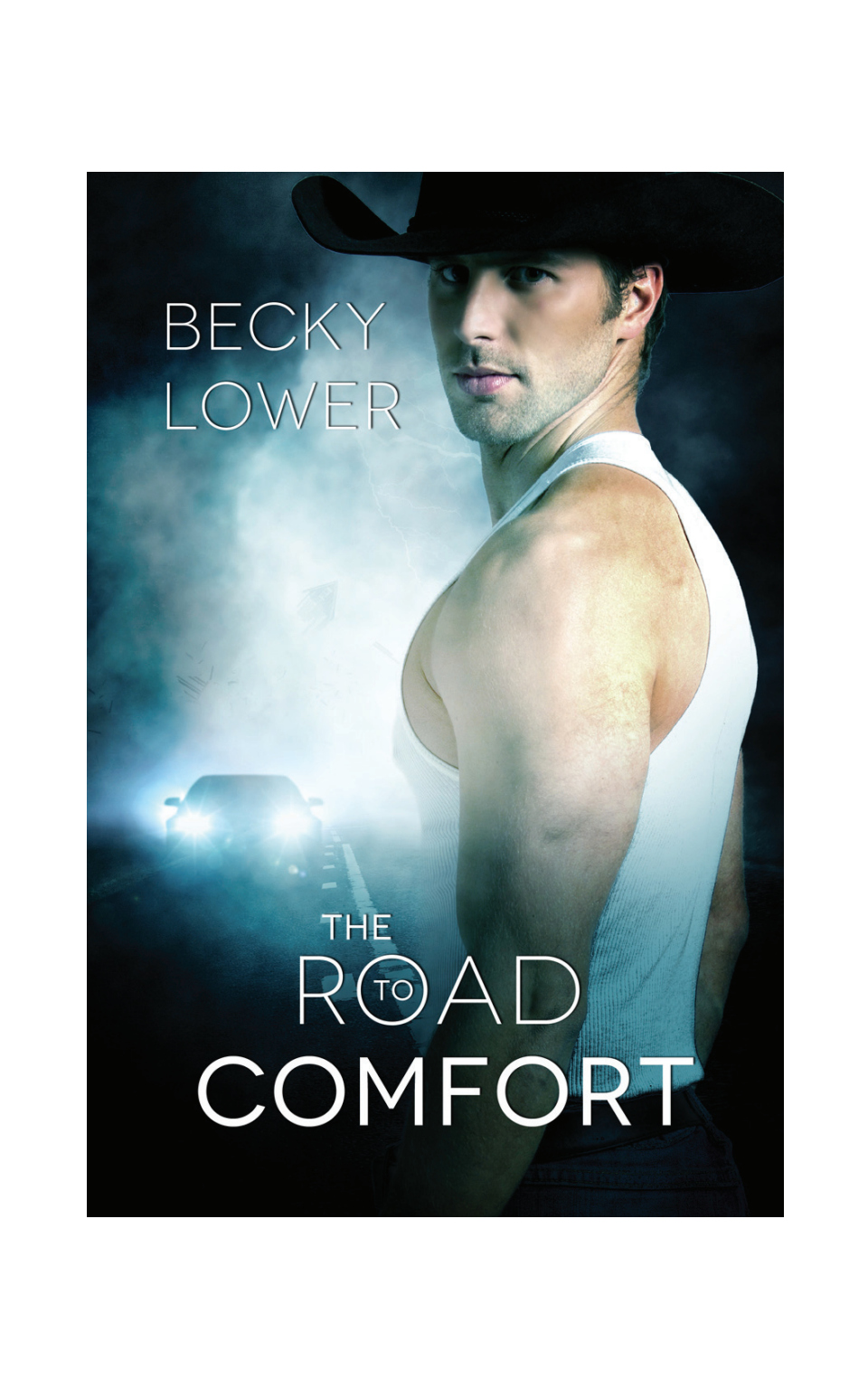


A movie poster featuring a man in a black cowboy hat and a white tank top, looking over his shoulder. The background is a dark, stormy night with a car's headlights visible on a road in the distance. The title 'THE ROAD TO COMFORT' is at the bottom, and the name 'BECKY LOWER' is in the upper left.

BECKY
LOWER

THE
ROAD
TO
COMFORT

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BECKY LOWER



SOUL MATE PUBLISHING

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THE ROAD TO COMFORT

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BECKY LOWER

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*To my Uncle Jim,
who took me on my very first motorcycle ride.*

Chapter 1

Juliette St. James had only done two impetuous things in her life. And, from the billowing cloud of black smoke belching out from under the hood of her car, the second one was no wiser than the first.

The first occurred twenty-three years earlier when she shared one night with a handsome stranger, which resulted in becoming a single parent at the age of eighteen. The second, taking a cross-country road trip on her own to celebrate becoming an empty-nester, was turning out to be every bit as ill planned.

She nudged the car to the side of the road and cut the motor, thinking maybe she should get out of the car before it caught on fire. Or before the noxious fumes the fire was causing made her pass out, in which case she'd literally be toast. Fighting against the uneasiness beginning to nibble at the corner of her brain, she quickly stepped out of the car and glanced at the surrounding landscape. Row after unrelenting row of corn surrounded her. Not a landmark in sight. Hadn't Stephen King written something about monsters coming out of the cornfields? Not the image she should be putting into her already overactive imagination. What she needed to do was call for a tow truck. What state was she in, anyway? Nebraska? Oklahoma? Kansas? They had all blurred together over the past day and a half.

Having a plan of action in her mind, finally, she leaned in through the open window and reached for her enormous purse lying on the passenger seat. She rummaged through it,

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pulled out her cell phone, and turned it on. No signal. Oh, great. Even if she did know where she was, she couldn't call for help. Wonderful.

What to do? She couldn't get back in her car and huddle there forever, even though the smoke was beginning to taper off. She'd just have to start walking, children of the corn notwithstanding. Grasping the door handle, she hesitated as a fat drop of rain fell onto the car's windshield. Very dark clouds were quickly moving in from the direction she had been headed when her car finally gave up. If it had been a dog, her car would now have rolled over alongside the road, wheels spinning in the air. She glanced at the sky. It remained sunny behind her. If her car had still been working, she'd turn around and head back the way she came, maybe outrun the rain. What kind of storms did they have in this part of the country, anyway? Tornadoes? Cyclones? She drew in a breath.

Maybe she should get back in the car. At least, with the rain, the immediate threat of a car fire was obliterated. The clouds on the horizon outmatched the one still billowing slightly from under the hood. They did mirror her thoughts though, as she mentally kicked herself, locked in a state of indecision. Why had she taken off on a whim anyway? On a trip to nowhere? By herself?

It was so unlike her normal controlled world. She wanted to shake herself for being so impulsive. But then, it wasn't every day that her son got married and left home. Leaving her alone. She was all by herself, for the first time since she was eighteen. She obviously didn't know how to act, making decisions based solely on what she wanted. It was a luxury she hadn't ever before experienced. And she botched the very first one she'd made. What had she been thinking?

Sure, she'd had a grand time of things so far. She'd let her hair stream down instead of putting it into her usual bun; she'd turned up the volume on her car stereo and sang along

at the top of her lungs with Adele and Bruno Mars. Trips inside various quick-stop grocery outlets meant that all kinds of junk food filled her car to overflowing. Her arm dangled out the window, outrageously in violation of her admonition to her son over the years not to ever do that, since you never knew when a dog would come along to bite it, or a passing vehicle would get too close and rip it out of its socket. She'd basically thrown her rigid common sense to the wind on her wild trip, and now she surveyed where her impulse had gotten her. She was in the middle of nowhere.

Droplets of rain began to pepper her skin. With a deep sigh, she flung open the passenger door behind the driver's seat and climbed in. At least she could put her feet up there while she waited out the storm. And she could do something to quiet her uneasiness and her rumbling stomach.

Juliette pulled her bag of snacks onto her lap and removed a bottle of water from her stash in the cooler. If she was going to be stuck here for a while, she'd at least eat well and stay hydrated. She leaned forward and slid her purse through the armrest opening and pulled out her Kindle. Nothing like a forced break from the dreariness that was Middle America to allow her to catch up on her reading. Her fingertips on one hand were turning orange from the Cheetos she was consuming at a rapid pace as she turned the virtual pages on the machine with the other.

Lightning flashed in the distance, and the rain splattering on the windshield became more intense. Juliette raised her eyes from the book, her concentration interrupted. The storm was rolling in quickly, and grayish-black clouds now darkened the entire sky in front of her. Great. Now she'd have to fend off the corn children in the dead of night. Uneasiness threatened to turn into panic as it settled in, big-time. She jumped out of the backseat and climbed behind the wheel. She didn't care if it seemed stupid, she turned the key once

more, praying for a miracle. Nothing. She pummeled the steering wheel with her Cheeto-ed fingers as she assessed her situation. She was in a broken-down car on the side of the road, in Kansas, Nebraska, or Oklahoma with monster children about to emerge from the surrounding fields. Oh, and yes, a storm was rolling in. Could things get any worse?

A steady clip-clopping sound broke into her tormented thoughts. She glanced into the rearview mirror and spied a horse and rider coming up the side of the road behind her car. *You've got to be kidding.* Help had finally arrived, but it was in the form of a cowboy, wearing a black hat and a duster coat? And he was on a horse. Oh, yeah, she was a long way from civilized Ohio. The sun burst forth behind him in a last hurrah as the dark clouds raced toward them. Terrific. Evidently, things could get worse. Much worse.

The last thing Cy Kelley expected to find on this stretch of highway was a car with out-of-state plates broken down by the side of the road. He could see the smoke signals for help emanating from under the car's hood from a half-mile away, and responded. He had to get the person in the car to safety, and quick. With this weather rolling in, and the warnings that had been issued during the day, a car was the worst possible place to wait out the storm. He cut through the field of corn and approached the car from behind on his horse.

As he halted in back of the lame vehicle, he spied just one person inside, who jumped out of the car as he rode up. He was able to make out a slender person with shoulder-length hair wearing a pair of jeans and a baseball jersey. Male or female, he wasn't yet certain. At least his horse would be thankful the person being rescued was not a 300-pound Sumo wrestler.

He dismounted and walked up on the driver's side just as the person turned around to face him. Cy's 'hot chick' monitor went off, big time, and he nearly doubled over at the sensation. Her presence hit him as strong as a punch in his gut. She resembled his first and only dream girl—Brigitte Bardot—but she was in a broken-down Toyota Corolla instead of a Cadillac convertible. Her long, blonde hair had strands of many different colors, giving it character and depth that he suspected was natural. He had a kid sister who was a beautician, so he knew a thing or two about hair. When she stared up at him with her huge brown eyes, he almost whimpered.

Holy shit. He tried, unsuccessfully, to turn off the visceral male response to her. The woman was daintily sucking orange dust off one of her fingers. Cy's jeans tightened as she repeated the process with another finger. He stared at her. If he made any other movement, it would be to take those fingers into his own mouth.

"Hi there, cowboy," the vision in front of him finally spoke. "Can you call a tow truck operator for me once you get back to where you're going?"

Cy finally unglued his tongue from the roof of his mouth. "I'll do better than that. I'll take you into town with me. You're not safe here with a storm coming in."

The woman glanced at the horse, then back at him. "I don't see how that would be possible."

She was nervous. He could tell by the way she ran her tongue, her gorgeous pink tongue, over her full, pouty lips. He groaned inwardly. He really didn't need the distraction standing in front of him. Not today. Not ever. He may not need the distraction, but Lord, he wanted it. He wanted her.

"We'll ride together, that's how it's possible."

She studied the horse. Her hand went to her hair, which was blowing across her face from the increasing wind.

Her eyes came back to him. Brown eyes, he noted again. A brown-eyed blonde, something he'd been waiting for his whole life.

"No, I can't get up on that beast."

"Bud takes great offense at being called a 'beast'. He's a gentleman. Besides, the way I see it, you don't have a choice. You're alone on the side of the road in the middle of Tornado Alley, night's about to roll in, and a car is the worst place to be when a big one comes crashing through. I can't leave you. Old Bud here won't bite, and I'll be in the saddle right behind you, holding you in place."

Her eyes narrowed as she regarded him and crossed her arms in front of her. "The horse is not the one I'm worried about."

His face split into a grin. She might be nervous, but she definitely had spunk. To emphasize her point, she reached out a tentative hand to the horse's reddish-brown neck.

"Hi, Bud. Nice to meet you."

"Come on. No sense in us getting soaked any more than we need to. Grab your purse from the car and let's go. I'll take you to the motel in town."

"What about my suitcase?"

He moved to the horse's side. "Lady, this horse doesn't have a sidecar to carry your luggage. Leave it in the trunk, and you can get it tomorrow. Let's go. The wind is picking up and this rain isn't exactly a picnic."

He boosted the very unsure woman up on the horse, told her to slide forward, and then hoisted himself up behind her. It was a tight fit with the two of them in one saddle, which was just fine with him. As Cy put his arms around her and picked up the reins, he breathed in her scent. Lilies, a decidedly feminine aroma. For a moment, he forgot where he was going. His big belt buckle pressed into her back, along with his hardened man part, as he drew her close.

The woman lurched forward at the contact. He tightened his grip around her waist as she nearly pulled them both off a patiently waiting Bud.

“Whoa, lady. I assure you the only hardware you’re feeling is on my belt. Now hold still before we both land on our backsides.” He chose to ignore the throbbing man part she must be aware of.

She settled in, finally, as the horse began to move. Cy took a short cut back through the field to get to shelter. There were worse things in life than riding through the rain with his arms around the prettiest thing to come his way in a long time. As she relaxed a bit, and her body sank back into his chest, he let out a breath. Yeah, there were a lot of things that could be worse.

Chapter 2

Juliette didn't know which she was more afraid of—the animal or the man. She'd never been this close to a horse before in her entire life. And she hadn't been this close to a man in more years than she cared to admit. A man who had his muscular arms wrapped so tightly around her that they brushed against the sides of her breasts. She would swat him away, if she could force herself to loosen her grip on the saddle. But right now, staying on the horse took precedence over decorum.

This ride was never-ending, although she was certain they'd only been at it for a mile or so. Through the cornfields. With a strange man. Wearing a large black Stetson hat, so she couldn't quite see his eyes. Not that she really wanted to stare into his eyes, but they did reveal a lot about a person, she'd always believed. His body was hard and muscular, though. She could tell that when she leaned back against him. And he smelled good—as clean as the outdoors, and she sniffed the remnants of some manly cologne. A Ralph Lauren commercial ran through her head—a good-looking, rugged cowboy, a horse, a nubile woman . . . except she didn't think of herself as a nubile anything. She was a mother, and a college professor, as politically correct as you could get. No, definitely not nubile.

Rain continued to pelt them, and the wind whipping past them made walking, even for this strong horse, a bit challenging. Its black mane whipped wildly about and its head lowered as it plodded forward, leaning into the weather. Juliette brushed her wet hair from her eyes and glanced

down at herself. Her soaking wet jersey made her resemble an entry in a crass beauty contest, where usually the one with the biggest boobs won. With a gasp, she pulled her purse to herself, to shield her front from prying eyes. And she closed hers, whispering a silent plea, praying for a town, any town, to show on the horizon, and in a hurry. Then this trip into the gates of hell would end.

The man behind her shifted in the saddle, causing her eyes to pop back open as she grabbed the saddle once more. He cleared his throat. *Oh, God, he's going to want to make small talk, and all I want is for him to disappear.*

"I think, since we're stuck here together for the next little while, we should at least introduce ourselves, don't you think?" His voice came from low in his chest, and she could feel the rumble against her back as it made its way north. "I'm Cy Kelley, ma'am."

She gritted her teeth and didn't bother to turn around in the saddle. "Nice to meet you. I'm Juliette St. James."

"Juliette St. James, eh? Are you by chance a stripper?"

Juliette turned around sharply then, as best she could, and glared at him. "Why would you say something so stupid?"

He waved his hand through the air in her general direction. "Well, you're certainly equipped for it. And Juliette St. James sounds like a made-up stripper name."

She turned back around so sharply, her wet hair slapped her in the eyes. "No, I'm not a stripper. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Well, then, you must be a romance writer, Juliette St. James. What do they call it when you write under a different name—a pen name? Am I right?"

"Jesus." She decided not to grace him with a glance this time. "No. Juliette St. James is my real name, it's been my name my whole life, and I am a professor of American History at a small college in Ohio, okay?"

“Okay, if you say so. But I prefer the whole stripper story to the naughty professor.”

“There is no stripper story, nor is there a naughty professor story. Just a boring Juliette St. James story. Let’s change the subject, shall we, and talk about you. Cy Kelley, huh? What’s Cy short for, Cyrus?”

She could sense the grin on his face as humor stole into his voice. “No, darlin.’ Cy is short for Cyclone. Seems I chose to come into the world during a twister.”

Juliette couldn’t help herself. Laughter bubbled up out of her. She realized she hadn’t laughed in days. She’d been feeling mighty sorry for herself instead. “Cyclone Kelley. Don’t tell me. You are a rodeo clown or maybe a bull rider of some kind.”

“Used to be. You got me pegged right. I rode bulls for a living once upon a time. But, I broke too many body parts, so I’m permanently sidelined now. Ah, town’s coming into sight.”

Juliette stared at what Cyclone was calling a ‘town.’ Oh, God, she really was in the middle of nowhere. All she could make out was a low building, one of those strip motels you see in the most unfortunate parts of town. That’s where they were headed. Taking a gulping breath, she talked herself into accepting the fact she’d be staying at this fleabag place for the night. *I can do this. At least, I’ll be out of the rain. Maybe not warm, maybe I’ll share my room with roaches, but I’ll be off this horse named Bud, out of Cyclone’s grasp, and dry. At this point, that’s enough.* In a true Scarlett O’Hara moment, she decided to worry about the rest tomorrow.

Cy dismounted from the horse in a quick and unexpected movement. The saddle leaned to one side as he got down and Juliette was grasping on to the front of it in order to keep her seat.

“Here, let me help you.” He extended his hand to her.

She glanced down at him. The ground did seem far away, but she couldn’t bring herself to grasp his hand, either. Instead, she swung her leg over the horse and slid down on her own. And would have made it to the ground just fine, if that blasted horse of his hadn’t decided to move, throwing her off balance. She ended up in a puddle on the ground, at Cy’s feet. Embarrassment flushed over her as she sat there, being pelted by the rain.

So instead of helping her down, he helped her up. Great. Now, in addition to being wet, she was dirty. Things were rapidly shifting from bad to worse to nightmare. And she had an uneasy feeling she wouldn’t be waking up from this crazy dream anytime soon.

“Where are we?” she asked, as she was hoisted to her feet, hoping to shift the focus from her clumsiness.

“You’re at the finest motel in all of Comfort, Nebraska, darlin.”

“It seems to be the only motel in all of Comfort. Where is the town, anyway?”

He grinned. This man was incessantly happy, at least in comparison to her. “The town square is a few blocks up the street.” He gestured with his hand. “If you’ll give me your keys, I’ll make sure to get your car towed into the local garage in the morning.”

She thought for a moment. Her suitcase, with her clothes and her laptop, were in the car. Did she trust this man with her possessions?

“Not a chance. If you could just send the tow truck here in the morning, I’ll ride out to the car with the driver.”

Cy shrugged. “Whatever you want. Come on, let’s get on inside now. Lolly’s got a room for you.”

Juliette stared at the motel office, with its “Room Available” sign flashing. “Judging from the empty parking

lot here, I'm guessing Lolly's got five or six rooms available for me."

"Play nice, Professor. Let's go inside and I'll introduce you to Lolly before I leave. I need to get my horse to the barn before this storm gets any worse."

The wind was high and rain was pelting them. Lightning flashed in the distance. She wondered how the storm could get any worse, but said nothing. Instead, she wrung the muck out of her shirttail, straightened up, and headed inside with him to meet Lolly. Not that she was exactly putting her best foot forward. She was a bedraggled mess. But then, this was Comfort, Nebraska and she didn't know anyone.

Lolly turned out to be a woman in her mid-fifties, if Juliette was to hazard a guess. She had a bubbly personality and big, teased-up bleached-blond hair. Despite Juliette's dire circumstances, Lolly made her feel welcome.

Once installed into a room, which was whistle-clean, much to her surprise and smelled vaguely of furniture polish, Juliette grabbed a towel and dried her hair. She hauled her phone from her purse and stared at it. Still no bars. Crap. Even if she wanted to interrupt her son's honeymoon to tell him she was fine, she couldn't. But, of course, he wasn't worried about her, since he didn't even know she was on this trip. He thought she was still in Ohio, trying to figure out what to do with her summer. And with the rest of her life, now that she was by herself.

She threw the phone back into her purse and fought against the sudden tears that formed. She'd call him tomorrow from the phone in Lolly's office. She couldn't fall to pieces, here in the middle of nowhere. In the middle of Comfort. She'd gotten herself into this mess by being impulsive, and now she'd have to deal with it. That should be easy, since she'd been dealing with it, whatever *it* was at the time, all her life. She glanced around the small motel room and took a deep breath, chanting her motto, "You can do this, too."

What she could do right now was to strip off her wet clothes and climb into a hot shower. She let the hard spray pelt her back, releasing the knot of anxiety that constantly took up residence between her shoulders. The water from the shower mimicked the rain falling outside and, for several minutes she stood under the spray, listening to the droplets hitting the tile, tub and window. Finally, when the water began to turn cold, she shut off the shower spigot and wrapped herself in the big fluffy towel. A comfortable towel.

Who would have thought that “Comfort’s finest motel” would have such wonderful towels? She’d been expecting the thin white ones with the blue stripe that most one and two-star motels were fond of. With a sigh, she ran her hands down the soft cotton, luxuriating in its welcoming embrace. Juliette bent down, and surveyed the only clothing she had at the present time as she picked each piece up off the floor.

She wiped the mud off her jeans and rinsed out the jersey before she hung them over the two chairs in the room to dry. Her undies were scrubbed and her bra rinsed before she draped them over the register in the room. She tried out the motel-issue hair dryer attached to the wall and was surprised that it actually worked. Of course, she didn’t have a round brush to coax some curl into her hair, but it was at least no longer wet. Dry hair, dry body, and drying clothes. She’d done all she could. And she was bone tired.

She sat on the bed for the first time since she entered the room, and was surprised to find a tiny chocolate mint on the pillow. She smiled at Lolly’s attempts to make her little motel into a Hilton. After unwrapping the candy, she slowly let it melt in her mouth, luxuriating in its chocolate peppermint goodness. She closed her eyes and moaned in delight. Chocolate had always been her weakness, the only weakness she’d ever allowed herself to have. After all, she’d had a son to raise, all by herself. But her job was now done, and she was bone tired from that, too.

She dropped the towel onto the bed covers, and slid between the sheets. The decadent feeling of being nude in bed threatened to overwhelm her senses. She hadn't been in such a state for a long time. With a boy in the house for her entire adult life, it had been best not to surprise him when he joined her in bed as a youngster. Her sleeping attire had morphed from being nude to wearing a long T-shirt and flannel bottoms.

Her son, Noah, was long past the stage of jumping into bed with her in the mornings. Now, he was jumping into bed with his wife, Camille. If Juliette had been able to hand-pick her choice for a wife for Noah, she could not have done better. She'd raised a fine young man, who now had found his soul mate. So, what did that leave her with? She needed to figure out how this next act in her life would play out. She'd had a rocky start so far, taking off in her car with no particular destination in mind. So not like her. She'd start over tomorrow and try to get better traction in her new life. Not tonight. She was too tired and the bed was too inviting. She'd worry about what was next once her car got fixed and she could leave Nebraska in the dust.

Cy couldn't decide which he preferred. The view of Juliette's nicely rounded backside as she slid off the horse, or the way her also nicely rounded boobs bounced when she lost her balance and fell into the puddle. From both the front and the back views, she was sex personified. His Brigitte Bardot fantasy come to life. No, things didn't get much better than this in Comfort. Having a mouth-watering woman fall into his lap didn't happen every day.

Well, to be honest, she hadn't quite fallen into his lap. Yet.

Even in her pissed-off and nervous state, she climbed up on the horse with him. That was a big step for her, especially since she was a woman alone, and not from Comfort, but

a bigger town, where nasty things occasionally happened to single women. She definitely screamed city. Uptight city. Not someone who rode a horse on a regular basis. Or ever, he could almost guarantee. And definitely not with a strange man.

Well, he had a couple days to country her up, and he was eager to get started.

She'd trusted him enough to get up on the horse and ride off with him through a field of corn. He'd wished it was the two of them riding off to some deserted place where they could indulge in a long love-making session out in the open, but it was into rain and a field of corn instead. Ah, well. But, after a few minutes, she relaxed back into his chest, which tempted him to move her wet hair out of the way and nibble on the nape of her neck while they were riding. But he refrained.

He'd sensed the tension in her body and a wrong move on his part would have her jumping off the horse. And he didn't want her to jump. For the first time in a long time, he wanted a woman to stay with him. Wrapped in his arms. She had hit him like a two by four when she jumped out of her car, licking her fingers. But he realized that right now, to her, he was merely a conveyance, a means to an end. She probably hadn't even noticed him as a man. Not yet, anyway. He gritted his teeth.

He'd make that a priority in the morning. By tomorrow evening, she'd not only be aware of him as a man, but hopefully, she'd be in his bed, obtaining visual and physical proof that he was indeed a man. If it took a bit longer than that, he'd be willing to give it some time. Her car had probably thrown a belt of some kind, and he undoubtedly had the part in stock at his garage. But, if he decided he wanted her to stick around an extra day or two, he'd tell her he needed to order it, thereby buying himself a few more days. He directed Bud up the street, listening to the sound of his horse's gait.

The clip-clop had given way to a slush-slush. He needed to get the horse, and himself, out of this weather. Glancing around, he rode into the empty town square, thinking how odd it was that a total stranger had gotten under his skin in a matter of minutes.

If he was brutally honest with himself, he had only wanted to see women in his rearview mirror for the past five years. Love them and leave them with a smile on their face. That was his motto since Tammy had died.

He stopped at the barn behind the diner and put up his horse, drying the wet chestnut coat and giving him feed and water. The weather was getting too bad to risk taking the steed any further. And he wanted to get out of the rain himself, get some grub, and get some sleep. Where he could dream about the lovely Juliette, who was sleeping just down the street. He'd spend the night in the apartment above his garage, where the antique poster of Brigitte Bardot still hung. His father had chided him when he'd bought it as a foolish boy of thirteen. He told Cy the picture had been taken in the 1950s, and that Brigitte Bardot didn't remotely resemble it anymore, but Cy didn't care. She had posed in a V-neck dress and had her blonde hair piled messily on top of her head. Her deep brown eyes pierced through the camera lens as she pouted her lips. One leg was drawn up, inviting him to explore her hidden depths. He got rock hard every time he examined that poster, even now. His thoughts were muddled as he bent his body against the rain and dashed from the barn to the diner.

The string of cowbells rang out, signifying his entrance through the back door of the diner. The owner of the establishment, and one of the motel owner's triplet sisters, Molly, called out to him.

"What the hell are you doing out and about tonight? I was just about to close up. I thought everyone with an ounce of sense would be hunkered down at home by now."

Cy walked up to her and planted a kiss on her cheek. "Well, there you go. I don't have a lick of common sense." He glanced around the diner and spied the only other occupant, one of his best friends. "And neither does Jimmy, it seems. I put Bud up in your barn for the night. Needed to get him out of the rain. I'll get him in the morning."

He slid into the booth opposite Jimmy, who was polishing off a slice of cherry pie and nursing a cup of coffee. "Hey, man."

Jimmy wiped his mouth before he replied. "God, you're a drowned rat."

"I was busy saving somebody from a broken-down car on the highway. I got her to Lolly's for the night."

