lightweight cotton pajamas she'd brought to wear were soon sticking to her skin. Beth turned to go back inside the house with its air-conditioned chill when the patio light went out.

She stiffened, unmoving and unable to think. Did someone just turn out the light? Where was the switch? Who would have turned it off this time of night? Who would still be awake? What time was it anyway? Damn it, her watch had been sitting on the counter in the bathroom. Why didn't she see what time it was when she'd gotten some water?

Beth strained her ears and eyes to catch the sound or sight of someone moving near the house. Not a lick of breeze rustled the trees, but the night sky was a fairyland of stars. As the minutes stretched and nothing revealed itself, another possibility came to mind.

Maybe the light was on a timer, she tried to convince herself.

The tiny belief was enough to make her feel better. Smiling to herself, Beth

turned to go back inside the house again when she heard a door slam.

Not close. Slam. Which meant whoever it was wasn't trying to be stealthy about it.

Burglars don't slam doors, her subconscious told her.

Yeah, but they turn out the lights, she answered back.

The sound of boots tromping over the gravel walkway between the house and the barn alerted her. She stared into the darkness, waiting for her night vision to kick in, or for the prowler to reveal himself, whichever came first.

Suddenly, the crunching sound disappeared, and her heart sped up a notch. What if it was a ghost? Or some kind of paranormal apparition?

Oh, screw it, Beth. You're half asleep, it's the damn middle of the night, and you need to go back to bed.

Beth turned around when she caught sight of something white moving just beyond the patio. An instant later, a row of lanterns lit up like a line of pale yellow stars. They illuminated a trail leading downhill. But what surprised her more was the figure of the man taking the path away from the ranch house. The man who had shucked his white t-shirt and flung it over his shoulder.

Billy. She'd recognize that backside anywhere.

Beth had no idea why she started to follow him. For some strange reason, it felt like the right thing to do.

Fortunately, the path made of flat rocks felt warm beneath her bare feet. Billy's boots made scuffling noises, masking any sounds she might make. He never turned around to see if there was anyone else around. *Why would he?* she asked herself. Who else would be up at this time of the night?

At the bottom of the small embankment was what looked like a swimming hole. It was hard to tell in the semi-darkness. A short pier stretched from the shore.

Once Billy reached the pier, he dropped his t-shirt on the boards and sat down to remove his boots. Tossing them to the side, he stood and unbuckled his belt. Seconds later he'd unzipped his jeans and dropped them. Buck naked, Billy dove under the water with a soft splash.

The sound of him entering the pool gave her the impetus to walk the rest of the way to the pier. As she stood at the edge where boards and rock met and stared down at the water, Billy broke the surface with a loud splash and gasp for air. He immediately stilled when he spotted her.

"Beth?"

"Uhh... hi."

He glanced around. In the dim light he reminded her of a bedraggled puppy as he treaded water. "What are you doing out here at this time of night?"

"I had a headache and came outside to get some air when I saw you heading

down this way. Do you often come swimming in the dead of night?”

“Deeble is foaling. I stayed with her until she gave birth. Fatima would kill me if I tramped afterbirth and blood into the house, so I came down here to wash up,” he explained, then stopped. “It’s pretty late, Beth. You should go back up to the house.”

Beth snorted. “Now you’re starting to sound like your brother,” she accused with more than a smidgen of irritation. Billy instantly read her tone.

“I’m sorry. I’m not used to being followed by a beautiful woman down here.” He dipped back underneath the water, surfacing again and pushing his hair out of his face.

With his hair plastered to his scalp, the sharp planes of his face stood out in the lamp light. Beth could see the familial resemblance between Billy and Wyatt. But where Wyatt’s looks were devastatingly handsome almost to the point of being cruel whenever he was angry, Beth could see a gentleness around Billy’s eyes and mouth. The same lines of gentleness she saw on Susan’s face.

She sat down on the end of the pier and let her feet and legs play in the cool water, disregarding the fact that her pajamas were also getting wet.

And then it hit her...

He called her a beautiful woman?

She opened her mouth to comment when Billy swam closer. Although the

water was clear, the light from the lantern didn't penetrate the pool enough to where she could see any further than his chest.

"You're getting your pants wet."

Beth shrugged. "I don't care. The water feels good." She grinned. "You're making me jealous."

"Oh? How?"

"A humid night like this, and you ask how?"

He grinned back, and again she was struck by how different he was than his brother. Wyatt smiled, but he never grinned. For that matter, she couldn't remember when was the last time she'd heard him laugh spontaneously.

"Well, I'd ask you to join me, but that wouldn't be proper, now, would it? Asking my brother's fiancé to go skinny-dipping with me?"

She started to respond, but bit her lower lip instead. How much should she tell him? Should she open up and reveal the truth behind her visit to the ranch like she did to Susan? And if she did, would Billy believe her?

"Do you always go swimming in the nude in your pool?" It was a lousy attempt at being flippant, but she felt she had to say something.

"This isn't a pool," he quickly corrected her. "It's a tank."

"What's the difference?"

"It's an artificial watering hole for the livestock," Billy explained. "Some of

our tanks are stocked with fish, so we can go fishing in them, besides swimming.”

“Are there fish in this one?”

He shook his head. “No. I like to keep this one varmint free so I can take a dip without having to worry about diving on top of anything.”

That was a relief. She didn’t have any desire to have her toes nibbled on by something she couldn’t see. “How deep is this one?” she asked, noticing how he continued to work at keeping himself afloat.

“Oh, I don’t know. Hold on.” Without warning, Billy took a quick breath and dropped under the surface. A few seconds later, he bobbed back up. “I’d guess about ten-to-twelve feet in the middle. It’s shallower on the sides.”

She started to ask him more about what kind of fish, when he launched himself across the pool, taking the length with long, strong strokes. His pale ass teased her as it rolled back and forth in the churning water as Billy swam away from her. Once he reached the other side, he dove and came back underwater.

She reached down to feel the cool water glide over her hand. God, what she wouldn’t give to strip down and join him.

“Mind if I ask you a personal question?” he ventured softly, interrupting her train of thought when he surfaced in front of her.

“What?”

“Does Wyatt know you’re breaking off the engagement?”

Stunned, Beth could only stare at him in wonder. “How...?”

Billy nodded. “It’s not hard to guess,” he told her. “First time I saw you, you had that look on your face.”

“What kind of look?”

“That ‘deer caught in the headlights’ look. Like an animal trapped in a cage, except in this case the cage was metaphorical. I always thought engaged women would be thrilled to be getting married. That nothing could beat picking out their wedding gown, and table settings, and all that other stuff like the cake and flowers.”

“Don’t forget the honeymoon,” she laughed softly.

Billy grinned again. It was a sight she was quickly growing partial to. “Yeah. The honeymoon. But you don’t look happy, Beth. You don’t act like a woman who’s met the man of her dreams. You don’t have that glow like a woman in love should have.”

“Gee, how’d you get to be such a romantic?” she half-teased. Her chest felt tight, and the familiar tingle in her eyes and nose signaled she wasn’t too far from crying. Maybe coming out here wasn’t such a good idea.

“I think every real man has to have a streak of the romantic in them if they ever expect to fall in love.”

Beth stared at him in surprise. Billy nodded. “If it’s any consolation, I know

what you're going through. I know the real Wyatt, like you probably do now, too. I know how he can be. What he's like when he's mad. How he can charm the skin off a snake. Don't forget that I've had to put up with him a lot longer than you have."

Oh, my God. He's right. It was like getting hit across the face with a wet towel. Beth didn't have to say a word about how she was feeling because Billy knew from personal experience.

"Then... you suspected that Wyatt and I might not get married after all?" she asked.

He bobbed underwater and came back up, running a hand over his face to clear away the droplets. "Let's just say I was hoping you'd come to your senses before it was too late."

Curiosity prompted her to ask, "Why? Why would you care? You don't know a thing about me."

"You're right. I don't know anything about you." He continued to tread water as he moved a little closer to the pier. "But I do know I wouldn't wish Wyatt on any undeserving female. Despite what he put me through when we were growing up, for some reason I love my brother. That's why my wish for him is that when Wyatt does tie the knot, and I honestly hope he does one of these days, that the woman he marries gives back to him as good as she receives. My brother can

be an all-star son of a bitch and a woman like you doesn't deserve the crap he's probably been putting you through."

The man was one hundred percent sincere, and maybe more than a tad afraid for her. His concern touched her in a way she hadn't felt when Susan tried to comfort her.

Billy continued to move around in the pool. If she tried, Beth believed she could put her feet on his wide, muscular shoulders that floated like islands above the water's surface. Nearby, a frog began to croak its mating call.

"Hope you brought another pair of peejays," Billy smiled, drawing her attention back to him. "Unless you plan to ditch your bottoms and just sleep in your top."

"Hell, as humid as it is, I'd probably be more comfortable sleeping in the nude anyway." Beth laughed softly, not aware of the implication of what she said until it was too late. Surprised at herself, she stared at the man who didn't seem to notice the sexual innuendos hanging over them.

