



Dancehall Diaries: Lynette

Celia Stuart

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Chapter One

Jon Lindsay stepped inside the Bluebonnet Dance Hall a mere forty-five minutes after he arrived in Bluebonnet, Texas.

From the outside, the place wasn't much different than the bars around Alpine that he frequented. Corrugated tin roof with a brick façade and a walled-in beer garden. Inside, kids ran hither and yon as the band finished warming up. Rustic and quaint were the two words that came to mind as he crossed the cement floor only to slow mid-stride and gawk at the huge, incredibly realistic mural on one wall. It was a dance hall scene right out of *Gunsmoke* or *Bonanza*. Complete with half-naked dancing girls, a poker game and a lady sheriff sporting a set of shiny six-shooters.

Someone was a very talented artist.

He ordered a beer and his gaze finally drifted down from the wall behind the bar to settle appreciatively on the bartender whose nametag read Lena. Women like her were the reason Hanes still made T-shirts. A pretty, sable-haired beauty dressed in snug jeans and an even tighter white T-shirt, she was quick to smile, quick to flirt and even quicker to take his money.

If the mural didn't catch your eye, Lena definitely would.

He scolded himself for ogling the busty bartender, only to stop and tick off just how long it'd been since he'd known the loving comfort of a woman.

Months, it had been months.

He really needed to quit writing erotica and concentrate on mainstream. And if his agent had her way, he'd soon get his chance. But that wasn't something he wanted to deal with right now, any more than he wanted to deal with cleaning out his grandmother's house—the reason he was in Bluebonnet to begin with. A quick inspection had assured him he had his work cut out for him, and his dad would end up owing him big-time.

"Why a lady sheriff?" he asked, more to distract himself than anything.

"That's Susie, the owner. Zack, her nephew..." Lena nodded toward the stage, "—he painted it. Thought it might be kinda funny to paint her in it as a sheriff, since she runs things around here."

"That's great. I like that. Thanks, Lena." He raised his beer to her, winked and wandered off.

The band was even better than the crowd. And the female lead, a tiny buxom brunette who apparently suffered from a bad case of night-time morning sickness, was hot and sassy. She gave as good as she got between songs—and trips to the restroom—and more than once, he found himself laughing aloud as she traded sharp quips with the audience members, many of whom she knew by name.

After the blatant reminder of his long-term celibate state, Jon couldn't decide whether a one-nighter was worth the trouble or not. At least in Alpine he knew the playing field and kept to a select few women. But here, this was all new territory, and since he only planned to be in town a few weeks, he didn't need any difficult entanglements.

He even danced a few times. First with a thirty-something brunette. She had "be my next ex" written all over her. Jon put as much distance between himself and her as he

could. Then a set of cousins: twenty-something hardbodies who both insisted on dancing with him and left him with a case of the willies. Man-eaters.

As a writer, he had a tendency to isolate himself, but that didn't mean he was naive when it came to women. On the contrary, he found women far more interesting than men, and he made it his business to know as much as possible about them.

From his spot in the doorway between the bar proper and the beer garden, Jon spotted *her*. A dishy redhead he took great pleasure in watching. The low lighting softened her character lines but he still put her in the late thirty to early forty range. Which was good because he religiously stuck to a fifteen-year age limit difference.

Older, not younger; he didn't fool with babies. He preferred his women with more character than he usually found in women his own age or younger.

Her body language told on her if you listened. Jon listened. She nibbled her lower lip, played with the stir stick in her drink and turned down three dances without even checking out her prospective partners. No barfly there. He'd guess more along the lines of a little Earth Mother. Maybe the type that kept a garden and did crafts, or read. She tugged repeatedly on the auburn curls at her nape and occasionally snuck glances around the bar, as if she didn't quite know what to make of it all.

Eventually the tension eased from her body; her shoulders and back weren't quite so stiff. At one point she even sang along with her friends: a blonde, a brunette and a young girl with vivid purple hair. His little Earth Mother's mussed hair and full lips made her look as if she'd just left her lover. Jon chuckled at his fancifulness, then patiently bided his time until he could put himself in her path.

*

After a tipsy and raucous round of Matraca Berg's "Back in the Saddle," Lynette excused herself to find the powder room. All that laughing and singing had left her breathless and made a break necessary. On her way back to Betti and the girls, she ran right into a tall, lanky cowboy who turned and stepped in her path. As she looked up, the apology died on her lips. Then she was staring. She knew she was staring, but couldn't seem to help herself.

He was beautiful. Blonde, deeply tanned, with a chiseled jaw, his starched jeans and plaid shirt accentuated the rest of his assets. Of which he had plenty. He could indeed have thrown her in his pickup truck and right then, she wouldn't have cared. She took it all in with an unabashed sigh.

"Excuse me." He gave her a dimpled grin.

She stood there like an idiot, a smile tickling the corners of her mouth. He could have stepped straight from the pages of a western by Joan Johnson. Her heart skipped a few beats as she turned away, her cheeks suddenly hot. *For heaven's sake. He looked almost young enough to be my son.* If she had one.

Lynette gave herself a mental shake and turned back toward the table only to stop at a tug on her shirtsleeve. Mr. Dimples gave her a lazy once over. *Thank goodness the dancehall isn't well lit.*

"Great dimples," she thought, realizing too late that she'd thought out loud. She prayed for the impossible. For an earthquake. The next ice age. That he hadn't read her lips. But there was no such relief.

He mouthed a thank you and blatantly looked her over again, but never let go of her arm. As if he might be interested? Surely not.

“Wanna dance?”

Her mouth moved, but no reply came out. Heavens, he was beautiful. Even better looking than Betti’s husband, Ty, and that was saying a lot. Her head spinning from a combination of heat, alcohol and embarrassment, she took a deep breath and tried again. “I can’t dance.” *How pathetic.* She should have just said, “No, thank you.”

“It’s a slow song.” He quirked one dark blond eyebrow, then graced her with that wicked, heart-stopping grin again. “You could at least shine my buckle.”

Lynette glanced down at his waist, then blushed even harder when he winked at her. *Gawd! I looked at his crotch and he knows it!*

“I might step on your feet.” She shrugged apologetically.

“I’m wearing boots,” he countered.

He really was cute and had gone to the trouble of asking. What would it hurt? She could be brave just this once; she’d steal a page from Bad Betti’s book. Taking a deep breath, she nodded. “Sure, okay.”

Out on the crowded dance floor, Dimples pulled her close and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Relax.”

His voice floated across her skin like a leaf in free fall, distracting her. “What?”

“Relax.” His sky-blue eyes, accentuated by thick sooty lashes, crinkled at the corners when he smiled. She liked that. It gave him character, and assured her he was older than she’d first thought.

One hand on his shoulders, the other held in his firm, smooth grip, Lynette swayed to the song, too distracted by the warm male heat of him and the muscles rippling under her fingertips. Her tongue was glued so firmly to the roof of her mouth, she couldn’t even seem to ask his name, and as close as he held her, he apparently had every intention of having his buckle polished. If only she were twenty years younger. Or at least ten.

Fairies danced ‘round a fire in the pit of her belly and her nipples puckered under her cashmere sweater. Embarrassed at her body’s reaction, she worried he’d feel them through his shirt. Lynette snuck another look at him from under her lashes and licked her lips.

His curved into a smile. Could he read her mind? The knowing look in those blue orbs spoke volumes. He looked amused, but not like he was laughing at her. She’d lay odds he knew his way around a woman, despite his youth. And he was probably much too young for her.

All too soon the song ended, and Lynette reluctantly pulled away.

“One more?” he asked, a blonde eyebrow quirked.

She shyly nodded as the lyrics to “Strawberry Wine” drifted through her head, but at that moment, she couldn’t remember being seventeen, and didn’t really care. She was too intent on the smell of his aftershave as he pulled her back into his arms. She’d forgotten how much she missed the smell of a man and inhaled deeply. The light masculine scent reminded her of watching her ex-husband, Robert, shave in the early days of their marriage. “What’s your name?”

“Jon.”

“I’m Lynette.” She was enchanted. His lips looked soft, and sensual ... and soft. She watched his mouth move. She wanted to touch them. Men shouldn’t have lips like that. They made her want to snuggle close and pucker up.

“That’s very pretty.” Jon’s voice was deep and smoky, like a good Cuban cigar. Lynette did love the smoky sweet aroma of a good cigar burning. Odd for a woman, but true.

“Thank you.” He had such a nice solid chest. She wanted to lean into it and close her eyes. Maybe that last Sloe Screw Betti had talked her into had been a bad idea.

“Are you a tourist?”

She shook her head, then blinked to clear her vision. “I just moved here.”

“From where? I detect a little peach in that drawl.” There went that eyebrow again.

“Savannah originally, but Conroe most recently. Over the other side of Houston.”

Her southern accent came through loud and clear.

Or was that slur?

“Are you all right?” He frowned even as his arm tightened protectively, around her waist.

“I’m a little warm is all. Maybe ... maybe I should sit down.” As much as she needed to sit, Lynette wasn’t sure if it was from the heat, the drinks, or him.

With a nod of understanding, Jon gently guided her off the dance floor. He ignored her pointing and instead of returning her to Betti, guided her through the crowd to the beer garden. The evening had cooled off nicely, and despite the late hour, twilight had barely deepened to full dark as he led her down paths lit by twinkling lights until he found a secluded bench and sat.

“Better?” he murmured, keeping his arm around her.

“Much, thank you. I’m not used to this.” Lynette forced herself to perch on the end of the seat and try to act ladylike, despite a case of light-headedness. It wasn’t easy when her eyes kept wanting to cross.

“Used to what?”

