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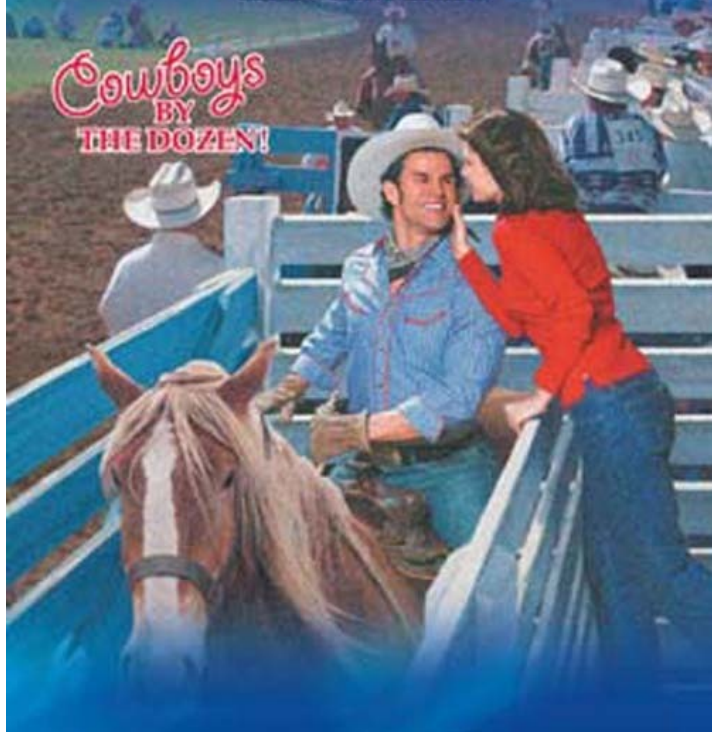
August

American ROMANCE

LAREDO'S SASSY SWEETHEART

Tina Leonard

Cowboys
BY
THE DOZEN!



Tina Leonard

Laredo's Sassy Sweetheart

Аннотация

Laredo Jefferson was eight seconds from shaking the dust of Union Junction, Texas, from his boots. Eight seconds from discovering the Something Big he was destined to do. He couldn't reckon how he'd promised those eight seconds to sweet filly Katy Goodnight, but he sure as shootin' knew why. He wanted to be her hero. And that meant riding the beast Bloodthirsty Black. Laredo was a lover, not a bull rider. Still, he craved a challenge—and so, it seemed, did Katy. For this gun-shy Lonely Hearts gal handpicked him to unsaddle her of her virginity. Suddenly, where Katy was concerned, eight seconds could never be enough....

Содержание

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” he asked	5
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	6
Laredo’s Sassy Sweetheart	7
THE JEFFERSON BROTHERS OF MALFUNCTION JUNCTION	8
Contents	10
Chapter One	11
Chapter Two	30
Chapter Three	39
Chapter Four	56
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	60

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” he asked

“I’ve never been kissed like that before,” she said on a gasp.

He smiled. “Then let’s do it again and go for two.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “Laredo...I’m not the girl for you.”

And then she ran into the Lonely Hearts Salon.

Not the girl for him? Of course she wasn’t the girl for him. He wasn’t looking for a girl. He was passing through town on his way to Something Big.

But he liked Katy, liked her an awful lot. Wouldn’t want to hurt her.

Katy was right—she wasn’t the woman for him. There would never be a woman for him.

He should never have kissed her....

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tina Leonard loves to laugh, which is one of the many reasons she loves writing for Harlequin American Romance. In another lifetime, Tina thought she'd be single and an East Coast fashion buyer forever. The unexpected happened when Tina met Tim again after many years—she hadn't seen him since they'd attended school together from first through eighth grade. They married, and now Tina keeps a close eye on her school-age children's friends! Lisa and Dean keep their mother busy with soccer, gymnastics and horseback riding. They are proud of their mom's "kissy books" and eagerly help her any way they can. Tina hopes readers will enjoy the love of family she writes about in her books. Recently a reviewer wrote, "Leonard had a wonderful sense of the ridiculous," which Tina loved so much she wants it for her epitaph. Right now, however, she's focusing on her wonderful life and writing a lot more romance!

Laredo's Sassy Sweetheart

Tina Leonard



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Many thanks to my readers! There is never enough I can say to thank you for your support and your generosity. This series is for you. Here also I wish to extend special mention to the following wonderful people: LaJoyce Doran, Shadin Quran, Nicole Christoph, Jeanette Bowman and Beth Reimer.

More than ever, my gratitude goes to the editor angels at Harlequin who watch over my career—thank you to Melissa Jeglinski for your many kindnesses and Stacy Boyd for your calm guidance and patience!

And extra-sloppy, noisy kisses to Lisa and Dean. I adore you and need the light you bring to my life~~Mumzie.

THE JEFFERSON BROTHERS OF MALFUNCTION JUNCTION

Mason (37)—He valiantly keeps the ranch and the family together.

Frisco Joe (36)—Newly married, he lives in Texas wine country with his wife and daughter.

Fannin (35)—Should he pack up and head out to find their long-lost father, Maverick?

Laredo (34), twin to Tex—His one passion: to go east and do Something Big with his life.

Tex (34), twin to Laredo—Determined to prove he's settled, he cross-pollinates roses, but can't seem to get them to bloom.

Calhoun (33)—He's been thinking of hitting the rodeo circuit.

Ranger (32), twin to Archer—No one believes him, but he's serious about joining the military.

Archer (32), twin to Ranger—He'll do anything to keep his mind off his brothers' restlessness—even write poetry to his lady pen pal in Australia.

Crockett (30), twin to Navarro—He's an artist who loves to paint portraits—of nudes.

Navarro (30), twin to Crockett—He may join Calhoun in the bull-riding game.

Bandera (26)—He spouts poetry like Whitman—and

sometimes nonsense.

Last (25)—Never least, he loves to dispense advice, especially to his brothers.

Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter One

“A man only fights for the good, boys, not to impose his will on others. Believe in yourself. No one can do that for you. But a real man learns to fight with his brain, not his fists.”

—Maverick Jefferson to his sons when they asked him if they could give Sammy Wickle a black eye in kindergarten.

Laredo Jefferson had seen a lot of madness in the past month. The neighbor the twelve Jefferson brothers had known all their lives, Mimi, had become engaged, a startling situation in itself, since the engagement was to someone other than his big brother, Mason. Mason hadn't pulled his head out in time to realize he was going to lose someone who mattered a lot to him—or, at least, Laredo was pretty certain Mimi and Mason meant a lot to each other. Sometimes it was hard to tell if all the preening and poppycock was prideful love or just the wear and tear of a brother-sister relationship.

Frisco Joe had married a fine woman, another surprising development, since, of all twelve brothers, Frisco was the darkest horse, being possessed of an ornerier-than-most nature. Amazingly, Annabelle had certainly sugared him up a bit, and baby Emmie kept Frisco in a constant state of cockeyed grinnyness. It had been a pleasure to watch his sour brother get mowed down by a little mama and her no-bigger-than-a-chickpea baby.

But he was not about to be caught in the same net.

After all the years of drought on their ranch near Union Junction, they'd had a veritable shower of charming female visitors. And it was all he could do to resist paying court to every one of them! Nine new women had come to town from Lonely Hearts Station, a neighboring town. After helping out during last month's terrible storm, the women had decided they would stay.

A lot of bachelors in Union Junction, Texas, had been real happy about that.

Laredo hadn't asked any of the women out on a date. Fidelity was something to be avoided, at least in his opinion. If you were dying of thirst, and someone offered you a huge jug of water, wouldn't you drink as long as you could? he'd reasoned to Mason.

Mason had grunted and told him to go fill the water troughs for the horses. Laredo thought the house was going to be plenty empty without Frisco, and plenty full of Mason and his bad temper. Without Frisco Joe, life wouldn't be the same! Mason had ridden Frisco, Frisco had bucked Mason—without Frisco, Laredo might be next in line to be ridden, and he didn't have Frisco's ability to deal with Mason. Laredo's brothers called him a dreamer, but they usually gave him a pass and picked on his twin, Texas, more, since Tex's passion was growing roses that never bloomed. Budus-interruptus, Frisco had told Tex, that was his problem. Tex had been really steamed, but Laredo had snickered under his sleeve, his face turned from his twin.