Jimmy's brown eyes took on a glimmer of interest. "There's a new single lady in town?"

"I don't know if she's single or not. Didn't ask. All I know is she was alone in the car."

"And you didn't jump all over that? Why? Was she old? Ugly? There has to be a reason why you didn't offer to show her a good time."

Cy waited until Molly placed a mug of coffee in front of him and he took a sip of the hot, strong liquid. Juliette was definitely neither old nor ugly. She was a sex kitten if ever he'd seen one. She was also more than a little bit scared.

"Not my type." Now, that much was true. She was not his usual one-night stand. She was the kind of woman you'd want to keep. And if he had any sense of self-preservation, he'd steer clear of her until she left town. But hadn't he just told Molly common sense was the one thing he didn't have?

"Maybe she's mine, instead. I'll need to check her out tomorrow. What's her name, anyway?"

"I didn't catch it. I just dropped her off at the motel, and I'll go back and pick up her car tomorrow."

"I just bought some new jeans. Maybe I'll put them on and help you out tomorrow, picking up her car."

“Don’t need your help, man. Eat up and let’s get out of here. Give me a ride down to the garage, will you?”

The two men finished up quickly and ran through the rain to Jimmy’s truck. A short time later, as Cy stripped off his layers of soaking clothes in the apartment above the garage, he thought about Juliette doing the same thing in that little motel room a few blocks away. And controlled, just barely, the urge to go back to her and take her to dinner. And to have her for dessert.

No, no sense in scaring her to death by becoming a stalker. Not after they’d bonded so nicely over the horse ride. Tomorrow was time enough to begin his campaign with her. And what campaign would that be?

He picked up the photo of Tammy and stared at it for a long time. Her long hair was caught up in a ponytail in the picture, and she was laughing. He’d always loved the way she laughed, full and robust, not soft and girly. Her life was similar to her laugh. A life which had ended way too soon. While they’d been married, they had talked about what they’d want for each other if one of them should die. But it was more what he’d want for her, since bull-riding was a pretty unforgiving profession and they both thought he’d be first to go. He told Tammy he’d want her to find someone else and to live her life to the fullest, should he die.

And she told him the same thing, but neither one ever expected her to be the one to die. He’d done a lousy job of protecting his woman, leaving Tammy alone for long stretches while he followed the rodeo around the country. Since Tammy’s death, he hadn’t wanted to find someone else to love and put her in danger, too. He’d fucked up, big time, on his first go-round, and there was not going to be a second chance for him. He’d see to it. He’d have to. He didn’t trust himself not to screw things up again.

It would be best if he’d get Juliette on her way out of town in the morning, before he tempted fate.

Chapter 3

A harsh pounding at the door woke Juliette from a lovely dream about a knight in shining armor charging to her aid on the back of a large horse. But the knight in her dream was wearing a black Stetson and a long duster. And the horse wasn't a white charger, but an ordinary black and brown horse. She opened her eyes quickly, as her gaze ricocheted around the strange room. Where in the name of God was she?

"Your tow truck is here, Juliette. Time to wake up."

She ran a hand over her eyes and groaned. In a flash, it all came back to her. She was stuck in the middle of Nowhere, Nebraska. There was only one man in this little speck on the map who knew her name. And that man was now pounding on her door. Crap.

She jumped out of bed and gasped. She was naked! Grabbing the towel she had tossed to the foot of the bed last night, she wrapped it quickly around herself as the pounding grew louder.

"Okay, okay. I'm up." In a huff, she yanked on the door, opening it much farther than she intended.

Cyclone Kelley's glance ran up and down her body, causing an outbreak of goosebumps on her bare skin. Way too much bare skin. She tried to shut the door a bit, but one large cowboy boot was in the way.

"Mornin', darlin'. You look like you slept well." He grinned at her.

She gulped, remembering her dream. Holy crap. Cy had been the man in her dreams. And Bud was the horse. Well, she'd never let him know that little tidbit.

“Quit gawking at me. Did you say something about the tow truck?”

“Yep, it’s here. Throw on some clothes and we’ll go rescue your car.”

Juliette dropped her eyes to her haphazardly draped body. No man had seen her in such a state of undress in more years than she cared to think about. This particular man had made her nervous from the minute she met him, and his eyes grazing over her body made her stomach jump. She had the urge to smash that cowboy boot by slamming the door shut.

“Give me ten minutes, okay?” Her temper was beginning to rise along with her color.

“Sure, no hurry. By the way, nice lingerie.” He pointed with his head to the radiator near the door where her bra and sensible cotton panties were laid out.

Immediately, her cheeks took on the same pink hue as her underwear. She brought a hand to her face and the towel slipped. In real danger of flashing him, she backed up a step and regained control of the towel.

“I’ll meet you outside in ten.” She moved toward the door, ready to close it in his face. A blast of hot air hit her.

“Good Lord, is it always so hot here?”

“Well, it is mid-June in Nebraska, so you pretty much have to expect the heat.”

“Well, then, come on in. It’s at least a bit cooler in here. But you go no further than the bed while I get dressed.”

His brow cocked as he waited to see what she would do next. Too late, she realized she had just invited him to her bed. And, of course, he would take it the wrong way. The raised eyebrow and the shit-eating grin on his face told her so. The man infuriated her to the point where all she could do was sputter as she gathered up her clothing. The temperature outside might be blazing hot, but the heat in this room was out of control.

“I’ll just sit here.” He plopped down on the edge of the bed. The bed she had just gotten out of. The bed where she had dreamed about this man coming to her aid on a big horse. Holy shit. The goosebumps just returned.

“God, you’re annoying!” Juliette exclaimed as she trotted into the small bathroom. To make her point, she locked the door with a loud click. And followed it up with a swift kick to the door itself. Then she took fifteen minutes, not ten, to make herself presentable. Well, as presentable as she was going to get with dirty, wrinkled clothes and no hairbrush. Or toothbrush. She squeezed out some toothpaste from the little travel-size tube she found in the medicine cabinet and loaded up her finger. The taste of it reminded her of the chocolate mint she found on her pillow last night. The pillow Cyclone Kelley was now pressed up against, in her bed. Which was probably still warm from her body being in it. Damn. How had she gotten into such a predicament?

As she rinsed out her mouth, she gazed at her reflection. Not good, but it was the best she could do. She fluffed her hair before she caught herself. Why did she care how she came across? It wasn’t as if there was anyone in this backwater town that she was trying to impress. To fluff her hair for.

When she finally emerged from the room, she was not surprised to find Cy had made himself at home. He was sitting on the bed with his back up against the headboard, and his long legs were stretched out in front of him, his boots crossed and resting on the footboard of the bed, way too relaxed. He had taken off his hat for the first time since she met him, and his thick, closely cropped dark hair was neatly cut. She did appreciate a man with a good head of hair. He was engrossed in something on her Kindle, which she had left on the nightstand. Her cheeks pinked anew as she remembered the torrid romance she had been in the

middle of reading when she shut the device off the night before. Right before she had her own torrid romance, in her dream. About the man now lounging in her bed. Maybe she did want to impress someone in this tiny backwater town.

He glanced up. Clear blue eyes honed in on her, and she lost the ability to speak. He grinned, shut off the machine, and jumped up from the bed.

"I do love your taste in reading material," he said as he replaced the ever-present hat on his head. "Let's roll, shall we?"

So he had been looking at the romance about a kilt-wearing Highlander and the woman he carts off to the castle to make his own. She gave him her most withering expression, the one she used on Noah when he had done something wrong. "Men. You're all the same," she muttered as she walked by the bed and opened the door.

They went outside into an empty parking lot, except for the tow truck. "What'd you do with the driver, Cy?" Then, she caught a glimpse of the sign on the door of the truck. "Cyclone Towing." She turned to him. "Ah, don't tell me . . ."

"Yep, darlin', I'm your date. Let's go get your car and figure out what's wrong with it."

"This is not a date, believe me," she growled, as she opened the door of the truck and cringed at the grating sound of metal on metal as the door hinge protested. She climbed on the running board and hoisted her body inside. The cab smelled vaguely of gasoline and motor oil. And of him. Her eyes narrowed at him as he strolled around to the driver's side and positioned himself behind the wheel.

"Buckle up, Professor. It's going to be a bumpy ride."

In more ways than one, she thought as she grabbed the dirty seat belt and strapped it around herself. Then, she exhaled a long breath. "Let's go. The sooner I get my car fixed, the sooner I can get out of this place."

He started the truck, and while it idled, his gaze flickered over her. Her breath caught in her throat as his eyes lingered on her breasts. She could feel her nipples budding in response and hoped he wouldn't notice it through her shirt. But from that ever-present grin on his face, her hopes were dashed. He could tell the effect he was having on her, and was enjoying every embarrassing second of it.

His eyes moved up and caressed her face. At least that's what she thought. Without lifting a finger, he managed to touch her.

She turned away from him and stared straight ahead. She'd been reading too many Highlander stories.

Cy couldn't keep the grin from his face. It was almost too easy to get her riled up. She was even more stunning in the daylight. The sun bounced off her blonde curls, her brown eyes glared at him most enticingly. And she was as turned on by him as he was by her, even if she wouldn't yet drop her uptight professor attitude and admit it. He'd seen it in the way her nipples responded as he raked his gaze over them. And how her lips parted when his eyes moved up to her face and she held her breath. He desperately wanted to lean over the gearshift and brush those lips with a kiss. But, they had all day to get her used to the idea of culminating their mutual desire. He didn't know anything about her yet, but he sensed she wasn't in the habit of picking up strange men, even if she was interested in them. She had a wall around herself stronger than Fort Knox.

He was playing with fire, and he welcomed it. His emotions were alive for the first time in a long time. First, he had to get her car towed to his garage. He'd assess the damage, but already had decided he'd find a way to buy them some time. He'd fix her car, eventually, satisfy the lust he was sensing from her that matched his own, and get her

on her way to wherever she had been headed when her car gave out. Give her a great experience to tell her friends back home about how nice those Nebraska folks could be. Yes, that was his plan. If only she didn't smell so good. He lost his train of thought when he inhaled her lily and womanly scent. And had another overwhelming urge to lean over and kiss those pouty lips.

Instead, he put the truck in gear, grinding it a bit for effect before they left the motel parking lot, heading out to the road where Cy had first found his lady fair. They drove in silence for the few minutes it took to get to the right stretch of highway. The thoughts swirling around in his head were all about her, and he hoped hers were running along a parallel path. He pulled over to the side of the road when they reached their destination and stared blankly out the window.

"Holy shit." A narrow band of destruction was carved through the field of corn by the side of the road and the car was nowhere in sight. He jumped out of the truck and began to comb the ground, looking for tire tracks. Maybe it had already been towed away. Juliette was momentarily forgotten.

She vaulted out of the truck cab and joined him beside the road. "What happened? Where's my car? Are you sure we're on the right road? The right place?" Her questions shot out of her in machine gun fashion.

"Yeah, we're at the right place. A small twister must have touched down after we left last night. Funny, I didn't hear any sirens when the storm came through. Must have been just a bitty one. But, see how the corn is mowed down?" He waved his hand in the general direction of the field. "It tore through the field and then jumped up here onto the highway and roared down the road."

Juliette's face lost all its color. "You mean, my car just . . ." she whirled her hand through the air.

“Yep. And if you’d stayed here while I went for my truck, you’d be Dorothy.” He imitated her whirl in the air.

And barely caught her before she hit the ground in a dead faint.

“Ah, Juliette, darlin,’” he whispered as he picked her up.

He carried her to the passenger seat of the truck and propped her in place, tapping her cheek gently to bring her out of her faint. Damn, he needed smelling salts. He grinned at the thought of putting a few smelling salts into his first aid box. For all the damsels in distress he ran into. But, she wasn’t responding to his gentle taps on her face, so he had to do something. He left her side, closing the door so she wouldn’t fall out of the cab as he rummaged around in the bed of the truck for anything that would help.

Bleach? Gasoline? Motor oil? What would work? He tried the bleach first. Opened the bottle and held it under her nose. She drew her head away from the odor, but her eyes remained shut. He repositioned the bottle and let her get another big whiff of it. He took a deep breath when she fluttered her long lashes and opened her eyes.

“Wha—? What happened?” she asked, weakly, in stark contrast to her rapid-fire delivery of moments ago.

“You fainted when you realized your car got sucked up by the twister, that’s all.”

She sat up straighter and ran a hand over her eyes. “But I never faint.”

He gave her an appraising glance. “Well, then, today’s a first for you. When was the last time you ate, anyway?”

“Uh, yesterday afternoon, I guess. I had some Cheetos.”

So that explained the orange dust she had been sucking so provocatively from her fingers.

“Well, I hate to burst your bubble, but Cheetos aren’t one of the major food groups.” He leaned into the cab of the truck and opened the glove compartment. She gasped

slightly at his nearness. He took out a fiber bar and handed it to her.

“I thought you were, ah, going to pull out a raw steak, or something.” She took the food tentatively. “Thanks.”

He slammed the passenger door shut and strode around to his side of the cab. “I save the raw steaks for true Nebraskans.” He grinned at her in an attempt to put her at ease. “I need to take you to the diner and get some breakfast into you.”

A few minutes later, Cy pulled into the parking lot of a small building. He got out, went to the passenger side, and opened the door. A still shaky and pale Juliette leaned on him as they made their way inside the restaurant. Cy walked slowly, savoring the feel of his arm wrapped around her waist. Her color had returned a bit, but she was rattled, still.

“Hi, Molly. This here’s Juliette. She needs a glass of OJ real fast, and then some breakfast.”

“Okay, sugar. Coming right up.” Molly returned quickly, setting the glass in front of Juliette, who had a questioning look in her eyes.

“What is it?” Cy asked.

“Isn’t that Lolly? The lady from the motel?”

Cy grinned. “No, this is Molly. They’re sisters. There’s another one, too. Dolly.”

“Holy crap. Why would anyone give their children names that rhyme?”

“Can you tell them apart?”

She took another long glance at Molly. Same teased-up bleached blonde hair, same small nose, same washed out blue eyes. “No. They look exactly alike.”

“Well, there’s a good reason you’re confused. They’re a set of identical triplets. The way I keep them straight is to remember where I’m at. Lolly handles the lodging at the motel. See? Lolly and an L, Molly makes the meals, M and

M, and Dolly owns the only dress shop in town. We'll go there after breakfast."

"I don't need a new dress. What I need is a phone that works, so I can call my insurance agent and get myself a car so I can leave town."

Chapter 4

Juliette didn't care if it was undignified. The minute the breakfast of eggs over easy, bacon, toast and hash browns was set in front of her, she dug in as if she were starving. In actual fact, she was. She dipped a wedge of toast into the runny egg yolks. When was the last time she'd eaten egg yolks, anyway? Everyone in Ohio, and the rest of the planet, it seemed, was all about eating only the whites of the egg. Even McDonald's had caved. And bacon. Her mouth watered as she brought the crispy slice to her lips.

Everything on the plate was good, down-home cooking—a far cry from her usual sensible breakfast of Greek yogurt and decaf coffee, no sugar. It was as if, here in Comfort, she could bend the rules a bit, and let down her guard a little. So what if she gained a few pounds eating the best, and most artery-choking food ever? She'd repent and diet when she returned home. To reality.

She ignored Cy, although if she was honest with herself, she merely ignored his chatter. She could not sit across from him and be unaffected. He took his hat off, and set it on the table, so she got a clear view of his face. He reminded her of a dark-haired Robert Redford from his Electric Horseman days. She shook her head at her foolishness. Maybe it was just the setting. After all, her first impression of him was on a horse. And he was an ex-rodeo person, same as Redford had been in the movie. Cy was the first man she'd ever met who could put that kind of occupation on his resume. There weren't too many ex-rodeo men roaming around in Ohio.

Yes, that's all it was. Despite his beautiful blue eyes, he was no Robert Redford.

"Juliette? Darlin'?"

He was speaking directly to her. She lifted her gaze to meet those eyes.

"Sorry. What did you ask? My mind was a million miles away."

"Yeah, I noticed." Cy grinned at her. He seemed to be always grinning. Evidently, she was a great source of amusement to him. "What I asked was, other than your insurance agent, is there anyone you need to call? A husband, maybe? Or whoever you were driving to see? Are you expected somewhere?"

"Oh, not really. I probably should call Noah at some point, but I hate to bother him."

A flash of, what? Annoyance? Disdain? Interest? Jealousy? Whatever it was, it ran over Cy's face at the mention of a man. And was gone, before she had a chance to figure out what it was. She was so not good at deciphering men.

"Well, once you finish here, I can take you to the garage and you can call your insurance guy from there."

"It's very nice of you to take time out of your day to make certain I'm fed and taken care of. But don't you need to be at work? To get back to towing something?"

Cy picked up his mug of coffee and took a long sip. "I have one hard and fast rule. If a lady faints while we're on a date, I need to make sure she's all right before I leave her."

It was Juliette's turn to grin. "First, it wasn't a date. Second, are you in the habit of making ladies faint?"

Cy pumped his chest with a fist. "Swoon more than faint, but yeah, it's happened."

Juliette couldn't keep the groan in. "You have a highly inflated sense of yourself, don't you?"

His gaze flittered over her face. “No one’s complained so far.”

She lowered her eyes to the table and could tell her cheeks were turning pink. She needed to change the subject, and fast. Her body was betraying her, as her center swirled with warmth. The last thing she wanted was for Cy to guess her reaction to him was the same as every other woman’s had been. And, from what he’d intimated, there had been many before her. Legions of them. As there would be many after her.

Grasping the only conversation thread she could think of, she said, “I, uh, I still can’t wrap my head around the fact that my car is gone. God, I loved that car.”

“Well, to my practiced eye as a garage mechanic, it had quite a few years on it. Lots of rust.”

Juliette bristled at the comment and her eyes bored into him. “My car may have had some rust on it. You can’t go through too many Ohio winters without having some rust on you. But it had a lot of sentimental value.”

He reached across the table and took her hand in his. “Do you have some rust on you, too, Juliette? The way you said that, it seemed you weren’t just talking about the car.” His voice was low, and what? Caring?

Unexpected tears sprang to her eyes. He was getting way too close to the truth. She removed her hand from his gentle touch and blinked the wetness from her eyes. “It was the first car that I bought new. After years of buying second-hand cars, other people’s cast-offs, I was finally able to get a brand-spanking new one. I did my homework and reviewed all the brochures. Read reports on the best cars on the market. It took me months to decide which brand to buy.”

“Yeah, I can see you doing that. You’re not the type to just jump into a new situation with both feet.”

Her anger was returning. Better anger than tears. He

thought he already had her pegged, did he? “I can be very spontaneous when I want to be!”

“Prove it. Let me take you dancing tonight.”

“Dancing? In the middle of nowhere? No thanks.”

“Thought you’d say that. I rest my case.” He lifted his mug to his lips. She tried not to stare. And failed. She had mug envy. Her mind twirled with the idea of being on a date with this force of nature named Cyclone. He was incredibly handsome. And he’d probably try to kiss her with those same lips that were caressing the mug right now. She needed to change the subject.

“When I think of that twister picking up my car and hauling it off... I could have been inside of it, thinking I was safe from the storm. If you hadn’t come along when you did, I’d be a dead woman and someone else would be calling Noah. So, I guess I do owe you something, since you saved my life.” She shivered and ran her hands down her bare arms.

Cy plunked down his mug. “Who’s this ‘Noah’ person you keep talking about? Your husband?”

Juliette laughed. So it had been annoyance. He had become so good at pushing her buttons after just meeting her, she decided to try to push some of his. “Noah and I have lived together for twenty-three years now.” Cy’s angry gaze caught hers. She smiled serenely at him before picking up her coffee mug and bringing it to her lips.

“So why is he not here with you, then? Why, in the name of God, would he let you travel by yourself? Getting caught up in a tornado is the least dangerous of the scenarios that could happen to you.”

“He’s not here because he’s on his honeymoon. Noah is my son.”

Anger gave way to surprise. The man was incredibly easy to read, once she let herself respond to him.

“What were you, a child bride? You’re not old enough to have a twenty-three-year old son otherwise.”

Despite her admonishments to herself to be unaffected by him, she was touched. And allowed herself to graze his hand. “Thank you. Sometimes I think I’m an absolute relic, rust and all.” She sighed softly, and kept her hand near his a moment longer than she should have.

He took advantage of her nearness and grasped her hand in his. Then, he bent over and kissed her wrist.

Grateful she was sitting, Juliette St. James came close to fainting twice in the same day.

“You’re no relic, Juliette. What you are is one incredibly sexy woman, who I should stay as far away from as I can. All the bells and whistles in my head are going off, telling me to leave you alone. Despite my better judgment, though, I want to take you dancing. There’s a really nice dance hall at the edge of town, and on Friday nights, everyone in Comfort who can walk is there. What do you say?”

Once more, she removed her hand from his grasp. “I haven’t been sexy in a long time. I think you’d be disappointed. I’ll take you up on your offer of a phone so I can call my insurance agent, since I can’t seem to get a signal on my cell phone. But that’s all. No date. I’ll save us both the awkwardness.”

Cy contemplated her for a moment. How could she not see what he was staring at? He hadn’t been this turned on by a woman’s mere presence in a long time. And when was the last time he did something as ridiculous as kiss a lady on her wrist? Had he ever? He caught Molly’s amused glance as she kept an eye on them. If he didn’t seal this dancing gig with Juliette soon, he’d be a laughing stock in Comfort within a matter of hours. Molly would make certain of it.

“Well, I’m using my bargaining chip right now. I did save your life after all, and I demand payment. And that payment, I’ve decided, will be to let me take you dancing tonight.”

“Jesus, you’re a dog with a bone, aren’t you?”

Cy reached across the table and took her hand once more. “Yes, I am. And we’re not moving from the diner until you say yes. I’ll take you to the garage to make your phone call, and then to the dress shop so you can buy what you need for the evening, but we are going to end up dancing tonight. Understood?”

Juliette dropped her eyes from his face. Suddenly, she appeared nervous, as she caught the hidden message underneath his pronouncement. He would take her dancing at the country bar, and they’d see where the night led. Maybe they’d end up doing another kind of dancing, too. Nervous was just fine. At least she had some reaction other than that cool, professor thing that she preferred to layer on.

“Well, I do owe you. And, if you promise not to be too disappointed by my behavior, okay. We can go dancing. But only dancing, Cy. Don’t get your hopes up for anything else.”

Cy released a deep breath. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding it in. “Just one thing. You mentioned your son, but not your husband. I’m assuming he’s not still in the picture? Because I don’t date married women.”

He was pleased to see her smile. “Another of your hard and fast rules? It’s nice to know that you do set some parameters in your love life. To answer your question, Noah’s father was gone from the scene before I even was aware I was pregnant. I’m not proud of the way he was conceived, but I am proud of my son.”

“Good to know.”

“Well, turn about is fair play here. Tell me why you’re not married. I thought most Midwesterners married young.”

“One could ask the same of you. Last I checked, Ohio was in the Midwest, too.”

She got her back up at his comment. Lord, he did love to see her reactions. “I had a child to take care of. And an education to get. So I had very little time to devote to finding a husband. Besides, there aren’t too many men who wanted a ready-made family. And, you’re dodging my question. Why are you not married?”

He avoided her steady gaze, even though without staring back, he sensed her eyes burning holes in him. Through him. To his very heart.

“I was married. Once.” His voice came out soft, almost a whisper. Which was all he could manage when he talked about Tammy.

She reached across the table and, this time, she took his hand. “So, what happened?”

“She died, way before her time.”

He caught the sharp intake of her breath. Not the answer she was expecting, he guessed.

“Oh, Cy. I’m so sorry.” She squeezed his hand before she removed hers and placed it on her heart. He had to do something to get past this awkwardness. He shifted in his seat and cleared his throat.

“It was a long time ago, and I prefer not to talk about it. So, let’s change the subject. Let’s get on with the day, if you’re done chowing down. I’ll take you to the garage so you can call your insurance agent, see if he can get a rental car to you. But then, you’ve got to get to Dolly’s and buy an outfit for tonight. You’ve got a lot to do to get ready for date number three.”

She appeared confused. “No, the dance will be our first date.”

He shook his head. “Wrong. Our first date was this morning when we couldn’t find your car and you fainted.

Fainting counts as a date. Number two was here at the diner, when I bought you breakfast. So tonight will be date number three.” He grinned at her. “And you know what that means.”

She squirmed in her seat. “It’s, uh, been a long time since I’ve been on a date. Does date number three still mean the same thing?”

“Yep, little darlin’. It means the same thing.”

“Well, then, it’s definitely date number one in my book. I’m not having sex with you.”

Chapter 5

She was going to have sex with him! She had stared at his philtrum, that vertical indentation between his nose and mouth, all during breakfast. The deeper the indentation, the stronger a person's sex drive, or so she'd been told. And Cy's was the deepest philtrum she'd ever seen. That tidbit of useless information flitted through her mind as she pictured the two of them having hot jungle monkey sex, bringing each other to a mutual orgasm. When she squirmed under his gaze, it was partially to control the unconscious and totally physical reaction his mere presence gave her.

Juliette peered into the mirror of the motel room. She'd be on her way out of town tomorrow, according to her insurance agent, so no harm could possibly come from a one-nighter with Cy. She spent a few hours in Dolly's Dresses 'n Such and took the woman's advice on what to wear for her big night out in Comfort. She smiled at the incongruity of her thoughts. Big night out in Comfort meant something totally different from what she was used to. Her reflection screamed Halloween costume to her, but she had it on good authority that this was entirely appropriate attire for a night of boot-scooting. A turquoise silk blouse hugged her ample bosom and revealed a great deal of cleavage. Her tan flouncy skirt ended just above her knees and she was wearing a pair of blinged-out cowboy boots, no less!

She had added a silver belt to her waist, partially because she thought the outfit called for it. But also because Dolly said it was necessary for your thumbs to have a place to latch onto during the dancing. Juliette didn't know what that

meant, but Miss Dolly was quite serious about the whole thing. She stopped the store owner when it got to head attire. The last thing she needed in the back seat of her car tomorrow as she headed out of town was a cowboy hat to remind her of what was going to happen later tonight.

For good measure, and to make certain she didn't repeat her mistake of twenty-three years ago, she stopped at the corner drugstore for a pack of condoms. A three-pack. With any luck they'd use all three before morning. Then, she'd take off, leaving Cy and Comfort behind and would drag out the memory of her one night with a handsome cowboy on cold and nasty Ohio winter nights.

She laughed as she pictured how her circle of lady friends back home would react if she ever told them she had a torrid night of sex with an ex-bull rider. They were staid professor types, similar to herself, and could never imagine such a thing. Of course, they would never have taken off alone on a cross-country ride to the middle of nowhere. To the middle of Comfort. It was probably best if she'd keep her summer behavior to herself. All of it. No one in her circle would ever be the wiser. What happens in Comfort...

When the rap came on the door, her heart jumped. She gave her lips one final application of gloss, tossed her long mane of hair over her shoulders, and opened the door. Cy's breath whooshed out of him, and she smiled. *Thank you, Dolly.*

"God, you're beautiful." He stood rigid at the doorway, as if afraid to move. Or to touch her. Instead, she reached out to him, and ran her hand lightly down his arm.

"Aw, thanks, big guy. You do know how to make a girl feel good." She was grateful she had stocked up on undies while at Dolly's too, since what she had on were already done for.

He caught her hand before it left his arm and pulled her forward. She bumped into him and could sense he was already

aroused. Dolly obviously was very aware of what type of clothing appealed to the men of Comfort. He wrapped an arm around her and swooped in for a kiss before she realized what he was up to. It was her turn to have her breath leave in a hurry. His lips were feather-soft as he lightly brushed hers. He broke the kiss and she nearly moaned in dismay. She wanted more. Much more.