“Bars. Betti said this wasn’t a real bar, like a meat market, you know? With a price on your ass ... stamped. Stamped on your ... tush.” He nodded and she turned away, ignoring his twitching lips. She didn’t expect him to understand anyway. “I’m recently divorced.”

“I understand.” His fingers teased the curls at her nape until her head tilted to the side, silently encouraging him to continue.

“That feels nice.” Glancing over her shoulder at him, she murmured, “You’re very handsome. Oh Lord! Now I know I shouldn’t have had that last Sloe Screw.”

“A what?” Laughter colored his voice.

“A Sloe Screw. My friend, she talked me into it. I think it’s...” she dragged the word off her tongue, “...technically a Slow *Comfortable* Screw, though.” Lynette inhaled, catching her breath, then chattered on like a magpie. “You smell wonderful. What is that?”

“Romance,” he replied, tugging her back to sit next to him.

“I never met a cowboy who wore Ralph Lauren before.” She gave in and reclined next to him on the bench. What she really wanted was to curl up against his side. He felt warm and solid, his cologne was spicy yet subtle. Sexy. Her fingers itched to touch him.

Jon chuckled and leaned closer, his voice low. “You’re a very pretty lady, Lynette. And, I must confess, I have a serious weakness for redheads.”

“Oh, no. No, I’m not at all. Really.” She was plain. Hearty. That’s what her mother had called her, *hearty*. “My friend...”

Anything else she might have said was cut off by Jon's lips. Sloe Gin and Southern Comfort delayed her reflexes. Not that she had any intention of pulling away. His mouth was firm and warm, lips gentle on hers as they sipped and teased before finally letting her come up for air.

"That was very nice. Do it again ... please."

Jon laughed softly. "I think I'd better take you back inside and find your friend."

"Oh please no. They won't care." Lynette leaned into him and licked her lips, which were still tender and tingling.

Jon pulled her close, strong fingers tracing the sensitive skin covering her collarbone and trailing up her neck. "Far be it from me to disappoint a lady." He kissed her again. His lips searching and his tongue more insistent this time. Her mouth opened under his and she could feel herself melting. It had been a long time since ... well ... she'd been this worked up. Lynette felt as if molten glass ran through her veins, and she realized she was hungry, starving in fact. She wanted to rub up against Jon like a cat and let him scratch her.

To hell with consequences. "Take me home with you. Please."

"Sweetheart, that's a very bad idea."

Well it sounded like a damned fine idea to her and the fingers rubbing her neck and teasing her hair seemed to agree.

"I'm sorry." She looked away, and her shyness returned full force as embarrassment at her forwardness made her face burn. *What would he want with an old dried-up peach anyway?*

"I am too. More than you know, but if we did, you'd regret it come morning."

"I should go," she muttered. Lynette stood and looked around, trying to find the way back to the main path.

"Wait..." Jon stood as if to follow.

"No," she said, waving her hand to stop him, "that won't be necessary. Thank you for the dance ... and everything else."

* * * *

Jon spent the short drive home thinking about Lynette. He'd bitten back his laughter when he caught her sniffing him. "Jon," was all he could manage as he pulled her close, hoping she wouldn't notice how tickled he'd gotten.

Obviously, it'd been a while for her as well. She'd sure been a nice armful to hold. Little Miss Lynette was soft and curvy, and he liked her name. It sounded feminine. The type of name you'd be proud to yell at just the right moment, though he had a feeling she'd be fairly tame in the horizontal boogie department. He grinned in the darkened car. He liked sex. Imaginative sex in imaginative places. Sadly, his own sex life was fairly tame.

Ever try asking a grown woman to go parking on the side of a mountain? Or to make love in the desert in broad daylight? Don't bother. Sex while tubing down the Rio Grande? Forget it. His last girlfriend had threatened to have him arrested.

When Lynette had started swaying and babbling like a brook, he couldn't help himself. Jon had wanted to get closer and the beer garden had seemed like the perfect place. She was, in a word, adorable. Pert nose, pert hair, sensual lips, freckles, full breasted and soft, with curves and lots of padding. He liked that ... padding. He liked

women with hips and breasts. The kind that jiggled and bounced and swished and swayed when they walked. The kind of hips that cradled you when you made love and soft, pillowy breasts with puffy nipples to tease.

Lynette had a way about her, that was for sure. Such a contradiction of sexy and reserved. He'd briefly considered leaning up and biting her. He wondered if she'd squeak. Or squeal. Or moan and melt.

He shifted uncomfortably in the Roadster's bucket seat. At this rate he'd end up in a cold shower or jacking off. Between thoughts of tender flesh brushed with curls, chocolate brown eyes and sweet berry-tasting lips he was a goner.

He would have brought her home but he had rules. When he made love to a woman, he didn't want either one of them waking up with regrets or hangovers the next morning. He hadn't meant to upset her or hurt her feelings and was disappointed when she hurried away. He'd hoped to at least get her number; maybe see her again while he was in Bluebonnet. He figured cleaning Gram's house would take at least two weeks.

By the time he pulled into the driveway, the long day and the seven-hour drive he'd made caught up with him in a big way, but Lynette had inspired him. Jon was up until three in the morning, fleshing out the plot for his next novel, which was good for his writing but bad for house cleaning.

He slept in, then was up sucking down coffee and sorting through the downstairs rooms of Gram's rambling two-story house, pen and paper in hand. More than once he cursed his dad who'd arm-twisted him into the job as only a judge can. He'd threatened Jon with a visit from his mother.

* * * *

Lynette's tongue felt as if she'd licked her way across the Mojave and she had a monster headache to go with it. The sunshine streaming through her bright yellow kitchen curtains didn't help, but coffee, Advil and a hot shower worked a minor miracle.

She spent the rest of the morning working her way through the boxes she'd stored in the spare bedroom, but moved just above a snail's pace. At this rate, she'd never get done. All she really wanted was to stay busy enough that she wouldn't dwell on how she'd acted such a fool over that young cowboy last night. Her mother was probably rolling over in her grave. Good Southern girls didn't act like that. *Especially not Georgia Peaches.*

To celebrate completing the living and dining rooms, she stopped late in the afternoon and threw a double batch of brownies in the oven. Once they cooled, she iced them and put some on a plate for Mrs. Lindsay's son.

She'd noticed the metallic blue Audi TT Roadster in her neighbor's drive when she got home from the beauty salon yesterday. Robert had desperately wanted one. He'd begged and pouted like a child until she finally reminded him that they just couldn't afford it and keep his Land Rover, too. He'd refused to give up the high-priced SUV, and in typical Robert fashion, laid the blame at her feet. Robert conveniently forgot that it had been his idea for her to kick her business degree to the curb, stay home, raise children and be his little corporate wife.

Unfortunately, the children hadn't come, and she'd hated the corporate wife job. The schmoozing and backstabbing, plotted over gin and tonics and hidden behind sugar-sweet smiles, was more than she could stomach. The memories of her seventeen-year marriage,

which had ended when Robert decided his new job in Dallas required him to be single, left a bad taste in her mouth.

She shook it off, refusing to look back any longer than necessary, and reoriented herself. Mrs. Lindsay's son was here to sort out her affairs. The least she could do was be neighborly and take him some brownies, even if she didn't care for his choice in cars. Sorting through one's deceased parent's affects wasn't fun. She'd done it herself not a year ago.

She stepped out onto her front porch, plate in hand, and again noted the Audi parked in the neighboring driveway. Honestly, was there anything worse than a man having a midlife crisis? Yes, a man having a midlife crisis and driving a foreign sports car. He was probably bald. She sighed. That damned hangover had left her peckish.

The hot, dry afternoon sun baked her skin as she made her way across the two yards and knocked on the door.

And waited.

Apparently, Mr. Lindsay also had a thing for Pat Green. Not that she had a problem with Americana-style music, she just didn't care for hers at quite that volume. *Mid-life crisis, indeed!*

She knocked again, louder this time, and waited. Lynette never heard the footsteps approach, but blinked in surprise when the door flew open. Standing before her in bare-chested glory was her golden-haired cowboy, with a scowl on his face and his hair standing on end.

Chapter Two

Still recovering from the surprise of seeing Lynette at his door, Jon barely managed to catch the plate she shoved at him, let alone stop her. Then she was gone and he was left with... He frowned down at the icing smeared all over his chest.

A mess.

“What a waste.”

He certainly hadn't expected to see Lynette at his front door. Apparently, she hadn't expected to see him either!

As a piece of brownie landed on his toe, he watched Lynette's Chrysler Sebring shoot out of the driveway two doors down and take off in a squeal of tires. With a sigh, he checked out the rest of the neighborhood, wondering if somewhere behind air-conditioned doors someone had seen their altercation. The street was eerily quiet after the sound of her car faded away. Not even the sound of a water sprinkler or the smell of freshly cut grass to distract him. Just chocolate.

Icky, sticky chocolate. He gave the street one more furtive glance then ran a finger across his chest and stuck it in his mouth as he stepped back inside his own air-conditioned house.

Jon did the only thing he could under the circumstances. He took a shower. Sadly, the moist, chewy treat was a wash. Most of it ended up down the drain. Which was absolutely criminal to a chocoholic like himself.

After a good scrubbing and fresh clothes, including a shirt this time, he headed next door, plate in hand.

* * * *

After a long drive to calm down, Lynette spent a couple of hours at the bookstore, hoping that restocking and organizing her inventory would stop her hands from shaking. No dice. By the time she pulled into her driveway, she'd calmed down considerably but was still mortified. Not just about how she'd reacted, but about seeing him after her behavior the previous night. Wearily, she climbed the porch steps, only to stop as she reached for the screen door.

Jon had been here.

