

# Larkin's Cowboy

By Kira Barcelo

Copyright 2010 Blushing Books Publications and Kira Barcelo

Copyright © 2010 by Blushing Books® and Kira Barcelo

All rights reserved. No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Blushing Books®,

a subsidiary of

ABCD Graphics and Design

977 Seminole Trail #233

Charlottesville, VA 22901

The trademark Blushing Books® is registered in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Barcelo, Kira

Larkin's Cowboy

eBook ISBN: 978-1-60968-407-5

Cover Design: ABCD Graphics

Blushing Publications thanks you whole-heartedly for your purchase with us!

There are plenty more stories such as the one you've purchased from Blushing Books! Visit our online store to view our mighty selection!

<http://www.blushingbooks.com>

This book is intended for adults only. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as advocating any non-consensual spanking activity or the spanking of minors.

## Chapter One

After hours and hours of driving, Larkin Gregory was so far unimpressed with Texas. The whole state was one entire highway, as far as she was concerned. Highways and flatlands and lots of sky, and not much of anything else. From there, how far could she possibly be from New York, and could she make it back to the Big Apple in two days flat?

“Ah, forget it. Not happening,” she mumbled out loud and slammed her foot down on the accelerator.

The numbers on the speedometer inched upwards. Seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five. When it hit ninety, she eased her foot off the pedal. She’d already gotten one speeding ticket down there at the end of the world. With Christmas only a few weeks away and Thanksgiving right around the bend, she couldn’t afford to give another of those little one-stoplight towns money that would be better spent on gifts for her niece and nephew.

And then after the holidays? It was right back to the east coast, to her apartment in Chelsea. For however long it would take for her and Eric to patch up the mess they’d made of their relationship. Thankfully, her time in that big, dusty state, with all those itty bitty towns sprinkled across it, was limited. After the holidays it would be right back to civilization for her.

Over the rental car’s satellite radio flowed spa-style music, even though there was no soothing her that afternoon. All she desperately wanted was to be off that highway. Larkin heard the feminine but computerized voice of her GPS system.

*“At point-eight miles, take Exit 4, then take ramp to Sutter Road. Take Exit 4, then take ramp...”*

Her GPS couldn’t fool her. Even *it* was lost out here in the middle of nowhere!

When was the last time she’d had something to drink? By now all the bottled water and her Diet Cokes were gone, nothing in the disposable cooler she’d bought along the way but water and slushy ice.

Now wouldn’t it be her luck that all the flights to Houston had been booked? So there she’d been left with no other choice than to fly into Dallas. Ironically, her sister and her family lived closer to Houston. *Closer* being a relative term in this case. If a hundred and twenty miles away from Houston could be deemed *closer*.

*“Drive twenty-point-five miles on Sutter Road—”*

“Oh, you have to be kidding me!” Larkin exclaimed.

Besides feeling like she was coasting right into *The Twilight Zone*, Larkin knew she wasn’t going to make it another twenty-point-five miles without getting something to quench her thirst. At the first available stop, just a gas station along that stretch of road, she pulled the car into the lot.

Even though it felt good to stretch her legs, she felt like there was an entire layer of highway dust on her. The gas station was old but not totally ancient, with pumps that accepted plastic. Once inside the shop she made a beeline to the refrigerated area, barely waiting until after she'd paid for her bottled water before quenching her thirst with a satisfying swallow.

"Can you tell me if I'm anywhere near Santo Pueblo?" she asked the clerk behind the counter.

"Santo Pueblo, Santo Pueblo," the woman repeated, as if giving herself a moment to think. She looked about fifty, then again she might have been a hundred, too. It wasn't that she was old, but her skin was darkened and leathery from the sun, and she looked like she'd been through some of life's harder times. "That's, oh, what do you think, Adam? Another twenty miles?"

"Prob'ly."

Larkin turned at the waist, following the deep masculine voice to a man. Her jaw dropped open slightly before she stopped herself.

*That's...a...cowboy.*

A *real* one. Not that she'd ever seen one up close like that. In the movies, sure. He reminded her of some good-looking country western singer, minus the ubiquitous guitar and dressed in his own clothes, not some star-studded mess he'd wear onstage. Larkin wasn't particularly a fan of country western music.

But this "Adam" was—well—easy on the eyes, to put it mildly.

He tipped back his cowboy hat on his head and acknowledged her with a nod.

"Where you headed to in Santo Pueblo, miss?" he inquired. "I live there. Grew up there, so I know it like the back of my hand."

"I'm going to my sister's home."

"Oh...kay." Humor registered in those twinkly blue eyes. "What I meant is, whereabouts does your sister live?"

Those eyes were the culprits. They were distracting her. Gorgeous, blue, with some down-home style razzle dazzle. And if Larkin let her eyes travel down the expanse of his broad shoulders and chest, those faded black—and tight—jeans were pretty damn distracting, too.

What was she thinking? She remembered reading an article in a magazine a while back about cowboys. The reality didn't quite stand up to the myth, as she recalled. Besides, she wasn't some giggly townie, ready to fall over her own feet over a man like that, built with leather and denim.

Larkin straightened up. "They live on Appleton Way. I think she said that's close to the historic part of town."

"Oh, all right. I know where that is. Come on outside, I'll show you."

Before following him through the door, she glanced back at the clerk, but the woman was preoccupied watching a college football game on the TV perched on the wall behind the counter. Turning back around, though she tried not to notice, she was treated to a rearview of the cowboy and his muscular male backside, in all its draped-in-faded-denim glory.

So, okay. He was rugged. Not anything at all like the metrosexuals she was accustomed to seeing in the City. His skin was bronzed by the sun, too. Larkin supposed he spent quite a bit of time out in the Texan sunshine. Blondish brown hair peeked out from under his hat, and his bone structure was striking, a young version of Clint Eastwood.

Unfortunately, he wasn't her type. She liked her men like Eric; intellectual, well-read, someone who could enjoy an indie film with her, then discuss it intelligently over lattes on a snowy New York day. What was the term? A beta male. Something told her that cowboy got straight A's in the looks department, but an indie film would, amusingly enough, go right over his head. He was also definitely an Alpha male.

Besides, she just needed directions from him. Then she'd be on her way and they wouldn't cross paths again during her stay.

"Keep on going down Sutter that way," he paused to wave a sinewy arm to his right. "You'll be driving a good twenty miles, maybe a little more..."

"Oh. That's what my GPS said. I was hoping it was wrong. It steered me wrong a couple of times on the way here from the airport."

"Those things are crazy. You can trust 'em to a point, right?"

The cowboy gave her a deep wink. In spite of herself she smiled, but then she felt a flush of heat in her cheeks. Larkin bit her lip before she could utter, *Aww, shit!*

He was flirting with her. Well, that probably worked with the little hillbillies he charmed at the local honky-tonk. It wasn't working with her.

"For three hundred bucks, I think I should be able to trust it all the time," she said, adjusting the strap of her Dooney & Bourke handbag on her shoulder. "Anyway, thanks for your time."

"Well, wait. You want me to drive on ahead of you? I don't live far from there myself. I don't mind making sure a lady gets to where she's going safely."

*Let me guess. That big gas guzzler's yours, right?* She glared in the direction of a huge, shiny black pickup, casually parked over by the side of the building.

"Thanks anyway, but I'll be fine on my own." With another swig of her water, she gave him her back and headed back to her own car.

"All right then, lady. You take care."

*Lady.* She supposed she should've been grateful he didn't call her *honey* or *baby*, pouring on more of that cowboy charm.

Larkin knew she shouldn't have peeked back at him, but she did, promptly feeling the color rising even more in her face. The cowboy stood with those long legs of his, his head tilted slightly, one eye squinting from the sun, his gaze raking over the sight of her in her jeans, black leather heels and slinky red top.

What did he expect her to do? Swoon like a silly teenager and run back to him, hopping right into the rear of his truck and let him have his way with her? Hardly!

Instead, she refused to even look at him, starting up her car and swerving back onto the road in the direction of Santo Pueblo. She was there to visit with her sister, her brother-in-law and their kids for Thanksgiving. Besides, maybe she and Eric were temporarily on the outs right now, but she already had a man. Even they were cooling their relationship for a bit, they were still sharing an address. That had to count for something.

Even if it didn't, she didn't have time for cowboys. Not now, not ever.

\*\*\*\*

Though she'd fully expected to fall sound asleep right after dinner at her sister's, Larkin found the meal had given her enough energy for a night out on the town.

If it could be called that. Santo Pueblo, for as far as the eye could see, was an average small town. It didn't exactly boast a hopping nightlife like New York's Greenwich Village or Times Square.

But when her sister Stefani and her husband Trey insisted on leaving the kids with his mother and taking Larkin out for a drink, she welcomed the chance to unwind. Larkin loved the kids—Abby was seven now and Ian was five. Still, a couple of hours of catching up with her sister and brother-in-law over drinks was too inviting to pass up.

Even if the drinks happened to flow from the bar at the Heart of Town bar. Apparently, that was Santo Pueblo's idea of a trendy nightspot. The locals sure seemed to like it, since the place was pleasantly crowded with folks everywhere from the bar to the dance floor, where couples danced along to the music of Tim McGraw, Alan Jackson, and Shania Twain, to name a few.

Larkin, having changed into her comfortable, flowing blue dress, decided she'd just go with the flow. Lounging out on her side of that booth, she sipped on her rum with Coke and chatted with Stef and Trey.

"So where's the nearest Starbucks?" she wanted to know.

"I'm guessing probably back in Houston?" Trey replied.

She blinked at him. "You're serious."

“Yeah, I’m serious!” Both he and her sister laughed. “I don’t think there’s a Starbucks anywhere near Santo Pueblo.”

“There’s a Dunkin’ Donuts, though,” her sister offered.

“Ah! Coming up in the world!”

Her sister took no offense, only said plainly, “We do things a little differently here in Santo Pueblo.”

“Oh, yeah? How so?”

“Well, for one thing, we usually make our own coffee. Like at home.”

Larkin cupped her chin in her hand. “You never miss New York?”

“Sure, I miss it. Enough to visit you, hopefully next year sometime, if we can get away from work. Not enough to move back there, though.”

Trey swallowed a swig of his beer and asked, “You think you’d ever want to move down here, Larkin?”

“Here?”

“Well, I mean Texas. Not necessarily Santo Pueblo. I guess a little town like this isn’t for everybody. But there’s bigger towns.” He shrugged. “Your sister misses you a lot.”

“I miss her, too.” For a moment she exchanged a glance with Stef. She felt the back of her throat constrict. “I miss you all more than you know.”

“But you don’t want to leave Eric,” her sister suggested.

“Oh, yes. Eric.” Pausing, Larkin cleared her throat. “There’s something I haven’t told you. Things are, um...not going well with Eric these days.”

“They’re not?” Stef looked surprised.

“Uh, well—oh, the hell with it. We’re sort of not...together right now.”

“You’re not *together*?”

“Well, it’s only, you know—it’s temporary. We’re taking a break from the relationship right now. We’re still living together, though. Trying to figure out where we are, what direction we want the relationship to take.” She hesitated, then decided just to plunge in headfirst with the truth. “We’re seeing other people. Or rather...*Eric’s* seeing other people. Women. I’m, oh, just taking a break in general...”

Larkin took another good, long gulp of her drink. At that rate, the rum would be going straight to her head, but she didn’t care. This wasn’t a conversation she’d planned on having until later on that week. Hopefully after she’d had some time to prepare her sister for it.



“Well, don’t take this the wrong way, sis, but I’m glad Eric’s gone. You’re well rid of him.”

