

MEAGAN
MCKINNEY

THE COWBOY
CLAIMS
HIS LADY



Desire

Meagan McKinney

The Cowboy Claims His Lady

Аннотация

With his take-charge attitude and penetrating gaze, cowboy Bruce Everett spelled "Danger" from his Stetson to his boots, and Melynda Clay had sworn off men for good. She'd come to his dude ranch for a little rest and relaxation, and giving in to Bruce's masterful seduction wasn't on the itinerary! Never had anyone unraveled Bruce's restraint and roused his desire like Lyndie. Though the tempestuous city girl denied the powerful attraction between them, Bruce was determined to possess her, body and soul. Perhaps a night of passion would unlock Lyndie's chained heart and make this woman his - and his alone....

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Bruce stared at her in the darkness of the paddock. She couldn’t read his expression at all.

“It would delight me to no end to prove her and her wicked matchmaking ways wrong. Would you go along with the gag?”

He stepped toward her, tall and intimidating, masculine and domineering.

“I’ll go along with it. How far are we going?”

“Well—not far enough for me to be a notch on your bedpost,” she confirmed nervously.

“I’d rather you be tethered to my bedpost.” He pressed his long, lean body against hers.

She looked up at him, wondering how feminine wiles could ever tame such a male animal. Against her will, her breath quickened. She was no match for him when his very nearness caused her to tremble and melt.

“This is just to fool Hazel,” she said. “I’m not really going to try to seduce you. You do understand that, don’t you?”

He nodded.

Then, in a harsh whisper, he said, "I know. 'Cause I'm going to seduce you...."

Dear Reader,

In honor of International Women's Day, March 8, celebrate romance, love and the accomplishments of women all over the world by reading six passionate, powerful and provocative new titles from Silhouette Desire.

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Joan Marlow Golan

Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

The Cowboy Claims His Lady

Megan McKinney



MEAGAN MCKINNEY

is the author of over a dozen hardcover and paperback historical and contemporary women's fiction novels. In addition to romance, she likes to inject mystery and thriller elements into her work. Currently she lives in the Garden District of New Orleans with her two young sons, two very self-entitled cats and a crazy red mutt. Her favorite hobbies are traveling to the Arctic and, of course, reading!

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One

“Get over here and give this old cowgirl a hug!”

Melynda Clay laughed at the greeting. She heard the familiar voice before she could even glance across the small airport terminal of Mystery, Montana.

“Hazel!”

Tugging her wheeled luggage behind her, Lyndie headed toward the petite older woman with the elegant silver-chignoned hair. Her great-aunt was the same old contradiction in terms Lyndie remembered. The handsome cattle baroness also wore faded jeans tucked into dusty cowboy boots and a smart alligator-band Western hat.

“So how is my notorious great-aunt?” Lyndie asked with laughter and a hug.

“Right as rain on a wood duck! Never better!”

Lyndie had to agree. Hazel McCallum didn't look a day over sixty but the matriarch was well into the next decade.

All that clean-living and fresh mountain air, Lyndie mused. Certainly it was the opposite of the life she'd been living recently, bent over accounting books, worrying and biting her nails in the back of her little French Quarter shop in New Orleans.

“Lands, let me look at you!” Hazel exclaimed, holding Lyndie out at arm's length. “Hon, I love what you've done with your hair. Last time I saw you, you were just graduating college and you

practically had a buzz cut, remember?”

“Remember? Are you kidding? You kept asking me if I’d joined the Marines!”

“Well, the shoulder length and the blond streaks are perfect for your McCallum good looks,” Hazel said approvingly, still admiring her. “You’ve got my daddy’s sapphire-blue eyes. My gosh, you’re a regular traffic hazard.”

Hazel narrowed her own Prussian-blue eyes as if seeing more than Lyndie wanted her to. Lyndie wondered if her great-aunt was taking note of the signs of chronic strain and worry molding her features these days, especially the dark circles under those “sapphire-blue eyes.” The smudges betrayed the days of endless fretting and the sleepless nights.

“Well, c’mon, city slicker,” Hazel said, taking Lyndie’s free hand and pulling her toward the parking lot. “I’m parked right out front. You’ll find no chauffeur-driven Jaguars around here. Just my dusty old Caddy with tumbleweeds stuck in the grill and longhorns for a hood ornament.”

“Chauffeur-driven Jaguars?” Lyndie repeated, gasping. “Aunt Hazel, I’m not doing that well.”

“Oh, cowplop! Your mom tells me you’re getting ready to open your second store. That lingerie empire of yours is practically now a conglomerate. I’m proud of you, sweetie. I guess there’s two sharp business tycoons in this family. So don’t you let those cowhands of mine tease you mercilessly about those underwear shops.”

“All for Milady,” Lyndie replied, hamming it up for her favorite relative and quoting from the advertising copy Lyndie had written herself, “offers a complete line of women’s intimate apparel, the latest in fit and luxury for the discriminating woman.”

Hazel rolled her eyes. “Oh, brother! Intimate apparel? All my cowboys know about a ‘teddy’ is that he was once the president.”

They emerged into the sun-drenched late afternoon, a gorgeous June day. Lyndie was amazed that Hazel had meant it literally when she said she was parked right out front. Her cinnamon-and-black Fleetwood sat only about ten feet from the front doors. The small parking lot was almost empty.