On unsteady legs, she walked past him as he stepped aside. She glanced around the parking lot for a vehicle. This time, it wasn't a horse or a tow truck. There was a Harley motorcycle in the parking lot. Holy crap! Her number one fantasy date had come true.

"Ooh, are we going to drive the motorcycle to the dance hall?"

Cy helped her strap a helmet on her head, pausing to kiss her once more before strapping on his own.

"You don't *drive* a motorcycle, darlin'. You *ride* one. And yes, we are going to ride over."

She pressed her lips together, to retain the impression of his kiss. How could this muscled, virile man have lips that tasted so sweet? He threw a leg over the side of the bike, and then held out a hand to assist her aboard. He kicked the big motorcycle to life, and she wrapped her arms around him tightly as they drove off. The hum from the machine, or maybe it was the nearness of Cy, made her very aware of that little bundle of nerves between her legs. Yes, she was definitely going to have sex with him.

Cy used the time between the motel and the small bar to rein in his riotous emotions. If he thought Juliette was gorgeous in a wet shirt and jeans, seeing her in a skirt and boots nearly knocked him senseless. And that blouse. He had run his hands down it as he held her in place at the motel door. It would slide off her really fast, it was so silky. And

then, she'd explode in orgasm, multiple times, before he was done with her. He was reacting to her as if he was thirteen and had just found out what his private parts were all about. And he had to admit, his dick hadn't jumped for so much joy in a long time.

Maybe he'd bribe the DJ to have his turntable and other equipment break down early tonight, so they could cut short the festivities on the dance floor and get to the main event. His thoughts were veering down a dangerous path, since he'd made it clear to everyone for years now that his sexual cravings did not include romance. But with Juliette, he wanted the romance. All of it. Beginning tonight. He'd pull out all the stops for her. He was going to have sex with her before the night was over, come hell or high water. She just didn't know it yet. Intentionally, he dipped the Harley from side to side, so she would tighten her grip on him as they rode the few short blocks to the dance hall.

He pulled up in front of the dance hall where nearly every man, woman and child in Comfort made an appearance each Friday night. His plan was to introduce Juliette around, laugh as she stumbled over the steps of the latest line dance that even his five-year old niece had mastered, and maybe entice her to play a game of pool. The thought of staring down her cleavage as she leaned over a pool table had him salivating as he cut the motor on the bike. Jesus, the woman was affecting him in ways he thought he was long past.

With a laugh, Juliette hopped off the bike, unbuckled her helmet, and bent over to shake out her hair. Cy nearly tipped the bike as his focus was directed at her. He managed to put down the kickstand, and slid off the bike without toppling it. He wrapped his arm around her waist, and drank in her scent of lilies and sex. This was going to be a long night.

"Ready to meet Comfort's finest, darlin'?"

She took a deep, centering breath, which emphasized her already ample bosom. Cy smiled down at her, gratefully.

"I guess so, but I am a little nervous."

"A few longnecks will take care of that in short order."

"Longnecks? Oh, you're talking about beer. I thought for a minute you meant humans."

Cy laughed. "Well, I can guarantee some of the men inside will be craning their necks to get a glimpse of you but yeah, I was talking about beer. You do drink, don't you?"

"Every now and then. But it's usually white wine."

"But wine is for sissies. Everybody knows that. Here at the dance hall, you must drink a longneck if you want to fit in."

She got a huge smile on her face. "All right then. For my one night in Comfort, I want to have some fun. Longnecks and line dancing it will be. Lead on."

"That's my girl." He opened the door, and loud country music rolled out into the parking lot. His chest puffed up as he escorted the most beautiful woman in all of Comfort into the dance hall. *My girl*. He repeated his phrasing in his head.

"Don't you think Cy's new woman fits right in here?" Dolly, of the infamous Dresses 'n Such store asked her sisters. Molly, Dolly, and Lolly formed a circle in a corner of the large room of the dance hall. Dolly patted her beehive hairdo as she caught sight of Juliette and Cy entering the hall. "I gave her fashion advice today, and styled her."

"She is lovely," Lolly remarked. "And such a nice girl."

"I don't think she's a good match for Cy, though, do you?" Molly raised an eyebrow at her sisters as they enjoyed the crowd, ranging in age from nine weeks to ninety years, who were lining up for the next dance, the babies in the arms of their parents. "I mean, she's a city girl. Why is she even interested in him?"

Dolly studied Molly carefully. "Why wouldn't she be? Even a city girl can have good taste. Have you taken a good gander at him lately? He's even more handsome now than

he was in his rodeo days. And he was swoon-worthy even then. He's tanned and muscled and that hair is to die for. If I was twenty years younger, I'd go after him myself." Dolly fanned her face in an exaggerated motion.

Molly's gaze went to Cy, and then back to her sisters. "But she must see him as a country bumpkin, don't you think? After what he's been through with Tammy, I don't really want to see him get hurt. And I have a bad feeling that's what's about to happen. She'll use him and scoot out of town, leaving it to us to put Cy back together, like we did the last time. We have to do whatever we can to keep that from happening."

"That's your opinion, Mol. Frankly, I am enjoying having her here in town. She's got that killer body, and so far, she's taken my advice on her wardrobe. Rachel Zoe has nothing on me now. I'm a stylist, and Juliette is my star. The only things she's rejected so far are the fringed undies and a cowboy hat. Although I did talk her into some thong panties instead of the old lady panties she originally picked up."

Lolly sighed. "So unfortunate about her car, though. I guess she'll be stuck here another day or two." The trio was jostled as the room became more crowded. "Good Lord. I haven't seen this many people in here in a long time. Do you think Cy told everyone in town he was bringing a new lady in tonight?"

Molly sucked in her cheeks. "I, uh, may have been the one responsible for the crowd. I joked at lunch today about how long it took Cy to close the deal with her." Two identical heads swiveled in her direction. Molly shrugged. "They were in the diner for breakfast and Cy was mooning all over her, but she resisted him. Never seen it happen before. Usually it's the other way around. You know how most women respond to him. Anyway, it took him some time to get her to agree to come here with him, and I thought it was funny that

the famous town stud had a chink put in his armor. May have mentioned it to a few people.”

“So, they’re all here tonight to see the woman who could resist Cy, even for a little bit? What a hoot!” Lolly laughed as she surveyed the crowd. “I think every man in this place, just about, has his tongue hanging out, while they stare at her.”

Molly replied, quietly, “Just as long as she doesn’t hurt Cy.”

Dolly said, “Or if she does decide to go after Cy, she at least dresses nicely.”

Juliette surprised him. From what he’d seen of her so far, she came across as a person who didn’t take chances with her life. Yet here she was, throwing back beers with the best of them, and finding things to talk about with all his male friends, who were all eyeing her with lust. Cy was even getting a little bit angry. Maybe she just behaved as an uptight professor around him. She certainly seemed to be kicking up her new cowboy boots with his friends.

Right now, she was hanging onto his friend, Jimmy, as he was helping her line up the pool stick. Or to be honest, Jimmy was the one hanging onto her. He may lose his title as one of Cy’s best friends after this evening. He noticed Jimmy was wearing the new jeans he’d talked about the previous evening in the diner. Had Jimmy been hoping Juliette would show here at the hall tonight, so he could slide right in alongside her and show her a good time? Cy had seen it happen way too often, with other women he had brought here. But always before, he hadn’t minded, since in his head, Jimmy was helping him out by taking what Cy was eager to be rid of. Maybe it had been a mistake to bring Juliette here tonight. He hadn’t even gotten started with her yet, and he certainly wasn’t eager to be rid of her.

Jimmy had a grin on his face a mile wide and a hand on Juliette's hip as he leaned over her back to assist her. They resembled a couple of spoons and it made Cy see red. He strode over to them and took the stick out of Juliette's hand.

"She's my date, Jimmy. Get your own."

"Yeah? Your 'date' doesn't seem to mind my attention. Maybe we should let the lovely Juliette decide." Jimmy stood up, but kept his hand on Juliette's hip, as he and Cy glared at each other.

She stood between the two men, wavering on her feet. She had a sloppy grin on her face as she glanced from one to the other. "You're gonna fight over me? God, fantasy date number two." She put up a hand with two fingers outstretched.

"I think you've had enough to drink. It's time to leave." Cy grabbed her hand and pulled her after him out of the bar.

"Whacha doing?" She turned on him once they cleared the doors of the honky-tonk. "I was having fun." She turned from him and gratefully took long gulps of the fresh air. Cy grinned at her.

"Gets a little close in there after awhile, doesn't it?" Fresh air filled her lungs, bringing some color back to her face. "All those bodies and the noise."

"And the cigarettes. Lord, doesn't Nebraska know about second-hand smoke?" She fanned her face with a hand.

"Yeah, heard about it. Also about a person's right to do what he wants to. We leave people alone here."

He handed her the helmet and she plopped it onto her head, but couldn't get it buckled. He fastened it for her, taking the time to kiss her as he did so. He didn't want her to be angry at him for pulling her from the bar. This time, it wasn't the chaste, light kiss that began the evening. This was a kiss of possession. He plastered his body up against hers and wrapped his arms tightly around her, letting her know he was hard and ready for her. He wanted her to get the message

that Cy Kelley was all the man she needed. He didn't want her straying over to Jimmy or to anyone else. He found her, he had saved her life, and she was going to be his before the night was over. He'd staked his claim.

For her safety's sake, Cy positioned Juliette in front of him on the bike, cradling her in his arms. The last thing he wanted was for her to tumble off the bike as he took a turn in the road. The ride might be awkward, but it wasn't far to the motel. Just long enough for him to get his emotions under control. He didn't want to be angry when he took her to bed. He wanted the night to be a wonderful memory for them both, since she'd made it clear she wouldn't be in town any longer than she had to be. She leaned into him as they rode down the paved highway, and he drank in the feeling of her closeness. His arms wrapped around her tighter. When she nuzzled her back into his chest, he about exploded in his pants. Holy Christ.

Okay, so the whole bar thing hadn't gone as planned. Yeah, he had introduced her around, and she had quickly mastered the steps of the line dance. She could have been doing line dances her entire life, from the way she strutted around the room. But he had forgotten that during this particular now-popular dance, other men got the opportunity to twirl her around and put their hands on her. Every time someone else took her hand or held onto her waist, Cy became agitated. And then, when Cy and Juliette got their turn at the pool table, other men crowded around and were ogling her cleavage as she leaned over the table. And the way she swished her tush before she took her shot got all the guys' attention. They were like a pack of crazed dogs, salivating around his woman.

No, the dance hall had been a bad idea. What had he been thinking, parading the most beautiful woman to hit town in ages in front of the entire male population of Comfort before

Cy had sealed the deal with her? But the night was young. There was still time to make a memorable evening out of it.

He walked her to the door of her motel room. The parking lot was empty and dark, so he took full advantage when she put the key in the door and turned to him to say goodnight. He wedged her up against the door, and kissed her. Her mouth parted, and his tongue swooped in. Her moan nearly brought him to the brink of orgasm. He ran his hand down her arm and brushed the side of her breast. She moaned softly, and moved slightly so his hand rested front and center on her bosom. He began to massage her nipple through the shimmery blouse and bra and could feel the hard nub form beneath his thumb. There was no way he was leaving here tonight. She melted into his embrace.

Suddenly, she bolted upright. An expression of horror splashed over her face. She put her hands to her mouth, broke from his embrace, and dashed inside the room.

Juliette wrapped her arms around the toilet bowl as the beer, hot wings, pretzels, and, yes, even a drag on Jimmy's cigarette came bubbling up and spilled over. Somehow, it tasted much better going down. When the retching stopped, she put her forehead on the cold porcelain for a moment, and thanked God she made it to the bathroom in time. The last thing she wanted was to throw up all over Cy's dress boots, which she was certain cost him hundreds of dollars.

She heard those boots now as Cy let himself into the motel room. He walked to the door of the bathroom and knocked just as her stomach started to cramp again.

"Don't even think about coming in here," she yelled through the closed door.

"Can I help?"

Her reply was lost as the last of her stomach contents splashed into the toilet. She didn't dare move. Not yet.

“Are you okay in there?” He sounded really concerned now.

“I think so, but I wanna be sure. Take a seat, or go home.”

“You sure I can’t help?”

“And do what? Hold back my hair as I upchuck? No! No man helps me throw up until the second date. That’s one of *my* rules.”

“Well, technically . . .”

“Yeah, yeah, you think this is date number three. Do you really want to have sex with someone who’s holdin’ on to a toilet bowl?”

“Well, since you put it so graphically, no, thanks, I don’t. But I do want to make certain you’re going to be all right, so I’m not leaving until you show yourself.”

“Okay, give me a few.”

Ten minutes later, she opened the bathroom door. She had rinsed out her mouth and run a brush through her hair, as best she could, since she was having trouble focusing on her reflection. Her color was still pale and her stomach was far from normal. With a hand on her jumpy belly, she turned to Cy. He was in her bed, back up against the headboard, legs out in front of him and crossed at the boots. Reading her Kindle. Holy shit. She’d been having visions of him in her bed all afternoon, but he was holding her, not her e-reader, in those illusions. He was the sexiest man she’d ever met, and the sight of him in her bed was doing strange things to her body. Her belly flipped and it had nothing to do with what she’d eaten or drunk tonight.

“Better, darlin’?”

“A bit.” She sat in a chair, her body still a bit wobbly. “Why is it, ever’ time you come into this room, you end up on the bed?”

“God, I thought you’d never get the hint.” He patted the portion of the bed near him. “Come over here.”

She moved from the chair to the edge of the bed and sat. He wrapped an arm around her middle and pulled her up

against his chest. He nuzzled her neck, but kept his hands in PG territory. Despite her rollicking stomach, she was mildly disappointed. She had so envisioned this night being X-rated, not PG. She sighed deeply, and leaned back into him.

“Do you want me to get you a ginger ale, or something?” His voice rumbled against her back.

“No, I’m okay. Boy, this is not the way I thought tonight would go.”

“Me, either. Believe me. I definitely had visions of us ending up in bed together, but not fully dressed. I guess I should leave, if you’re okay now.”

She sighed. “I guess so. But can you help me first? I don’t know how to get these boots off.”

He laughed and climbed out of bed. Kneeling at her feet, he quickly dispensed with her left boot. He held her foot in his large hands and reverently kissed her instep. Her breath caught in her throat. No one had ever been so tender toward her before. He went through the same motion with the other foot, and a piece of her heart went out to him before she could caution herself not to let herself get involved. This man was dangerous. And surprising. She could fall in love with him really hard if she didn’t watch herself. She’d made one big impulsive mistake in her life before. And if she didn’t leave Comfort soon, she’d be in danger of making another one.

“You don’t have to go.” God, now why did she say that? Where was her famous control? Had she left it behind in Ohio? It seemed that she had forgotten to pack her inhibitions for the trip and they had stayed behind once she crossed the state line.

“Yeah, I do have to go. I have one hard and fast rule that I don’t have sex with ladies who are drunk.”

“So many rules,” Juliette replied, her voice still slurred, as she ran her hand along his arm.

“It’s best this way. I don’t want you doing anything you’ll regret in the morning. You may think you’re okay

now, since you're not hugging the toilet, but you're still drunk. When we have sex, and believe me, we will, I want you to remember every touch, every lick, every thrust." He ran his hand up her body, skimmed over her breast, and cupped her face, tormenting her further. "We're going to be so good together, and I want you to remember everything."

She shuddered as his touch rocked her back on her heels. The dizziness she'd experienced in the bathroom returned, not brought on by the beer this time. She lowered herself to the mattress and closed her eyes. He leaned over, and kissed her lightly.

She heard the door softly close. When she opened her eyes, he was gone.

Chapter 6

Despite a queasy stomach, the next morning Juliette dressed in a pair of white shorts and a brown blouse with a V-neckline and fringe at the sleeves. She walked from the motel to the garage. The fringe tickled her arms as she moved. It wasn't her first choice, but nearly every blouse in Dolly's shop had fringe somewhere. And Juliette thought the color matched her eyes, so she accepted Dolly's advice. But when it came to the fringed undies, Juliette took a pass, although they had made her grin. A brief image of her swinging that fringe in front of Cy entered her brain before she put them back on the shelf. Her path today took her through the center of town, with its neat little square and parking spaces set on an angle. Dolly was in front of her store, with a broom in her hands, sweeping the entrance. She waved, so Juliette crossed the square.

"You've got on one of the outfits I put together for you yesterday. Looks right nice on you, honey," Dolly said, with an agreeable smile. "God, I'd love to have your figure."

"Thanks, Dolly, but I have to admit, this is far from my comfort zone." She toyed with the fringe on her sleeves.

"Well, comfortable or not, you're rocking it. Your outfit last night at the dance hall was pretty, too. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Yeah, right up until my body realized I had imbibed one too many longnecks."

"Ah, rough night, then? You heading up to see Cy now?"

"Yes, I need to call my insurance agent again and see

if Cy can get me a rental car so I can leave. At least that's the plan."

"So, you're gonna leave town, lickety-split?"

"It was never my intention to stop here in the first place. If it hadn't been for my car breaking down and that twister, I'd have been through here before I was even aware Comfort existed."

"Well, speaking strictly from the angle of a clothing store owner, I'd love for you to stay in town for awhile. If you keep prancing around in outfits from my shop, I'll do a good business this summer. You definitely show off my clothes to their best advantage."

Juliette snorted. "God, you're good for my ego, Dolly. I haven't 'pranced' in years."

She waved goodbye to the woman who had just bolstered her confidence, and continued on her way to the other end of town and Cy's garage.

He had been a real gentleman last night, and she had been touched by his unexpected tenderness. And touched by him. The memory of his hand as it moved up her body lasted long after he left the room. Nerves and shyness took over now and her newly-found confidence waned as she took one step after another toward the garage. Then, she spied him, and what little confidence she had managed to find went out the window.

He was putting air in the tires on a woman's car, carrying the hose from one underinflated tire to the next, all the while chatting up a storm with the woman. A flash of emotion ripped through her and her steps faltered. Why was she even remotely jealous? She weighed the new sensation carefully. Cy was as much a part of the fabric of this town as were the square and the parking stripes surrounding it. He probably was friends with everyone in a twenty mile radius. And she was the outsider, not knowing anyone except him. And the triplets.

So, he'd been kind to her last night and not taken advantage, which he certainly could have. That still gave her no right to harbor jealousy because he was laughing with some woman. Some attractive young woman, from what she could tell. In an expensive BMW, not a rust-bucket Toyota Corolla. *Jesus, Juliette, get a grip.*

Cy was wearing a wife-beater shirt that already had a grease stain down the front. His tanned arm and shoulder muscles glistened in the morning sun. She closed her eyes for a moment and remembered the feelings those arms and shoulders had evoked last night when they were around her. She opened her eyes, wanting to see more of him. His jeans were form-fitting, and Juliette got a glimpse of his nicely developed backside as he bent over to inflate the last tire. Another laugh between them, and the woman took off down the road, churning up a hail of gravel.

Cy put the hose away and glanced up, seeing her for the first time. He grinned and waved at her. There was no backing down now. She took a deep breath, and walked the rest of the way.

"Hi there, darlin'." His low voice tickled her ear. "Are you feeling better this morning?" He opened the door to the office portion of the garage for her and drew her into his arms when they crossed the threshold, dropping a kiss on her lips and running a hand through her hair.

She closed her eyes and relished the feeling of his arms around her before she backed away. This man was definitely too tempting. "Yes, better now. Thank you for last night. From what I remember of the evening, I had a lot of fun. Until I became best friends with the toilet bowl, anyway."

Cy grinned. "The night didn't end the way I had hoped it would, either, but yeah, you were the life of the party. We'll have to do it again, so you can remember it this time."

She held a hand to her head. "I don't think there will be a next time. My headache this morning is telling me I

shouldn't. Besides, I have to call to my insurance agent again, see if he's managed to straighten things out for me and then get back on the road soon. May I use your phone one more time?"

"So that's it? You're going to take off?"

Juliette glanced up when she heard the rip of anger in his voice. "That's been my plan all along, Cy, you know that. Even if we had ended last night in bed with each other, I'd still be leaving Comfort as soon as I could. I was never supposed to stop here in the first place."

"Well, I thought we had something special going on. We were certainly turning each other on, until you got sick. I thought we could continue what we started, to keep each other company for a few days. Maybe I'm losing my touch."

He turned his back to her, and it could have been her imagination, but an icy blast of air surrounded her. Goosebumps broke out on her body, and she wished for him to wrap himself around her once more. She rubbed her arms.

"Cy, don't do this. Don't be angry with me. You're the only friend I have in this town." Her fingers itched to reach out and touch him.

"Make your phone call. I'll be out in the garage." His voice sounded frosty too.

She sighed. And missed being called darlin'. How was that possible? He'd only been calling her by that moniker for a few days. How dare he show anger at her decision to leave. Wasn't the plan for both of them to have one night of passion and then she'd be gone? Hadn't he made it abundantly clear that he was a lady's man and that what he wanted was a simple roll in the hay? Why was he acting as if she was betraying him? She shook her already pounding head. Maybe she wasn't so good at reading men, after all.

He left her alone while she made the call to her insurance agent. When she finished, she wandered into the garage

portion of his establishment. He had a car up on a lift, and was changing the oil.

“I, uh, hate to say this, but it seems I must impose on your help once more. I’m sorry.”

He tossed his head her way. “Whatcha need?”

“My agent told me the book value on my car is down to nothing. So, even if they do get assurance from the local weather people that a tornado stole my car, I won’t get anything from the insurance company for it. They won’t even spring for a rental, since I chose not to get that option on the policy. So, I’m left to my own devices. Can I call somebody for a rental car? Maybe that place that brings the car to you...”

He took his time answering her. “Closest place to rent a car is Omaha, and I’m sure even the rental car company that brings the car to you has a mileage restriction, so you’re out of luck there.”

“How far away is Omaha?”

“About five hours’ drive.”

Juliette stared up at him. “Will you take me?”

He studied her for a long moment. “Can’t.” The glacier was still in his voice as he directed his attention back to the car he was working on. “When I’m not at the garage, I’ve got a farm to run.”

“Well, then. How about a bus? Surely, there’s a bus that comes through here every now and then.”

“Nope, just pickups and horses.” He gave her a sidelong look. “Do you have the cash to buy a car outright?”

“Well, not on me. But I can have my bank transfer funds, or write a check. What do you have in mind? Do you have a car out back you can sell me?”

Her question made him smile. Finally. “No, not me. But I know a guy who has a dealership in Omaha. You can check out the dealer’s inventory on the Internet and if you

see something you like, I can order it for you. They've been known to deliver, as long as you've got the cash."

Juliette let out a breath. "That might work. Give me the web address and I'll see what he has in stock."

Cy's face softened a bit. "Are you going to take the same amount of time to decide as you did last time you bought a car?" She caught a glimpse of his tell-tale grin and realized he was teasing her.

"I'll, uh, try to be a bit more spontaneous this time."

"Pity. I was hoping indecision would keep you in town a bit longer."

"Cy..."

"Yeah, I know. Come on, I'll get the website address for you."

He left her alone to browse the many cars and trucks that were available. As she scrolled through her options, she briefly toyed with the idea of a pick-up. What would Noah say if she pulled into her driveway in Ohio driving a truck? She chuckled as she imagined his startled expression. No, a pick-up was way too ridiculous. Especially for her life in Ohio. She turned her attention to compacts and hybrids, and spent the next half-hour narrowing her choices to something that was more appropriate to her life. *Boring*. The word flitted through her mind as she searched. Maybe she could really go Ohio crazy and get an orange or maybe, a lime-green car instead of veering toward silver, black, or white? Or something considered really risqué in Ohio—red. What kind of wild statement would that make about her? With a sigh, she wrote down her choices.

She returned to the garage bays with a slip of paper in her hand, detailing her final selections. Cy's attention was on an engine that was idling funny. It would act fine for a minute, then sputter and fume before it went back to normal. Juliette watched him work in silence. It seemed Cy had a

similar effect on car engines as he did on humans. Her heart had been tripping like the engine all morning. She smiled and touched her chest.

Finally, he noticed her. "Did you find something?"

"I've got a couple that have caught my interest. I'd like to get your opinion on them, and then could you call your buddy and make sure they're still available? I'll buy you lunch." She dangled the invitation. If Cy was like most men, he wouldn't turn down an offer of food, regardless of how angry he was with her.

"Sure thing. Just let me clean up a little first." He wiped his dirty hands on a rag before he turned to her. The twinkle was back in his eyes. "You realize lunch will be date number four, don't you? We're way behind."

She stepped back slightly, away from him, since she didn't trust herself. Even with the grease, he smelled way too good. *Danger, danger, Will Robinson*. "No, it's only date number two. We're way ahead. So tell me, how does this work? If I order a car, how does it get here?"

"They'll bring it out here on a flatbed. We've done it before. There's just one thing. They only offer that service on the weekends. So, you'll be stuck here until Saturday."

They went to Molly's diner. Cy would have preferred going to his apartment above the garage, but Juliette was acting strangely this morning. She would balk like an untrained colt if he suggested they go upstairs, so he opted for a public place. They had come so close to making love last night. He questioned his own choice of words, but that was the way of it. With Juliette, he would not be having sex, he'd be making love. Holy shit. Just a shift in his thought process made all the difference in how he regarded their encounter. He'd better get a grip on himself, and fast. He had no business making love with anyone, much less a woman

like her. But even knowing she was not his usual little plaything, he couldn't help himself. If only she hadn't gotten sick, he wouldn't have woken up alone this morning. And the boner he had all night would now be non-existent. Or back again. Regardless, the awkwardness of the first sexual encounter would be over and done with by now, and they'd be working on encounter number three or four. He'd be back to normal. Whatever normal was when it came to Juliette St. James.

Her mere presence had him hot once more. When he first saw her that morning, as she walked up the street toward him, with her long bare legs and the fringe on her blouse swaying with her movement, he nearly swallowed his tongue. But she was acting as if she didn't remember anything about the evening after they left the dance hall. As if she didn't remember melting into his body, thrusting her breast into his hand, shivering from his touch as he ran his hand up her body as she lay in that bed. She hadn't returned his kiss, and she backed away from his arms. She seemed very eager to escape Comfort. And him.

A jolt of pure pleasure coursed through him as he realized Comfort was making her uncomfortable. He enjoyed seeing her that way. Flustered. Off balance. Comfort didn't fit with the buttoned-up, sterile lifestyle he imagined she had in Ohio. She was the epitome of a sensible professional woman who wore flats, not heels or cowboy boots. Well, he and Comfort were going to shake things up a bit before they let her go. He could hold his heart in check for a while longer. After all, he'd been doing so for years. What were a few more days? He could do it, for a chance to get her into bed. He'd see to it.

They slid into opposite sides of a booth and Molly came over with a menu for Juliette. Cy had the menu memorized, having been a regular customer for more years than he could count. The menu hadn't changed in all that time, nor had Molly. She still had the over-teased bleached blonde hair

with multiple pencils sticking out from it, a diminutive frame, and a gravelly voice that spoke of too many cigarettes. She plucked a pencil out of her hairdo, pulled an order book from her green apron, and waited patiently for Juliette.

“Give us a few minutes, will you Molly?” Cy wanted, desperately, to talk to Juliette and to find out why she had such a reversal in her attitude this morning. Molly brought them a couple cans of pop before she stepped to the other side of the diner, leaving them alone.

Crickets. Dead air. Stony silence.

Juliette used her finger to trace the initials that had been long-ago been carved in the ancient tabletop. Cy controlled the urge to take her hand and trace his own message onto her palm. And what would that message be? *I want to fuck you until we both can't see straight?* That message may have appealed to other women, but Juliette wouldn't go for that. Something more subtle, maybe. *I'll give you roses every day, if you'll only stay in town a bit longer.* That message would appeal to someone like his sister, but Cy had a hard time with it.