Her eyes widened at her sister’s remark. “But I thought you liked Eric?”

“I didn’t. I was nice to him because I figured you loved him and he loved you, and he was the man you wanted. But I always thought he was...” Stef wrinkled her nose. “A know-it-all.”

“And a pain in the ass,” Trey offered matter-of-factly.

Larkin couldn’t stop her giggle in time, though she came to her former lover’s defense. “Oh, I don’t know about him being a know-it-all. Eric has very strong opinions, sure—”

“He’s a know-it-all,” her sister said almost defiantly. “And he talks down to people, like he’s instructing them, since we’re all entitled to *his* opinion. It didn’t matter what you were talking about at the time. Eric always thought he was an expert on everything under the sun. Sorry, but that makes him an annoying, snotty know-it-all.”

“*And a pain in the ass!*” her husband said again, this time with a great big smile.

In place of a giggle, Larkin laughed even more heartily. That didn’t stop her from trying again. She *had* to convince them, especially since, after all, she planned on getting back together with Eric Breakfield. “I think the thing is that Eric’s just such a smart guy. He sometimes lacks social skills.”

“You mean smart people are by nature annoying?” Trey shook his head. “Sorry, honey. I know a lot of smart folks. My brother happens to be one of them. And my brother’s no Eric Breakfield. I’ve never known him to be anything but a gentleman with other folks.”

“That’s true. Your brother Mark’s a pretty nice guy.”

*And you’re right. He’s no Eric Breakfield.* How telling was that, that those same words were right on the tip of her tongue as well, ready to be said?

Courtesy of the bar’s DJ, the song changed from a ballad to a more rousing tune. Larkin noticed the interaction between her sister and Trey, those smiles that conveyed without words, in the way that a man and woman who’ve been together for a long time have of communicating, that they were listening to a favorite song of theirs.

“Why don’t you two show them how it’s done on that dance floor?” Larkin urged.

Trey shook his head. “No, we came here to hang out with you.”

“So? That doesn’t mean you can’t have some fun out there. Go on. The rum’s going to my head anyway. I need some fresh air. You go on and dance with your honey!”

Even Larkin recognized that band by its lead singer’s memorable voice. That was Brooks and Dunn, a country group that she *did* like; a fellow nurse at the hospital had introduced her to them via their CDs. She lingered only long enough at the table to smile and wave at Stef, who took her up on her offer and headed without delay to the dance floor with her husband and lover.

She felt an unexpected twinge of jealousy on her way out to the bar's wraparound porch. It was painfully obvious that what Stef had with Trey was deeper than what she'd had with Eric. Larkin didn't want to totally admit that. That would be like admitting that she'd thrown away over four years of her life with a man who'd walked away too easily from her, a man who'd been emotionally unavailable to her for an even longer time than that.

*Shake it off, she told herself. You're here for the week. For the holiday. Relax. Forget New York. Forget Eric.*

Closing her eyes, she luxuriated in a wisp of breeze that swept over that porch. That second wind wasn't going to last. In another half hour she'd be ready for bed and a long, restful sleep.

Then she heard it, the sound that came from the other end of the porch. It was a smacking sound, like a hard slap, and then came a sharp little yelp.

*"No, Jeremy—stop! Somebody could come out and see us!"*

*"Well, honey, you should've thought about that before. Now stop wiggling!"*

Larkin's eyes shot open. It was dark at the other end of the porch, but once her eyes adjusted she could make out what she was seeing. It startled her when she realized that yes, that was *exactly* what she was watching. She clutched the porch railing with both hands, her lips parting in a silent "O".

That was a couple down there at the end of the long porch. The man was seated; draped over his lap was a woman. She wore a short skirt that was hiked up even more, revealing a pair of panties. Larkin watched, stunned, as the man proceeded to spank the woman's bottom, which was poorly if at all protected by the sheer undies.

*He's spanking her!* Right there, in public, on the porch of a public place. Larkin guessed he was spanking her hard, too, since his hand landed on her flesh with resounding, hearty smacks. Each time the woman jiggled and cried out, indignant but held firmly in place by his arm wrapped around her waist.

What should she do? Her heart thundered inside her. Did she run back into the bar? Get Trey? The bartender? The bouncer? That big jerk couldn't do that. He couldn't strike the woman at all, least of all right there in front of any passerby.

Which, in this case, happened to be Larkin herself.

She *had* to get help. She had to go back inside the bar. But how? Her legs seemed bolted to the floor. How many times had that hand descended on the poor young woman's bottomcheeks? By Larkin's count, at least fifteen, maybe twenty times.

Damn, that had to burn like crazy! Almost of their own volition, her hands travelled back to her own bottom, resting there.

"All right, young lady. That's enough for now." She watched as the man tugged the skirt back down, not that there was much material to begin with. What there was, however, managed

to provide some modesty, covering her entire shapely backside. He rested his hand there, even giving her a few pats. The gesture seemed strangely loving. “But when we get home, your bottom’s got a hot date with my paddle.”

Larkin gasped. Had she heard right? Had that brute just threatened the woman with *another* spanking?

More alarmingly, why was her heart pounding like that? Why couldn’t she tear her eyes away from the couple? It was, oddly enough, exciting. That alone was crazy, and she tried to tell herself she wasn’t thoroughly mesmerized by the unusual scene, but she most certainly was.

Maybe the woman hadn’t seen her but she knew for a fact that the man was aware of her presence. He must have heard her gasp, yet he’d only cast a brief glance in her direction. He seemed more intent on helping the woman who’d been over his knee to her feet. Larkin watched her, too, noting that as soon as she was steadied on those high heels, her small hands had flown behind her, immediately trying to rub the sting out of her spanked bottom.

Larkin swallowed hard. If she had any common sense at all, she would march right back into the bar and tell someone. The bouncer, an off-duty cop, anybody. But she turned too quickly and bumped hard into what felt like an unyielding brick wall.

No, not a wall—a man’s chest. A ripply chest, easy to see even through the fabric of that cotton shirt with the sleeves partially rolled up. She tossed back her head and looked up at the man who had to be a good six inches or so taller than her. If her heart had thundered before, it was rattling like gale-force winds now inside her.

Looking back down at her—actually, smiling mischievously—was that easygoing but utterly sexy cowboy from earlier that day. The same one who’d offered to escort her, driving ahead in his studly set of wheels, that black pickup, to her sister’s home. Larkin knew she should have known better, and still she blurted out, trying to keep her voice down.

“Did—did you see that?” she demanded.

He wasn’t wearing his cowboy hat now. He was roughly the same age as her, perhaps a few years older, in his late thirties. “See what?”

She pursed her lips. He was playing innocent with her. “What was happening down there. At the other end of the porch.”

“Oh, you mean the young lady who was getting her naughty little tail soundly spanked?”

What was that Trey had said? Or was it her sister? Damn, if she could remember. Her head was all mixed up now.

*We do things a little differently here in Santo Pueblo.*

*Well, no shit, Sherlock!*

Larkin tried to maintain her composure. It was probably best to get off the subject anyway. “How strange to see you again, Mr.—uh—”

“McLeod. Adam McLeod. And what do they call you?”

“Larkin Gregory.” She scowled up at him, anything to keep this from getting too friendly. “Like I said, it’s kinda strange to see you again.”

“Yeah. Maybe it’s fate.”

“Or maybe you’re following me?”

“*Following* you? That’s kinda presumptuous, don’t you think?” *Presumptuous* was a word that surprised her, coming from the mouth of a man who was supposed to be a good-looking-but-not-too-bright cowboy. “Did you ever stop to think that maybe this is just a small town? Sooner or later, you’re going to run into somebody you know?”

She regarded him with distrust but chose not to pursue the matter. “Never mind. Shouldn’t we do something?”

“Like what?”

“*Like what?* He was *spanking* her!”

“Maybe the lady needed spankin’. The gentleman she was with seemed to think so.”

“She—*oh!*” Larkin shook her head, eyeing him in confusion. “Maybe I should mind my own business.”

“Well, I was gonna suggest that, ma’am. I was just trying to find a way to say it so it wouldn’t sound rude.”

“You’re *serious*, aren’t you? If you were any kind of gentleman, you would’ve stopped him.”

Suddenly those blue eyes narrowed at her. “I don’t appreciate that, Miss Gregory. If he’d been a monster and *beat* her, rest assured, I would’ve knocked him into next Tuesday. But he was *spanking* her. Now I don’t suppose you’ve ever been spanked.”

“What, *me*? Of course not. Who the hell do you think you are?”

Adam McLeod’s voice dipped, that no-nonsense tone of his sending a shiver through her. “I think I’m the kind of man who knows a spoiled city girl when he sees one. And you’re the kind of woman who, if you were with me, I’d be sitting on that same bench right now and you’d be across my knee with your skirt pulled up, just like she was, getting one hell of a spanking.”

Without touching her, just with his words, that cowboy managed to knock the wind right out of her. Larkin sputtered, temporarily speechless. She also felt a wave of trepidation coming out of nowhere.

*He’s going to do it, she thought, getting panicky. He’s going to make good on that threat unless I run like hell!*

Yet she couldn't run. She refused to show him fear. Rather, she squared her shoulders and tilted her chin up, mustering every ounce of her pride.

"I have to be getting back to my sister," she announced stiffly. "Good night, cowboy."

"Yeah. Good night to you, spoiled city girl."

There was no malice in his voice. If anything, Larkin thought she detected a hint of disappointment.

For her part, she made it through the door, hoping he hadn't noticed how hard she was trembling. More than that—it was *he* who'd made her tremble.

## Chapter Two

“You’ve lived in New York too long. That’s the problem.”

Larkin blinked and her hands grasped the shopping cart handle tighter. Had she heard right? She cast a glance over her shoulder at her sister.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she demanded.

Stef was moving even more slowly behind her, neither of them in a particular hurry. They’d made the trip to the supermarket for those last-minute items, including vegetables for the Thanksgiving meal side dishes. Larkin, who’d never cooked the traditional meal, found even the excursion to the store a festive occasion. Besides having been decorated with holiday and fall-themed decorations, more customers than usual had flocked in for the rest of what they needed. There was a joyful spirit in the air that was infectious.

“You know what I mean,” Stef half groaned as she inspected a large yam. “New York and its whole politically correct mindset. You folks are afraid to say ‘good morning’ without offending anybody.”

“Oh, that’s not true. Maybe you didn’t hear right. I said the guy was outside the club and he was spanking that woman. Had her over his knee and everything!”

“Well, I’m with you there. He should’ve at least waited till he got her home.”

“He should’ve—*what?* Is that what Trey would’ve done? Waited until you guys got home before he upended you on his lap and turned your butt red?”

“Most...of the time. Yeah.”

Stunned, Larkin turned to her sister again. Stef dropped her gaze just as she began to blush.

“Do you think we should get marshmallows for the yams?” Her sister hastily changed the subject. “Or just have them with some butter and brown sugar? That sweet enough?”

“Aw, no. You’re not getting off that easily.” There was no other way to put the question other than to just blurt it out, yet she dropped her voice to a whisper, with so many people within earshot. “Trey spansks you?”

“I don’t know if I should answer that question. Are you going to pass judgment on us, too, like you did to those people last night and that cowboy who argued with you?”

Was that how she was coming off? To her own sister, no less? As somebody who would pass judgment on her? Was she being so stridently politically correct that she wasn’t keeping an open mind?

“You can tell me,” she said, then promised softly, “I won’t think badly of you or Trey. Just...I don’t understand.”

Stef hesitated for a moment. She allowed her hand to rest beside Larkin's on the cart handle and spoke in low tones.

