



Tied to Trouble (Holidays Ever After #1)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Disappearing cattle, a secretive lab, and forbidden kisses—a dangerous mix in Mockingbird Hollow!

Az Newcomb's got enough trouble dealing with cattle vanishing from ranches all over the county—including his own. Things only get worse when the stubborn, beautiful girl he's sworn to protect starts cozying up to a scientist connected to a mysterious local lab. Kissing Mandy Merriweather was never supposed to happen, and now he can't forget it—or her.

Mandy is fed up with Az treating her like a little sister. Determined to shed her innocent reputation as the county's last virgin, she's eager to explore love on her own terms. But when one heated kiss flips their friendship upside down, Mandy realizes that Az might be the one man she's been looking for all along.

As Memorial Weekend turns sultry and dangerous, Az and Mandy must navigate secrets, passion, and an unseen threat that could tear them apart forever.

Note from author: This spicy-sweet romance contains mild disciplinary spanking fantasies. Reader discretion advised.

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Page 1

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“I don’t care what you say, Az Newcomb, it’s none of your business where I spend my time,” Mandy declared stubbornly, her eyes narrowing at the impossibly tall man glaring down at her. He’d only been home for a few hours, and her self-appointed protector was bossing her around again.

“You cannot go to a bar and leave with the first cowboy who offers to take you home, Mandy,” he gritted. “You have no idea what trouble you might be getting into.”

“I never said I was going to do that,” she protested hotly. “The virginity thing was just a frickin’ joke. Where’s your sense of humor?”

Mostly...maybe not.

“You might as well have,” Az insisted. His eyes, the color of turquoise stones, were glacial. His eyes were very different, and Mandy had always found them fascinating, but at the moment, she wanted to punch him in one of them and make it all black and shiny.

Besides, she had her private reasons for wanting to frequent The Lazy Saddle Saloon; she was searching for a special guy in her life. She didn’t know who she was looking for, but she was sure she would know him when she found him. Isn’t that how love is supposed to work? All that ‘across a crowded room’ in the romance books must have a basis in reality somewhere. The Lazy Saddle Saloon seemed like a good place to meet a lot of people to choose from. It’s where all the singles in Whippoorwill County hung out.

Secretly, she was a tad bit worried about being the only virgin left in Whippoorwill

County. But the virginity thing had just been a joke...mostly...except Az had taken it all wrong.

Now they were arguing in the stockroom of her grandmother's store, Benson's Market, and Mandy's temper was quickly escalating. What had started as a 'catching up with each other's life' conversation, and a simple joke about frequenting the bar every weekend to find candidates with which to lose her virginity, had quickly deteriorated when Az suddenly went all bossy on her.

She hadn't intended to do it...well...maybe she was a little serious, but he irritated her with his overprotective attitude. Shouldn't he be over that by now?

"I have had it with your hovering over me and bossing me around," Mandy snapped, her rebellious chin shooting high. She had no intention of allowing him to tell her what to do. She was so over that.

"I'm not hovering," he denied, a bit of red creeping up his neck.

"Yes, you are, you might as well admit it," she yelped. "I get that you felt sorry for me when my dad died when I was fourteen. And I guess that's why you decided to be my big brother, but I'm all grown up now. I don't need protecting anymore."

"I said no, and I meant it." Az's strong, angular jaw was set in stone as he glared right back at her.

"You can't tell me what to do, I'm old enough to make up my own mind now. I am not your responsibility, I never was. You just chose to make it so."

She stared defiantly back at him, his commanding attitude suddenly giving her indigestion. He'd always been bossy, but there was a new maturity to his stance, a rigid, iron determination that he seemed to have grown into while he was away.

A funny curling sensation began in the pit of her stomach. She wondered if the spicy barbecue she had eaten at Tilley's diner was giving her indigestion.

Deciding it didn't matter, she spun on her booted heel and started to walk away. She had a delivery to make, and Az was only keeping her from working.

She'd spent two years chasing an associate's business degree and planned on getting her bachelor's as well, eventually taking over her grandmother's market. She wasn't a little lost high school girl anymore; she could take care of herself. She was shocked when he grabbed her arm just above the elbow and swung her back around to face him.

"You have a bad habit of getting yourself into trouble, Mandy. Trying to seduce me when you were fourteen was bad enough, but now you're bound to attract the wrong sort of person by going to the bar."

"Thank you for that ungentlemanly reminder, Az, but it's none of your business. I'll do as I please, and I can date who I please. You have nothing to say about it."

"You want to experiment, little girl?" he snapped, his arm muscles bulging in his red plaid shirt as he reached for her. "I'll show you what you're in for."

Mandy stared wide-eyed at the sudden fire in his eyes, the determination of the dark head bending down towards her. She gasped as his mouth closed cruelly over hers, taking her lips in a fierce plunder. He put his lean, tanned hand in the curls that fell to her waist, holding her head still as he ravished her sweetness like the ruthless Aztec warrior she'd always imagined he resembled.

Az actually had Osage Indian in him. His mother loved and studied Indian cultures and was especially fascinated with the Aztec culture, hence his strange name, Aztecuaní Newcomb. Tecuaní in the Aztec language means jaguar or tiger. His

mother lopped off the Az part of Aztec and added it to Tecuani to get the name. Supposedly, he got his eyes from his Swedish great-grandmother on his mother's side. His height of 6'6" came from his great-grandfather's Osage Indian DNA. As commonly happens with strange or difficult names to pronounce, Aztecuaní was shortened to Az, much to his mother's chagrin. Mandy had found it all fascinating when she was younger, but now? Now he was just a pest. A pest who was suddenly stirring feelings she'd never felt before.

Their hats fell to the ground as the brims clashed, and he pulled her in closer to his whipcord body. His other arm wrapped around her slender waist like an iron clamp. He smelled good, like horses, hay, and something tangy.

Mandy whimpered in protest and tried to snap her head from side to side, but she couldn't escape the punishing mouth that held hers captive. She pushed ineffectually at the broad shoulders until her traitorous arms finally began a journey of their own volition up and around his powerful neck. His hard length against her soft body was intoxicating.

When her exploring fingers slid into the fine, dark hair at the nape of his neck and her bones melted into his hard abs, his ravaging kiss changed to something even more devastating. Desire stronger than she'd ever felt before careened along her veins like quicksilver as she tentatively returned his exploration, her tongue sliding along the inside seam of his lips.

Nothing but Az existed in that moment, and she found herself returning his ardor as hot, sweet pleasure encompassed her entire body. She fit into him like a glove, like they were made for each other. Her pert breasts hardened where they thrust against his hard chest.

She'd often wondered what it might be like to kiss Az, but he was just a friend, her self-appointed protector since high school. At one time, she'd been infatuated with

him, but the first time he'd turned her over his knee and swatted her, the rose-colored glasses had broken. In her mind, he was a bossy bully from that time on.

When Az finally broke off their kiss and stood back to stare at her, she gasped and panted for breath, her world suddenly turned upside down. Trembling all over, she stared wide-eyed up at him.

How could this be?

Az wasn't supposed to have this effect on her. She put her shaking fingers to her swollen lips, touching them in wonder, feeling the heat he had left upon them.

"Mandy, I'm sorry. I...I'm just sorry," he rasped hoarsely, running his fingers through his coal-black hair and stepping back to break their connection.

"Sorry for what?" Mandy's voice was a whisper as she tried to collect her senses and rearrange them in the box they didn't fit in anymore. "Sorry you kissed me? Sorry we're just friends? What?"

Somehow, everything had changed with just one kiss. One brief moment in time now dictated that there was no going back. No man's kiss had ever had this effect on her before. Confused, she awaited his answer.

"I'm sorry I was so rough with you." His glittering gaze never left her face. "I must have shocked you, and I didn't mean to hurt you."

Mandy sensed his withdrawal. He was attempting to restore the big brother door solidly back into place, but it was too late now. Like the horse escaped from the barn, desire was running rampant through her bloodstream, and from the looks of the bulge in his pants, it was in his as well.

The damage was done—knowledge gained.

So many things suddenly fell into place. Was Az the one she'd been searching for all this time? Was he the reason no other man seemed good enough? Or attractive enough? Or whatever, enough? Something was always missing.

Suddenly, she wanted him to kiss her again to test that theory. Maybe declare their friendship null and void and become lovers instead. The big crush that was supposed to die when she was fourteen had been faking it all along and was now resurrecting with righteous fury.

Her mind raced, searching for answers, but there weren't any. Suddenly, her common sense decided to wise up.

What the crap was she thinking?

She couldn't be attracted to Az Newcomb; they were just friends. Sort of. Ironically, though, he'd just moved into the number one slot of competitors to give her virginity to.

Not funny!

"Shut up," she snapped abruptly. "Just shut up. Don't tell me you're sorry, I don't want sorry." She reached up and grabbed him around the neck, pressing her slender body against his hard length. "Tell me you wanted to kiss me."

Az only hesitated for a second. "Come here," he growled, taking her mouth once again. Silence reigned as they breathlessly explored each other, neither one hearing the approach of solid footsteps.

"Ahem."

Startled apart, they looked around to see the stern features of Mrs. Collier staring at them, her white bun on the back of her head jiggling slightly as the foot in the worn penny loafer tapped insidiously against the hardwood floor.

“This is not the place for such goings on. Land sakes, Amanda Merriweather, what would your mother say?”

Faded blue eyes fastened on Az from the granny glasses perched on the end of the aristocratic, hooked nose. “And you, Az Newcomb. What are you doing accosting my granddaughter in the stock room of my market? Don’t you have anything better to do?” The twinkle in her faded blue eyes belied the censorious tones in her voice.

Mandy knew darn well that her grandmother couldn’t wait to pass on her and Az’s discretion as soon as she could get to her phone. Grams had always had a soft spot for Az Newcomb, and had hinted on more than one occasion that Mandy could do a lot worse in her choice of a man.

“Accosting, Grams?” Mandy rolled her eyes and sighed. “Isn’t that a little old-fashioned?”

A Z FLUSHED AND STEPPED back, releasing Mandy. “I...I beg your pardon, ma’am. I was just...just...” Words failed him at that moment. What was he supposed to say? He had been caught red-handed, or with his britches down as his gramps had been fond of saying. Any excuse he could give would be miserably lame.

“I’ll catch up to you later, Mandy,” he said finally, picking up their hats from the floor and handing her the yellow straw one. He jammed the black hat down on his head, stalked out the screen door into the back alley, and jumped inside his dusty jeep without opening the door. With his height, it was easier to keep the top down and just

hike his leg over the side. Since the summers were hot and muggy, he liked to drive his jeep and let the wind cool him off.

“Too bad you can’t burn rubber on gravel,” he muttered after starting the engine and stomping the gas pedal to the floorboard.

He drove automatically, his thoughts on the sweet shape of Mandy’s rear in the tight jean shorts, and the rounded breasts that had been visible beneath the molded white tank top that hugged her upper body. The cowboy hat sitting on dangling curls of long blonde hair made her look sexy as all get out.

Thinking of the plush pink of her lips drew a groan up his throat. Something in his gut twisted at the thought of that lovely mouth and sweet body beneath anyone but him. He sighed as his thoughts drifted.

Losing his father to liver cancer had been a huge blow to him. So, when her father had died in that fatal car accident, he’d become very protective of Mandy, knowing what it was like not to have a dad anymore. She’d only been fourteen, and his protectiveness had caused her to have a crush on him. Until he’d smacked her butt for being a brat when she attempted to practice her girlish charms on him. From then on, she’d been angry and resented him for interfering in her life.

He hadn’t wanted her practicing her charms on any other male either.

His job had been to protect her, and he took it seriously. Through the years, he’d convinced himself he only wanted to be friends, until somewhere along the way, being her friend had become the last thing on his mind. Unfortunately for him, Mandy hadn’t changed the way he had.

Until now.

Did that toe-curling kiss they'd just shared mean she had changed her mind? And if it did, their relationship just became even more complicated by the fact that he had nothing to offer her at this stage in his life. Another reason he'd kept her at little sister status even after high school. ?

When she'd defied him and turned her back on him today, it had been the last straw, and he couldn't help his reaction. No way was she going to go to the Saddle alone and pick up dates. It was just too dangerous. Had it been a joke? Or was she still a virgin, and her intent was real?

He frowned at the road in front of him. Back in town for just a few hours, and she was already turning him inside out. The girl was trouble with a capital T. What was he supposed to do with her?

A few minutes later, he came to a screeching halt in front of the sheriff's department and climbed out of the dusty jeep. He was met by the cool air conditioning when he stepped inside the building and swiped the sweat off his brow by ducking his forehead into the shoulder of his plaid cotton shirt.

He liked to wear his shirts open with just an undershirt beneath. That way, he could take off the outer layer, if need be, especially at this time of year when the cooler weather was trying to keep out the heat and humidity common to a Memorial Day weekend.

"Morning, Az," Emily Butler chirped.

Az nodded in response. Nothing changed much in the small town of Mockingbird Hollow, the county seat of Whippoorwill County, Missouri. Emily had been Evan Dorney's secretary for as long as he could remember. Nodding to the attractive, middle-aged soccer mom, he traversed the narrow hallway to the sheriff's office, opened it with a scowl, and eased his long frame inside.

“Howdy do to you too,” Sheriff Dorney greeted him good-naturedly, grinning at the scowl on Az’s face. “What’s got a burr under your saddle this afternoon?”

“Nothing, I’ll handle it.”

“Wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with Mandy Merriweather, would it?”

Az snorted. “Maybe—but I’m not telling you if it is.” He lifted an eyebrow at his tormentor.

Sheriff Dorney chuckled. “You’re a durned fool, boy. You should have already tied the knot with that filly by this time. You’ve been hankering after her for years, since you were both youngins’, I reckon.”

“She’s just a friend, that’s all.”

“That’s how it’s supposed to start.” Brown eyes twinkled under his bushy blond eyebrows. “Then you get married—a step you seem to have missed somewhere along the line.”

“I don’t want to get married.” Az slouched his long frame in the hard-backed chair and crossed his left ankle over his right knee. “Besides, even if I did, I have six more months of schooling. I can’t get married right now; I don’t have time for that nonsense.”

He stared at the older man, daring him to refute his statement, which he was sure he would. Sheriff Dorney was never afraid to let anyone know his opinion.

“Oh hell, where there’s a will, there’s a way, son. You’re going to keep playing that little fish until she slips off the hook if you aren’t careful.” His sharp eyes, undimmed by the relentless passage of the years, studied Az with a mocking gleam.

Az grinned. “You know what they say, plenty more fish in the sea.”

“But only one for me,” came the swift retort. “You’ve been carrying a candle for that little girl for years, admit it.”

“Maybe,” Az agreed, still feeling restless and irritated with Mandy. “Then again, maybe not. I don’t know for sure.” He studied the sheriff in return. He was a big man, nearing fifty and tough as an ox. His brown hair was the color of cocoa with a few white streaks in it, and in the mustache that adorned his upper lip. Az liked and respected him, despite their barbed repartee.

The sheriff leaned back in his chair, the wheels creaking slightly as they moved backward a bit, and folded his hands across his taut stomach.

“Well, son, while you’re trying to figure it out, someone else may come along and take her out from under your nose. She’s been frequenting The Lazy Saddle more and more lately. And I know for a fact that Sam Pickering has his eye on her.” He twiddled his thumbs and grinned like a wolf. “Besides, there are plenty of men sniffing around her, always have been. She just hasn’t been ready before now.”

“What do you know about it?” Az growled, jealousy instantly flaring in his gut. “And who the devil is Sam Pickering?”

“Sam Pickering works for Genetico,” he replied. “I always know what goes on here in Mockingbird Hollow. That is...until lately.”

“Until lately?” Az perked up; a mystery always caught his interest.

The sheriff stroked his mustache. “It’s the weirdest thing. We’ve got some rustling going on, and some of the ranchers are getting hot under the collar. The problem is that none of the cattle are showing up anywhere. Doesn’t look like they are being sold

off for meat either. So, I'm not sure what is going on except there's been some talk about Genetico."

"The lab on the outskirts of town?"

"Since we only have one, yeah, that's the one." The sheriff's eyes twinkled.

"Smartass," Az replied. "So, what kind of talk?"

"People are conjuring up all sorts of crazy ideas about genetic testing and all that science fiction type mumbo jumbo." He picked up his coffee cup and took a drink. "I think they've been watching too many horror movies, myself."

Az leaned forward; his interest piqued. "That sounds right up my alley. I think I'll do some investigating."