Her now-clean cobalt blue Fiestaware plate sat innocently on the wicker side table. She picked it up, turned and gave the street a once over. The lights were on next door and his car was in the driveway. Otherwise all was quiet except for the wind rustling through the big oaks in her yard. Even the few children who lived in her neighborhood were nowhere to be seen this late in the day.

With one last glance toward Jon's house, Lynette eased the screen door open and slid her key in the lock. *As if he has super-sonic hearing!* The alarm shrieked as soon as she cracked the door, reminding her he didn't need super-sonic hearing. Lynette winced and lunged inside to reset it. *So much for being quiet.*

She carried the plate into the kitchen and placed it on the counter. Fatigue, last night's overindulgence and the stress of closing on a house and a business in the space of

a week caught up with her. She glanced at the microwave clock. It wasn't even nine, but between her hangover and hours spent handling dusty used books she was ready to call it a night—after a long hot soak.

Maybe if Jon didn't see any lights he wouldn't come back.

Glass of wine in hand, she locked up then flicked the lights out one by one. Her room was located at the back of the house and only lit by a small bedside lamp. No way could he see that from his porch.

Lynette stripped, then washed and moisturized her face while the tub filled, willing it to hurry up as the chill from the ceramic tile seeped into her feet.

She climbed in the water with a heavy sigh. Heat and wine seeped into her pores, taking away a day's worth of grime, grit and regrets. It eased up her neck, slipping the tense knots located there loose and had her sinking lower in the warm jasmine-scented water. Despite her best efforts, the events of the last twenty-four hours repeated themselves on a mini-movie screen behind her eyelids. The sight of Jon's scowl turning into surprise, then horrified shock at the sight of his chest covered in chocolate had her giggling. And every time she'd think she was through, it'd pop up again and get her tickled all over, until she was laying on her side, trying to catch her breath.

The sound of her doorbell ringing ended her laughter. She could lay here, pretend she didn't hear it. What if it wasn't him? Of course, it was him. Who else would it be? Eventually he'd have to go away, wouldn't he?

But he didn't. The doorbell was followed by repeated knocking, then more doorbell action. With a groan, she climbed out on shaky legs, quickly toweled off, and snatched a light cotton gown from its hook on the back of the bathroom door. She pulled it on as she crossed the bedroom, pausing to untangle it at her waist and tug it down across her broad hips, before she flipped on the hall light.

Embarrassment and dread washed over her as she stood behind the closed and locked door. In twenty-four hours time she'd managed to kiss him, drunkenly proposition him and dump brownies on him. With shaking fingers she turned the deadbolt and eased the door open.

"Yes?" She tried to act casual, despite her pounding heart and quaking stomach.

"Did you get your plate?" His silky voice slid up her spine.

"Yes, thank you." She stood there, unsure of what else to say or how to form an apology. Where should she start? With last night? Or with the brownies?

Finally, he spoke up, making the decision for her. "You owe me some brownies."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You owe me some brownies. Those were almost unsalvageable." Jon stood there with crossed arms, his handsome face inscrutable.

Brownies, it was then.

"Fine. I can bring you some tomorrow after work."

Lynette had the door half closed when he spoke up again. "It nearly killed me to wash those brownies down the shower drain. Don't you have anymore?"

"More?" She couldn't believe he was making such a fuss. There hadn't been anything special about them.

He nodded.

"Now?"

"Yeah," Jon said, nodding again. The expression on his face was pure puppy dog.

Any minute now, she expected his lower lip to roll out. Pitiful. Then again, it was the least she could do, considering.

"I'll be right back," she sighed. She softly closed the door.

Darting into the kitchen, she scooped all but one brownie out of the pan, saving it for herself. She hadn't even had any, for heaven's sake. This time, Lynette stopped to cover the plate with plastic wrap before hurrying back to the front door.

She swung the door wide and held out the plate. "Here."

"Are these iced, too?" he asked, taking the plate.

"Yes." Dear heavens! A male chocoholic?

"Good. I liked the icing. What I got of it." He lifted the plastic wrap and scooped up a finger full. While a smiling Jon licked the chocolaty goo from his finger, his eyes leisurely skimmed down the length of her. Goosebumps popped up on her skin. If Lynette hadn't known better, she would have sworn he was licking her. Once again, she found herself mesmerized by his lips.

Despite the late hour, the sun hadn't quite set and she was standing on the front porch in her nightgown. Old, soft, *thin* cotton. That meant he probably had a good idea of what was under it, and there was plenty. Her nipples tingled. Damn, it wasn't even cold outside. She fought the urge to cross her arms over her breasts as Jon licked his lips.

"Were you getting ready for bed?"

"I was *in* bed." No way would she tell him she'd been in the bath, laughing at him.

"Oh." He gave her a grin worthy of Alice's Cheshire Cat. "Early to bed; early to rise and all that jazz."

Feeling like the mouse to his cat, Lynette took a deep calming breath. She refused to retreat, despite the feel of his eyes lapping at her breasts and the furnace in her belly kicking things up a notch. It had been a long time since any man had excited her like this. But that didn't mean she had to act on it ... did it? "I have to work in the morning."

He fished the remains of the brownie he'd mutilated earlier out from beneath the plastic wrap. "What do you do?" he asked, casually, as if this were a social event. As if she weren't standing outside in her nightie.

He took a bite, his baby blues twinkling with mischief while he waited for her reply. Her nipples were hard and probably well-defined under the thin cotton. She wanted to squirm, duck back inside and hide behind the safety of her screen door, yell at him to go away. She felt certain he could discern the color of her areolas, positive he knew what she was thinking, wishing. She should be ashamed of the lusty thoughts watching him eat a mere brownie brought out. But she wasn't. What would Jon do with a woman, after the way he'd dug into the chocolate confection? As if it were manna from heaven.

"I own a bookstore." Trying to act casual, Lynette leaned against the doorjamb and crossed her arms over her chest to cover the distended peaks. Her willpower deserted her even as her eyes betrayed her, lingering on his mouth again. For a second Lynette wished she were the brownie in his hand.

A crumb clung to his chin. Unthinking, she reached up and brushed it away. After swallowing the bite, he mumbled his thanks.

"How long have you owned a bookstore?"

"A week," she ruefully admitted.

He took another bite.

Lynette stood there a few more uncomfortable heartbeats before she said, "I really need to get some sleep."

Jon held up his finger, indicating she should wait, and finished the bite in his mouth. "About last night..."

"You don't have to say anything. Really." *Please. God. Don't.*

"But I want to. May I come in? So we can talk?"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. I don't let strangers in my house."

"But you bring strangers brownies to theirs? He quirked a blond brow. "They're *very* good, by the way."

"Thank you, but I was only being polite to a neighbor. I thought you were here to clean out your mother's things?"

"Grandmother's... And I'm your neighbor. I also kissed you last night, remember?"

How could she forget? She nodded, her cheeks burning at the memory. He was the first man she'd kissed in ages. "I don't see what there is to talk about."

And her bath was getting cold.

In lieu of a response, he quirked one eyebrow and leaned in, as if searching her face. "Why are you embarrassed?"

"I don't normally act like that. I'm sure my Momma's rollin' over in her grave."

"How long has she been dead?"

"I'm sorry?" She frowned up at him, a surprised laugh on her lips.

"Well, the way I see it, unless she was buried alive, she ain't rolling." Jon's grin proclaimed him incorrigible.

"Oh my heavens!" Lynette didn't know whether to laugh or be shocked. "I am well aware that I made a fool of myself last night, Mr..."

He waggled his eyebrows and grinned from ear to ear. "Lindsay ... Jon Lindsay." When Lynette reached out to shake the hand he offered, he raised it to his lips and lingered over her knuckles, as if they were brownies. She knew he wasn't being gallant, but instead, just flat out naughty. The stubble on his chin tickled, and Lynette jerked and tugged until he gave her hand back.

"If you'll excuse me, it's my bedtime," she said, her tone haughty as the most well bred Georgia peach. She turned to go back inside, not caring how the light illuminated her generous backside. It was long past time she reigned herself in and ended Jon Lindsay's nonsense.

"I do so have a weakness for redheads," he murmured.

She glanced over her shoulder to see if he was teasing her again only to find he'd moved when she had and now stood less than a foot behind her. Warm and solid and very male. He looked her up and down, as if he had all the time in the world. "Want some company?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"We could finish the brownies and... visit." He sidled closer, plate in hand.

"I'm not that kind of woman." But deep down inside, Lynette wished she were. He was ... tempting. Very tempting.

Jon leaned closer, his blue eyes gentle. "Now you know why I turned you down last night."

Mesmerized, Lynette couldn't move, and didn't care anymore if he could see down the neck of her gown. Her pulse skittered at the base of her throat as his finger skimmed over her lower lip.

"Who you been kissin' tonight?" he whispered, his tone a little possessive.

"Nobody," she replied softly, never taking her eyes off his face.

"Your lips say different."

"They're just...like that."

"That's nice," Jon said, stroking her plump lower lip with his thumb. "I like that."

Slowly, he leaned over and caught it with his teeth. When he started sucking on it, Lynette moaned. Jon released her lip and firmly guided her into the house. Slamming the door behind him, he practically tossed the plate of brownies on the little oak hall table. Lynette kept her back to him, shoulders stiff, unsure of what to do next but unable to stop it. She was in way over her head.

Jon leaned over and growled, "I wanted to do this last night." His warm breath tickled her neck.

"Do what?" She turned her head to look at him.