Middle of the night, with Susan and the help asleep. Just him and her. And Wyatt and the rest of the family a good two hundred miles away? Would Billy put the moves on her if she let him? Or was she the one offering the invitation and waiting to see if he accepted?

Oh, shit.

Get out of there, girl, before you two do something you won't regret.

“I... It's late. You're right. I need to get back to my room and try and get some sleep before tomorrow.” Pulling her feet out of the water, Beth rose and turned to quickly leave, when her toes caught in the sodden hem of her pajama bottoms. She instinctively tried to kick herself free. She lost her balance. With nothing to grab onto to keep herself from falling, Beth could only flail her arms helplessly as she fell backwards off the pier and into the tank.

Straight into Billy's embrace.

Chapter Five

“Whoa!”

Billy’s yell was the last thing she heard before she hit the water. The sudden shock of the cold water on her hot, sweaty skin made her gasp involuntarily. Water rushed into her lungs, and Beth nearly lost consciousness as she struggled to find which way was up.

Strong hands grabbed her and pulled her up to the surface. Heavy whacks on her back were enough to jar her back to reality and Beth retched. She felt herself being thrown over a shoulder, and the impact against her abdomen forced more water out of her lungs. Beth threw up again as she struggled to breathe.

As if he knew what she needed, Billy drew her into his arms, tilting her head back across his arm as his mouth clamped down over hers. A deep breath pushed into her body. Again, her body’s need for survival took over and she began coughing. Billy flipped her over so she could spit up the rest of the water.

After several frantic minutes, Beth shuddered. She felt a hand push her hair back away from her face, and realized she was being held tightly against the rock-hard body she’d been admiring not too long ago.

“Susan told me you had a bit of the klutz in you,” he chuckled. She could feel

the vibrations all the way down to her toes. She moved her legs slightly, and her toes encountered a soft mat of hair.

Hair. And a thick rod of flesh. Involuntarily, Beth wriggled her toes against the equally hard cock, and this time she felt Billy react.

She coughed again as he slid her down from his shoulder, letting her rub down over his chest and body until they were face-to-face. In the pale light, she couldn't read the expression in his eyes, but his hands continued to grip her around her waist and shoulders.

He moved her a little lower. His cock was now between her legs, between her thighs. Before she could think about what she doing, she raised her legs to rest them on his hips.

"Th-thank you." Damn it. She was stuttering, but she couldn't help herself.

"My... pleasure." His body was warming hers, in spite of the cold water. In spite of the humidity and the summer night.

She wanted him. She wanted him to take her right then, right there, without having to ask. She needed to know if he was as different from Wyatt in his love making techniques as he was in temperament. Somehow, she already knew the answer in her heart, but that didn't stop the sharp craving in the pit of her stomach.

Beth reached up to encircle his neck. Closing her eyes, she slowly raised her

lips, seeking his.

Billy's mouth found hers in a gentle, almost tender kiss. His lips pressed hers, never breaching, never demanding more. Softly. Sweetly. Already, Beth felt shocked by his touch. Wyatt had never been this tender, had never been gentle, even when they made love. His kisses were hard and forceful; sometimes sticking his tongue so deep into her throat, she nearly gagged.

Billy released her shoulders and cupped her cheek. The kiss deepened, and she opened her lips to allow him access. Oddly, he didn't immediately pursue it. Instead, he pulled back to look at her. "I want to make love to you," he whispered.

"Okay."

"But you have to be honest with me, Beth," he said. She could hear the hard edge in his tone. The near-angry edge. "You're calling off your engagement, right?"

"Yes." She nodded as tears welled up in her eyes. "I have to."

He looked surprised. "You have to? Why?" Suddenly his eyes narrowed. "What has he done to you?"

Beth managed to shake her head slightly. "Nothing... except prove to me why I don't want to be his wife."

He took a moment to think about what she said. Then, without warning, he turned and began swimming toward the sloping edge of the tank, dragging her with him. Beth buried her face in the curve of his neck and held on.

Once he felt the muddy bottom beneath his feet, Billy reached down and tugged off her pajama bottoms. He slung them over their heads where they landed on the grassy edge. Beth beat him to the buttons on her pajama top, and the top followed the pants.

The water moved seductively between them, silky and smooth like a hundred intimate caresses. A simple undulating movement between them, and the liquid teased her pussy in ways she'd never believed possible.

A muddy, grassy embankment met her back as Billy pressed her against the slope. Her head, shoulders, and upper body were out of the water, and he leaned back to gaze down at her breasts gleaming wetly in the golden lamplight.

"You're as beautiful as I thought you'd be," he breathed. His mouth immediately closed over one pale pink nipple, and Beth called out softly as his tongue stroked the hardening peak.

Wyatt was a biter. In fact, he treated her breasts so roughly that after a while, she'd begged for him not to touch them anymore. He never suckled them like this. He never cupped her breasts so he could bury his face between them and rub the stubble of his cheeks against them to the point where it was driving her insane.

Billy rolled her nipples with his thumbs, pressing them, pinching them just enough to send little shockwaves straight into her womb. And when his mouth

closed over the other breast, and he began teething the pebbly tip just enough to increase her frenzy, Beth grabbed his hair and pushed his face harder against her.

Billy released her with a final lick. His breathing was faster, shallower. “I want to fuck you so badly.”

His remark struck a funny chord in her. “Don’t do it badly,” she giggled. “Do it right.”

“I don’t have a glove,” he whispered near her neck. His breath was hot. Ragged. He dropped a light kiss to her bare shoulder.

“I’m protected.”

The words were barely out of her mouth when she felt his hands slide down her inner thighs. He then lifted her knees, pressing forward, pressing his cock against her until it found her inner lips.

He softly murmured, “God help me,” and began to burrow his way into her. Plowing hard and relentlessly over the sensitive nerves in her inner walls, until her pussy constricted around him. Beth gasped as she hooked her heels above his ass and jutted her hips toward him.

It was like being strangled below the waist.

She couldn’t cry out, could barely breathe, and she had to have more of him.

Billy clutched her hips to do just that. Pulling out, he rammed back into her. And he did it again. And again. Over and over, he pumped her as the water

splashed around them, almost digging his way into her womb.

Beth tightened her arms around his neck and held on. She could no longer think about what was happening to her, or revel in how wonderful it felt to have him take her like this.

Making love to Wyatt had never been this exciting or mind-numbing. It had always been quick, effortless on her part, and almost always in a bed. No love play, no experimentation, and very little foreplay.

She felt the buildup like a slow-moving force gathering momentum. She barely had time to acknowledge it when it hit her like a train out of control. Her orgasm slammed into her as Billy continued to pound her into the muddy bank, but his movements were becoming erratic. Without warning, he plunged hard and fast into her once, twice more as a low groan rolled out of his chest.

He lay on top of her as they both relished the trembling aftereffects. The water kept him buoyed so she didn't bear all of his weight. At some point Beth opened her eyes to see the stars in the night sky sparkling like strewn glitter.

She felt as if she could stay like this forever.

A kiss on her neck reminded her that, at least for the moment, she was allowed some happiness... sometimes.

Billy started to pull out of her, when she clenched her muscles. He paused and chuckled. "Don't get me started again."

“Why not?”

He blinked in surprise as he stared at her and realized she was serious.

“Beth.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” She dug her elbows into the mud and managed to lift herself. Releasing her legs from around his waist, she found the bottom and slowly stood. The water was just below her breasts.

“Turn around,” he ordered softly.

She did, and he quickly washed off the mud and grass from her back and shoulders. Once done, he turned her back around to face him, cupping her cheek again in one hand.

“I didn’t screw you because you are, or were, my brother’s fiancée,” he murmured. “To be honest, I have been attracted to you ever since Susan showed me those pictures of you that she’d taken in Florida, back when you first became roommates in college. Please believe me, Beth. I wouldn’t have taken you now if I didn’t believe you are going to call off your engagement. I don’t try to steal anyone’s girlfriend away from anyone, especially not from my big brother.” He added a small smile to his confession. Then, to cap the night, he leaned over and kissed her again. It was as sweet and seductive as the first one. This time when he pulled away, Billy launched himself back toward the middle of the tank, deliberately distancing himself from her.

“Go back to the house, Beth.”

And do what? Try to go back to sleep? she wanted to ask him. Try to forget any of this happened? And what happens in the morning when we have to face each other over the breakfast table?

She wanted him to answer her questions, but for some reason all she could do was nod. Turning around, she was able to get a decent foot-and-hand-hold in the embankment and crawled out of the tank. All the while she remained aware of the fact that Billy was getting a good eyeful of her best assets. Once she scrambled up where the tank leveled out, Beth straightened and looked back at where he continued to watch her.

“See you in the morning?”

He answered with just a nod.

“Goodnight, Billy.”

“Night, Beth.”

She gathered up her dripping wet pajamas and walked back up the rock path to the house.

The cold air-conditioning inside was another shock to her system, making Beth shiver. She dumped her wet clothes in the tub so they wouldn’t make a mess on the floor before making her way back to her bedroom.

She was asleep as soon as she was under the covers.