The sheriff choked on his coffee and sputtered, "Now hold on there. You need to leave that to me, son. You're still in school. It's not that I don't trust you; you've got good instincts, but I don't want anyone getting hurt on my watch."

"You know me better than that," Az replied with a snort. "Besides, if I'm working with you for the summer, that makes me an employee...at least for now. And I have no intention of doing anything stupid."

"Well, now that's true," admitted the sheriff grudgingly. "Except when it comes to women." He shot Az a gleaming side eye. "Your brain's a bit addled in that department."

Az just eyed him with a disgusted grunt, refusing to be baited. "It's summer break, and this rustling business is just the project I need to concentrate on."

“Rustling is dangerous business; you sure you want to get involved?”

Az nodded. “I don’t think we’ve lost any yet at the Golden G. I’ll have to check with Hugh and Aaron, though.”

The Golden G was the Newcomb ranch just outside Mockingbird Hollow. Az’s great-grandfather and his immigrant wife from Sweden had built it in the late 1800s. His great-grandfather had been half Osage Indian. He had adopted the ways of his white mother’s family and had taken the Newcomb name. His great-grandmother’s name had been Golda, and the ranch was named after her. The Golden G.

Az hadn’t done the genealogy research, but his mother had. She was in her element when researching different cultures. The Osage Indians were reputed to be beautiful people, not only tall, but physically handsome, and had lived in southern Missouri. During a time in history when most men were under 6 feet, the fierce Osage warriors often grew as tall as 6’7”. They were feared by many of the other tribes.

The sheriff stood up. “Alright, you can poke around with me, but you need to let me do the talking.” He reached for a folder on top of the filing cabinet behind him. “In the meantime, you can look over this file. This is all the complaints and information I’ve collected so far.” He walked around and handed the file to Az. “You read. I’ll drive.”

“Where are we headed?” Az asked, taking the folder and following Evan out to his police truck.

“Genetico.”

Genetico—that was where this Sam Pickering worked.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:40 pm

“Darn you, Az Newcomb,” Mandy muttered to herself as she sent the little red Ford Subaru pickup barreling along the dusty lane towards Genetico. She hadn’t been able to put their interrupted kiss out of her mind since he left, and it aggravated her to the utmost. It also confused her.

Az was just an older brother wannabe, nothing more. He had always been there for her. He’d helped her through high school, watched over her after graduation, threatened her dates, and generally made himself a nuisance while pursuing his degree in criminal justice. Then he’d finally gone off to Kansas City for an extended school for crime scene investigations and other special classes in law enforcement. He’d always wanted to be a police detective, just not a private detective. That was two years ago, and he’d rarely been back. Which was fine with her; she’d been in college herself. Eventually, she intended to take over the store from her grandmother.

Not that Az had needed to do much to protect her from the hot-blooded high school boys back in the day. Mandy had simply never been interested enough in any boy long enough for it to be worth the hassle. Besides, she knew every boy in town and all their parents, too. They were boringly familiar.

Now that summer break had brought Az home once again, Mandy had been happy to see him. That is, until the first thing out of his mouth was questions about who she was dating. Geez, talk about a broken record.

Leave it to Az to start hammering her right off the bat, so she snapped at him and brought up the virginity threat, which led to the rest of the argument. It wasn’t any of his business if she wanted to give up her virginity after all this time, but he tried to make it his business anyway. It was her reaction to his kisses threat that had her

confused.

Her thoughts wandered to Sam Pickering, whose kiss had already slotted into the possible candidates-for-exploration department, and then grimaced in wry disgust. Sam's kisses now seemed insipid compared to Az's burning exploration, forcing her to admit that she didn't feel much desire for Sam after all.

"Az Newcomb always has to ruin everything," she complained to the silky-haired golden retriever on the seat beside her.

Mags just woofed in doggy agreement, her pink tongue lolling out of the side of her mouth. Her big brown eyes stared adoringly at her.

Mandy laughed and patted her head. Mags was getting older and accompanied her on most of her deliveries. She kept her at the market when she was working as well. The kids loved to pet her as she lay on her big pillow by the wooden sales counter. Gentle Mags loved the attention, even from the overly eager toddlers who sometimes fell onto the pillow with her and wallowed all over her.

Mandy patted the dog on the head and scratched around her ears. "We girls have to stick together, don't we, Mags?"

Mags licked her hand in complete agreement.

A few minutes later, Mandy pulled up to the sentry box at the gates of Genetico and paused to wave at the dour-faced guard who barely acknowledged her with a nod.

He waved her through, so she downshifted into first gear and sent the truck barreling on. Around the corner, she came to a screeching halt in front of the warehouse doors at the back of the building she'd delivered to the first time she'd been to Genetico.

“Here’s your order, Sam,” she yelled as Sam Pickering opened the metal doors connected to the concrete dock three feet high. It was a delivery dock for big trucks, and she looked up at the man standing in the open doorway.

“Thanks, Mandy. I’ll help you with that,” he replied as he leaped nimbly off the dock and followed her to the back of the pickup.

“What do you guys do with all this stuff?” she asked, staring at the fit, dark-haired man with the mustache lining his upper lip. He wasn’t as tall as Az or as powerfully built, but he had a suave, sensual air that attracted her. He was dressed in his usual white lab coat, although on Friday nights at the Lazy Saddle, he normally dressed in a plaid shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots like everyone else.

“I can’t tell you that,” he replied good-naturedly, grinning lazily at her. “I’d have to keep you prisoner here if I did.”

Mandy knew that Sam worked in the lab at Genetico Industries and lived on site with the other scientists. It provided the residents of Mockingbird Hollow with plenty of speculation.

It also provided Mockingbird Hollow residents with jobs. Many of the townspeople worked in the kitchen and living areas of the employee quarters and human resources departments. The lab itself, however, was security clearance only, and there wasn’t anyone in Mockingbird Hollow qualified to work in it.

“Oh, come on, Sam,” Mandy wheedled. “It can’t be all that hush-hush. Good grief, you have no idea what people are saying goes on out here, especially with the cattle disappearing lately. Every gossip in town thinks you all are experimenting on them, and that humans will be next.”

Sam’s dark eyes narrowed to slits. “I know, I’ve heard,” he said shortly. “Trust me,

we have nothing to do with the disappearing cattle.”

“But you aren’t going to tell me what it is you do experiment on?”

Sam huffed. “Who said we experiment on anything? Let’s change the subject, shall we?” He walked up close to her and looked down into her eyes.

Mandy shrugged her slender shoulders. “Fine, we’ll change the subject. I’m in a hurry today, so I need to get going anyway.” She pivoted and strode back around the front of the truck.

Sam followed her to the driver’s door. “You going to be at the Lazy Saddle tonight?” He opened the truck door and stood just inside it while Mandy climbed in.

Mandy figured he was watching her bottom, but since she couldn’t do anything about it, she pretended she didn’t care. “Maybe,” she replied airily, tossing her long curls back as she fastened her seatbelt. “If I’m in the mood for dancing, I might.”

Sam put his hand in and turned her chin to face him. “I hope so. I’ve been looking forward to it all week.” He leaned in as if to kiss her.

Mandy pushed his hand away from her chin and briskly started the truck. She didn’t want his kiss—not with Az’s recent plundering still fresh in her mind. She was startled when he grabbed her chin and turned it towards him, then bent down and firmly claimed her mouth.

“You aren’t getting shy on me, are you?” he asked, when he lifted his head, his dark eyes boldly raking her flushed face. “I thought we were past that and getting ready for step two.”

“What’s step two?” She felt the urge to wipe her mouth, but something in the look of

his eyes stopped her.

His fingers trailed lazily down to the top of her molded tank, dipping below the rounded neckline. "I think you know."

Mandy pushed his hand away. "I've never given you any reason to expect me to go to bed with you, Sam," she replied stiffly, not liking his intimate touch.

"No?"

"No," she replied firmly, trepidation stirring in her stomach. A few kisses don't mean I'm ready to take my clothes off. Now, may I leave, please?"

"Of course not, I didn't mean it that way," he apologized quickly. "I'm sorry if I took liberties, Mandy."

"It's all right, I just need to get back. Grams and Mom will be worried about me if I'm late." She was relieved when he backed out of the doorway and allowed her to shut the door.

"Tonight," he mouthed at her through the window as she backed up and spun around.

Mandy felt uneasy as she barreled down the dusty lane once more. Sam had never touched her like that, and it bothered her. Had she given him reason to believe she was that interested in him? Beyond a few kisses, that is? Perhaps she had given off signals she wasn't aware of just because she was thinking about the whole virginity candidate thing. Could men tune into that?

She huffed and shrugged her shoulders. She did like him; she just didn't want him pawing her. At least he helped to pass a boring Friday night in Mockingbird Hollow.

Then she flushed with guilt at the thought. Maybe she had been leading him on. Using him to assuage her boredom at the lack of eligible men in these parts.

When she'd blurted out that stuff to Az about being the only virgin in Whippoorwill County, it had been because she had toyed with the idea of finding a lover. After all, everyone else was doing it, so why shouldn't she? It just hadn't cemented into a firm idea until Az had annoyed her with his ultimatum that she couldn't. Her best friend, Beverly, was already living with her fiancé, while she had yet to find a steady boyfriend.

She pulled the visor down and glanced critically into the mirror while still keeping an eye on the road. There was nothing to worry about, except an occasional vehicle or two. The worst thing you had to watch out for was possums and squirrels. And deer, of course. Missouri was thick with them.

Did Az see her as anything other than a friend? She studied herself in the mirror. If not, why had he kissed her like that?

Slapping the visor back up, she sighed in exasperation as she swerved around a recent road kill on the black asphalt. "Men," she muttered.

She waved at the sheriff's truck as he went by, and then looked in the rearview mirror when she realized the subject of her musings was in the police truck with Sheriff Dorney.

"I wonder where they are going? It's probably something to do with the missing cattle. Especially since the only thing out that way is Genetico. Right, Mags?"

Mags just woofed in agreement—she always agreed with everything Mandy had to say.

“Why can’t men be more like dogs?” she asked. “Life would sure be a lot simpler.”

Mags woofed again as if fully understanding what Mandy was saying.

About fifteen minutes later, Mandy pulled into the driveway of her home. After putting the truck in park, she opened the door and slid out, Mags following her. As she walked around the front of the truck, perspiration beaded on her forehead from the contrast between the truck's air conditioning and the humid heat. It was shaping up to be a hot summer this year.

The cheerful, budding heads of the asters and dahlias flocked in great profusion alongside the old brick home. A row of yellow Columbines was blooming beside the detached garage. She and her mother both enjoyed gardening, and the Columbines came back every year with no effort on their part. Not all the flowers were that easy, though. She opened the side door to the house and stepped inside.

“Mandy, is that you?” Sara Merriweather looked up from her book to smile as Mandy rounded the corner of the kitchen and entered the living room.

“Yeah, Mom, it’s me,” she replied as she walked into the sunny, spacious living room and leaned down to kiss her mother’s cheek. “Did you have a good day?” she asked before flopping on the sofa.

Mags leaped up to settle beside her on the brightly colored couch cover. It sported yellow Black-Eyed Susans, one of Mandy’s favorite flowers. They grew wild along the highways and gravel roads of Mockingbird Hollow. She propped her sock feet up on the footstool, covered in the same material.

Sara gazed fondly at her. “I had a lovely day, thank you.”

Mandy watched as her mother skillfully wheeled her chair over to her and away from

her beloved computer. The computer was her link to the world, and she kept records of the market accounts on it.

“How about you, honey?” Sara asked curiously, parking her chair beside Mandy.

“It was all right, nothing special.” Mandy fingered Mags’s silky ear, her thoughts on Az once again.

Her mother interrupted her reverie. “Are you going out tonight?”

“Probably.”

“Are you going out with Az?”

Mandy wrinkled her nose. “No. Why would I?”

Her mother tapped her fingers on the arm of the wheelchair. “I do like Az Newcomb. I think you and he would be good together.”

“No matchmaking, Mom, I’ll find my own boyfriends, thank you. Besides, Az is like a brother.” Her thoughts flashed to the kisses they had shared, the mental image mocking her.

Sara smiled dryly. “Is that why you were kissing him in the stockroom? Because he’s so brotherly?”

Mandy blushed slightly, then grinned, unrepentant. “Grams never could keep a secret, could she? I bet she couldn’t wait to get on the telephone and spill the beans.”

“She called me as soon as you left for Genetico,” her mother replied, chuckling.

“It’s no wonder I’m still a virgin,” Mandy complained with an exaggerated sigh. “Between Az and Grams, I never had a chance.”

“Mandy!” Sara laughed outright. “You’re as blunt as your father always was.”

“Speaking of boyfriends, when are you and Randy Berenger going to commit?” Mandy asked. She studied her mother with a broad grin. Sara had never remarried after the accident that had taken Mandy’s father away from them and left her mom in a wheelchair. Although she was just going on forty-five, her mom looked as young as she ever had.

Mandy had just turned fourteen that year, and it was still a painful memory for both of them. But as an adult, she would be happy to see her mom settled with someone who loved her. Of course, being in a wheelchair tended to put a lot of men off.

Before she could reply, Sara’s cellphone rang, its sudden shrill tones sounding loud in the room. She picked it up from the small platform attached to her wheelchair. A frown marred her brow as she listened. She spoke a few noncommittal words and then hung up.

“Who was that?” Mandy asked curiously.

“That was Randy,” Sara replied in a troubled tone. “Two more of his cows have gone missing.”

M ANDY WAS LATE GETTING to The Lazy Saddle that night. Sam met her at the door with an impatient glance at his watch.

“Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for an hour for you to show up.”

The parking lot was packed and the musical strains of Garth Brooks drifted out the door. The flashing neon saddle with a rodeo cowboy outlined in blue stars flashed in and out in various rhythms to imitate a bucking bronc and its rider in motion.

“I’m here now, aren’t I?” Mandy brushed aside her irritation with his possessiveness and entered the saloon, headed for the booth she usually liked. Her eyes searched the bar and dance floor looking for Az. Normally, she would have been flattered at Sam’s words, but her feelings had changed since this afternoon.

“At least you’re here now,” Sam replied. Still looking disgruntled, he trailed along behind her.

Disappointment at not seeing Az’s broad figure made the evening feel flat, but Mandy allowed Sam to seat her in the booth. Lifting her chin, she determined to make the best of it.

Az usually came to the Lazy Saddle on Fridays when he was in town, so she’d dressed with extra care tonight, wanting to impress him and wash away the image of being a little sister. She didn’t feel like his little sister anymore.

Sam took a seat beside her, his arm stealing possessively around the back of her shoulders. “Would you like a drink?” He eyed her appreciatively, his gaze skimming the tanned curves between the gaping buttons of the blue plaid shirt. Mandy had left the shirt unbuttoned three buttons down, with just a matching solid blue spaghetti strap tank that barely came to the top of her breasts. It was provocative, meant to be teasing, and Sam certainly seemed to appreciate it.

“Did you dress just for me tonight?” His lips grazed her ear as he spoke.

“Yes, I’d like a drink—and no—I didn’t dress just for you,” Mandy teased, a wicked grin curving her lips. “For you, I’d need to plan on something easier to get out of.”

She laughed when his eyebrow shot up. It was fun to tease Sam, although she probably shouldn't, not given the way he'd acted this afternoon. But Mandy was feeling let down at Az's absence. After the kiss they had shared this afternoon, she'd been sure he would be here tonight.

After three Mojitos and a few dances, Mandy was feeling decidedly bolder. Especially since she hadn't eaten anything except a few french fries. Her burger was untouched.

"You going to eat that?" Sam asked, gesturing to the cheeseburger on her plate.

"No, you can have it."

While Sam was eating her cheeseburger, she kept glancing at her watch and checking the bar until she decided Az wasn't coming. The entire night was officially flat and boring.

To hell with Az.

He'd stayed away so she wouldn't get any ideas about this afternoon. This was his way of saying she was just his kid sister, nothing more. But even as his kid sister, you would have thought he'd be here to protect her, she thought peevishly.

She wasn't drunk, but she was feeling just good enough that she might go home with Sam. After all, who wants to be a virgin forever? Sam was looking pretty good about now as he signaled the waiter with a huge grin. Her laughter was a bit brittle as she joked and teased with him, but he didn't seem to care. At least he was here. And he was attentive—something Az was not.

"Would you like another drink?" Sam asked smoothly, his eyes gleaming at her flushed face.

“Yes, I’d like another drink,” she replied, feeling a bit lightheaded. Maybe she should have eaten that cheeseburger after all.