"He doesn't—well, he doesn't spank me *all* the time," she explained. "Actually, I get spanked less now than when we were newlyweds. But I still end up getting my panties pulled down from time to time. To be honest, we talk about it ahead of time. Trey never spans me out of anger. I'm always in agreement, even though it hurts like crazy to get your behind blistered. 'Course..." Stef flashed her a mischievous smirk. "Sometimes that happens just for fun, too."

Larkin tried to follow her. "You get spanked for *fun*?"

"Yep. Ever try that with a man?"

"Can't say that I ever have."

"Oh. Well..." Her sister eased closer to her, whispering, "The sex afterwards is *amazing*."

She felt a tightening in her stomach that had come, seemingly, out of the blue. It was impossible to keep that visual from entering her imagination. It was like a mind photograph, a still: She could see her adversary, that broad-shouldered and, she hated to admit it but it was true, good-looking cowboy, taking a seat on a bale of hay, with her draped over his lap. Fully dressed, except with her jeans bunched down at her calves. His big, work-calloused hand poised high in the air, aiming it right for her bare, unprotected bottom.

Another ripple zapped through her belly. Surprisingly, she felt a sudden twitch against the fabric of her panties. Larkin gripped the cart handle tighter and sighed, trying to catch her breath.

The thought had turned her on. *How weird is that?*

"So, anyway, what's your cowboy's name?" Larkin asked.

"Adam McLeod. And before you say anything, it's not that I want to remember his damn name. It's just that he sounds like some character in an action film or something." *And what's worse, he looks like one.*

"*Adam McLeod*? Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious. What is he? A local celebrity or something?"

"Sort of!" Stef laughed. "Adam owns the farm down on 321. That's been in his family for a couple generations. He only took it over about ten years ago when his father died."

"He's a farmer? What was he before?"

"A businessman. He was a banker out in Los Angeles. But since he took over the ranch, I guess you could say he's come back to his roots." Seriously, her sister added, "He's a good man. He's done a lot to help Santo Pueblo. He's kept mostly to himself since his wife died a few years ago. Lost his dad and his wife."

“So he’s human. Thanks. That, I didn’t know.”

Though Thanksgiving was still three days away, instrumental Christmas tunes were filling the air through the store’s sound system. Nevertheless, even over the music and the cacophony of people’s voices and vegetables being sprinkled on and carts moving, Larkin heard Nickleback playing on her cell phone. She checked the screen for the caller’s name.

“It’s Eric,” she said, surprised that it sounded like a question, even to her own ears.

“Oh, then you go ahead and take your call, Lar. I’ll be over here. I want to get some cheese and crackers to munch on while we wait for the turkey to roast.”

As her sister strolled away, Larkin mused to herself. She would never, not in a million years, guess that dynamic was a part of her relationship with Trey. And *Trey*? Easygoing, soft-spoken Trey, taking Stef over his knee for a spanking?

But she would have to ask Stef more about it later. She was...intrigued. Not that she cared to admit that out loud. For now, though, she had a call to answer.

“Hey, stranger! Didn’t think you missed me enough to call.”

There was silence for a second, then a forced laugh that didn’t sit well with her. “Hey, there, baby! How are things in the Red Star State?”

“Um, I think it’s the Lone Star State.”

“Whatever. You having a nice time?”

“Pretty good. How about you? You in Connecticut this week, seeing your parents?”

“Naaa, I hate turkey, you know that. I can always taste the chemicals they use. Besides, turkeys don’t kill me. Why should I kill them?”

“Uh-huh, well...” Larkin wasn’t in the mood to debate Eric, who’d been on some kind of diet for nearly a year. Micro-something? Macro? Whatever it was, she respected his choice to be on it, though he’d seen no problem in being the food police anytime she ate something that wasn’t micro- or macro-anything.

“But you can have other stuff,” she pointed out. “Or just not eat anything and—”

“Ahhh, Thanksgiving’s overrated anyway. Just a reason to pig out and see relatives that I can’t stand anyway. It’s almost as bad as Christmas!” Another laugh on the other end, this one even less genuine than the last one. “Anyway, I won’t keep you, babe. Just wanted to let you know I’m moving out this week.”

“You’re—this week?” Larkin had been inspecting a container of fresh cranberries and nearly dropped it. “That’s...sudden.”

“Not really. I put in for a transfer a few months ago. Job came up in Seattle—Larkin, *Seattle*! You know that’s a dream come true for me, going out there.”



“Yeah. That’s true.” She could have let it slide, but something inside her hardened and she refused. “You never told me you put in for a transfer.”

“No? Pretty sure I did.”

“Actually, no. Pretty sure you *didn’t*.” *Liar*. Now a lot made sense about Eric wanting his space and all those other cowardly lies. On anything but a romantic note, his unexpected departure was going to put her in the unenviable position of having to make that Chelsea rent on her own. That was something she would have to deal with, though not right now.

“I guess there’s nothing more to say then. Goodbye, Eric.”

“Huh? That’s it? No congratulations?”

“Oh, yeah. Congratulations on your dream coming true, going to the Pacific Northwest and all that. Now make sure you clean up after yourself when you leave the apartment. And take anything you want with you or I swear I’ll toss it out on the street just to get it the hell out of my way.”

“Hey! Why so mean, Lark—”

Disgusted, she snapped shut the phone and chucked it back into her purse. Stef was headed back in her direction, an armful of cheeses and other goodies in her arms.

“Everything okay?” her sister asked.

“Everything’s peachy.” Larkin sighed.

Her sister, as always, would give her a shoulder to cry on if she needed it. The thing was, Thanksgiving was right around the corner. She didn’t want to put a damper on a major holiday by crying over a man who’d treated her shabbily. If anything, she should have seen that phone call coming from a mile away, if she’d been paying attention instead of constantly making excuses for him.

Adding a lilt to her voice, she wondered out loud, “Where’s the liquor section? I think we’ll definitely need some Jose Cuervo to wash down those carbs!”

\*\*\*\*\*

Luckily it was late. Late enough, close to ten-thirty at night, that no one was around. Larkin was free to try and get her mind off her troubles, which in this case meant satisfying her curiosity.

Or being nosey. Whichever of the two, she didn’t care. She had no intention of staying long at Adam McLeod’s farm.

The breakup with Eric, and how callous her now ex-boyfriend had been over the phone, didn't fully hit her until after dinner that evening. On top of that was the added bonus that she would probably have no choice but to move out of her apartment. Certainly there were other options, like advertising on the Internet for a roommate. But she'd done that before and both experiences had soured her on that option. Somehow she'd ended up with the Roommate from Hell twice in a row.

So, fine. She'd lost her boyfriend, who'd treated her as if the years they'd spent together had meant nothing to him. *And* she was losing her home. In three more days she'd be feeling grateful for the Xanax in her purse.

If nothing else, she could go out for a drive. That rental car gave her the chance to clear her head. More than that: Larkin got an adventure, the chance to satisfy her curiosity. Hunting for and finding Adam McLeod's farm was a fun little diversion for a woman whose whole life was about to be turned upset down.

She was doing fine, too. The place looked like a Thomas Kincaid painting, right down to the lights coming from the farmhouse. A place that looked too big for a man who'd been widowed at a young age.

Earnestly, she found herself enjoying the excursion. That is, until she decided to get too close. She had seen what looked like a pond in the distance and had sneaked onto the farm for a closer look, never expecting the Mazda's tires to get stuck in the mud.

*Don't panic, don't panic!* She told herself, glancing back through the driver's side window at the house.

Gorgeous farmhouse, old and rustic. Evidently, Adam maintained the place well, lovingly. It had a wraparound porch and plenty of windows. A light glowed on the porch and another lit up the living room window. That meant, to her chagrin, the cowboy was home, most likely cleaning his guns or his spurs, or whatever businessmen-turned-cowboys did on their spare time.

As for her, she was stuck on the man's property. No boyfriend, no home, and now no damn common sense. She'd probably get arrested for trespassing, too.

*Don't panic. Shift, reverse, gun it!*

Nothing.

Those wheels were turning but the freaking car just wasn't going anywhere. What if she got out and pushed it? Could she do that? One thing was for sure: Larkin couldn't afford to damage the rental. She had enough bills coming her way without adding a few dents or scratches on a rented car.

*Shift, drive, floor it!*

Again, nothing.

Pushing was her only hope. That decision came to her after more gear-shifting and more gunning the engine than was wise, considering she could flood the thing. First putting the car in Neutral, she stepped out, keeping one hand on the door, the other on the steering wheel.

What *was* that stuff? It was almost like quicksand and it smelled outrageously bad. Trying to push a car in her high-heeled boots was no easy feat, either. Within moments Larkin slipped, getting that mess all over her jeans.

“Oh—*shit!*” she swore loudly.

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

Larkin froze. Still holding onto the car door, she shot a glance over her shoulder. Her worst fears were realized.

There was the cowboy coming right towards her. She must have been making so much of a racket out there that he’d come out of his home to inspect. What was worse, he wore a smirk that stretched from ear to ear.

“*What’s* about right?” She regarded him sullenly.

“Shit. That’s manure you’re standing in.”

“*Nooooo*. Aw, hell, no—”

“Hell, yeah. It’s all over you. Now stop the car or you’ll push it right into that tree.”

She licked her lips. “I’ve never done this before.”

“That’s all right. Careful, don’t slip again.”

Maybe he wasn’t *that* much of a jerk. Besides, after the stint Eric had pulled earlier, it would have been hard even for a macho cowboy like him to look as bad. What was more, Larkin felt foolish for landing in that position, and she would have felt even more stupid had she unwittingly steered the rental right into a nearby tree. But Adam McLeod had spoken gently to her, even kindly.

She did as he asked, stepping aside and watching as he pushed the vehicle out of the muddy ditch. In spite of herself she had to admit that was a gorgeous view, watching a big, strong man with his plain white T-shirt and faded jeans outlining muscles garnered from hard work. He wasn’t wearing his cowboy hat, letting her see that head of wavy, blondish-brown hair of his.

Adam managed to get the car out, reaching in and turning off the ignition. He handed her the keys.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he remarked.

“Yeah. What a coincidence, huh?” Larkin swallowed hard.

“Is it?” He shrugged. “You took a wrong turn or something?”

“No. I’m...trespassing.”

He did a double-take at her. “Well, you’re honest. I’ll give you that much.”

“Well, then I might as well come all the way clean. I was—I guess you could say admiring your farm. I wanted a closer look. But I’m sorry. Regardless, I shouldn’t have done that. I’ve had a—a bad day.”

“And now you got manure all over you. That’s what you get for trespassing on a farm. Anyway, come inside, Larkin. Get cleaned up.”

She blinked in surprise. *Larkin*. The cowboy had remembered her name. She didn’t know why that should bring a smile to her, yet it did.

“I don’t want to—that is, I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” she said to the back of his head as she followed him.

“I was just relaxing. Going to bed in a few. Have to get up early tomorrow.”

Adam walked faster than she did. Then again, he had those long, athletic legs of his.

*And she was going in his house.* How wise a move was that? What had she gotten herself into?

“You can leave your boots out here. I’ll clean them for you.” He paused to grin back at her. “I’m sure you’re not crazy about getting that manure off anyway.”

“No. Not really. *Blech!*” She could barely stand the smell.

“But first I’ll get you something to wear. It shouldn’t take long to wash and dry your jeans.”

There had been a woman there in that house...once. There were still traces of her, though the living room and kitchen had more of a manly feel to them now. Larkin could see it in the little knickknacks and pretty dishes displayed in the hutch and the china cabinet in the dining room, in the collection of unusual mugs on a shelf set over the cabinets in the kitchen.