Chapter Six

The smell of sausage frying woke her. Throwing back the quilt, Beth swung her legs over the edge of the bed, and the rub of her bare pussy against the sheet reminded her of what had occurred last night. She clenched her inner muscles and a shudder went through her.

Oh, damn. Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn!

How in the hell was she going to face Billy after last night? What made her think everything would be just hunky-dory after the little sexual escapade they'd shared?

Throwing on a robe, Beth grabbed a change of clothes from her suitcase and poked her head out the door to look down the hallway. The coast was clear. She tiptoed into the bathroom.

Her muddy pajamas were still in the tub where she'd left them. They were another reminder that she hadn't dreamed about making love in the tank.

Beth smiled underneath the spray of warm water. Yeah. They had made love. In fact, what she and Billy had done had been the stuff songwriters wrote about, and singers sung about. There had been tenderness, and caring, and gentleness. And to put the icing on the cake, there had been that sense of adventure and near-

discovery that made their encounter that much sweeter and exciting.

Wyatt never chanced a sexual encounter outside the bedroom, calling people who did so “stupid asses”. Once she’d tried to seduce him in the back of the limo he’d rented the night he’d proposed. Unfortunately, they’d ended up squabbling again, even after she’d accepted. The next morning they’d come to an affable understanding, even though it had been Wyatt’s fault, but Wyatt never apologized. They had fucked as usual, as if nothing was wrong. But after that, she never tried again to entice him to mess around in any place outside the bedroom. Not even in the bathroom, the kitchen, or any other room inside their apartment.

Beth let her hands run over her body, remembering how Billy had stroked her. She touched her sensitive breasts, and the nipples rose to renewed life beneath her fingers. God, she loved what his mouth did to them.

She slipped her fingers between her pussy lips to find the nub already engorged in anticipation. There was nothing more in the world that she enjoyed than a healthy screwing first thing in the morning. A little horizontal exercise to get the blood pumping and the senses tingling. But Wyatt said he didn’t have time in the mornings, which was a crock, she’d once told him. If he set the alarm clock a few minutes earlier, they’d have time! Unfortunately, as was always the way with him, if he didn’t think of it first, it wasn’t a valid idea. And the longer Beth stayed with him, the more she’d come to realize how dominating the man was.

She rinsed out her pajamas and hung them over the shower curtain rod to dry. After dressing and combing the tangles out of her hair, she pulled it back with a clip and went to see what they were having for breakfast.

She'd mentally steeled herself to face Billy, and wondered how she would be able to appear casual and friendly around him. Especially in front of Susan, who could decipher her moods with those x-ray eyes of hers.

"Good morning! How'd you sleep last night?"

Beth stopped at the end of the hallway and stared at her friend seated alone at the big table. "I think I died last night," she answered, pasting a smile on her face as she joined her friend. It wasn't a lie, per se, she told herself. After she gotten back from the tank, she must have fallen asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

"Something smells great!"

"Eat up. I swear, I think Fatima doesn't know how to cook for less than a dozen people," Susan laughed.

Beth looked around as she poured herself a cup of coffee. "Heard from anyone yet?"

"No. Billy ate earlier and left to go take care of one of our horses that foaled last night."

Deeble is foaling. I stayed with her until she gave birth.

"Mom called. She and Dad were just leaving town. They should be here by

lunch.” Susan passed a plate of biscuits. “I haven’t heard from Wyatt. Have you?”

Beth shook her head. “No, but I haven’t checked my phone to see if he’d called or left a message.”

Susan shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. He’ll get here when he gets here.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Beth managed to laugh.

Fortunately, the conversation turned to other topics, much to Beth’s relief. For a while she could relax and enjoy the food and friendship. When they were finished, Susan excused herself. “I hate to do this, but I gotta run into town and pick up a few things for Fatima. Normally she’d go herself, but she’s in the middle of fixing a lunch she promises will make grown men cry.” Susan rolled her eyes in emphasis.

Beth laughed. “Even Wyatt?”

The idea of Wyatt Byrd crying over a meal made both women crack up.

“Anyway,” Susan continued. “I told Fatima I’d run to the market and get what she needs. Wanna come with me?”

“No, thanks,” Beth said. “I’d like to take a tour of the place. Maybe go down to the barn and get a better look at everything, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, no! Go ahead. Make yourself at home.” She leaned over to give Beth a small hug. “Check you later, girlfriend,” Susan said, added a little wave, and strode out of the dining room.

Fatima, the Byrds' housekeeper and cook, bustled into the dining area and began scooping up plates and breakfast remains. "Are you through, Miss?" the older woman smiled.

"Yes, thank you."

"Want the last of the coffee before I clean the pot?"

"Yes, please." Beth fixed herself another cup, then walked over to the double-glass, sliding doors which faced the patio.

She could make out the rock walkway, now that she knew where to look. What she had thought were small lanterns leading down to the tank were actually miniature lights hanging from thin, ornately curved wrought-iron poles.

She stepped outside into the morning sunshine. Just as it had been last night, the weather was muggy and humid. Overhead, the sun managed to peek between the clouds filling the sky.

Walking over to where the ground sloped down to the tank, Beth noticed the small wooden pier jutting out over the water. The tank was larger than she realized. More oval in shape, the narrower end was where she and Billy had... *made love*.

A sad smile came over her face. A sudden urge to find Billy and apologize for her behavior last night seemed paramount. She had to tell the man that the woman he'd screwed last night wasn't the real Elizabeth Runnels. The real Beth was a

woman who was willing to compromise, but not at the risk of losing her individuality. She felt the need to let Billy know that being with Wyatt had taught her she didn't need to think less of herself for any man, because a man who truly loved her wouldn't browbeat her or try to make her feel less than a woman.

She finished her coffee and left the mug on the patio table before taking the rock walkway that led toward the barn-like structure. As she neared the single door braced by two windows, she realized the light she'd seen go out last night had come from one of those windows.

One thing suddenly struck her odd. If this was a barn, where were the animals?

Beth opened the door. It opened into a short, narrow corridor with an office to the left and one to the right, which explained the two windows. Both offices were glass-enclosed and devoid of personnel.

The corridor opened up into the immense barn-like structure, except this place looked like no barn she had ever seen before. Okay, she admitted to herself that the only barns she'd seen were the ones in the movies or on television. But wasn't there supposed to be a profusion of hay everywhere? And pens with horses in them? And farm implements! Where was the tractor and stuff like that?

She sniffed. The place smelled more like fresh paint than anything else.

"What do you think of the place?"

Beth whirled around in surprise. Billy stood at the side, wiping his hands on a paper towel. He was wearing a clean pair of jeans and an Aggie t-shirt, but he still had on the clodhopper work boots. In the daylight he appeared more appealing and virile than he did last night with his clothes off.

“It-it’s... big!” she managed to stutter, and promptly blushed. The picture her brain had flashed her that same instant as her reply had nothing to do with the building, and everything to do with his erection.

Billy snorted and smiled. “It’s new. The crew just finished construction on it last week. I’ve been busy getting the final touches done on it before we bring the livestock inside.”

“So that’s why it doesn’t look like a real barn?”

The question made him laugh. It was a heart-felt laugh, completely non-intimidating. And genuine.

“Let me guess,” he said, walking toward her. “You think a barn should have hay on the floor, a hayloft overhead, and years of accumulated dust and spiders’ webs hanging from the rafters.”

“Well, yeah.”

Strangely, she didn’t feel threatened when Billy drew closer. In fact, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. As if he was going to come up to her, put his arms around her waist, and give her a warm hug before adding a kiss to his

welcome. Which was probably why she felt bereft when he stopped less than a yard away from her.

“To be honest,” he confessed, “we do have that kind of barn. It’s the next structure over. This facility is meant to replace it as the main housing area for the animals.”

“Oh.”

He held out a hand. “Would you like for me to show you around?”

He was trying to keep things as comfortable between them as possible, which she appreciated. But deep inside Beth was hoping there would be more. Maybe another embrace. Or at the least a soft kiss.

“Yes. Please. I’d like that.”

He stopped first to glance over her shoulder toward the door where she’d entered. “Where’s Sue?”

“She offered to go into town to get some things at the grocery store since Fatima’s busy cooking. She wanted me to go with her, but I said I wanted to tour the place.”

There was a sparkle in his eyes, and his grin widened. “Not a problem. Hope you don’t mind just me, then.”

“No, no. In fact I’m glad you’re...” Beth paused, aware of the fact that she was about to commit another faux pas if she didn’t shut up. No matter what

happened, she couldn't let Billy believe she'd been looking for him, much less craving him again like an addict. Thinking quickly, she finished with, "...still around to show the place to me."

"Great! I'm glad, because this place, if I may take a moment to brag, is completely my design!" He beamed as he placed a hand on her upper arm and guided her toward the back area where the stalls were located.

Beth bit her lip as her whole body went on alert from his touch. The air felt like it was electrically charged. Billy continued to point out certain areas and describe their use or function, but she was no longer able to hear him or understand what he was telling her. She felt like she was burning up. Her pussy was so hot it literally wept at the thought of sucking his cock back inside her. Even her nipples were throbbing for his touch.