“She doesn’t need any more to drink. I think it’s time for you to go home, Mandy.”

Mandy rolled her eyes. Now he shows up? She glared up at his tall figure, even taller because she was sitting down. “Wouldn’t you know it, you always manage to arrive just in time to spoil the fun,” she snarked. How could he possibly know how much she’d drunk? He was just being as bossy as ever. Didn’t the man know when to quit? She opened her mouth to tell him off, but Sam interfered.

“I’ll take her home when she’s ready,” Sam replied from across the table. “She’s here with me, so get lost, cowboy.”

“She may be here with you, but she won’t be going home with you,” Az replied firmly, his vivid eyes flashing.

Sam stood up. “Just who the hell are you?”

“He’s my protector,” Mandy mocked, her nose scrunching up. “My Aztec warrior to defend my honor.” Her words were slightly slurred, which surprised her. Had she actually drunk that much? She’d sort of lost track. “Aren’t you, Az?” she cooed as she stood up between the two men, feeling the room spin a little bit.

“Knock it off, Mandy,” Az growled. “You’re not going home with this man in the condition you’re in.”

“I’m not in any condition—and don’t tell me what to do. You’ve been doing that since we were kids and I’m damn... hic ...sick of it.” The small hiccup just came out, and Mandy was mortified. How many drinks had she had? She frowned, trying to remember, but the information escaped her.

Sam eyed the big man and turned to Mandy. “Do you want to come home with me or not, Mandy. If you do, tell this cowboy to get lost and let’s go.”

Mandy hesitated, staring at Sam with huge blue eyes, slightly out of focus. She didn’t want to go home with Sam, but she didn’t want to give in to Az either. What a dilemma.

When she didn’t answer, Sam slapped a couple of bills on the table, his anger palpable. He turned back and spoke to Az, his voice bitter with resignation. “If this woman belongs to you, you better put a collar on her. She’s lucky she picked me to play with. I wouldn’t force her to do anything against her will, but not every man would be so generous. If she were my woman, I’d haul her over my knee and give her a damn good spanking.” He turned and stalked indignantly out of the bar.

Mandy blinked at his words. “Well! That was rude.” She laughed weakly and sat back down. “He sure has a lot of nerve, talking like that.” What had gotten into Sam?

“He also had some excellent advice,” Az growled, taking her wrist and pulling her out of the booth. He began tugging her along behind him, heedless of her protests.

“What are you doing? Az, you’re embarrassing me,” she hissed. It felt like every eye in the place was watching them as he pulled her toward the exit.

“Having a little trouble there, Az?”

“It’s about time you took that filly in hand, Az.”

The catcalls and comments directed their way had Mandy blushing bright red.

“I will never forgive you for this humiliation,” she cried, trying unsuccessfully to pull out of his strong grip. “Let go of me.”

“If you don’t want to be embarrassed, then don’t get drunk in public,” he stated bluntly. “You’re out of control, little girl. You need someone to rein you in before you get into trouble you can’t get out of.”

The cool night air helped clear her head when Az pulled her outside the bar. Eying him from the corner of her eye, she realized that he had that same look he always wore when he was determined to follow through with a goal. Only this time, she wasn’t sure what that goal was. Was he really going to spank her? The idea was ludicrous, she wasn’t a bratty fourteen-year-old anymore. “Don’t even think about spanking me, Az Newcomb,” she fussed.

“Someone needs to.” When he began to shove her into his pickup, she protested again. “I drove my truck; I have to drive it home.”

“You’re not driving anywhere.”

“Yes, I am, bossy butt. I don’t want to leave it.”

His eyebrows rose. “Bossy butt? You’re asking for it, brat.”

“I’ve already relieved you of brother duty, I can drive myself,” she announced with another wayward hiccup. What the heck was up with the hiccups?

She planted her booted foot against the seat; her knee bent to keep him from pushing her inside the cab. She grabbed the edges of the open door. “Stop pushing me around, Az, I’m not getting into your truck.”

“Oh yes, you are.” The words were emphasized with two hefty spansks, one to each side of her buttocks. The black denim material was stretched tightly across her rounded cheeks, making the spansks feel tight and hard. “Ow, you butthole,” Mandy squealed in surprise. The shock of it made her let go of the door, and Az shoved her

up into the truck seat.

“Now stay there, or there’s more where those came from.” He slammed the door shut and stalked around the front of the truck.

Mandy watched him with her mouth open, her buttocks burning and stinging. She rubbed furiously until he got to his door, and then she folded her arms and greeted him with icy silence.

Az didn’t say a word all the way to her house, Mandy didn’t either. Not until they pulled into her driveway. “Okay, mister macho , just how am I supposed to get to work in the morning?” She glared scornfully over at him.

“I’ll come by and pick you up.”

She grimaced in disapproval, but held her ground when he turned the truck off and faced her with a considering gaze. “Don’t bother to see me to the door, I’ll find my own way in.” Mandy pulled on the door handle, but Az held her arm. She didn’t like the look on his face, and she fidgeted, suddenly nervous.

“Don’t get sassy with me, Mandy. You’re just one step away from going over my lap and getting the spanking of your life. I doubt you’ve ever had a real one, and God knows you sure need it.”

“Boring—you’ve already done that once, remember?” she snarked airily.

“If you’re referring to when you were fourteen, that wasn’t a spanking. Those were just love taps to wake you up.”

He would have to bring up the most humiliating experience of her life. It was when her feelings had turned from lusty admiration to hate. “Oh, I woke up all right. You

ripped those crush-colored glasses right off my face and made me realize what a bully you are, Az Newcomb. My opinion hasn't changed in the last eight years, either." She shook his arm off. "Besides, if I choose to have a good time and flirt with someone, that's my business. It's a free country."

"You let that man think you were going to bed with him when you didn't intend to," Az replied bluntly. "It's called leading him on...there's another name for it too, but I won't repeat it."

"Maybe I did intend to," Mandy taunted. "Anyway, what business is it of yours who I sleep with? I already told you that I don't want to be a virgin forever." She tossed her head defiantly.

"That's enough, Mandy, you're just asking for it." His eyes narrowed in warning, but she ignored it.

"Mind your own business, bossy butt." Mandy's blue eyes flashed scornfully, anger making her imprudent.

"Mandy, you're drunk."

She just couldn't help herself; she was too aggravated with him. "Bossy butt...bossy butt...bossy butt," she chanted in a childish, singsong voice. When he suddenly reached for her, she squeaked and jumped.

She wasn't quite sure how it had happened. One minute, Az was sliding into the middle of the bench seat, and the next minute, she was face down in the driver's seat. Her body was suddenly sprawled awkwardly across his lap, her feet digging into the floorboard as she tried to scramble upward. When a burning slap landed across the seat of her jeans, followed by several more, she screamed in rage. Bucking and kicking didn't help; all her heels met was the underside of the dashboard, and that

didn't stop the spansks that were raining down on her unprotected backside. "Stop it, Az! I hate you! Stop it!"

"I'll stop when I think you've had enough."

"You have no right to do this."

Mandy grabbed the steering wheel with her right hand, trying to pull herself up, or interfere with the painful barrage that was burning into her cheeks. Unfortunately, she couldn't do either because of the broad arm that was blocking her. Az had a firm grip on her hip and seemed set on showering her with endless spansks that were building to a very painful level.

He paused, his palm resting on her blazing backside. She could feel the heat through her jeans. "I have every right. You shouldn't lead a man on, brat. It's a good way to get more than you bargained for."

"It's none of your business either way," she spluttered.

"It's been my business all along, and it's still my business. You go looking for trouble, and you're going to find me right behind you." He landed several harder spansks.

"Ow, stop it, Az, you're hurting me." The last sentence came out on a plaintive wail that she couldn't help.

"I want it to hurt," he replied without sympathy. "I want to make sure you feel this through your jeans. And I want you to give up the ridiculous notion of losing your virginity. Just tell me when you're ready to be sensible." Then he continued to spank her, apparently determined to send his message home.

Mandy yelled in pain and outrage until she couldn't take anymore. "All right, I'll give it up!" She sobbed helplessly, confused, frustrated, and angry. She wanted to stamp her feet and punch him in the face. "I hate you, Az Newcomb," she cried when he pulled her upright.

"You can hate me all you want, but I'm not going to let you get yourself in trouble, little girl," he said firmly.

Mandy glared at him in the moonlight. His features were hard, the contours of his tanned face calling for her fingers to explore them. "What do you want from me, Az?" she whispered raggedly.

He was silent for a moment. "You need to get to bed, Mandy. Tomorrow comes early, and you have a hangover to get past."

"I'm not drunk, Az. Maybe a little too much to drink, but not plastered. Besides, you can't keep me from making my own mistakes forever. One of these days, there will be another Sam Pickering; you can't stop them all."

When his eyes hardened into gleaming, turquoise rocks, she recognized the same fury she'd experienced in the back of Bensons' Market. She wanted him to kiss her, but not in punishment. Yanking furiously at the door handle, she pulled away from him and almost fell out of the truck in her hurry to get away. At that moment, she really did hate him, but not because he'd spanked her, but because he confused her.

The evening air kissed her wet cheeks and lifted her hair as she ran down the concrete walk to the side door to let herself in. Then she leaned back against the door until she heard his truck start up and leave.

Page 3

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A z watched Mandy to the door, torn between regret and satisfaction. He hadn't wanted to spank her, but she'd pushed him into it.

Sighing, he started his truck and put it into gear. At least he could get her truck and bring it home for her. One of the fellows at the bar would help him.

His right hand throbbed and he wondered how her butt felt? It didn't matter, not at this point. He was determined she would not waste herself on some lab jockey who couldn't appreciate her. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, realizing he had another problem at the moment. The feel of her firm buttocks beneath his hand and her breasts bouncing against his thigh had created a powerful urge within him.

She was really getting to him.

Gritting his teeth in frustration, he backed out of the driveway. He couldn't lie to himself; he'd secretly thought of Mandy as his wife many times through the years, but he always squashed the idea. Being her friend was easier to deal with. He didn't have anything to offer her yet, he wasn't through school, and he didn't want to get involved until he was.

Once out of school, he'd be working with Sheriff Dorney and ranching with his brothers. Then they could get married and look for a place to build their own home on the Golden G, or maybe move to the city. Would Mandy be happy in Kansas City? Or even St Louis?

The last he'd heard, she wanted to take over her grandmother's store. Hell, when was the last time they had ever had a decent conversation together? All they seemed to do

was argue when they saw each other, or fight because she was up to something he didn't approve of.

That was his fault, though; he couldn't help being protective because Mandy had a wild streak in her. She was also beautiful, and men were attracted to her. He'd made it plain to anyone who came near her that she was off limits. That wasn't fair to her either, but again, he couldn't help it.

His conscience nagged at him. Maybe the sheriff was right. Could he lose her if he didn't act soon? She sure seemed ready to up her game with this ridiculous notion of giving away her virginity.

Maybe he'd been fooling himself all along because he was the one who wasn't ready to claim her. He hadn't been protecting Mandy just as a big brother, but because she was his.

He growled low in his throat and ran his hands through his hair. Maybe he did need to let her know before it was too late. Maybe they needed to start dating seriously this summer, and not just spending hang-out time here and there. He could handle that; he'd invite her to dinner tomorrow night.

But what if she refuses to come?

I N S I D E T H E H O U S E, S A R A glanced up when Mandy ran past. Were those tears on her daughter's face?

"Hey, honey...wait up," she called softly as she wheeled her chair around and followed her towards the bedroom.

Mandy had already shut the bedroom door, so she maneuvered her wheelchair to the side and opened it. Inside, she could see her daughter, face down in the pillow, sobbing like her heart was breaking.

Concerned, she wheeled inside and over to the bed, reaching out to lay her hand on the shining curls. “What’s wrong, Sunshine?” She had always called Mandy her sunshine because her smile was like the sun coming out. It cheered and warmed her every time her daughter laughed. Especially after her husband died. Mandy had no idea how much she had leaned on her during that awful time.

“It’s just Az, being a first-class jerk,” she replied, sniffing and reaching for a Kleenex on the nightstand by her bed.

She didn’t miss Mandy’s wince as she sat up. A knowing smile curved her lips. “What has he done now?”

Mandy grabbed a Kleenex from the box on the side table and blew her nose before speaking. “He...he made me come home, even though I wasn’t drunk,” she exclaimed. “I had to leave my truck at the Saddle. That man is an arrogant, bossy, chauvinist pig, and now I don’t have a way to work tomorrow.”

“Didn’t he offer to come and get you?”

“Well...yeah, but that’s not the point.”

Sara grinned as Mandy eyed her suspiciously, as if she were defecting to Az’s side. “So, what is the point?”

“I could have driven home myself,” she grumped. “I wasn’t drunk, but no, he always has to play the macho protector, and it drives me crazy.” She got up and walked around, unconsciously rubbing her backside while she fumed and snuffled.

Sara didn't miss the obvious. "Sore muscles, dear?" She phrased the question delicately.

Mandy flushed and jerked her hand away from her backside, her face turning beet red. "I...that is...uhm..." she stammered, at a sudden loss for words.

Sara laughed. "Let me guess. Az smacked your bottom a few times. Am I right?" The chagrined look on Mandy's face confirmed it.

"He has a lot of nerve," she snapped. "I can't believe he did that. I should have him arrested."

"It wouldn't do you any good, honey. Sheriff Dorney is a male chauvinist pig, as you put it, from way back," she replied with a chuckle.

"That's not fair!" Mandy raised her voice in protest.

Mags stood up on the bed, woofing as if in agreement with her mistress's plight.

"Do you really want to have him arrested?"

Mandy sighed and then shook her head. "Not really, Mom, I just want him to stop being so overprotective." She massaged her bottom cheeks ruefully. "And I don't want spanking me to become a habit."

"Did you ever think that maybe he is in love with you?" she asked gently.

Mandy blinked. "He sure has a funny way of showing it, if he is."

"Not really. Men are always protective of women they care about."

“Maybe,” Mandy said doubtfully, “but I don’t know, Mom. Az has always thought of me as a little sister.” She walked over and surveyed herself in the mirror. “Maybe I should wear something more... eye-catching,” she mused.

“That would depend.”

“On what?”

“On whether or not you want to catch his eye.” Sara stared thoughtfully at her daughter. “You and Az have been friends since you were kids. Are you sure you want to turn that into something more?”

“Maybe...I’m not sure.”

“Try sleeping on it, dear,” Sara replied with a smile. “Maybe things will look different in the morning.”

“You’re probably right,” Mandy conceded. She leaned down to give her mother a kiss and a hug. “Good night, Mom.”

“Good night, dear.”

Sara wheeled herself down the hallway to the living room, her lips curved in a knowing smile. She’d always liked Az Newcomb. She couldn’t think of a better match for her headstrong daughter.

A S MANDY WATCHED HER mom leave, she bit her lip and thought of the kiss she and Az had shared earlier that day. Their relationship was already something more, irrevocably changed in the backroom of Benson’s Market. Her heartbeat

quicken, and she admitted to herself that if she wanted to lose her virginity, she couldn't think of a better person than Az.

But was that what she really wanted? Just to lose her virginity? Or were her feelings seriously changing for the stubborn boy who had become a sexy, obstinate, and aggravating man?

AFTER ACCOMPLISHING his mission, Az let himself wearily into the front door of the Golden G and headed for the liquor cabinet in the living room. The old stick-built home had been created during a time when families were expected to be large, with plenty of family members running around.

Improvements had been made since his great-grandparents' time with modern updates, but the bare bones of the old home were still as warm and welcoming as they had always been. Hardwood floors, the huge oak planks still hanging in the ceiling, and the stone fireplaces in most of the rooms for heating were all part of the yesteryear charm of the 1800s era.

Az loved the place, but he also intended to build his own home one day. The stone fireplace in the living room didn't hold a fire, it was too warm this time of year. A 72-inch flatscreen television had been put above the fireplace, but nothing was on. The lights were low, so he automatically assumed his brothers were in their rooms or out at the barn.

Going straight to the liquor cabinet on the left side of the room, he took a bar glass from the glass cabinet above the small wooden bar, poured himself two fingers of tequila, and swallowed it. It went down with a slight burning sensation that was still soothing as he slid onto one of the three barstools, and his thoughts focused on the aggravating girl he'd just spanked.