How about, *I desperately want to spend more time with you, get to know you, explore every inch of your body?* Yeah, that would do. For both of them. He couldn't remember the last time he wanted to get that particular message across to a woman. Probably with Tammy. And he'd been about seventeen. But that's what he wanted now. With Juliette. And he was pretty sure she was thinking along those same lines. She just had to get rid of those rigid Ohio fences and boundaries she had created for herself. Or at least carve an opening in them a bit.

Instead of reaching across the table for her hand, he cleared his throat. She glanced up, and he caught the sparkle of tears in her eyes as she rapidly blinked them away.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I’m just feeling sorry for myself. I’ve done such a lousy job with my life.”

“From where I sit, I don’t think so. You’ve raised a child on your own, you’ve managed to get an advanced degree, which couldn’t have been easy with a small child to care for, and you’re a college professor, something not many people can say. How is that lousy?”

“I’ve only managed that by adhering to a stringent timeline. Every day, for my entire life. I never got to be a carefree college student. I did one impulsive thing in my life, and I’ve paid for it every day since.”

“You mean, your son?”

She sighed. “Don’t get me wrong. I love my son dearly. I don’t begrudge him at all, never have. After all, he had nothing to do with how he came into this world. I’m glad he turned out well, and is now a loving husband to Camille. She’s delightful, too. But, it was a struggle, raising him by myself, and there were more days where I wondered if I’d ever get through them than there were good times. Especially in the early years, while I was trying to go to school, work, and raise him.”

“What about your family? Did no one offer to help? Your mom never offered to babysit and give you a break?”

“No, my mom and dad died the summer I got pregnant. Car crash. It was pretty brutal and tragic. I was all alone in the world, at eighteen. That’s why I reached out to Noah’s father. I wanted to not feel numb, for a little while.”

“Wow. That’s a lot to handle, regardless of your age. No wonder you didn’t even think about abortion.”

“No, that was never an option. I had some life insurance money, which enabled me to go to college. But Noah spent a lot of time in day care while I was getting my degrees, and I spent the rest of my life making up for not being there for him in the early days.”

“Sounds as if you raised a fine son, despite the rocky start. So now that you’ve completed your job of raising him, you can think about yourself for the first time.”

She shook her head. “Yes, and therein lies my problem. What did I do, right off the bat? Messed up once more. I got a wild idea that a road trip would be fun and took off for parts unknown. By myself. Not a clue where I was headed. Not a logical thought in my head. I can’t make the right choices with my life, when it’s just about me. I tend to veer all over the place.”

Cy could control himself no longer. He took her hand and held it between his. “Ah, Juliette. You can’t be blaming yourself for your present circumstances. Mother Nature just slapped you in the face. It has nothing to do with your ability to make decisions. Think about it. In your wildest dreams, did you ever create the scene where your car would be sucked up in a tornado?”

She got a small smile on her face. The first smile he’d seen from her all day. He was beginning to feel better.

“Well, since you put it that way, no. But if I hadn’t made the stupid choice to get in the car, with no destination in mind, I would not have ended up on a road where tornadoes happen with some frequency, don’t you see?”

“And you would not have met me, the triplets, or the people from town that you were introduced to last night. Just think of the stories you’ll be able to tell your friends when you get back home.”

She fell quiet, but didn’t remove her hand from his grasp. He took that as a good sign. He began to rub circles on her wrist with his thumb, and she shivered. A better sign.

He brought up the reason why they were here. The other reason. “So, let’s talk cars.”

“No, let’s talk about you first. Do you mind? You know my life story, but I don’t know a thing about you, other than

that you can ride a horse and a Harley with equal authority. Tell me a little bit about you.”

“You forgot that I can also ride a bull, something not many men can say. You guessed that I was in the rodeo. Not much more to tell.”

She let her gaze dance over his face. “Oh, I think there’s much more to your story. What’s it like to be on the back of a bull?”

Cy’s chest puffed up a bit. “I was the best in the business, for a time. I’m the only one who ever rode Red Devil all the way to the buzzer.”

Her brow furrowed. “But aren’t bull rides only eight seconds in length?”

“That’s right. The longest eight seconds of your life.”

“And this Red Devil was the worst bull of the bunch?”

Cy grinned. “Red Devil is responsible for me actually making some money from the circuit. The payoff in prize money isn’t that much. It’s the endorsement deals where bull-riders make their coin.”

“I see, I guess.” She wove her fingers between his. “What kind of endorsement deals did you have? Belt buckles and other cowboy stuff?”

Cy leaned over and kissed each of her fingers as he ticked off the various companies who had sponsored him. Her eyes grew wide as she recognized some of the big names. Beer companies, soda bottlers, auto parts. More companies than she’d ever imagined, he could tell. When he finished his recitation, her eyes met his.

“So I guess the rodeo is a bigger deal than I thought.”

“Yes, it is. We’ll have to go sometime.”

She removed her hand from his. “I’ll be gone long before rodeo season gets here. Whenever rodeo season is.” Did he detect a note of sadness in her voice? Or maybe he was just hoping for one. He shook his head and stood up.

“Well then. We need to go somewhere right now. Molly, we’ll be back in a little bit for our lunch. Just hold on to the tab for the pop and we’ll be back later for lunch.”

He wrapped a hand around Juliette’s wrist and pulled her from the booth.

“Come on. We’re going to the farm.”

Chapter 7

“What’s at the farm that we need to get to in such a hurry?” Juliette yelled at him over the sound of a blaring radio playing country music and the open windows of the pick-up.

“You’ll see soon enough,” Cy replied, as he brought the truck to a screeching halt in front of the barn.

Juliette sat in the cab for a moment while Cy walked around to her door. Along with the usual assortment of farm outbuildings, she spied a sweet-looking house on the other side of the driveway. It had a huge front porch, where rocking chairs moved gently in the breeze. Royal blue shutters added a pop of color to the white house, and planters at the bottom of each window were filled with an assortment of summer flowers.

Cy opened her door and took her hand, but he wasn’t walking toward the house. He was headed, instead, to the barn. She glanced at him, and found the shit-eating grin back on his face. Uh-oh. Suddenly, her stomach, which was only now settling from the previous evening, began to roll again. What did he have up his sleeve?

Cy let go of her hand to pull open the barn door. Then, he bowed, and let her go in first. She took a gulp and gingerly stepped inside the cavernous building. The sweet smell of hay permeated the air. As her eyes adjusted to the low light inside the barn, she took a quick glance around. On one side was an enclosure, with cushy foam inside. In the middle was a huge mechanical bull.

Cy's grin grew even wider. And, she spied what she thought was a twinkle in his eyes. He was going to enjoy showing off for her.

"This here's where I practiced for thousands of hours before I ever got on the back of a live bull. I call this guy Fu Manchu."

"Okay, I'll bite. Why do you call it that?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Like the Tim McGraw song?"

She shrugged.

"Lord, you certainly aren't country, are you? Anyway, let me show you how to flip the switch, then I'll climb aboard."

He set some dials, indicated what lever to pull, and then jumped up on the machine. He nodded in her direction and put his hand on the brim of his hat in a salute. She started the bull up.

Cy was spinning so fast, it took her breath away. Up and down, back and forth, first one direction, and then another. He had one hand over his head, the other strapped in under the rope. The machine dipped and twisted, but Cy stuck on it as if it was nothing. She was fascinated at how such a ride could resemble poetry, but it did. A lifetime later, the bull stopped its pitching motion, and he climbed down.

"And, that, little darlin', is how it's done. Now it's your turn."

"Are you crazy? I'm not getting on that thing!"

"I'll run it at the slowest speed for you, and you'll be fine. What do you say? After all, it's only for eight seconds."

Juliette had the uneasy feeling she had annoyed Cy by belittling his profession, and this was payback. Her gaze ricocheted around the barn, eager to find something to change the course of this conversation. And she found it, in the shape of a vintage motorcycle, in its own private stall. Walking over to it, she ran her fingers over a pretty, cherry-fender skirt.

"What is this? I've never seen anything like it."

Cy went to her side and touched the bike reverently. "This is a 1947 Indian Chief motorcycle. Seventy-four cubic inches of unbridled power. Took me two years to rebuild her, and parts were hard to come by, since I didn't want reproduction parts. I searched the country for what I needed."

"Can we take her out for a spin?"

"Yeah, we can ride it back to the diner, if you want. Right after you take a spin on Fu Manchu."

Juliette took a deep breath. Okay, two could play at this game, and she was desperate for a ride on the vintage bike. She took the dare, set her purse down inside the fence and moved to the center where she climbed up onto the back of the machine and inserted one hand under the rope around the machine's middle.

It began slow enough, a gentle bob up and down, while moving in a circular motion.

"Press your knees into the sides of the bull," Cy called out.

The pace increased slightly as the machine got going. She was hanging on with both hands and her knees were pressed so tightly, she thought she'd leave an indentation. But suddenly, the machine switched direction and she wasn't ready for it. She flew through the air, landing on a pillow of foam.

She shook the dizziness from her head, propped herself up on an elbow and glared at Cy. "You did that on purpose," she growled as he came over to help her to her feet.

"No, I didn't touch it, honest. That's part of it, though. Just when you think you're getting close to the finish, the bull will change directions, and you're on your ass in the middle of the ring."

"Well, you let my ride go on much longer than yours."

"Nope. You lasted 6.7 seconds. You can check the timer on the machine if you'd like."

"But, I know I was up there for ages, not just seconds!"

“Sorry, darlin’. 6.7 seconds. That’s it. And I bet they were the longest seconds of your life. Am I right?”

Juliette brushed herself off and wrestled her arm from Cy’s grasp.

“You’ve made your point, rodeo man. Can we get some lunch now?”

“Sure. Unless you want to try once more, and see if you can stick on his back for the full eight.” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“No thanks. I would like to freshen up, though. It’s not every day I get thrown from a bull. Can I use the bathroom in your house?”

Cy’s gaze moved from her to the house and back to her. “You are fine. You don’t need ‘freshening.’ Besides, the diner has a restroom.”

He turned on his heel and began to walk toward the Indian Chief. She glanced at the cute little house, gave a slight shrug, and followed him. So, she wasn’t welcome in his home. She got it, but wondered why.

“So, tell me more about this bike.”

“It’s a unique motorcycle because it has a side shift, and a suicide clutch. You sure you want to ride her?”

“A suicide clutch? Heck, yes, I’d be crazy not to want to hop on the back of her, even if I don’t know what that means. It sounds exciting. Start it up.”

As she waited for him to kick the engine to life, she grinned. 6.7 seconds on the back of a bull named Fu Manchu, and a ride on a 1947 Indian Chief motorcycle with a suicide clutch, no less. Yet more things to add to her list of unusual experiences on this trip to nowhere.

She did need ‘freshening,’ despite what Cy said. She used the diner’s modest restroom to straighten out her hair and makeup. And to brush the hay off her blouse. A casual

observer might think she and Cy had just tussled in the barn. In actuality, she had gone head over heels, but not for Cy. It was over the back of the mechanical bull. What would her book club ladies think of that?

When she returned to her seat, Cy had placed their lunch order, and was reviewing her list of possible cars.

“So, shall we discuss your car choices now?”

“Let’s hold off on that for a bit longer. I want to know more about you. You mentioned before that you were born during a tornado, but, if that’s normal procedure here for naming babies, there must be thousands of little Cyclones running around Nebraska. So tell me the truth. How’d you get your name?”

He smiled at her question. “You probably don’t know this, being from Ohio and all, but June 3, 1980, the night I was born, is called the Night of the Twisters here. All I have to do is tell people my birthday and they figure it out from there.”

“Well, since I’m an outsider, why don’t you tell me about it?”

“It happened a bit south of here, near Grand Island. There were a total of seven tornadoes that came barreling through that night, and my mother was in the hospital, in the midst of delivering me while all that was going on.”

“Wow. How much damage was done?”

“Millions in property damage, as you might expect. Five people killed, more than two hundred injured. It was a hell of a night.”

“I knew there had to be a story behind your name. And it’s a great name to have as a bull-rider. Kismet, I’d say. I can hear it now, over the loudspeakers.” She pulled her can of soda pop off the table and used it as a microphone, dragging out his name as she imitated an announcer. “Next to ride is Cyclone Kelley from Nebraska!”

Her silliness amused her, and she grinned at him. "And what about your personal life? I get the impression that no woman's been in your house since your wife died. Am I right?"

He shrugged his shoulders and stayed silent.

"Can you tell me about her?"

He took a large swig of his soft drink before he directed his attention to her. "We were high school sweethearts. Went to the prom together, attended the county fairs, all the usual growing up on a farm stuff. My first and only love, and I screwed things up, big-time."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because I should have been here, beside my woman, taking care of her and the farm. Instead, I was off chasing the dream of becoming a big-time rodeo cowboy and I left her alone for months on end to run the farm. If I'd been here, I would have been the one in the way of that faulty conveyor belt that broke and killed her, and she'd still be alive."

"You don't know that for a fact. She could have still been in the way, even if you were standing beside her."

"Maybe so. But I made a mistake by wanting to make a name for myself and, maybe even more than that, wanting to make some big, easy money. And, as a result, Tammy paid for my foolishness with her life. And when you mess up that badly, you don't get a second chance."

Juliette took hold of his hand. "So that's why you've become the town playboy? Because you don't think you deserve another good woman?"

He pulled his hand away from her, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Okay, Cyclone, I get it. You want to remain a man of mystery. So, let's talk cars."

Cy put his napkin on top of the table after they finished lunch. "Thanks for buying my grub. I'll head to the john, while you settle up with Molly."

Juliette sighed, as she watched him walk toward the rear of the diner. She had glimpsed into the torment of Cy's life only briefly before he drew back and changed the subject. The remainder of the lunch had included a lively discussion about cars, but nothing more about Cy.

It might have been her imagination, but she thought Molly gave her a rather stern gaze as she made her way to the booth with the bill. She stood silently and waited for Juliette to dig through her purse for her wallet. Molly was making Juliette very nervous. Some of the contents of her purse spilled out as she searched for her wallet. When the dollars exchanged hands, Molly raised an eyebrow at her.

"Do you know what you're toying with here, missy?"

Juliette had guessed right. It had been a stern expression.

"I'm not toying with anything, Molly. Just trying to get the hell out of town as quickly as possible."

"That would be for the best, I think. You're getting way too friendly with our Cy. How much do you know about him, anyway?"

Juliette tried to control her temper. Being grilled by one of the triplets was making her uncomfortable. And angry. What business was it of hers, anyway? "I know enough. He's told me why he's named Cyclone, and that he was married once. Oh, and that he used to be in the rodeo, but had to quit because he broke too many bones."

Molly touched her massive hairdo, and then put her hand on her heart. "This is the only thing of Cy's that's broke."

"What do you mean?"

"He says he broke too many bones in the rodeo, but he was just fine until his wife died."

"She died in an accident, right?"

"Listen to what I'm sayin' instead of interrupting me, okay? Tammy was trying to keep the farm together while Cy was on the road, following the rodeo. She wouldn't have been anywhere near the conveyor if Cy had been here,

working the farm instead of out on the rodeo circuit. He's been blaming himself ever since, and his heart hasn't healed. May never."

Juliette gulped, and took a long drink of water. "So why are you telling me this story? I know I'm not the first woman he's dined with in here."

"But you're the first one he's been interested in. Big difference, from where I'm standing. And if all you're going to do is use him to satisfy an itch and then leave town, I'm telling you not to do it. Leave him alone."

Juliette didn't know which nugget of information to latch onto. Cy was more interested in her than the others he'd brought in? That Molly thought she was a slut? Her head was spinning and her anger was bristling. She decided to address the veiled threat instead.

"I'm not planning to use him to 'satisfy an itch', as you put it. I am a mother, with a grown son. Having a good time in the sack with a total stranger is not something I do on a regular basis. I'm not that kind of person."

Molly reached across the table and picked up the packet of condoms that had fallen out of Juliette's purse when she had grabbed for her wallet.

"Then, you'd better put these back in your purse and walk away, Missy." She slapped the condoms on the table.

Juliette's face became very hot as Molly turned, signifying an end to the conversation. She hadn't been this embarrassed since the sixth grade, when she walked out of the little girls' room with toilet paper stuck in her underpants and dangling behind her. Holy crap on a cracker, she'd just been reamed out by the lunch lady. Her meal was threatening to make a reappearance. Suddenly, the charming town of Comfort seemed way too small for her. She gathered up the other items that had fallen from her purse and waited outside the diner for Cy to take her back to the garage.

Chapter 8

Cy placed the phone back into its cradle and stared at Juliette. She was reading the flyers on the bulletin board, her fingers lightly touching each one before she moved on. While she was preoccupied, he gave himself a moment to study her. He'd done the math and figured out she was seven years older than he was. Not that he had a problem with an older woman. In fact, he preferred them, since they weren't so obsessed with their outward appearance and had enough wrinkles, inside and out, to make them interesting. But the legs she was showing beneath her respectable shorts were not the legs of a 41-year old woman. His hand itched as he remembered touching her smooth skin last night. It was going to be a long haul to get her back to that moment, with all the roadblocks she was putting in the way today. Was he up to it? Did he want to tango that badly with her? Why not just find another willing female instead?

She turned at that moment, and a smile lit her face. Yeah, he wanted to tango. Rhumba, Fox-Trot. Boot Scoot. His jeans grew tight as he returned her smile.

"So, what did you find out, Cy?"

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. "The car you like is available at the dealer's. My buddy can bring it out here on a flatbed for you to inspect, if you're serious about buying it, but he can't get here until the weekend, as I suspected. So, it seems as if you're stuck in Comfort for a week. I guess it's a good thing no one's expecting you."

"Isn't there some way to get to Omaha? Can't I hire a

cab to get me there? Maybe I can get to the dealer faster than he can get to me.”

“This isn’t exactly the big city, Juliette. No buses, no taxicabs, no subways. Just horses, Harleys, pickups and tractors. Sorry.”

She bit her lower lip. Exactly what he’d been thinking about doing. He inwardly groaned as his dick swelled in response. She took a deep breath, which brought her ample breasts front and center in his thoughts. His memory of last night, when he massaged her breast and brought her nipple to a hard nub under his hand ran through his mind, and he seriously thought his pants zipper would explode open.

“Well, I guess I can stay here for a week. But I’ll go crazy in that little motel room with nothing to do.”

Cy’s thoughts tumbled together. He formulated a plan in his head quickly.

“Why don’t you stay upstairs here instead? And I can give you something to do.”

Her head snapped up. “Isn’t that where you live? I, uh, don’t think that would be the best solution. And although I may have considered it last night, my mind is clearer today. I’m not interested in whatever you have in mind for me to do.” She huffed, actually huffed, as she narrowed her eyes at him.

He grinned at her. “Love the way you think, darlin’. Even though it’s a great idea for us to cohabitate for the week, I was thinking more along the lines that you’d stay at the apartment by yourself, and I’d bunk out at the farmhouse. It’s past time to mow the hay, and I need to be there anyway. And, as for something to do, you can watch the garage for me if you want to, and collect any money that comes in from people buying gas or candy bars. What do you say?”

“So you want me to work for you here at the garage? What’ll be my payment?”

His grin grew wider.

She shook her head. "Shut up."

"I didn't say a word. Must be all in your head, darlin'. Come on, let's go get your stuff from the motel and you can settle up with Lolly."

"You know she'll run straight to her sisters and gossip about me then, don't you?"

"So? You're not going to let three middle-aged biddies get to you, are you?"

"But you're a local, one of them, and they want to protect you. I'm the outsider." Her shoulders slumped and she turned from him.

Cy finally stood up and walked over to her. He wrapped her in his arms and held her close, inhaling the sweet, floral scent of her hair. He could stay here all day, pressed up against her backside. As much as he yearned to touch her more intimately, now was not the time. She needed consolation, not a frontal attack.

"What did Molly say to you?"

She shuddered in his arms and turned to him, burying her face into his shoulder. His shirt grew damp from her tears. "I'm so sorry, Cy, about Tammy."

He moved a step away, removing his arms from her. "I already told you about Tammy. What did Molly say to you?"

"She told me how you retired from the rodeo after the accident and came home to heal your broken heart. She thought I needed to hear it. And she warned me to stay clear of you, unless I planned to take up residence here."

"But we both know that's not in the cards. You're only going to be here for a few days, not the rest of your life. You're a professor at a big university, not a country bumpkin. Molly had no right to threaten you. If we, as two consenting adults, want to have some fun together, it's not Molly's or anyone else's business if we do."

She took a deep breath, and backed away. "It's funny how life repeats itself, isn't it? I thought exactly the same

thing the only other time I made an impetuous decision. I just wanted to have some fun with the man who became Noah's father and no one was going to tell me I couldn't. And it defined my life for the next twenty years. Molly was only putting things into perspective for me. I'm sorry, Cy, but I'm not going to make the same mistake I did before. I'll keep my distance, and stay at the motel for the week. Come and get me when the car arrives on the weekend."

She turned from him and left the garage. Her long legs ate up the distance much faster than he wanted them to. He stood and followed her white shorts with his eyes until she rounded a bend and disappeared from sight.

Juliette's backside tingled as she stifled the impulse to run away from the garage. What in the name of God was wrong with her? She had come precariously close to making a huge mistake. Again. The only time she had done things right in her life was when she put her son's interests ahead of her own. What would Noah have to say about her current behavior? He'd probably tell her she was overreacting to finally being on her own, and she'd better dial things back a notch. Come back home and get some proper perspective on her life. The scenario she'd been envisioning since almost the moment she entered Comfort would be absolutely the worst thing to do—ever. But, she wasn't yet ready to hear her sensible son's ideas, although she'd have to check in with him soon. She could remain in town as long as she stayed as far away from Cy as possible in the next seven days. So, that was her plan. Stay away from Cy, and call Noah at some point.

She took a moment when she got to the picturesque town square, and sat on one of the park benches near the gazebo where she figured a band would set up shop and play in a few weeks, on the Fourth of July. The diner was on one

side of the square, Dolly's dress shop on the other. Mixed in between were a small grocery store, an iconic hardware store, and a beauty parlor. Juliette was guessing teased hair and beehives were the salon's specialties. But the town itself was delightful. She sat on the bench and listened to the people as they emerged from their pickups and cars, hailing each other as they walked from one store to the next.

Petunias dripped in cascades from the hanging baskets at every lamppost, sweetening the air with the scent of cloves. In another life, in an alternate universe, she could see herself fitting in here. She'd always wanted to live in a quaint little town where the residents gathered on the green for big events. Instead, she'd made a home for herself and Noah in a bedroom community with no flavor at all—clove or otherwise—from which she drove each day to the city and her job as a professor. She sat a moment longer and let the sun warm her skin. With eyes half-closed, she let her thoughts wander.

They went straight to Cy. What was it about him that turned her mind to mush? It was similar to eating ice cream really fast on a hot day and getting brain freeze. But Cy was the opposite of ice cream. He was hot, hot, hot. Sex appeal oozed from every pore of his body. He could easily be a male model, even at the advanced age of thirty-four.

Thirty-four. Yeah, an advanced age. *He's a younger man, Juliette. And he's gorgeous. And he wants the same thing you do.*

So what if the triplets came after her with baseball bats as she drove off into the sunset a week from now? She would have the memory of a week of heady sexuality. There had been far too little of that in her life. One night with Mr. Studly that had resulted in Noah. And then a few random grab and go dates sandwiched in between Noah's soccer games and band practice. Certainly not the marathon headboard-banging lovemaking she was envisioning with Cy.

Why should she deny herself that enjoyment? Because, that was why. She closed her eyes, well aware of the danger more than one night with him would cause, and not just to him. She had already given him a part of herself. He wasn't the town heartthrob he tried to portray to the world. If he were, he'd have jumped her bones last night when she was too out of it to put up much resistance. Lord knows, even in her stupor, she wanted him. Her body responded greedily to his touch, rising of its own accord to meet his wicked hands as they skimmed over her. No, one night and then a quick getaway would be all her heart could take. More than that, and she'd want to stay by his side forever. She would wait until he came to her at the end of the week with the car before she acted on her impulse. That would have to be enough. She sighed and stood, walking slowly the rest of the way to the motel. Alone in Comfort. What an oxymoron.

She let herself into her room, and spun in a slow circle. There was the gray metal door where Cy first kissed her and made her nipple blossom under his hand. There was the small radiator where her pink undies first grabbed his attention. And the bathroom, where she had hugged the toilet last night. Then, there was the bed, with its serviceable flowered comforter, where he had stretched out both times he was in the room. And where he had taken off her boots with such loving care. And touched her, more intimately than she'd been touched in years.

She whimpered as she lowered herself onto the bed and closed her eyes. Immediately, his face sprang into view in her mind. That beautiful head of hair that reminded her of soft black velvet. She wanted to get lost in that hair. Forever. Clear blue eyes with their icy depths. His filbrum, God yes, that little cleft that she longed to lick. She let her mind drift to his other body parts. Strong, chiseled shoulders and muscular arms without being bulky. Strong enough to hold her. And strong enough to let her go.

Molly had to be mistaken. Cy had no feelings for her other than what he had for any other woman he'd been with since his wife died. Her mind went back and forth over the merits of making Cy her boy-toy for the week. Should she let loose of her rigid control and get what she wanted? What she needed? Juliette was certain she was right, and Molly was wrong. Cy only wanted a plaything for a few hours, or a few days. Then, he'd be happy to see her leave.

And she desperately wanted to be that plaything. It was almost as if she was at a Vegas weekend. What happens in Comfort stays in Comfort. To hell with being the uptight professional and mother. She wanted to fulfill Cy's fantasy of her as the naughty professor. Or the stripper he originally associated with her name, and teased her about. Her mind was made up. She'd take him up on his offer. Why, in heaven's name, shouldn't she have it all, for a few hours or maybe a few days, for just once in her life? She deserved this, didn't she?

She'd move into his apartment and have sex with him at every opportunity: before he left for the farm each morning; at lunchtime, when he'd come in from the fields for a nooner, smelling like the hay, the outdoors and good, honest, sweat, making her damp in her nether regions with just his glance; and jungle monkey sex every night, all night to the point where she'd stagger around the next day, sleep-deprived, but with a mile-wide grin on her face. She had seven days before her car was being delivered. Seven days she could fill with either motel boredom or heady sex. Her panties got damp at the mere thought. Yes, a diet of steady sex for the next week was far better than watching television in this cramped space and reading books on her Kindle. She'd return to the garage and tell him she'd changed her mind.

She hurriedly gathered her meager belongings and put them into the plastic bag from her shopping excursion at Dolly's. As her hand grasped the door handle, she stopped

and glanced down at herself. Good Lord, she was a bag lady, wandering down the street with all her worldly possessions, and announcing to everyone in Comfort that she was about to fornicate with the town stud. Her cheeks became heated even as she thought of the image. Molly would probably chase her through the town square with a frying pan if she caught sight of her. Juliette's hand dropped from the door. Tomorrow was soon enough to return. Without her bag of clothes. They'd talk things over as the sane adults they were and decide on the proper course of action.

Then, she'd fornicate with the town stud.

Chapter 9

Juliette took one final glance in the mirror. Her white shorts were crisp and clean. A casual yellow and white printed blouse with a built-in bra, another of Dolly's recommendations, hugged her curves and provided enough cleavage to be enticing. She sprinkled on some of her favorite cologne, which she'd found in her oversized purse. A final dab of lip gloss was all that was left. With full knowledge that she was taking a big step which she hoped was not a mistake, she locked the door to her little motel room and walked toward the garage, and to her hunky, soon-to-be lover.