He led her through the swinging doors and into a room larger than she expected. This wasn't a stall. It looked more like a doctor's examination room. Beth looked up at Billy, noticing for the first time that the top of her head came to his shoulders. Billy paused, waiting for her to comment.

"It looks like a vet clinic."

His answering smile made her feel accomplished. "Good observation, Beth. That's exactly what it is. The nearest animal hospital is nearly a hundred miles away. A prized animal could die by the time you reached it. We have some high

quality and expensive head of cattle and horses on this ranch. That's why this facility was built. To protect our investment."

Beth shook her head. "I can't see your father as a rancher. I thought he was an investment banker."

"He is. He's savvy about a lot of things. He also recognizes the value of certain breeds of livestock."

"How big is this place?" She noticed an enormous, flat pad on the floor at one corner of the room. Near it was a cage-like contraption with leather straps hanging to the pristine floor.

"Are you asking about this facility? Or the ranch?" Billy grinned, standing back to watch as she slowly examined the room's contents.

"Both, if I may."

"This building is a little over eleven thousand square feet. The ranch is just under four hundred acres."

"Wow." A place of that magnitude was too large for her to get a clear mental grasp. "How many people work here?"

He moved closer. "Right now we have four full-time ranch hands, not counting Fatima up at the house. Once this place goes on-line, we hope to employ another two or three workers." Billy gently shook his head. "We're not a full-fledged ranch, Beth. My folks treat this place more like a vacation home."

Something in the tone of his voice made her glance back at him. “But you don’t,” she said, already guessing the truth.

He nodded. “You’re right. I want to build this place up. Not to the point where it becomes a working ranch. That’s not my intent. I’d like to see the Flying B become a ranch that deals in livestock with good bloodlines. Bring in some good stock from around the country and breed them with other strains, so that the resulting animals have the best of both breeds.”

“What do your parents think of your ideas?”

“So far they’ve allowed me the chance, as well as the finances, to build this facility.” He held out an arm to encompass the building. Narrowing his eyes at her, Billy asked, “What do you think of my ideas?”

She paused. He wanted her opinion, but she was at a loss as to what to tell him. Wyatt had that same way of asking her a question. First, he’d narrow his eyes at her, then he’d ask. But she’d learned early that what he was really seeking was not her opinion, but rather he wanted her to give him emotional strokes. To build up his ego and make him feel successful, even if what he planned to do was a horrendous idea.

Oddly enough, Beth didn’t get the feeling that Billy wanted a pat on the head. He actually valued what she thought. “You said the closest animal clinic was an hour and a half away?”

He nodded.

“I think this is a smart move. I hope you get your dream.”

An expression of relief settled over his face. To hide her smile, Beth reached out to touch the cage-like apparatus. The aluminum latticework was cold to the touch, since the building’s interior was hermetically controlled. What she didn’t expect was for Billy to come up behind her and lift one of the wide leather straps.

“What’s that for?” she asked as he took her arm and wrapped the straps around it, near the elbow. The strap’s underside was lined with a thick cotton batting, preventing the strap from digging into her flesh. Any fear she would have had quickly vanished as she noticed the strap closed with a simple belt notch and loop.

Billy took her other arm and began to buckle it down on the other side of the enclosure. “This is a mating cage,” he softly told her.

Beth looked up at him, but met a gentle smile. Then, to her delight, Billy cupped her cheek in that way that shook her all the way down to her toes, and kissed her -- long, slow, and deep. Beth felt herself growing wetter between the thighs, soaking the crotch of her jeans. A singular beat began to pulse hard and heavy in her womb.

She barely had time to realize he’d pull away from her mouth when he stood directly behind her, and warm hands reached under her shirt. His touch on her

bare belly made her gasp. He was a wall of heat at her back. His breath, which smelled faintly of coffee, teased her neck and the curve of her shoulder.

Not a word was spoken as his hands slowly slid up her skin, reaching for her breasts. His fingertips teased the underside of her bra, moving in circles as they crawled toward her nipples.

She expected him to reach down inside her bra. She never expected him to go back down to the underwire and pull the brassiere above her breasts. The moment his fingers gently pinched her nipples, he pressed himself against her buttocks, and Beth could feel his hard cock rubbing along her butt cheeks.

Automatically, she tried to reach up to touch him, but the straps had her locked down. She opened her eyes, gasping in realization, when Billy kissed her neck.

“The straps keep the mare from bolting so that the stallion can mount her,” he whispered, nibbling her earlobe. His hands continued to fondle her breasts, carefully squeezing them and rubbing them, paying special attention to her nipples until she wanted to beg him to suckle them again.

Beth bowed her head in surrender. Billy took her movement to remove one of his hands from her breasts and bend her over at the waist, gently pushing her against the inch-thick iron bar suspended in front of her. Lying with it pressed against her breastbone, she felt his hand leave her back and snake its way around

to her belly, then drift toward the waistband of her jeans.

Beth felt him spread her legs with little nudges from his work boots. She never fought him. It was too overwhelming to believe he was going to take her right there, right in the middle of this barn cum animal clinic. She tugged again on the restraints, but they gave little.

A kiss on the back of her neck got her attention. “The mare is in heat. Her smell is what gets the stallion’s attention and makes him hard for her.” Billy took a deep, noisy breath. “You smell wonderful. Like soap. Clean. But you also smell like a woman. How do you taste, Beth? Do you taste as wonderful as you smell?”

His voice was like a lullaby, non-threatening and sensuous. She felt herself growing wetter and more impatient.

“Billy...”

“Shhhh. Don’t struggle. Don’t talk. You are totally under my control.” He licked the back of her neck, sending shivers down her spine. Her womb clenched in anticipation as his fingers slipped under the elastic band of her thong and reached her pussy. They played with her, twirling the hairs around and around with his fingertips.

His chuckle vibrated along her spine. “Such softness. I couldn’t believe how soft you were all over. Even your pussy hair. Not too thick. Not too thinned. Juuuuust right.” He kissed the back of her shoulder, and his fingers slipped

between her lips, finding her clit. Lightly he strummed the tightening nub like he would a guitar. A whimper escaped her as she bobbed her buttocks, rubbing them against the concrete-hard cock nestled in the crack between them.

“I don’t know what it is about you that drives me insane with need,” Billy murmured. He shoved his hips against her, pressing her harder along the bar. His breath tickled the short, baby-fine hairs at the back of her neck. “After last night, I couldn’t sleep. I kept reliving how fantastic it was to fuck you, and all I could think of was trying to figure out how we could do it again.”

His hand left her soaked pussy. Beth heard him sniff his fingers. “Oh, God. Wonderful.”

Suddenly his other hand released her breasts. Billy struggled with the button at the waist of her jeans, found the zipper, and a moment later he pulled the pants down to where they sagged around her ankles.

Billy slid down her back, across her buttocks, to where he could part her butt cheeks. Beth lifted her hips, and the next moment he plunged his tongue into her.

She shrieked from the sheer pleasure. His fingers kept her ass in the air and her pussy lips parted so he could lick, and lap, and suckle on her clit with ease. She no longer cared if this was wrong or right. It no longer mattered that this was her fiancé’s younger brother. The fire running through her like a sweet narcotic was all

that she cared about. She wanted more, she had to have more, and he had to give it to her. If it weren't for the straps around her forearms, she would have turned around to attack him.

“Fuck me, Billy! Oh, please! Please! Give it to me hard!”

She heard a slurping sound, but she couldn't look back or down to see what he was doing. But she could hear him. With every stroke of his rough tongue against her sensitive flesh, along her burning clit, he moaned with relish.

Tears slipped down her cheeks. Never in a million years could she dream that sex could feel like this. Like... heaven.

“Billeeee!”

He scrambled to his feet. Beth heard the jangle of him undoing his belt, and the zip of his zipper. His jeans had barely cleared his thighs when he grabbed her buttocks again and began to slide himself into her.

Beth spread her legs as far as her pants would allow. Billy continued to push inside her, making her feel like she was being invaded. She couldn't move or bounce her ass as his hands kept her immobile. She gave another whimper as he groaned along with her.

“Jesus, Beth!”

He started to pump her, slowly and steadily. Her wetness quickly lubricated his thickening cock, making it increasingly easy for him to drill her. When the

heavy veins ribbing his cock slid over her inner walls, every nerve ending fired off.

“Fuck me,” she begged again.

“Oh, yeah. Count on it, Beth,” he breathed heavily, sliding in and out of her with perfect rhythm. “I’m going to fuck you until neither one of us can move. I’m going to fuck you so hard, you won’t be able to walk without thinking of me.”

He made a slight adjustment, then began his assault. Beth unclenched her fists and grabbed the railing. Bowing her head, she tried to meet him thrust for thrust, until their pounding made loud wet slapping sounds as sweaty flesh met wet flesh.

Suddenly, he pushed into her so deeply, she would swear he was at the mouth of her womb. Billy froze, and he pulsed his cock, shifting it slightly. Beth gasped loudly, never expecting his next move.

He bent over her and let his fingers reach down to where he could play with her clit, right where the two of them melded into one. Slowly, excruciatingly, Billy dragged his teeth over the back of her neck, over her shoulder, and down her back. Not hard enough to puncture the skin, but enough to leave little red tracks.