He'd been furtively watching Mandy with Sam Pickering from behind the mirror over the bar all evening. Since the Saddle had become so popular in the last few years, Rusty Perkins, the owner, had replaced the regular mirror with a viewing mirror. It allowed him to observe the patrons and get a heads up when trouble was brewing. Being able to call the sheriff early had saved him a lot of money because repairs from brawls started by rowdy patrons were expensive. With the mirror, he didn't have to ban anyone, and business was better than ever because his bar was safer.

Az knew Mandy was drinking too much too fast, even if the Mojitos were a mild drink. He'd also noted that she hadn't eaten anything but a few french fries. And there was little doubt in his mind as to Sam Pickering's intentions. No way was he letting that happen. He took another sip of his drink.

"Kind of late to be hitting the booze, isn't it, little brother?"

He swung around to see the big, barrel-chested body of his oldest brother, Hugh, rise from a lounge chair in front of the fireplace and turn to face him. "Didn't you get enough of that at the Saddle?"

"Only one reason a man drinks alone, and that's a woman," chuckled another deep voice. His other brother, Aaron, rose from another chair to join them.

"You're right, Aaron, that has to be it," Hugh agreed.

Az eyed the two men sourly and tossed back the rest of his tequila shot. They reminded him of Hoss and Little Joe Cartwright from the old TV series, Bonanza.

"Well...if it isn't Little Joe and Hoss...in the flesh. Since you are both older than I am by four and two years, respectively, I don't consider either of you experts on the subject of women."

“Little Mandy giving you fits again?” Hugh’s warm blue eyes twinkled and danced as he joined Az at the bar and poured himself a drink.

“Look who’s talking,” Az jibed. “You can’t even hold onto a woman, let alone give advice.” He grinned at his brother’s scowl. “That must be why you’re both sitting here in the dark alone instead of out on a date on a Friday night.”

“We just haven’t found the right one yet,” Aaron assured him, joining him and Hugh at the bar.

It was uncanny how much Aaron’s teasing face and dark hair resembled Little Joe with more modern clothing.

Az’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh? What about Anna? I thought you two were going to tie the knot for sure.” Az poured himself another drink. “Whatever happened to her?” he chided.

Aaron grinned. “Nah, it was never serious. Anna wouldn’t have been happy living on a ranch, she was a city girl.”

“And I just haven’t convinced Mary yet that she can’t live without me,” Hugh piped up.

“Yeah, right...it’s more likely you’re both running scared.” Az grinned derisively when the barb found a niche, and Hugh flushed.

“No, I’m afraid it’s Mary who is running scared,” he said glumly. “I asked her to marry me, but she hasn’t made up her mind yet.”

“Why not?” Az asked as he and Aaron both stared curiously at their older brother.

Hugh looked uncomfortable. “If I had to guess, I’d say it’s because I paddled her little butt a while back. She’s been kind of cool towards me ever since. Says she needs time to think.”

Being a typical dominant male, Aaron asked, “Why would that bother her? It’s just par for the course in a relationship.”

Az stared at him in amazement. “It is? Since when?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never spanked Mandy’s butt,” Aaron taunted. “A girl as feisty as her?” He shook his head.

“Mandy and I are just friends.” Az flushed slightly, his throbbing hand denying the lie.

“You’ve been hovering over that little girl since you were kids,” Aaron replied scornfully. “Don’t bother telling me you aren’t in love with her. Damn, man—you always have been.”

Az scowled at him, tossed back his drink, and then set the glass on the bar. “Even if I were, I can’t think about marriage right now. Besides, she isn’t in love with me.” He stalked out of the room, leaving his brothers staring thoughtfully after him.

Sleep was the furthest thing from his mind as Az veered from the stairway towards the second floor. Instead, he went out the back door off the kitchen to the raised deck outside. Snagging a lawn chair, he plopped down with a grunt and closed his eyes.

The old rambling ranch house had a pretty, peaceful garden out back. The scent of wild honeysuckle tickled his nostrils. The mulberry trees and blackberry patches in the back pasture provided the delicious pies and jellies that his mom made every year from their berries. The trills of the Northern Mockingbirds, or the Whippoorwills as

they were commonly known, caressed his ears from among the Mulberry branches, even this late. Those darned birds could go on all night when they wanted to.

Soft footsteps behind him told him his mother was awake. He turned to face her when she took the deck chair next to him. “Trouble sleeping, Mom?”

Beth Newcomb wrapped the lightweight purple robe around her and tied the belt with a chuckle. Her small feet, encased in purple scuffs, were stretched out in front of her. “You know me, I always have to make sure my babies are home before I can sleep.”

“How the heck do you sleep at all those research conferences you go to then?” he teased.

She smiled, her even white teeth barely visible in the pale starlight and the sliver of the new moon. “That’s different, of course.”

The night air felt like silk on Az’s skin now that the heat of the day was past. Despite the sultriness of Missouri’s weather, it was always cooler at night, especially in the late spring. The full heat of summer wouldn’t begin until the summer solstice.

“Are you and Bill going to the Memorial Day barbecue in town this weekend?” he asked. Bill was a fellow professor who often visited from the University of Missouri in Columbia.

“Not this year,” she replied, staring out into the darkness.

Az didn’t press her. His mom hadn’t been the same since she’d lost his dad. None of them had been the same, but he was pretty sure she was lonely. His mother was still a pretty woman in her late fifties. The professional brown bob layered along her chin and slightly down her back was complemented with golden brown eyes and a slender figure. She and Bill had been an item for a few years, but wedding bells never seemed

to enter the picture.

“I heard your brothers teasing you about Mandy,” she offered, changing the subject. “Were you two out tonight?”

Az hesitated. “Not really. We were both at the Saddle, but we weren’t together. She had a little too much to drink, so I took her home.”

Beth chuckled. “I’m guessing she didn’t agree with your analysis of her condition.”

“What makes you say that?” he asked warily.

She turned to face him. “I’m aware of her feelings towards you hovering over her.”

“I’m not hovering,” Az objected for the second time today.

“Son, you’ve been carrying a torch for Mandy for years, whether you believe it or not. You might want to ask yourself why it was so important for you to look out for her all these years. Because it wasn’t out of the goodness of your heart, although you’re a good man.”

Az grunted. He’d been asking himself that very same thing all afternoon. “Maybe,” he finally admitted. “I’m not sure either of us is ready for a serious relationship, though.”

Beth snorted. “Well...while you’re thinking about getting ready, you might realize that she’s thinking too. And whether or not you’re in her thoughts, or some other man is, will be up to you.” She reached out and placed a palm on his arm. “Don’t wait too long, son. The right one doesn’t come along every day,” she added wistfully, turning her face back to the stars and leaning back in her chair. “You don’t want to waste precious time you could have had together just dithering.”

Az's stomach clenched. He couldn't resist asking, "What about you, Mom?"

She hesitated, then sighed. "Adam was my right one, Az. No one else has ever come close. So, until that happens, if it happens, I'm better off alone than only giving half of me to another man."

Az's heart tugged, and he went quiet. His thoughts were so focused on Mandy that he almost missed the lights bobbing off and on across the west cattle pasture. How would a light get into one of their pastures...unless?

He jumped up. "Did you see that, Mom?"

Beth jumped up. "See what?"

"Those lights out there."

Beth squinted in the direction Az was pointing. "Yes...yes, now I see them. What are they?"

"Hugh! Aaron!" Az yelled to his brothers as he ran for the back door. The two men met him in the kitchen.

"What? What's going on, Az?" A concerned Hugh was striding across the kitchen floor.

"There are lights in the pasture!"

"Rustlers!" Aaron yelped. "Come on, let's catch 'em red-handed."

"Horses will be faster in the pastures than a truck," Hugh said, sprinting for the door.

“What if they have guns?” Az asked, pausing in mid-run. “Shouldn’t we grab our rifles?”

“You grab the rifles, we’ll have the horses ready,” Hugh ordered with authority only an older brother can wield and get by with.

“Do you want me to call Sheriff Dorney?” Beth asked with a frown as she came through the doorway.

“No, not until we know what’s out there,” Hugh threw over his shoulder as he headed out the door.

What seemed like a mad scramble quickly became an organized and efficient manhunt, the three brothers picking their way around the creek and jumping the fences. They were about halfway into the west pasture when the lights went out.

“They are on the run,” Aaron hissed, “they must have seen us coming.”

“I don’t see anything, though,” Az replied uneasily, slowing his horse to a walk as his eyes strained to see through the dim moonlight. Shapes and sizes were distorted at night, and distance was often miscalculated. “I could have sworn the light was coming from this area...not much further up ahead.”

“Much farther and we’ll be on Possum Lake Road,” Hugh whispered. “I don’t like it.”

Az pulled back beside Hugh. “Have we lost any cattle, Hugh? The sheriff told me today that he’s had reports from various ranchers about missing cattle, including Randy Berenger.” He reined his mount in tighter.

“Shh—what’s that?” Hugh held his hand up to stop all conversation, and the men

strained to listen.

“Sounds like a truck engine,” Aaron replied, looking towards the road. “If it is, whoever was here is just leaving.”

“Come on, let’s investigate from here to the road,” Hugh ordered, urging his horse forward. “Spread out and holler if you hear or see anything. Not too far apart now, we don’t want anyone to run into danger without close backup.”

Az, Aaron, and Hugh automatically spread out in three different directions, each picking their way carefully towards the dusty road that wound around and curled up to Possum Lake Dam.

They were just coming out of the trees along the edge of their property when a shot rang out in the still night air. Hugh tumbled off his horse, landing flat on his back.

“My God, Hugh has been shot!” Aaron yelled the chilling words to Az, and they both sent their horses thundering towards their fallen brother, fearing the worst.

When they reached him, they leaped off their mounts and knelt beside him, frantically searching for blood to see where he’d been hit. Their hands were all over him, and he began to slap them away, bellowing disgustedly, “Get your hands off me, I’m fine, just bruised from the fall.”

“You didn’t get shot?” Az’s eyes narrowed as he searched his brother’s chest carefully.

“No—I didn’t get shot.”

“Then how come you fell off your horse?” Aaron asked, exasperated. “You had us thinking you’d been killed, you fool.”

“For your information, I was reacting to the gunshot,” Hugh huffed, drawing himself up to a sitting position. “Something I see you both failed to do.”

“By falling backwards off your horse like an idiot?” Aaron was incredulous.

Az hid a small grin of relief. Just like Hoss and Little Joe, those two were always bickering, although their hearts were made of gold. He and Aaron were both relieved to see that Hugh wasn’t shot after all.

“Hold it right there, varmints! I got my Bessie aimed at your heads,” ordered a thin, reedy voice.

“Skeeter Davis, is that you? What the devil are you doing out here taking wild shots at people?” Hugh thundered, standing up as a skinny old man came into view.

Skeeter lowered his rifle in disappointment. “Oh—it’s just you Newcomb boys. And here I thought I’d caught me the varmints that have been dumping in the lake.” Suddenly, he raised his gun again. “Unless it’s you that’s been dumping.”

“Put that gun down, you goldarned fool, before you actually shoot somebody,” Aaron ordered. He eyed the old man with his scraggly-looking beard. “What are you talking about? What dumping?”

“Someone’s been dumping in the lake?” Az asked, his attention riveted on Skeeter.

“That’s what I said,” Skeeter replied testily.

“What are they dumping?” Hugh asked, shoving his black hat back on his head.

“How should I know? I’m not going to dive into it and find out. That end of the lake is deeper than a con man’s wallet.”

“How come you haven’t told the sheriff?” Aaron demanded.

“Because I just ain’t got around to it yet,” Skeeter answered impatiently. Glaring at the men, he turned and stalked off, his shotgun over his arm. Skeeter was a law unto himself, and most people thought he was plumb loco.

The brothers looked at each other and shook their heads. “It’s too late to go nosing around in the dark,” Hugh said. “Let’s get back to the house. Whoever was here is long gone now, anyway.”

“Shouldn’t we call Dorney?” Aaron asked, taking out his cell phone.

“No point in it,” Az replied. “We can’t see anything in the dark, and we don’t even know for sure that anything was taken. It’s black as pitch out here with no moon. At first light, we’ll check the pasture. Then we’ll call Evan if we find anything missing.”

His brothers agreed. As they rode back to the house, Az yawned so wide his eyes watered. Lord, he was tired. His thoughts drifted back to Mandy and the sight of her denim-covered backside wiggling and bucking over his lap. Now there was a memory to sleep with—or not, as the case might be. Some things kept you awake more than put you to sleep though, and Mandy’s cute little butt was going to be one of them.

Page 4

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Saturday morning dawned bright and clear, and Mandy faced her mother over the breakfast table. It was Saturday, and she would be off early today. “Will you be okay if I go to the lake for a few hours after work?” she asked. “I’d like to start working on my tan today, and I thought I’d see if Beverly wanted to go with me. Summer will be here before you know it.”

“Oh sure,” Sara replied. She waved her hand at Mandy, engrossed in the papers she was studying. “I have a lunch date with Randy myself.”

“Is he taking you out?”

Sara looked up. “Yes, to that new restaurant over in Mule Valley. I hear it’s a good one.”

“Well, have fun then,” Mandy chuckled as she got up and kissed her mother’s cheek. “I’m going to call Az and see where he is. He was supposed to pick me up this morning.”

“Your truck is in the driveway; he brought it home last night.”

“Aww—what a sweetheart,” Mandy cooed sarcastically. “Not!” She could hear her mother’s chuckle behind her as she grabbed her purse and cell phone and headed for the front door.

Mandy took great pleasure in thumbing her nose at Az’s jeep when she drove by the sheriff’s office, her anger still simmering beneath the surface. She’d checked her butt in the mirror this morning and it was still pink in a few spots. She grimaced at herself

in the mirror as she wiggled to get comfortable on the covered bench seat.

“He should be horsewhipped, right, Mags?” She muttered the question to the loyal Mags, who was lounging on the seat beside her. Mags woofed in agreement, and Mandy patted her head with a chuckle.

When the bell chimed over the market door at 11:00 a.m., Mandy looked up to see Az sauntering toward her. “Oh my, look at the time. I’m off for the day.” Breezing out from behind the counter, she headed for the back of the store, completely ignoring the advancing Az. She’d just been getting ready to leave for lunch and the lake anyway, so the timing was perfect to dodge him. Leave him pining after her, she thought with a snicker.

“Hold it right there.”

She fumed at the naked command in his deep voice, wondering if he had always sounded so stern, or if she was suddenly more sensitive to the nuance. Either way, she ignored it and kept walking. When her elbow was grasped and she was whirled around to face him, she stared at him in icy silence.

“I asked you to stop, Mandy, I want to talk to you.”

“No, you didn’t ask me, Az,” she pointed out. “You ordered me to stop. I don’t take orders from you.” She jerked her elbow out of his grasp, aware of her grandmother watching them from the service counter. The feel of his fingers lingered on her arm, stirring strange sensations in her lower regions. “What do you want?”

His eyes narrowed warily. “I wanted to see what you were doing tonight, and whether you would like to go to dinner with me. Sounds like you’re not interested. though.”

Mandy’s heart took an excited leap. She wanted to go with him, yet she didn’t. She

was still angry with him for spanking her. Right now, she wanted to make him squirm. “I hadn’t made plans today, beyond swimming and sunbathing at Possum Lake, but I’ll have to check and see what Mom is doing,” she replied coolly.

Az’s dark brows took a downward dive like two spears slanting in. “You’re not going to Possum Lake; I don’t want you up there right now.”

Mandy stared at him in disbelief. “Excuse me? What did you just say?”

“I said, I don’t want you going to Possum Lake today. I’ll let you know when you can go again. In the meantime, it’s off limits.”

Mandy heard the mocking tone in his voice and mentally started counting to ten. Not only was he telling her what to do again, but he was laughing at her while he was doing it. Not even deigning to answer, she spun on her heel and stalked off indignantly towards the bathroom before she completely lost her temper and started throwing canned green beans at his head.

“Mandy, wait, let me explain,” he said as he caught up to her again and whirled her around for the second time. “Something is going on at...”

A feminine voice interrupted him. “Az, I haven’t got all day. It’s now or never.”

Mandy looked down the aisle to see Courtney Beauchamp turning her back on them, her ample rear swaying back and forth in blue cotton shorts as she walked away. Mandy gritted her teeth and jerked her arm out of Az’s grasp, a stab of white-hot jealousy coursing through her. “You better catch up with your girlfriend before she leaves you behind,” she said snidely.

“I do have to go, Mandy,” he replied, sounding frustrated. “I’ll pick you up at 7:00 this evening.” He began to hurry away after the retreating girl, much to Mandy’s

disgust. "I'll explain about the lake later."