“The only reason they call this paved pasture an airport,” Hazel informed her niece as they stored her luggage in the trunk, “is that we get a few flights from Helena. You’re in back of beyond now, girl. And I still say it’s just what you need. Your mom Sarah’s been telling me you’ve been working from get-up to go-to-bed, seven days a week.”

Lyndie managed a woeful smile. “I’m glad to be out west, Aunt Hazel, and to see you. But I confess I’m not so sure about this dude ranch of yours. That part is a little off-kilter right now.”

“Land sakes, why?”

“Oh, you know...I’m not really in the mood to be bonding with a bunch of tourists—”

“Oh, pouf! Besides, Bruce will keep all of you so dang busy there won’t be much time for idle jawboning.”

“Bruce?”

“You remember, I mentioned him to you on the phone? He trains and breeds horses for all us ranchers in Mystery Valley. During the summer he also runs Mystery Dude, from May to September. With some help, of course.”

Lyndie could have sworn she saw a glint of shrewdness in Hazel’s eyes as she added, “He’s also one of the most eligible hunks in the valley. ‘Bedroom eyes’ as us older gals used to say. He puts me in mind of Gregory Peck in his salad days.”

“Oh, no you don’t!”

Hazel glanced over, the very picture of faux shock. “Oh, no I don’t—what?”

“Aunt Hazel, I know good and well a scheming mind lurks behind that innocent-little-old-lady exterior of yours. I told you I wouldn’t come if I was to be one of your victims. Mom has told me all about your little matchmaking schemes, and I made it clear I’ll take no part in—”

“Schemes?” Hazel protested. “I’ve...facilitated a romance or two, perhaps, but—”

“Four weddings in one year? Mom says you even use notches now to count them.”

“Oh, you know Sarah,” Hazel said dismissively, “that niece of mine always liked to stretch the blanket a mite.”

“Uh-huh, sure. Well, please don’t try to ‘facilitate’ anything for me, okay? A little fun and diversion, well, all right, I’ll give that a whirl. But believe me, right now ‘romance’ is the last thing

I need.”

“Now, you needn’t be so testy,” Hazel scolded. “I simply remarked that Bruce is good-looking, and here you go and erupt like Mount Vesuvius.”

“I’m sorry.” Lyndie sighed, wondering if she had been overreacting. She was certainly prone to it these days.

Hazel nattered on enthusiastically about Mystery Dude Ranch while Lyndie dutifully tried to pay attention. Outside, the brittle light of late afternoon was taking on the mellow richness of sunset. White gauze clouds drifted in a deep cerulean sky, with majestic mountains forming a postcard-perfect Western vista. Mystery, Montana, was downright sublime in its natural beauty.

Lyndie abruptly realized Hazel had asked her a question.

“I’m sorry, what’d you say, Aunt Hazel?”

“I said, Mystery Dude is right on the way to my place. Since you’ll be moving in there tomorrow, anyway, why don’t we swing by and leave your cowpoke duds in your room? It’s close to supper, Bruce should be back to the house now. You can meet him.”

Lyndie aimed a suspicious glance at her.

“No Cupid tricks,” Hazel assured her. “Honest. Just to give you the lay of the land, that’s all.”

“Sure,” Lyndie responded, perking up a bit. “You’re right. That way we won’t have to haul my stuff around needlessly.”

A grin divided Hazel’s weather-seamed face. “Now you’re whistlin’! Maybe we can even pick out your horse.”

Lyndie could have sworn the sly glint was back in Hazel's eyes when she added, "If there's one thing Bruce Everett is a good judge of, it's horseflesh."

As if the place were only remembered in dreams, Lyndie realized she had forgotten how breathtaking Mystery Valley was—a patchwork of verdant pastures and fields like spokes radiating from the hub of the town of Mystery, population four thousand. About ten minutes after they entered the valley through a winding mountain pass, Hazel swung the Fleetwood off onto a dirt lane. The lane led to a ranch much smaller than her own Lazy M that dominated the valley.

"Why, there's Bruce now," Hazel remarked, tooting the horn as she pulled up in front of a long stone watering trough.

Perhaps a dozen or so people of both sexes and various ages, most with Lyndie's unmistakable look of "city slickers," stood near a big pole corral watching something—or someone. The car rolled a few more feet forward, and then Lyndie spotted a tall, lean, weather-bronzed man who was evidently demonstrating how to cinch a girth, using a barrel-chested sorrel horse as his model.

"This is the second new group of the season," Hazel explained as both women got out of the car. "Bruce takes a new group every three weeks—that way everybody's on the same page."

Bruce Everett smiled and waved a greeting at Hazel, excusing himself from the group and striding over to meet the new arrivals.

Even from where she was, Lyndie could see he was indeed

handsome, but she felt an almost physical backlash to her attraction, and she couldn't help but think of the old truism "Once burned, twice shy."

"Hazel, you cattle rustler!" he called out cheerfully. "What have you come to swindle me out of now?"

"Me the swindler! You're the one who sells spavined horses to unsuspecting old ladies."

During this exchange of fond insults, his gaze quickly appraised Lyndie. For some reason, Hazel's comment about his prowess in judging horseflesh just wouldn't leave Lyndie's mind.

"Bruce Everett," Hazel announced, handling the introductions, "this is my grand-niece from New Orleans, Melynda Clay. But everybody calls her Lyndie. She doesn't know beans about horses, but I expect you to remedy that in the next few weeks."

"As long as she's sound of limb and wind," he assured Hazel, "we can turn her into a cowgirl. Glad to meetcha, Lyndie."