"Shhh," he said, gently grabbing a handful of auburn curls. Jon pushed her head to the side, exposing the soft flesh of her neck. When he nipped her, there was nothing Lynette could say. Any protest would have been a lie. Jon knew it and so did she. The squeal that echoed through the living room said more than words could have anyway. Before she could protest, he kissed the sting away. Lynette struggled out of his grasp and turned to face him. *Why in the world would he pick a chubby, plain, former hausfrau to taunt.*

He reached for her but she batted his hand away.

"How old are you?" she demanded.

"How old do you think I am?"

"I don't know."

"Older than you think. Now guess, since it's so important to you."

"Twenty-six." She shrugged.

"I was thirty on December seventh. I'm a Sagittarius. Satisfied?" His blue eyes narrowed.

Lynette could tell he was mad but had a point to make. "I'm forty-one, almost forty-two."

"So?" He stood there, arms crossed like a recalcitrant child. She'd interrupted his seduction.

"That's over ten years."

"So?"

"I'm older than you." Didn't he care?

"You wouldn't be the first older woman I dated," he confessed, though he didn't look at all apologetic.

"Really?" She frowned up at him in surprise. She'd never met a man who admitted to dating older women.

"Truly." He smiled, moving closer.

"I'm fat and I have gray hair under...the dye," she said, nervously running a hand through her freshly tinted locks.

“Behold a woman’s hips! For they are the cradle of the universe,” he replied, one blonde brow arched in amusement.

“Did you just make that up?”

“No, I wrote it in college,” he said, grinning with pride. “If you’re a good girl, some day I’ll recite it all to you.”

Lynette sighed. “I don’t have gratuitous sex.”

“Neither do I. I take my love making very, very seriously, honey. As you will soon learn.”

* * * *

Jon was tired of talking. And tired of being teased, even though he knew it wasn’t deliberate. The sight of her in that nightgown had nearly undone him. He pulled her into his arms, and before she could utter protest, sealed her mouth with his and plunged his tongue inside. He gently cupped her face while he explored her mouth and coaxed her to come and play. She shivered against him. Judging from her earlier reaction, he took that as a good sign. Tentatively she responded, her own tongue seeking, following his lead. It seemed to last forever and his self control was quickly evaporating as his hands roamed from her face to run over her breasts. Jon cupped them in his hands and teased the nipples he’d spent at least ten minutes admiring outside.

Lynette moaned into his mouth and pressed closer as Jon’s lips progressed down her neck to nuzzle the hollow between her breasts, leaving a fiery trail. While his mouth was occupied, his skillful hands worked at the tiny buttons on the front of her nightdress. Lynette struggled out of his grasp before he could peel it back. She stood there holding her gown together, her breathing as ragged as his.

He noted her blush covered not only her face but the tops of her breasts as well. Maybe he should just take the forthright approach. “I want you.”

Chapter Three

“You want *me*?” she stammered, the light dusting of freckles now standing out against her pale skin.

Jon took in her swollen full lips, her long, hard nipples protruding rudely through the thin cotton fabric of her gown, at the lack of any panty-line, and nodded. If anything, she turned two shades redder. “Yeah, I do.”

A myriad of thoughts flashed through her eyes. Excitement, fear, hope. Jon waited, patiently, to see how she’d respond.

Her voice soft, Lynette finally spoke, “Then will you be my lover? Teach me. Show me.”

“Baby, earlier you weren’t even sure you wanted to let me in your house.”

“I know.” She nodded, her face ablaze at her boldness. “I have a, well ... sort of a proposition for you. Can we go sit ... in here.” She pointed, indicating the plum-colored sofa taking up one wall of the living room.

They sat and Lynette laid out her plan.

“I know you won’t be here in town long.” Her hands worked invisible knots in her lap and Jon resisted the urge to reach out and grab one to stop her. It didn’t take a genius to figure out she was nervous and completely out of her element.

He was curious about what exactly it was she wanted ... and touched. He hadn’t imagined his sweet, shy redhead could have such spunk.

“The realtor told me the house was going to be sold soon—your grandmother’s. I’m not very good with men. I’m shy ... and old fashioned, I suppose. And, well, I’ve never been adventurous. My ex-husband is the only man I’ve ever slept with,” she confessed as if it were a sin.

It wasn’t, and Jon found it all very endearing. Not to mention, highly arousing to think he’d only be the second man she’d slept with. He decided to take pity on her.

“Okay.”

“That’s it? Okay?” Thin eyebrows drew together in confusion. As if she were afraid he didn’t understand exactly what she wanted. “But ... but you don’t understand. I don’t just want sex. If we’re going to do this, I want wild, passionate, *hair-pulling* sex ... and not ... just in bed either!”

“Okay!”

Her earnestness tickled him but Jon didn’t give into the laughter that threatened. She really was cute.

“Well, do you want to start right now?”

“Do you have condoms?”

Lynette’s cheeks turned a deep pink. “No.”

“Then tonight is out. I didn’t think to bring any with me. I hadn’t planned on ... this.” He truly hadn’t planned on seducing Lynette tonight. He’d only wanted to spend some time getting to know her and reassure her that she had nothing to be embarrassed about after last night. He should be ashamed for teasing her but he loved watching her get all flustered.

“Could you run home and get some?” Her voice was timid yet hopeful.

“I meant from Alpine. That’s where I live.”

“Oh.”

He gave her a gentle smile “Tomorrow would definitely be better for me. Say around seven?”

* * * *

Astounded at the turn of events Jon practically danced across the yards back to his house, a grin plastered to his face. Her earnestness had tickled him. Her eagerness had warmed his blood, but condoms were a must. So he’d just have to wait. Which would make it all the sweeter.

Once he was in his own living room, he contemplated a much-needed cold shower then decided to not squander a perfectly good hard on. It wasn't his favorite way to write, but sometimes an erection could prompt interesting results. He locked the house up and headed upstairs to the bedroom he’d commandeered.

Once he was naked, he stretched out on the bed, pen and legal pad in one hand, his cock in the other. He'd masturbate and think about what kind of trouble he could put his female character into.

By the time he was through, Jon had been at it a little over an hour, sketched out almost two chapters, including a threesome that would probably give his editor a heart attack, and managed to forestall two orgasms. No mean feat when his mind kept wandering back to sexy little Lynette and the curveball she’d thrown him tonight.

When he reached the limits of his endurance for a third time, Jon headed for the shower to finish jacking off.

* * * *

Self-indulgence wasn't something Lynette was comfortable with. Good Southern girls didn't do that.

Masturbate.

Something she’d actually gotten pretty good at in the last few years of her marriage. She could almost hear her mother's voice in her head. *Shut up, Mother.*

But thoughts of Jon had kept Lynette up tossing and turning, and when she woke up still as achingly frustrated as when she’s she’d finally dozed off, she hadn’t had much choice. By the time she left for work, Lynette was filled with mixed feelings about the evening ahead. She had never in her life acted so rashly and more than once, she considered canceling.

The day slid by in a haze of fatigue dread and excitement. She found herself cursing the lack of sleep that left her eyes gritty, and thoughts of Jon for distracting her.

She mispriced two boxes of books and caught herself intermittently daydreaming about the night to come. She should have been dusting and stocking shelves, not dreaming of oral sex, tangled sheets and hot sweaty bodies.

* * * *

Jon was up early that morning, dusting, mopping and killing dust bunnies. By the time he finished, he'd stopped sneezing and the entire house smelled like Pledge and Murphy's Oil Soap.

Much better.

As a reward, he gave himself the afternoon off to write, opting for his laptop this time. In the early afternoon, he took a break to run out for condoms and lunch. Driving home, he couldn't help but grin at the two bags in his front seat. Two Arby's Beef `n Cheddars in one. A dozen of Trojan's best from Jay's Drug Store in the other.

He settled back in at the dining room table with his laptop, and by the time he heard Lynette's car pull in the driveway next door, he'd transcribed all his hand-written notes and knocked out two chapters.

With a smile of anticipation, he shut down for the day and headed for the shower.

* * * *

The evening was shaping up to be a disaster, at least on Lynette's end. She got home late. Nerves made eating dinner impossible, and deciding what to wear almost gave her a breakdown. After scorching two shirts with the iron she said to hell with it and settled on a brown knit T-shirt and jeans. There was no telling how long she'd actually be wearing them, anyway.

At seven straight up a knock at the door sent the butterflies in her tummy into overdrive. For the first time in her life, she was going to have completely gratuitous no-strings-attached sex. Good girls don't.

Shut up, Mother.

"Take a deep breath," she softly chanted, heading down the hallway toward the front door. She swung the door open to find Jon standing on her porch dressed in khakis and a baby blue polo shirt, a bag in hand. He hadn't forgotten the condoms.

He looked incredibly handsome and utterly confident standing there. She couldn't decide whether to laugh or chicken out.

* * * *

Jon couldn't hold back a grin when the door swung open to reveal the titan-haired vision who had distracted him all day. His mouth fairly watered but he didn't miss her wide-eyed expression, or her pale complexion. Her eyes were overlarge pools of Godiva chocolate, her face pale and her nipples hard shadows under her blouse. She looked like a deer about to bolt. He hadn't even considered how difficult it might be for her after sleeping with only one man her entire life.

His virginal little queen had quite a surprise coming. Between his writing and thinking about her all day, he'd dreamed up all sorts of scandalous ways to spend the evening, though he'd probably keep it fairly tame.

No need to scare her—the first time.

"May I come in?"

Lynette nodded and swallowed, opening the door wide. "Would you like some wine?" A tentative smile played at her lips.

"Wine would be great." Jon leaned over to kiss her and stepped inside. She smelled like sunshine, spice, and books. Her lips trembled the tiniest bit under his, so he kept it

light, enjoying the smooth, rich feel of them beneath his. He was looking forward to finding out if the rest of her would feel the same.