Mandy watched him go, seething at the fact that Courtney once again seemed to have Az on the run. She'd been after him all during high school, and he'd seemed to lap it up. "Big jerk," she muttered.

"The Beauchamps have lost some cattle," Grams spoke up. "I'm guessing she's in town on behalf of her brother to report it."

Mandy snorted and didn't reply. Courtney was as conniving as ever, and she didn't trust her. "Later, Grams."

When she drove out of the alley in her pickup, she saw them together in front of the store. Courtney was leaning against the white police truck, and Az had his arm resting protectively along the roof's edge, giving the impression of intimacy with the pretty, auburn-haired girl. His white teeth flashed in a grin at something she said, and she moved closer to him, putting her hand on his broad chest.

Mandy couldn't help it. Anger and jealousy flared, and she peeled rubber while pulling out onto the main street. He couldn't stand still long enough to explain his dictates to her, but he could make time to flirt with Courtney?

She was still furious when she pulled up in front of Beverly's blue, two-story Victorian home with white shutters and a concrete porch on Apple Street. Her friend was waiting at the end of the sidewalk. Mags woofed and stuck her head out the door when Beverly opened it.

"Move over, Mags, give me some room," the small, dark-haired girl said with a laugh, pushing the dog over. She took one look at Mandy's face and her eyes widened. "Wow...what has you in a tizzy?"

“Nothing,” Mandy muttered, sending her vehicle speeding towards the cutoff to Possum Lake. She’d be darned if she would listen to Az. If it wasn’t important enough to explain, then it wasn’t worth worrying about as far as she was concerned.

“Is it because Az made you leave the Saddle last night?”

Beverly was making herself comfortable with Mags lying her head in her lap. Mandy could feel her friend’s inquisitive brown eyes studying her. They had been good friends since they were kids.

“That’s only part of it,” she replied. “He had the nerve to come into the grocery store and tell me I couldn’t go to Possum Lake. How arrogant is that?”

“Why not? What did he say? Did he have a reason?”

“No, he was too interested in following Courtney Beauchamp out of the store to bother explaining,” Mandy snarled. “He said he would tell me tonight,” she added, turning her blinker on as she slowed for the turnoff to the lake.

“You two are going out tonight?”

“He thinks so, I don’t.”

“Why not? And what do you mean—he thinks so?” Beverly was trying to follow the gist of the conversation, but there were too many hidden innuendos that she didn’t understand.

“I mean, I wouldn’t go out with him now if he paid me,” Mandy snapped. “Not after his little exhibition with Courtney on Main Street.”

“What exhibition? What’s going on?”

Mandy looked over at the bewildered girl and realized that Beverly was trying to follow the gist of her remarks, but her bitter, short jabs at Az weren't gelling for her. So, she explained everything in detail that had been said and done, and in a calmer tone, as they made the short drive to the lake. When she finished, they were both silent for a few moments.

"Mandy, maybe there is a good reason for us not to come up here," Beverly replied, looking around uneasily as Mandy pulled her small truck into the gravel parking lot above the beach and butted the back tires up against a railroad tie.

"What reason could there possibly be? Other than him being bossy?" She flung open the truck door and dropped to the ground. "Are you coming? I brought lunch."

Beverly opened the door a bit hesitantly. "Well...there have been those cattle rustlings, you know. What if he knows something about it and it involves the lake area?"

"Like what?" Mandy scoffed, looking around her. They were the only people here as far as she could see.

Possum Lake was quite extensive, but this was the main beach and her favorite spot. It was a little early in the year for sunbathers and swimmers, so that would give them plenty of privacy to start their tans. Beverly's words had made her feel a little uneasy, though, so she surveyed the wooded edges of the forest carefully. The beach was in a broad open area with two parking lots. They could easily see if anyone were to drive up the road or walk out of the trees.

The dam was three hundred yards off to their right, the noise from the giant sluiceway giving off a gentle roar as the water fell through it for two hundred feet. A metal grate walkway stretched across the dam, and people could cross to the other side of the lake if they wanted to. The walkway was lined with six-foot, see-through metal walls on

both sides. It wasn't a place for small children to be alone, but adults could open the gate latch and walk out over the lake easily enough.

Beverly shrugged. "I don't know, but since he's working for the sheriff's office, it stands to reason they might know something."

"I don't see any reason why we shouldn't be here," Mandy replied stubbornly. "Besides, we have Mags. If anyone comes within a hundred yards of us, she will let us know about it."

Mags woofed in agreement and shot Beverly a doggie grin.

Beverly stared. "You know, sometimes I think that dog understands everything you say."

"Of course she does."

Mags just stared back.

The girls walked down to the beach and spread their towels out on the sand while Mags roamed around, sniffing and snuffling at everything in her path.

They were feeling relaxed as they stripped to their bikinis and chatted amiably while they ate their picnic lunch. After clearing away the mess, they had just lain down on their towels when Mags began barking and dancing at the water's edge. Mandy and Beverly both shot up, the dog's frantic movements making them uneasy again.

"What is it, Mags?" Mandy asked, running down to the dog and looking out over the water. She shaded the sun from her eyes with her hand as she searched for the source of Mag's concern.

“I think she is barking at that wooden thing in the water,” Beverly said, shading her eyes and pointing out towards the middle of the lake where something that looked like a round piece of wood was floating slowly towards the dam. “What is it?”

Mandy studied the wood, finally realizing that the majority of it must be underwater. It was slowly spiraling in a circle as it floated. A small wave bobbed it sideways, and when part of it popped up from beneath the water, she recognized it. “It’s a barrel.”

Mags sniffed the air, whining and running along the shore, following the slow progress of the barrel.

The girls followed her, also intrigued by something that seemed to be floating out of the barrel from a hole in the side.

Mags sniffed the air and barked, putting her front paws in the water along the edge as she paced herself with the moving barrel.

As they came closer to the dam, the lake narrowed, and the barrel moved in closer toward the shore. Another fifty feet and it would enter the downward pull of the sluices.

“Come here, Mags.” Mandy grabbed Mags’s collar, worried that the frantic dog would jump in the water. It was at that point that the barrel twirled again in the faster moving water and let go of the protuberance poking out from the hole. When the object popped fully up, the girls let out a gasp.

“Oh my gosh! It’s part of a cow’s leg with the hoof attached,” Beverly shrieked. “That is so gross!”

Mandy was having a difficult time holding onto Mag’s collar, but they watched as the tumbling barrel took in more lake water now that the bovine leg had unplugged the

hole. When it turned upside down, she could see the letters stamped across the lid in bright fluorescent green.

GENETICO .

Then it disappeared into the sluice where it bobbed against the rush of the water behind it, trying to push the barrel through a too small opening.

The girls watched in horror as it burst open. Mags too-small, but she stopped pulling at her collar. For an instant, what was parts of a cow, including the head and the escaped leg, bounced and bobbed against the sluices before being inevitably sucked in.

The clang of the gate banging shut broke the stillness of horror that had settled over them at the macabre sight, and the girls looked up to see a man just coming off the dam, headed in their direction.

And he was carrying a rifle.

“Let’s get out of here,” Beverly squealed, turning and sprinting for the truck.

Both girls were spooked as they raced towards their beach gear. Mags was barking and running around them as if it were all a game. It was no game to them, though. Mandy was shaking as she grabbed her bag and ran for the truck, not even making the time to grab her towel.

When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw the man had stopped and was watching them. She clambered into the cab, sand and all, slammed the door locks down, and shoved the key into the ignition, her fingers shaking.

“Go, Mandy, go,” Beverly urged, her face as white as a sheet. “Go, before he starts

shooting.”

Mandy shoved the pickup in reverse and spun out, then wheeled around and headed out of the parking lot, going for Possum Lake Road. The man could have almost intercepted them if he had chosen to, but he just stood there watching them. That made her feel a small bit of relief. She didn’t want to run over somebody, but she would if she had to.

As they came level with the man, Mandy glanced over at him. He was too far away to see his features clearly, and he had on sunglasses and a ballcap, but she could have sworn it was Sam Pickering. She’d never seen Sam with a ballcap before, though. Besides, he’d sworn that Genetico had nothing to do with the missing cattle.

Was he lying?

“Where did he come from?” Beverly’s voice was still high-pitched, her body shaking as she voiced the question. “He wasn’t there when we pulled up.”

“He must have parked across the dam,” Mandy replied. “And he could have been on the catwalk, and we wouldn’t have noticed him. Maybe he was standing there watching that barrel, too.”

“Geez, Mandy, that was gross. We have to tell the sheriff. What is Genetico doing to those poor cows? Are they doing horrible experiments and then chopping them up? And why are they putting them in barrels and dumping them in the lake?”

“I don’t know, Beverly.” Mandy chewed on her lip. Az must have known something about the cattle’s disappearances and was trying to warn her of possible danger, but she’d completely ignored him—because of Courtney.

The seat found a sore spot on her bottom when she hit a pothole, and she winced. It

reminded her of what had happened last night. How would he feel when he found out she had gone to the lake after he told her not to? Especially after what just happened? She fidgeted uneasily. He had better not try to spank her again.

“I wonder if they’ve chopped up any people and put them in barrels?” Beverly’s imagination was working overtime. She was prone to panic attacks under extreme stress. This situation could certainly qualify.

“I doubt it,” Mandy scoffed uneasily, trying to be matter-of-fact. “There must be some other explanation. Sam said Genetico wasn’t doing anything with cows.”

“And you believe him?”

Mandy shot her a glance. “I don’t see any reason not to, Beverly. Calm down, will you?”

“I’m trying, I’m trying. But oh, my gawd...we could have been barrel meat if that man had caught us.”

Mandy rolled her eyes, but she let Beverly ramble on. It would relieve her stress. Her thoughts were still on Az, although she was listening to her friend with half an ear. Az seemed to have changed so much, and she didn’t know him anymore.

She realized the spanking he’d given her at fourteen wasn’t anything like the one he’d given her last night. She also realized that the Az she’d known all her life would never have kissed her like that, either. Chances were, this new Az might spank her for disobeying him. Her stomach danced at the thought.

They were driving along the west edge of Az’s ranch on Possum Lake Road when they spotted another vehicle heading their way. It looked like one of the police trucks, like the truck Az had been in earlier.

Mandy's heart dropped into her stomach, and her pulse picked up. When the pickup drew near, it slowed and turned into a stop sideways across the road, causing Mandy to have to slow down and stop.

"Oh no, that's Az," Beverly squealed unnecessarily. "And he doesn't look very happy, Mandy. Boy, I'd sure hate to be in your shoes right now."

Beverly's comments did nothing to ease the cold feeling in the pit of Mandy's stomach as Az stalked around the front of his vehicle, his long legs eating up the ground. He looked very dangerous suddenly, and she felt the cowardly urge to drive away. Too bad he'd parked across the road; she couldn't just leave him in her dust.

Instead, she opened her door and slid on shaky knees to the ground, her chin lifting bravely as she walked around the front of her truck to meet him. Mags danced excitedly around her, then ran to Az to poke her nose inside his hand. His large hand, she silently noted, remembering the sting of those lean fingers on her tender buttocks.

"Az, you'll never guess what we saw up at the lake," Beverly gushed, running around her side of the truck.

Mandy was relieved when Az's piercing gaze settled on her friend. She felt like she could breathe again...for the moment.

"And what might that be?"

The question was low and silky, its deep male tones sliding over her nerve endings, and Mandy shivered involuntarily. She could sense the held in anger. It emanated from him like a seeping cauldron.

In short, he was furious.

AFTER BEVERLY'S EXCITED explanation , Az's stony face softened slightly when he realized how scared the girls had been. He reached out and put his long arms around them both, relieved that nothing bad had happened. The fact that it could have made him sick with fear for Mandy. There was no point in belaboring the fact that they shouldn't have been there; he held Mandy responsible for that and would settle with her later. Beverly had always gone along with her friend.

"I'm glad neither of you was hurt, but this is a break in the case. I want you girls to follow me into town to speak with the sheriff. He needs to know this." He turned to Mandy. "Are you going to be okay to drive?" He could feel the trembling in her body where his long arm stayed around her waist.

"Yes, I'm fine," Mandy replied stiffly.

He leaned down and whispered privately in her ear. "We are going to talk about this tonight, little girl."

An involuntary shiver shook her frame.

Good. He wanted her to be worried.

Fifteen minutes later, they were all seated in the sheriff's office, explaining what had happened. Sheriff Dorney rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You say Sam Pickering was up there, Mandy? Did he make any threatening gestures?"

"No. The man was carrying a rifle, but he didn't act threatening, and I can't swear it was Sam," Mandy replied. "I'm just saying it looked like him."

“He started towards us.” Beverly leaned forward in her excitement. “It scared me to death. I thought he was after us.”

“He could have been—which is exactly why I didn’t want you girls going to the lake in the first place,” Az inserted sternly. “After Skeeter Davis pulled a rifle on my brothers and me last night, I was worried. Since someone is dumping up there, like he said, it could be more than just cow parts.”

Beverly protested. “Hey, don’t blame me. Mandy never told me you said to stay away until after we were already on our way.”

Sheriff Dorney looked directly at Mandy. “I don’t want you making any more deliveries to Genetico until I’ve checked this out.”

“All right, Sheriff,” Mandy assured him. “I’ll let Grams know.” She stood up. “Are we finished here? I need to go home and get a shower. I’m dropping sand everywhere.” She scrunched up her small nose.

Mags stood up as soon as Mandy made a move.

Az put his hand beneath Mandy’s elbow. “I’ll see you girls to the truck.” His hand was very possessive as he all but frog-marched Mandy down the hallway and out the door, much to her indignation. He could feel the tenseness emanating from her. Too bad, she would probably be a little more upset tonight.

When they arrived at the driver’s door of Mandy’s pickup, he placed his hand on the door handle, keeping her from opening it. Once Beverly was safely inside, he asked softly. “Why did you disobey me this morning, Mandy?”

Her eyebrow shot up in disbelief. “Since when are you my boss? You’re not my keeper, Az Newcomb, and I don’t have to answer to you.”

His eyes narrowed to slits. “You didn’t listen, and look what happened.”

“If you hadn’t been so busy with Courtney Beauchamp, maybe you would have had time to explain why I shouldn’t have gone. As it is...don’t expect blind obedience from me, Az. Even if you had the right to tell me what to do, which you don’t, I don’t take orders very well.” She looked down her small, slender nose at him.

“Mandy...”

His words were cut off when a black Land Rover suddenly whipped around them and screeched to a halt at the curb. The door swung open, and Sam Pickering stepped out of the truck, holding a deadly-looking rifle.

“Sam!” Mandy’s shocked voice came out in a squeak as Az roughly shoved her behind him. Sam wasn’t wearing a cap, but the sunglasses and red t-shirt matched the man at the lake.

Mags woofed and ran to Sam, looking for the customary biscuit he would give her when she saw him during their deliveries. He chuckled, reached into his jeans pocket, and brought one out for her. He held the rifle pointed down at his side, a sardonic grin on his handsome face. “Relax, cowboy, I’m not here to shoot anybody, I’m here to see the sheriff.”

Mandy stepped out from behind Az, and he let her. Mags hadn’t seen a threat; she knew Sam, but he didn’t care for that.

“Was it you at the lake a little while ago, Sam?” Mandy asked.

“Yes, it was. Why did you run off like that? I just wanted to talk to you.” He looked quizzically at her.

“I...we...that is,” Mandy stammered, her face turning pink.

“She did the right thing,” Az interrupted. “After what she and Beverly saw go into the sluice, they had a right to be nervous.”

Sam frowned. “Yes, I saw it too. I got a message to meet a man there, but no one showed up. I was still waiting when I noticed the barrel because Mags was barking at it. I think I was supposed to see it, though.” He patted Mags on her silky head as she nosed at his jean pocket. “No more, girl. You got the last one.”

“What do you mean?” Az asked, ignoring his jealousy over Mags.

“I got a call this morning, a little before 3:00 a.m. A male voice told me that Genetico was doing experiments on cows, and he had the proof. He told me to meet him at the dam in the middle of the crosswalk at 8:00 a.m., and he would show me.”

He glanced down at the rifle. “Naturally, I brought some protection in case he was some kind of kook.”

“You shouldn’t have tried to meet him alone.” Az frowned again.

“Do you realize how many weird calls we get about the missing cattle?” Sam asked impatiently. “Nine out of ten of them are crank calls. That’s what I figured this was, but I decided to check it out anyway. I wasn’t expecting to find anything.