His strong white teeth flashed in a wolfish smile, and an eerie, unpleasant sense of *déjà vu* washed over her. There was a confidence—a confidence bordering on arrogance—about this man that was reminiscent of Lyndie's ex-husband Mitch's manner. But whereas Mitch was all show and no substance, something told Lyndie to be wary of this cowboy's confidence. It just might turn out to be the real thing.

His scrutiny trapped her.

Suddenly irritated, she flung him a frozen, perfunctory smile,

then let her gaze turn to study a group of horses in a paddock beside the sprawling stone ranch house. As she'd hoped, her dismissal of him was obvious.

"Same here," she intoned in a pleasant, detached manner, her attention glued to the paddock.

"Well, that gets my money," she thought she heard him say under his breath.

Hazel raised her voice for Lyndie's benefit and suggested cheerfully, "Bruce, maybe you two could pick out Lyndie's horse while she's here."

They joined her near the paddock.

"That little bay mare with the white socks is one of my favorites," he told Lyndie. "Course, they're all good animals. They're not what you'd call well-schooled in dressage, but all of them are honest and fit. They do to take along."

Lyndie chanced a longer look at him this time.

He had removed his hat, and a shock of jet-black hair curved across his strong brow. The eyes watching her were the shade of morning frost.

He didn't have Mitch's features, no. But the handsome smile and the confidence—they were reminiscent of the traits she had fallen for hardest in Mitch. And the very thought of him still soured her blood.

"They'll do to take along where?" she replied, though she knew full well it was just a westernism he had spoken, not a literal remark.

He gave another interrogative glance at Hazel. “Wherever I take ’em,” he replied, placing slight emphasis on the word I.

Hazel, her expression clearly betraying how much she did not like the trail they were taking, again spoke up.

“You know, hon, I just remembered you must be tired from your trip. You can pick out your horse tomorrow. Why don’t we just take a quick look at your room, then head on to the Lazy M?”

“That’s sound just like the tonic I need,” Lyndie said.

Bruce seemed to want to elaborate on what kind of tonic he’d like to give her, but to his credit, he directed “Right this way,” leading them toward a low building of new milled lumber that stood between the main house and a row of stables.

“This here’s the bunkhouse.” He threw open a door. “The place has been renovated to make private rooms. As you see, they’re basic, but they’re clean as the bottom of a feed bucket. And there’s plenty of hot water.”

Lyndie stepped into the room. Her black Italian pantsuit looked absolutely out of place next to the rough-hewn log bed and the throw rug covering the floor. She already felt like a fish out of water, and only more so when she turned and met the cowboy’s gyrfalcon gaze.

There was no reading his mind. He was like Mitch, a cipher. But she swore she saw the twist of a smirk on his lips as he, too, noticed the contrast between her and the simple room.

Rattled, she ran her hand down the thick, scratchy wool blanket on the bed. “Well, I didn’t expect the Ritz, so I guess this

will serve its purpose just fine,” she said dismissively.

His gray eyes lit with an amused sparkle. “It’s always served my purposes damn well—”

Hazel interrupted him with a coughing fit. “Lordy, don’t know what came over me,” she apologized when she was finished.

“I—I guess I’ll get my bag, then,” Lyndie remarked.

“Let me help you,” he offered.

“Thanks, I can manage,” she assured him, walking out the door without turning around.

He stared at her until she turned the corner.

“Well, ain’t she silky satin,” he mumbled under his breath.

Hazel grinned. “Actually, she is.”

He raised one dark eyebrow.

“She’s in the lingerie business, remember?”

He grinned back. “That’s right. Well, either she’s got a mighty high opinion of herself, or a mighty low opinion of everyone else.”

“Neither one,” Hazel insisted. “She’s a wonderful girl. Just give her a little time, that’s all.”

Bruce lifted the corner of his mouth in a smirking smile. The gray of his eyes deepened. “Tell you what, Hazel, her nose may be a little out of joint, but the rest of her sure seems to be in order.”

“Atta boy,” Hazel encouraged him. “You just keep thinking like that, and sooner or later things are going to start humming right along.”

He narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Humming along? Hey, I just run a dude ranch here, Hazel, and I try to be civil with all comers. I got no ulterior motives regarding your niece.”

“Well, you’d better get some,” Hazel insisted.

His jaw slackened in surprise.

But before he could respond, Hazel said, “Shush now, here she comes.”

“The hell you up to now, old gal?” he muttered.

“Just the usual tricks,” she muttered right back, quelling her smile before Lyndie saw it. “Just the usual tricks.”

Two

Bumping her wheeled suitcase along the dirt road toward the bunkhouse, Lyndie began to wonder what she'd gotten into.

A couple of weeks at a dude ranch had sounded fine in the steaming French Quarter—but that was then. Now she found herself in her high-heeled designer shoes, having to negotiate a hoof-rutted dirt path—not to mention the treacherous road map of a certain Mr. Everett.

He'd shaken her more than she wanted to admit. The lazy, hooded stare sparked something inside her which she feared was lust.

But she was not going down that highway to hell. Not now. Not ever. Fancy lingerie was fine for married women and the swinging single gal, but she was a businesswoman, and the lacy, sheer demi-bras she sold were now nothing more to her than product. They were the accoutrements of some other world, not of her own.

“Ma'am,” a deep-chested voice said in her ear.

Somehow he'd appeared beside her. She faced the ice-gray eyes of Bruce Everett.