Maybe his brothers were getting on his nerves. Maybe they'd

lived together too long. Which got him thinking about traveling east—something he'd been thinking about long before the madness of love had hit the ranch. He was in the mood for adventure, a change of pace. Love wasn't going to hit him, he vowed, and picked up his packed duffel bag. He was not about to settle down.

He wanted to do something big.

Without another glance back he left the only home he'd ever known to venture out into the warm March morning. First stop: paying a visit to the Lonely Hearts Beauty Salon, just long enough to say hello to some ladies who'd made his life a little more fun last month. There was a place for a troubled man to find a sympathetic ear.

Three hours later he was standing outside the salon, amazed by the hubbub inside—it sounded more like a general meeting place—when suddenly the door flung open. His sleeve firmly grasped in two desperate female hands, he was hauled inside.

He remembered Katy Goodnight, the woman who now had him in her determined grip. He remembered thinking that a man could spend many good nights with a girl like her.

"This is him!" Katy announced to the room at large, which was filled with elderly men, a lot of women and even a pet chicken in a cage on one of the back counters. "This is the man we can enter in the rodeo as the champion for Lonely Hearts Station, Texas. If anyone can ride Bloodthirsty Black, it's Laredo Jefferson. Ladies and gentlemen, pay homage to your champion, and the man who

can whup the daylights out of our rival, the Never Lonely Cut-N-Gurls and their bull, Bad-Ass Blue!"

Voices huzzahed, hands clapped, Katy released his shirt so she could clap, too, and even the chicken uttered a startled squawk. But no one was more startled than Laredo to be picked as some kind of bull-riding savior.

He'd never ridden a bull in his life.

Katy whispered, "You got here just in the nick of time. You're my hero!"

He swallowed, and decided to keep his mouth shut. After all, he'd been looking for a little adventure—and it wasn't every day a man got to be a hero to a woman named Goodnight.

KATY KNEW that desperation had just opened the door and sent her a man—a man who looked as if he could solve her problem. Laredo was big enough to hang on to an ornery, few thousand pounds of irritated horns-and-hooves. He was strong, judging by the muscles in his forearms and the biceps not covered by a short-sleeved red T-shirt. That area below the leather belt and covered by nicely fitted blue jeans looked healthy, as well—guaranteed to fit in a saddle and keep a seat well past the eight-second horn.

He was sexy as all get-out, too—a strong chin, square face and simmering dark eyes under a summer-weight western hat set her heart to jumping just like mad Bloodthirsty Black when he shook off lesser handlers. But sex appeal had nothing to do with her mission.

All she needed was a man who could hang on for eight seconds. Was that so much to ask?

Maybe hanging on wasn't what Laredo wanted—by the look on his face, she'd completely startled him with her announcement—but matters being what they were, she'd have to take the chance that his gentlemanly instincts would overcome his shock.

Their last bull rider had backed out after the Never Lonely Cut-N-Gurls sank their claws into him, filling his ears with stories. Katy had a vague idea what stories might be told in the salon across the street. Remembering her ex-fiancé, Stanley, wrapped around her ex-best friend, Becky, in the bridal changing room in the church, she had an inkling they were bedtime stories.

She eyed Laredo with eyes that missed nothing, and realized that if the Never Lonely girls had set an all-out campaign for the previous rider the Lonely Hearts girls had sent into the arena, Laredo had about a sixty-minute shelf life before he was discovered by the enemy.

And lured away.

Temptation must be avoided at all costs.

Because Miss Delilah, the owner of the Lonely Hearts Salon, really, really needed a champion. Katy's boss—and rescuer—Delilah, was looking for something big, something miraculous to happen for her salon. It housed the closest thing to real family Katy had ever known. So unless he turned her down, something big and miraculous was what Laredo Jefferson was going to be, Katy determined, staring up at him as he stared down at her,

apparently rooted to the floor in his big boots. If she weren't so desperate, she'd have time to appreciate the scenery, but as it was, time was limited.

Please let him say yes, she prayed, gazing up into those beautiful, stunned eyes.

Or at least don't let him shrug her off like the crazy woman she knew she must seem to be. She'd never had much luck with men—in fact, her ex-fiancé was right now enjoying her ex-best friend's thong in the south of France on a honeymoon Katy had planned—but, she wasn't really frigid. She was certain her heart was warmer than an ice cube, no matter what Stanley said. Being a virgin wasn't a crime...naiveté was unfortunate, perhaps, but it wasn't prissy, uncaring virtue she'd been wearing like a steel-plated hymen. It was just...innocence.

Or maybe, she thought suddenly, as she dimly realized Laredo had gorgeous dark-coffee-colored eyes that were dilated and focused on her with a heat matched only by the sun outside, maybe it was uncertainty that had kept her a virgin.

Uncertainty may have frozen her once, but today was a new day, and Laredo was not Stanley. She took a deep breath and forced her best cajoling tone. "So, what do you say, cowboy?" she asked softly.

"Little lady," he finally said, finding the voice she'd shocked out of him. "We have a problem."

Her throat dried out. A problem. That didn't sound like a yes, did it? She could feel all her sister stylists watching them,

could feel their breath held as tightly in their chests as hers was. "Problem?"

His eyes softened as he nodded. "Would you care to talk about it, maybe outside?" he asked.

Slowly she released his sleeve, which she'd been clutching since she'd dragged him inside the salon. "All right, Laredo." She glanced around at everyone in the salon. "I'll be right back."

Not towing a hero, maybe, and minus her paltry self-confidence. Not that her self-confidence was the main thing, of course. If Laredo couldn't be the hero they were looking for, then time was paramount. They'd have to find another hero.

The rodeo was in four days, and someone had to ride their bull. Lord only knew she'd fantasized about riding it herself, to save Delilah from her sister, Marvella, who owned the competing salon across the street. Marvella's salon had just about finished off Miss Delilah's honest way of work.

Because, rumor had it, it wasn't just a close shave being sold across the street by the Never Lonely girls, which left Miss Delilah with very few clients indeed. She'd had to let half her staff go last month. Fortunately, Union Junction had welcomed the nine newcomers. Yet, how cruel of Marvella to deliberately set out to ruin her own sister!

Not yet, Katy told herself, as Laredo closed the salon door behind them. Not if she had anything to do with it.

Outside, the sun shone brightly on the pavement. If it was possible, Laredo looked even more handsome in bright light.

Flirting skills. Enticement. Clearly, she was lacking in some womanly fundamentals, she decided. Because Becky, her ex-best friend, who even now was no doubt having her thong removed by the apparently lusty Stanley Katy had never known, would have roped, tied and thrown Laredo to the ground, all without doing much more than smiling. Rolling her hips. Showing pretty knees beneath her daily miniskirt parade.

Becky would have had a yes out of Laredo before he'd even drawn another breath.

That didn't mean she was sexless or frigid, Katy assured herself. It just meant she hadn't ever tried flirting. She didn't get an F just because she didn't take the course.

She took a deep breath, marshaled up her best Barbie smile, widened her eyes and sucked in her stomach so her breasts would at least marginally appear through her linen ankle-length dress—a move she was copying straight from the Never Lonely Cut-N-Gurl handbook. Her posture thrown off by the sudden stiffness, Katy placed a hand on Laredo's forearm for support, which he gallantly covered with his other hand, as if she truly were a doll worth holding! Maybe Becky had been onto something with all that gooey a-man-is-made-to-be-adored stuff. "You were going to tell me about a teensy little ol' problem, Laredo?" she asked, so sweetly she was certain sugar drizzled out of her mouth. "I'm just positive a man like you never lets a little ol' bump in the road stop him."

He nodded, frowning, seemingly flustered by her full-force

display of flirt-go-ditz.

“I’ve never ridden a bull,” Laredo said.

THE EXPRESSION on Katy’s face was no longer hero worship, and Laredo felt as if all the air had been let out of him. Bam! Just like that, he was an ordinary mortal again. And here he’d been dreaming of doing something big with his life.