She felt out of place there and yet, paradoxically, she felt warmed and welcomed by the large house. Adam disappeared down the hallway for some minutes, leaving her alone with an old mixed breed dog that gave her a curious look, then resumed his nap on the rug in front of the sink.

The cowboy returned to the kitchen carrying a folded pair of sweat pants in his hand.

“Here. That’ll be a little big, but it should fit you,” he noted. “You can change in the bathroom right over there. I’ll take your jeans when you’re ready. There’s a phone over there if you need to call anybody. Be my guest.”

“I—I don’t think—okay. Thanks. Be right back.”

Her hand had brushed against his as she'd accepted the clothing. Adam had noticed, too. Larkin had seen him look from her hand to her face, then shake his head and look away. A moment of shyness? Whatever that was, it was unbelievably *cute*. She'd almost run into the bathroom just to keep herself from staring back at him.

Why? Because she *liked* looking at the man. He was downright yummy. But still, she wasn't supposed to be there. She wasn't supposed to be wiggling out of her mud- and manure-encrusted jeans, then pulling *his* pants over her legs and panty-clad bottom. *She wasn't supposed to be in his house. How in the hell had that happened?!*

She shuddered as she slithered out of her yucky jeans, then took them gingerly by the waistband, trying hard not to touch the soiled legs, and stepped out of the bathroom.

"I really appreciate this," she said, handing the pants to Adam. "And I can leave now if you—well, if—"

"Tell you the truth, I don't really mind the company." He didn't expound upon those words, disappearing to another room, presumably where the washer and dryer were. He called out to her, "There's some coffee in the pot. Help yourself to some if you'd like."

With him out of sight, Larkin let her hands glide down the rounded orbs that shaped her behind. Those were *his* pants. She had to stop that, she really did. Yet the fleece felt soft against her skin and the fact that the same fabric that had touched his body was touching hers made her flesh tingle with anticipation.

She *had* to snap out of that. "Can I pour you a cup, too, Adam?"

He returned to the kitchen looking pleasantly surprised. "Sure, I can have a cup. Thanks."

"It won't keep you up?"

"I'm one of those people who can have a couple cups of coffee before bed and I'll still sleep like a baby."

"I'm like that, too. I can have espresso and still sleep all night, no problem." Larkin almost reached for the cabinets, then remembered her manners. "Cups?"

"Right here." Stepping up beside her, Adam opened an overhead cabinet and took down two mugs. "I also have Coke if you prefer that. Or beer. You don't look like a girl who drinks beer, though. I'm guessing you're more of a wine lady."

"I can drink a beer." She gave him a saucy smile. "But coffee's fine. You don't have to entertain me, though, Adam. I'm the one imposing on you."

"Trespassing, not imposing. You're not very good at trespassing, though."

"Maybe not. But I feel terrible for having done it."

"I'll give you a pass this time. It's kinda cool getting tourists on my farm."

He had a sense of humor, winning a giggle from her. Larkin poured them each a cup of coffee from the glass carafe.

“And what happens next time I trespass on your property? Will you call the cops? Or will I get spanked like that girl at the club?”

Adam had just retrieved the sugar bowl from the same cabinet and was fishing two spoons from the utensils drawer. He lifted his head, looking at her with humor in his eyes.

“You don’t seem as opposed to that idea as you were the last time you and I discussed that subject,” he pointed out.

Larkin could feel the color rising in her face. “W-well, maybe the idea’s sorta new to me. Maybe I don’t understand it as well as people around here do.”

“I don’t think it’s rocket science, honey. You’ve just never been spanked. Or have you?”

“Yes, I have. I’ve been spanked before. A...long time ago.” She neglected to explain that the “spanking” had consisted of a quick smack on the behind, and that was *quite* a long time ago, possibly pre-kindergarten. “I’ve never been spanked just for fun, though.”

“And I don’t usually spank a lady for fun. If I spank a woman, she probably needs to be taught a lesson. Like she shouldn’t be trespassing onto somebody else’s property.” He’d poured sugar and milk into his coffee, but he wasn’t touching it. Adam had one hand on his waist, the other on the counter. “But in this case, I can sure make an exception. Especially since...”

Her heart went wild, pounding like crazy against her chest. He had just taken her by the hand and had escorted her back outside to the porch.

“...you know, Larkin, I’ve thought you needed spanking ever since you put up that fuss that night at the club!”

“Out—out *here*?”

She hadn’t considered that one. She was about to suggest they go back inside, in his living room or the kitchen, someplace private. Adam moved quicker than she could speak, however. In a flash he had her bent over the porch railing, her hair loose and cascading forward. Larkin gave a little gasp as she felt the sweatpants being yanked down. Her panties—she’d worn those sexy, sheer blue ones—were tight across her bottom.

Adam tightened his arm around her waist. She could feel his hand on her behind, cool even through her panties. It seemed to be caressing her butt, giving her cheeks a bit of attention and TLC. Larkin couldn’t help but react with arousal.

“Out here’s a good a place as any,” he told her. “Besides, let’s get one thing straight, Larkin. You don’t get to pick where you get spanked. That’s up to me. And I think that out on the porch is fitting, since the first time you watched a lady get spanked was out on a porch. And hey—now it’s your turn.”

Larkin heard him chuckle. He was *enjoying* this! Another moment passed and she felt her panties being pulled down. Again she gasped, more embarrassed than she'd expected to be, having her bottom bared by a cowboy who gave her bottom one more reassuring rub before laying into her.

And lay into her he did. That first smack came down, sending a white-hot sting through her cheeks. She cried out in surprise and gripped the railing's bars with both hands as more smacks followed. Each was more painful and hotter than the last.

"Having fun yet?" Adam asked cheerfully.

"*Ohhhhhh...*" She closed her eyes and groaned, her legs kicking as if of their own volition. "You're—*owwww!*—too good—*ouch!*—at this!"

Spanking for fun? Maybe her bottom wasn't as tough as Stef's. Or maybe all that country living had made Stef a hardier woman than she was. Larkin wriggled and bucked, but Adam's aim was flawless, landing spank after spank on its target, which was getting hotter and hotter by the minute.

How many was that now? Twenty? Thirty spanks? If this was just a playful spanking, she could just imagine the danger her butt would be in if it was serious, like the one that woman had gotten that night out at the club!

"All right, Larkin. One more. Then I think you've had enough for now."

She breathed a sigh of relief, only to widen her eyes as that parting shot rained down on that spot right where her legs met her rump. Driving the rental back to her sister's that night with a sore rear end in that driver's seat was going to be some experience. "*OWWWWWW!*"

"Well, I couldn't let my first tourist leave without a souvenir," Adam quipped behind her.

"A souvenir," she sputtered. "Very funny!"

"Larkin, honey, I know your fanny's on fire, but you might want to wait till you're back in the house to give it a good rubbin'."

"What?"

She didn't need any further explanation. Across the way, several yards away in fact, was a car on the road that had slowed down. Larkin wasn't sure how much the passengers, a man and a woman, had seen, but apparently she and Adam had put on quite a show for them. They were pointing in her direction and giggling and chatting among themselves. She imagined her face must have been turning a shade of red that matched the other end of her.

"Oh!" she turned abruptly, trying so hastily to get back into the house that she forgot her bottom was still bare—and now blistered and sore to boot—and her panties and those sweatpants were bunched around her knees, making her gait downright comical.

Particularly to the cowboy behind her, whose hearty laughter had an undeniably masculine and sexy ring to it.





## Chapter Three

“Soooo...does it still hurt?”

Larkin shot her head up. Only a moment earlier she'd been gazing down at the dining room chair, wondering if the cushion would go easy on her bottom or if she could somehow sneak a throw pillow in from the living room.

“Does what hurt?” She smiled coyly at Stef.

“What do you think? What that jerk, Eric, did to you.” Her sister slid into the chair to her right and opened the cedar box that contained the silverware. “I know you can't be over that so quickly.”

“Ah, well. Maybe I'm more resilient than either of us give me credit for.”

A day had passed. Sitting had been pretty uncomfortable the night before, when she'd squirmed in the driver's seat of the rental all the way back from Adam's farm. Before bed she'd found it soothing in the shower to turn, bend over and let the cascade of water cool off her toasted buns. She couldn't describe it, what had come over her as she'd aided the water by rubbing her orbs gently. It was as if she could still feel his hand across her skin, that big, wonderful hand of his, which had awakened something new and mysterious to her.

When bottom finally met chair, Larkin grinned. Not quite as uncomfortable, but there was still a reminiscent prickliness that actually felt quite pleasant.

“Still hurts a little, though.” She muffled a giggle. “Pass me a cloth.”

“Oh, you don't have to help me. You're a guest and all.”

“Excuse me? I'm no guest. I'm family. Now pass me one of those.” Her sister obliged by handing over not only a cloth but also a large silver serving fork. “I've never done this before. You know—helped in all the preparations.”

Stef smiled. “I was kinda hoping you'd help me with the side dishes and the desserts, too. I don't want to scare you, though. It's not *that* much work. You can usually count on Aunt Opal to make her sweet potatoes and Trey's sister makes a mean green bean casserole.”

“Hey, I'm in on whatever you need me to do. Not that I know how to do much. But I can learn.”

*And I want to.* Words that sounded silly now. It wasn't like she had a prospective family in her near future. Larkin knew she should have been feeling a lot bluer about that, but instead she was feeling more cheerful than she had in a long time.

“Well, I'm sure you'll learn fast. Maybe...” Stef stopped, licking her lips. “I don't know. Maybe you'll think about coming back here? To live, I mean?”

Again with that. This was the painful part of their visits ever since Stef had married Trey and they'd moved back to his native state. Partway through their visit, along with that last day together, the two sisters, who'd always been close, fretted over having to be apart again.

"Aw, hon, I don't know—"

"We could use some nurses here, you know. And you'd have it a lot easier than I did when I first came here. You'd have me. And I'd introduce you to all the ladies at our church. Who knows? You might meet a nice guy here. A real man, not like that Eric."

She couldn't have asked for a more perfect opening. "Hey, uh, what do you know? I might have already done that."

Stef narrowed her eyes at her. "What?"

For an ounce of courage, she took a healthy sip of blush wine from the glass at her side. "You know that Adam McLeod? I happened to—um—bump into him yesterday while I was out for a drive."

"Did you? Where?"

"Ohhhhhh...on his farm!" Once again, she was proving that lying had just never been one of her strong points. "To tell you the truth, I was kinda bummed out over Eric, so I went out for a drive. And you'd told me Adam owned a farm so I went over there. I guess you could say I was trespassing on the man's property."

Her sister laughed. "I could see you doing that. So what happened? I take it he didn't call the cops on you."

"Hmmm, no. He didn't. He...took the law into his own hands." Pausing, Larkin bit her lower lips. "And he...spanked me."

Stef dropped the ladle she'd been polishing and it clanked loudly on the butcher block table. "He—he *spanked* you?"

"Yeah. Oh, for—for fun, of course."

"For fun? The *hell*?" Again Stef laughed, though she dropped her voice to a whisper. Larkin had forgotten the kids were in the living room watching the Cartoon Network. "You don't seem very—oh—indignant."

"That's because I'm not. Indignant, that is." Larkin cleared her throat and nodded. "I don't understand what happened to me."

"Well, you can begin by talking to me about it. You know you can do that, right?" It was Stef's turn to nod. "For one thing, how did you feel about it?"

"Well...it hurt. Like crazy." Nervously, she giggled. "And it was kinda—oh, I guess you'd say it was intimate. Very intimate."