He took her suitcase and hefted it easily to his shoulder like a favorite saddle.

“That's all right—no—really, I can manage—” she stammered, following him like a schoolgirl.

“Been told you can manage just about anything—given what Hazel says about you,” he answered gruffly.

He turned and they locked stares.

Again she was frozen by his gaze.

Hazel showed up at the bunkhouse door, beaming. “We’ve got a good, old-fashioned Saturday night stomp at the Mystery Saloon tonight. You thinkin’ of comin’, Bruce?”

Lyndie cringed. She suddenly felt like she was in junior high, waiting for that first guy to ask her to dance. And there were no takers.

“You know I go for the trail and not the saloon, Hazel,” he answered gruffly.

Her great-aunt snorted like she was one of the cowpokes. “There was a time before Katherine that you were all too familiar with the saloon, and it’s time you stepped out again.”

If Lyndie didn’t know better, she would have sworn Bruce Everett gave Hazel one of those permafrost looks she was beginning to recognize herself. But that was not possible. No one thwarted Hazel. Hazel was the grand-dame of Mystery, Montana.

The McCallums went back more than a century, and had settled the entire valley. Among cattle ranchers, the McCallum name was interchangeable with the Midas touch. Even Lyndie herself knew how persuasive her great-aunt could be. In the midst of expansion and fiscal crisis, Lyndie had been lured to drop everything and attend a three-week vacation at a dude ranch—

when she didn't even know how to ride.

"We'll see you at the stomp," Hazel announced.

Bruce stood and stared at the two women, Lyndie's leaden suitcase still perched on his broad shoulder.

"Well, if looks could kill..." Lyndie murmured as soon as she was locked inside Hazel's signature burnt-orange Caddy and away from the eyes and ears of Bruce Everett.

"He just needs a nudge, that's all."

She looked at her great-aunt. "Hazel, I said no shenanigans. I certainly don't need them, not when you've convinced me to take a break. And certainly Bruce Everett doesn't need a woman thrown in his lap when he has this Katherine he's hung up on."

"He needs to quit his hang-up with Katherine. It wasn't his fault. She was a headstrong fool who couldn't be taught to respect a horse. And I don't care how beautiful she was, he had no business with a woman who wouldn't respect a horse," Hazel said astutely.

"I am totally confused. What does this have to do with me?" Lyndie enquired. "Because, let me tell you, I respect horses. In fact, if the truth be known, I so respect them that I'm scared to death of them. So let Bruce and Katherine have their respect-the-horse love-fest without me."

"He needs to go to the saloon tonight and two-step around a bit. It'd be good for what ails him. There was a time when he was the tomcat of Mystery. And believe me, the ladies didn't complain."

Lyndie released a cynical sigh. “I know too well of what you speak, Hazel, but his tomcat ways sound like Katherine’s problem.”

“Katherine’s dead.”

Lyndie gave her a sharp look.

“Yep,” Hazel continued. “She died on the trail with Bruce. There was talk he was in love with her. There was even rumor of a wedding. But Katherine had no horse sense, literally. She felt horses were no better than men, ready to serve her beck and call. When the bobcat attacked, she didn’t realize the cat was protecting her litter. Katherine ignored all her mount’s warnings, and, in my opinion, that’s why she was bucked and fell to her death off that cliff.”

The news punched Lyndie in the gut. Empathy, something she swore she’d feel for no man after Mitch, came swelling up inside her. “I had no idea,” she said softly. “Gosh, how awful for him.”

“Yep. And him the kind of man who likes to have everything in control,” Hazel said solemnly.

“Maybe you ought to leave him alone, Hazel. After all, I’m sure he feels guilty—”

“Guilty? Why should he feel guilty? It wasn’t his fault. The horse neighed and shied. And then shied and shied again. She shouldn’t have forced the poor animal. But that Katherine, she was the kind of gal who never took ‘no’ for an answer, and she spurred that poor frightened animal to its death. Along with hers.”

“How horrible.” A sympathetic moan emanated from Lyndie’s lips. “No wonder he’s so cold.”

“He was never cold before. But now he punishes himself every day.”

“Terrible.”

Hazel took a deep breath as she sped the Caddy along the dusty gravel roads toward her ranch. Every now and again, the matron gave Lyndie a probing glance. “It’s not your concern whether Bruce Everett heals or not. It’s just that the man works so hard. It’s as if he’s running from something—and I just want to see him stop and turn around, is all. Success is useless if you can’t have some fun now and then.”

Lyndie grew pensive, thinking of her own situation. Her divorce had been public and humiliating, but even worse was the inexpressible shock of betrayal, the sudden discovery that her “charming and loving” husband had been not only embezzling money from her for years, but using the funds to support his mistress.

Swindling his wife, betraying his wedding vows and her trust—it had meant no more to Mitch than killing a fly.

Suddenly, wanting to confide in Hazel, she said, “You know, Hazel, I didn’t always work like a slave. I used to have fun, but... well, the fun in me just ran out, I guess. I kind of understand where Bruce Everett’s coming from. Lately, work’s been my only antidote, you know? Sometimes I think that after going through a divorce, ‘hell’ is a redundant concept.”

Hazel gave her another study, then soothed, “You just have to let it go, hon, you hear me? What’s done is done, and it can’t be changed now. Remember, people come out west to start all over. From now on you have to be forward-oriented. And a few weeks at the Mystery Dude Ranch is just what you need.”