“Never ridden a bull,” Katy murmured, as if she couldn’t believe her ears. “But you live at the Malfunction Junction Ranch. All your brothers bull ride. I saw the ribbons and trophies. There must have been hundreds.”

He shook his head. “Not me, though. Mason figured I was the one most likely to have a wandering foot that’d take to the rodeo lifestyle permanently. It’s one of the very few things I would admit that my brother guessed right about me. And Last never has, either, but that’s because he was the baby and Mason didn’t have time to teach him to ride much of anything except a horse. Actually, Last never really did learn to ride a horse very well.” He realized he was babbling, trying to fill in space so he wouldn’t have to finish letting Katy down.

“Wandering foot?” Katy repeated. “What does that have to do with staying on a bull?”

He ran a gentle finger along the curve of her chin. God, how he hated disappointing her. She really was a cute little thing in her sandals and long dress, just like a girl playing dress-up in her mother’s clothes. He liked the fact that she had little or no makeup on. Her hair was a bit ruffled, which he wouldn’t have

expected for someone who worked in a beauty salon. Everything about her seemed somehow fresh and innocent, from her big blue eyes to the dark bangs that framed them. “Mason was determined to keep our family together. It’s a long story, but it has to do with the fact that our father left when most of us were young and Mason got stuck with the details of parenting. He made decisions the best he could. Sometimes he was wrong. But most of the time, he was dead-on.”

“So you’re a restless type.”

“That’s right.”

She pulled her chin away from his finger. “I wouldn’t know the feeling.”

He eyed her, knowing that she wouldn’t find that adjective attractive in a man. But that was okay, because he wasn’t trying to suit himself up to be attractive to her. “I don’t suspect you would.”

“So you never got to ride a bull?”

“I could have sneaked around. Last wasn’t supposed to, either, but he did just the same. Mason didn’t want the baby of the family busting himself up.”

“Of course not,” she murmured.

“But Last has always done whatever he pleased.”

She glanced up at him. “But you obeyed your brother.”

He shrugged. “I couldn’t quibble with his logic. I didn’t want the family separated myself, and I wouldn’t have been the one to do it. No one else seemed to have a hankering to leave the ranch

like I did.”

“You’ve left now,” she said.

“Yes.”

Hope flared in her eyes. “Maybe now is the time to disobey Mason about bull riding!”

He laughed. “I don’t have to obey him anymore. But I wouldn’t be any good at riding, Katy. I never learned. And there’s more to it than getting on.”

She looked as if she might cry any second.

“Here,” he said gently, “let’s take a walk. Tell me what’s going on, and maybe I can help you resolve your situation.”

“I need a hero,” she said stubbornly.

He placed a hand dramatically over his chest. “I promise I think better than I ride. Come on. Walk and talk.”

She sighed, not liking his offer one bit, but clearly seeing no way to refuse. “There’s a lot at stake.”

“You don’t look like the kind of girl who hangs around rodeos, Katy.” He eyed her curves underneath her long dress with appreciation. She’d look mighty fine in blue jeans—

“I’m not,” she said as they began to walk side by side. She glanced up, almost catching him eyeing those curves. “Until last week, I’d never even seen a bull up close.”

“What happened last week?” He couldn’t resist asking since her head had drooped, her pretty sable-colored hair swinging forward as she spoke. “Tell Uncle Laredo.”

She shot him a wry look. “You are not my uncle, cowboy.”

“Oh, that’s right. I’m supposed to be the hero. Only I got shot off my horse.”

“Bull, not horse.” She sighed. “Every year Miss Delilah buys a bull from one of the local FFA kids. The kids raise their bulls, usually from the time they were born, until they auction them at the fair. This pays for college and other expenses. Then Delilah enters her bull in certain events, such as riding, and best hoof painting.”

“Hoof painting?” He put out a hand to slow her determined gait. “You act like you’re marching on the enemy yourself. What’s best hoof painting?”

“It’s sort of a paint-your-nails-for-bulls event. Only it’s the hooves that get painted as pretty as they can possibly be. Flowers, doodles, Indian sunsets, you name it. On an animal that won’t stay still. It’s a mental and physical challenge.”

“I’ve never heard of that.”

“Miss Delilah thought it up.”

“Of course.” It sounded like a beauty salon owner’s idea.

“Don’t sound so snickery. Miss Delilah raises a lot of money for charity with her contests. People come from miles around to enter. And then, when the fair comes to town the following year, she sells the bull to the restaurant in Texas that bids the most for it. By then, everybody’s seen her bull for that year, in several events, and they bid it pretty high. With this money, she’s been able to keep her salon open.” Katy shook her head sadly. “Everyone wins, you know. The student who raised the

bull, Lonely Hearts Station charities, a lucky restaurant and Miss Delilah's favorite charity, taking in women who need a helping hand. But not since the Never Lonely girls opened up their salon."

She tossed her head in the direction of a business no one could miss—almost the red-light establishment of beauty salons with a neon sign sure to light up a dark sky and all manner of lip prints painted on the windows. "Rivals, huh?"

"Delilah's sister, Marvella, runs that shop, and she wants nothing more than to put Delilah out of business. And her weapon of the moment is a bull named Bad-Ass Blue."

Laredo would have laughed, except, by the serious stiffness in Katy's back, he knew he'd better swallow the laughter fast. "So, how does a bull ruin Miss Delilah's shop?"

"By getting more attention. By having a rider that knows how to showboat. By luring our rider into missing his ride," Katy said bitterly. "Bloodthirsty Black never even got out of the chute because we didn't have a rider."

Laredo was afraid to ask, but he had to know. "And the best-hoof-painting contest? How did Bloodthirsty Black fare in that?"

"Not at all," Katy said. "Someone slipped a baby mouse into his stall and he darn near broke it down trying to crush the poor thing. After that no one dared get near him."

Laredo shook his head. "No one plants a mouse. They just hang around livestock areas."

"Not this one. It still had the price tag on it."

He couldn't help a chuckle now, which earned him a rebuking

stare from Katy. "They don't put price tags on mice, Katy."

"This one was wearing a red price tag on his back. Two dollars and ninety-eight cents," she said definitively.

Laredo was positive she was giving him a tall tale. "A marked-down mouse, I guess."

She instantly halted, putting her fists on her hips. It was a gesture he kind of thought looked good on her, even though any sane man shied away from a ticked-off female. "There is nothing funny about Miss Delilah's dilemma. If you were truly my hero, you would know that this is a serious matter."

That stung, far worse than it should have. So much for doing something big—he couldn't even pass a small hero's test like not laughing at a story aimed to make him look like a patsy. "I'm sorry," he said earnestly.

"You certainly should be. It's not gentlemanly to laugh at people's livelihoods."

He hadn't thought of it that way, and Katy was right. In silence they began to walk again, more companionably now since he'd proffered an apology. "Okay, say the price tag on the mouse was a coincidence. Maybe it had run through a bag and picked it up accidentally."

"Maybe, but I don't think so. It was from a store in Dallas."

"But it could have been something someone brought to the rodeo," he insisted. "What's the purpose of leaving a price tag on a mouse? It basically alerts you to the fact that there's been cheating and sabotage."

“But that’s the intimidation factor. They have never cared that we know what they’re doing. Who’s to stop them? All the younger men in this town go to that salon, including the sheriff. We get the wives, who want no part of what goes on over there.”

“And that’s another thing. Have you ever been inside the salon? Tried their services?”

“No.”

“So how do you know that this is all deliberate?”

“They lured our cowboy into their salon, they got him drunk—and possibly more—on the day he was supposed to ride. What assumption would you draw from that?”

“That he was a lazy cowboy, and maybe not even a real bull rider, Katy. Did you ever think of that?”

“He had a buckle and all kinds of pictures of him with other trophies.”

Laredo sighed, knowing any of that could have been bought or finagled. Katy, as earnest as she was, seemed the type people might take advantage of. She was so sweet and trusting and open. A marked-down mouse, indeed. Why would a rival salon go to the trouble of bringing in a mouse with a red tag when they could have spooked the bull any number of ways? “So, if the rodeo is already over, why do you need another rider?”