Naturally, I was surprised when Mandy and her friend showed up, since the voice on the phone was male.” He grinned at Mandy and eyed her appreciatively. “You look great in a bikini, sweetheart. If you ever change your mind, let me know.”

Az shot him a freezing glare. “You better go talk to the sheriff. Since I’m helping him with this investigation, I’ll be back in there in a minute.”

He watched as Sam sauntered away, and then turned back to Mandy. “You go on home and get your shower. I’ll be at your house at 7:00 tonight to take you to dinner.”

Mandy lifted her nose in the air. “There you go again, telling me instead of asking. When will you learn, Az Newcomb?”

Az leaned in close—so close she could see the dark specks in his turquoise eyes. “Someone will be learning a lesson tonight, and it isn’t me. Guess who that leaves?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:40 pm

“Are you threatening me?” Mandy asked.

“Without a doubt.”

She couldn’t breathe. With anger almost choking her, Mandy sent him her best icy frown guaranteed to curl the leaves on a philodendron at ten paces. “Don’t bother picking me up.”

“I assure you, it’s no bother.”

“You’re not spanking me,” she hissed.

“Wrong.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but he was already moving away, his back to her as he skirted the front of the truck and bounded up on the sidewalk. She was livid. Yanking open the door of her pickup truck, Mandy waited for Mags to jump in. Then she slid herself in and slammed the door shut behind her.

“What was that all about? Why did Sam have a gun? What did Az say?” The questions tumbled out of Beverly’s mouth, one after the other.”

“Nothing!”

“Okay—if you say so.”

“I’m sorry, Beverly,” she apologized, “but Az makes me so mad I could scream.” She

banged her small fist against the steering wheel and winced as she drove toward Beverly's house on Apple Street.

Mags sat up and whined, her tongue licking Mandy on the arm.

"It's okay, Mags, I'm just mad." She patted the Golden Retriever soothingly on the head.

"Just out of curiosity, why are you so mad?"

Mandy's glance slid sideways to Beverly and back to the road. She'd never kept any secrets from her best friend before, but she didn't know how to tell her that Az had spanked her—and intended to do it again.

Beverly was living with her boyfriend, Wiley, and the couple had set a wedding date. Impulsively, she asked, "Beverly, does Wiley expect you to do everything he tells you? I mean—is he on any kind of a male macho trip?"

"What do you mean?" Beverly's voice was guarded, and Mandy glanced over at her in surprise.

"I mean, if you had been me this morning, and Wiley was Az, what would he do?"

"Well," Beverly hedged. "Wiley and I are engaged. I didn't even know you and Az were dating."

"We've known each other forever, Beverly. He's been bossing me around forever, too, and I'm done with it," she boasted with a bravado she didn't truly feel. "He did ask me to dinner."

Bev stared skeptically. "So, are you dating?"

“I don’t know what we are. Anyway, that doesn’t matter. Just tell me what Wiley would do.”

“If I tell you, do you promise not to say anything? To anybody?” Beverly’s voice was pleading.

“Of course, I won’t. You know me better than that.”

Beverly flushed and shifted uncomfortably on the seat. “Okay, then, I guess I can tell you. Although you have to promise me you won’t think I’m weird.”

“No, I won’t think you are weird. Beverly, we’ve known each other all our lives, for heaven’s sake. What is so bad that you’re afraid to tell me?”

Mandy whipped the pickup over to the curb to park in front of her friend’s house. She watched curiously, waiting for her to continue.

“We have sort of an agreement, I guess you would call it.” She flushed slightly, the color creeping up the white column of her slender throat. “Oh, hell—there’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just say it. If I did what you did, Wiley would put me over his knee and spank me.”

“You’re kidding,” Mandy squealed. She had begun to suspect it might be that with all of Beverly’s hesitation, but the revelation had shocked her anyway. “And you say you agree to that?”

“You can’t say anything to anybody.” Beverly stared defiantly at her. “You promised, Mandy.”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t tell a soul.” Her voice lowered a few notches. “That’s what Az intends to do to me,” she confessed.

It was Beverly's turn to look shocked. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"I wish I were. I can't get over how much Az has changed. He's not the same person he used to be. I don't think I like this new one any more than I did the old one either."

"He spanked you last night, didn't he?" Beverly guessed, grinning.

"Yes, damn him." She threw her shoulders back and banged her fist on the steering wheel. "But he isn't going to get the chance tonight, because I'm not going to be home when he comes to pick me up."

"Mandy!"

"I'm not. He has no right, Beverly. Good grief. At least you and Wiley are engaged and have an understanding. I guess that kind of... sort of... gives him some rights, doesn't it?"

"He thinks so," Beverly replied with a giggle.

"Well, I'm not putting up with this macho crap. I'm going to be somewhere else tonight."

"Where?"

"Anywhere but home," Mandy vowed fervently.

"A bit of advice for you—don't run. They don't like it when you run from them, and it only makes it worse when they finally catch you." Beverly smiled knowingly.

"I can't believe you agree to it."

“There are some super side benefits that we both enjoy.”

Mandy stared at Bev as if she had sprouted horns. “What sort of benefits? I can’t think of a single benefit to getting your butt whacked by a hard-as-a-rock hand.”

“Famous last words,” Beverly replied dryly as she slid out of the cab. “Take my advice and stay put. Get it over with.”

Mandy thought about it as she drove home, but she didn’t intend to follow her friend’s advice. She wasn’t going to sit around waiting for Az to come and punish her like a recalcitrant child. Glumly, she mourned the chance for a nice dinner and maybe some toe-tingling kisses, but she had to stand her ground.

She wasn’t a child—she was a woman—with rights.

Besides, he was flirting with Courtney Beauchamp. “Let him go spank Courtney, Mags,” she huffed to her canine pal.

Mags woofed in agreement.

“Crazy Courtney would probably love it.” She snickered at the thought of Courtney yelling and pleading as she got her comeuppance, but a sliver of jealousy shot through her. Who was she kidding? She suddenly found that she didn’t like Courtney being anywhere near Az.

What was wrong with her anyway? All her feelings were upside down and swirling around in confusion, with one aggravating male at the center. She grumbled into the house with Mags trailing her and wagging her tail in full agreement with everything she said.

S HERIFF DORNEY AND Az stood gazing at the calmer waters of the overflow basin, while men in waders assembled what was left of the cow parts and the barrel that had burst open.

“Nothing big would have gone on downstream, not with the grating in place,” observed the sheriff.

“This is pretty weird, Sheriff. Why would you chop up a cow and put it in a barrel?” Az watched as various gory pieces of a cow were brought to the banks.

“Look at this, Az,” yelled one of the sheriff’s deputies. He brought over a piece of cowhide to show the men. The brand on it was an arch with the letter G in the middle.

It was Gramp’s brand.

“That must be one of the steers we lost last night,” Az said, eyeing it with distaste. Hugh and Aaron told him they’d lost three before he left this morning. And it wasn’t the first time, either.

“Probably,” the deputy replied. “These remains are not rotted at all. It looks like a fresh kill.”

“I’m noticing something here, boys,” the sheriff pointed out, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “There doesn’t appear to be much meat. You’ve brought up some horns, hide, and feet, but no real chunks of meat. Why do you suppose that is?”

“Maybe it’s in another barrel,” suggested the lanky deputy.

“Or maybe someone kept the meat,” Az observed.

Sheriff Dorney nodded. “Or if what Sam Pickering is saying is true, then maybe

someone is butchering the cows and trying to blame Genetico Industries by putting the remains in their barrels.”

“But why?” Az asked, his brows wrinkling.

“Any number of reasons.” The sheriff tipped his hat back. “It could be a disgruntled employee wanting to get even. Or it might be someone butchering the cows for food and trying to throw us off the scent. Things to keep in mind at this point.”

Az stared at the hide in his hands. “I guess that could be why the cattle haven’t shown up anywhere. But who would do it? And how? You can’t butcher a cow just anywhere.”

“I think we need to have some divers check out the lake, for starters. Whoever called Sam this morning knew what was going on. And if Skeeter was telling the truth about dumping up here, then there may be more barrels in there. If there are, and the meat is gone, then someone is eating them. Or, selling the meat packaged and ready to eat, which would make them dang near impossible to track. Twenty-seven head of cattle on the hoof don’t just disappear into thin air, though. They have to be somewhere.”

“I think we should talk to Skeeter Davis again,” Az decided. “He might have seen something last night, considering the crazy old coot took a shot at us.”

“Agreed.” The sheriff shaded his gaze as he looked at the horizon where the sun was slowly beginning to sink. “It’s time to call it a night. I’ll arrange for the divers and meet you at the office in the morning. Then I’ll go by Skeeters.”

A S AZ RETURNED TO HIS truck, his thoughts returned to Mandy. They’d never been far from her all day, and the coming chat he intended to have with her had been

weighing heavily on his mind. It was time to finish the day's business and head her way.

The girl was as headstrong as she had ever been, maybe even more so as a woman. She was beautiful, with all the curves a man could want in all the right places. She needed her butt blistered for ignoring him today, though. The girls had been in real danger. Rustlers weren't known for leaving witnesses.

It was 7:00 p.m. on the dot when Az knocked on the front door of Mandy's ranch-style brick home, the memories of the many times he had crossed that threshold washing over him. The evening air was silky as it blew across his face, the smell of something cooking inside filling his nostrils. It smelled like beef stew, and his stomach rumbled.

The house was set slightly on the outskirts of town, but only about fifteen minutes from the grocery store Mandy's grandmother owned. Petunia Collier had bought it from the Benson family several years ago, and Mandy had worked for her grandmother since she was old enough to help.

Az still remembered the day Mandy's parents had been hit by a grain truck on I-70 when their car had stalled out. It left her without her father, and left her mother in a wheelchair.

Mandy had only been fourteen when the accident happened, but it had aroused his protective instincts. And looking out for her had become a permanent habit. The next fall, she started high school. Once she finally decided she didn't have a crush on him, they'd settled into an uneasy friendship. After he was out of high school and attending the nearby junior college for his associate's degree in criminal justice, he was extra careful to keep tabs on her so that the randy juniors and seniors of Mockingbird Hollow High didn't take advantage of her. She hadn't appreciated it much, but he knew how it felt to lose a dad, and he knew she was hurting just as

much as he was.

Glancing over at the driveway, he didn't see Mandy's red pickup parked in its usual place, but Randy Berenger's Lincoln town car was in the driveway. He must be visiting Mrs. Merriweather.

"Well, hello, Az." The door opened, and Mrs. Merriweather was there in her wheelchair, smiling. "Can I help you with something? Mandy isn't here."

"Not here?" Az glanced at his watch. It was two minutes after 7:00 p.m. "Where is she? We were supposed to go to dinner."

Mrs. Merriweather was a fine-looking woman, and Az could see where Mandy got her looks from. Unlike her daughter, Sara had always been sweet and polite to him.

"She never said anything about having a date," Sara replied, looking puzzled.

"Did she say where she was going?" Az clenched his hat in his fist, his irritation starting to simmer.

"No, she didn't...wait. I overheard her having a conversation with Beverly on the phone earlier. Maybe she went over there. She just told me she was going out for a while and would be in early."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll just go over and check on her." He jammed his black hat down on his head and stalked towards his old brown and white Dodge pickup. It was embarrassing to show up for a date and find the girl wasn't there. It didn't make him feel any happier towards Mandy for running away from him. Growling low in his throat, he jumped into the truck. "You can run, Mandy, but you can't hide."

“I S THERE A PROBLEM , Sara? Is that Az I heard you talking to?”

The rich, deep tones of Randy Berenger came from behind her, and Sara turned her chair around to face the tall, distinguished rancher. “It seems Az had a date with Mandy, but Mandy isn’t here. Isn’t that odd?”

Randy chuckled. “I didn’t know they were dating.”

“They aren’t—or at least they weren’t. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Well, I did hear that Az took her away from Sam Pickering last night at the Saddle. So, maybe they are a couple now.”

“Oh, you know how small towns are—they gossip about everything,” Sara retorted. “It’s not like Mandy to avoid Az. Lord knows I’ve often wished he and Mandy would get together, but they’ve always just been friends. Mandy always called him her buddy, or her big brother.”

Sara really liked Az and his family, and had always thought he would make a good husband for Mandy. Her headstrong daughter was used to doing exactly as she pleased and needed a firm hand for guidance in the future. She took too many risks.

Randy nodded. “I’ve always liked Az, and I agree with you. However, from a man’s point of view, I’d say he’s been more than just a big brother. There’s something behind that friendship that’s been on simmer all these years, according to Evan.”

“Sheriff Dorney, you mean? Randy, have you two men been gossiping?” She scolded him with a laugh.

Randy wagged his dark brows at her. “Not gossiping, just observing. Evan swears Az has been in love with Mandy all his life, but he just hasn’t acted on it yet.”

Sara's eyebrow arched upward. "Really? Shame on you two for speculating about my daughter."

Randy leaned down, his hands on her hands on the wheelchair handles, to look her in the face. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed, Sara Merriweather. Because if you do, that means you're fibbing to me. And you know how I feel about that."

Sara laughed. "You know me too well, Randy. All right, yes. I've noticed that Az does seem unusually attached as a protector through the years. But that doesn't mean they are in love."

"True," he conceded, then went behind her to take the handles of her wheelchair. "It doesn't mean they aren't either."

She shrugged her shoulders and allowed Randy to push her back to their card game. No point in worrying about it. Mandy would tell her what was going on in her own good time. Secretly, she really hoped it was true.

W HEN AZ TURNED DOWN Apple Street and saw Mandy's red pickup truck in Beverly and Wiley's driveway, he hesitated. Now that his anger had cooled, he wondered if he should pursue this or just let it go. It was obvious that she didn't want to see him tonight, knowing she was in trouble with him.

He pulled over to the side of the road and put his truck in gear, letting the engine idle while he thought. The kisses they'd shared yesterday had changed everything. So had the spanking he'd given her last night. He was suddenly aching, blazingly aware of her as a woman, and he wanted it all. He wanted to cherish her, protect her, bury himself deep within her, and make her his. But did he have the right to enter into a serious relationship with her this soon?

He sighed as he thought, his anger at her avoiding him seeping away. It mattered little if she were running from a spanking—he could catch her if he wanted to. If she was running from him, that bothered him. Did she care for him at all? Or was she just experimenting with that kiss? Was she playing with him as she had been with Sam Pickering? Worse yet, was he now a candidate in her silly quest to lose her virginity?

He didn't like the thought of that.

Finally, making a decision, he flipped a U-turn and sent the pick-up back towards the Golden G. Maybe it was better this way. He was still in school. He and his brothers shared the ranch Gramps had left them with his mom. He wouldn't be able to afford a home of his own for a while.

Feeling miserable, he turned onto Possum Lake Road and headed towards the dam. He used to go up there all the time when he was a kid, just to think. The moon was bright, and the stars twinkled, seeming to mock his loneliness as he parked in the shadows, seeking the darkness like a balm to his troubled thoughts.

If he were lucky, maybe a dumper would show up, and he could impress Evan with his stakeout skills. They were investigating the lake after all, but he didn't see any sign of the sheriff or a deputy anywhere. With a sigh, he settled back in his seat.

In the vast wooded area surrounding the lake, the Whippoorwills chorused their three-syllable song. “ Whip-por-WILL...whip-por-WILL .” Emphasis on the third syllable. He rolled down his window to listen. Whippoorwill County and Mockingbird Hollow were named after the full-throated little warblers.

Tonight, they reminded him of his granny, as he called his grandmother. She and his mom both liked to sing the old song, ‘Mockingbird Hill’, to him and his brothers, and basically, anyone who would listen when he was growing up. He hadn't realized how much he missed hearing his granny belt it out.

The song was based on a Swedish song called 'Life in the Finnish Woods' . Popular fifties singers Patti Page, Les Paul, and Mary Ford made it popular around 1951, but his granny always preferred the Slim Whitman version with his yodeling included. Boy, could she yodel back in the day.

A grin curved his lips as memories of Mandy singing along with Granny on a hot summer day several years ago drifted into his thoughts.

Tra-la-la Tweedledee-dee-dee it gives me a thrill,

To wake up in the morning to the Mockingbirds' trill.

Tra-la-la, Tweedledee-dee-dee there's peace and goodwill,

You're welcome as the flowers on Mockingbird Hill.

As he thought about her, he began to realize that a lot of his best memories centered around the young girl he had decided to protect and take care of. Maybe Evan was right, perhaps he had been in love with the little brat all along.

But was she in love with him? That was the 64-dollar question.