She thought, briefly, of Tammy, and how she'd died. Cy blamed himself for her death, since he was off chasing his dream while she was trying to hold things together at home. Even if it had been a mutual decision, and even if Tammy had grown up on a farm and knew what to do, it was putting a lot of pressure on her, while Cy was on the road. Juliette was certain Cy blamed himself every day for not protecting his woman, and she couldn't really fault him for not wanting another long-term relationship. His heart must be broken, just as Molly said. Well, she didn't want to apply for the job of patching him up. She had just finished taking care of one young man. She didn't want to jump into anything else that spoke of commitment. If he truly was Humpty Dumpty, someone else would have to fix him. She just wanted to play with him until Saturday. If she kept telling herself that, she just might believe it.

Her own heart beat a little faster the closer she got to Cy's place of work. It had nothing to do with the modest exercise she was getting, either, although she told herself it had to be the only plausible explanation. She began to scour the garage with her eyes as soon as she rounded the bend, looking for Cy's mouthwatering physique. He wasn't out by the gas pumps, nor could she spot him in the empty garage bays. Disappointed, she walked the remaining few yards to the building and put her hand on the door leading to the office.

As she let herself in, the sound of a woman's voice talking on the phone wafted down the hallway from the office. The woman noticed her from behind the desk, waved, smiled and held up a finger signaling to her she was almost done. Juliette's return smile was tight. A quick glance around the room told her Cy was not in the garage at all. She took a few calming breaths, inhaling the odors of motor oil and gasoline. She ran her finger along the corkboard, which was loaded up with flyers, and pretended to read them intently, although she had just seen them all the previous day.

Juliette's eyes returned to the woman, and she observed her for a few moments. The young woman was lovely. She had long strands of caramel-colored hair that drizzled softly around her heart-shaped face. Her blue eyes sparkled. If Juliette had met her under other circumstances, they might have been friends.

But the gut-twisting jealousy that surged through her body told her she'd never be friends with this woman. This replacement. She had turned Cy down yesterday, and now, without any warning, there was another woman in this garage. And in his bed too, evidently. Where *she* was supposed to be. From the tousled look of that mane of hers, "the replacement" probably just climbed out the bed upstairs. Maybe Juliette had misread him after all, and Cy really was the town playboy he professed to be.

The woman hung up the phone, jumped up from behind the desk and came forward with her hand outstretched and a smile on her face. “Hi! I’m Josephine, Josie. How can I help you?”

Juliette stared at the woman, and amended her earlier assessment. The woman was not merely lovely. She was stunning. Daisy Duke shorts clung to her hips, and a bandeau halter covered her perky double-Ds. Mid-twenties, probably. Not just her breasts were perky. She actually bounced when she walked, exuding confidence and youth. Exactly the kind of woman Juliette would expect Cy to gravitate to. Molly had been so off base in her theory. Juliette was not Cy’s type. Not by a long shot.

“I, uh, I was hoping to find Cy.”

“Sorry. I’m the only one here today. He’s out at the farm, and asked me to come in and cover for him at the garage. I’ll see him later, though. Can I tell him to contact you?”

“No, no, that’s okay. No message. I, uh, I’ve gotta go.” Juliette stumbled from the garage, and down the street. She controlled the impulse to run, but just barely. Hot tears smarted at her eyes, but she refused to give in to them. Just that fast, he was over her. One J name was as good as another, apparently.

Juliette couldn’t sit still. The room was stifling, and the small window A/C unit did little to cool the air. When she opened another window, it only made things worse, as the hot air from outside mingled with the oven temperature inside the room, and sent waves of heat cascading over her body. She got up from the bed, where she had stretched out, hoping to take a nap. All stretching out on the bed did was remind her of Cy’s body as he parked himself there to wait for her. Something that wouldn’t be happening again. She whimpered.

He hadn't waited for her. He'd replaced her, almost as soon as she was out of sight. He really was the town lothario, as Juliette originally assumed, instead of a man with a broken heart, as Molly had claimed. With a sigh, Juliette left her room and her tortured thoughts behind and walked to the office, hoping to find Lolly.

Juliette had barely cleared the door when Lolly started talking. "Oh, good, you're awake. I didn't want to disturb you if you were asleep, but I did want to tell you that there's a pool out back you can use. I don't usually offer it to my guests, since it's my private pool and not part of the motel. But since you're going to be here until the end of the week, and we're having record high temperatures the next few days, I thought you'd be interested in hanging out there."

"Thanks, Lolly, but I don't have a swim suit. I'm really looking for a place where I can use my cell phone to call my son."

You might be able to do that out by the pool. There's one spot where if you stand just right, you can pick up a signal. And, as for a suit, Dolly brought something over for you. Here it is."

Lolly pulled out a tiny bikini from under the counter. It was really beautiful, with merlot-colored flowers on a white background. Juliette fingered it, luxuriating in the soft fabric, then raised her eyes to Lolly.

"I haven't worn a bikini in years. Not since my son was born."

"Well, then I'd say it's high time, sugar. I'd kill to have your body. And Dolly knows her stuff when it comes to clothing. If she thinks this is the best suit for you, then it is."

Juliette took a deep gulp. The pool was in the backyard of the motel, no one would see her anyway. And she could indulge in yet another of her fantasies and parade around in a bikini, as if she were a young woman. That bitch Josie wouldn't hesitate to put this on. And neither would she.

Goddamn it. After all, this was Comfort, where she was an unknown. Where people didn't expect her to behave in a certain way. She'd wear the hell out of the suit over the next week, especially if it was going to be hot as Hades every day. She'd get a nice tan for a change. Then, when she left town, she'd stash it away and never again put it on, ever. She'd go back to her staid life as a professor and a mother. And be fine with it. She nodded to Lolly.

"Thanks for the offer. A pool would be lovely. You're right. It's just what I need. And you're right about Dolly, too. She does know how to dress a woman to her best advantage. I'll wear the suit."

She ran back to her room, tore off her clothes, then pulled on the suit. And grinned into the mirror. *Thank you, Dolly. Again.* Juliette picked up a towel, her Kindle, and her cell and dashed around the building to the backyard. The water was so inviting, she dropped her stuff on a chair and plunged into the deep end. Her body temperature was cooling off by the second. Her mind immediately latched onto the metaphor of her actions. She had been about to jump into the deep end with Cy, and came to her senses in the nick of time. Her emotional temperature needed time to cool off, too. To throttle back, putting it into Cy's language. Yes, she could stay here for the week and avoid Cy altogether. That was now her plan. She exited the pool, toweled off and found the spot where the cell phone got a few bars. Noah picked up on the second ring.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hello, sweetie. How's your honeymoon going?"

"Hard to believe, but it's almost over. We've had a great time, but it'll be nice to get home, too. We'll be back tomorrow night and will stop over at your house then."

Juliette ran a hand over her damp hair. "Well, there's something you need to know first." She quickly filled him

in on her spontaneous decision of a week ago, to hop into the car and drive away from Ohio with no particular place in mind, and what had happened to her car.

“So, I can’t get another car until this weekend, and I can’t get back home until a few days after that. Can you drive by the house and make certain everything’s okay?”

“Do you want me to drive down and get you instead? Or fly to the nearest city and rent a car? Where did you say you were, Nebraska? How far is that from Ohio?”

Juliette laughed. “Too far for you to drive, especially after just getting back from a week’s vacation. And Nebraska is as far away from Ohio as you can get, in terms of lifestyles. I’m kind of enjoying it, though. I’ll be fine here for another couple of days. I don’t have anything pressing until August, anyway.”

“But, you’re stuck, Mom. I can take a few more days off and fly to the nearest airport, rent a car, and come to get you. It’s got to be boring as hell to be stuck in some little podunk town in the middle of nowhere. We could fly back together, and you’d be home in two days.”

“Honey, it’s okay. I got myself into this fix, because I didn’t have a clear idea of what I was doing. So, it’ll be up to me to get myself out. I’ll manage. I always do. And it’s turned into a mini-vacation for me. There’s a pool at the motel, so I can swim, sunbathe, and catch up on my reading. I’ll be fine.”

Noah hesitated. “Okay, then, if you’re sure. It’s so unlike you, though, to just go wandering off without a plan.”

“I know! It’s the most impulsive thing I’ve done in years. And what happens? I end up losing my car and my clothes in a tornado. Guess that shows me I don’t do impulse well. But Comfort, Nebraska is a lovely little town, so I’m quite happy to stay here for a few more days.”

“Well, you might be pleased to stay there, but we were hoping to see you tomorrow. I can’t wait until you get back

to tell you the big news. You're going to be a grandmother in seven months! Camille took a pregnancy test while we were in Acapulco. We suspected as much before the wedding, but wanted to wait until after the ceremony to make sure."

Juliette smiled into the phone. "I'm so happy for you two! I've been hoping, since you guys got together, that you'd provide me with a grandchild to spoil the heck out of. I'm so excited."

They talked for a few more minutes, then she said goodbye and broke the connection. Juliette glanced down at her bikini-clad body. Yes, once she left Comfort, she'd never put on this bathing suit. Grandmothers don't wear bikinis.

Cy hustled around to the back of the motel. He had a momentary panic attack when Juliette hadn't answered his knock, but Lolly stuck her head out from the office and told him she was at the pool. He thought, for a foolish moment, that Juliette had found a way out of town before he could explain Josie's presence. Josie told him the stranger had been upset as she left the garage, and Cy could imagine all the scenarios Juliette had been putting into her head that afternoon. He needed to clear things up with her. And he needed to tell her Molly was absolutely right in her assessment of his feelings. He was interested in her, and for far more than a few days or a week. Juliette hadn't been out of his thoughts for a moment since he picked her up by the side of the road.

His image as the town heartthrob was just that—an image. But that was pretty much all that Juliette had seen, so far, so he couldn't blame her for getting the wrong impression. Underneath all his bluster, he really wanted a relationship similar to what he'd had with Tammy. But he hadn't appreciated what he had when he had it, and, as penance, their rosy marriage came to a horrible end. If you

mess up once with something so monumental, you don't often get a second chance.

Juliette was that second chance. He didn't know why or how she stumbled into his life and was giving him a chance, but he was more than willing to grab onto it. He was man enough to take it. He drew in a deep breath when Lolly told him that, no, Juliette hadn't found a way out of town. She was still here. Maybe he could make this right. Neither of them had an easy life so far, but there was still time to correct that. He wanted the second chance Juliette could offer. And he wanted to give her a chance at happiness, too.

He came to a halt at the chain-link fence surrounding the pool area. Juliette was asleep in a lounge chair. He took a moment to drink her in. God, what the woman did to a bikini was insane. She was even more gorgeous than she had been yesterday. His eyes caressed her face. That little line of worry between her brows had smoothed out a bit. That's what he wanted to do with her: kiss away her worry, massage away the knot of anxiety that caused her shoulders to curl. And he wanted to make love to her, from her head to her toes. For the next, oh, twenty or thirty years.

As if sensing his eyes on her, she woke up and raised her hand over her eyes to return his stare. The fence between them was a good thing, because if she hadn't been fenced in, he would be tempted to act on his impulse to grab her, pull her into the pool with him and make sweet love to her until neither of them could see straight. Somehow, he didn't think Lolly would appreciate that type of behavior in her pool.

"Hi." He lifted a hand to the brim of his cowboy hat in greeting.

"I didn't expect to see you today."

The frost in her voice nearly made him turn and walk away. Or cry. For her or for him, he wasn't quite sure. What else did he expect, though? To have her run to the fence and

wrap her arms around him? That would have been nice, but she wasn't that kind of woman. She had denied herself pleasure for twenty or so years, paying her dues for one night of debauchery, and she was allowing her misguided notion of who Josie was to deny it again. She'd quickly retreated to her old habits. Damnation!

He gritted his teeth and replied, "I was told you were at the garage today and thought you might need something." He left the interpretation up to her, and of course, she jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"I don't need anything from you, Cy. And it seems you don't need anything from me, since I was replaced so quickly."

His heart ached at the hurt in her voice. "You mean, Josie? Yeah, she offered to pinch hit for me today at the garage, since you declined my offer."

Juliette turned from him and mumbled something under her breath. He couldn't hear her, but he had a fairly good idea what she was saying. He took a deep breath.

"And, even though she's my sister, she told me I have to find someone else tomorrow, if I wasn't done with the hay crop, since she has her own job to get to, and a couple kids and a husband to take care of."

He nearly smiled at her confused stare. He did enjoy confounding her.

"Your sister? You mean, that gorgeous young woman is your sister?"

"Yes, Josie is my sister." He allowed himself to grin now. "Good looks run in the family." He preened a little bit, raising his hand to his chin and showing off his profile. Then he got a serious expression on his face. "Contrary to public opinion, I don't have women stashed in every corner of this county."

She stood up, finally, and approached him. His hands itched to touch her skin, and his mouth wanted to taste her

once more. But instead he held onto the top of the fence as if it was a life preserver. And it might just be that.

She opened the fence gate and motioned for him to enter. "Let's talk."

Juliette sat in her lounge chair. She didn't trust her wobbly legs. Every time she was in the presence of Cyclone, he stirred her up just as his name implied. She had a twister churning through her body right now. Good Lord, she'd already fainted in front of him, and she'd nearly passed out from too much to drink, on the first two times they'd been together. Then, the third time, she spilled her condom stash in front of Molly, who was obviously the town's emotional sheriff. With that kind of string going, she'd probably fall into the pool from just his nearness if she didn't sit, and fast.

She drew in a shaky breath and let her eyes feast on him for a minute. He must have come right from the hay field since, when he removed the ever-present cowboy hat, she could see flecks of straw in his beautiful dark hair. His body glistened with a fine sheen of sweat. If his physique was any indication of the kind of shape a man could get into just by working on a farm, it was a pity it was a dying profession. She bunched her hands into fists so she wouldn't be tempted to brush the bits of hay from his mop of hair.

He returned her stare but didn't say anything. He was obviously waiting for her to speak. After all, she'd invited him in for a talk. She cleared her throat and shook her head to clear her mind.

"How much longer do you think you'll be with the mowing?"

"Another couple of days, probably. There's a storm due to blow in on Wednesday or Thursday, so we need to be done and have the bales stored by then."

"So you'll need someone at the garage each day?"

“Either that, or I close the garage down. Been known to happen, but there’s no reason to inconvenience people, if there are able bodies who can cover the store.” He scanned her from head to toe, making her very aware of how scantily clad she was. Obviously, he thought she was able-bodied enough. A rush of warmth pooled in her core. She shifted in her chair. God, the man did make her uncomfortable. And excited. She wet her lips with her tongue and noticed he followed the trail of her tongue with his eyes. Suddenly, her mouth went dry.

“Nice suit.” His voice was a whisper, but that was all he said. Leaving it to her to interpret that he thought the body inside the suit was nice, too.

“Thanks. Dolly picked it out for me.”

He nodded, but didn’t say anything more.

“Okay, I’ll watch the garage for you on two conditions.” She lifted her hands in the air and ticked off her points on her fingers. “One, I will continue to stay here at the motel. I won’t move in to your apartment.”

“All right.”

“And two, you have to stay away from the garage.”

His eyebrows shot up at that condition. “Well, I have to show you how to operate the cash register, and how things get done.”

“Yes, okay, you can give me a quick training session, but once that is done, I don’t want you hanging around. After all, you’re supposed to have fields to plow, or something.”

“Juliette, I’m not going to pounce on you the moment you turn your back.”

Possibly not. But she couldn’t trust herself not to pounce on him when *he* wasn’t expecting it. She hesitated, and bit down on her lip so hard she tasted blood. He was asking her to put herself into the path of temptation, into the path of a cyclone, every day for the next three days, even though he might not look at it that way.

“Come on, darlin’. I think it’s the least you can do, since I did save your life.”

“I thought you had already played that card. Isn’t that how you got me into the dance hall?”

“Well, considering how that evening ended, I think it’s only fair that I should be able to play it again.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Do we have a deal?”

He paused for a moment, and then stretched out his hand. She shook it to seal their bargain. But had a niggling feeling she’d live to regret it. Or to rejoice from it. That was the trouble with Cyclone. He churned up her thoughts to the point where she couldn’t decide what the right response should be. And she was afraid that, once Cyclone blew through her life, it would be unrecognizable, much like a house that had been squarely in the path of a tornado.

Chapter 10

Juliette pawed through her meager wardrobe, searching for something that would be garage-attendant appropriate, but yet would also catch Cy's eye. She was going to spend part of the morning with him, as he taught her how to operate the cash register, and Lord knows what else that went into operating a garage.

Stop it, Juliette. Cy might be a handsome hunk of man, but his taste in women did not include soon-to-be-grandmothers. She was old enough to be a mother to most of the women he usually hung with. It was past time to put the fantasy of a hot young lover while on her rash road trip aside and get back to her old lifestyle. In six days, she'd leave Comfort and its residents behind. There were men at home who were better suited to her conservative lifestyle. All she needed to do was to find them. Maybe she should sign up for one of those on-line dating sites. And endure fifty first dates. Hell, she'd raised a son all by herself. She could wend her way through fifty frogs to find a prince.

She pulled out the jeans and baseball jersey she'd worn the day her car broke down. Lolly had offered to wash them for her, so at least they were clean and without wrinkles. Beside them, she placed her white shorts and the yellow top with the built-in bra Dolly had convinced her to buy. With a sigh, she ran her hands over the Dolly outfit, and pulled her jersey over her head. Her jeans and nondescript shirt would be fine. White shorts were a bad idea in a greasy garage anyway.

As she walked the four blocks to Cy's business, she listed the things she needed to do. Buy at least one more outfit from Dolly. Get some non-perishable groceries into her room. Go to bed with Cy. She stopped walking. *No, no, no, Juliette. Remove that last thought from your mind.* With a groan, she shifted her thoughts and spent a moment admiring the town square.

Comfort really was a pretty little place, with its white gazebo smack-dab in the center of the square, and a fine, manicured lawn around it. Two-story buildings surrounded the park on all sides. Juliette took a guess that some of the second floors were apartments over the shops, and for a few minutes thought about how she would decorate such a space.

Good Lord, Juliette, you're not going down that road, even in your mind. Your home is in Ohio, near Lake Erie, not in Tornado Alley where there's not even a small lake in sight. Quit dawdling and get to work.

She shook her head and quickened her pace for the remaining block to the garage. Cy was waiting for her, and here she was, daydreaming about setting up housekeeping in Comfort. Lordy.

He was outside, talking to someone in a pickup truck. The sun shone behind him, creating a halo effect. Sun seemed to follow him wherever he went. Better than a dark cloud. Or a tornado. She smiled at the thought, and put a hand to her stomach as he raised his head and caught sight of her. Cyclone. His mother had named him well. He had the ability, with just a wave of his hand, to stir her emotions to the boiling point. If he did touch her, in any kind of intimate way, she would spontaneously combust.

The truck took off down the highway, and Cy waited for her. He put his hands on his hips, emphasizing his slim waist and broad shoulders. He was wearing a regular T-shirt today, with ragged edges where the sleeves had once been. It

was blue, almost the same color as his eyes. His jeans clung to his hips and legs, and Juliette allowed herself a moment's indulgence to admire what was inside those jeans as she completed her journey.

"Hi." The word came out of her breathlessly. She blamed it on the quick pace she had used to finish the last block.

He smiled at her, as if he was aware of the real reason she had lost her breath.

"Hi." He stuck his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. She glanced down at them, and realized he was cradling his cock and balls. Her mouth became very dry as she remembered his large, hard shaft up against her belly as he'd kissed her at the motel door. Right before she upchucked her beer. In an attempt to control her wayward thoughts, she turned away, and stared at the building. Her tongue darted out and ran over her lips, hoping to give some relief to her parched mouth. She glanced at him.

"So, what exactly do you want me to do?" Her voice croaked. God, she couldn't be around him without becoming a blithering idiot. Not when he was cradling his cock. He raised an eyebrow at her in response.

"Shut up." She took a step away from him, toward the building.

He followed her inside. "I've written the instructions on how to operate the cash register, and put them beside it. Let's go through the procedure one time, so you get the hang of it." He ran her through the register details, and she tried it out a couple of times to make certain she could open the drawer quickly.

"Well, professor, you caught onto that really fast. Other than that, take messages if anyone calls, and you need to know where the cut-off is for the pumps, just in case. Pretty simple."

"Just in case of what?"

"What?"

“The cut-off for the pumps. Just in case of what?”

“In case someone accidentally plows into the pumps.”

“That happens with regularity?” She tried to keep the incredulity from her voice, without much success.

“No, but it has happened. Best to be prepared. And, if you hear the weather sirens, don’t even think twice about it. Cut them off.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be nice for the next couple of days?”

“Darlin’, you’re in Nebraska. The weather can change in an instant. And with all this heat, something’s bound to happen soon.”

“You mean, another tornado?”

“I mean, it’s best to be prepared.” He took hold of her chin, and brushed her lower lip softly with his thumb. “I don’t mean to scare you, but you need to know what to do.”

He led her to the switch and showed her how it operated. Then, he turned to her. “I have one more thing to show you, Madam American History Professor. Come with me.”

He took her hand and tugged on it, leading her out the back door and behind the garage. There was an open field with plains grass growing tall and waving in the breeze. He stopped at the edge of the field and waited for her to register what she was seeing. A portion of the field beginning at the back door of the garage and cutting through the prairie grass was rutted and scarred with tracks of some kind. She glanced up at him, with a quizzical expression on her face.

“What could possibly have left such deep scars in the earth?”

“Wagons. By the thousands. This was a small part of the Oregon Trail at one time. The wagon trains lumbered through here every summer on their way to Oregon from Missouri. I sometimes sit out here and think about what those folks on the trains were thinking as they came through here. Were they tired out and ready to stop once they got to this part of the country, or did they want to continue? Did they see the

beauty of what became Nebraska, or did they merely want to pass through, eager to get to Oregon? I thought you'd enjoy seeing it."

Juliette knelt down and touched the ruts in the ground. "Wow. You've got a huge chunk of history at your back door. This is sacred ground."

He smiled down at her. "I thought you'd like it. Tell you what. On Saturday when you get your car, maybe before you take off, we can go to Chimney Rock. It's not too far away."

"I'd love to see it, even though I know the initials of the settlers have long since disappeared. It's still a connection to the mass migration that took place. Having an experience such as this under my belt will make me a better teacher."

"Tell me what it's like to teach history to teenagers who are still wet behind their ears." He settled on the ground next to her and dipped his hand in the tracks of the long-departed wagons. "Do they get it, or are they just bored out of their minds?"

"Some do get it, and appreciate what our forefathers went through to get us where we are today. But there are some who are just marking time, so they can cross it off their list of required courses and move along. But when I get a student in who understands, and who asks intelligent questions, or writes a brilliant paper, I still get goosebumps."

"I bet you're a great teacher, to have inspired them."

She smiled. "Well, I wish I could say that inspiration hits someone every semester, but I'd be lying. Sometimes an entire year goes by and no one gets bitten by the history bug. But being this close to wagon tracks will definitely help my discussions when we get to that point next year."

"So maybe your spontaneous trip really did have some unconscious thought behind it, seeing as how you've been following the Oregon Trail since leaving Independence, Missouri. And your trail led you to my garage. And speaking of my garage, you need to get inside, and I need to get going

out to the field.” He stood up and brushed the dust from his fingers before extending his hand to her.

Juliette took Cy’s hand as he helped her to her feet, and thought about what he had just said. Could he possibly be right and she was meant to stop here? She quietly followed him back inside the garage.

“I hope you brought that Kindle of yours, since you’ll probably be bored shitless by noon. I stocked the cupboard and refrigerator last night, so you’ll have something to eat for lunch. And, I’ll try to be back here by six or so, to lock up. See you then.”

He hopped into his pickup and drove off into the sunrise. She touched her lip, where his thumb had been only minutes ago. The taste of his saltiness lingered as she licked her lips. She hadn’t spontaneously combusted after all. Probably a good thing, considering she was standing over a huge gasoline tank. But, already her body ached for his nearness. It was going to be a long day.

Cy jumped in his truck and sped away as fast as he could. If he didn’t leave soon after he took her chin in his hand and softly touched her lip, he never would be able to. One touch only made him want more. He envisioned himself hauling her over to the desk, stripping off her tight-fitting jeans and mounting her there. Or maybe throwing her over his shoulder like a cave man and running upstairs to the apartment, where he’d lay her on his bed and ravage her body until neither of them could walk. The memory of that same shirt plastered against her body on the night he picked her up and delivered her to the motel was burning a hole in his brain as it was, and she had worn it again this morning. Did she choose it on purpose just to torment him? God, what was it with this woman? She fell into his life only four days ago and now he couldn’t imagine the rest of his days without her. He wanted

to take her to his farm, where they'd be away from prying eyes, and make sweet love to her for days. Years. Decades. In every room of the house, as well as the barn and each of the outbuildings.

What was wrong with him? He shook his head to clear it as he drove away from the garage. No woman, other than his sister, had set foot in the farmhouse since Tammy died. He knew Juliette was curious about it, since she'd asked to go inside after their impromptu bull-riding session, but he refused her. Josie came out once every few weeks, to clean up after him. But he spent so little time there, it was hardly necessary. He was grateful, though, that she'd gone through the drawers and closets and taken all of Tammy's clothing away. He couldn't bring himself to do it. And, up until now, the thought of any other woman in the house was unimaginable. It had been Tammy's house. She designed it, decorated it, chosen the paint color for those ridiculous shutters. Her stamp was all over the house, and no other woman was allowed in, physically or emotionally.

So why, suddenly, was a vision of Juliette, dressed in nothing but a bib apron and meeting him at the door each evening flitting through his mind now? Good God, just thinking about her got him hard. He had sat by her side last evening and talked to her about working for him as if they were rational human beings. But the whole time, he was envisioning running his hands over her exposed flesh, and the not-so-exposed parts. He caught a whiff of her scent and nearly lost control of himself right then and there.

He had no idea what he said to her, since his thoughts were running wild. He kept his eyes on her lovely face with an effort, but every time she lowered her gaze, his eyes strayed to the ample cleavage revealed by that skimpy, scrumptious bikini. He wanted to lick the cleft between her breasts. For starters. She was turning him into one horny toad, something

he hadn't been since he was in high school and discovered what a penis was really for.

But it wasn't just her physical presence that got under his skin. Although she was every man's fantasy in the physical sense. Or at least Cy's life-long fantasy. A blonde with brown eyes was an unusual combination, and he'd been on the hunt for one since he first found that poster of Brigitte Bardot when he was thirteen. He still remembered how his father laughed at his choice when he bought that poster from the antique shop with his allowance money. But he had also told Cy he had good taste in women, even at his tender age. He'd had beautiful women in his arms since Tammy's death, but they never affected him the way Juliette did. From what he'd been able to pry out of her, she'd had one night of folly twenty-three years ago and had been paying penance for it ever since. Although having a child, regardless of how it happened, would never be a mistake, as far as Cy was concerned.

She had lived a very rigid, controlled life up to this point, out of necessity. They were two lost souls, Juliette and Cy, for entirely different reasons. He found her by the side of the road in just the nick of time, for both of them. He took that as a sign from above. And he wasn't inclined to let her go. Would she be willing to alter her lifestyle if they did get together? It would take a lot of convincing on his part for her to give up her job in Ohio and leave her son's side. It was ridiculous to think she would toss over her life for him, anyway. He wasn't that big of a prize. After all, his first go-round with marriage had ended in disaster. If Juliette had any sense about her, she'd continue to resist him for the rest of the week.

And now, to preserve his own sanity, when he should have been keeping his distance from Juliette, he had put her front and center in his line of vision each and every day, for the next couple of days. He wasn't content to leave her

tucked away behind the motel, where she wanted to be, hidden from view. Rocking that skimpy bikini. Looking like sin. Where she was safe. Where she couldn't upset the tipsy boat his life had become. Oh, no, he had to install her in his garage, promise to keep his hands off her and to stay out of her sight, most of the time from now until Saturday. It was as if he was a diabetic and placed himself smack in the middle of a candy factory. What form of idiocy was he engaging in? What penance was he paying? He had to remind himself to pull his tongue back into his mouth this morning, when what he really wanted to do was to follow Juliette around and lick any appendage that she put within range of him.