“The stallion bites the mare’s neck,” he almost growled. “He marks her with his teeth as he rams his cock as far into her as he can to guarantee conception.”

She gave a little growl as she felt herself rising on the edge of her orgasm. She knew his fingers were going to leave little bruises where they gripped her

thighs, but she no longer cared.

He was pumping her with increasingly faster strokes, moving himself back and forth, in and out of her while she remained locked in place, unable to move. Unable to do anything but struggle to stay upright on watery legs. Beth raised her face, eyes squeezed shut, as she waited for her release.

Billy yelled as he came, but still he continued to pound himself inside her. Like Billy, she screamed, not caring how loud she was because no one would hear them. She could swear she could feel him pouring his seed into her.

Gradually, he slowed, finally sliding out of her still dripping. Then, to her shock, he bent over her and wrapped his arms around her, and laid his cheek on her shoulder.

“What am I gonna do, Beth?” he whispered. “What am I gonna do?”

Her knees felt weak, definitely unable to hold herself up, much less his weight, too. But Billy must have sensed it. He grabbed one of the bars she was strapped to and shifted so that he was partially holding her up. She felt his cock slide back down her ass. It was not as hard, but it was still sizeable and somewhat stiff, which amazed her since Wyatt’s cock always shriveled up into a little button and turtled back inside his scrotum after sex.

After a few more minutes, Billy released her and stepped back to stuff himself back inside his jeans. Instead of pulling her pants back up, he undid the

straps to let her do it herself. But as soon as her arms were free, he turned her around to face him and gathered her against his chest. A tender kiss touched her forehead.

“It isn’t fair,” he whispered, and kissed her forehead again. “It’s not fucking fair.”

She never had the chance to ask him what he meant. Billy released her and left the room, the swinging doors flipping back and forth in his wake. She listened to the sound of his footsteps as he left the building, and then there was absolute silence.

Chapter Seven

It was only a little past ten a.m. Beth stood at the door of the facility and glanced out at the hot mid-morning. Strange, how differently the world looked now. How she could smell the late morning air as it shimmered with heat?

Billy was right. With every step she took, her swollen pussy reminded her of how good real exuberant sex could be... with the right person. Exciting sex. Lusty sex. Sex that burned calories instead of brain cells.

Someone once said that nothing beat a hot, hard, sweaty fuck. They were right.

Beth smiled, and then it disappeared. What in hell was she going to do? She still planned to go through with her original intention. Today, once Wyatt and his family gathered where she could address them all together, she would tell Wyatt that marrying him would be a mistake, and she would give him back his ring.

She glanced down at her hand that wore the five-carat princess cut diamond. That much weight never felt right. She was always banging the damn thing on walls and tables, to the point where she was deathly afraid of losing the stone. And then what would Wyatt say?

It doesn't matter anymore, does it, Elizabeth?

What did matter was that once she announced the end of their engagement, then what?

I'd now like to tell everyone that I'm in love with Billy, your other son, and I'd like your permission to see more of him.

“Forget it, Beth. There’s no way the Byrds would let you anywhere near them again. Not after the way you’ve dumped their beloved firstborn son. Their up-and-coming offspring, with his almighty law degree and his promising future, which might include becoming part of a prestigious Dallas law firm if his interview yesterday pans out the way he promises it would.”

One fact was very clear. When she announced that she and Wyatt were through, the same would go for the rest of the family. It may even affect her friendship with Susan, unless Beth was lucky. Beth had lost count of how many times Susan had warned her about her big brother’s temperament. Maybe Susan would forgive her. Beth could only hope.

But as for Billy...

Oh, Jesus, what am I going to do? He was right about one thing. It wasn’t fucking fair that she would be Wyatt’s fiancée. Even when she did call the engagement off, there was no way she could turn around and jump in Billy’s lap.

Beth paused. Well, not immediately. But maybe in a few weeks? Or months?

Was there an accepted length of time given before an ex-fiancée could

approach, or be approached, by another member of the same family?

Who did she know that she could ask such a question?

Once she double-checked herself to make certain she was presentable, Beth left the building, glancing around to see if she could spot Billy. There was no sight of him, but that didn't mean he'd left the ranch. No, she suspected he was probably at the other barn. Or maybe he'd gone to the house.

The sound of a car horn honking almost made her jump. *Easy, Beth.* If she didn't feel guilty about what was happening between her and Billy, then there was no need to broadcast it with a guilty look on her face. The best she could hope for was a little yelling, a little righteous anger, and a swift departure on her end. She'd never expected to spend the entire weekend at the ranch, anyway.

By the time she made it to the patio and slipped into the house through the double glass doors, Brian and Ginny Byrd were also inside. The couple greeted her with hearty hugs and kisses, which only made Beth feel all more the guilty.

"Is Wyatt here yet?" Ginny asked, glancing around the place.

"Not yet," Beth answered. "But we expect him soon."

Brian had dumped their suitcases in a back bedroom before returning. "We saw Susan's car at the grocery store. We figured you two would be shopping together."

"I told her to go ahead. I wanted to take a tour of the place."

At the mention of a tour, Ginny Byrd's face lit up. "Did you see the new clinic Billy is overseeing construction on?" Instead of waiting for an answer, the older woman walked over to glance out the glass doors. "Oh, look! He got it painted! Oh, I like that color. Honey, did you know he got the clinic painted?"

Beth watched as the Byrds went over to admire the structure, only she listened to them with half an ear. For some reason, she felt like a countdown clock turned on inside her stomach. T minus two hours and counting... maybe?

One thing was certain. She wouldn't wait until after their meal to break the news. No, it would be best to tell them as soon as everyone was seated, because if she tried to eat first, her nerves would get the best of her, and she'd probably find herself throwing up all over the floor.

"Have you gotten to see inside it?" Mrs. Byrd asked her.

It took Beth a couple of seconds to realize the woman was speaking to her. "Oh! Yes, I did."

Damn it. There was no way she could stop the heated flush from overtaking her face. Beth decided to take the offense, and she waved a hand in front of her eyes. "Sorry. I just came in from outside. I can't believe how hot it already is, and it's not even noon!"

"I'll go let Fatima know we're here, and find out when she plans to have lunch ready," Ginny said. "I'll have her bring out some iced tea to tide us over in

the meantime. You're right, Beth. It's a scorcher already!"

"It smells like we might be having King Ranch chicken," Mr. Byrd commented, throwing Beth a wink. "Well, Beth, what do you think of the place?" He sauntered over to one of the easy chairs and plopped down on the leather cushions.

She pasted on what she hoped was a convincing smile. "It's incredible! It's hard to believe this is your weekend getaway place."

"Actually, Ginny and I are eyeing a place down near Austin, near Lake Travis, in the hill country. It's only about sixteen acres, but it has almost three hundred feet along the shore."

"Don't forget to tell her you've been hankering for a catamaran cruiser ever since you saw Taylor Comstock's," Ginny laughed.

She carried a large, glass pitcher of iced tea. Slivers of lemon were draped around the rim like they were bright yellow shrimp cocktails. Right behind her, Fatima followed with a tray of glasses. Both the pitcher and tray were placed at the end of the dining table. "Fatima must have read my mind. She already had tea made," Mrs. Byrd announced. "Come and make your own. Dinner won't be for another hour."

T minus sixty minutes and counting.

The three of them fixed their beverages. Beth retreated to the chair near the

saddle. She tried to think of something to say to be polite, and opted to return to their previous conversation.

“So you’re looking into lake living?”

Ginny Byrd nodded. She was parked on the armrest of the chair where her husband was sitting. “Brian’s looking into retiring in maybe four more years. We’d really like to find a place where’s a little more water where we can go skiing. Do some houseboating and fishing.”

“What about this place, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“We were going to hand this over to the kids,” Brian explained. He started to say more when he was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening, and Wyatt made his grand entrance as usual.

“The party can now officially begin! Wyatt is in the house!” He blew in and headed straight for his mother first to give her a quick peck on the forehead. His casual pants were spotless and dry-cleaned creased, and his golfing shirt looked like it had just come off the store shelf. The man was cover model perfect, right down to his three hundred dollar loafers.

“Ginny! You’re looking ravishing as always. Hey, Brian.” He shook his father’s hand as he looked around. When his gaze landed on her, Beth felt as if she had just been coated with a thick layer of oil.

Not only did she no longer love the man, but he was starting to creep her

out. Beth always had a problem with people who referred to their parents by their first names. She had been brought up to believe it was a sign of disrespect, but she kept her opinions to herself, like she always did when it came to Wyatt's predilections.

She fought to keep a pleasant expression on her face as he strode over to give her a hug and kiss. His lips were cold and wet, apparently from something he'd been drinking. And it wouldn't be non-alcoholic, if Beth knew him as well as she believed she did. She thought she tasted scotch, but couldn't swear to it.

"How was your trip down, Sweetie? Did you miss me?" Wyatt grinned as if he'd made a joke, and turned back to his parents without waiting for her reply.

"Where is everyone? Let's eat! I'm starved!"