He followed her into the kitchen, taking in the decidedly feminine house he hadn't paid much attention to the night before. The kitchen walls were a bright, pale yellow, and combined with the pinkish tile, reminded him of sherbet. "Interesting color choices. Did you decorate yourself?"

Taking the bottle from her trembling hands, he silently opened it for her and poured.

"Some of it I did ... last week before I moved in. Some of it, like the dining room walls and the kitchen floor, were already like this."

"I like it. It suits you." With a grin, he handed a glass to her and slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Like your accent," he teased. "What did you do? Show me."

"The walls in here." It was such a small thing but she beamed with pride.

"Give me the grand tour." He leaned in for another light kiss. This time her lips didn't tremble. Low in his belly satisfaction mingled with excitement.

Eyes downcast, she led him back through to the dining room. "The only thing I added in here was the rug, and the furniture." She chuckled nervously.

A brilliant orange-red rug with a southwestern design along its borders complimented the dark Spanish-influenced furniture and salmon colored walls.

"I like this. Very nice." Especially the table. What would it be like to lay Lynette down across it and make her his feast? Not tonight, but soon.

"The living room's through here." Her soft drawl drew him out of his sexual reverie. She led; he followed, sipping his wine and admiring the sway of her denim-clad hips.

White walls tinged with the barest hint of purple complemented the plum velvet sofa they'd sat on the previous night, and a charcoal rug covered the hardwood floor.

"You like O'Keeffe?" he asked, nodding toward an oversized copy of O'Keeffe's "Dark Iris Number Two" that hung above the fireplace.

"Yes." She clutched her wineglass as if it were an anchor.

So did he. "You do know what they say about her flowers?" he teased, thinking of the age-old rumor that her flowers resembled a woman's labia.

Lynette snorted. "*Everyone* knows what they say about her flowers."

He laughed and gave her a wicked grin. "You're right. They do."

"I have the 'Red and Orange Hills' in my bedroom." The minute the words left her mouth, Lynette caught her lower lip between her teeth. She finished off her wine in one large swallow while eyeing him over the rim of her glass.

"Show me," he coaxed, keeping his voice low and soothing.

She made a small mewling sound but led him toward the back of the house, passed the bath and another closed door to the end of the hall.

Her bedroom was also done in plum. The queen-sized bed was covered with a velvet duvet and lots of silken pillows in deep jewel tones. Above her bed hung the other O'Keeffe. It's orange, melon, pink and deep purple hues complimented the dark spread and throw pillows.

Sheer lavender curtains hung at the oversized window along one wall, framing the settee, covered in a nubby plum linen. A tall wrought-iron lamp sat on the other side, he presumed for reading. He could feel her watching him as he strolled across the white shag and picked up her latest read. *Peaches* by Lindsay Johns.

“This looks interesting.” He sipped his wine and scanned the back flap. *Honestly, who wrote that drivel on the back?* Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Lynette's hands flutter as if she yearned to yank it out of his hands. It was killing her to watch him hold her book, and Jon bit back a grin. “So, does she get her man?”

“I beg your pardon?” she asked, reaching out to snatch the book away but missed.

“Does Diana get Roger? Or no?” He held it just out of her grasp.

“I haven't finished it.” She shrugged and reached for the book again.

“What do you think?” He gently returned the book to its spot on the chair's arm.

“Well, typically all romances have a...”

“Romance?” he asked, holding the book up. “This doesn't look like the cover of any romance I've ever seen.”

Lynette blushed.

The sepia tinted cover depicted a woman in a low cut blouse, her cleavage and ample breasts clearly visible, as was the lacy detail of her bra. Her head was thrown back and a man's lips were pressed to her neck. He was obviously bare-chested and one of his hands skimmed just under the heroine's breast. It definitely wasn't his mother's “clutch cover.”

“I think they call that ... it's romance combined with erotica.” She looked like a schoolgirl caught smoking. Her creamy complexion took on a pink hue visible even in the dim light.

He swallowed his laughter, thinking of the time his mother caught him reading Kathleen Woodiwiss' *Shanna*. He'd been twelve.

“Interesting. Hustler meets Harlequin. So, anything in there you'd like to try?”

Her cheeks turned pinker and her eyes slid downward in obvious embarrassment.

Jon waited patiently for her to speak. At the same time, he scolded himself for twitting her. The entire room was extremely feminine and inviting. He had expected no less, and she might be every inch the lady, but he had a strong suspicion she had the soul of a courtesan. “Lynette?”

Her head whipped up as if he'd yelled at her.

“Do you want this? Do you want me here? Because, if you don't, I'll leave. Just say the word, okay?”

She nodded even as her color returned to normal and the stiffness in her shoulders visibly eased.

“You're all right with this? You want me to stay?” He sure hoped so because God knew, he wanted to stay.

“I want you to stay.”

“Good.” He gave her another gentle smile. “Now ... anything in there you want to try?”

“Maybe.” Her voice was barely above a whisper and came out sounding like a confession.

“Such as?” He was dying to know which scene she wanted to try. “Lynie, honey ... is it okay if I call you Lynie?”

She nodded again, eyes wide.

“Lynie, if we're gonna be lovers, you have to learn to talk about sex.” While he spoke, he slowly ambled toward her. Jon gently pinned her to the dresser, his legs surrounding hers. “Which one?”

“What do you mean ‘which one’?” Her voice shook.

“Well, surely they have sex more than once. Come on, you can tell me. Just close your eyes and blurt it out.”

Taking a deep breath, she lowered her lids and whispered, practically choking on the words, “He ties her up ... with silk scarves.”

Suddenly his hands were too slippery to hold onto the wineglass any longer. He set it on the dresser and lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. “So you think you'd like to be tied up?”

“Maybe, but not hurt.”

“I think I might like tying you up, and I would *never* hurt you,” he murmured, his lips against her ear. Jon could feel the goosebumps on her arm and the slight tremor his lips caused. “I'll make you a deal.”

“What?” She pulled back and looked up at him, expectant.

He was so close he could see her pupils dilate and contract. Nerves radiated off her in waves and he wanted to lean down and help her nibble on that lower lip she kept biting but he reined himself in. He couldn't wait to be inside her, to feel how soft she was. To hear her moan and call his name. His cock swelled against the constriction of his briefs and his balls throbbed.

Soon, it'd have to be soon.

This was perfect, better than perfect even. “I have a few ... fantasies of my own. Rather than just having *great sex*, what do you say you help me with mine, and I'll help you with yours?”

“Can we have sex outside?”

The minute the words left her mouth, her lips formed a small “O” of surprise. She'd apparently shocked even herself.

Jon laughed, secretly pleased at her display of boldness. “Baby, we can have sex anywhere you want.”

He took the empty glass out of her hand and set it on the dresser next to his. Leaning down, he nibbled at her neck slow and easy, enjoying the feel of her satiny skin beneath his lips. Her breath hitched, and she arched ever so slightly against him. Her surrender only made him hotter.

“Do you want me, Lynie?” he whispered, nipping at the velvety lobe of her ear.

Her only response was a whimper of surrender. Jon backed away and slowly undressed as a wide-eyed Lynette watched.

First came his shirt, peeled off and tossed on the settee. He wasn't a man for weight lifting and washboard abs but he definitely kept in shape. Her lips puckered and her chocolate brown eyes turned almost black. She stared at his belly. At least, he thought that's what she was staring at as she licked her lips. Did she give head? And if so, did she enjoy it? Maybe later they could find out.

Without wasting any movement, he removed his khakis next, leaving his cotton boxer-briefs in place. The white cotton perfectly outlined his erection, blatant evidence of just how much he wanted her.

He sat on the edge of the bed and gave her an easy smile. “Undress for me, Lynie.”

The heavy, sleepy, lustful look in her eyes was replaced with worry. Her mouth worked but no sound came out.

“Undress for me, Lynie.” Jon backed up his words with a nod.

She slowly pushed herself off the dresser and slipped her own sandals off.

“Come here.”

She slowly crossed the carpet until only a foot separated them.

“Now ... undress.”

Lynette swallowed and caught her lip again, grasping the edges of her T-shirt. With one last hesitant glance at him, she pulled it over her head. He couldn't hold back an appreciative sigh. Apparently, his Lynie had a thing for satin.

Purple satin, to boot.

In the dim light it made her skin glow. He reached up and unsnapped her bra, eager to see them, taste them, test their weight in his hands. She slid it off, meeting his gaze despite the red of her cheeks. Her ample breasts, slightly pink from her blush, were blessed with puffy, tip-tilted nipples. He smiled again, resisting the urge to reach out and tweak one. Or catch it in his mouth and—his cock twitched and strained, growing harder at the knowledge that he had her right where he wanted her.

“Beautiful. You have beautiful breasts, Lynie.” He kept his voice low as his hands skimmed across the satiny skin of her belly and cupped them in his hands, lightly running his thumbs over the darkened peaks. He could feel her heat but he wanted to smell her. Taste her.

He watched her face, enjoying her response. Her lips pursed as a mewl of pleasure slid past them and her eyes were glued to his tanned hands on her pale flesh.

“Now the pants. Hurry.”

She quickly shucked her jeans, revealing matching panties and stepped into his waiting arms, her eyes shyly downcast. As he pulled her near and buried his face in her breasts, his cock strained for freedom. He cupped them in his hands, amazed at how soft her skin was. As he sucked and nibbled, enjoying the feel of them in his mouth, he gauged her responses: the lip caught between her teeth, the tiny sighs. Lynette leaned forward, back arched, her body silently begging for more, and he gently tugged her down next to him, pushing her back onto the velvet spread beside him.