Stef was definitely enthralled. She set down her cloth and leaned in closer, dropping her hand into her chin. “Describe it to me. What he did, what you did.”

She could feel herself blushing. Cautiously, Larkin glanced over her shoulder. She didn’t mind sharing that with her sister, but she didn’t really want Trey to come in suddenly and overhear the conversation.

“He, um, bent me over the porch railing—”

“Damn! He spanked you *outside*?”

At that true confession, Larkin needed another good, sturdy hit of wine. “Yeah. He pulled my pants down. *And* my panties.”

“Reeeally, now? How very politically incorrect!”

“Oh, shut up!” Larkin knew her sister was teasing and laughed with her. “I don’t know how many times his hand came down, but it was enough for me to know that I won’t be trespassing again any time soon.”

“I’ll bet you won’t. So when are you seeing your cowboy again? Want me to invite him for Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Oh, n-n-no!” She bolted upright in her seat. “I couldn’t. You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because, Stef! I can’t see him again.”

“Again, I ask you why not? Did anything else happen that you should feel embarrassed?”

“Getting my butt turned up high in the air and spanked was embarrassing enough, thank you very much. No, nothing happened. I left too soon afterwards.” Sighing, she admitted the truth. “But I wouldn’t have minded if something else had happened.”

“So I repeat, when are you seeing your cowboy again?”

Larkin set aside the serving fork and grabbed a large spoon, polishing it with gusto. “I’m not ready for another relationship right now. And besides, I have to fly home on Saturday. That wouldn’t be fair to Adam or me. Listen to me—I’m talking as if Adam would want a relationship with me. I mean, outside of what happened last night.”

Stef grinned. “I’ll admit, usually the relationship comes first. But who’s to say something special can’t come of this?”

“You just want me to stay.”

“What I want is for you to be happy. But, yes, I’d love to see you be happy here, closer to me. Me, Trey and the kids—we’re all the family you’ve got, Larkin.”

The doorbell rang, its chimes heard over the sounds of their voices and the TV in the next room.

"I'll get it," Larkin offered, rising from her seat.

It was probably one of Stef's neighbors. That cozy complex seemed like a close-knit community. Earlier, a neighbor had returned one of her sister's casserole dishes following a block party held several days earlier, and another neighbor had passed by to invite Stef for Girls' Night Out after Thanksgiving.

Instead, she opened the door and found her breath swiftly swept away. Standing there on the porch, hat in hand, was "her" cowboy, as Stef had put it. All six feet plus, one-hundred-and-eighty pounds of captivatingly rugged, all-American male.

"Hey," he greeted her.

"Hey, yourself!" Larkin quickly stepped onto the porch, closing the door behind herself. With her hand still behind her on the doorknob, she felt like a preteen greeting a young, would-be boyfriend. "What're you doing here?"

"I got my truck stuck in the mud out there in your sister's yard." His smile alone could almost fill her with the same emotional impact usually reserved for a kiss, if that was possible. "Well, to be honest, I just...I thought I'd pass by on my way home. See how you're doing."

"I'm—I'm fine."

"That's good."

"And you?"

"I can't complain."

Larkin watched him run his hand along the rim of his hat. It was a simple gesture, one borne of shyness and an awkward moment. She was quietly and pleasantly surprised by how such a small, simple thing could make her heart race.

Of course, he'd been alone for some time after his wife was gone. This was new to him again. Really, though, she had to do the right thing. She had to remind him that in a matter of days, she would be gone. She couldn't lead him on.

"Listen, I—I'm gonna be up at that restaurant tonight," he stammered slightly. "The one where we met. They have a live band tonight. They're pretty good. Maybe, if you're not busy, I'll...maybe I'll see you there tonight."

Larkin squinted at him. "Are you asking me out on a date, Adam McLeod?"

"A date? No, no. Well...yeah. Yeah, I am." Tall, lanky, tanned, and strong. And handsome in that rough-n-tumble cowboy way. "Thing is, I'd like to see you again. But only if you're willing, too. I'll be there at seven. And I'll understand if you're not there."

"Adam—Adam, I'm going back to New York this Saturday."

There. The truth was out. Whatever was going on with her, though? She felt like she'd run a mile. That was how breathless she suddenly felt.

"That's Saturday. I'm asking about tonight, Larkin. And I know you won't be here for long. I'm just asking for tonight."

There was nothing awkward or shy in what happened next. If she thought she was breathless before, she was completely unable to breathe in that following moment, when Adam wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her in closer to him.

There was no pretense in that man, absolutely nothing feigned or smooth. He simply took her, brought her body up against his, and then he brought his mouth to hers in a heartfelt, scorching kiss. If she'd had her wits about her, she would have pushed him gently back, told him to go easy. There were steps to be taken first, after all.

But one kiss from that rough-around-the-edges cowboy and Larkin knew she wasn't stopping that kiss before she'd had her fill of it. What was it with that man? Whether he was pulling down her panties to warm her butt or stealing a kiss from her, he had every nerve in her body ready and willing for sex.

*Sex.* Heck, it wasn't like she'd ever been that amorous. Sure, she enjoyed sex as much as the next person and all. Yet something told her that sex with Adam McLeod had to be one hell of a thrilling ride.

"I'll..." She was able to catch her breath seconds after the kiss, though she still reveled in how good his arm felt, still coiled possessively around her waist. "...I'll see you tonight."

He kissed her again, the kiss moist and lazily delicious, like he was savoring every bit of it. Behind her, his hand dropped down, giving her behind a couple of firm pats. "Good girl."

\*\*\*\*

Adam arrived at the restaurant some minutes before seven, and as was his habit, he paced patiently on the porch. Granted, there was a good possibility that little New York minx wouldn't show. Truth be told, he couldn't really blame her. She'd traveled down to Texas to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with her family. He had some nerve expecting to steal her away for a couple of hours, just to have her to himself.

Yet in all honesty, he couldn't help himself. He had to see her, if only for one more time before she stepped out of his life, maybe forever.

Pacing, for him, was the chance to think on his feet. Thinking was something he'd done a lot of since that sexy little interloper in high heels had trespassed onto his property. Thoughts that hadn't even entered his mind in all the time since he'd become a widower.

Turning, he saw her approaching from the parking lot. The woman was steamy in jeans that hugged her figure, but now here she was—earlier than he'd expected her, when part of him hadn't even thought she'd come—in a skirt and top. Damn if that woman didn't have a body that looked downright sculptured. She was slim but not overly so, rounded in all the places that could make a man dizzy just from the heat. The skirt wasn't too short but it sure as hell showed a lot of leg, and hers were shapely and moved with a slow, deliberate rhythm. High heels again, too. Larkin wore them like a starlet straight out of the 1940s, with that much glamour and just the right touch of bad girl.

And if he'd had it his way, Adam would've said the hell with dinner and led her straight back to his place. He probably couldn't have gotten her clothes off fast enough, though playfully enough, he wouldn't have minded leaving those naughty lady heels right where they were. They would have looked pretty damn cute slipping off her feet as she kicked them...while he had her turned facedown over his lap for another spanking.

*No spanking. Don't even mention it.*

He *wanted* to, naturally. But he didn't want her to leave without revealing more about himself, and hopefully learning more about her. She would be leaving in any event; it was unrealistic to think she'd stay because of him. At least, however, maybe she'd leave with the thought of seeing him again the next time she was in Texas visiting her family.

"I was hoping you'd come," he admitted openly.

"I said I would. I'm a woman of my word." Smiling, she stood on tiptoe and moistened his mouth with a kiss.

"Good to know. I respect that." It was easy to touch her. With no hesitation whatsoever, he rested his hand on her waist. Adam leaned in closer to her, taking a breath full of the tender skin on her neck. "You smell nice."

"I wore my good perfume. I went all out." Larkin whispered in his ear, "Oh, and I'm not wearing anything under this skirt. Are you hungry? I'm starved. Shall we have dinner?"

His head was spinning—and it definitely wasn't from her fine perfume! How was he, a man, one who hadn't had sex in some time, supposed to go from the knowledge that there were no panties under that skirt to a steak-and-potatoes meal?

"You're a tease," he scolded with a lighthearted chuckle, once the hostess had escorted them to their table and left them with menus.

"It's called playing hard-to-get. Sort of a lost art these days." Larkin opened the menu and feigned deep interest in the selections. Her eyes, under the veil of her thick lashes, looked especially pretty. "But I happen to like being pursued."

"Yeah? That's good. I happen to like doing the pursuing, myself."

He liked the direction of that conversation. Larkin hadn't wasted time, either. Like a thoroughbred, she flew right out of that gate. He didn't have to mess around with guesswork, like

he remembered in times before he'd met his wife. She was sending him the message outright: *I'm interested.*

She set down her menu, regarding him seriously. "You know, before we go any further, I have to be up front with you: I'm going back to New York."

"I know. I know that's your home. That your job's back there and all." He shrugged. "And I know we don't know each other very well. We're virtually strangers—"

"Yes, but that being said, there's something there. Between us."

So it *was* mutual. His heart felt like it was doing somersaults, like he was some lovestruck kid instead of a man who'd once been married. "That kiss today. That meant something to me."

"That was *spectacular* to me!"

Adam gazed back at her. Her sincerity and exuberance awed him, yet he didn't know exactly how to react. He resorted to staring at the menu, as if there were answers there on what to do next, what to say.

This was the first woman he'd paid any attention in the past few years. It had taken so much of his will just to learn to be alone again. Now the last person he would have thought he'd had anything at all in common with, sat across that table from him, claiming to have been just as moved as he was by one kiss.

There was one other thing he had to know. "And that—that other thing that happened the other night."

Larkin half grinned. "You mean when you spanked me for fun?"

"Well...full disclosure, I guess. For fun, I shouldn't have spanked you that hard."

"Really?" She frowned. "So why did you?"

It wasn't often that Adam engaged in a conversation like that. The waiter returned, giving Adam a reprieve while he took their orders for drinks and dinner. Then he launched right in with the truth.

"Well, for starters, you were rude when I first met you. Then you were judgmental that next time I saw you, right out there on that same porch. And then, maybe you were curious, you *still* trespassed onto my property. So while I had your bottom bared, I decided all you needed was some good, old-fashioned attitude adjustment."

He braced himself for an argument hurled at him from across the table. That could happen, after all. Now that the novelty had worn off, Larkin could launch into an indignant huff like that last time they'd been in that restaurant.

Instead she surprised him with a pout that made her totally irresistible to him. "In that case, you should spank me just for fun. *Tonight!*"

“Tonight? Is that right?”

“Yes, that most certainly is!” Her tone was demanding. “Since that was what I thought I was getting. I was hoping for another one tonight, anyway.”

Adam managed not to chuckle. Her comment had tickled him, but he didn’t want her to think he was laughing at her expense. He’d been in that position himself years ago, so he was going to be sensitive towards Larkin.

“Would I be out of line if I assumed you weren’t...that opposed to getting spanked as you were before?”

Larkin was blushing. That *did* bring a chuckle out of him, in addition to the urge to reach across that table and kiss her again, kiss her face, her neck, her shoulders, to assure her there was no reason to be embarrassed. Though he was appreciative of that unexpected glimpse into her heart, seeing that facet of her, that slice of innocence.

“I didn’t think it would have—oh, I don’t even know how to explain it,” she said, sounding frustrated.

“You’ve been thinking about it,” he guessed out loud.

“A *lot*.”

How had they landed on that subject? Adam specifically had wanted to steer clear from it, just enjoying a romantic evening with her. Rather than skirt around it, he went with the flow.

“That’s been a part of me for a long time,” he confessed.

“Since when?”