“Because Miss Delilah raised a huge stink and called Marvella and told her that she knew she’d cheated and that if there wasn’t a rematch, she was going to burn the Never Lonely Cut-N-Gurls Salon to the ground.”

“She did that?” This didn’t sound like the woman who had come out to Malfunction Junction with twenty women and one baby, who had taken care of eleven cowboys and a truck driver during one of winter’s worst storms. That woman had seemed very sane and practical. “I’m having trouble with Miss Delilah being a lawbreaker and an arsonist.”

“We’ll never know, because her sister agreed to a rematch. The thing is, though, I think it’s a setup,” Katy whispered, stopping to gaze up into his eyes. Laredo felt his heart go thud and then boom as he tried to inhale. Then exhale. Katy’s eyes widened, drawing him in. “I think a red-lined mouse was child’s play to Marvella. Call me gullible if you will, and trusting, but I was recently duped by a girl who was just like a sister to me.”

“You don’t say,” Laredo breathed, trying real hard to sound surprised.

She nodded. “So I know what women are capable of.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“And I know Miss Delilah’s getting set up on this.”

“What could Marvella do?”

Katy’s gaze swept over his shoulders and then across his chest. “I don’t know. But she will send her girls to steal my hero.”

His mouth dried out at the thought of a bunch of women coming after him with their feminine lures. It wasn’t an altogether unhappy vision.

But the words from Katy’s mouth had perked up his heart. He could be her hero. He could do it. He was not the kind of guy to

make a promise and then cut and run.

"You can count on me," he said.

"You'll ride Bloodthirsty Black?" she asked on a gasp.

"I'll probably get stomped by his brightly painted hooves, but then at least everybody will know about the hard-wired bull Miss Delilah's got for sale. Then the charities will be happy, and a restaurant will be happy, and some FFA kids will be happy—"

"I'll be happy." She threw her arms around his neck by launching her small body up against his chest, leaving about twelve inches dangling between her feet and the sidewalk. "Thank you, Laredo. I knew I could count on you!"

He would call Mason tomorrow, he thought, and get some tips on how to stay on a beast from hell. Right now he was just going to stand here and smell Katy Goodnight's perfume, and try not to think about how sweet a girl like her would be in his bed.

And then again, maybe thinking about how sweet she'd be in his bed was exactly why he'd said he'd ride her darn bull. He hadn't been kidding when he said he'd probably get stomped.

"So," he said into her hair as he held her against him, "what happened to the mouse?"

"I rescued her," Katy murmured. "When Bloodthirsty kicked in the stall, she ran out, and I scooped her up before she could run into another stall to get crushed by a different bull."

"Her?"

"There are only girls in our salon. We named her Rose, and she sleeps in a little box beside my bed."

Oh, boy. "Lucky mouse," he muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said quickly. "I just can't wait to ride that bull," he fibbed.

"Think you can stay on eight seconds?"

He squeezed her to him, breathing in deeply. "I'm positive I have much longer than eight seconds in me."

"Really?"

"Well," he said hastily, switching gears from sexual to realistic, "I don't expect I'll be that good."

She smiled at him luminously. "Since it's your first time and all."

He swallowed, his Adam's apple jerking in his neck like a double knot on a child's tennis shoe. "Yeah."

"Do you have a place to stay for the night, Laredo?"

His throat tightened. Was he about to receive an invitation of the best sort? "No."

"Then you can sleep in my room."

Heaven! Hallelujah! Doing something big in his life was turning out to be so easy. Why hadn't he been adventuresome sooner?

"And I'll sleep with Miss Delilah," she continued.

His enthusiasm withered like day-old soda pop. He set her down on the concrete. "I'd hate to put you out."

"It's the least I can do for the man who's going to single-handedly save our salon."

He nodded jerkily, trying to look appreciative.

“And we’re fixing wilted lettuce and greens for dinner.”

He pasted a smile on his face, thinking that if the menu was always so green and healthy, he wouldn’t have to ride Bloodthirsty Black. He’d just gnaw the steak-on-the-hoof to death and chalk up an easy win that way. “Thank you,” he repeated.

“Let’s go back and tell everyone what you’ve decided,” Katy said, delighted.

“Oh, yes. By all means,” he agreed reluctantly. Longingly he glanced across the street, where a stunning blonde was deliberately trying to catch his gaze through the window. She was wearing a red shirt tied at the waist, and, even at this distance, he could tell she was a very healthy girl. To his surprise, she held a sign to the window that read Free Meal to Travelers in bold red, glittery letters.

Beside him Katy floated along, oblivious to the exchange. To be polite—because he’d only heard one side of the story, after all—he tipped his straw western hat to the blonde and then shook his head in the negative.

Fair was fair, and no matter how bright the invitation across the way—even if they served steak and mashed potatoes—he was going to be a man Katy could trust.

Chapter Two

“So what exactly was the big problem?” Hannah Hotchkiss asked as she walked into Katy’s bedroom.

“Problem?” Katy asked, eyeing her best friend and companion stylist warily.

“The one Laredo mentioned. By the time the two of you returned from your walk, you had a yes out of him, and he was wearing a distinctly cattywhumpussed expression.”

“A minor detail,” Katy murmured. “Nothing that was truly a problem.” She wasn’t about to share the worrisome detail that their knight in shining armor lacked experience in the saddle.

“I think you’ve caught that man’s eye.”

Katy glanced up, horrified. “Do not say that. He is not my type at all.”

“What is your type?”

Stanley came to mind, but Katy tossed that thought violently out of her brain. “I haven’t figured it out yet. But I’m certain I’ll know it when I see it.” She blew her bangs away from her forehead. “These bangs will not grow fast enough to suit me.”

“Why are you letting them grow out? They suit your face and showcase your eyes.”

“I look like a little girl. I don’t want to look like that anymore.” She handed a picture to her friend of a model dressed like a ballerina, her hair pulled away from her face in a severe topknot.

“That’s the way I want to look.”

“Like you haven’t had a good meal in a month?”

Katy snatched the paper back. “Elegant. Sophisticated.”

“Like you don’t give a damn.”

“Exactly.” Katy nodded. “I don’t.”

“Now you just have to convince yourself.”

“Right.”

“What a bozo that Stanley must have been.” Hannah sighed and got to her feet. “Listen, pulling your hair back until you look like a scarecrow isn’t going to give you the mature edge you’re looking for.”

“You have a suggestion for maturing a permanent baby face?”

“No. The baby face is not the problem—and, by the way, it’s called a cute face. There’s nothing baby about you. Your challenge is to become more daring. Daring. Remember that word.”

Katy raised a brow.

“You’re masking your real worry by making it a hair issue, something all women do, and sometimes men, as well. The key is to face the issue dead-on, and pin it on the body part where it actually belongs. It’s never a hair issue. Could be the brain, could be the breasts, could be your—”

“I don’t need a body catalogue,” Katy interrupted.

“So, where’s your real issue?”

“My heart.”

“Not possible. Choosing the heart is a stall tactic. It means

you're still transposing and referring your denial. The heart is not part of the equation, as it is only a label for people's emotions. A visual, if you will."

"I don't know if I will or not." Katy groaned, unwilling to go down the path. "My womanhood," she finally said. "If I'd been more of a woman, even Becky couldn't have gotten Stanley away from me."

"That's a myth, you know. Women successfully steal men all the time. It doesn't take much effort."

"I will never believe that. There are a few men out there who have antitheft devices on their hearts."

"Yes, but we're not talking about their hearts, and I have it on good authority that antitheft devices do not fit on a man's p—"

"All right!" Katy interrupted. "So any man is ripe for the picking. Then what's the point of me trying to overcome my issue if their issue is unsolvable?"

"Because once you develop more confidence, your chance of a man ever straying from you is dramatically diminished. You put a certain amount of color on a lady's hair to diminish her gray, don't you?"

"Yes," Katy said uncertainly.

"Well, you have to wear confidence to attract and keep someone you love. Become a bright, new color. Remember our new word—daring."

"Lack of confidence was not why Stanley married Becky."