Despite the breathtaking summer panorama, Lyndie still felt a chill settle on her as she remembered a much different, much uglier picture from last fall in New Orleans. She had returned home unexpectedly early from a business trip to Manhattan. Nothing in her life could have prepared her for the shock of opening the front door and seeing the man she loved, naked and in the throes of orgasmic bliss with a woman she had never even suspected existed.

She had tried so hard, in the difficult, intervening months, to erase that picture, to somehow focus on the good in her life and expunge the bad. But her own mother’s divorce had left permanent scars. Somehow work seemed the only way to heal. At least she wouldn’t be impoverished as her mother had been when Dad had kissed them all off for a younger woman. Her mother had been abandoned, with no skills, and no job, and a young child of five to raise all by herself. Work was a way to restore her pride, as her mother’s pride had been restored when she went back to school and refused to let the McCallum money raise her child.

But no matter how hard Lyndie tried, it seemed that negative thoughts always had the upper hand; already the “good times”

she had shared with Mitch had become a formless mist in her memory, while the sharply defined edges of the ugliness still rubbed her raw....

You have to curb such thinking, Lyndie lectured herself, or the entire trip will be a waste.

“I said, has success tied your tongue? Lands, when you were little, everybody called you Babbling Brook, you rambled on so.”

The memory coaxed a little one-sided smile out of Lyndie. “I forgot about that name.”

Despite the brave front, Lyndie felt the old familiar sting of unshed tears. Even as Hazel watched, Lyndie temporarily lost the battle and one lone tear tipped from her lower lid.

“Love,” Hazel said gently, “they say the best way to cure a boil is to lance it. If you want to talk about something, anything, you just get it off your chest, you hear me? I’m a crusty old dame, it’s true, but I’m an excellent listener.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” Lyndie demurred, angrily swiping at the proof she was fibbing. “And I’m sorry for the sob stuff. I honestly didn’t come out here to be gloomy and weepy.”

“Save your embarrassed apologies for somebody who doesn’t love you. You just need to get busy is all. But don’t you think I’m doing one of those silly fix-ups with Bruce Everett. That’s not it. He’s my own special project. I just want to bring out the tomcat in him again. And being a woman of a certain age, I know I can’t do it all myself, so I’ll have to see if the gals at the stomp can do him some good.”

Lyndie couldn't suppress her smile. "Since when do you eliminate yourself on account of age?"

Hazel grinned. "All right. I may be old, but I'm not dead. And that Bruce Everett is a piece of sirloin that'd be a shame to go to waste."

Lyndie shrugged. "I guess it's a pity I'm vegetarian, then."

"So far," Hazel bested, then pressed down the accelerator.

Hazel's guest room was as posh as that in any five-star hotel, but one that blessedly lacked pretension. Curling her toes in the thick Tabriz carpet, Lyndie studied herself in the hand-hewn pine mirror and wondered if she would pass as a Montana native.

She wore her great-aunt's cowboy boots, the ones Hazel wore every day and which possessed enough scrapes and mud to prove it. Tugging on jeans and a simple white cotton T-shirt, she thought the transformation complete, until Hazel knocked on the door and handed her a black cowgirl hat and a pair of dangling turquoise earrings.

"Now you're fit to stomp," Hazel pronounced, tipping her own custom-made Stetson.

"Then, too bad Mitch isn't here," Lyndie mumbled on the way to the Caddy. "Cause I'd sure like to stomp him."

The dance was held at the old Mystery Saloon, circa nineteen-ten. There was a line to get in at the door, but the minute the Caddy pulled up, a skinny young man in a white cowboy hat opened the door for Hazel, and after helping the cattle baroness to her feet, he immediately went to park the car.

“You’re certainly the celebrity,” Lyndie marveled as the crowd parted to let them in first.

“When you’re older than God, the young folks humor you,” Hazel quipped, winking at her.

Lyndie gave her a wry smile and said, “Ri-i-i-ight.”

The western band was already up and running with a two-step. The room was alive with couples having a good time, and Lyndie suddenly felt her aloneness. To get her mind off the negative, she played tourist. She studied the exquisite truss-work of spruce that held the roof, and she was most impressed by the oak dance floor, worn to an ice-pond finish by nearly a century of sliding cowboy boots.

“When in Rome,” Hazel said, handing her a glass from the bartender.

Lyndie took a sip and coughed. “This is whiskey!”

“Like I said, dear, ‘When in Rome,’” Hazel repeated, smiling secretively.

“I’m not much of a drinker...” Lyndie tried another sip. The next one didn’t burn nearly as much.

“That which doesn’t kill you, my dear...”

“Yeah, I know. But I’m really sick of having to be so strong.”

Hazel gave her another one of those tricky smiles. “That’s what tonight is for. Don’t be strong tonight. Just loosen that girth a little and— Why, speak of the devil! There’s Bruce Everett!”

Lyndie looked across the packed dance floor.

She found him in the haze, leaning against the bar like

a gunslinger. She'd thought he was tall, but in the crowd he looked even taller, gazing over the crowd with those shuttered, unapproachable eyes.

"Look! He's seen us! He's coming over!" Hazel exclaimed with glee.

Suddenly the whiskey started tasting pretty good to Lyndie. Another gulp and she was prepared to meet those silvery eyes.

"Miss Clay, Hazel," he said, tugging on the front of his black cowboy hat.

"Why aren't you out there on the floor boot-scootin'?" Hazel demanded.