M ANDY LISTENED WITH half an ear, expecting Az to knock on Beverly's door at any time. That is, if he wanted to find her. The knot of apprehension in her stomach had been like a cold ball all evening, and she wished he would just come and get it over with.

The minutes ticked by like hours, and soon it was 9:00 p.m. Mandy put her cards down and went to the kitchen to get another soda, restlessly staring out the window as

she drank. There wasn't much to see. The night was quiet, and nothing moved in the moonlight.

"Do you think he will come?" Beverly walked in and stood beside her, looking out the window.

Mags put her paws up on the windowsill to survey the moonlit street, then woofed and hopped down. Nothing was going on out there that she could see.

"I could have sworn he would, but now I'm not sure. Maybe he was so mad when he went to my house and I wasn't home, that he just left."

"I don't know what to think either," Beverly replied, shaking her head. "I would have bet he would come."

Mandy felt a painful tug at her heart, but she pushed it away. "I guess if he doesn't care, he won't bother," she added wistfully.

On an impulse, she picked up the phone and dialed her home number, getting her mother on the line. When she found out that Az had been there to pick her up at 7:00 p.m. and left, she carefully put the receiver down, trying to stifle the disappointment. Her mother had suggested she might be at Bev's, but he hadn't come after her.

"I...I think I'll go home and get in an early night, Beverly," Mandy said painfully. "I'm tired after all the excitement of today."

Beverly nodded in sympathy and waved goodbye to her friend as she pulled out of the driveway.

A few minutes later, Mandy slipped into her bedroom with barely a few words to her mother and Randy, declaring tiredness and an early night. She lay back on her bed

with Mags at her feet and stared at the moon out her window. If she hadn't wanted to be with Az tonight, then why did she feel so bereft and lonely? She should be happy that she wasn't with him. That he wasn't bossing her around and spanking her.

It was what she'd wanted—wasn't it?

She turned on her side as tears welled up unbidden and unwelcome. Sniffling, she turned her head into the pillow and cried.

Mags whined and crawled on her belly up to where she could lick the tears from Mandy's face. Mandy put her arm around her faithful friend and finally fell into a troubled sleep.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:40 pm

A z woke with a start , instantly awake and searching for the source of whatever had awakened him. The silence was deafening, the Whippoorwills' calls absent in the night air. Glancing at the lighted dial on his watch, he realized it was almost 11:00 p.m. He must have fallen asleep.

Some stakeout expert he was.

With a wry grimace, his eyes automatically searched the shoreline, his senses on alert.

Finally, he spotted a movement off to his left, near the top end of the lake on the opposite side. Getting his binoculars out of the glove box, he trained them in on the movement until he realized that it was a man rolling something off the back of a pickup truck. He swore under his breath when he realized it was a barrel. It had to be weighted because it sank immediately when it hit the water. Another one soon followed.

He watched as the man lifted the back gate of the pick-up so he could read the license plate. Unfortunately, there was no back license plate, and he huffed in frustration. He watched until it pulled away, then got out of his truck.

Working his way along the edge of the woods beside the road, he made his way to the spot where the lanes on either side of the lake converged into Possum Lake Road. Whoever it was would have to come past here to leave the lake area; there was no other way out. He waited in the shadows, his ears straining to hear the sound of an approaching truck engine, but it didn't come.

“What the hell is going on?” he muttered to himself. He glanced at his watch again. It was almost midnight. The dumper should have been here by now—if he was coming.

Tired of waiting, Az began hiking along the forest edge and up the other side of the lake. It took him about thirty minutes on foot, but he finally reached the upper side of the lake where the truck had been dumping.

Cautiously, he looked around but didn’t see the mysterious truck. Walking to the water’s edge, he stared down into the dark, murky water, but saw nothing. Whatever the man had dumped, it must have been heavy. According to the ranger services, this area was over forty feet down, and the bank was steep. You would need to be a good swimmer to dive in at this point. Needless to say, it was discouraged with warning signs.

Puzzled, he followed the tracks of the truck around and back towards the picnic area, carefully keeping in the shadows. How had he missed them? Even if they’d gone on around the lake and past his truck, he would still have seen them when they came onto Possum Lake Road. Another twenty feet and the answers were staring him in the face. “The old logging road. I’d forgotten about that,” he muttered.

That road hadn’t been used for years, except for kids doing off-roading in their four-wheel drives. Some of the more enterprising kids would even go over the mountain and down into the other side of Mockingbird Hollow, but it was a rough ride. Not too many wanted to risk tearing up their trucks for a lark.

Looking at his watch again, he decided to head back to his truck and get the sheriff first thing in the morning. There wasn’t much he could do now. Whoever had been here was long gone.

He was taking the shortcut across the dam catwalk when he heard the sound of an engine coming up Possum Lake Road. He stopped and watched, his heartbeat

quickenings. Who would be coming up here at this time of night? Especially if the dumpers were using the logging road?

When Mandy's red pick-up crawled out of the woods, his breath came out in a whoosh. A fierce surge of anger and disbelief pulsed through his body. What in the name of Hades did she think she was doing? Especially after the scare she and Beverly had today?

His booted feet clanked on the metal catwalk as his long strides took him across the dam. By the time he reached the other side and opened the gate, Mandy had parked beside his pickup and was walking down to the beach with Mags.

He could hardly believe his eyes.

After what he had told her earlier, she had the nerve to walk on the beach? Alone? And at 12:30 in the morning?

Furious, he slammed the metal gate shut behind him and stalked towards her. He realized he'd scared her when he saw her hand fly to her throat. Good. She'd better be scared, because when he got through with her, she wouldn't be sitting for a week.

M ANDY'S HEART LEAPED in her breast at the sight of Az coming towards her in the moonlight. Pissed was a milk toast kind of phrase to describe the look on his face, and she recoiled in dread.

It was almost a pagan dance in the moonlight on the deserted beach as he stalked her like a hunter. In accompaniment to his dance step, she retreated, an unconscious plea in her eyes for the beast not to devour her. She wished she were back in her bed, even though she hadn't been able to sleep.

Her troubled conscious had sent her to the Golden G, wanting to make the wrong she had done him right somehow, but he hadn't been there. Recalling that he often went to the lake when they were kids to think, she had driven up here, not intending to stay if she didn't see him. Surely, nothing could happen to her in the safety of her truck and with Mags along to protect her. But when she'd seen his truck parked and empty, she'd decided to look for him.

But holy crap!

Who was going to protect her from the pagan advancing on her? His features appeared carved from burnished mahogany in the moonlight, and the look on those features would have convinced a sacrificial victim that all hope was gone.

Backing up, Mandy didn't see the piece of driftwood that lay in her path. She stumbled awkwardly over it and went sprawling on her backside. In a flash, Az was standing over her, his fists on his hips. She instinctively put her hand up to protect herself, to stave off the inevitable.

"Az—no."

"No, what, Mandy?"

The voice was low and deadly, and Mandy began to shiver. "D-don't," she quavered. "P-please, Az."

She had somehow awakened a fierce warrior bent on punishment, and she knew exactly what he was going to do. Without a doubt she was about to get her butt spanked like she'd never been spanked before.

Mags whined and licked her face, then set off toward the water to investigate. Her dog was going to be no help at all.

Traitor!

A Z STARED STERNLY DOWN at his woman. For she was his woman, there was no denying it any longer, and his woman was in sore need of chastisement. With a growl that would have made his ancestors' hearts swell with pride, he reached down and pulled her to her feet. From there, it was an easy step to tuck her beneath his long arm, her body bent, and place her cringing buttocks at a convenient angle.

With a ruthless swipe of his right hand, her cotton shorts went down her thighs, dragging her dusty rose panties with them. He didn't even hesitate to appreciate the sight of the pale globes glimmering in the moonlight, he just began to paddle the errant backside laid open to his view.

The sound of the spanking echoed, ricocheting across the lake and back again as the slaps on bare skin resounded over and over. He took no pity on the shrieking girl as his hard palm worked up and down both thighs and across the rounded bottom like a master painter at work.

Disobeying him once when he'd warned her off was bad enough, but twice? Especially with the full knowledge of the danger the second time around? Putting herself in danger on purpose was completely unacceptable. His fear for her made him implacable, and he was determined to see that she thought twice before disobeying him again when it came to her safety.

"I 'M SORRY, AZ! I'M sorry—I'm sorry," Mandy yelped, helpless as his long arm held her firmly in place and bent over. She danced and yelled louder as the pain and burning built to an unbearable level, and she was afraid he was never going to stop.

Mags barked and ran around them both until she finally lay on the ground near the bench and placed her paws over her eyes.

“Az—please stop!” Her pleas seemed to fall on deaf ears, and she finally burst into tears, unable to take any more without crying.

Az stopped, but only for a moment. He scolded her as he marched her over to the wooden bench by the trash bin. “I am your keeper, little girl. I always have been—I always will be. You might as well get that through your stubborn little head. You belong to me.” Sitting down, he pulled her across his left thigh and hooked his long right leg over hers.

Mags whined and moved out of the way as Az invaded her bench, but she didn’t growl at him.

“No, Az!” Mandy struggled wildly, but her struggles were useless against his superior strength. She put both her hands back to cover her buttocks, and surprisingly enough, he didn’t move them.

“Why did you come up here, Mandy? Especially after I told you to stay away from here?” He rested his hand on her upturned palms.

“I was looking for you,” she sobbed. “I felt bad about standing you up tonight, and I wanted to apologize. When I didn’t see your truck in your driveway, I thought you might have come here. Like when we were kids.”

She talked fast, hoping to stave off any more spanking of her flaming cheeks. They ached and throbbed terribly, and she was in a compromising position at the moment.

“Did you know where I was before you got out of your truck?” The question was snapped out.

“Well...no,” she confessed. “I figured you were here somewhere, though.

He began spanking her thighs just beneath her buttocks, lecturing as he spoke. “And I might have been lying dead here somewhere, or at the mercy of someone. You might have walked into a trap, or any number of things.”

“But you’re not dead,” Mandy screamed, her hands flailing in a vain effort to reach the area he was ruthlessly paddling. That sensitive area where the buttock meets the thigh was particularly painful. She tried to throw herself sideways back and forth to alleviate the steady slaps, but it was useless. It occurred to her that she might wish he were dead at that moment—anything to stop this blistering assault on her bottom.

“Yes, lucky for you,” he replied, finally pausing.

Still, he didn’t let her up, and Mandy sobbed wildly, praying he was finished. She was shocked when he began to rub her hot flesh, his palm now feeling soothing as he ran it up and down the backs of her thighs and over her tender nates.

“There was someone here earlier dumping barrels in the lake, Mandy. I tried to figure out who it was, but I forgot about the old logging road that runs over the other side of the mountain. By the time I walked over there, he was long gone.”

He continued to gently caress her buttocks and thighs while Mandy listened, not daring to speak. She caught on immediately about the barrels and shivered at the implications of the danger Az would have been in. No wonder he didn’t want her up here.

“When I was coming back across the dam and saw your truck come out at the head of the road, it hit home in an instant what could happen to you if you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. It also occurred to me that I’ve been stupid for a long time now.”

Mandy felt herself pulled up and turned to face Az, her buttocks aching and stinging as they came in contact with his denim jeans. She stared at him in the moonlight, her chest softly heaving. At least he'd lost that predatory, threatening look finally. Hopefully, he was done spanking her. The skin on her bottom felt blistered and sore. "What...what do you mean?"

Az paused when the sound of an engine assailed their ears, and he swiftly turned to look at the head of the road. "Someone's coming," he hissed, standing her up and yanking her shorts and panties up.

"Ouch," she cried as the elastic from her garments scraped across her sore flesh.

"Come on, we have to get to the trucks, or the edge of the woods, and out of sight." He grabbed her hand and pulled her across the parking lot toward the trucks.

"Damn, we would have to park so far away," he muttered.

"We aren't going to make it, Az," Mandy cried as they looked around for any sign of shelter to be out of view from whoever was coming. There was nothing.

"Come on, Mandy, run," he urged, pulling her hand harder.

Mandy tried to run, but her shorts were crooked and she was trying to adjust them. "I'm coming," she gasped. Mags was running ahead of them, a low growl telling her that Mags recognized their panic.

"Will you stop playing with your clothes?" he growled.

The black car cleared the head of the road and began to glide silently towards them as if it were looking for prey. To Mandy, it looked like a smooth-skinned shark, gleaming and deadly, seemingly intent on cutting off their escape. She felt terror

welling up in her throat. She choked back the desire to scream as she ran, desperately trying to keep up with Az's long legs. He was half dragging her as it was, with her hand grasped firmly in his.

"We aren't going to make it," Az growled as the black car pulled ahead and cut in front of them, stopping between them and their trucks. Az stood still and pushed Mandy behind him as two men stepped out of the car and stared at them.

Mags stood at attention, her gaze on the newcomers. A warning growl rumbled in her chest.

"Evening, folks," the shorter, stout driver called. He approached them as he watched Mags cautiously.

"Evening," Az replied calmly.

"Does your dog bite?"

"Not normally."

The driver looked relieved, and he grinned at Mags. "Can we be friends, doggie?" He cautiously held out his hand for Mags to sniff, but she ignored him. He quickly withdrew.

"Stay, Mags," Mandy ordered quietly, and Mags sat down, but she didn't take her gaze off the two men.

"Do you know where we are supposed to go?" This question was from the taller of the two men.

Mandy could see that both men appeared rough and were dressed in clothes that had

seen better days long ago. Upon close inspection, even the black car had rust around the bottom edges and what appeared to be hail damage that had never been repaired.

Mandy stepped up beside Az, her heart in her throat.

Az's eyes narrowed slightly. "That all depends on where you are going," he replied carefully.

The short man guffawed and slapped his leg. "Ain't you funny," he chuckled. "Hell, to get the meat that Murphy..."

"Shut up, Pete," the taller man ordered as he stepped forward, his dark eyes gleaming in the moonlight. He was thin, almost gaunt, with a haunted look about his eyes. The sleeves of his plaid shirt didn't even come to his wrists, and the material was worn thin in many places. He had several broken teeth, but seemed clean and tidy, and Mandy wondered who they were. She didn't recognize either of the men as being from Mockingbird Hollow.

Pete looked as hard-up as his counterpart. The knees of his jeans sported a few patches, and his red t-shirt had some holes in it.

Tall and thin stared suspiciously at Az and Mandy. "Just who are you? I don't recognize you from our neck of the woods."

Mandy could feel panic rising in her throat. She knew the reference to meat meant these two were somehow involved in the rustling. Had all the reasons Az had told her to stay away from the lake happened for real? If she'd only listened to him. If she had, then they wouldn't be in danger now.

Then an idea popped into her head.

TALL AND THIN'S QUESTION had Az thinking fast. There was no doubt in his mind that the 'meat' he was referring to had to be the rustled cattle. Since someone had been dumping tonight, it stood to reason that person had stolen a cow earlier and cut it up.

He squeezed Mandy's trembling hand in silent warning and replied, "We don't know you either, but that doesn't mean we don't know Murphy. He promised us some of the meat too."

Tall and thin looked dubious. "You don't look poor to me. Besides, Murphy never told us anyone else was in on it." He stepped closer to Az. "You look more like a cop than anything else."

Az was surprised when Mandy suddenly spoke up.

"We're newlyweds and we have no money and not much family to support us. My husband just lost his job at Genetico, and Murphy offered us some beef," she piped up bravely.

Az mentally groaned but immediately nodded and wrapped his long arm around her in support. "My wife's right," he added, playing the loving husband.

"Genetico! You worked at that no-good place, too?" Pete spat on the ground. "That's where Murph lost his job. Of course, you know all about that, or you wouldn't be here."

Az nodded again. "Well, Murphy didn't tell us everything, but he did offer to help us. For that, we are grateful."

Pete stepped forward and offered to shake Az's hand. "I'm Pete, and this tall drink of water is Harley. He looks mean, but his bark is worse than his bite." He chuckled. "Since you all were here first, have you seen Murphy? He told us to meet him here at 1:00 a.m. What time did he tell you all?"

Az shook hands with Pete and then looked at his watch. It was 12:57 a.m. "He told us 1:00 a.m. too, but I haven't seen him yet," he lied glibly. He was sure it was 'Murph' that had been dumping across the lake. He had to find a way to get Mandy out of here before Murphy returned.

The distant purr of a truck engine told him it was already too late.

Desperately, he tried to think fast. Pushing Mandy gently before him, he started to circle the two men. "Did you leave a Coke for me, honey? I'm getting thirsty waiting for Murphy."