“Since...almost as long as I can remember. First time I was twenty. She was a girlfriend, she was nineteen. She was being really bratty, really mean to another girl, just out of jealousy. I told her there was nothing between me and the girl, but she wouldn’t listen. Then she went and did something, I don’t remember what, something stupid and spiteful. I found out about it and I blistered her butt good.”

To his relief, the story brought a smile to Larkin. “Did she ever do anything like that again?”

“I don’t know. After that, she broke up with me. And that other girl ended up becoming my wife.”

Larkin’s laughter was sweet to his ears. “I love happy endings!”

“Same here.”

The waiter returned, placing a glass of sweet tea in front of him and another in front of her. That gave Adam a sliver of time to study her, seated across the table from him, her chin in her hand, her hair falling over her shoulder. Her smile was soft and warm, a slice of summer on a late November night.



“No kids?” she asked.

“One. Well, there would’ve been one. A boy.” Adam nodded slowly. “He was a stillborn.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. We were, too. We tried again but I guess...I guess it wasn’t meant to be. So it was just us two for all those years. Which was fine, too. Though I think Kim would’ve made a great mom.”

“And I’m sure you would’ve been a great dad.”

Adam had been fiddling with an extra straw that the waiter had dropped onto the table by accident, but he looked up to return her smile. If it bothered her to talk about his late wife—or any other woman in his life—Larkin sure didn’t show it.

He asked the question that had been on his mind, though secretly he dreaded the answer. “Is there anyone waiting for you back in New York?”

“There was. Or, well, I *thought* there was when I first came down here. Not anymore.”

“Uh...what does that mean?”

She shrugged. “My boyfriend—well, my ex-boyfriend now—thought we should step back, slow down, get some space, whatever the hell he wanted to call it. But I thought we were together. Then, lo and behold, he calls me and tells me he’s moving out.”

*Sounds pretty recent.* Adam swallowed, nearly able to taste his own disappointment, though he pretended to recover. “You broken up about that?”

“Would you think I’m terrible if I said that I wasn’t? I don’t know, Adam.” Larkin tossed a hand in the air. “It’s taken me a couple of days, but I’m finally coming to accept that I probably haven’t felt the same about Eric in a long time. Not the way I used to feel about him.”

“I wouldn’t think badly about you at all. Heck, I’m glad he’s out of the picture.” He’d blurted out those last words on impulse, pretty damn unwisely at that, but fortunately she’d laughed with him. “Even though I know you’re not gonna stay.”

He tried to read the emotions behind those expressive eyes of hers. She held up her glass of tea in invitation to a toast and he raised his own.

“I’m not, but at least we have tonight,” she said, smiling. “So here’s to tonight...and wherever it takes us!”

## Chapter Four

Just being back on that porch sent her adrenaline racing. There was no mistaking the reason, either. Larkin would never forget what had taken place the first time Adam had taken her out onto his front porch. She watched as he took his key from his jeans' pocket and unlocked the front door.

"Not out here this time?" she asked.

He grinned back at her. "No, a little more private this time."

*Whew! What a relief!* Though not a total relief. She was excited, almost electrified from the anticipation, but she was also nervous.

What a difference from that night at the restaurant, which she now realized marked her introduction to spanking. Looking back, she wasn't earnestly as put-off and outraged as she'd insisted, both to Adam and to herself. It wasn't as if she'd been so repulsed that she'd hurried away. On the contrary: Now she could admit that she'd been fascinated. She couldn't explain it, she couldn't understand what she'd felt that night, and even less what she felt now. She only knew this was something new in her life.

"You really don't have anything on under that?"

Adam had asked the question with his arm against the doorframe to the living room, leaning with his other hand at his waist. Larkin was almost frozen in place by the hazel eyes staring back at her. That contrast of a strong, wildly masculine body and eyes that were regarding her with unmistakable desire were enough to melt her.

She responded with a flirtatious smile. "Hey, don't take my word for it. See for yourself."

"I think I will. Come here, baby."

He disappeared through the door. Where was he going now? Her heart pumped faster as she followed him down the hallway to what was the master bedroom, remarkably neat for a gentleman's room and sparsely decorated.

"You got a bad girl spanking last time," he remarked with a wink. "But I have to say, you straightened up some."

She frowned at him. "I straightened up?"

"Yes, ma'am, you have. So I think you've earned a good girl spanking." Adam undid the buttons of his sleeve and slowly rolled it up to his forearm. "And then I'm gonna draw a bath for you."

"A bath!" she squealed with delight.

“Yeah, a bath. And then I’m gonna spoil you some more.” Drawing her closer by her waist, Larkin felt Adam’s hands slide under her dress, where they found her behind. His touch on her skin accelerated her excitement. “Ah, as promised!”

His erection was already rock-hard against her. She tossed back her head and parted her lips, hungrily accepting the kisses from his mouth. Adam’s tongue didn’t stop there, coming down lower to explore her neck as he reached up with one hand to cup around her right breast.

“I should have done this that first night,” he drawled.

“You should have, yes.”

Wasn’t he talking about that little foreplay? The kisses, his tongue, whatever magic his fingers were working with her nipple even through the fabric of her dress?

But, no—Larkin understood what he meant a few seconds later when he walked her over to the bed and sat himself first before guiding her over his knee. She could feel the skirt of her dress breezily tossed up, exposing her entire bottom and legs, all the way up to her breast. A little gasp escaped her.

“Baby, I didn’t tell you this the first time, but you have the cutest little ass.”

She was upturned pretty good, her hands around the first muscles of his calves and her hair nearly touching the floor. Adam was teasing her, stroking her clit with his fingers alternately with lovingly caressing her rear.

That was new, to say the least. And breathtaking. And it felt *amazing*. It was like a paradox: On one hand, she felt vulnerable, securely over his knee, her bottom bare and unprotected and about to receive stinging swat after stinging swat, and on the other hand she was aroused something wicked. One thing was certain: Adam sure knew how to touch a woman. Larkin wriggled and gave little moans of pleasure as his fingers formed little circles, pulling back up to her chubby cheeks.

“That feels—oh, I love that, I *love* that!” she called out.

“Ah, the spoiling begins! But I don’t want to spoil you *too* much. This...” A moment passed. What was going on? Larkin looked back over her shoulder, just in time to see Adam raise his hand high in the air, landing that first stinging smack. “...is something to remember me by, even when you’re miles and miles away...”

The same hand that had delivered the spank again caressed her, soothing her. Breathlessly, Larkin looked back again at him. His smile was, heartbreakingly enough, filled with affection.

“I’m not ever forgetting you,” she told him.

“No? Well, that’s good. I’m not forgetting you any time soon, either, baby. And...this...”

His hand descended again, harder and lower, down at that tender spot right above her legs. Larkin yelped a helpless little, “*Owww!*”

“That’s—well, that’s actually not enough. Excuse me, baby, hold on...” With rapid-fire precision, Adam’s hand landed a good six or seven more times, sending some serious heat into Larkin’s butt. She closed her eyes and held tighter onto his legs. “There we go. That’s so you’ll remember how hot pink your cheeks turn when you’re over my knee...”

What had she been thinking, asking for a spanking just for *fun*? It wasn’t quite the bottom-roasting she’d gotten the first time, but damn, it hurt! It felt like she’d fallen asleep on the beach while lying on her stomach without her bikini bottom. Not enough for a serious burn, but if she reached back now she’d feel the same heat under her skin.

But then Adam once again massaged her derriere, rubbing away some of the sting. It was as if there was a little electrical current coming from his fingertips, a sensation that made her react and twitch with arousal. So, yes, it hurt...though not quite so much that she wasn’t utterly turned on.

Reaching further down, he continued to play with that tiny magic button. Making her gurgle with delight, making her head spin.

“Last one, baby,” she heard him say. “Last one. Well, maybe just a few more...”

The extent of her protest was a groan. These were light swats by comparison, a set first delivered to her right cheek until she arched her back to signal she’d had enough, then that hand paid ample attention to her left cheek, landing an equal amount of smacks.

But Adam didn’t stop there. The spanking might have been over, but they still had a bit of unfinished business. He left her in that position, splayed facedown over his knee, and returned his fingertips to her clit, forming circles deliberately and slowly. Over and over, his hand moved faster until she writhed with pleasure and cried out in mid-climax.

Larkin could barely catch her breath, let alone talk. She murmured, “Oh, Adam, Adam.” That had felt so unbelievably good, the way he’d touched her, the way he’d brought her to the point of an orgasm.

And the spanking? Oddly enough, that *was* fun. A lot more fun than that first time when her bottom had been sore and reddened. He kept her right where she was, her turned-up bottom still throbbing and, most likely, her cheeks flushed bright pink. She bit her lip, in essence biting back a giggle.

Gently, Adam eased her back onto her feet. She watched him pull a throw pillow onto his left thigh, something soft and comfortable and inviting to her behind as she sat her on his lap. Those strong arms enveloped her and he kissed her mouth, her neck and handfuls of her hair. Sting or no sting in her seat, she could have sat there on his lap all night, feeling cozy and naughty and small, wrapped in those arms.

“Better?” he asked.

“Uh-huh. And where’s that bath you promised me, cowboy?”

“Comin’ right up. I’m getting inside you first, city girl.”

“Oooh. Now you’re talkin’.”

That was him right under her. That was a *rock*. A *whopper*, at that!

Adam let her up only briefly, only long enough to get his own pants off. His erection seemed to spring right out through that zipper, ready for action.

“Over there, in that drawer, baby,” he instructed.

Larkin obeyed eagerly, anxious to have him inside her. For a moment she fumbled with the packaged condom, in her excitement almost dropping it once she had it out of the box, but she relaxed enough to open it and helped him to glide it onto his erection.

It was easy, him sliding into her, especially with her facing him, seated on his lap, her legs wrapped around him. She was still moist from the orgasm she’d gotten during their foreplay, making his penetration effortless. She moved slowly, helped along with his hands cupped around her bottom and guiding her in and out.

“Oh, baby, you feel really amazing,” he growled.

“So do you. Oh—oh, so do you, baby.”

How was that possible? She was getting worked up again so soon? But she’d already climaxed.

Could it be—yes! There really *was* a G-spot! She would’ve felt completely foolish voicing that discovery out loud, besides the fact that it would’ve damn well ruined the moment. Larkin hadn’t had that many lovers in her lifetime, but in all those years she hadn’t experienced what she was experiencing right now. There was something there within her walls, something that was welling up more arousal inside her, and this sometimes-stern, sometimes-playful Texan cowboy had discovered it.

“Hold on now, Larkin, baby. I’m not gonna drop you...”

As if she was as light as a young teenager, he easily lifted her, shifting her onto the bed. Evidently, he wanted even more leverage to thrust in and out of her.

“You’re really wet.” Adam chuckled. “So am I. You just got me so excited, baby...”

She liked getting spanked by this man. She liked being kissed by him. Him touching her, him playing with her, him teasing her and driving her crazy, him getting her to orgasm.

And she loved him making love to her, making it feel like there was a whole freaking earthquake rocking every inch of her body. He was moving harder now and his breathing was heavier, his eyes squeezing shut as his own insides climbed higher and higher.

“Oh, oh, Larkin—ah, *baby!*”

With those last few thrusts she met him up there at the plateau. The line of fire ran from that spot inside her, all the way up through her belly and clear through her bloodstream to her

brain. She had to hold on tight to him, nibbling at his shoulders so hard that it was his turn to yelp. Laughing, he collapsed on top of her.

*Something to remember me by, even when you're miles and miles away.* Larkin was reminded of those words some moments later, when Adam had finally caught his breath and cleared her hair away from her face to gaze at her. There was a doleful shadow to his eyes.