"Susan's in town getting some things at the store," Beth answered. "She should be back shortly."

"Good for her. What about little brother? Has he shown himself since you got here?" Wyatt asked his folks.

As if on cue, the patio doors opened, and Billy walked in. Immediately, Beth noticed the man had left his muddy boots outside and entered the house in his stocking feet. Their eyes had barely met when Wyatt descended upon his younger sibling.

"Shit, Billy! You've really got that chicken fried country boy look down pat!"

Wyatt slugged his brother in the upper arm with enough force to knock Billy sideways. Billy grimaced.

“Good to see you, too. I saw the small tornado you kicked up when you drove up to the house. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go wash up for lunch. Hey, Mom. Dad.”

Beth watched as the younger son gave his mother an affectionate hug and a kiss on the cheek before shaking his father’s hand. Giving Beth another sideways glance, Billy disappeared down the hall without another word.

She remained seated by the ornate saddle and watched as Wyatt began to run roughshod over everyone. As the man yelled out to Fatima to bring on the food, and waved off his parents’ request to wait until Susan arrived, she realized she couldn’t wait until after lunch to break the news.

No. The sooner she made the announcement, the better. The better for all of them.

Most of all, the better for her peace of mind.

Chapter Eight

What are you waiting for, Elizabeth? Do it now and get it over with while everyone's here.

Her niggling conscience was right. Might as well tell everyone the news, and then leave. Besides, it would better for her stomach if she did. At the moment, she wasn't the least bit hungry. Not to mention, if she drove straight back to the apartment, she could have her things packed and out of there before Wyatt returned.

Beth started to get to her feet when the chair suddenly scooted out from under her. She could feel herself falling backwards, and she reached out to grab anything that would keep her from hitting the floor and possibly hurting herself. Her fingers found something rough, and she scrambled for it.

Too late she realize she'd grabbed part of the saddle. A sudden jerk, and something came off in her hand as she continued to fall. Something crashed, something broke, and the Byrds stood watching the whole thing in petrified astonishment.

She landed on her tailbone with a painful jar that ran all the way up into the base of her skull. Her teeth clicked together, catching the tip of her tongue. She gave a little squeak of pain as she tasted the hot bitterness of blood.

It took several seconds for her to become aware of what had happened. At the same time, it didn't take Wyatt long to deride her for her clumsiness.

"What the hell, Beth! Look at what you did!"

Typical Wyatt. He wasn't about to ask if she was hurt, much less help her to feet. She managed to rise into a crouch when a hand appeared from nowhere to grasp her arm.

"Are you okay?" Billy asked softly.

Beth nodded, too ashamed to look up at him. Plus her tongue felt twice its size. It was all she could do keep from wincing.

"Now, why did you go do that?" Wyatt challenged his younger brother.

"I thought she might have hurt herself," Billy snapped back. "It's only right to see if she's all right. She's still a guest here, in case you've forgotten."

Mrs. Byrd stepped forward. "Are you sure you're fine? That looked like a nasty fall."

"Fall, nothing!" Wyatt sneered. "The woman's a walking disaster! I swear to God, if anything goes wrong, you can bet that Beth is probably in the middle of it!" He motioned toward the saddle lying nearby, adding, "Nice going. You know that's going to cost a pretty penny to repair that saddle."

A biting pain in her palm made her take notice of what she was still gripping. It was one of the silver, ornate conchos she'd accidentally ripped from

the saddle. Beth held it out toward Mr. Byrd.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’ll pay to fix the saddle, I promise.”

Wyatt snorted as he watched his father take the concho. “Beth, I know what kind of money you make. What do you plan on doing, *dearest*? Make regular payments for the next five years?” The last bit he deliberately emphasized to let her know she wasn’t his “dearest”. Not at the moment. Wyatt had a thing for using words of endearment and turning them into insults. It was almost a gift.

“Don’t worry, Beth,” Billy intervened again. “Accidents happen.” Once Beth was firmly back on her feet, Billy released her arm and strode over to pick up the topic of conversation. She caught a glimpse of the muscles in his back flexing as he hoisted the obviously heavy object and laying it across the chair she’d been sitting in.

Wyatt gave a hoot at Billy’s remark. “Accidents happen? That’s a good one, Billy boy. Take it from me, when Beth’s around, accidents don’t just ‘happen’. They’re a sure thing.” He laughed, not caring at how the comment stung. However, Mrs. Byrd was quick to call her firstborn on it.

“Billy’s right. Beth is our guest, and accidents *do* happen.”

“Why don’t we all find our seats and eat?” Mr. Byrd quickly stepped in. He made the first move for the head of the table when they heard the front door open and close. A moment later, Susan breezed into the room.

“Hey, all! Sorry I’m late, but I ran into Mrs. Perkins and she was asking about everyone. Hi, Mom! Dad!”

She was greeting her parents when Wyatt commented, “Two minutes earlier, and you would have caught Beth’s latest comedy act.”

“That’s enough, Wyatt,” Mrs. Byrd said firmly.

“Oh?” Susan gave Beth a curious look. “What happened? What comedy act?”

“It’s not important,” Billy began, when Wyatt barked with laughter again.

“She nearly single-handedly destroyed great-granddad’s Mexican saddle!”

“She didn’t do anything that drastic,” Billy emphasized. “It was an accident!”

“Shit, *everything* she does is an accident!” Wyatt snorted. “The woman was a *born* accident!”

“Wyatt, calm down.” This time Mr. Byrd decided to speak up.

“No, no, no. You have to hear me out on this,” Wyatt insisted. “If there’s something Beth can run into, run over, fall over...”

“I think we’ve heard more than enough, Wyatt.”

Beth turned to see Billy’s tight-lipped expression as he faced down his brother.

Wyatt looked back at him with a surprised lift of an eyebrow. “You mean

Susie hasn't shared her list of 'Beth-capades'? Oh, they're a riot! The woman is a walking, talking Murphy's Law!"

Billy took a step toward Wyatt, and there was no doubt in her mind that the man wanted to do whatever it took to shut Wyatt up. Wyatt noticed Billy's advancement, and gestured for him to keep coming towards him.

"Go ahead, Billy boy. What are you going to do? Try and make me be quiet?" He wagged his fingers at Billy again. "Come on, chicken king. Chicken fried country boy. *Braaak!* You never could beat me when we were growing up. What makes you think you can do so now? Huh?"

"Wyatt, I said that's *enough!*" Mr. Byrd tried again to intercede.

Beth raised her hands to call for a truce. Wyatt was being his usual obnoxious self, and there would be no stopping him. The man truly believed he had to right to say whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, and to hell with the consequences. She dreaded to think what kind of practicing lawyer he would become.

"Please, Wyatt! No more!"

Oh, shit. She'd forgotten about her abused tongue. Beth hastily shut her mouth to wait out the stinging pain, leaving Wyatt to mistake her action.

"What's the matter, sweetie? Truth hurt? You know I'm not making this shit up." He laughed derisively, and it was the last straw for her. The past three

months and the whirlwind engagement were at an end.

“I came here today, not because Susie asked me to, but because I felt it was the right thing to do when I called off our engagement!” Her tongue throbbed, but at least she was coherent. A few tugs on her ring, and it came off without incident. Beth walked over and laid it on the dinner table. She didn’t dare hand it directly back to Wyatt.

Wyatt stared at her for several seconds before bursting out in laughter. “You’re dumping *me*? Oh, that’s just rich! Who’s going to be your sugar daddy now, Elizabeth? Who’s going to buy you your fancy jeans and pay for those expensive purses you like so much?”

“I never asked for those things,” she reminded him. “I never asked for you to spend money on me, or to buy me expensive gifts. And I sure as hell didn’t beg for that five-carat diamond the way you like to tell people I did!”

“Beth? Are you sure about this?” Ginny Byrd asked.

Beth turned to face the woman. “I’m more than sure. I’m sorry, Mrs. Byrd. Mr. Byrd. You’re probably furious at me, but I honestly cannot marry Wyatt. I’m sorry. I came here to break it off with the whole family present. I felt it was the right thing to do.”

Her face was flaming, as if she was suffering a fever. Turning around, she hurried down the hallway and into the bedroom. Grabbing her suitcase, she threw

her still-damp pajamas and her toiletries into it, then zipped the suitcase closed. Halfway around the back of the suitcase, the zipper jammed. Beth jerked hard on the metal sliding tab, when it suddenly snapped off in her hand.

“Oh, shit. What next?”

She was fighting tears as the sound of rising voices filtered in through the closed bedroom door. At times, she could make out individual words.

“If you weren’t such an asshole!”

“...she never objected to my money!”

“What are you upset about? Because she dumped you in front of witnesses?”

Gathering up the suitcase in her arms, she snagged her purse and headed back into the main living area, and for the front door. She barely glanced at Wyatt and Billy having it out, with Mr. and Mrs. Byrd trying to referee as she hurried to leave. Miraculously, she managed to make it out the door without dropping anything, falling over anything, or tearing the door off its hinges.

Susan was waiting for her outside.