"I think there are more in the cooler," Mandy replied breathlessly as she followed his lead. He knew she could hear the vehicle coming too, and they would be trapped shortly.

Pete and Harley didn't look too dangerous, but he didn't know about Murphy. That man had gone to a lot of trouble to set Genetico up; he would not take kindly to his plans being interfered with.

Their best bet was his truck. He had a hunting rifle hanging behind the seat. He always carried it when he was home because he liked to hunt whenever the opportunity arose.

"You two just stay put," warned the ever-suspicious Harley. "Your story doesn't quite ring true to me. I always had a nose for liars."

He stepped between Az and the trucks, a handgun appearing out of nowhere, its deadly nose pointed right at them.

Az and Mandy froze in their tracks.

“He has a gun,” she squeaked in alarm.

Quickly, Az stepped in front of her again. “There’s no need for that—put it away before someone gets hurt.”

By now, the truck that had cleared the head of the road was coming towards them. It pulled up and stopped, and the driver opened the door to get out.

Az looked around for inspiration. He knew they couldn’t outrun a gun. He might have stood a chance if he had been alone, but he had Mandy to protect.

“Howdy, Murph.” Pete hailed the man emerging from the truck. “We were wondering what happened to you.”

“Don’t go getting any ideas,” Harley warned, keeping an eye on Az. “You just stay still until Murphy identifies you. Then, if you’re legit, I’ll apologize. If not...” He didn’t finish the sentence—there was no need.

Az could feel Mandy shaking, and his arm tightened around her. As the man called Murphy approached, he whispered in her ear, “On my signal—run.” He studied the man approaching them, his muscles tensed for action.

Mandy squeezed his hand in silent assent.

Murphy appeared to be in his forties with salt and pepper hair, an untrimmed mustache, and a hangdog look about his features, as if life had played a cruel trick on

him. He was a big man, slightly overweight and heavy around the jowls. Az thought he might have seen him around town at one point, but he couldn't be sure.

He returned Az's stare, his eyes assessing them both. "Who the hell are you?" he asked bluntly. When Az didn't answer, he turned to Harley. "I take it they aren't friends of yours?"

"They told us they were your friends," Pete replied, looking bewildered.

"I don't know 'em."

"Alright, that settles that," Harley replied, scowling. "Now the question is, what do we do with them?"

"Bring them with us," Murphy ordered curtly. "I have a cow in the back that's going to wake up soon, and I don't want to shoot it here. I pride myself on leaving no traces to be found. Let's get it to the cutting shed, and then you boys can take the meat for distribution to your people, and then go on home. I'll figure out what to do with these two nosy people later."

"You aren't going to kill them, are you?" Pete gasped, looking worried. "I don't want to be mixed up in nothing that smacks of murder."

"Shut up, Pete," Harley snarled. "You're in this now, no matter what happens."

He turned to Az and Mandy. "You two get in the back of the car. And no funny tricks."

Mags tried to jump into the car when Az grimly bundled Mandy into the backseat of the beat-up sedan.

“Stay, Mags,” Mandy ordered her dog.

Pete and Harley got into the front seat. Harley kept the gun pointed at them as they followed Murphy’s blue pick-up around the lake.

Mags wasn’t the least bit happy. She started barking and following the car when they left, but the dog was too old to keep up. Soon she was trailing further behind.

Mandy’s eyes filled with tears at the sight of her loyal companion panting with her tongue hanging out after she finally stopped to watch the car disappear. Mags,” she whispered, her heart breaking for her faithful friend who wouldn’t understand what was happening. Would she ever see her again?

“It’s all right, honey, Mags will be just fine,” Az whispered in her ear as he pulled her in close to him. He squeezed her hand tightly, trying to reassure her. He just wished he could be as sure about them.

“Dang it, Harley. I don’t know if this car will make it in and out of this place. I hope the road doesn’t get any rougher,” Pete complained once they reached the logging road.

“Just shut up and drive, Pete,” Harley ordered.

They were bouncing all over the place as the sedan traversed the rugged terrain. Murphy’s truck was having a much better time of it. The logging road was not the place for a car.

When they finally arrived at their destination, Murphy took over. “Put those two in that shed behind the barn. I’ll deal with them later.”

The old shed and barn were dilapidated buildings left from the logging camp where

lumber had been cut out of the hills. There wasn't even a window in the shed to let in light, and Mandy huddled into Az, her body shaking. Probably afraid of what might be in the dark that she couldn't see. He wasn't too comfortable himself, and he held her protectively in his arms.

"What are they going to do, Az? I'm scared," she whispered to him in the inky blackness.

"We're going to watch for an opportunity to escape," he told her, hoping he sounded more optimistic than he felt at the moment.

"This is all my fault, I'm so sorry, Az," Mandy cried. "I should have listened to you when you said to stay away."

Az couldn't let her take all the blame, especially when she was coming to apologize to him for running from him. "It's not all your fault, Mandy," he replied gently. "I should have gotten us out of here immediately instead of spanking your little butt. That could have been taken care of later." He huffed when she punched him in the shoulder.

"Or never," she sassed.

"I should have put the clues together faster regarding the dumping Skeeter Davis was seeing, and the stray barrel that didn't stay dumped."

"Just remember that the next time you want to spank me," she jibed. "If we survive this, you owe me one."

When a chainsaw suddenly jumped to life, Mandy shrieked in fear, but Az knew this was their chance. "Now is the best time to try and get out of here, Mandy. They are cutting up the steer, and there is so much noise they won't hear us."

With his eyes starting to filter a little in the blackness, he moved Mandy aside and kicked at the door, trying to break it down. The sound of the chainsaw filled him with a grim sense of horror. The image of them being stuffed in pieces into a barrel like the leftover cows lent strength to his kicks. The idea of the darkness at the bottom of the lake held its own horror, he didn't like deep water. That wasn't going to be his final resting place if he could help it.

"It's not working, Az," Mandy cried, the terror in her voice giving him impetus to launch his shoulder against a rotten spot near the doorframe. It gave a little, but not nearly enough to race a chainsaw to completion of the work at hand.

Az didn't intend to give up, though. He kept at it, trying to make a hole big enough to slip his hand through so he could reach the door latch on the outside. He was almost there when the chainsaw suddenly stopped. His blood froze.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:40 pm

When the sudden sound of a police siren split the air, Az almost collapsed in relief. A loud voice, obviously coming through a megaphone, rang out in the darkness. “This is the police! We have you surrounded! Put down your weapons and lie on the ground with your hands behind your head.”

“It’s Sheriff Dorney,” Mandy cried joyfully. Tears of relief ran down her face, and she hugged Az around the neck, clinging shamelessly to his strong body.

“I do believe it is,” Az replied with a chuckle, enjoying the feel of her body close to his. In the next moment, the door was yanked open, and moonlight streamed in, temporarily blinding him as his eyes adjusted to the light. Mandy buried her face against his neck.

“Dang, boy,” the sheriff chuckled. “The way Mandy is holding onto you, maybe I should just close this door for a while.”

“We’re pretty glad to see you, Sheriff,” Az admitted, sticking his hand out to shake with his friend. “We weren’t quite sure where we were going to end up.”

“Well, I have to admit that we had you covered all along. I tried to get you at home after Randy Berenger called and said another cow had been shanghaied. He saw the truck this time, so we knew it happened tonight. Deputy Crane and I decided to stake out Possum Lake Road and watch for whoever was dumping. It seemed to go hand in hand after what Skeeter Davis told us.”

“The dumper has already been up here once tonight,” Az replied. “It was around 11:00 p.m. when I spotted him dumping. His name is Murphy, and he used to work

for Genetico. He wanted revenge on Genetico for firing him.”

“Now, that I didn’t know,” the sheriff replied. “We got the call from Randy about thirty minutes ago and jumped right on it. I was surprised to see you and Mandy’s trucks up here, but when we moved in on foot, we saw you with those two fellas and decided to wait and see what came down. Then the other truck came too, so we followed you all over here with no lights. That old logging road is rough, but we made it. We had to wait for the chainsaw to stop before we could announce ourselves.”

“We’re glad you did,” Az replied.

The sheriff pushed his hat back on his head. “It looks as if our butcher has been mighty busy.”

“Murphy was in the truck, and the other two men are here to collect the meat,” Az added. “They thought we were, too, until Murphy arrived and denied knowing us. That’s when they decided we knew too much. I’m not sure how far Murphy would have gone if you hadn’t shown up.” He could feel Mandy shiver beneath his arm.

“I don’t know what you were thinking, boy, bringing Mandy up here with all this going on,” the sheriff scolded. “You shouldn’t have been up here yourself without back-up.”

“It’s my fault,” Mandy admitted. “I came up here looking for Az. If I hadn’t been here, I’m sure he would have been just fine.”

“Maybe,” the sheriff grunted, his eyes narrowing at them both. “I’m not even going to ask the whys and wherefores regarding that statement. I’ll just say that neither one of you should have been here and leave it at that.” He jammed his hat on his head and turned back to the cleanup.

Az looked down at Mandy. He couldn't disagree with Evan's analysis. He should have just hauled her out of Beverly's house and tended to his own business, then he wouldn't have been at the lake and been forced into a compromising situation. "He's right, you know," he said quietly. "We're lucky the sheriff was doing his job."

"I know," she whispered back. "But we won't tell him that," she added gamely.

Az grinned.

B ACK AT THE BEACHHEAD , Mandy was thrilled to see Mags come out from under her truck when the sheriff dropped her and Az off. "Mags, I'm so glad you are alright," she cried, dropping to her knees as Mags ran towards her. She hugged the dog around the neck, a few tears dropping onto her soft fur.

Mags just woofed and licked her face, her entire body wiggling with joy.

"She's a smart dog. She knew you'd eventually come back to your truck, so when she couldn't follow you, that's where she stayed."

"You're such a good dog, Mags," Mandy whispered in her ear.

Az stretched his hand towards her. "Come with me, Mandy."

Mandy took his hand and stood up, but when Az started towards the beach, she pulled back. As she remembered, this was the part where she had been in the process of getting her butt royally blistered. She had no desire to pick up where they left off, she was already sore enough that sitting was uncomfortable.

Az chuckled and tucked her under his arm. "Come on," he said softly. "I'm not going to spank you; I just want to talk to you."

Mandy was silent, but she allowed him to lead her back to the bench they had been sitting on earlier. He sat down and pulled her onto his lap. For a while, they just sat there, and she savored the feeling of being close to him and the knowledge that they were safe.

“So, you were looking for me to apologize, huh?” he finally asked.

Mandy lifted her head and studied his face. It was so familiar, and yet so different. She pondered the changes as she reached up to tentatively run her palm down the side of his cheek to his sculpted chin. It was a little bristly, but warm, and it sent a surge of something undefinable through her.

“I’m confused, Az. You are the boy I’ve always known, and yet—you’ve changed.”

“Like you, I grew up,” Az said gruffly, his hand reaching out to cup hers.

She looked away then, trying to formulate her thoughts before speaking. The lake was beautiful in the moonlight, but the water was also deadly. Shivering, she forced her thoughts away from the barrels lying in its depths, and thankful they weren’t a part of them.

Az’s arms tightened around her. “Don’t think about what could have happened—it didn’t. Just tell me why you were up here in the first place,” he said gently, using his fingers to turn her chin back towards him.

Mandy swallowed and nodded. “I...I was so angry with you for your highhandedness that I went to Beverly’s to get away from you. But then, when you didn’t come for me, I felt...” She shrugged her slender shoulders, not sure where to go from there.

“Felt what, Mandy?”

“I felt so alone,” she whispered. “And I felt terrible that I had been so childish and

maybe hurt you.” She dropped her head, ashamed to face him. “And...” She trailed off.

“And what?” he asked gently, lifting her chin between his thumb and forefinger.

She licked her lips, screwing up the nerve to continue. “And I thought I might have driven you away for good—just when I finally realized that I wanted you.”

“Wanted me?” he growled, seeming uncertain of himself. “You mean to lose your virginity with?”

The question sounded bitter, and Mandy smiled. “I never really planned on doing that.” Well...mostly never. “I was just mad at you,” she said, her eyes twinkling. “You tend to bring out the worst in me with your bossy attitude.”

“I’m not bossy,” he protested, then flashed her a sheepish grin. “Okay, so I’m a little bossy, but it’s only for your own good.”

“According to you,” she sassed. “Maybe I know what’s best for me and I don’t need a bossy, demanding man in my life to tell me what to do.”

Az’s expression softened. “Well, I’ve realized that I need a bratty little scamp that I’ve been in love with all my life in mine.”

“You love me?” Mandy’s heart flipped with instant joy.

He trailed his finger down the side of her soft cheek and under her hairline until his hand was cupping the back of her head. “Yes, I love you, Mandy. I think I’ve always loved you; I just wasn’t prepared to do anything about it. We both had our educations to get out of the way, and I haven’t even fully decided what I want to do with my life. Ranching or policework...or maybe both, I don’t know.”

“I think I’ve always loved you, too,” Mandy confessed. “It’s why I was so angry with you when I was fourteen and thought I was ready for love. You destroyed me with your rejection. That, and the fact that you spanked me like a five-year-old, made me hate you.”

“You wanted to experiment, little girl. I didn’t want you experimenting with me,” he growled. “And then I didn’t want you experimenting with anyone else either. I guess I was jealous and possessive, and wanted to keep you for myself. Like a package I couldn’t open yet,” he added with a rueful chuckle.

Mandy stared indignantly. “Well, you certainly took long enough to make up your mind,” she declared. “When you kissed me in the stockroom at the market, I couldn’t believe how it changed everything for me. I had Sam Pickering in my sights, and you ruined it,” she huffed.

His eyebrows shot up. “I intended to ruin that,” he replied, his grin unrepentant. “He was trying his luck with my girl. He was right about what he said, though. You deserved to be spanked for playing games.”

Mandy’s gaze softened. “It wasn’t a game to me, though. I...I’ve been looking for someone to fall in love with, to spend my life with, but I couldn’t seem to find the right person. I just didn’t realize you were my standard of measurement until you kissed me.”

“You’re going to spend the rest of your life with me,” he growled possessively. He slid her off his lap and dropped to one knee in the sand. “Will you marry me, Mandy?”

Mandy’s mouth dropped open. “Are you for real? Being a bossy butt by telling me what’s going to happen and then proposing in the next breath? A girl could get whiplash trying to keep up with you, Az Newcomb.”

His eyes softened in the moonlight, the sparkling turquoise gleaming like polished stones. “I think you can keep up, sweetheart,” he assured her with a chuckle.

Mandy melted. Leave it to Az to be completely unpredictable. “Did you hear that, Mags? He wants to marry me,” she said softly, glancing over at her canine companion, who was curled near their feet once more.

Mags opened one eye and elicited a tiny woof, and then yawned a doggy yawn. The antics of her master and the others had worn her out for the night. Her duty done, her master answered, she could now go back to sleep.

Mandy laughed in delight, and her gaze swiveled back to Az’s handsome face. “You’ve loved me all along? Really?”

“Really,” he returned with a smile, his thumbs rubbing the back of her hands. “But it took tonight to make me realize how quickly I could lose you. Walking across that catwalk and thinking about what could have happened to you if I hadn’t been here turned my blood cold. Don’t you ever do anything like this again, little girl,” he ordered.

“You didn’t look very loving; you scared me to death.”

A satisfied grin appeared on his chiseled mouth. “Good. I wanted you to be scared. You deserved every spank you got and more. He shifted his knee in the sand. “How long are you going to keep me on my knees, little brat?”

“I kind of like you there,” she replied with a giggle.

“Mandy...”

She pulled her hands away from his and threw them around his neck. Of course, I’ll marry you, Az. I don’t think I ever fell out of love with you. I just held a grudge all

this time.”

He swiftly stood up and pulled her up with him. It’s about time.” He reached around and slapped her bottom. “That’s for making me wait. And a warning to stop holding grudges in the future.”

“Ouch! I just knew you were going to be trouble, Aztecuaní Newcomb,” she complained, rubbing her sore posterior. “From the minute you returned to Whippoorwill County and kissed me in the storeroom, I knew you were going to be my biggest problem.”

“Ha! Look who’s talking. I wasn’t ready to get tied up to a little bundle of trouble yet, but you’re mine now. Trouble or not, I’m never letting you go.”

Mandy shivered in delight as her fierce warrior swooped down to claim her mouth. “And I’m never letting you go,” she whispered against his firm lips. “I love you, Az.”

“And I love you...Trouble,” he responded with a chuckle.

The End