"What?" she asked, concerned. "What is it?"

"Aw, nothin'." He heaved a sigh and kissed her before getting up. "Let me go draw that bath for you, little city girl."

\*\*\*\*

"Aren't you coming in, too?"

Adam had meant to allow Larkin some time to just luxuriate in the bathtub, but keeping his hands off her naked body had seemed like torture. Through the water, which had turned murkier because of the fragrant bath oils, oils he'd picked up especially for her, he could still see the form of her body as she relaxed. He couldn't wait; he'd gently lifted her leg to the tub's rim, taking his time with a washrag that he glided up and down that shapely limb.

"Tub's not that big," he said softly. "That's okay, though. I'm having fun just watching you. Water's not too hot for you?"

"Uh-uh. It's perfect." Larkin sank down slightly, enough to blow ripples on the water's surface. "So relaxing. Um...a man's never done this for me before."

His eyebrows arched. "Never?"

"Never. You're going to be a hard one to forget."

He paused, the washrag poised in his hand. Adam couldn't keep the disappointed tone out of his voice. "I really don't want you to forget me, baby."

*Enough.* What was happening to him that night? He'd gone into this logically, with no expectations other than to show Larkin Gregory another facet or two of himself. Yes, sex had been part of the deal. So had that erotic spanking, something that had drawn them closer besides a source of pleasure for them both.

But something was happening that, frankly, Adam hadn't thought would ever occur again, not since he'd become a widower. He'd thought his work and his land would be enough for him, that he could live the rest of his life without another woman.

In the short time he'd known her, Larkin had proven him wrong on that.

"I'm not ever going to forget you, Adam. You won't forget me, either, will you?"

She'd smelled good before. Now her skin smelled like the oil fragrances, womanly and exotic. Adam had been massaging her neck and shoulders with the washrag in hand, kissing her hair.

"No, I reckon that's not possible, Larkin."

She was quiet for a moment. With her head tilted to the side, her eyes closed, she drank in a shallow breath. Even that was sexy. All her little mannerisms, the drowsy timber in her voice. He couldn't wait to take her one more time, after the bath, after he'd towed her off and carried her back to the bed.

"You're very intriguing," she declared.

"That so?" Adam was both amused and curious. "In what way?"

"You're very tender. I didn't expect that." Larkin cast a flirtatious glance at him over her shoulder. "Not from this rough-around-the-edges cowboy."

"Yeah? Surprised you, huh?"

"Yep. You're very romantic. And you know how to treat a woman..."

Adam waited. He could hear that little gulp in her throat, and her voice ended on a note that suggested there was more. But then she turned back around and said nothing else.

The patch of silence was more painful to him than he might have imagined. Trying to sound as matter-of-factly as he could, he asked, "So how long do you think before you come back this way?"

"Hmmm, well...it's hard to say. Usually I try to come down twice a year. That's if I can get time off from work, if I can coordinate it with Stef and Trey. They come up and see me at least once a year. It's harder for them." Another uncomfortable moment passed. "I don't suppose you'd ever care to see New York...would you?"

"That an invitation?"

She turned more fully, giving him a view of her breasts, wet and glistening and full. "Yes. It is, in fact. You're invited to come up to see me sometime."

Adam chuckled. "You sound like that old movie star. What was her name? Mae West."

Larkin persisted like a capricious child. "Soooo would you come or not? We could do all the touristy stuff. I'd take you to the Statue of Liberty. Take a ride in a horse-drawn buggy in Central Park. Grab some cheesecake at Junior's on the West Side. Go to the Village and get tipsy at a sidewalk café on Macdougall."

"Touristy stuff. I like touristy stuff. Bet you didn't know that, me being a rough-around-the-edges cowboy and all that."

"You're just full of surprises!" she teased. "Oh, we could take a cab home afterwards. You could spank me in the backseat. Wouldn't that be fun?"

“In the backseat? Honey, what about the driver?”

“Hey, we’re talking New York cabbie here. *Nothin’* fazes those guys!” Her laughter ended abruptly. Somehow, she’d drawn closer to him. Her mouth was within inches of his, and his whole body was itching to kiss her again. “Please come. Spend a few days with me up there.”

*Don’t leave at all. Stay here, Larkin.* What was wrong with him? Adam knew better than to make that demand. Now he was the one who swallowed hard.

“I will,” he promised, his voice hoarse.

“But that’s in the future anyway. What about Thanksgiving? What are your plans for that day?”

“I don’t do very much that day. Not for a long time. Sort of try to think of it—and Christmas, too—like it’s just another day.”

“Oh. You’re welcomed to come to Stef and Trey’s. I know they wouldn’t mind. You could come have dinner with us. That is, if you want to.” Larkin shrugged. “Just, you know, think about it.”

He touched her face, cupping her cheek in his hand. “Well, hell. I’m not gonna bullshit you, honey. The thing is—I mean, it’s like this—”

“No, no. It’s okay. Really. Geez, I have to be going anyway.” Grasping the rim of the tub, Larkin rose to her feet. “It’s okay. I understand. I really do.”

*No, no, you don’t.* Adam didn’t know how to say that without sounding argumentative, and that was the last thing he wanted, for that night to take a combative turn.

Instead he reached for a towel, one of the fluffier ones in the linen closet, and wrapped it around her before helping her out of the tub. Her bare feet brushed against his on the rug and he continued toweling her off, enjoying any excuse to touch her and fuss over her.

“You gotta understand, Larkin, honey,” he tried again. “I’m not very good at hashing things out. That’s, you know, something women are good at. I never quite got the hang of it, though—”

“You don’t have to explain. You really don’t.”

“Baby, now *listen*.” He was firm, not actually stern with her, but it was enough to quiet her. Adam had noticed that she responded well to firmness despite her feisty streak. That temporarily sidetracked him. “You won’t be getting spanked by any other man up there in New York...now are you?”

“Why? What if I was? Would that be a problem?”

Sure would. Especially because he considered Larkin Gregory’s curvaceous and naughty bottom his to spank. Though she regarded him ever so innocently, he could tell she was teasing him again. Not a wise idea; Adam was almost tempted to drive home the point with some resounding and stinging licks from a sturdy leather brush he typically used on the horses.



But his good humor won out. “I’d have a problem with that, yeah.”

“Really? As in, you’d be jealous?”

On one hand, the woman could work his very last nerve. Then, on the other, he stared back at her, awed by how this naked, delicious beauty with her hair still damp and falling in tendrils around her face could appear both vulnerable and yet smolderingly sexy at the same time. She’d allowed the towel to fall to the floor and pool around her feet. With both his hands on her waist, he drew her up against him.

“That’s my whole point, honey,” he tried to explain. “I haven’t felt this way in a long time. You’re doing things to my head that no woman’s done in just so long. I need to get all this sorted out. I know this doesn’t sound like it makes much sense at all...”

“Adam, Adam...”

Whatever she’d meant to say didn’t get said. The words dissolved with her kiss, one that was long and filled with as much emotion and thunder as the tempest that was sweeping inside him at that very same moment. The sensation of her sweet naked body so hot and trembling mildly against his was too much for him. By the time the kiss had evolved into another, Adam was hastily freeing himself from those jeans and falling back onto the bed with her.

If he’d meant to protect his heart from trouble, then he was doing a damn lousy job at it. Hell, he was plunging headfirst into those dangerous waters.

And loving every second of it, too.

In the midst of another kiss he could hear a burst of music from somewhere. Beneath him Larkin broke the kiss.

“I hate to tell you, but that’s my phone. She doesn’t usually call when I’m out.”

He rolled off her. “That’s okay, Larkin. Go on.”

Adam guessed her sister wanted something mundane—a gallon of milk from the store on Larkin’s way back to the house or something. It was an interruption, but a familial one, and despite the fact that he couldn’t wait to get back to their sex play, he found himself warmed by the gesture.

That was until Larkin frowned and her expression darkened. The conversation was brief, yet it had taken a somber tone from the start.

“Well, but—where is she right now, Trey?” Her brother-in-law. It wasn’t her sister on that other end. “So you want me to meet you at the hospital?...All right. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Adam waited until she’d clicked off the phone. “Something wrong, baby?”

“Very. I’m sorry, Adam. I have to get going. I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

He watched her scoot off the bed, looking around until she spotted her clothes over by the rocking chair set between the window and the closet door.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“It’s Abby. That’s my niece. She’s seven.” Larkin had hurriedly dressed in her jeans and had just pulled on her blouse before turning to him. Her voice cracked as she said, “There’s been an accident.”

## Chapter Five

Larkin had no trouble finding Mercy General, considering she remembered passing signs for the hospital when she'd accompanied her sister to the supermarket days earlier. In the parking lot, before heading to the emergency unit's sliding entrance doors, she looked around for Trey's SUV or Stef's blue Neon. Which of the cars had been involved in the accident? That would have told her the extent of the accident. Seeing neither vehicle, she hurried into the building.

Silently she said a little prayer for her family. That was who they were, too; *her* family. Her father had died first and then some years ago, her mother had lost her battle with cancer. Of course, there were relatives, aunts and uncles and cousins, some of which she was closer to than others, but they were relatives. Her family, those closest to her, were her sister and her husband and children.

How could she go back to New York now? Other than to straighten up odds and ends, end her lease and pack up? Yes, she had her job there. But she was a nurse. She could work anywhere.

*I can't think about that right now.* Giving the waiting room a sweeping glance, she spied a very tired looking mother leafing through an issue of *True Story* while her preteen daughter rested her head on her shoulder. A rerun of *Everybody Loves Raymond* was playing on the television in the corner. Larkin approached one of the women behind the counter.

"A little girl was brought in earlier today. She's my sister's daughter," she explained.

"What's the name?"

"Abby Richards."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Trey several feet away. He was waving to her.

"That's okay—that's her husband over there. Thank you," Larkin said hastily, turning in her brother-in-law's direction.

"Everything's okay now," Trey reassured her even before he greeted her with a hug that conveyed his appreciation upon seeing her.

"It is? Oh, Trey, I would have come sooner. I was—well, I would have come sooner."

"That's all right."

"Is Abby in a room?"

"Not yet. They're admitting her tonight, but it's going to take a while. You know how it is. Your sister's with her."

"What happened, Trey?"

He placed a hand on her arm and gently led her down a hallway that led away from the emergency room. “Might as well get a cup of coffee in the family waiting room. They were taking her for X-rays and I doubt she’s back yet.”

Larkin wanted peace of mind before taking another step. “But is she all right? What did the doctors say?”

“The doctor here said she’s got a broken arm, maybe a broken rib, too. We won’t know until they have a chance to look at the X-rays.” Nodding, Trey smiled. “So don’t worry. We didn’t know how badly she was hurt, if Abby had any internal injuries. Want a cup of hot chocolate? It’s not bad out of the machine.”

The family waiting room appeared much more comfortable than others Larkin had seen. There were three rooms in total—the largest room, which had three tables and chairs, then a smaller room with more comfortable chairs, a couple of ottomans, a table filled with magazines and a TV set, and the last, where no less than six vending machines were stored.

A cup of hot chocolate would help to calm whatever nerves were still jittery. Though she had to admit that Trey had already put her mind at ease. They chose the more comfortable room, with its more inviting recliners, and Larkin sipped her chocolate while Trey explained how they’d been in the other driver’s blind spot when the pickup truck and switched lanes.

The Neon hadn’t fared too well. Only Stef and Abby were in the car; they were returning from Abby’s dance class. Mom had gotten scratched and banged up in the process, fortunately nothing truly serious, but their little girl had needed an ambulance called to the scene.