"I was waiting for you," he offered, taking Hazel's arm and wrapping it inside his, as he led her away.

Lyndie watched the two on the dance floor. Bruce and Hazel waltzed as if they'd been made for each other. As they floated and laughed around the crowded floor, Lyndie gripped her whiskey. She was feeling braver, and yet more out of her element with every passing second.

And for this, she had agreed to a vacation?

She should have stayed home. It was less bruising to her ego to spend every day hunched over her books, than hunched over a bar, hoping some cowpoke would ask her to dance.

Bruce brought Hazel back to the hitching post that separated the bar from the dance floor. Lyndie leaned against it, anticipating the moment he'd ask her. She couldn't dance a two-step but she was suddenly eager to try.

She watched as Bruce whispered something in Hazel's ear. The cattle baroness laughed.

Then he was gone, like a shadowy sharpshooter who dissipated in the mist.

"Well, I'll be," Lyndie muttered.

"You'll be what, dear?" Hazel asked.

"Oh, nothing."

Hazel winked at Lyndie's empty whiskey glass. "Why, you've gone dry!" She was off to the bar before Lyndie could stop her.

It was another hour before she saw Bruce Everett again. Lyndie spied with him a young brunette who was falling all over him on the dance floor.

"Don't you think he's robbing the cradle a bit there?" she muttered over her glass.

"Who?"

Lyndie went to point out Bruce, but the waltz had stopped and the band picked up a lively two-step.

"Dance?"

She looked up and found Bruce next to her, his dark expression quizzical.

It took a moment for Lyndie to realize what Hazel had done. The cattle baroness had to have known that after watching all the couples dancing for an hour, and downing a couple of stiff ones, Lyndie would be tipsy and, at last, ever so grateful to be asked to dance.

"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to

get you,” she joked to herself before taking Bruce’s strong arm.

Out on the dance floor she had some difficulty following him. Then suddenly she burst out, “I get it! A two-step is really three steps!”

He laughed. His teeth were very white.

The vision sent an unwanted thrill down her back.

“Give the little lady a hand,” he smirked, pulling her back into sync with him.

“This is fun, actually,” she confessed.

“Course it is. Why else would we do it, then?”

She looked up at him, capturing his gaze through the shadow of his low-slung hat.

“I’d better watch out,” she teased. “A girl could get used to having fun and not working so hard.”

“Why do you need to work so hard? I thought you were the boss.”

“That’s exactly why I have to work so hard. I’m expanding and I can’t find a silent partner, so I’m having the worst time financing—”

She giggled and put her hand to her mouth. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to bore you.”

“You’re not boring me,” he said, his gaze never leaving her.

She laughed out loud. “But it’s technical. You won’t understand.”

“I may not be an MBA from one of those fancy East Coast schools, but I understand a good—”

She put her hand to his mouth. His lips were taut with suppressed anger, and she wondered what it would be like to try to kiss the anger away.

“Look, I don’t want to ruffle your feathers. I’m here on a vacation. To have fun. So let’s have fun.”

He pulled her around the dance floor one more time before he spoke.

“You wanna have fun?” He seemed like he’d pondered something for a while and finally had made up his mind.

“Sure,” she said lightly.

“Have you seen the old gristmill?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen an old gristmill—let alone the one here in Mystery.”

“Then, let’s go.” He stopped dancing and took her hand.

The whiskey must have really hit her hard because she heard herself saying, “What do you do at the mill?” instead of, “My God, I’m not going anywhere with you alone!”

“Skinny-dip,” he answered.

She took this bit of news more calmly than she would have expected. “But you don’t understand. I can’t—” she began.

He stopped her. “Sure you can. Just take off your clothes and jump in. It’s easy.”

“Take off my clothes?” she repeated numbly. “I really don’t think I can take off my—”

“Hey, you’re the underwear queen. I thought showing off the merchandise would be second nature.” he countered.

“Just ’cause I sell lingerie doesn’t mean I can go around—”

“Sure it does,” he said soothingly, putting a vise-like grip on her arm as he led her away.

“No really,” she countered, but still let him lead her.

“I’ll make you a deal then. I’ll let you keep on everything you sell in your shop.”

“It’ll just bore you. I only wear what’s beige and functional. I save the froufrou for the customers.”

He seemed to hold back a grin. “I’m a cowboy, ma’am. Plain and simple’s just fine with me. In fact, you’d like to get plain right down to your birthday suit—”

“I couldn’t. I just couldn’t,” she added.

He grinned in full. “Then, bore me with the beige and functional. And hey, think of it as advertising. Do it for the business. It’s good customer relations to show off the merchandise.”

She didn’t really have an answer for that one.

His arm went around her waist and soon they were out the door.

“Shouldn’t I have told Hazel where I’ll be?” she asked before getting into an old faded-red pickup.

“You never lived in a small town, did you?” he asked, sliding behind the steering wheel.

“Nope,” she answered with more vigor than was necessary.

“Believe me, everybody, including Hazel, knows we’re going to the mill.”

“Now, how can that be?” she murmured stumped. “Does everybody here have cell phones I can’t see?”

“Don’t need ’em. We’ve got Hazel McCallum—and everyone reports to Hazel the goings on ’round here. That’s twice true if it concerns one of her own.”

He smiled that carnivore’s smile and said, “So are you ready?”

She looked at him in the dark. Suddenly she wanted to get out and run.

“I guess,” she whispered, all the while wondering what madness had gotten hold of her.