He stopped long enough to slip her panties off, then leaned over and kissed the triangle of curls between her thighs, smiling to himself at her shiver. His hand traveled up her thigh, across her soft round belly to caress the side of one plump breast, then higher, to the column of her throat, exposed so he could see the pulse fluttering there. He continued on across her jaw to her lips, watching for her every reaction. He nuzzled one pillowy breast while he teased the other, rolling and pinching her nipples between his fingers until both coral peaks were impossibly taut.

With a squirm of obvious frustration, Lynette spread her legs but Jon ignored her silent demand and took the opportunity to massage the insides of her thighs instead.

Lynette ached. Every inch of her hummed with increasing frustration. She wanted him to touch her, there, between her legs. She wanted him to stroke her clit and slide his fingers inside her, but she wasn't quite brave enough to say the words. The combination of his interest and her need made her bold, though, and when his free hand, which had been playing with her hair, trailed across her lips, she gently drew his finger into her mouth. He leaned up and nibbled on her ear until she giggled and squirmed away—as much as he'd let her.

“I want you,” he whispered only to move away again.

She stared at him, caught in his deep blue gaze while she tried to silently convey exactly what she wanted. “More,” was the best she could do.

“Like that?” he asked, lips poised above one tight wet peak while he slipped a finger, just one, inside her.

Lynette nodded with a sigh of relief as he explored every slick inch of her. But one wasn't enough and she nearly screamed in frustration when he stopped to massage her mound, then nearly laughed in glee as he found her swollen clit and stroked it.

She moaned, unconsciously pulling her legs higher and arching her hips to give him easier access when he slipped two fingers into her silky tight sheath. She fluttered around his fingers, squeezing him with surprisingly strong muscles.

A deep satisfaction filled Jon at her responsiveness, her heat. But he wanted her drenched and aching. He wanted her to beg. He positioned himself between her thighs and let his mouth take over where his fingers had left off. He held her open and lightly ran his tongue across her clitoris, then smiled to himself as her nails dug into his shoulder and latched onto fistfuls of hair. It wasn't enough. He wanted to push her to her limits.

He increased his pace, sucking and nibbling at her clit. She was so close, and he didn't know whether to push her or lead her gently across.

Lynette moaned his name and as her frantic moans increased, so did the speed of his mouth and fingers. She thrust her hips rhythmically against his tongue, her body reaching higher, until the force of her orgasm had her screaming his name.

While she recovered, a shaking Jon meandered back up her body, stopping to tease each nipple, softly kiss the valley between her breasts and nuzzle that tickle spot just beneath her ear. His patience had nearly reached a breaking point.

“Scoot up,” he whispered, then reached for the box of condoms on the nightstand. Shaking one out, he threw the box to the floor and impatiently ripped the package open.

Once he was ready, he settled himself between her lush hips and gently slid his cock inside, surprised at what a snug fit she was. She moaned and pulsated around him, greedily welcoming him as he stroked her deep and slow. His arms cradled her, and he nibbled at her lips. She whimpered and moved with him as he whispered endearments.

“You feel like heaven, baby.” He kept a slow yet steady pace, struggling against the impatient need to rut.

“Oh, Jon, that feels so good.”

“You are so beautiful, Lynie.” Her name came out a sibilant hiss. “I could do this all night.”

“Please,” was her only reply as she caressed his back, nails lightly scratching his skin and sending electrical impulses dancing down his spine.

He leaned down and gently nipped each taut nipple. “Want more?”

“Oh yes.”

With a satisfied grin, he thrust a little deeper. “Faster?”

“Please.” The word stretch like taffy.

“Deeper?”

“Yes!”

Even as his own control slipped inch by inch, Jon obeyed her requests, picking up speed and stroking as deep as he possibly could and she matched him thrust for thrust.

He stopped just long enough to catch his breath and sit up. He rested her legs on his shoulders so he could slide deeper still and stroke her clit with the pad of his thumb.

And watch her. He wanted to watch her come this time.

She was a beautiful sight, with her eyes closed and her head thrown back, her skin warm and creamy against the dark purple sheets. She clutched at the bedcover and moaned, begging him not to stop.

“Like that?” he asked, not letting up.

“Yes ... Jon,” she cried, breathless.

His mind was numb to all but the peak they'd nearly reached. He felt her quicken around him. Her hips took on a mind of their own, surging against him. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she moaned long and low. With a final surge, he allowed the dam inside him to burst, slamming into her. Jon felt his own climax from the top of his head down to his toes.

*

Lynette's toes curled and her calf muscles tightened. Her head was thrown so far back she thought her neck might snap. She didn't even try to contain the screams that slipped past her lips as her mind reeled at the force of her orgasm.

Jon collapsed on top of her and they both lay there panting and slick with sweat, trying to catch their breath. Neither of them moved for the longest time.

“I'll be right back,” he finally murmured, slipping out of bed.

Lynette's mind drifted as she lay there drowsily contemplating what had just happened until Jon returned from the bathroom. Never, in forty-one years had she felt anything so intense, nor imagined it was even possible.

“Are you okay?”

“I think so, why?” she replied softly.

“You're so quiet.”

“Honestly, I'm not quite sure what to say.” She turned on her side to face him.

“Why?”

“I've never had a reason to discuss an encounter and I've never experienced anything like this. With my ... ex it was nothing like this,” she admitted, a bit chagrined for even mentioning Roger. “Sorry.”

“Don't be.” With a smile, he leaned over and softly kissed her.

Lynette smiled back and ran her fingers through his hair as he rested his head on her shoulder. As she drifted off, her mind wandered back to her marriage and how Robert had never been nearly as adventurous or exciting a lover, never giving or receiving orally, never experimenting with new positions. She didn't know whether to be angry at being so cheated or to laugh.

Chapter Four

Jon watched her doze a while, then slipped out of bed. He grinned to himself as he quietly dressed. He knew she'd be shy but her eagerness had surprised him—pleasantly so. The hall clock rang four when he slipped out her front door, shoes in hand. He shivered in the chilly pre-dawn air as he crossed to his own yard. It was heavy with the tantalizing smell of rain they'd probably never get.

He was, in a word, enchanted with Lynette.

A few minutes later he settled in on the couch, the heat cranked up and a fresh mug of coffee at his elbow and wrote, fueled by the night's adventures. Giving up on pen and paper, he returned to his laptop. The words flew from his brain to his fingertips, with no stopping in between. He wrote with no regard for spelling or punctuation, grammar or even, at times, reason, and knew he'd go back later and find spots he'd forgotten to put complete words in, places he'd transposed letters and even passages he'd forgotten he'd written. That was normal. Often his fingers went faster than his brain and eighty words per minute wasn't enough. By the time the sun danced through the dining room window, he was fast asleep on the couch.

*

Lynette woke up with a smile on her face, sore but sated. It had, to be frank, been two years since she'd had sex. The stubborn part of her refused to call what she and Roger had done toward the end of their marriage lovemaking. More often than not, he acted like it was a chore to be borne, like mowing the grass or washing her car.

She shook off thoughts of her ex in favor of Jon, giving in to the twinge of disappointment that he'd left without saying goodbye. But then they'd never discussed him staying all night. Gingerly, she eased out of bed and headed toward the bathroom, pleasantly sore in places rusty from disuse.

While she waited for her shower water to warm, Lynette stood at the vanity studying her nude reflection. Something she normally avoided doing. Until Jon, she'd thought of her body as more of a functioning machine, not a living breathing entity of its own, complete with its own needs and cravings and desires—with the ability and desire to behave sinfully, yet feel no shame.

She ran her fingers through her hair and pushed it off her face. Thanks to her mother's constant nagging about being in the sun, Lynette's face was pleasingly wrinkle free, except for the little crinkle lines around her eyes. She flexed her jaw and ran a hand across her neck. Great cheek bones and no wattle.

Then her eyes dropped to her hips. They were wide and there was no getting around that but Jon didn't seem to mind them. Or her large bottom. She couldn't suppress another smile at memories of the previous night.

She turned sideways, revealing the distressingly natural outward curve of her belly. Not even years of walking a golf course had been able to keep it at bay. Facing forward again, she studied her ample breasts. Pale and smooth and still pointing in the right direction, thank God. Her nipples puckered beneath her gaze and she pressed her hands to her cheeks, as if she could will away the heat that filled them. Jon again. She smiled and,

feeling better than she had in months—years—showered, dressed, and headed off to work.

Today was going to be a very good day.

* * * *

Jon woke to the chirping of his cell phone and fumbled his way along the coffee table until his hand closed around it. He rolled onto his back and checked the display. Two o'clock, three in New York and his editor, Marci Sands was checking up on him. With a groan he pushed "talk" and silently stretched. "Lo?"

"How are things in Texas?" she asked, her voice husky from years of smoking.

"Fine. How are things in The Big Core?"

She chuckled at his stale old joke. "Great, great. How's the new book coming?"

"It's really moving along great. I hope to have a first draft done in say eight weeks?"

Marci was by far the best editor Jon had ever had, and he'd had a few. She was also a friend and he respected her opinion when it came to writing matters.

What he didn't respect was her position on him "coming out." She loved the idea; he hated it. While he appreciated how high the stakes were for the both of them, ultimately the decision was his.

"You know we're nowhere near being under the gun. Yet," she teased.

"I know but, well, something hit me."

"What's her name?"

Jon grinned up at the dusty fan overhead. "Now, now! Did you have a reason for calling or just want to harass me?" He rubbed his face, eradicating the last of the sleep from his brain, and gave her his full attention.

"No, actually I did. The publicity department called. They want you to autograph thirty copies of *Peaches*."

"Send 'em on." Pausing Jon added, "I'm not at home though. I'll be in Bluebonnet for the next two weeks."

"Where the hell do you southerners come up with such atrocious places to live?"