"He did that because he was already at the church, the guests

had flown in, his mother was wearing Bob Mackie, and you, my sweet gullible angel, had footed the bill as the bride. Plus, he still had a smile on his face from what had occurred in the bridal changing room. Strategically, if he couldn't wait another five minutes or so to enjoy your virginity, I'm thinking he didn't have much staying power for the long haul. Not that I'm judging him, exactly, since I have never met him. However, sometimes actions speak louder than words, and I sincerely believe your wedding day was one of those loud action moments." Hannah examined her nails casually. "By the way, you are going to send his parents a bill for the wedding."

Katy gasped. "Maybe Stanley and Becky, but not his parents!"

"No way. His parents are filthy rich and worried about impressions. You got the shaft and they'll be anxious to make certain you don't pay for their son's cruel indiscretion, lest you tell someone important like...Dear Abby. Oprah, even. The whole matter sounds very Jerry Springer to me. That'll hit Stanley's parents where they panic, and they'll certainly cough up what you're owed."

Katy flushed, hating the humiliation she'd suffered that day. "I want to keep it quiet. Forget about it. Move on."

"You are not as confident as you could be, Katy," Hannah said softly. "And under the circumstances, I understand. But by the time I'm finished with you, confidence will radiate from you!"

She wondered what Laredo saw radiating from her. Messy ponytail and no lipstick—probably all he saw was a dull aura.

“Okay, do your darnedest. I guess.”

Hannah lifted Katy’s ponytail and ran it through her hand; Katy could practically hear her friend’s creative brain whirring away.

Sighing, she reminded herself that she’d come to work at the Lonely Hearts Salon for just this reason. She needed the emotional support of women to help her get over her deepest fear: that she was sexually dysfunctional. Truth was, it hadn’t been all that hard to keep her virginity. She had never felt a point-of-no-return reason to surrender it. But her best friend was talking about men as if they were as easy to pick as a dessert from a menu, and for Katy that would never be the case. It would take a kind and gentle man eons to teach her any differently. “I’m like Rapunzel. Locked in my own ivory tower.”

“I think you should experiment on Laredo Jefferson, Katy. I believe romancing that man could knock a few bricks out of your tower. Rattle the foundation a bit.”

Katy shook her head. “The last person who could ever save me from myself would be the freewheeling Laredo Jefferson. I’ve been to his home at the Malfunction Junction Ranch, and his family is wild and woolly. Fun, but too much for a girl like me.” She shrugged. “Anyway, someone once told me that an ivory tower is really a phallic symbol—in Laredo’s case, I’d believe it! And right now, this is just a stop on his eastward hunt for adventure, so I’d never dream of allowing him to scale my walls. Even if he wanted to.”

“See, there you go again. If. Of course he does!”

“Do you really think so?” Katy asked doubtfully.

“A man does not agree to ride a bull unless he’s fairly sure there’s a helluva prize waiting for him once he’s hit the dirt, honey.”

Katy straightened. “I don’t think of myself in those terms.”

“Wait till I’m done with you. You’ll be thinking Scarlet O’Hara by Saturday. I promise.”

“Scarlet O’Hara was a flirt, a maneater,” Katy protested.

“Exactly.”

“YOU’RE DOING WHAT?” Mason shouted in Laredo’s ear over the phone. “Have you clean lost your mind?”

Laredo pictured Katy’s concerned face. “Not lost it, just temporarily misplaced it, maybe. Mason, I need some tips.”

“You want a phone course in killing yourself by stupidity.”

“Someone has to do this, and it’s going to be me.”

“Obviously,” Mason muttered. “This is not what I thought you meant when you said you were heading back east for adventure. You’ve barely left the county!”

“You know what they say about one’s own backyard.”

“Oh, hell.” There was an audible sigh from the other end of the line. “I guess I’ll send Tex over with the gear you’re going to need.”

“Tex won’t want to be torn away from his roses right now,” Laredo warned. “He’s right in the middle of preparing for the oncoming spring season.”

"I'll hire Martha Stewart to baby-sit his buds," Mason growled. "In the meantime, Tex can come out there and share his vast knowledge with you."

Somehow, the idea of his twin coming out and spending time around Katy wasn't altogether appealing. "Well—"

"I can't give you pointers by phone, if you're determined to do this. What's the name of the bull, by the way?"

"Bloodthirsty Black."

"Is he a first-night bull or a marquee bull?"

Laredo scratched his head. "He's an unknown quantity. The last cowboy who was supposed to ride him had a change of plans."

"Maybe he was smart."

Any man who chose having sex over bull riding probably had some sense. Laredo squinted around Katy's room. Her bed was unrumpled and covered with a clean, white cotton bedspread. There were white lace curtains floating at the open window. Beside her bed, Rose the mouse stared up at Laredo, her pink-flesh ears and tiny paws quivering. She was smaller than his little finger, and for a mouse, quite adorable. Her red price tag was stuck on the side of her wire-covered box as a pretend welcome mat. Katy had drawn a door above the welcome mat, and placed paper lace cutouts around fake windows. Laredo sighed to himself, then sat straight up as he realized something white and lacy was poking out from under Katy's pillow.

Gingerly, he tugged the lace. It left its hiding place with a

smooth, gliding flash of froth. Holding it up, he realized it was sheer, it was very short, and Katy slept in this at night. His pulse raced as he glanced toward the door. He was pretty certain Katy wouldn't appreciate walking in and finding him with her nightgown in his hands and very little room left in his jeans.

"Laredo?" Mason's voice asked in his ear. "Laredo!"

Having sex or riding a bull.

He hadn't been offered sex. But occasionally a lucky hero got gifted with such a prize. Shoving the nightgown back under the pillow, he said, "I'm riding that bull, Mason, come hell or high water."

"DID YOU GIRLS NOTICE the new man in town?" Marvella asked as she stared out at her sister's salon.

"Did we ever!" her girls chorused.

"Looked like a real cowboy to me," Marvella said. "I so love cowboys! I do wonder how Delilah keeps coming up with these timely miracles."

"I've got first dibs," a stylish brunette called. "It's my turn for a new customer."

"Honey, he's not a customer till you convince him he is," someone corrected her. "And all's fair in love until the moment one of us closes the bedroom door."

"I wouldn't say it's over just because the door closes," someone said. "If I recall, one of you managed to be in the bed waiting, while you had a fake phone call downstairs for the girl he thought he was going to be spending the night with."

A few giggles went round the room, and a redhead in the corner blushed uncomfortably. "I should have known it was a trick. Extra points for creativity, especially since he didn't seem to mind the switch," she said.

"Well, this cowboy isn't going to get his eight seconds onboard Bloodthirsty Black. If Delilah wants to be humiliated twice, we can accommodate her," Marvella said. "But we can't be obvious, because I can guarantee you, he's been told in detail how truly mean, unkind and positively sex-starved we are. Delilah will be extracautious this time." She tapped long fingernails against the windowsill. "In four days. I don't want him to even lay a leg over Bloodthirsty Black. This calls for sweetness and light, and dainty coincidence."

"Dainty?"

"Did you see that he was escorting Katy Goodnight on a walk? That's dainty as powdered sugar on a doughnut," Marvella pointed out.

"If her fiancé ditched her at the altar and married her best friend, she's got something missing in her sugar bowl," someone suggested. "Dainty is not always delightful."

"Okay," Marvella said with a snap of her fingers. "I've got just the plan."

"Is it dainty?"

She smiled as she watched the lights coming on inside her sister's salon. "No," she said. "It's a doozy."

Chapter Three

The next morning Laredo met his brothers at the arena so they could get an eyeful of Bloodthirsty Black in his holding pen. The bull looked as if he had only ten more seconds before he busted out another perfectly good stall. Stepping back so they wouldn't irritate the bull more, Tex and Ranger shook their heads in unison.

"You're a nut," Ranger said. "You're going to need spine replacement if you ride him."

Laredo glared at him. "Tex is the one who's coaching me. You just came along for the laugh."

Tex shrugged. "He came along to keep me company on the ride, and mainly to try to help me talk you out of getting yourself killed. How's your health insurance, by the way? Both physical and mental? Maybe you should see a head shrink before you do this, 'cause I think you may have left your brains back in puberty."