“I’m only doing this because Hazel trusts you. Otherwise, let me tell you, I never go off with strangers.” Lyndie rambled on while the pickup negotiated the unpaved mountain road.

“I’m no stranger,” Bruce said. “Ask Hazel.”

“She says you used to be a tomcat. And even this city girl can figure out what that means.”

“Haven’t been tomcatting in a while,” he almost whispered.

“She told me that, too.”

A silence permeated the truck’s cab. It was so deep and oppressive, Lyndie was glad when the silhouette of the mill appeared over the hill.

“Here we are.”

He pulled next to the fieldstone building. A small river emptied alongside the building and drove the wheel. Beneath it all was a large inviting pool of river water that shimmered in the opalescent moonlight.

She opened her door and got out.

The creaking wheel and the splash of water suddenly set her nerves on edge. As did the tall dark man next to her.

“So, what do you do here?” she asked in a tough voice.

“Swim. I’ll show you.”

He tugged his shirt out of his jeans and peeled it over his head.

In the moonlight, she could see the ripple of muscle on his chest. There was also a light sprinkling of dark hair that narrowed where his abdominal muscles tightened into a grid. It formed a trail that disappeared into the waist of his jeans.

When he reached for the button on his jeans, she held up her hand.

“If I’m giving a lingerie show, then, so are you. Keep ’em on,” she instructed, gesturing to his white boxers that showed through his fly.

“You sure you’ve never done this before?” He grinned.

She nodded. “I’m sure.”

Tossing off his hat and scuffing out of his boots, he finally stood in his boxers, arms crossed as if impatiently waiting for her to follow suit.

A lump of anxiety caught in her throat, but the whiskey told her she wasn’t out of her mind—that it was perfectly acceptable to go swimming with a man she’d only met that afternoon.

“Hell, it’s the country, isn’t it? What’s wrong with getting back to nature when I’m on vacation?” she muttered, pulling off her hat.

“That’s the spirit,” he coaxed.

“But I’m keeping my T-shirt on,” she told him.

He seemed only too compliant. “Sure. Go right ahead.”

She looked down at herself.

The sheer white T-shirt would be worse—or better, depending on the perspective—than being naked. Still, her sense of modesty wouldn’t allow her to fling it off.

“You know, I think you’re setting me up,” she added warily.

“For what?” he whispered in her ear before he took her hand and pulled her on top of him into the swimming hole.

“You j-j-jerk!” she stammered, gasping at the frigid chill of Rocky Mountain melt water.

“Best to keep moving” was all he offered.

Enraged, she tried to dunk his head.

Laughing, he even let her a few times, as if it would be good for her to get her anger out.

“Bet you can’t do this.” He swam over to the wheel and held on to it for a few feet. Then he dove into the pool as if from a diving board.

“Oh, yeah?” she taunted, answering the challenge. She was shivering and acting like a child, but she had to admit, she couldn’t remember ever feeling so free.

She held on to the churning wheel. After a couple of seconds, she pushed herself off and plunged into the dark, frigid pool.

When she came up for air, she screeched with laughter. “My God, it’s c-c-cold!”

He went to her. Unbidden, his arms encircled her waist. His torso was like a branding iron against her, but she couldn't deny herself the welcome warmth.

"Is this how you've gotten all your girls? Through hypothermia?" she jabbed.

"Nope," he answered, looking down at her while they treaded water. "Whiskey always worked just fine. But I figured you'd be a tough pony to tame."

"Ha!" She pushed his head into the water and swam away.

To prove her point, she held on to the wheel, this time longer, then cannonballed him.

"You know," she said blithely, swimming on her back, "this is fun. I'm actually getting used to the temperature of the water."

"Unfortunately, once you get out, you freeze all over again." His gaze followed her.

"Can't wait." She splashed him, he nearly splashed back.

She laughed and was almost grateful when he took her waist again and warmed her.

"I have a confession," she sputtered, wiping the water from her eyes. "You wouldn't know it from what I do for a living, but I was a tomboy as a child. I always wanted an older brother, too. To do stuff like this. Now I kinda feel like I have one."

He pressed her closer. "I hate to tell you this, but I have no intention of being your older brother."

She looked at him. The moonlight sparkled across the water and upon the droplets that clung to his chest hair. He seemed

sexier by the minute, and yet, no warning bells went off in her head.

She feared it might still be the whiskey.

“No, really,” she insisted. “That was a compliment. I always wanted some guy friends to pal around with. I thought after five years of marriage that I’d get some companionship from my husband, but, boy, was I wrong!” She smiled and gave him a little splash. “This has been just what the doctor ordered.”

“Good,” he answered in a husky tone, just staring at her.

“What?” she asked, her words lazy and maybe even more inviting than she had intended.

“How’d you meet him?”

“Who?” she asked, suddenly blank.

“Your husband.”

She almost laughed. “At a book reading. Can you imagine anything more dull? That should have been the first warning, huh?” She treaded water. “Then, after that, he decided to write the Great American Novel, and like the infatuated fool, I did everything I could to support him. Even when he took all the money I had to give with my little business, I still believed he deserved more. I always thought he needed to travel more, to prop up his surroundings so he could write. I had to be the perfect helpmate, and that meant to give and give and give ’till I and everything else was spent. But I wasn’t going to end up alone and poor like my mom.” She released a wry smile. “So since I’m alone now, I work 24/7, so I won’t be poor, too.”