"Two words ... Buffalo, Big Moose and Schenectady."

Marci shouted with laughter. "That's three. So have you heard from Veronica?"

"Not yet." His agent Veronica, or Ronni Sutherland, was currently shopping his first mainstream novel. The one nibble they'd had, besides Marcie, also wanted him to come out—share his pen name with the reading public. It was something he just wasn't prepared to do. He gave Marci the address to send the books to and hung up, then immediately dialed Ronni's office and left a message for her to call him back.

He spent the afternoon cleaning Gram's house, since he was too distracted to write. The living and dining rooms were as done as they'd get for now, except for the decorative doo-das everywhere. He quickly packed up the milk glass his aunt wanted and put the rest of the knick-knacks in another box. In the kitchen, he fried bacon and threw together a couple of BLTs, while he started on the cabinets that lined one wall. They were full of dishes and cookware and Tupperware. The good china in the dining room he'd pack up for his cousin Pam at a later time but the kitchen stuff wasn't anything anyone in the family would want or need. *Goodwill*.

By the time he was done eating and had washed his skillet, he'd filled two boxes and thrown away umpteen million Cool Whip bowls.

He placed a call to Goodwill for a pickup in two days, then headed upstairs and started on one of the spare bedrooms. Judging from the maze of magazines and boxes of junk stacked on the floor around the purple and white gingham bed, Gram had turned Aunt Phyllis' old room into storage.

Her punishment for moving to Seattle and adopting a Korean orphan.

With only the sound of country singer Deryl Dodd to keep him company, Jon spent the majority of the afternoon hauling all the magazines and newspapers out to the curb. Then he dove under the bed. He was so engrossed in pulling out boxes and boxes of old photos, the sound of a voice in the hall hours later nearly undid him. He rapped his head against the metal bed frame.

"I'm in here!" Jon sneezed, and managed to bang the tender spot at his hairline in the process. He was so grimy, he felt as if he'd gone swimming in a vat of dust. It was after six. He'd completely lost track of time and Lynie was home.

"Bless you! My goodness, it's dusty in here. Are you hungry?" she asked from the bedroom door.

Jon sat up and gave her a tired smile. For a woman who'd spent most of the previous night engaged in hot, sweaty sex, she looked damned well rested.

"I cooked." With a smile, she stepped into the room, eyeing the dusty tracks in the old wood floor and the stacks of to-be-shipped versus to-be-tossed.

"What's for dessert?" he asked, wiggling one eyebrow.

"You're being naughty." She crossed her arms and gave him a stern look he didn't buy for a minute.

"And you love it." He propped himself against the bed frame and gingerly probed his forehead with his fingers to assess the damage. "What's for dinner?"

"Nothing fancy, just chicken enchilada casserole. I just stuck it in the oven so you've got about twenty minutes to shower and clean up," she said, pointedly ignoring his earlier innuendo.

"Don't you mean *we*?" he teased. He should be ashamed but he did so love baiting her.

"I have to go make a salad."

"Hey?" He crooked a finger at her, motioning her over. Once she was close enough, he grabbed her fingers and yanked her down on top of him. She had to brace herself against the bed to keep from falling as she straddled him. That put her breasts in his face and he took full advantage, nipping at her cleavage through the thin material while she was still off kilter and unable to stop him.

"Jon!" she squealed.

He just laughed but gave her a chance to reposition herself on his lap. "Kiss me, baby."

"Jon," she softly begged.

"Kiss me, Lynie," he coaxed in a low voice.

She leaned down and tentatively sipped at his lips. Jon's tongue fluttered against hers and she opened her mouth, welcoming him. He went easy on her, though, and the kiss was slow, languorous, lazy and deep.

"Sure you don't want to take a shower with me?"

"Dinner might burn."

"Have you ever taken one with a man before?"

She shook her head, her eyes drifting away from his.

“Tonight? Afterward? Will you?” Anticipation curled in his belly at her nod. “Go finish dinner. I’ve got some wine I’ll bring over if you want.”

“That sounds good.” She gingerly stood up and stepped off him, then offered him a hand up. Jon took it and kissed her lightly. “I’ll see you in fifteen?”

He hid his grin as she licked her lips. “Bye.”

After she left, he showered and threw on clean clothes, anxious to find out what tonight would bring. He paused at the ancient refrigerator and fished out a chilled bottle of Llano Signature Estacado from behind a quart of milk. But before he could get out the door, his cell phone rang in the living room. He darted back through the house and snatched it up on the final ring. “Hello!”

“Jon, it’s Ronnie. Are you okay?”

“Just about to walk out the door.” He set the cold bottle on the coffee table and sank into the couch cushions. “But I wanted you to know I heard from Marcie today.”

“If she’s putting too much pressure on you, I can run interference.”

“I’m okay, but how’s it looking on your end?”

The long pause before she spoke told him *it* wasn’t looking good. “We got two more rejections . . . sorry, Scout.”

That brought their total to four, though the first two had been his doing. “We still got four rounds of live ammo out there.” He didn’t feel near as optimistic as he sounded.

“Chin up. It won’t be too much longer. And if not this manuscript, then another one.”

* * * *

He leapt the picket fence between their yards, then chided himself for acting like a teenager. The last thing he needed was a broken leg. But in the back of his mind, the conversation with Ronnie replayed itself. Those damned rejections bothered him—a lot. If he’d just give in to Marcie, he’d have his sale, but he wasn’t sure it was worth the readers he’d lose.

Lynie stood on the porch watching him, arms crossed, a big grin on her face. More than anything he wanted to sit and talk about the entire mess with her over a glass of wine. Jon forced a smile on his face and whistled, as if he were Gene Kelly in one of the black and white musicals his mom still loved to watch.

“Ready to eat?”

“Starving.”

“So, what would you have done if you’d tripped jumping over that fence?”

“Begged you to come nurse me?” He climbed the porch steps as sedately as possible and planted a big smacking kiss on her lips. Then he swatted her ass as he walked past her into the house, and shrugged off the rejections and New York in general. He’d just have to deal with it like he always had.

She squealed. “If you weren’t holding that bottle, Jonathan!”

“You sound like my mom.”

“Dinner’s ready, Sir.” She motioned him toward the dining room with a wave of her hand.

The casserole oozed melted cheese and filled the air with the mouthwatering tang of sour cream, chicken and spices, and the table looked cozy with her cobalt blue dishes and blue-stemmed wine goblets and brightly striped place mats against the dark mahogany.

Jon opened the wine with the corkscrew Lynie had left on the table and filled both their glasses.

The meal was great and he was surprised to discover just how much they had in common. From dominoes, to rodeos, to being outside, to their love of books, which was a given. He felt a small twinge of guilt over his sin of omission, but didn't know her well enough to share that part of his life with her. Lynette was indeed a gardener, as he'd first assumed. Briefly, he wished he could show her the gardens he'd put in at his place in Alpine.

"Disney or Warner Brothers?"

"Disney!" Her shocked tone implied there was no other. "I watched the Mickey Mouse Club for Pete's sake!"

In reruns maybe. "That was before my time," he teased.

"Do you want dessert?"

"Yup!" He wiggled his eyebrows.

"Then save the age jokes," she warned, standing and removing their plates.

"Yes, ma'am." His grin, a sharp contrast to his humble tone, morphed into a leer at the sight of her swaying hips heading for the kitchen. He was already anticipating what would come after dessert.

"More wine with your dessert or something stronger?" she called out from the kitchen.

"Wine's great. Not much of a man, am I?"

"Now I don't know about that." She returned and slipped a plate in front of him. Chocolate torte smothered with ganache and topped with a raspberry glaze. His mouth watered. The only thing better would have been using Lynie as his plate. A shiver of desire sliced down his spine.

"You did *not* just make this?" Jon's chocolate weakness would rival a woman's.

"I must confess I didn't. There's a bakery two doors down from the bookstore." Lynette shrugged and settled back in her own chair.

"I don't care, Lynie. Chocolate is chocolate."

She laughed at his undisguised cocoa-lust, glad to see his mood had improved since he'd arrived.

"This is so good," she sighed, eyes closed as she consumed another bite.

Jon grunted in agreement and Lynette giggled again.

He laid down his fork a few minutes later and leaned back in the chair, sipping the last of his wine and fighting the urge to ask for seconds. Maybe later, after he'd satisfied his other hunger. "You do know the way to a man's heart."

"More?" she asked, pointing at his empty plate.

"I better not. I'll be too stuffed to move." Standing, he carried both their empty plates in the kitchen. She followed with the remains of the casserole and they cleaned up, Jon storing the leftovers and while she washed. He finished first and leaned against the counter, beside her. "So what other fantasies do you have?"

He watched as the glass casserole dish she'd been about to put in the dishwasher slipped from her grasp and settled in the rack with a heavy clank. "Why don't you tell me one of yours?"

"Outside, in public..."

"I couldn't..."

Jon cut off her protest with a shake of his head. "You didn't let me finish. I meant in a public place and not full sex. Knowing my luck, I'd be arrested." He grinned. "But I'd love to make you come. Your turn."

*

Lynette placed the last glass in the dishwasher, added soap and started it, buying herself time before she turned to face him. "Water?"

"In water?" he replied eyebrows raised.

She nodded, nibbling at her lip.

"Shower? Bathtub? Hot tub? Does it matter?"

She shook her head as her nerves returned in full force. To some people, it might not seem like much of a fantasy but to her it was. And good Southern girls didn't talk about sex. She'd have to work on that. He smelled so damn good and she loved the feel of him near her.

"You promised to take a shower with me after we have sex," he reminded her. His voice slid across her skin like raw silk.

She nodded again and stood her ground as he moved closer. Lynette knew what was coming and she welcomed it. Her panties were already embarrassingly damp.