Twin or no, Laredo was duty-bound to argue. "If I was deranged, I wouldn't be calling for reinforcement. Now, shut up and start coaching."

"Let me ride him for you," Ranger offered. "The Lonely Hearts girls just need a champion. They don't care who it is."

"It's gonna be me," Laredo said stubbornly.

"Why?" Tex demanded. "Ranger has the most wins besides

me.”

“He’s too old. That was ten years ago.”

“Excuse me?” Ranger said. “I’m thirty-two. You are thirty-four. How am I too old?”

“Because you’ve always been old. Me, I’m just now trying to find myself. This is my midlife crisis,” Laredo said proudly, staring at Bloodthirsty Black. “All two to three thousand pounds of it.”

“Sheesh. Other men want a pretty woman. My twin wants a head-and-neck rearrangement from an animal born to hate him. Makes perfect sense to me.”

Ranger chuckled. “If Laredo’s suffering a crisis, does that mean you are too, Tex?”

“Just because Archer’s spending all his time writing to a Nicole Kidman look-alike in Australia, does that mean you’re burning up the stationery with Byronic sonnets?” Tex jutted his chin. “Pull your head out, Ranger. Being twins does not mean we’re split halves of the same person, as you very well know!”

Bicker, bitch, battle. For a moment Laredo thought his whole big fantasy of being a hero might go flushing downstream, until Katy Goodnight rounded the corner, bearing a basket with a cherry-printed cloth napkin inside. Instantly his whole day brightened. “Hi, Katy,” he said with a big grin he couldn’t control.

“Hi, Laredo,” she said with a smile, before turning to his brothers. “And another Laredo,” she said to Tex. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have forgotten your name since I met you only a month

ago, but I do remember your face,” she said to Ranger.

“Well, that’s all that’s important,” he said gallantly. “If a pretty gal just remembers my face—”

“Howdy, fellas,” said another female voice.

They all turned as Hannah Hotchkiss came into view, carrying a basket decorated with blueberry sprigs. “This is Hannah,” Laredo began, then ceased his introduction when he realized Ranger had nearly swallowed his teeth as she smiled up into his face. “Ranger,” Laredo said sternly, “this is Katy’s best friend.”

“We brought you a snack,” Hannah said. “We didn’t know you had company, Laredo. But we have plenty.”

Ranger took the basket from her and peeked inside. “Mmm. Cookies and strawberries. My favorite.” He pulled Hannah with him until they were off by themselves.

Laredo rolled his eyes at Tex. “Did you have to bring him?”

“Oh, well. He can amuse himself now.” Tex smiled at Katy. “How’ve you been, anyway?”

“Just busy. What brings you to Lonely Hearts Station?”

“We came to give Laredo some tip—”

“They just stopped by to say hello,” Laredo said.

“It’s nice of you to check on your twin. Is it true that twins are really close?” Katy asked.

“No,” Laredo said.

Tex laughed. “We’re fraternal in mind-set, you might say. I’m the settled one, Laredo is the wild one. If one of us was ever in a fistfight at school, the teachers didn’t bother to check which

one of us it was. They just automatically called Mason and said, ‘Come get Laredo.’”

“It wasn’t quite like that,” Laredo said, getting more annoyed with his twin by the second. “I wasn’t a hooligan.”

“I grow roses,” Tex said.

“Oh, I love roses,” Katy replied.

The dreamy tone in her voice as she stared into his twin’s eyes was almost more than Laredo could stomach. Her reaction was the same as every other woman’s when Tex mentioned those stupid roses. Clearly, the roses were a conversational prop Tex employed just to get a woman’s attention—he probably grew the stupid things just to get on women’s good sides. “Okay, enough with the flowery stuff. Can we get on with the lesson?”

“Lesson?” Katy repeated.

“Yeah, I’m teaching Tex everything I know about bulls.”

“I thought you didn’t know anything,” Katy said, her voice innocent.

Tex snickered, and Laredo made a mental note to punch him later. “I know a few things,” he said, trying to hang on to his bravado. Something about Katy just got him so mixed up and confused! He wanted to brag in front of her, wanted to strut his stuff just a little, but somehow he kept goofing it up.

“What Laredo means,” Hannah said, as she and Ranger moved back to the circle, “is that he knows more about Bloodthirsty Black. He’s filling Tex in on the history.”

“That’s right.” Laredo straightened with a grateful glance at

Hannah. "History's important."

"Yeah, we all remember your report card," Ranger said.

Silence descended. "Excuse me," Tex said. "I'm going to go find a gents'."

He left, and the conversational void stretched. Laredo frowned at Ranger, who sighed.

"Now, just what is it about this bull we need to know?" Ranger said, clearly deciding to leave off the sibling rivalry and let Laredo get his neck broken if he was determined to do so.

"He pulls to the left," a voice said. "And then, just when you lean, he jerks to the right with a mean midair kick. Every time."

All four of them whirled to look at the woman who'd spoken. Laredo felt his jaw go slack, and heard Ranger's jaw hit the pavement with a resounding thunk.

This woman was simply stunning. As fresh and cute as Katy was, as punky-funky cute as Hannah was, this woman would set records for head-snapping stares.

Beside him, he could feel Katy stiffen.

"Hell-oo, there," Ranger said. "Thanks for the tip." He tipped his hat to her, and grinned.

The woman smiled back, one hand on her hip, the other casually resting against Bloodthirsty Black's stall. "You're welcome."

Laredo glanced at Katy for an intro. Hannah didn't seem too happy about the woman's presence, either, especially since she and Ranger had just spent a cozy five-minute chat together.

The woman ignored the female frostiness and extended a delicate hand to Ranger. "Staying in town long?" she asked softly, her voice full of hints.

"He's leaving in a couple of hours, actually," Laredo replied.

"And you?" she asked smoothly, looking back to Laredo.

He probably shouldn't tell what he was up to, Laredo thought. Katy probably wanted him to be the surprise weapon. "Uh, a guy can't hang around beautiful women in a quaint town forever, I guess."

"That's too bad. We're real nice to strangers here in Lonely Hearts Station." The woman smiled, and imperceptibly tightened her posture so that her breasts thrust forward in an invitation even the greenest male could understand.

Laredo thought he could see Ranger's eyes spinning around in their sockets. Wow! He didn't think he'd ever seen his hard-edged brother so...softened up.

"This is Cissy Kisserton," Katy said reluctantly. "Cissy, meet Ranger and Laredo Jefferson."

"Real cowboys?" Cissy asked.

"Born and bred, ma'am," Ranger said. Hannah rolled her eyes, which Laredo thought was appropriate.

"Well, I don't want to keep you," Cissy said. "Just wanted to be friendly to the visitors in town. You send them over our way for a cup of cocoa, Katy. We'll make sure they're well taken care of."

"It's a bit chilly in here, after all, isn't it?" Ranger said. "I'll take you up on that cup of cocoa right now, Miss Cissy," he said,

following after the beautiful woman like a lovestruck puppy.

The two of them disappeared around the corner, but not before Laredo saw Ranger slip his arm around her. Laughter floated over the stalls to them. Laredo groaned to himself. Ranger was the most steadfast of the brothers! Certainly he had his share of wild hairs—he'd been bluffing about going to do some military service for nearly a year now...of course, he'd never leave Malfunction Junction Ranch, but he'd sure been trying to put action where his big mouth was. He'd actually started hanging around the police station, trying to act civilized.

But nothing like a beautiful woman to make a man's mouth run away from him. Laredo looked at Katy, who appeared dumbfounded; Hannah seemed disappointed down to her very orange toenails, peeping out of cut-open tennis shoes.

The expression on Hannah's face told Laredo that Cissy wasn't the only woman around who thought Ranger was a hunk.

Oh, boy.

"Where's Ranger?" Tex asked, coming back to join them.

"He went off with a woman," Laredo said. "Cissy Kisserton. You should have seen her."

"You should have seen him," Hannah said. "It was like watching a giant tree get felled by one termite."

"Oh. I apologize for my brother's behavior," Tex said.