Get real, cowboy! She's a college-educated professor at some high-faluting university, and you're a farmer who owns a gas station on the side. In the middle of nowhere. Your wife is dead, and it might as well have been at your hand, for all you did to protect her. Best to keep your hands, your lips, and your tongue, off of this woman. Maybe tumble her once, just before she leaves town, to show her what Comfort truly means. But that had to be all. Molly was right. His heart couldn't take another blow.

Cy was right. Juliette was bored out of her mind at the garage, long before her stomach told her it was time for lunch. She sold a couple candy bars, and a few people pulled in for gas, but the pumps only took credit cards, so they pretty much operated themselves. Once or twice the phone rang, but all she could do was take messages. She cleaned up the office a bit. Even though Cy's garage was as clean as it could be, considering the materials used on a daily basis, there were some areas that could be improved upon. Men could be dirty and unaffected by filth, as she was well aware, having raised one.

The coffeepot hadn't been cleaned thoroughly in about a year, from the looks of it. She got it to sparkle, and then made a pot of coffee for herself. While it was brewing, she let herself out the back door and stared at the ruts from the wagon trains. Cy had a huge piece of history at his back door and very few people knew about it. She paced alongside the ruts until they disappeared into the road that ran perpendicular to the field, trying to imagine being a part of one of the wagon trains following these tracks to a new future. She taught the western expansion in her history classes and knew that, if folks got to Chimney Rock by the fourth of July, their chances of making it to Oregon before winter set in were good.

And she also was aware that women and children, as well as the men, usually walked alongside the wagons, which were loaded down with supplies and possessions. Regardless of whether the women were about to deliver a child or not, they'd walk for miles before they'd haul their cumbersome bodies into the back of the moving wagon and have their baby. Then, they got up at four the next morning to make breakfast over an open fire. She had a healthy dose of admiration for them, even before actually seeing, and physically touching, the route they took to The Promised Land.

Tears welled in her eyes as she gave thanks to those hardy souls, and promised herself she would read every one of their journals once more as soon as possible. She reentered the garage, poured a cup of coffee, and sat down to read the last of her romance book. She inhaled the aromatic brew, and blew on it to cool the coffee before she took a sip. Yum. She did appreciate the fact that Cy's taste buds were as well developed as the rest of him.

She was at the big climatic scene in her novel, climactic being the key word. The heroine finally stopped fighting the attraction between herself and her Highlander heartthrob,

and was about to tumble into bed with him for the first time. Juliette's body became warm as she sped through the final scenes. The coffee grew cold as her finger rapidly turned the virtual pages on her Kindle. Her mind began to wander from the pages of her book to the pages of her own life.

Maybe that's what she should do. Stop fighting against the attraction between herself and her Highlander, which in her case was a cowboy wearing a Stetson and jeans. Nice, tight jeans that hugged his well-developed backside. She gave in to her fantasy and allowed herself to imagine gazing at him in the buff when he finally ripped off those jeans and revealed himself, in all his muscled glory, to her. That was right before he took her so hard she lost her breath.

Her gaze became unfocused as she played out the scene in her head. His thumb had scorched her lip this morning, even though it had been just a light, feathery breath of a touch. If he were to kiss her again as he had the night of the dance—right before she'd tossed her cookies—she didn't think she could ever leave him. And leave him she must. This man and this town were her fantasy vacation from reality. That was all this could ever be.

After all, she was a professor at a far-off university. In a land far-far away. In another galaxy. Another dimension. It took her a few seconds to recall the name of the college where she had spent the last fifteen years of her career. Her son and new daughter-in-law lived just down the street from the home she had worked so hard to buy when Noah was still small, so he could have a stable home life. And there was a new grandchild in her future. No, it was still not the time for her to be selfish and indulgent, to want what she surely couldn't have. It may never be time for her. Her mother always used to say some people were put on this earth to take, and others put here to give. She sighed as she realized she was one of the givers.

All she could do was to fantasize about what life in

Comfort might be like, but never to act upon it. She needed to make certain her son's dreams were realized and spoil her grandchildren.

She closed her eyes and indulged for several minutes in the fantasy of Cy taking her to the bed upstairs where she was certain so many others had gone before her. She didn't even care if she was one of the long parade of women who came through the loft. She wanted to join the festivities, just once. To become a notch on his bedpost. She wanted to be a taker, to grab life with both hands.

She wanted to be the headliner, the majorette tossing her baton in the air, or a cheerleader in a skimpy outfit showing off in front of the world. Cy would not be able to resist her, even with all his hard and fast rules. He'd take her upstairs and strip her nude, then would rake his eyes over her while he took off his shirt. He'd stop to tease her, would lean over her body and take her breast in his mouth, bringing her to orgasm without laying a hand on her.

Then, he'd unzip his jeans, and she'd finally feast her eyes on his hard, solid, large manhood. The penis she'd been brushing up against and fantasizing about for days now, as if she were some hormonally-driven teenager. She'd reach up and take his shaft in her hands and luxuriate in the sensation of having her hands around this male body part for the first time in years. Her hands curled of their own accord as she daydreamed, and her mouth opened as she gave herself permission to lick his cock.

"Hey, is anyone here?" A male voice pierced through the cobwebs of her mind and brought her back to reality. Embarrassed at how damp she was, just from thinking about Cy, she quickly rose from her seat, coffee and Highlanders forgotten, but still momentarily befuddled.

"Yes, I'm here. Just a sec." She ran a hand down her shirt, making certain she hadn't drooled on herself while in fantasyland, and walked to the front room,

Cy's friend, Jimmy, the one who'd gotten so touchy-feely the other night at the dance hall, stood in the small front room of the garage, where the candy, auto parts and cash register were.

"Oh, hi, Jimmy," she said weakly, as she ran a hand over her hair. "Cy's not here. He's at the farm for the day."

"Yeah, I figured as much. I just came in for some spark plugs for my tractor, and I'm off to do the same thing. I'm surprised you're here though. I expected Josie."

"Josie had to work today, and fortunately for you, I didn't have anything better to do. So you can get your spark plugs and head on out to the fields."

Jimmy took her hand as she gave him back the change and held onto it for a moment. "Yep, it's a shame I have to get that field plowed. Otherwise, I'd be happy to stay here and keep you company. Create a few sparks of our own, if you know what I mean . . ." He winked broadly at her.

She laughed and removed her hand. "I swear, Comfort is good for my soul. I've been hit on more in the last four days than I have in the past twenty years. Thanks, Jimmy, for making my day."

"Maybe I'll come back later and see if I can't make your night, too."

"Goodbye, Jimmy." She laughed as he drove off.

Juliette turned away from his departing truck and decided to find something for lunch. She walked to the little refrigerator and cupboard Cy claimed to have stocked. The refrigerator gave up a turkey, swiss cheese and bacon sandwich, piled high on sourdough bread. And a coke, in a bottle, not a can. For some reason, that amused her. As she pried the cap off the bottle, her nose twitched as the carbonation of the beverage reached her. She opened the cupboard and put her hand on her heart. There, stacked up and waiting for her, were six individual-sized bags of Cheetos.

Chapter 11

Cy's ear tickled when Juliette's voice came on the other end of the phone, saying, "Cy's Garage, may I help you?"

"Hello, darlin'," he replied, sounding like a George Jones country song, even to himself. "How are you doing there? Any problems?"

She laughed. He got weak in the knees. If he could crawl through the phone line, he would have right then and there, so he could capture her upturned lips with his own. The lady deserved to laugh, every day for the rest of her life.

"No, it's actually been a very pleasant day. Jimmy stopped in for some spark plugs, I've sold some snacks to a few people, and folks have stopped in to fill up their tanks. Other than that, nothing out of the ordinary."

He stopped listening when she said Jimmy stopped by. Even though Jimmy was one of his best friends, he had no doubt the man would try to get next to his woman at the first opportunity, horn-dog that he was. And Juliette was *his* woman, God damn it!

"Was Jimmy working today?"

"Yes, the spark plugs were for his tractor. He said he might stop back later on, though."

Just as Cy thought. Jimmy was never one to miss an opportunity with a pretty woman. He was thinking about returning to the garage, where Juliette sat, alone and unprotected, and he would press his advantage, Cy was sure of it. Maybe Juliette could handle herself with Jimmy. With the knowledge Cy had about her life, he was aware she was a fighter. But what if she didn't want to fight him off? Visions

of her welcoming Jimmy's charms burned through his mind in a jealous lava flow, even though, rationally, he realized Jimmy was no more near her type than he was. Regardless, he didn't want her to be tempted by Jimmy, or anyone else. Two could play at Jimmy's game, God damn it.

"Listen, it's getting on toward five now, and we've decided to keep working in the fields until dark, so I won't be able to get back and show you how to button things up. Here's what you have to do . . ."

He quickly ran down the list of how to close down the cash drawer, cut off the pumps, and the few other details involved. "You might as well go ahead and do it now, rather than wait until six. I want you to get back to the motel before it gets too late. Maybe take a dip in Lolly's pool to cool off."

"Are you sure I shouldn't stay here until closing? Really, it will be all right. I know the way back to the motel by now."

Cy ran his hand through his sweaty hair. Every nerve ending in his body strained toward the voice on the phone. He couldn't risk having her and Jimmy together. He had staked his claim, at least in his own head, and he had to protect what was his.

"There's really no need. People around here understand, during harvest, that sometimes, things close early."

"Well, okay, then . . ." She trailed off for a moment. "By the way, thank you for the Cheetos. They made my day."

He grinned into the phone. "How many bags are left? Do I need to restock for tomorrow?"

She laughed again. He loved the sound. "No, I only ate two bags of them. Plenty left for tomorrow."

"Okay, go on and close up. If I get done here at a decent hour, I'll stop by and take you to dinner, as payment for your day's work."

"That would be nice, Cy. But, if you have work to do, please don't feel obligated. I can feed myself."

“Darlin’, after a long day working in the fields, there’s no sight I’d rather see than you in that skimpy bikini of yours. I’ll be there.”

He hung up the phone, thinking of Juliette sucking orange Cheeto dust from her fingers while wearing her pretty swimsuit. Nightfall couldn’t come soon enough.

Cy pocketed the phone and turned to his brother-in-law, O.C., in the field. “Let’s get this done. I have things to do.”

“Why are you suddenly in such an all-fired hurry?”

Cy blinked and tried to control his runaway thoughts. He ran his hand through his hair. In reality, O.C. was the brother he never had, not just a brother-in-law. They had been working side by side for two days now, to get this hay mowed, baled and stored away. They shared their crops with each other, just as they had shared Tammy. She had been O.C.’s baby sister and Cy’s wife. Cy took a swig from the water bottle and offered it to O.C. before he leveled his gaze upon the man.

“What would you say if I told you I was getting serious about a woman?”

O.C. narrowed his eyes at his friend. “I’d say it’s about damn time. Who is she?”

“Are you serious?”

“Hell, yeah, man. So, who is she?”

“Her name’s Juliette St. James, and she’s staying in town this week. I picked her up last Thursday near the Jenkins’ cornfield where her car had broken down. Took her to Lolly’s motel.”

“Is she the one who caused such a sensation at the dance hall on Friday?”

“So you heard about that. Yeah, one and the same. You were probably the only single guy in town who wasn’t

there to see the new chick. New blood in town always stirs things up.”

“I was stirring things up on my own, with Callie. That’s why I missed Friday night. We meant to get there, but couldn’t seem to get out of bed long enough. So, this new lady, this Juliette, she’s stirring you up?”

“You could say that.”

“Well, good. It’s been a long time coming.”

“You wouldn’t mind? I mean, Tammy was your sister and all . . .”

O.C. clamped his hand on Cy’s shoulder. “Tammy’s death shouldn’t mean a death sentence for you too, Cy. We both have been beating ourselves up for a long time over not being here to protect her when she needed us. I’ve finally moved on, and found a sweet woman to spend some time with. You need to do the same. So, tell me about this lady. Is she good-looking?”

“You know that old poster I have in the loft?”

“Brigitte Bardot?” O.C. put his hand to his shirt and began tugging on it rhythmically, imitating a rapid heartbeat. “Don’t tell me she is a Bardot look-alike.”

Cy nodded. “A dead-ringer.”

“How long is she here for?”

“Just until Saturday. Unless I can convince her to stay longer. But she’s got a really good job back in Ohio, and a son who just got married, who still lives close to her. So I don’t know if I can keep her in Comfort.”

“Well then, why are we standing here talking? Let’s get the rest of this field mowed so you can get into town and to your lady.”

Cy laughed, his mood suddenly lighter than it had been in days. Years. O.C. was right. It was time for Cy to move on with his life. And he couldn’t imagine anyone he’d rather move on with than Juliette. He inhaled the scent of the freshly mown hay.

“Yeah, let’s mow the rest of this field down, O.C. I’ve got a pretty lady waiting for me.”

“Lucky bastard.” O.C. laughed as he got back up on the tractor and they got to work.

The bells attached to the door of Dolly’s Dresses n’ Such jangled as Juliette entered the store. She reminded herself she was only there to settle up with Dolly about the swimsuit, not to buy a new sexy outfit for dinner with Cy. What she had on would do just fine.

“Hello, Juliette,” Dolly called out from the counter, where she was folding some clothing. “Funny, I was just thinking about you. I got in these blouses today, and thought they’d be terrific on someone with a body like yours. What do you think?” She held up a deep rose-colored V-neck blouse with a cross-over effect at the breasts, and shirring on both sides.

Juliette held the silky fabric between her fingers. Once again, Dolly was spot-on. She would be beyond sexy in this. Especially with her white shorts . . .

She brought herself up so quickly she almost gave herself whiplash. What would she do with it once she left town? This is not the type of blouse a grandmother would wear. If she kept on in this manner, with Dolly picking out some new article of clothing for her every day, she’d leave town with a mountain of apparel in the back seat of her car that would be most inappropriate for her life in Ohio. And they would only remind her of her stay here in Comfort, since she could never wear any of them. She’d have a healthy charitable donation to make at Goodwill if she didn’t stop buying clothes here. A professor had no business wearing a top with a built-in bra or white shorts. She’d best start reining herself in. And she would. Right after this purchase.

She smiled at Dolly. “You’re right, it would probably fit me very well. Let me try one on. And, I want to thank you for dropping off the swimsuit yesterday. It’s lovely.”

“I thought you might appreciate that, especially with the heat we’ve been having.”

And with the heat Cy and I have been having, Juliette thought, as she entered the dressing room.

A few minutes later, she left the store with less cash in her wallet, and a new bag with her rosy pink blouse in it. What had happened to her normal restraint? Had she left that behind in Ohio, too? She finally was at a point in her life where she didn’t have to watch every penny to make sure she would have food on the table. But, if she kept on at this pace, she’d be destitute in no time. With a closet full of slinky, definitely not her style, clothing.

She returned to her motel room, hung up her new blouse, and ran her hand down the material. It was indulgent, but isn’t that what vacations were all about? She pulled off her sweaty jersey and jeans and donned her bikini. The water would feel good today.

Lolly had placed a floating chair in the pool and, after a quick plunge into the water, Juliette hoisted herself into the chair, dangling her feet in the water. She paddled for a few minutes, then began to relax. She may not have intentionally chosen Comfort as a vacation spot, but it did have its benefits. Cy was revving her engine every bit as masterfully as he worked on the car engines in his shop, and for the first time in ages, she was thinking about sex every waking moment.

She appreciated the laid-back lifestyle here. Even though she lived in a relatively snug little suburb, how many people did she really know? She certainly didn’t have a personal fashion stylist in Ohio. And the ruts from the long-ago Oregon Trail were in Cy’s backyard for her to walk beside and dream about. She certainly didn’t have that back

in Ohio. Yes, she was enjoying her unexpected hiatus. It was as if Comfort was wrapping its arms around her, and making her feel at home.

She yearned for Cy to wrap his arms around her, too. Even though their deal was for him to stay away from her while she was working at the garage, she hadn't included the nights in the bargain. Was it an intentional oversight on her part? He presented a dangerous situation, but she couldn't help herself. All she had to do was see him, and she got embarrassingly damp. The mere thought of his lips scorching a path down her body made her melt. She had to have him before she left town, even if it was just once.

She couldn't turn her back on him yet, not now that he'd awakened the sexual cravings she'd buried for years under homework, soccer matches, and earning a living. In Ohio, her chances of finding someone to pair up with were slim. So why not indulge her daydreams with him? Her mind drifted back to the fantasy she had put into her head before Jimmy so ungraciously interrupted her this afternoon, and her nerve endings began to shoot out sparks.

She was well aware of why she shouldn't. Because once would never be enough.

Upon seeing Juliette at the motel pool, Cy's first impulse was to catapult into the water and land on top of her. She had fallen asleep in the floating chair and was unaware of his presence, so Cy allowed himself a few moments to indulge in her before he made himself known. As if he were a twelve-year-old boy who had just discovered a woman's breasts, his gaze lingered on her cleavage. He'd love to bury his nose between her breasts and stay there for days.

Even though her physical presence and her scent were enticing, he found himself drawn to her more and more as

he discovered little things about her. She'd had a hard life, because of one cataclysmic error when she was eighteen. But, she'd dealt with it, made a life for herself and her son, and become the strong woman she was today. The kind of woman who would be a perfect farmer's wife. The kind of woman he could imagine cooking meals in the kitchen of his farmhouse. The house no woman had been allowed access to since Tammy's death.

He rested his hands on the top of the chain-link fence as he pondered where his thoughts were headed. He'd been a brash and selfish young man while he was married to Tammy. He left her alone for months at a time while he went in search of fame and fortune. He'd gotten huge endorsement deals for everything from belt buckles to boots to bottles of beer, but at what cost? True, they'd both agreed he should go on the road and earn some big money if he could, but it was because she was doing what should have been his work that she was placed in the path of that faulty conveyor belt. He wasn't entitled to anything more than the life he now had. And his life in Comfort wasn't all that bad. Or it hadn't been, before Juliette dropped into town and shook him to his core.

Because of his endorsement deals, he now had a paid-for farm and gas station, and, if a crop failed one year, it wouldn't set him back much. He realized his position was far different from most of the farmers in Middle America, who were mortgaged to the hilt, and one bad crop could spell financial hardship, if not ruin. He should be content with his lot in life. For the most part, he was. But sometimes, he still wanted to complete the picture with a lovely wife and a child or two. Things he thought he'd have with Tammy. And, because he had screwed that up, thought he could, or should, never have again. Until now.

As if sensing his presence, Juliette woke from her slumber. When her gaze locked with his, she smiled a lazy

smile, the kind he'd expect to see after a night of indulgent lovemaking. The kind of smile he wanted to put on her face every day from now on. He grinned back, as his body began to react to her presence and he opened the gate. To hell with what he had thought he deserved. This woman was what he wanted, right now. And for the rest of his life.

"Hello, darlin'. I missed you today."

He stripped off his sweaty shirt and cowboy hat, kicked off his boots, but kept the rest of his clothes on as he walked into the water and up to her as she floated in the chair. She leaned over and brushed back his hair.

"You've still got hay all over you." He took advantage of her nearness and swooped in for a kiss. She moved back into the chair and away from him.

So he flipped over the chair. She came up sputtering. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her before she could say anything.

This time, she didn't back away. She plastered herself to him, and he welcomed her. His kisses became torrid, and he sought entrance into her mouth. She wrapped her arms around his wet body and held on tightly as they bobbed through the water together. He ran a hand down her front. He'd wanted to touch her midriff and her flat stomach for days now. He stopped his hand's downward progression when he got to her bikini bottom, but slid a finger in between her skin and the elastic. She shivered in response. He brought his hand back up to her luscious breasts, and cupped her right breast in his hand, sensing the nipple reacting to his touch. Lord, how he wanted to cover that ready nipple with his mouth. But he couldn't stop kissing her lips. She tasted pure and clean, and he couldn't get enough. The rest of his life wouldn't be long enough.

They broke apart, finally, both gasping for air. Cy kept his arms around her as they continued to bob around

the water in each other's embrace. His hands slid over her stomach, stopped to play with her belly button, and skimmed the top of her bikini bottoms. She quivered under his touch and his shaft ached with need. Juliette had a solid grip on his shoulders, and he never wanted to let her get any further away from him than she was right now. For several minutes, they held onto each other, running their hands up and down each other's bodies.

"This is the first time I've seen you without a shirt. Nice," Juliette purred into his ear. Her hot breath on his ear nearly made him whimper. She ran her hands down his hard six-pack and his skin erupted in goosebumps.

"And I wouldn't mind it if you'd wear nothing other than this bikini ever again." He fondled her breast once more.

"You say that now, but wait until you see what Dolly found for me today."

"Are you intentionally trying to torture me?" He claimed another kiss from her, and his hand moved to her bikini bottom. He cupped her backside, and she moaned as she rocked against him. He pulled her closer, so his hard cock bumped against her core and the bundle of nerves of her sex. She shivered in his grasp, which nearly took him over the edge. With a great deal of effort, she backed away.

"No, you're trying to torture me." She moved out of his grasp, finally, and exited the pool. She picked up a towel and wrapped it around herself. Cy wanted to cry.

He followed her out of the water, and tried to take her in his arms. She moved away. "Cy, this craziness has to stop. We both know this attraction for each other is wrong. And potentially dangerous. Yet every time I get within two feet of you, all I want is for you to touch me, and vice versa. This can't go on. You deserve a girl who can be happy living on a farm in the middle of nowhere. In the middle of Comfort." Was it his imagination, or did she just sigh as she said those last words?

“You could be that woman, Juliette,” his voice came out deep and gravelly.

Tears glistened her eyes as she faced him. “No, I can’t. As much as I’d like to be that woman, I didn’t just drop out of the sky. I have a home and a family and this is just some kind of crazy dream. Let’s drop the subject and go to dinner.”

Chapter 12

She wore the new top and her white shorts. Not that she wanted to seduce Cy. Really. She simply had nothing else to wear. At least that's what she told herself, as she hopped onto the back of his Harley and they sped off toward town. Cy had the foresight to pack a clean pair of jeans and a shirt, which he'd changed into before they left the motel room. While he was in the bathroom for his turn, she let her thoughts drift to a naked Cy toweling off mere feet away from her. She nearly swooned. Now she knew what that word meant in all the Regency novels she'd read. It was an overwhelming feeling. But Cy was a tempting morsel she couldn't allow herself to touch anymore, so she was entitled to a swoon.

The evening air was cool on her bare legs, and she huddled behind him on the Harley for the three-block ride. And wrapped her arms around him tightly to keep the chill at bay. She was aware of every nerve-ending in her body, and her core hadn't calmed down since he put his hands on her ass while they were in the pool and he'd pulled her against his erection. She was a puddle of emotions, and all she could do was hang on for dear life. And repeat to herself that she had her arms wrapped around him simply for safety's sake.

They took their places across from each other in a secluded booth at the diner. Molly gave her the evil eye when they walked in, but didn't say anything. And kept out of their way, except to take their orders. Cy reached across the table and took her hand. She had missed his touch in the few minutes since they'd gotten off the bike. Good Lord, she had a bad case of the hornies.

But was that all it was? She admitted she was a ball of sexual energy, more so than she'd ever been in her life. So, could she strap him between her legs for a long ride before she left Comfort in her rearview mirror and be satisfied? She shook her head, knowing that one taste of the complete package that was Cy would never be enough. No, it was best to step away from temptation and to not even venture down that road. Easier said than done.

"We have to talk," she said in a low voice. He shifted his attention from her hand, but didn't let go of it. In fact, he added a little massaging of her wrist with his thumb for good measure. She sighed and pulled away from his grasp.

"See, this is what I'm talking about. This crazy reaction we have toward each other. It has to stop, for both of our sakes."

"Why?" Such a simple question, and one for which there were a million different answers.

"Because I have a life in Ohio that's quite nice. I have a great job, my son and his new wife live down the street from the house I raised him in, and I'm soon to be a grandmother."

His eyes carved a torrid path down her body to her breasts. Her nipples sprang to life under his gaze. Holy crap, what this man's gaze did to her. She had just been seared by his mere glance.

"You sure don't remind me of my grandmother."

Her voice caught in her throat at his response. "Ah, Cy." She whispered. And then cleared her throat and straightened up in the booth.

"Maybe a baby's just what I need, to put my life back into focus. This trip has been so unlike me, and you're so unlike me. I need to get back home, to my life, and leave you and Comfort behind."

"I'll agree with you on the baby part. Maybe that is what you need. Since you already have a son, I'd be content with a daughter, wouldn't you?"

She gasped. "I'm not thinking about having my own child. Spoiling my son's child will be quite enough."

“But women in their forties are having babies all the time now. Why not you? Why not us?” He sought her hand and lifted it to his lips. “I’m in love with you, Juliette. I talked things through with O.C. today while we were working. And, if he could see the effect you are having on me, surely you can tell that by now too, can’t you?”

She wanted to gasp, but she found she had no breath. For good measure, Cy planted a kiss on her wrist. Then, he tugged her across the table and kissed her hard on the mouth before she could resist.

She sunk back into the leather cushion of the booth, aroused by his actions to a perilous point. If he had no common sense about their situation, it would have to be up to her to find some for both of them. By declaring his love for her, he had thrown down a gauntlet, and she had to deflect it. But he had declared his love for her, something she thought no man would ever say to her! No, no, she had to put an end to this.

“You can’t be in love with me. I won’t allow it. And, as for talk of marriage and babies, that’s hogwash. You’re the craziest thing that’s happened to me since I got in the car a week ago. And, believe me, a whole lot of crazy’s been going on. Now you’re throwing in marriage and babies? That is insane on top of crazy.”

“Why is it crazy? Don’t you think a man could fall in love with you in an instant? You had me the minute you got out of your car and sucked your fingers.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she put her hands to them, hoping her cold hands would pull the heat from her cheeks. “It’s crazy because love doesn’t happen that fast. Lust, yes, sex, yes. But not love. That’s an emotion that grows slowly, over a considerable time. You can’t be in love with me. It’s not possible.”

He gave her his heart-melting smile. “Well, okay, I’ll amend my statement. The first emotion I had was lust. My

God, how could I not? You're the most physically beautiful woman I've ever met. But, we've now known each other for five days, and I've had time to get acquainted with your mind. I've discovered your inner package is even more beautiful than the outer one. So, over a considerable number of days, I've grown to love you."

"Ah, Cy . . ." she said as she put her hand on her heart. "But I need to get back home . . ."

"We can do that, if that's what you want. I'll sell the farm and the garage, and move to Ohio with you."

She stared at him. "You'd do that, for me?"

"In a heartbeat. Darlin', why do you think you're not worth it? Why do you think we're not worth it?"

She could sense her tears resurfacing. "Because my life's not been an easy one, and true happiness for me has never been in the cards. I've learned to be content with my lot in life."

"If anyone ever needed to be happy, it's you. Circumstances may have made your life until now one where you focus on your son, but that job's done. So here's your chance. Our chance. My life's been one of regret, too. But together we can change it. All you have to do is rethink your life, and focus not on what you thought it would be, but what it could be. Leave yourself open to a new idea for your future, be it here or in Ohio. I know I have, now that I've met you."

She laughed slightly. "Is that all I have to do? Rethink my life? Easy-peasy."

"It can be, Juliette. All you need to do is let yourself go. Don't hang up your spurs just yet. Let's make each other happy for the rest of our lives. I'm begging you."