“She’s okay,” Larkin concluded with relief. “That’s what matters.”

“Yeah, it could’ve been a lot worse. I dread to think, you know, Lar, what could have happened. And with Thanksgiving coming tomorrow? I don’t think we’d ever celebrate that day again if something had happened.” The laugh that Trey gave was a shaky one, the laugh of a loving father who had been spared tragic news that night. “Oh, and by the way, lady...looks like Thanksgiving’s cancelled this year.”

She laughed with him. “Oh, well! There’s always next year!”

“You ready to go back? Abby might be back from Radiology by now.”

“Definitely. Let’s go.” Rising to her feet with her cup in hand, she said, “I’m sorry I wasn’t home. You could’ve left Logan with me.”

“It’s not that far to my mother’s. He’s fine. He’s with his grandma. Where were you tonight? You had a date with Adam McLeod, didn’t you?”

Larkin stared forward at the winding corridor in front of them. Naturally, her sister had told her husband about that. She’d wanted to keep that under wraps, though now in light of the serious turn that night had taken, she realized it didn’t matter.

“I—yes, we had a date.”

“Wow. You two really hit it off. That’s another reason for you to consider coming down here to stay. You know you’re welcome in our house until you found your own place. That guest room would be yours for however long you needed it.”

“Yes, I know.” His sincerity and hospitality weren’t unusual, and they certainly weren’t feigned. Trey Richards had always made her feel welcomed in the home he shared with her sister. “That’s a big step. I really need to think about it. But believe me, Trey. I won’t have to think that hard or long about it.”

“Hey, look up ahead. I believe that’s your cowboy, Ms. Gregory.”

Larkin raised her head. They were just coming back into the emergency room’s waiting area. Looking past a vacant wheelchair and the rows of uncomfortable seating and two EMS workers chatting, she spotted Adam standing near the entrance. He was removing his hat just as his eyes met hers.

*That’s your cowboy.* Those words seemed to ring true, if that tender look he was giving her was any indication. Her heart felt as if it were doing somersaults inside her.

As soon as she neared him, Adam explained, “I shouldn’t have let you go by yourself when you got that call, Larkin. I wanted to check on you and your family, make sure everything was okay.”

“Well, thank you,” Trey spoke up first. He extended a hand to Adam, who accepted it heartily. “Trey Richards, I’m Larkin’s brother-in-law.”

“Adam McLeod. How’s your little girl?”

She had stepped closer to Adam, who’d placed his arm behind her, resting his hand on her waist. She was awed by how natural both motions had seemed.

“She’s going to be okay, thank God. Thanks. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to check on her right now. Larkin, take your time. I’ll be back for you so you can see Abby and Stef.”

“Thanks, Trey.”

“No, no—that’s all right, Trey.” Adam touched her arm lightly, leaning in closer to you. “You go on and see your niece. Go on with your family. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay. I know how upset you were when you left.”

Larkin didn’t even glance at Trey. Her brother-in-law had heard that last part, yet he was discreet. Now how did she handle the situation? Invite Adam along? Ask him to wait for her in the waiting room?

She did neither, though she gave him a chaste kiss on the cheek. “Thank you for thinking of us.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Larkin. But let me know how she is. Y’hear?”

“I will.”

Trey waited until Adam had left and they were walking through the double doors into the emergency unit, then past a nurse's station and down a corridor. He asked, "So, if you don't mind my asking, is that where you were tonight? With Adam McLeod?"

"Uh...yes."

Larkin gave him a side glance. Her sister's husband was looking straight forward and grinning. "Boy, am I out of the loop! How long's that been going on?"

"Nothing's going on. We just—I mean, it's just—we had dinner together."

And sex. And before that she got a spanking over the sexy cowboy's knee. Her second spanking from him, as a matter of fact. But she realized right then that what she felt for him went way beyond the physical. When Adam had walked out of there, it felt as if he'd taken a huge chunk of her heart with him.

Yet he hadn't stayed. Had he just been gentlemanly about it? Or had he come down to the hospital because she meant something to him?

Larkin swallowed her disappointment then, walking into a small room where her little niece was sitting up in bed, alive and well and in one piece. Stef stood by her bed and smiled when they walked into the room. Larkin waited until Abby had hugged and kissed her daddy, and then it was her turn.

She found herself hugging that little girl tighter than she ever had before.

\*\*\*\*

"It's not like you make it, Mommy," Abby murmured as she pushed the food around on her plate.

Her five-year-old brother also turned up his nose at the hospital cafeteria's attempt to create a Thanksgiving-away-from-home meal.

"Yeah, it's pretty crappy," Logan agreed.

Larkin muffled a giggle. Both Trey and Stef had offered to share their dinner with her, but she'd passed in favor of grabbing a quick sandwich or something. In fairness, the dinner—which the family partook of right there in Abby's hospital room, with the lovely view of the facility's parking lot through the third-floor window, gave off a somewhat delicious aroma. At least, it was delicious when compared to standard hospital fare.

"Next year," Stef promised her kids. "Next year we'll have a great Thanksgiving at home."

"The one we were supposed to have this year," Logan helpfully pointed out.

“We can still have it,” Trey suggested. “We’ll have to wait until you come home, Abby, honey, but we can still have the dinner.”

“But Thanksgiving will be over by then.” Abby sounded bummed. “And Aunt Larkin won’t be here. She’ll be in New York.”

Larkin spoke up then. “It’s okay, honey. I’ll be back next year. Actually...maybe I’ll be back sooner than that.”

Abby’s eyes brightened. “Because you’re going to come here to live?”

“Maybe. We’ll see.” She shared a smile with her sister, then returned her attention to Abby. “But you’re with us today, Abby. And you’ll get better soon. You’ll be better than ever. That’s what really matters.”

Her phone buzzed inside her tote, that different ringtone that told her she had a text message coming in rather than a call. The message across the screen took her by surprise: *meet me downstairs @ the fountain. adam.*

“Who’s that?” Stef asked.

“Ah, just a friend.” Tucking the phone into the pocket of her jeans, she slipped her tote straps onto her shoulder. “I’ll be back in a little bit.

Larkin watched as Trey flashed a wink at his wife and Stef smiled.

“Take your time,” her sister said. “And wish the cowboy a Happy Thanksgiving for us.”

On her way out of Pediatrics and down the elevator to the lobby, Larkin passed a few of the hospital’s employees and a handful of visitors. In spite of finding themselves there on a major holiday, everyone she passed seemed to be in a lighthearted, festive mood. She was greeted with smiles and cheery greetings of “Happy Thanksgiving!” In the lobby, two staff members were busy putting up decorations for Christmas, even though it was still weeks away.

It was warm outside, the Texas sun was potent and shimmering in the stretch of blue sky. The walk from the main entrance to the courtyard was short but pleasant. In the distance she could see the fountain, around which were set up small tables and chairs. At one table to the far right sat a woman in nurse’s scrubs, sipping on a Diet Dr. Pepper and eating a sandwich while she read a magazine.

The only other person there was Adam. Initially he had his back to her, pacing casually with a bag in his hand and watching the water falling into the fountain’s basin, into which children had tossed pennies. Moments later he turned, met her gaze, and smiled broadly.

“I got my surprise for the day,” Larkin announced.

Adam laughed. “Your sister knew I was coming. She keeps a good secret if you didn’t know I’d be here.”

“Really? That’s not the surprise. The surprise is that I wouldn’t have thought *you* were the kind of man to send a text.”

He laughed again. "I have a nephew. He's about thirteen now. We text back and forth. In fact, he's my texting buddy. So I'm not quite so antiquated after all."

There was a gentle affection in his eyes as he waved an arm at one of the tables. "This good for you?"

"Fine. I'm grateful that you chose to come here."

"You probably needed to get out of that place for a while. You hungry?"

"Hungry? Why?"

"Because I thought we'd share Thanksgiving dinner together."

She widened her eyes and took a seat. "Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah. Well...it's not anywhere near as good as what your family had in mind. But I'm sure it's better than what the hospital can whip up."

Seating himself across from her, Adam brought two wrapped sandwiches on rolls out of the bag, plus two bags of chips and two cans of Coke. Out also came napkins and two straws.

"Turkey with cranberry sauce and lettuce," he told her. "Your sister said you'd be going out for dinner alone. I didn't see any sense in both of us eating alone."

"Especially not on a day like today." When Larkin blinked, she felt the sting of tears in her eyes. "I'm so glad you chose to come. Will you come up afterwards and say hello?"

"If...if you'd like me to. I don't want to impose."

"You're not. I'd like you to go upstairs."

"Then I will. I'd like to meet the kids. Your sister's kids, that is, the rest of your family."

She bit into the sandwich. It wasn't the huge, elaborate meal her sister had been planning ever since Larkin had gotten there from New York, but she wouldn't have appreciated that or fine dining as much as she did that simple, tossed-together meal shared outside with this man that had come into her life.

"Last night, when I left," Adam explained quietly, "I didn't want to, but I felt like I was in the way. It was family business last night and...well, I didn't really belong here. That's the only reason I left. I came just because I was worried about you. And then I spent the rest of the night thinking about you."

"Good. Because I spent the night thinking about you, too." Larkin took a sip of her soda before continuing. "Last night changed a lot of things."

"Yeah? In what way?"



“Well, I realized I don’t want to be that far from my family anymore. They’re all the family I have, Stef and Trey and the kids. And I’m a nurse, after all. I can work here. I can work anywhere.”

“That’s true!” Adam chuckled.

Larkin was hesitant but went on anyway. “And I...feel like I have another reason to come back here.”

“You *do*.” Then his voice took a serious tone. “When you come back here, I’ll be waiting for you, baby.”

That promise both touched and excited her. “And I’ll be looking forward to coming back to you as soon as I can.”

Grinning, he nodded. “But you do know this isn’t New York, right? You know now that we do things a lot differently here.”

“Uh-huh. So I’ve heard.”

“I expect spanking to be a part of our relationship. And *you* can expect that it’s not always going to be fun. From time to time, you’re going to need to get your bottom warmed. I might use my hand or I might use a paddle or a switch, whichever one the situation calls for. But one way or another, young lady, you’ll be getting spanked. How do you feel about that?”

Larkin sat up straight, trying hard not to squirm in her seat. Besides the fact that the chair had suddenly become as uncomfortable as hell, just thinking about what he was saying made her bottom twitch. And a *switch*! That had to hurt like hell. A paddle wouldn’t exactly tickle like a feather, either. Hell, by the time Adam was done setting her behind on fire, it would color coordinate perfectly with her favorite pair of high heels, which happened to be a shade of vibrant cherry red.

But her sister had married a man that spanked her, yet she and Trey were very happy together. Neither she nor that woman out on that restaurant’s porch that night were alone, either. Larkin knew that, for all that roughness around the edges, her cowboy had the kind of heart that made him a man she could love forever.

“I think I’ll be spending a lot of time,” she said after some thought, “staying out of trouble. I sure won’t be doing any more trespassing onto anybody’s property, I can tell you that.”

“Well, good. That’s a start.” He washed down a biteful of sandwich with a big sip of soda and then smiled. “You know, baby, this is my favorite Thanksgiving in a long time.”

She relaxed, studying that sweet expression of his. His hand reached across the table, enveloping her smaller one. Larkin didn’t know whether the nurse was still there at that other table, reading and having her early dinner. She couldn’t tell if other visitors were passing the courtyard on their way to the parking garage in the next building over. It seemed as if she and Adam were the only ones there.

And sometimes words were so inadequate, when a kiss, like the one she impulsively shared with her cowboy at that moment, spoke more directly from the heart.

THE END