"Is Cissy a Never Lonely Cut-N-Gurl?" Laredo asked.

"Obviously," Katy said.

"Whoa." He'd have to be very careful to avoid that Venus

fly trap. There was a real sensitive issue between the two salons for certain, and it clearly wasn't all about who gave the better haircut. "By the way, Tex, Cissy was awfully helpful. She says Bloodthirsty Black pulls to the left. And when you lean, he jerks to the right with a midair kick every time."

"Does he, now?" Tex eyed the bull speculatively. "And why was the competition being so helpful?"

Laredo looked at Katy and Hannah. "I guess she just wanted to be nice to the strangers in town."

Katy and Hannah made disgusted sounds, gathered up their baskets with the food in them and marched off without a word.

The parting looks they shot the men spoke loudly, however.

"You just blew it," Tex told his twin.

"What did I say?"

"First rule of girlhunting—never let a woman you like believe another woman has anything to offer you. Anyway, I'm supposed to be giving you tips on Mr. Bloodthirsty, here, not love. It's unseemly for a brother to have to coach his twin in things any freshly minted teenage boy knows."

Laredo's heart sank. "Cissy was awfully friendly. I thought she was nice. And she didn't have to tell us about the trick this old bull plays."

"True."

"Ranger stuck on her like glue. He didn't see anything wrong with her, either."

"There, then. You don't have anything to worry about."

Laredo frowned. Nothing to worry about except he'd upset Katy, and that was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Pulls to the left, huh?" Tex said. "When I went to the gents', I noticed the arena was empty. There's no one around. Let's sit you up on Bloodthirsty and see exactly how hard he kicks."

"Have you lost your mind? I'm not getting up on him." Laredo eyed the bull, who was pawing at something in his stall as if he were sharpening his hooves for the kill. "Don't we need about four other men helping us hold him?"

"If we were loading him in a chute, yeah. But you're just gonna get up on top of this bull and get used to the feel of him underneath you."

Laredo shook his head. "I'll wait till Saturday."

Tex sighed. "Look. It's not that hard. Watch me."

He pulled on his glove and looped a rope around the bull's neck. The animal snorted, demonstrating his displeasure by slinging his head. Tex jumped up on the top rail, squared himself up, jumped and landed briefly on the bull's back.

There was silence for an infinitesimally split second, and then all hell broke loose.

"I DON'T THINK the Jefferson boys are the men we thought they were," Katy said to Hannah as they walked home. "Laredo brags, Tex is a ladies' man and Ranger's off with the enemy."

Hannah nodded. "For a minute I thought Ranger might have liked me. He sure seemed to."

Katy's heart melted at the sound of sadness in Hannah's voice.

"It's just that darn Cissy Kisserton. She knocks men down at their kneecaps."

"But if he'd really liked me, he wouldn't have even seen her," Hannah said. "You notice Laredo didn't so much as shake her hand."

Katy brightened a little. "I suppose he didn't." Then she faded again. "But he's still a braggart. If I were to fall for another man, I know I'd want one whose actions match his words."

"That may be the impossible holy grail, Katy. All men pad their résumés. So do women."

"I don't."

"You do," Hannah insisted. "I've noticed that since Laredo hit town, you're trying to stand like our competition does. Tush out and breasts stuck forward."

Together, they walked up the back-stair entrance of the salon and went upstairs to Katy's room. "It's true," Katy said. "That's exactly what I was doing. But if I don't shift things around, I'll never stand a chance against a girl like Cissy. She's got all the moves. And it's only a matter of time before those girls set their aim on Laredo. I just don't want to be around when they score a bull's-eye."

"Now, now." Hannah sank onto the bed and stared down at Rose the mouse. "Courage. Laredo seems loftier in morals than most men."

"I don't know. I noticed a marked decrease in loftiness when Cissy came by. We brought picnic baskets, and Cissy brought a

tight skirt and high heels.”

Hannah frowned slightly. “I thought I might like Ranger, but it was one of those moments where you look at someone and see someone they’re not because you want them to be something else. I must be in a needy phase. I’ll have to be more careful.”

Katy sat beside her, and patted Hannah’s hand. “What happened to daring?”

“That’s you, not me.” Hannah perked up. “Katy, stand up,” she said.

Katy complied, her eyes widening when she saw the scissors Hannah picked up from the table. “Not my hair, Hannah,” Katy protested. “I know you’ve been itching to cut it for a long time, but it’s unwise to give up an inch for a man. Truly, short and sassy isn’t me.”

“It is when you’ve got nice legs you never show,” Hannah said, picking up the hem of Katy’s long dress. She decisively cut up to Katy’s knee.

“Hannah!”

“Hold still, I’m gauging your siren potential. I think another two inches,” Hannah murmured, continuing to cut.

“I’m too short for short dresses,” Katy protested. “I’ll look even more like a baby-faced doll than I do!”

Hannah tossed the red fabric aside. “Nope,” she said happily. “Now that’s enough to give Laredo whiplash.”

“Hannah.” Katy knelt down to look into her friend’s eyes. “Listen to me. Laredo Jefferson is the last man I need. He doesn’t

fit the description. In fact, in some ways he reminds me of Stanley.”

Hannah cocked a wry brow. “In what ways? Stand back up so I can gauge the hem length.”

“Laredo’s ogle-meter. And that’s enough to tell me that he’s not even remotely close to...date material.”

“Did Stanley ogle Becky before the two of them met like ships passing in the bridal chamber?”

Katy wrinkled her nose. “Not that I ever noticed. I think that was why I was so shocked.”

“Something doesn’t add up about that. What made those two suddenly jump in each other’s arms?”

“My virginity.”

“No.” Hannah sighed, pulled out a needle from a drawer in Katy’s nightstand and threaded it with red thread. Industriouslly, she went to work turning up the hem of Katy’s dress by an eighth of an inch. “Linen’s hard to sew by hand,” she murmured. “I’m going to take tiny stitches, so stand very still.”

“Don’t you need a chalk or tape?”

“This will do for the lunch hour. I need you to concentrate. Did you ever tell Becky anything about Stanley?”

“I told her everything! She was my best friend, my maid of honor.”

“Did you tell her anything personal? Like, oh, that you two hadn’t slept together?”

“Everybody knew that, even my mother. We had a nine-month

proper engagement. Stanley used to say he was proud to be marrying a virgin.” She wrinkled her forehead.

“Don’t do that. Your face will look like a race track,” Hannah instructed.

“I told Becky everything a girl tells her best friend. Just like I tell you. She also knew that Stanley didn’t like to kiss me.”

Hannah stopped sewing. “What?”

“Stanley didn’t like to kiss me. Why are you looking at me like that?”

Hannah shook her head. “Why didn’t he?”

“He said it was too much temptation, since we couldn’t...um, you know.”

“And Stanley’s family is wealthy?”

“Right. Stanley Peter St. Collin III, of St. Collin Faucets and Hinges.”

“Oh, of course. Naturally.” Hannah grimaced. “And Becky’s family was where on the social register?”

“Well, way below ours, if you must use social register terms. Her mom and dad divorced a long time ago, when she was a child. And her mom worked as a waitress at night to make ends meet. Becky worked two jobs, too, after we graduated from high school.”

“And your parents were the Goodnights of Goodnight Protective Arms, starting with well-heeled British immigrant parents and going back three pedigreed generations in your hometown. And you dutifully and impressively went to college

and obtained a degree in chemistry.”

“Well, it was the easiest thing to do,” Katy said. “Chemistry is much easier than economics or something.” She shuddered. “Columns of figures and business principles, or putting cool stuff like hydrogen chloride into test tubes and seeing what blows up. Protons. Dissection. No contest there, huh?”

“Oh, yeah. I can see where chemistry is the easy answer. Miles and miles of chemical configurations.” Hannah went back to sewing.

“After I sort myself out—and I’m just about done, thanks to Miss Delilah—I’m going to teach chemistry at Duke in North Carolina in the fall. Of course, my original plan was to marry Stanley and become a perfectly manicured, Mrs. St. Collin III. Luckily, I’d sent out lots of applications after I graduated from college and before Stanley proposed. He didn’t like me interviewing at Duke. Did I tell you that I was invited to interview at Cornell, too?”