He had her thinking, anyway. Her life may not have been a smooth ride so far, but his hadn't been, either. He had been beating himself up over Tammy's death for such a long

time, he hadn't realized there was another way to live. He had been a self-centered brash young man whose life with Tammy should have been precious, and more than enough to make him happy and thankful. But no, he had been after money, fame and glory. Well, he got everything he wanted, and what did he have to show for it? His life was empty. Even emptier, now that he'd found Juliette, and realized she might leave him anyway. He'd made several million dollars by being a bull rider at the top of his game. And he'd shocked the rodeo nation by retiring from the business while he was at the top, shortly after Tammy's death. So, what was left? A hollow shell of a life. And he'd been content with it.

Until Juliette. Now, he wanted to grab on with both hands and live the wild ride that their life together could be. No bull ride could begin to compare to a life with Juliette. He wanted to hear her laughter every day for the rest of his life. And he wanted to be the one responsible for making her laugh. For putting that smile on her face.

She shifted in her seat. He made her nervous, and excited. It made him happy that he could break through her cool professor exterior and get her juices flowing. He hoped to keep her that way for years. But right now, she was awfully quiet. He decided to change the subject. To step back from the edge. He'd given her a lot to think about, and he was content to let the subject drop. For now.

"We got a lot done today, out at the farm. I wouldn't have been able to do that without you covering for me at the garage. So, thanks."

"You keep saying 'we' when you talk about the farm. Who's this O.C. person that you're referring to?"

"That's my buddy. I'll have to introduce you two someday."

"O.C.? As in Orange County?"

Cy smiled. "That's right. His real name is Otis. He and Tammy were brother and sister, and grew up here, but he

decided to try to become a stunt man in Hollywood. So, off he went, left Comfort behind. And spent ten years in Orange County before he returned. When he got back, we all just added another initial, since we called him 'O' the whole time he was growing up. O.C. fits him."

"So, he's your wife's brother? Does that make him a partner in your farm, then?"

"No, he's got his own farm. He's growing corn this year, I'm growing hay. We share in the work of harvesting of our crops, then divide everything in two."

She glanced up from the table, finally. "So, it's kind of a co-op. I've heard of the concept. Are you nearly finished with the hay, then?"

"Everything's mowed now. Tomorrow, we'll go back to the original field and bale that, since it's been drying since Sunday. Wednesday, we'll do the same with the field we cut today. Then, we'll be done, until it's time to pick corn."

"You'll still need me for two more days, then?"

"I need you for a lot longer than that, but for right now, two days will suffice."

Juliette shifted in her seat. Her eyes darted away from his face, and then back. He watched her swallow, hard.

"So your buddy, your brother-in-law, O.C. knows about me?"

He stared into her eyes, sensing this was an important question to her.

"Yes."

"Everything?"

"Well, I haven't given him all the details, but he knows you rev my motor in a way no one's done in years. Does that answer your question?"

"Well, how did he react to that knowledge? After all, Tammy was his sister." She lowered her gaze to the tablecloth.

He reached across and clasped her hand. "He told me to

learn from my mistakes and not let you out of my sight for a minute.”

She snapped her head up in surprise. “Seriously? He doesn’t hold a grudge against you for leaving Tammy alone?”

“No more than he does for himself. After all, he was in Hollywood, chasing his dreams when she died, so he wasn’t here to help her, either. We’ve both been beating ourselves up for years about not being there for her.” Cy stopped, his voice clogged with emotion.

She wove her fingers between his as she caught the tears in his eyes. “I’m so sorry, Cy, for both of you.”

“Yeah, it’s been rough.” He removed his hand from hers and ran it over his face. Then, he cleared his throat. “And it’s past time to move on. O.C. said so, and I have to agree. I want to change the course of my life, and you can help me, if you want to. What date are we on, now?”

“This is not a date, Cy. It’s my payment for working for you today. I think it’s best if we both remember that and behave accordingly, as responsible adults.”

In response, he reached across the table and curled a lock of her blonde hair around his hand. His hand brushed her breast, and her body shivered in response. “How do you usually wear your hair when you’re in Ohio and in front of a classroom of randy young men?”

“What a strange question, Cy.” She untangled her hair from his grasp and sat upright and out of reach. “I wear my hair in a French twist or a bun when I’m working. When I’m not working, I throw it back into a ponytail.”

“Yeah, I bet all your little college boys would go nuts if you walked into the classroom with your hair down like this. It’s a sexy style, not at all prim or proper. Do you realize since you’ve been in Comfort you haven’t worn any hairstyle other than this one? I notice these things, since Josie is a

stylist and she trained me well. Maybe you could wear a bun when we do the naughty professor fantasy?"

"There will not be a naughty professor fantasy, bun or no. Do I make myself clear?" She couldn't quite keep the smile from her face. He was such a *guy*.

"Yes, ma'am." He sounded serious, but he had a grin on his face. Juliette sighed in exasperation.

They finished their meals in silence. Cy tore into his, but Juliette's appetite had flown out the window with the course of their conversation. She pondered what Cy said. According to him, all she had to do was let herself imagine what her life would be with him, and she'd turn her back on her old existence. And her despised professor bun. But it wasn't as easy as he made it seem. After all, she had worked long and hard to get tenure and the security that came with it.

She scraped and saved every dime to afford a down payment on a house for herself and Noah. Her son had organized his life to stay close to her even as an adult. She appreciated his commitment to her. He had a nice job in town and the newlyweds had rented a comfortable apartment mere blocks away from the home Noah had grown up in. Her house was now paid off, and she could relax a little. And enjoy her grandchild. The last thing she needed was to start over, with a new baby, with a new man.

She stole a glance across the table at Cy. But, what a man! All she had to do was gaze at him, and her knees got weak. If she were to let herself go, she'd grovel at his cowboy boots and beg to be made his sex slave. She couldn't do that. For God's sake, she was a mother and a soon-to-be grandmother. She could not be having head-banging sex every night, even though it's what she desperately wanted. And needed. Her one mistake, when she was just a teenager, had shaped her life and made her grow up before she'd even had a chance to taste life, before she'd tested any boundaries. She wanted the type of love that had blossomed between her son and Camille.

Why shouldn't she have heart-pounding love in her life, too, even if she was over forty? Why couldn't she have Cy?

Because, because, because. She reminded herself of all the reasons why as they finished up their meal, hopped back on the Harley, and headed to the motel. Cy had been uncommonly quiet, waiting for her to talk, she supposed. He had laid out what their lives could be like together, either here or in Ohio, and was waiting patiently for her response. But she couldn't say anything that would please him. Good Lord, the man had just offered to up-end his entire life for her, and she had nothing to say to him.

He walked her to the door of her room, and she let him take the key and open it for her. When she turned to say goodnight, he caught her between the door and his body and was kissing her senseless before she could catch her breath. He backed her into the room and closed the door with a swift kick from one of his cowboy boots. Together, they wove a crazy quilt pattern through the room until Cy finally found the bed, and they dropped onto it.

One kiss melted into another. His touch seared her, branded her. She moaned, a long, low, animal sound that embarrassed her. That wicked mouth moved to the sensitive spot below her ear and lingered there long enough to make her pant. She was on the verge of passing out in front of him again. His large hand molded itself to her breast, and her nerves became tighter than a violin string. He tugged her new dusty rose blouse out of the way and moved her bra aside. His lips closed greedily over her nipple and he suckled her, tasting her completely and teasing her as no one had ever done before. The movements of his lips and tongue were sure and relentless. The sensations pummeling her body were unlike anything she had ever experienced, and she lost her steely control as she exploded in orgasm. Just as she had imagined that very afternoon at the garage, right before Jimmy interrupted her.

Cy held her, and pelted her with gentle kisses while she struggled to get her breathing under control and to bring her eyes back into focus.

“What just happened?” she whispered as she brushed his hair from his eyes.

“It’s what could happen to you every night, darlin’,” he drawled. “Don’t tell me you’ve never had an orgasm before?”

“Well, certainly not because of a touch. Not from someone sucking my boob.”

“I’d love to touch more than your breast. All you need to do is say yes.”

She smiled as she squirmed in his arms. “So we’re both negotiating now? I asked you to stay away from the garage when I’m there. And you’re asking me to . . . ?”

“Give me the rest of your life to make up for the lousy one you’ve had so far.”

The man did know how to take her breath away. She lay on the bed next to him and said nothing. She didn’t know what to say. Several times, she swallowed as she frantically searched her mind for an answer, but still came up empty. What he was asking her for was too much to agree to, at least not without making up a list of pros and cons and ruminating over it for many months. She couldn’t make such a life-altering decision on a whim.

For a long moment, he stared into her eyes, then pulled her bra into place, giving himself a moment to graze his hand over her breast one more time, which brought her again to full arousal. Her breath caught in her throat. With a heavy sigh, he straightened out her top and sat up, dangling his legs over the side of the bed. He rubbed his hands over his face, obscuring her view so she couldn’t read his feelings. She sat up and reached for him. He brushed her hands away.

“No. No more samples, Juliette. I’ve shown you what you could have, if only you’d let yourself take it. But if it’s not good enough for you, then I can’t be around you. You’re

awful damn close to breaking my heart, and if I was to go all-in with you, even for one night, you'd do just that. You might be able to just drive away from us, but it would come close to killing me. Your hesitation was answer enough. I got the message, loud and clear. I'll unlock the garage office for you tomorrow, but I won't be there when you arrive. I'll stay out of your way for the rest of the week, as you requested."

The mattress shifted as he rose and left the room, the door slamming shut behind him. Already her heart ached.

Cy had to get away from her. Now that he'd tasted her breast, he was in danger of breaking down completely in front of her. He'd come close in the diner, when he talked about Tammy. When was the last time he'd cried about that period of his life, anyway? He couldn't remember. And now, he was close to falling apart. He'd told her of the life he wanted for them, and she brushed it aside, as if it were of no consequence.

And why wouldn't she? A college-educated professor had no use for the likes of him and his hick ways. She'd only asked about the farm out of a sense of idle curiosity, nothing more. Here he was, picturing her living in the farmhouse with him, keeping him aroused at all hours, greeting him at the end of a long day dressed only in an apron, and allowing him to make love to her every night, all night. But she was still counting the days until she could leave Comfort in the dust with her new car. The car he was helping her buy.

They were coming at life from two different planes, and the more distance he put between them now, the easier it would be to let her go. As if he'd ever had her in the first place. She'd fall back into her life in Ohio, as a respected, uptight member of the community, with her son close by to watch over her, and a new grandchild to spoil. And he'd go

back to his lonely life in an empty farmhouse and an endless series of one-night stands whenever the urge kicked in too strong to deny it.

Even as he was having these thoughts, he was thinking of her comfort tomorrow. He'd drop off a sandwich in the morning for her, and make sure she had enough bottles of Coke to get her through the day. And he thought about Jimmy coming back to see her. He'd managed to get her away from the garage early today, so when Jimmy did stop by, he would have found the garage empty. But there was nothing to prevent him from returning tomorrow to advance his campaign of stealing her away from Cy. And knowing Jimmy, he would view the fact that she wasn't there today as merely a temporary setback. He'd be there tomorrow. And Cy could do nothing about it. She wasn't his to protect. She didn't want him as a permanent fixture in his life, and he damned well ought to get that simple fact through his head.

He shook himself as he nosed the Harley onto the gravel drive leading to the farmhouse. The crunching of the stones under the tires cleared his mind a bit. In order to steal someone away, you must have had a relationship to begin with. He may be able to get her body revved up sexually, but beyond that, he was beginning to accept the fact that she had no feelings for him.

Cy came to a stop at the front door of the house, and rested his head against the door frame. He finally admitted that his relationship with Juliette was entirely one-sided, and she would never grace this doorway. She was similar to the poster he had of Brigitte Bardot: something to be gazed upon and fantasized over when jacking off, but not someone to touch and hold. An unattainable goal. She didn't care about him any more than she did for Jimmy, so at least the two of them were on a level playing field. And he couldn't fault Jimmy for trying to press home an advantage.

But Cy had brought her to an orgasm tonight simply by sucking on her breast. And when he inhaled her scent, which was stronger between her twin mounds of flesh, he nearly came himself. She was the most sensual lady he'd ever encountered.

And he wanted to bring her to orgasm at least a couple times a night for the rest of her life, to make up for what she had denied herself for too long. He had no doubts she was up to it. He'd never met someone who oozed sex from every pore before.

Tomorrow was going to be a long day, and already his heart ached.

Chapter 13

By eight o'clock the following morning, the sun was already hot as Juliette opened the door to her motel room. Lolly was in the parking lot, sweeping away the dead leaves that had blown in. She glanced up from her work when Juliette emerged.

"It's going to be another hot one today, seems like." Lolly patted her massive hairdo and ran a hand over her sweaty brow. Then she grinned at Juliette. "I caught some of your and Cy's action in the pool last night. You seemed to be having fun together. Although there is a considerable amount of hay in there this morning that needs cleaned out."

Juliette's cheeks burned. "I'm sorry, Lolly. It won't happen again. And if you leave the pool cleaning until this afternoon, I'd be happy to take care of it."

"That's not why I mentioned it, honey. I'm just so happy to see Cy having a good time finally. And I might have wanted to razz you a bit."

"Well, like I said, it won't happen again. Cy and I decided we were better off not seeing each other anymore."

Lolly narrowed her eyes at Juliette. "And why not? If ever there were two people well-suited to each other, it's you two."

Juliette sighed. "Lolly, I didn't just emerge from a cocoon. I have a life back in Ohio, a son and new daughter-in-law, a soon-to-be grandchild, a great job. I can't leave all that behind, just because I'm attracted to a man."

"Oh, I agree wholeheartedly. And if all you are is attracted to him, I'll eat my shorts. You're in love with him,

from what I can tell, and it's easy to see that he loves you back. And a love that mutual, and that hot, from what I was able to catch last night, is a rare find, and one you should be willing to leave your life in Ohio for."

"No, it's best this way. I'll just finish out today and tomorrow at the garage, then he and I will be done. I'll camp out here until my car arrives."

Lolly pointed her broom at Juliette. "Your level-headed mind may think that's the right choice, but your pounding heart is telling you otherwise. I can tell these things. But, if you're serious about wanting nothing more to do with Cy, I'm getting another guest in this afternoon. He's a trucker who stops through here occasionally. Maybe he'll be better suited to you. You'll see him at the pool later. After you clean out the hay from last night." Then, with a huff, Lolly returned to the motel office.

Juliette walked the four blocks from the motel to the garage, trying to sort out her feelings. The conversation with Lolly upset her more than she wanted it to. She thought of Cy, in the hay fields with sweat dripping off his body. Perhaps he'd take off his shirt while he was working, fine-tuning his already chiseled physique by lifting those heavy bales of hay and loading them onto a truck. She groaned as she pushed away the image. No sense in even heading in that direction. Tomorrow was her last day at the garage, since the hay would be properly baled and loaded into wherever it was stored, and she'd be back at the motel, spending her days reading and sunning herself in her hot little bikini. But without Cy to heat up the water as well as her body, she expected to be bored out of her mind. Bored in Comfort. Truck drivers notwithstanding.

She stopped at the town square and breathed in the essence, the heartbeat of this place. Colorful hanging flowerpots graced every lamppost in the square and created a pleasing impression, to both the eye and the nose. She did

have a fondness for this town. Already, in six short days, she was acquainted with more people here than she was in her Ohio suburb. Well, technically, she did have more people in her address book back home, but they were mere acquaintances, parents of the boys Noah had been friends with, or business associates. Did any of them know her dress size or what she wanted for dinner without asking? She was as enchanted by the triplets as she was by Cy. Almost.

No, that wasn't true. Cy was the only reason she had feelings for Comfort at all. If she left town without seeing him again, would she ever return to see the triplets? No, he was the real reason she'd told Noah not to come and rescue her. She wanted to remain in the middle of Comfort, in the middle of the swirl that was Cy. For as long as she could legitimately be there. Which was only until Saturday. Sunday, tops.

She shook her head and continued to walk. There would be no Independence Day on the square for her, no cherry pie, fireworks, or an oom-pah band. No man to create fireworks with after the celebration. She was alone, as she'd been her entire life. The only man she had ever held any personal conversations with was her son. And he was busy with his own life now, so she was more alone than ever.

Quit feeling so sorry for yourself! Get a grip and get a move on!

She opened the door to the garage and let herself in. The scent that Cy left behind everywhere he went assaulted her nose. Fresh, manly, spicy, heady. He must have just left. *God, Juliette, pull your tongue back in your mouth and quit panting after him!*

She went into the small office to stash her purse, and opened the refrigerator to get a chilled bottle of water. The sandwich he had left behind for her was front and center on the middle shelf. And all the Cokes. She opened the cupboard and found a fresh supply of Cheetos. Tears came to her eyes

as she put her hand on her heart. Even though she rejected him last night, he was still taking care of her this morning. If she were to let him into her life for more than just this one forbidden week, he'd take care of her every day in the same manner. Could she do it?

She'd been the head of the household for so long, watching over her son and making certain he had a better life than she had. Could she relinquish the reins she'd held onto so tightly for so long? The knot of anxiety between her shoulders was back. She hadn't even noticed it until it started to slip away this week. She needed to talk to someone. She needed to call Noah. As she began to paw through her purse for her phone, she prayed the winds were blowing the right way this morning and that she could get enough of a signal to use it.

Her cell began to ring just as she pulled it from her purse. She glanced at the caller ID. Noah. She smiled. They always did have a sort of ESP with each other.

"Hi, sweetie," she replied as she hit the answer button.

"Hi, Mom. Just wanted to let you know we arrived home late last night. So, we're back in Ohio. How are you doing in—where is it that you are again? Nebraska?"

"Yes, honey, Nebraska. Comfort, Nebraska to be exact."

"Is it as sweet and boring as it sounds? Are you sure you want to hang out there until the weekend? I can still fly in to the closest big city and rent a car to come and get you."

"No, you need to get back to work. And besides, I want to stay . . ."

Juliette was embarrassed to hear a break in her voice. Tears flooded her eyes. Jesus, she prided herself on never crying over her lot in life, especially in front of her son. But since she hit Comfort, she'd been close to tears more often than not. And close to orgasm more often than not. Maybe the two went together. She took a deep breath to get a grip on

her emotions, and ran her hand over her eyes, but it was too late. Her son was way too familiar with her.

“What is it, Mom? You’re not telling me something.”

“Oh, Noah. This is crazy. I think I’m falling in love.”

Her son’s stunned silence spoke volumes. She was a foolish old woman, just as she thought.

“Mom, that’s terrific! A little out of left field, maybe, but it’s great news.”

Not exactly the response she was expecting, but she’d go with it. For now. Her son continued to surprise her, even after all these years.

“What do you mean? You’re happy about this? Your old mom falling in love within days of meeting a guy?”

“For God’s sake, Mom, of course I’m happy for you. I’m well aware of what you’ve sacrificed to get me raised. It’s your time now. Tell me about this guy. He must truly be something, to have swept you off your feet. My levelheaded, even-tempered mother.”

She took a deep breath, clutched her stomach, and began.

“His name is Cy, which is short for Cyclone, if you can believe that. He’s a former bull-riding cowboy who was on the pro rodeo circuit for a time. His wife died a couple years ago, in an accident. He now owns a farm on the outskirts of town, which I’ve only seen briefly, but I know he keeps horses there, since I had to ride one, and he owns a gas station in town, where I’m at right now.”

“I’m smiling, Mom, at the thought of you on a horse. And Cyclone sounds as if he’s a colorful fellow. Not at all what you’re used to. He already has me grinning.”

“That’s not all. Since my car and suitcase got sucked up in the tornado, I’ve had to buy some new clothes. The woman in the only dress shop in town has been creating a whole new appearance for me, which is so far from the staid business suits I normally wear, you wouldn’t even recognize me. I’ve

learned how to boot-scoot, play pool, ride a mechanical bull, and operate a cash register since I've been here."

Noah laughed. "So you've been having fun. That's great. Just how serious is it with this guy?"

"Serious enough, right now anyway. And could get a whole lot more so, if I want it to. He wants kids."

"After all this time, and all my years of begging for a baby brother or sister, you're now going to consider it? Your baby will be younger than my kid. What a hoot! I love the idea, Mom. When do I get to meet him? Does he have to ask me for permission? Yeah, maybe I should insist upon it."

She smiled into the phone. "I was so hoping you'd be happy for me. Now, I think I can go ahead and consider Cy for more than a one-week interlude in my life."

"What will this mean, though, long-term? Are you going to stay in Nebraska?"

"I don't know yet, sweetie. He offered to upend his life and move to Ohio, if that's what I want. He kind of laid it on the line last night for me, and I shied away from him. So he still thinks I'm leaving at the earliest opportunity. We need to talk. If I'm not too late."

"Go for it, Mom. And go for him. You deserve to be happy."

"I've been happy with my life, Noah. Don't ever think I haven't been."

"But you haven't ever allowed yourself to be involved with a man. You were too busy raising me. And now's the time for you to focus on yourself. Why not have it all?"

"Because it's a big step, and I'm scared. It seems I've been scared my whole life. First, being pregnant with you. Now, that was a frightening time. I had no clue how I was going to handle it."

"But you did, Mom. You didn't back down from being scared then, and you put together a pretty nice life. So be

scared once more. Take a dive off the thirty-foot platform. Be happy.”

“My insides are all twisted up right now.”

“Well, the man’s name is Cyclone, isn’t it?”

She laughed. “Yes, you’re right. Maybe I will let myself be scared once more.”

As she ended the call, she pondered what her intelligent son had said. It would be safe to run back to Ohio at the end of the week, and to take up the reins of her old life. And it would be excruciatingly boring. She was well aware of what to expect there. She wrung her hands as she contemplated what Noah had said. The motion of her hands mirrored the churning of her stomach. And, unlike Ohio, she didn’t have a clue what to expect with Cy and Comfort.

If she were to take this plunge ahead, she would never be able to figure out what to expect. Cy would keep her off balance every day for the rest of her life. For a day, or even a week, she could tolerate that edgy excitement. But could she manage it until the end of time? Just the thought of it frightened her to death. But it excited her too, made her feel alive in a way she’d never been before. She had planned to grow old gracefully, not spend her life in the middle of a tornado. Or a cyclone. And here she was, about ready to throw her bucket-list out the window, and start over. How crazy was that?

The longest day of Cy’s life just got longer. He vowed to stay away from Juliette and to guard his heart from her, yet he’d found himself at the garage early in the morning, making sure she had everything she needed for a comfortable day. Now, as the sun was beginning to set low in the sky, he and O.C. were nearly done with baling the first field—the one they had cut on Sunday. The 50-pound bales were then loaded onto a flatbed attached to a tractor and hauled into the

barn. Nebraska was not the place to leave bales in an open field, where they could be picked up by the next twister and tossed into Kansas. They brought the last load in from the field and were off-loading them from the flatbed when their conveyor belt quit working.

“Ah, man, this is so not what we need,” O.C. rested his head on his hands, which were around the steering wheel of the tractor.

“Yeah, but we made it this far into the week without a major breakdown, which is unusual. Let’s see what’s wrong.”

Cy figured out the problem within an hour and got it fixed so they could finish with the day’s work, but by then, it was well past nine, he was covered in grease and sweat, and Juliette had long ago left the garage and was back at the motel, so there was no chance of casually running into her. He and O.C. stored the equipment for the night and walked into the house, where they sat at the table in the dimly lit kitchen, longnecks in hand.

“So, are you going to go to her this evening?” O.C.’s voice broke their tired silence.

Cy took a long swig of his beer. “Why? She’s told me she doesn’t fit into my life, or vice versa. It’s best that I stay away.”

“And do what? Moon around here? Act like a whipped puppy dog? It’s a long time until Saturday. And as much as I dig you, bro, given the choice, I’d leave you in the dust and go to my woman.”

“By now, she’s probably sweet-talked some other guy into giving her a ride to Omaha. Or Vegas. Jimmy’s been nosing around her. She probably left town with him by now, since leaving town is what she wants to do.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you? Is she the type to go back on her promises? Didn’t she say she’d be in charge of the station until Thursday?”

“Yeah, she did. But that was before.”

“Before you became a cave man, you mean, and scared the bejeezus out of her?”

Cy smiled. “Yeah, except if I’d been a true cave man, I would have knocked her unconscious and dragged her off by her hair into my bed. Instead, I gave her a choice and the one she made wasn’t the one I wanted for her. For us.”

“So what harm can come from checking to make sure she got home safely? Isn’t that what you’d want someone to do for Josie?”

Cy shrugged and stood up, spinning the empty beer bottle on the tabletop. As O.C. kept his eyes on the bottle, Cy quietly left the room and drove into town.

He let himself into the garage and found the deposit slip and cash in the register. The woman was efficient, he’d give her that. So she hadn’t run off—at least not until after six, anyway. The scent of her still lingered in the air. Lilies and woman. God, he craved her as he had no other.

Despite giving himself vague stalker vibes, he drove his pickup to Lolly’s motel. He wanted to see a light on in her room, to know she was safely tucked in for the night. As he stopped the truck on the opposite side of the road from the motel, he ran his hands over his face. Ah, hell, he couldn’t even kid himself. Despite being bone-tired, despite having a day’s beard growth and sweat-soaked clothes, despite what he’d said about keeping his distance, he longed for the sight of her. Preferably in her bikini. Or nude.

A huge eighteen-wheeler was at the end of Lolly’s parking lot, which meant only one thing—Mike was back in town. Cy had run into him several times at the dance hall, when he happened to pass through Comfort on a Friday night. He was an ordinary sort of guy who thought he was hot shit because he was a trucker. His pick-up lines had worked on a few women in Comfort, which was why this was a favorite stop of his. And Mike undoubtedly had taken advantage of the scenery at the pool that afternoon. A rip of

jealousy coursed through Cy's body as he thought of Mike's eyes raking a path over Juliette's curves, and trying out some of his tired lines on her. Would she have bought into his sorry excuse for enlightened conversation and right now be off somewhere having dinner with him? No, she wouldn't put up with Mike's line of drivel. Besides, she was *his* woman, dammit! Should he storm into her room and remind her of that fact? No, he wouldn't. He could do nothing. He had no claims on her.

He blinked to focus his eyes and turned his gaze to her room. A weak light shone through the window. She was probably reading on her blasted Kindle. He smiled as he remembered the snippet of her sexy Highlander romance novel she had queued up and ready. More than anything else in the world, he wanted to put on a kilt, knock on her door, and reenact the scene with her as the heroine in their own tale of passion.

But for now, knowing she was still in Comfort, and safe, was the best he could do. He'd given his heart away once, to Tammy, and he nearly died, too, when she did. It had taken years to rebound from that devastating loss, and sometimes he'd doubted he'd ever be able to lead a normal life again. Until Juliette wandered into it. Into Comfort. Into his arms. He saved her life, and he now wanted her to save his. But, if she wanted out, if she wanted to leave, if she wanted someone else's arms, he couldn't stop her. All he could do was keep her safe until she departed.

When he saw the light in her room click off he reluctantly started up the truck and drove off, alone. He would get little sleep tonight.

Cy never came. Not to the garage to close up, nor to the pool at Lolly's, even though she stayed in the water until it was so dark she could barely see her hand in front of her face. She made good on her promise to Lolly that she'd clean

the pool of all stray pieces of hay. Her cheeks flamed as she remembered herself and Cy bouncing around in the water, locked in their passionate embrace. There was an awful lot of hay floating atop the water.

As soon as she finished cleaning the pool, Mike the trucker made an appearance. It was almost as if he was watching her skimming the water and didn't want to make his presence known until she was done. Juliette caught his approving gaze when she removed her shirt and glided into the pool dressed only in the two tiny bands of cloth that comprised her bikini. The man's gaze made her feel almost naked. For the first time since she put her bikini on, she regretted not having a more sensible suit.

"Hi there," he said as he joined her in the pool.