A long pause reigned when the only sounds were the creak of the wheel and the soft splash of falling water.

To relieve the tension, she flicked some water at him. “So how d’ya like that for a sisterly confession?”

“Nothing sisterly about it.”

“No?” she asked, raising her damp eyebrows. “You think I’d confess that to a date? I don’t think so. That’s for brothers only, pal.”

His stare only grew more intense. Even in the dimness of the moonlight, she could see his gaze tracing every shadow of emotion that swept past.

“Can’t be my little sister,” he instructed, his voice low, like a seductive growl. “Impossible. Because, first of all, I already have one. Her name’s Becky.”

“I’m sure she’s lucky—” she stammered, losing her train of thought beneath that dark stare.

“And second, I never wanted to do this to her.”

His arms tightened. He crushed her against his chest. Slowly his hard lips descended upon hers. The heat of his mouth shocked her. The delicious contrast of her cold lips and his warm tongue made her release an involuntary moan.

His kiss deepened and she could taste the whiskey on his breath and smell the male scent of him. Against her will, she found her mouth opening to him, as if she was thirsty for him and all she wanted to do was drink. His broad warm chest coaxed like a blanket in the snow. It was all too much to resist, and she

felt herself folding into it as if she could crawl inside the fortress of it and be safe and warm forever—

His tongue ran down the slick wet skin of her neck giving her chills that had nothing to do with the Montana night air. Instinctively she crushed her breasts against his chest, her nipples, puckered with cold, brushed erotically against the wet fabric of her bra and the hard warmth of his pectorals.

Her hand slid down his back and pressed his buttock. Groaning, he slid her fingers to his groin, enticing her to feel his arousal. But she knew he was hard and ready without having to verify it. He pressed himself against her, his maleness like a police baton.

She pulled back, suddenly knowing she was in over her head.

The weariness in her eyes seemed to stop him too. His warmth was suddenly gone. She seemed to awaken from a dream, and found herself in the arms of a snowman. He pulled away from her, the eyes still staring, but this time with accusation and censure.

“We’ve got to go,” he said abruptly, pulling her out of the water as if she were nothing but a rag doll.

“Why?” she gasped, disoriented by his moods and the lash of stinging cold air on her wet body.

“Do what’s good for you, girl. Get your clothes on,” he answered gruffly.

She looked at him. Every tight line of his buttocks was visible in the sheer wet cotton of his boxers.

He turned around to scowl at her. She held her breath. If what she saw between his legs was the result of cold shrinkage, she doubted she could handle it, even then.

“You want some now?” he demanded.

She gasped and shook her head.

“Then, get your clothes on.” He turned to scoop up his jeans and shirt.

She fumbled for her jeans. Sodden and shivering, she could hardly pull them on.

“You can put your boots on in the truck.” He led her by the elbow to the pickup and helped her into the cab.

Seated next to her, he flipped the switch for the diesel and started the engine.

“W-w-was it something I did?” she stammered.

He glanced at her, his face a stone mask in the dashboard light.

“I thought we were having fun—”

He stopped her. “Know what a grizzly feels like when it wakes up?”

She shook her head, her eyes wide.

“He’s hungry,” he growled. “So hungry he can’t think of anything but what it is that he wants.”

“And what do you want?” Her words came out in a frightened whisper.

He took one hard look at her. He didn’t have to speak.

Even she heard the word in the silence, the long, echoing word, damning her and praising her in a monosyllabic curse.

You.

Three

“A dead varmint. Yep. That’s what she looks like.” Hazel’s words penetrated the fog in Lyndie’s mind.

“It’s awake! It’s awake! Hallelujah!” Ebby, Hazel’s longtime cook, a tall raw-boned woman who’d ranched a hundred head of cattle and five sons all on a widow’s pension, stood over the bed.

Hazel peered over Ebby’s silver tray of coffee and toast. “Yep. There’s life in her still. I see her glaring at me.”

Lyndie sat up in bed. Her head pounded. She winced.

“Have a good stomp at the mill, did we?” Ebby tsked while she set down the breakfast tray.

“I’ll never drink whiskey again,” Lyndie moaned.

“Is it the whiskey you regret, or the man?” Hazel asked.

“Oh, please say it’s the whiskey.” Ebby clucked. “Even old hens like us dream about men like Bruce Everett.”

Lyndie eyed both women woefully. “I was set up. And which one of you did it? Was it—Hazel?” she accused.

Hazel smiled like a Cheshire cat. “Live life to bursting, I always say. But I didn’t think you’d go and do it the first minute you were off the yoke, dear. Still, you’re a McCallum through and through. You’ll find your way. We McCallums always do.”

“Hazel, promise me for the rest of this trip that you’ll refrain from mentioning the words whiskey and men.”

Lyndie wobbled to her feet, clad in pink satin pajamas of her

own label. The memory of the night before was coming to her in waves like the water from a gristmill. She recalled the awkward silence in the pickup as Bruce drove her to the Lazy M. It was almost as if Mitch and Katherine had been in the truck cab with them, casting their pall. After a chilly farewell, she'd crawled to her bed, vowing to forget about Bruce Everett forever.

And then the nightmares came.

She'd had them all night long.

She'd be at the grocery store, the accountant's, in line for a movie—then she'd look down and see herself as if in a mirror. Her white T-shirt was wet and transparent, outlining each half-dollar mauve nipple, and her sodden hair was plastered against her forehead like a water nymph.

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