“Peachy. Turn.” Hannah moved the needle in and out without glancing up. “These pretty legs are wasted on a chem prof.

“So, Duke in the fall.”

“Yes.” Katy sighed. “I should never have given up chemical calculations for a man.”

“Not Stanley, anyway. But you can’t throw marriage overboard and closet yourself in a lab.”

“Look at me, Hannah, please.”

Hannah complied, and Katy smiled at her friend.

“You have all been wonderful to me. But it’s time for me to strike out on my own and realize my true potential. I’m not man savvy. I’m not sophisticated. I spent too many years studying while my girlfriends were hanging out at frat houses to have learned the feminine ropes. If life is based on sexual chemistry, I got an F in the sexual and an A plus in the chemistry. But being smart means I can take care of myself. I think I might have gotten a little nervous about my life, and when Stanley proposed, I jumped at it. Maybe I didn’t want to be the smartest virgin spinster.” She sighed, looking down for just a moment. “In a way, Stanley dumping me at the altar was the best thing that could have happened. It made me realize I’m much safer if I just rely on myself.”

Hannah shook her head. “I think if you hadn’t told Becky that Stanley didn’t like to kiss you, she still would have stolen him. She needed a way out of her life, and you only thought you did. I think you subconsciously gave her the invitation to steal him.”

Katy stared into the mirror, seeing the miracle Hannah had wrought with her dress. She looked like a different person. Sexier. Hipper. “Maybe I had some unconscious motive I didn’t recognize, but I wouldn’t have picked my wedding day to be dumped.”

“That was unfortunate, but she was probably plagued by guilt, which caused her to wait until the last minute to act. She’s probably not enjoying her honeymoon at all, thinking about you crying your eyes out.” Hannah stood. “I haven’t seen you cry at

all, Katy. And I think all this talk of sexual dysfunction is a cover-up. Maybe you just wanted to keep men on the periphery of your life.”

“If I didn’t then, I do now. It’s humiliating when the maid of honor marries your fiancé, wearing the hot pink dress you picked out for her. It’s like, here’s hot and sexy and here’s plain and virginal. Which do you think most guys want? I don’t know,” Katy murmured. “You sure have a lot of insight into people, Hannah. How did you develop that?”

“I’m a hairdresser. I’ve heard lots of stories over the years. Be still.” Gently she took hold of Katy’s below-shoulder-length hair, slicked it into a smooth, high ponytail, then took one strand which she wound around the rubber band and pinned down. “Now a touch of red lipstick,” she said, applying it to Katy as she spoke, “and whammo! Instant femme fatale.”

Katy inspected herself in the mirror. “Maybe it’s fatal femininity.”

“Think confident. Be confident. I’m confident that you’re a woman not to be overlooked. Anyway, the plain-vanilla you is all but a memory.” Satisfied, Hannah put away the needle and thread and the hair-brush and lipstick, glancing with cool smugness at Katy’s dress. “See how easy it is to be daring?”

“This is daring?”

“For you? Yes. It’s a start. Let’s go have lunch at the cafeteria, Virginity Barbie. All this thinking’s made me hungry.”

LAREDO HESITATED outside the door of the Never Lonely

Cut-N-Gurls Salon. If Katy saw him going in here, he was toast. Unfortunately, he needed Ranger, and he needed him now.

Glancing guiltily across the street at the Lonely Hearts Salon, he pushed open the door.

KATY GASPED as she saw Laredo go inside the enemy camp. She and Hannah stepped back inside the door quickly, staring at each other in surprise.

“Whoa,” Hannah said. “I have to admit to being caught off guard.”

Katy’s heart felt as if it bled a drop as red as her newly short dress. “I told you. It’s a dysfunctional thing. Those girls have allure—and I do not.” Why should she even care? she asked herself. She didn’t like him anyway.

Did she?

“Boys will be boys, I suppose,” Hannah said. “You could go rescue him from himself.”

“I’d rather join Marvella’s payroll. Come on. Let’s go eat at the cafeteria. Only, we’re taking the back door. I wouldn’t dream of allowing Mr. I’ll-Ride-That-Bull-For-You to know we saw him slinking into the competition’s bunker.”

Chapter Four

“Hold still, Tex,” Ranger said, his teeth gritted, slightly annoyed at being dragged away from Cissy to tend his brother in Delilah’s barn. Tex was writhing a bit dramatically on the hay-covered floor, and Ranger had been far more impressed with the shoulder-massage Cissy had been giving him back at the salon atop a satin-covered chaise lounge. “I’ve got to check your shoulder good because if it’s broken, it’ll set crooked. What were you thinking, anyway?”

Tex tried his hardest to lie still while Ranger none too gently probed his back and shoulder. “I wanted to test this bull and see if what Cissy said was true.”

Laredo stared at his prone twin. “You couldn’t tell a darn thing with that bull in a pen.”

“I can tell you he’s got a helluva liftoff. But I don’t think he cranks left. No, I don’t.”

Ranger stopped what he was doing to look at his brother. “You don’t think he cranks left?”

Tex shook his head. “I don’t.”

The three men studied the bull through the rails. Bloodthirsty seemed satisfied to have flung Tex into the stall across the aisle. For the moment he was quite a bit calmer.

“He does have a spring-loaded midair jump, though,” Tex said. “Either this bull’s changed his mind about how he tries to

kill people or you were getting set up, Laredo.”

Ranger shook his head. “Cissy’s a nice girl. She wouldn’t deliberately tell someone wrong.”

“And bulls don’t change their mind,” Tex said stubbornly. “If they start out kicking left, that’s usually the way they always go. Bloodthirsty didn’t hesitate. Then he bunched himself up in the air and tossed me over the pen.”

Laredo wasn’t certain what to think. “Why would Cissy give me a bad tip?”

“So you’d lose, dummy,” Tex told him. “She’s a woman, and she’s a rival, and she’s sucking Ranger’s face to make certain all her bases are covered.”

“She didn’t suck my face!” Ranger protested.

“Your lips are pink,” Laredo pointed out. “Did you borrow some tinted chapstick, maybe? Drink a strawberry pop? Borrow a sun lamp and use it on your lips?”

“It was just a friendly peck,” Ranger said. “Nothing more.” But his face and neck turned as pink as the lipstick, and Laredo frowned.

“Why are you lying?”

“I’m not.” Ranger shrugged and gently helped Tex to his feet. “I think your shoulder’s fine. Just don’t test him again anytime soon.”

“Why? So we won’t interrupt your friendly pecking with Cissy?” Tex asked. “What’s gotten into you?”

“What’s gotten into you?” Ranger shot back. “Since when have

you cared who I talked to?"

"Since we're supposed to be here helping out a woman who rescued us last month, Ranger," Laredo stated. "Have you forgotten whose girls helped us and Union Junction through the big storm? Who helped with sandbagging, and cooking, and mopping up a creek's worth of water? Who hung curtains in our house and cleaned and generally kept the town from getting washed under?"

Ranger stared at his brothers, speechless. He shook his head as if his ears were buzzing. Then his shoulders drooped. "I don't know what came over me," he said, his tone apologetic. "It was like...it was like the call of the wild, and I couldn't shut it off. Like being in a dream I didn't want to wake up from." He looked at them sheepishly. "For a minute there, I was almost totally hypnotized by a woman. Whew!"

"Oh, boy." Tex shook his head. "Listen, we've got to keep our heads on straight. Our brother has signed on to ride one of the worst bulls I've ever come in contact with, and he has no idea what he's doing. We've gotta have a plan."

"My plan is to get on and stay on," Laredo said. "I'm going to be more stubborn than this bull."

Bloodthirsty Black cared little for Laredo's announcement. He gave a round-nostriled snort, reminding everyone he was in the business of tossing cowboys as if they were hay.

"Maybe you should just give money to Miss Delilah's charity," Ranger said doubtfully.

“It’s a man thing.” Laredo glanced toward the barn exit. “In Spain, they run from bulls. Malfunction Junction Ranch cowboys laugh in the face of danger.”

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