Stimulating conversationalist.

"Hello. You must be the trucker. Lolly told me you were going to show up this afternoon. I'm Juliette."

Mike's chest puffed at her words, yet he couldn't keep eye contact. His gaze dropped to her bosom.

"Lolly and you were discussing me?"

"Well, no, not exactly. She said she was getting another guest this afternoon, and it was you. That's all."

"So Lolly's making you work in order to use the pool? I caught you cleaning the water from my window."

So he had been keeping an eye on her. The knowledge made her skin crawl.

"I offered to clean it out. She doesn't let every person use it, since it's her own personal pool. It's the least I could do in exchange."

Mike nodded, and chose to change the subject. To press her a little, it seemed.

"So where are you from, little lady?"

Juliette gritted her teeth. She didn't like the way this man continued to devour her with his eyes. She was up to

her neck in the water, but it was now sparkling clear, so he could still see every inch of her body.

"I'm from Ohio. How about you?"

"Minnesota's where I hang my hat. But I do runs to Ohio with my truck all the time. Maybe I'll have to find you when you get back home."

Juliette had a sudden image of an 18-wheeler pulling up in front of her house in the staid little suburb she called home. Cyclones and truckers. Lordy, what would be next?

"Or would your husband object if I track you down?"

He was fishing, and she decided to reel in her line and close the tackle box.

"I'm not married, but I do live with a man, and I don't think he'd appreciate seeing your truck parked in our cul-de-sac." She forgave herself for hiding behind her son, since Mike was beginning to give her the creeps. Despite her rebuff, he didn't take the hint right away, so his other questions were met with one-syllable answers, which effectively shut him down.

Finally he gave up and hoisted himself out of the water. Juliette breathed a sigh of relief when he towed off and headed inside. Mike had never stood a chance, since she immediately compared him to Cy. Soft middle, from spending too much time behind the wheel of his truck. One tanned arm. A trucker's tan. But she supposed, if anyone was entitled to one, it was Mike. His dark hair was thinning on top, despite his best efforts at a comb-over. Once he got it wet, long strands of hair dripped around his ears, and the fading sun bounced off the top of his head. *No, Lolly, not even remotely tempted, thank you very much.*

She gave up waiting for Cy, finally, and went inside, where she showered the chlorine off her body and out of her hair. She dried off and got into her pajamas. The ones Dolly had selected for her. Satin, black, baby-doll PJs. Not

something she would have ever picked for herself, since it was way more provocative than she thought proper.

Proper for Ohio, anyway. But this was Comfort, and she was allowed to wear whatever the hell she wanted. Now, if only the man of her dreams would come over and get a load of her sleepwear. She doubted she'd get much sleep if he did. And she doubted the lingerie would stay on for long. Her core pooled with dampness at the mere thought of Cy's eyes raking over her body. God, she craved that man. She had a sweet tooth and he was a hot fudge sundae.

She tossed and turned in bed, trying to get comfortable enough to read. She was usually a fast reader, but somehow this Highlander book wasn't doing the trick. Her mind kept shifting to her own romantic hero. Except he didn't wear a kilt. He wore a black Stetson and rode a Harley. The emotion he could pull from her body rivaled anything that the Kindle author had put on the pages. Or bested it. Her mind kept wandering to the previous evening, in this same bed, when he placed his mouth on her breast and she plummeted down from the roller coaster heights of emotion he had stirred in her, just from his touch. From mouth on nipple. How would her body react if he put that impossibly sexy mouth on other parts of her body? If he teased her clitoris with that mouth, and thrust that wicked tongue into her depths? She tossed again, and groaned.

Admittedly, she didn't have much to gauge her reaction by. There had been Noah's father—a bleary, one-night stand when she just turned eighteen and was pretty well drunk on watered-down beer. She could only tell Noah his father's first name, since, if the man had, in fact, told her his last name, she had forgotten it by morning. Always, in her mind, he'd been nothing but a sperm donor. There was no molten sexual encounter between them. Just a fumbled coupling that lasted for only seconds, it seemed. Hardly even warmed her up.

Then, there were a few slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am get-togethers over the years with other assorted men, when she could squeeze them in between Noah's activities. A few couplings with his soccer coach when Noah was in grade school. But then, Noah moved up to middle school, and the soccer coach became a distant memory. There had been no lasting relationship in her life, no one she ever presented her son to, no one who truly cared about her pleasure. Until Cy. He cared. About everything.

That was it. The difference between Cy and the others. No one had ever cared about her before. She realized that now since she'd gotten a taste of what it was to have someone truly see to her needs. The way he stocked the garage refrigerator for her, the way he protected her against both tornadoes and unwanted advances from other men, the way he made her feel about herself and her body. With a deep breath, she finally admitted what her future course of action would be. She couldn't turn her back on it, on him, on Comfort. She wanted it all. She wanted a happy-ever-after in her own life, not just in a book. She wanted Cy.

And she would tell him so, tomorrow afternoon. It would be her last day to cover for him at the garage, so she was certain he would show up. She shut off her Kindle and the lamp, and let herself drift, thinking about her own knight in shining armor. In the distance, a truck motor started up and drove off into the night. She smiled into her pillow, thinking that in Comfort, Nebraska, the sound of a pick-up was every day fare. Maybe, if she hadn't blown it, she'd be able to get used to it, too.

Chapter 14

Cy and O.C. worked as fast as they could all day Wednesday. The weather radio had been squawking all afternoon about the pressure cooker that had been building in the atmosphere by four days of excessive heat. One man baled and one loaded the flatbed and hauled the hay to the barn. They were about two-thirds of the way through the field when the reports turned grim.

“Sounds as if Tornado Alley is going to live up to its reputation tonight,” O.C. called when Cy returned with the flatbed.

Cy gazed skyward. Dark, ominous clouds were rolling in. Everyone who lived in Tornado Alley was an expert at reading the sky. And this didn’t bode well.

He turned to O.C. “I need to go to Juliette. She won’t have a clue where to go when and if the sirens go off.”

“Maybe you should call her, tell her where the shelter is. She did tell you to stay away from her.”

“I can’t do that. Leave her alone when a tornado’s about to roar through town. She needs me, even if she doesn’t realize it yet.”

O.C. leveled a hard stare at his friend. “So, admit it. You’re nuts about her, you lucky shit.”

“Yeah, I am crazy about her. And she’s made it clear, she’s heading out of Nebraska ASAP. I have to let her go, if that’s what she wants. But right now, she needs me.”

O.C. laid a hand on Cy’s shoulder. “You’re right. You have to keep her safe. But you could just call her, and tell her where the shelter is and what to do..”

Cy began to unhitch the flatbed from his pickup. "If I don't go to her, and something happens, I'm going to be in the same position I was when Tammy died. I couldn't help Tammy. But this time is different, since I'm here and I can do something about it."

The wind kicked up, nearly blowing the men over as they stood in the open field. O.C. shrugged his shoulders.

Cy put his hand on O.C.'s shoulder. "Nothing we could have done would have saved Tammy. We both know that it was fate and probably would have happened even if we were here. But we've both been beating ourselves up about it for a while now, anyway. It's time to let that go."

"Let go of Tammy, you mean?"

"No, never that. But you and I both need to let go of the guilt."

"And you think Juliette's the answer?"

"Maybe, for me at least. Maybe this is my chance to set things right. To save Juliette, as I would have saved Tammy, if I'd been able. I don't think I can take any more grief. If I don't go to her, and something happens, that would be the end for me."

O.C. grinned at him. "So, go to your woman, and save her life once more. I want to meet her."

The two men stared at each other for a long moment. Lightning began to crackle off in the distance and the warning sirens began to blare.

"Go, now! You've got seven minutes, tops. I'll take care of the equipment," O.C. yelled at him as Cy gunned the motor of his pickup.

Cy sped down the road at breakneck speed, thinking about Juliette, all alone, a virtual sitting duck at the garage, not aware of the danger she was in. Or maybe she was aware of it, and panicking. He thought he had lost his heart to her, or very nearly, but now he realized it was back, and in his

throat. He coaxed more speed out of the truck, and didn't slow down until the gas pumps came into view.

Juliette breathed a huge sigh of relief when she caught sight of Cy's truck careening down the highway. He pulled into the garage and cut the motor, jumping out almost before the tires quit rotating.

"Are the pumps shut off?"

"Yes," she yelled over the blaring sirens. "I did exactly what you showed me. What's going on?"

"Tornado's been sighted close by. Come with me."

He grabbed her hand and began to run into the open field behind the garage, over the ruts from the wagon wheels, and beyond. At the far edge of the field, there was a black door in the ground, which he yanked open. He motioned for Juliette to climb down the stairs that were visible when he opened the door. She gazed into the black hole in the earth and called to him. "What is this?"

"Tornado shelter. Climb down. I'm right behind you."

Taking a big gulp, she glanced down into the dark hole in the ground. As rain began to pelt her body, she hurried down the stairs to the little room. Cy followed her, closing the door and locking it.

Juliette's body shook so hard she could barely stand. She was terrified, by the storm, and by this shelter in the ground. Dim light shown into the space through a small skylight. Juliette watched the rain slam hard into the little window as Cy plugged in the LED lights to provide a bit more illumination, and turned on the battery-operated weather radio, which came to life, squawking with warnings about the evening's weather and where the tornadoes had been sighted.

"Are you okay?" Cy noticed her trembling.

“My first tornado,” she replied weakly, with a tremulous smile on her face.

“Well, technically, it’s your second, since the first one took your car, and would have taken you, too. But then, you suck at numbers.” His attempt at humor failed.

She shivered as she glanced around the small room. The space was only about eight feet square, and had a stock of supplies along one side, with a cot of some kind on the opposite wall.

“How long do we have to stay here? I’m kind of claustrophobic.” Her voice sounded weak, even to her.

“Sometimes, it’s only for a few minutes. But more often, it’s a couple hours, or overnight. Better safe than sorry. But the first time in the shelter can be scary, I’ll admit. Come here, darlin’.”

He took her in his arms. And held her, just wrapped his arms around her and held her, until her shaking stopped. She had never experienced this feeling of safety before. Like she finally had a net under the tightrope that had been her life. She took a deep breath, and couldn’t swear to it, but she thought she caught a few tremors from his body too.

She finally gave up her feeble attempts to resist Cy, and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him to her for a kiss. This man had saved her life twice now. How could she not give the rest of it to him? She wanted to love and be loved by a Cyclone for the rest of her days.

Their kisses turned from soft and gentle to scorching and passionate within seconds. Juliette ran a hand down Cy’s broad, hard chest, feeling every indentation on his six-pack. She smiled up at him in the dim glow.

“This reminds me of a plot device used by a lot of contemporary romance writers. A woman is trapped in an elevator with a handsome stranger.”

His voice rumbled up from his chest. The chest she was still caressing with her hand.

“Since I don’t read a lot of romances, you’ll have to tell me what happens next, darlin’.”

Her hand moved to his belt buckle and began to undo his belt. “I’d rather show you.”

He took hold of her hand and pulled back from her face, where he had been pummeling her lips with his hot kisses. His eyes narrowed.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

“Well, technically, this is our third date, and you know what that means.” she smiled up at him.

“By my count, it’s date number five or six, but I won’t quibble with you. Are you sure this is what you want?”

“I’ve never been more certain. I want to stay here, in the shelter of your arms, for the rest of my life. I love you, Cy. Make love to me.”

Juliette promptly forgot about the tornado blowing across the land over their heads. The screaming freight train of wind, the pounding rain, the lightning crashing around them was nothing in comparison to what she was going on within her body. She was focused on the torrent that was happening in the shelter. Her body was experiencing strange, unaccustomed sensations and feelings. And it was all caused by a Cyclone. A beautiful Cyclone. Their lips met, and her knees gave out on her. She hung onto Cy, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. Her hands wove their way into his dark hair, something she’d wanted to do for days.

She focused on the contrasts in her confused body. Her mouth was dry, but her middle was damp. Her temperature was rocketing through the roof, but her skin, especially where Cy ran his fingers down it, erupted in goosebumps. She moaned when his hand drifted to her breast. And when he placed one hand on each breast, drew them together and licked the cleft between them, she let out a small scream.

His lips never once left her body, as he drizzled kisses along her jaw, her neck, under her ear, and feasted on her bosom. Breasts that had too long been denied the feel of a solid man. She was going to faint again.

Cy took his time. He could finally get to know every inch of his lovely Juliette, and he wanted to savor her. He peppered her face with kisses. His tongue dueled with hers as their harsh breathing filled the air. Vaguely, he registered the wind screaming outside the shelter of the underground room, and the radio issuing reports, but it faded as the sound of his blood pulsing through his body took over.

He unfastened her blouse slowly, one button at a time, and dropped his head to kiss each new inch of exposed flesh. She was hanging onto him tightly, her arms and legs wrapped around him. He drew in a deep breath of the scent of Juliette—raw sex combined with lilies. It nearly drove him to his knees.

Her blouse finally fell to the floor and he unhooked her pink bra and removed it, too. Juliette's breasts were totally nude for the first time in his presence, and his hands automatically cradled them, feeling their weight and their softness. As he ran his callused thumbs over her nipples, they sprung into hard little buds. He caught the gasp in her throat as she moved even closer to him. Her head was thrown back, giving him access to her lovely throat and to the vein that jumped and throbbed there.

He sucked gently on the vein, which elicited another cry from her. Yes, she had a body that was made for loving. How could no man have seen that in all these years? He lowered his mouth to her ready breast and covered the aureole. She arched back and gave a small scream of excitement as he could feel her skin begin to heat up. She wrapped herself tighter around him, just as she had that night in the pool.

He lowered her onto the cot, and got on his knees beside it. Inch by inch, he lowered the zipper in her white shorts, causing her to moan and squirm as her body sought release from the arousal he was creating. His thumbs grazed her newly exposed flesh until, at last, he removed her shorts and shoes. He allowed himself the luxury of gazing at her nearly nude body for the first time. He was hard as a rock and getting harder. She reached for his belt, but he gently pushed away her hands.

“First time is for your pleasure, darlin’. Allow me to love you as you should be loved.”

His hand cupped her and she jolted up from the mattress. He could feel the dampness through her undies. She was so wet for him, he nearly forgot what he was doing. He ran a lazy finger around the elastic as she gasped and moved into his hand as she began to rhythmically bump up against him.

“I’m glad to see you got rid of your granny panties,” he murmured as his hand matched the tempo she was setting.

“Wha?”

Cy ran his hand over her exposed buttock, which her new thong underwear did nothing to hide. “These are pretty. Did Dolly steer you to silk undies instead of your pink cotton ones?”

She arched an eyebrow. “Granny panties, indeed. Those panties got your attention a week ago. Are we really going to talk about Dolly now? Yes, she helped me. I’m dying for you to remove them, though. They seem to be getting in the way.” She pulsed against his hand once more.

“Not yet.” She whimpered as he retreated from her core and moved up to her lush breasts, palming them and brushing the tips. “Your breasts are beautiful.” He took one nipple into his mouth and suckled, then the other one. “My God, Juliette, you’re beautiful.”

She moaned, a long, low, primitive sound that nearly took him over the edge. She was panting, and her body

quaked beneath his touch. Once more, he took her breast into his mouth, and she careened over the edge into climax.

As she tried to catch her breath, his focus shifted from her breasts back to her center. He finally stripped off her skimpy panties and ran a finger around the folds of her opening. She was so wet and ready for him, he nearly wept. His fingers were busy, skimming up and down her thighs, reveling in the feel of her soft flesh. He tugged gently on her soft curls, which hid her clitoris, and brushed his hand over that small nub of nerve endings, an action which elicited another moan from her.

He massaged her, and she became even more aroused. When his fingers entered her for the first time, she spilled over quickly. He feasted his eyes on her face as it went slack with lust and her eyes glazed over. He would never get tired of seeing her with such an expression on her face. And to know he caused her to lose her precious control. He alone.

She tried once more to unfasten his jeans, but he still resisted.

“Cy, I want to see you, too.”

“There’s time enough for that. I’m not done with you.” That being said, he positioned his head between her legs and began to suck her sweet spot and thrust into her opening with his tongue. She was so wet her juices flowed down his chin and into the day’s growth of beard. She gasped as her body quaked under him. He drove her to the edge of sanity once more and then over.

He backed off at last, to let her get her breath. He stripped off his shirt and jeans in record time as her gaze lingered on him. Her eyes widened as he freed his shaft from the restraint of his jockeys and her hand curled around him. He stood over her, gazing down as she massaged his cock, causing a pearly droplet to form on the tip and drip onto her stomach.

“My God, Cy. No one’s ever made love to me so tenderly before. No one’s ever put his mouth there before.”

“Do you want to know what your taste is?”

Her eyes widened for a moment. Then, she reached up for him.

He positioned himself over her. The cot was only big enough for one, so he propped himself on his elbows and dangled a leg over each side. He plundered her mouth with kisses, and she licked her juices from his beard. His cock was pressing up against her clitoris and she moved under him. Her body bumped up against him in a slow, languorous dance. She still had a hand wrapped around him, and she began to lead his penis to her opening.

He placed his hand on her cheek and whispered, “Are you sure about this? I didn’t bring a condom with me.”

She laughed. “And here I thought you had everything you needed in this shelter. Have you never had sex here before?”

“It is a bit cramped for sex, don’t you think?”

“No, I think it’s just the right size. Very cozy. I’ve never been more certain of anything. I want you, Cy, and I want to have your baby. It’s time for a new life, for us and for a new baby, if we’re lucky enough to have one. I want a life filled with love and happiness. Filled with you.”

His heart swelled, and, as the tornadoes ripped through the landscape over them, their emotions swirled around them in their underground shelter. Cy’s thrusts were long and slow, then fast and short, then he lost track. She was so tight, it was almost as if she had never been touched before. When Cy sensed Juliette was close to another orgasm, he held back no longer and came in a long, steady stream that had been building since he first caught sight of her sucking the Cheeto dust from her fingers a week ago.

Chapter 15

Juliette's breathing finally returned to a normal rhythm. Cy had moved from his awkward position on the cot and was seated on the floor in front of her, running his hands up and down her body, as if she were a piano and he was a maestro, as if he was afraid she'd disappear if he wasn't touching her. She couldn't stop touching him either, after a long week of holding herself at bay around him. She listened overhead and could tell the storm was not yet finished. And she was not yet finished with her own Cyclone. She lowered herself to the floor alongside him and ran her hands through his dark locks as they lay in this cocoon against the world.

"I love your hair, Cy. Can't seem to keep my fingers out of it. What's happening up there, do you think?" she ventured as she pointed to the skylight.

"I'm not sure. The radio went dead while we were busy. I should have remembered to put new batteries in, but I forgot."

"How long can we stay here?"

"That's quite a different question from the one you asked when we first arrived." He ran his hand down her front, stopping to palm her breast and then went lower to cup her. The effect was total arousal for her. She opened her legs to him as she leaned over and kissed him, making his cock swell with need. She didn't need full sunlight to be able to measure the effect she was having on him. No, she could tell by the way he was breathing.

He hauled her on top of him. Their kisses became more urgent, his hands toyed with her breasts, bringing them to

full attention, and he positioned her over his ready penis, and plunged her down. Her gasp of surprise, followed by delight, excited them both, and he placed his hands on her buttocks, helping her ride him to the finish. They collapsed into a pile onto the floor, both gasping for breath.

As their heartbeats struggled to return to normal, Juliette whispered, "I've had more orgasms in one day than I've had in my entire life. If every tornado coming through town results in this kind of treatment, I'm glad we live in Tornado Alley."

Cy's eyes locked on hers. "Does that mean you plan to stay here, with me? You're not going to return to Ohio?"

"I can't possibly leave you, Cy. Not now. Not ever."

He blew out his breath. "That's good. Because I have big plans for us. I want to make sure you have at least four or five orgasms a day from now on until you're caught up." He cradled her in his arms as he rose to his knees and placed her back on the cot. Then, he began to rub her core once more. Her legs parted of their own accord to allow him access. Her muscles were slack already, her mind in a dreamy fog, and this man, only this man, was all she ever needed.

He moved her buttocks around so her back was up against the wall and her legs were open around him. His clever tongue went to work, licking and thrusting. His fingertips grazed her and she immediately began to breathe heavily. He kept his mouth on her little bundle, teasing it with his teeth and tongue, and thrust two fingers into her wet, slippery opening. She gasped when he began to plunge in and out, taking her hard, just as his cock had done minutes earlier.

She laced her fingers through his hair and held on for dear life as he took her up the roller coaster of emotion and she came, in a sudden rush of molten desire. He stirred something in her that had been previously unexplored. She

craved him as she had no other. She needed to taste his salty, sexy skin time and again. And to think, she almost walked away from this. Walked away from Comfort.

When she could move once more, she returned to the floor and lay beside him, running her hands up and down his body as he was simultaneously stroking hers. It was uncharted territory and she was determined to learn every inch of his landscape. And to find every hot spot on his body. To give back the multiple orgasms he'd so graciously given her. That would be her job for the rest of her life. To find ways to make Cy happy. She couldn't wait to get started on their life together. But for now, she sensed his breathing had changed when she cupped his balls and explored the length of his cock. She could go one more round, if he could . . .

Juliette's body was a big Gumby. She quaked with more orgasms than she ever had in her life. When she first discovered she was pregnant with Noah and didn't even know the father's last name, she had quaked at the enormity of what she'd done and the way one night of unsafe sex could force such a change in her life's plans. To compensate for that one moment of foolishness, she'd not allowed herself any pleasure, except for seeing her son blossom into a wonderful young man.

She'd kept her nose to the grindstone, made it through college, by hauling Noah to classes with her until he could walk and talk, and she managed to make a life for them. She'd gotten a decent job, scraped money together to buy a house for them, and provided a stable backdrop for Noah to thrive in. But the quaking she was feeling now was entirely different from what she'd lived with her entire life.

This time, her body had shuddered in fear from the wrath of nature that was accepted as an everyday occurrence in this part of the country, and then in sensuous delight, caused by

a Cyclone. He had done things to her body that no one had ever bothered doing before, and she loved him even more than she thought she could. They stayed in the shelter until the all-clear siren went off around midnight. Reluctantly, she put on her clothes and followed him to the surface and to the garage.

What she encountered made her already rubbery legs buckle. The corner of the garage, where the office was located, had been torn away. It was where she had been sitting, wondering what to do when the sirens first began blasting.

“My God, Cy,” she exclaimed as they checked out the damage. The desk had taken a direct hit from an overhead beam, and the chair Juliette had been in was smashed into an unrecognizable heap. She searched for her purse, which had been under the desk. It was still there, in the rubble. She pulled it out and checked the contents. Her cell phone was undamaged, but the three-pack of condoms she’d been carrying around all week were destroyed. She held the damaged goods up for Cy to see.

He grinned. “We don’t need them, anyway. Let’s go make a baby.”

He opened his arms and she walked into their shelter. He leaned down and kissed her lips softly. “Why don’t we make love in a real bed instead of a tornado shelter?” He began to nudge her toward his truck in the garage bay.

“Don’t you need to call the insurance company? Put a tarp over the roof? Something?” She laughed as she molded herself to his body.

“It can wait until morning. But you can’t.”

She could feel his hardness brushing up against her. “I’m going to be very sore in the morning.”

“And for many mornings to come, if I have my way,” he growled in reply.

He picked her up then, and cradled her in his arms as they moved from the damaged garage to his pickup truck. She had never been so safe before. All the restraint that had gotten her through her life up until now was gone. As was the knot of anxiety between her shoulders that had been a part of her for as long as she remembered. All the potholes on the road of life melted away and she breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction.

She could focus on a new future for herself. Since she'd ridden into town on the back of a horse, of all things, she'd encountered one new experience after another. Riding that horse was a big one, for starters. And a Harley. And a mechanical bull. Then, boot-scooting at a country bar, wearing actual cowboy boots. Putting on a bikini for the first time in more than twenty years, for lounging about a pool. Working a cash register. Tornadoes. Cyclone. Yes, especially a Cyclone. Her heart melted a bit more as she recalled how tender he was.

Sure, she'd still be a mother to Noah, and a grandmother to his children. But she was also a sensuous, desirable woman who now had a tall, muscled hunk of a man beside her to help shoulder the responsibilities of life. She was in Comfort now.

Two weeks later, Cy still had his arm around his lady fair. They were sitting on grass in the middle of the town square, lazy from too much food and too much sun. But the sun was setting now, and the band on the gazebo was tuning up for its program of patriotic music, which would end when the fireworks celebration began to light the sky.

After the night in the tornado shelter. Cy had driven Juliette to the farmhouse, where he carried her over the threshold as if she were a blushing bride. They were beginning

a new life together, so it seemed appropriate. Then they kept each other awake until dawn, making love in an actual bed.

The next day, they loaded up her new clothes at the motel and she settled her bill with Lolly. He drove her back out to the farmhouse. It was a monumental step, not just for her, but for him. And he found himself grinning at her as if he were a schoolboy. The sexiest woman he'd ever known had swirled into his life on the back of a tornado and was his. He had admired her body from the first moment he first laid eyes on her but, as she began to reveal bits and pieces of her past, he found himself in awe of the total package that was Juliette.

It had been a long time since he began to think about a future with someone, rather than the here and now. He wanted a future with this woman, and all that came with it. He wanted her. Two weeks of solid sex hadn't begun to take the edge off his desire. His body responded with need every time he caught sight of her.

So, here they were. Never more than an arm's length apart since that night, and totally in love. She wanted to learn every facet of the farm and how it operated, and was talking about raising chickens and getting a dog. He wanted to marry her now; she wanted to wait until Noah and Camille could come out and meet him. Either way, it would happen, and Cy leaned over and breathed in her scent. Sex and lilies. He'd never get enough of her.

As if reading his thoughts, she kissed him lightly and ran a hand down his cheek. "I didn't think I'd be here for the Fourth of July. This is exactly how I pictured the day would be. I love this town, the triplets, your friends Jimmy and O.C., and most of all I love you. Who would have guessed that afternoon when you picked me up on the side of the road, this would have happened?"

"It took a tornado to change the course of your life. To put you in the middle of Comfort."

“Not just a tornado, but a Cyclone.” She leaned into him and kissed his lips. “We chased away O.C., I guess. He hasn’t come back yet.”

Cy nuzzled her neck. “He told us we were making him sick with our PDA. He’s probably off seeing if any new women are in town for the fireworks.”

“There is one thing you haven’t done for me yet, Cy.”

“I’m not doing a good enough job? What can I do to make things perfect?”

“You have to take me to Chimney Rock, as you promised.”

“Hey, we’ve been kinda busy.”

She laughed. “Well, we need to go there, soon. Also, I need a project, other than you, as wonderful as these past few weeks have been. I want to do something to make the field behind the garage into some kind of tourist attraction. Sure, there are probably more picturesque places along the trail to see the scars in the earth, and to ponder what life on the trail was like, but this little piece of land, this tiny stretch, allows people to react to and get a sense of the tedium of the trip and to gain a real appreciation of what the journey encompassed. I walked alongside those ruts the day you showed them to me, and I could feel the anxiety of all those women who placed one foot in front of each other every day they were on the trail. That’s what I want to show people.”

“You’re never going to give up being a teacher, are you?”

“I think it’s a treasure, Cy, and it’s in your backyard. You shouldn’t hide it away.”

“Fair enough. Whatever you want, darlin’. You know by now I can’t deny you anything. But, as for waiting on the fireworks here, let’s go home now and make our own fireworks, shall we? Make a baby, a little firecracker that’s all ours.” He whispered to her as the firework explosions began to boom across the night sky.

“What will people say if we leave before the main attraction is over?”

“This isn’t the main attraction, darlin’, you are. And, as for the townsfolk, they’ll say we’re in love. Which we are. Besides, no one will mind. You’re in Comfort.”