Chapter Nine

Beth skidded to a stop, nearly bumping into her friend. Before Susan could say anything, Beth hurried to apologize. "I'm sorry, Susan. I tried to make it work. I really thought I was in love with Wyatt, but I couldn't take his treatment of me anymore. I can't take a lifetime of him deriding me or making fun of me in front of his friends, and especially in front of your family."

The tears were rolling down her cheeks, damn them. Plus, her nose was starting to run. Beth sniffed as Susan reached out and gave her a hug.

"I can tell you're very upset about all of this," Susan said. "I just can't believe you had the gumption to break off with him in front of all of us. That took guts, girlfriend." She took Beth's purse before it slipped out of her hands and dumped itself all over the gravel driveway. Giving Beth a smile, she asked, "How did you plan on getting back to Dallas?"

Beth felt her mouth drop open. Oh, yeah. Her car was still in town.

Susan nodded. "Don't worry. It's not a problem. I'll take you to it. Hop in."

Beth threw her suitcase into Susan's trunk and climbed into the passenger seat. Once they got to the blacktopped county road, Beth felt the nauseous feeling evaporate, along with the headache.

“Thank you.”

Susan glanced over at her. “For what?”

“For not condemning me. Does this mean we’re still friends?”

Susan made a face. “Bethie, I’m amazed you managed to stay with him as long as you did! What I want to know is why you never said anything to me before today?”

“I thought I could make it work. I thought I was being overly sensitive... at least, that’s what Wyatt kept telling me,” Beth told her. “I honestly thought I loved him.”

“Maybe you did. But any guy who cuts me down like that isn’t worth spending two minutes with, much less a lifetime.” Susan reached over with one hand and patted Beth’s shoulder. “Yeah, he’s my brother, and I still love him. But Wyatt is a class-A jerk, plain and simple. And the fact is, I love you too much to see him treat you like that.” She gave Beth a quick, bewildered glance. “But you could have said something to me before now. I would have gone up to him and told him to lay off before he does something else he’s gonna wish he hadn’t done.”

“I thought it would ruin our friendship,” Beth honestly answered. It felt wonderful to be able to finally get everything out in the open. Susan was better than any confessional.

Susan snorted. “Girl, the only thing I regret about this whole mess is that we

won't be in-laws."

Beth started to say something about Billy, but caught herself. *Let this whole ugly incident die over first before you let yourself start thinking about Billy*, she told herself. She briefly wondered if the two men were still arguing, when it occurred to her that the reason Billy was in the thick of the fight was because he cared about her.

He cares. He honestly cares! At the time, she had been too confused and humiliated to appreciate the look in his eyes when he'd helped her off the floor when she'd fallen.

Beth rubbed her eyes, then remembered she had put on her eye makeup that morning. Pulling down the visor so she could use its mirror, Beth saw the smear of mascara she'd made. Oh, hell, and she didn't have any tissues with her, either. Sighing, she closed the visor and tried to forget about it.

They pulled into the gas station parking lot where Beth's car was sitting off at one end. Susan helped her put the broken suitcase in her trunk.

"Now, listen to me," her friend gently ordered as she handed Beth a tissue. "You and me, we're like this, right?" She held up two fingers together, side-by-side. Beth nodded and blew her nose. "You don't owe Wyatt a thing, and you don't owe me or my folks any apology. Got that?"

Another nod. Beth was too choked up to answer, anyway. That, plus the fact that her tongue still hurt.

“Now. Go home. Go pack your stuff and find a motel somewhere.”

“I need to pay whatever I owe for the gas.”

Susan waved it off. “I’ll tell them to bill it to Wyatt.” They both laughed at the irony.

The two women hugged, then Beth got into her car. She rolled down the window, and Susan gave her shoulder another squeeze. “Call me when you get re-settled. If you need, you’re welcome to bunk down on my couch until you can find a place of your own.”

“I appreciate it, Susan. In fact, I think I will. Thanks.”

“Hey, what are friends for?” Susan smiled, stepped back, and waved. Beth started the car and pulled around to face the road. A quick glance back at her friend showed Susan frantically waving to the left. Beth obediently turned left and drove away.

She was barely out of town when a horn blared behind her. Beth checked her speedometer to make sure she was going the speed limit. She was. *Then who...?*

In her rearview mirror, a banged-up red pickup was practically riding her back bumper. Through the windshield she spotted Billy motioning for her to pull over.

The need to see him one last time overrode any fear that he had hunted her down to chew her out for dumping his big brother. Beth prepared herself for the

worst. If Billy wanted a confrontation, he was going to get one.

She pulled off into the grassy shoulder. A glance in both directions told her they were alone for as far as she could see. He was waiting for her behind her trunk, hands on hips and an unreadable look on his handsome face.

Chicken fried country boy. The slur Wyatt had thrown at his younger brother came back to her. Beth silently amended it. *More like chicken fried beefcake.* Wyatt Byrd may have been suave and debonair, but Billy more than outgunned him when it came to looks. And temperament.

And the sex. Don't forget the sex, her personal little demon whispered. A shiver ran through her as she slowly approached him.

Billy spoke before she got the chance. "Wyatt is a jerkoff, and he had no right talking to you that way. In my opinion, a man should never undermine the feelings of the woman he loves."

"Thank you. In a way..." She took a deep breath and smelled the rich scent of hay and wildflowers growing in the pastures on both sides of the road. "I'm glad it's over."

"What I can't understand is how you and Wyatt hooked up in the first place."

She shrugged. "When Susan introduced us, he asked me out. He took me to some of the fancier restaurants that I certainly couldn't afford. Then he offered me

that trip to Tobago. I guess I fell in love with the lifestyle.”

Billy continued to stare at her. “You’re right. Staying with Wyatt would have been a big mistake. You’re not his type. And you’re definitely nothing like the other women he usually dates.”

His eyes seemed to bore right into her. Beth would swear he could almost read her mind. She nodded. “Probably. What type of woman am I, then?”

“How do you feel about a country lifestyle?” he asked unexpectedly.

The implication immediately struck her. Beth shook her head. “Billy, I... I can’t.”

“Why not?” He narrowed his eyes at her. “I thought we... that you...”

“It wouldn’t be right.”

“Why not?”

Now she could tell he was upset. “Billy, I just broke off with your brother.”

“Who gives a shit? Beth...”

He suddenly reached for her and pulled her into his arms. His mouth came down over hers, but not in a hard or cruel way. To her utter shock, his lips caressed hers. One hand cupped the side of her face so she couldn’t pull away.

“Don’t go, Beth. Please stay with me. Please. Stay with me.”

“I can’t.” She managed to shake her head as more tears wetted her cheeks.

He drew back slightly, enough to look down at her. “Fuck Wyatt.”

No. I'd rather fuck you.

She would have sworn she thought the words. Or maybe she did say them aloud. In either case, Billy swooped her up into his arms and carried her over to the bed of his truck. Dropping the tailgate, he laid her on top of several horse blankets before climbing up to join her and shutting the tailgate.

They said nothing as they frantically undid their pants, not even bothering with their shirts. Beth toed off her sneakers in order to wriggle out of her jeans. Billy jerked them off her after sliding his down to his ankles.

He plunged into her and immediately began pumping. Beth tried to hold onto his shirt as she lifted her hips, too overwhelmed by how wonderful he felt inside her to realize how wet she already was.

One hand crawled underneath her Henley and burrowed beneath her bra to find her nipple. He gently pinched it, and Beth felt her whole body go up in flames. His face was next to hers, and she could hear his ragged breathing. Every few seconds he would whisper her name.

She had no idea she had been this hungry for him. Or maybe her body was trying to make up for all the bad sex she'd endured with Wyatt. She continued to clutch him, lifting her hips to match his thrust for thrust as he rode her hard. He wasn't just shoving himself into her. It was like he was trying to erase all thought of Wyatt from her mind. Or trying to remove Wyatt's taint from her body.

Billy paused once to grab her thighs and ground himself against her pubes. His cock was rammed so far up inside her, Beth wondered how sore she was going to be when they were done. Before she could comprehend the perspiration dripping off the both of them, Billy adjusted his position and began pile-driving into her.

She cried out at the mixture of pain and pleasure. "Billeeee!"

He gasped, and suddenly her orgasm struck her with full, blistering speed.

Billy continued to shove his cock through her silken channel, despite the stranglehold her pussy had on him. Each thrust was accompanied by a grunt, until he finally found his own release. Groaning, Billy fell on top of her and buried his face in her neck.

The noonday sun was intense. Worse, it heated the truck bed, turning it into a virtual oven. His muscles still trembling, Billy managed to rise up off her and roll over. Beth took a deep breath.

"You're going back to Dallas?" he whispered.

"I have to. I have to get my things out of the apartment before Wyatt gets back."

"And then what?"

"Find another place to live. Susan said I could stay with her until I did."

His calloused hand reached back under her shirt and bra to fondle her

breast. “Stay here, Beth. Stay at the ranch... with me.”

“I can’t.” She was crying again. God, she wanted to. In the worst way. But she couldn’t accept or even consider his offer. Neither could she look at him.

“Why not?”

“It wouldn’t be right. Besides what would your parents think?”

“It’s because you think I’m a hick, right?”

This time she grabbed his hand and held it. “No! No, that’s not it. That’s not...Billy?”

He had pulled away from her, gotten up, and thrown open the tailgate so he could hitch his jeans back on. He kept his back to her as he zipped himself up and buckled his belt. Beth hurried to redress as well. She was slipping her feet back into her shoes when he turned around and held out a hand to help her out of the truck.

After closing the tailgate, he gave her one final look. Beth tried to read him, but as usual her luck was never with her when she needed it the most. Letting out a heavy sigh, Billy climbed into the cab, backed up the truck, then turned it around to return to the ranch, never saying another word to her or even bidding her a farewell.

Beth bit her lips, but the tears continued to roll down her cheeks. She tried to convince herself she’d only fallen for Billy because she was on the rebound from

Wyatt, but that didn't ring true, either. In fact, no excuse she tried to come up with made sense.

Getting back into her car, she continued on toward Dallas.

She was four miles from the interstate when she blew out a tire.

Chapter Ten

“Are you sure you don’t want to join us? We’re only going to the movies,” Susan inquired again from down the hall.

“No, thanks,” Beth responded for the second time. She was already in her comfy clothes and ready to settle in for the night. So what if it was Friday night? Susan had a satellite dish and every available channel.

It hadn’t quite been a week since the breakup debacle at the ranch. But Susan had been as good as her word. Once Beth managed to call AAA and get her tire repaired, she’d made it back to the apartment she’d shared with Wyatt and got her few things removed without further problems. Monday after work she’d moved in with Susan on a temporary basis.

In the meantime, Susan let her know that Wyatt’s interview had not gone well, and he was presently job hunting. As for Billy... It took Beth a couple of days before she managed to casually ask her friend if she’d heard from him.

“Yeah. He’s still at the ranch, working on the clinic.”

“Did he ever take any college courses?”

Susan grinned at her, as if she’d just told a racy joke. “Oh, yeah. He graduated from A&M last December, remember?”

Frankly? No, she didn't, but she remembered the Aggie t-shirt he was wearing that day at the ranch. That day inside the clinic.

Already she could feel her panties getting wet at the memory. *Down, girl. It's over. Learn to cope and get on with your life.*

Yeah, but it's easier said than done.

She ached for Billy, but she also missed him. She missed his gentleness, his smile, and she missed the way he laughed. Laughed not at her, but with her.

It would be a very long time before she could forgive herself for not following her heart and going back to the ranch when he'd asked her. But maybe... maybe one of these days...

Until then, one day at a time, Elizabeth.

Until then, she was content with the fact that she no longer had to endure Wyatt's bullying. For the first time in many weeks, she could do what she wanted, when she wanted. Like now. Beth was channel surfing when the doorbell rang.

"Can you get that?" Susan called out from the bedroom.

"Sure."

Susan was getting ready for a hot date with a man she'd known for a couple of months. Jeff was a decent guy, and things were beginning to look serious between them. Beth wondered how long it would be before the man popped the

question to Susan as she went to let him in.

“Hi, Jeff!” she cheerily said as she opened the door. Except it wasn’t Jeff standing in the hallway. It was Susan’s parents, the Byrds. Beth felt the blood drain from her face. “Uhh, hi!”

Ginny Byrd’s greeting was warm and sincere. “Hello, Beth! How are you doing?”

“Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad! Come on in,” Susan invited.

Beth turned around to see her friend standing in the living room with a grin on her face. Something told her the parents’ appearance was not accidental. “Susie, I didn’t know your parents were coming over.” She glanced down at her ragged sweats and old t-shirt. “Please excuse my appearance.”

Ginny Byrd waved off her apology. “That’s not important, Beth. What’s important is Brian and I felt we needed to talk to you.”

Beth could feel cold dread starting to creep back into her stomach. “About Wyatt?”

“Yes. About Wyatt.”

The dread became a solid lump of ice so heavy, it threatened to push her dinner up through her throat. Beth swallowed tightly. Why were they here? Were they going to condemn her, now that they’d had several days to think about it?

“Beth.” Brian Byrd spoke up, getting her attention. “We wanted to

apologize for Wyatt's behavior."

"And especially for the way he must have treated you during your engagement," Mrs. Byrd concluded.

Beth stared at them and Susan, totally confused. "I'm sorry, but I'm at a loss there. You don't have to apologize for Wyatt's behavior."

Ginny Byrd smiled gently. "Actually, to be perfectly honest, we didn't come here because of Wyatt. We came because of Billy."

Beth knew her face must have given her away. If it didn't, the blood draining from it had to clue them in. Either way, whether she noticed or not, Mrs. Byrd ignored it.

"After Billy got back to the house after he'd tried to convince you to return to the ranch, he explained that he had fallen in love with you."

"Did he tell you why I turned him down?"

Mrs. Byrd nodded. "Yes."

"He told us you felt it wouldn't be right, since you had just broken off with Wyatt," Mr. Byrd said.

"That's why we're here today," Mrs. Byrd said. "To let you know it's okay with us if you started seeing Billy. That is, if you *want* to see Billy," she added.

Beth blinked, unable to believe what she was hearing. "Are you telling me you're not mad at me for leaving Wyatt?"

“We know what kind of man Wyatt is,” Mr. Byrd told her. “We also know what kind of man Billy is. After what happened at the ranch, we understood why you left Wyatt.”

Ginny Byrd smiled at Beth’s wide-eyed expression. “It was another case of bad luck tagging along behind you, Beth. You simply had the misfortune of hooking up with the wrong son.”

“We placed Wyatt on probation last year for past indiscretions,” Mr. Byrd continued. “We were hoping he would eventually straighten up and mend his ways. We even hoped that someone like you would be able to change him... even if it was just a little.”

Mrs. Byrd added, “Billy has always been more stable and dependable.”

“Billy is convinced you love him,” Susan spoke up for the first time. She walked over and sat down on the arm of the couch next to Beth. “But he thinks you turned him away not because of Wyatt, but because you think he’s just a hick country boy.”

A chicken fried beefcake. The phrase popped into her head. Beth knew that trying to hide her embarrassment wouldn’t work. “He’s wrong. I mean, he’s wrong about the hick country boy thing,” she quickly corrected herself. *Oh, shit. Please help me not screw this up, please!* “But, yes, I do love him. At least, I love him in a way I never felt about Wyatt.”

“Is it the money issue?” Mr. Byrd brought up.

“No. I-I mean, it was nice to go to the fancy restaurants and all. And the gifts he gave me to make up for all the times we fought were nice. But that’s not me. Oh, yeah, I was blind-sided at the beginning by it all, but all the money in the world don’t mean a thing if there’s no true affection involved. I just want to be cared for. I want someone who’ll really love me for me, and who won’t insult me or joke about me being Bad Luck Beth.” She crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself. “I want someone who’ll accept the fact that I sometimes make mistakes and won’t condemn me for it. Billy accepted me like that. I screwed up, but he didn’t care.”

“So, what you’re telling us is that it doesn’t matter to you that Billy’s not a fancy lawyer like his brother?” Brian Byrd concluded.

“No.” Beth shook her head and smiled. Why did she get the impression her luck was about to change? “In fact, I think I might enjoy country life.”

“That’s what I’ve been hoping you’d say.”

Beth’s jaw dropped open as the apartment door opened and Billy walked in. Except this Billy was not the hick country boy she knew. This man was as clean-cut and smartly dressed as any male fashion model. Hell, he could make the cover of GQ with ease.

The Italian suit, the silk shirt and tie, and a pair of five hundred dollar shoes made Billy Byrd look every bit the equal to his brother. Beth could only stare at

him in shock as he approached her.

“The offer’s still open,” Billy told her. “What Mom and Dad didn’t get to tell you is that they’re moving to the lake because they handed over the ranch house and clinic to me.”

“As a graduation gift,” Susan giggled.

“A graduation gift?” Beth repeated.

“Billy may not have graduated law school like his brother,” Mrs. Byrd proudly told her. “But his accomplishments are not any less impressive.”

“Elizabeth.” Brian Byrd got to his feet and motioned toward Billy. “May I introduce you to my son, Dr. William Edward Byrd, DVM?”

Beth gave a little gasp of surprise. “You’re a vet?” Dr. Billy Byrd? Her sweet country boy a veterinarian?

“Yeah. A vet.” Billy grinned at her as he held out his hand. Beth accepted it, and rose up from the couch. “How about it, Beth? Are you willing to take a chance on a chicken fried horse doctor?”

She started to answer him, but he prevented her from replying by lifting her chin and planting one of those knee-weakening kisses on her mouth. Somewhere in the background she could hear Susan giggling and clapping for joy. Whether or not the Byrds were still around no longer mattered.

Oh, yeah. Her luck was definitely changing for the better. And as his other

hand pulled her tightly against him, it was clear her future was going to find her heading in the right direction. On time. And without any mistakes.

That in itself would be a miracle.

The End

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Author Bio

Carolyn and her family live in the Texas hill country outside Austin. Writing is her hobby, and hubby approves because it keeps her out of the malls.

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