"Your turn," she whispered, looking up at Jon.

His blue eyes were stormy as he pinned her against the counter and slanted his mouth across hers. She could tell he wasn't in the mood to be gentle, and she didn't want him to be.

He tasted like chocolate and wine and the kiss was an erotic, explicit precursor to what would come very soon. His tongue probed deep as he fucked her mouth and his hips ground against her, showing her just what he wanted.

"Right here?"

"Condoms?"

She pointed toward the bedroom, her breathing heavy. "I don't think I can wait," she whimpered, shocked at her own words.

"That bad, huh?" Jon's own breathing was nearly as heavy as hers as he unsnapped her jeans and pushed them down low on her hips. Lynette leaned against the counter and tugged him closer, pulling his mouth back down to hers.

With his free hand, he unbuttoned her shirt and paused to glance down at her panties. "Pink?"

"Mmm, hmm." She buried her nose in his neck and inhaled the clean, soapy, masculine scent of him.

"Do you always match?"

"Usually." She wriggled her hips and sighed with pleasure as his fingers slipped inside her damp panties and expertly stroked her swollen clit. His lips found her ear, then his teeth lightly nibbled. Her hands clutched at his back and she moaned his name.

"Like that?" he whispered, his warm breath tickling her ear.

Her only reply was a gasp of pleasure.

"Did you think about me today, Lynie?"

She moaned again, nodding since her tongue refused to work. She'd spent most of the day with her chin propped in her hand, replaying the previous night.

Jon unsnapped her bra, pushed the silky material aside and cupped a breast, leaning down to suckle at it. Her belly clenched as she arched against his fingers at the erotic

picture of him latched onto her nipple. His deep blue eyes were hot and seductive; his tanned skin a sharp contrast to her pale skin. She wanted more, and clutched at his hair, pulling him in close, urging him to bite just a little bit harder. Her knees went weak as he slipped three fingers inside her, stretching and exploring. He stroked and probed and all of it only made her hungry for more.

“It’s still my turn, remember?” he whispered.

She nodded and tried to focus on whatever he was saying and not what he was doing.

“I want to watch you masturbate.”

“Jon!” When he bit her nipple, she’d felt it deep in her belly. She wanted to feel his skin on hers. She wanted to touch him like he did her. Every inch of her was on fire.

“I want to lay you down on that dining room table and smear the rest of that chocolate torte on you.”

The erotic image he painted made her need for release even more urgent, and she locked her arms around his neck as she climaxed with long hoarse moan.

*

They stood forehead to forehead for the longest time until he leaned back and looked down at her while he licked his fingers clean.

She watched him, her eyes hot, and his cock throbbed in response to the picture she made standing there with her lips swollen, to the musky scent and taste of her sex, to her uninhibited display and the wildness that lurked just beneath the surface. Unable to wait any longer, he pushed her jeans down, stopped just long enough for her to step out of them and dragged her through the house to her bedroom.

They stripped and fell on the unmade bed, lips locked and tongues as tangled as her sheets. Jon came up for air and a condom, then fumbled to get it on. He felt as anxious and excited as a fifteen-year-old. Without any preamble he found her moist opening and thrust inside. A shiver of pleasure worked its way down his spine as she met him half way with a primitive growl.

She felt so soft and silky wrapped around his cock, her hips cradled him, her arms wrapped around him; he felt as if he’d dived into a vat of warm chocolate. While underneath him, she made little mewling sounds as her nails dug into the skin of his back. His hips worked like a piston and he strained, not even trying to hold back.

“Lynie!” he cried, eyes squeezed shut.

“Yes ... hurry ... harder.” Lynette leaned up and bit him on the shoulder, then higher at the crook of his neck, and the pleasure-pain drove him on.

“Lynie.” Louder this time, “Oh, Lynie!”

She met him thrust for thrust, milking him, pushing him, coaxing him into the abyss. “Come, come for me,” she hissed, nipping at his ear.

Two more thrusts were all he lasted until his control crumbled to dust. Jon hurtled over the edge, burrowing deep inside her and shouting her name.

*

She hadn’t come again but it didn’t matter. Lynette shook from the intensity of their coupling. Just like Jon did above her. She held him against her until the cool air dried the sweat on their skin, and they drifted, caught between waking and sleep, both of them sated and quiet.

* * * *

“You’re awake?” he whispered a few minutes later.

“Yeah.” She snuggled closer, enjoying the feel of him still firmly seated inside her.

“How ‘bout that shower?”

“Sounds good,” she murmured.

He slipped out of the bed and started the water, then returned to gently tug her out from under the covers. They had sex in the shower and then, after a nice long nap, in her bed again, this time with her on top.

He ended up staying the night and by dawn, the condom box was half-empty.

* * * *

The days that followed flew by and they fell into a comfortable pattern, one of them cooking in the evenings and the other helping—usually at her place since his was such a wreck. He’d spend his days cleaning or writing and she’d work at the bookstore. Jon still hesitated to tell her about his work, about his rejections and about his uncertainty over things in New York, unsure of how she’d react. One ex-girlfriend had accused him of using their sex life as fodder for his books. In a way, it was true. He couldn’t help but add a dash of this or that from real life but he’d never used his relationship with a woman as the basis for a book.

One afternoon Jon stopped by the store and brought Lynette lunch—and condoms—and she closed the shop. She didn’t know it, but they were celebrating. Ronni had called with news of an offer. More than anything he wanted to tell Lynette, but it wasn’t a done deal until Ronni said it was a done deal.

So he consoled himself by teasing Lynette so much that they made love standing up in the stock room. With her, the sex was intense, but even after a week and a half he knew it wasn’t just about great sex anymore.

Jon watched Lynette growl in frustration and shove another stack of books on the shelf in front of her.

“I never imagined it would take me this long to rearrange the store how I want it.” She stood three bookshelves down reorganizing the “I” authors.

Jon pulled two books off the shelf, one historical and one mainstream suspense, both by the same author, and played dumb. “She writes both genres?”

“Yeah!” Lynette’s curls bobbed as she nodded. Her hair was a mess after their encounter in the storeroom, and he still had her scarf shoved in his back pocket as a souvenir.

“Do you read her stuff?”

“I like both, so yeah.”

“It doesn’t bother you when someone switches genres? Historical to suspense is a pretty big leap.”

She scrunched up her face for a second, then shrugged. “Sorta, but I always give a writer a chance. I figure maybe they get bored and need to try something new. I know I get bored reading the same thing over and over, so I can imagine writers do.”

So could he. As much as Jon enjoyed writing about people’s sexual escapades, there were only so many ways to actually have sex. He’d needed the challenge that came with branching out. “So what would you do if someone like Lindsay Johns changed genres?”

Lynette laughed and took the books away from him. “I’d give her the same chance I give every other author, though it’d be kinda weird after reading all her erotic romances.”

“Maybe her mainstream stuff would be just as hot.”

“What do you know that I don’t?”

He knew by now that Lindsay Johns books, and racy novels in general, were her secret weakness, and she read like she made love—with an unquenchable appetite. Jon scrambled for a reply that wouldn’t give him away. “Well, can you imagine her hopping from erotica to horror?”

“Good point.” She leaned up and pressed a kiss to his chin, and he pulled her close for something longer and slower.

She was funny, bright, and intelligent. He enjoyed her company and valued her opinion.

So why couldn’t he just come clean?

Chapter Five

“Jon,” the voice on the line chirped, full of honey. Oh Lord bless her, it was his mother, who always smelled like jasmine and *always* got her way. There was nothing worse than seeing disappointment in his mother’s doe-like brown eyes and Jon, his father and brother all went out of their way to make sure they were never on the receiving end of “that look.” Talk about an iron fist encased in velvet. Mom had it down pat.

“Mom! How are you?” He loved her even if she drove him to drink at times.

“I miss you, Jon. It’s been ages since you’ve been home.”

“I miss you too, Mom.” He knew darn good and well that he was being set up for something.

“Then you *will* come up for lunch at the club on Friday, since you’re so close. It’s time you met Pete’s new fiancée!”

And there you go. She didn’t ask, just naturally assumed he’d be there. He would. Despite the fact that it meant an almost two-hour drive to Austin in traffic that would make a New York cabby swear. And a lost day of writing. And an inquisition about his continued bachelor state. Briefly, he considered taking Lynie with him, but he wasn’t ready to share her yet.

“We’ll meet on the patio about eleven.”

“That means I have to leave here at nine. Can we do it at one?” He sank into the sofa and wiped his hands on his grimy T-shirt.

“If we wait too long, it’ll be too crowded and hot to eat on the patio. Besides, your father and I have an early tee time. We’ll be done by eleven.”

“All right,” he sighed. “Eleven it is.”

“Oh, and Jon, we’re golfing with the Jamisons and they’ll be joining us for lunch. You remember Breanna Jamison, don’t you?”

With a sigh, he rubbed his temples, fighting off the beginnings of a major headache. “How could I forget her,” he drawled.

His mother had been pushing Brea at him since high school. Her nickname made him think of cheese. She was two years younger than him, single, very pretty and perfectly groomed for the Junior League life. Definitely not his cup of scotch.

Jon made all the obligatory goodbye noises and hung up with another sigh. He hated the country club; it, like the pretty Brea, was very much not his style. *The things you do for mothers.*

His dad definitely owed him now. If he’d been in Alpine, this wouldn’t be happening.

The rest of the afternoon was spent staying out of the way of the painters. It’d be eggshell white all the way around; satin here; semi-gloss there. It made him slightly numb. If he had been decorating to live there, Jon would have felt more enthusiastic about the project. The hardwood floors had already been refinished, and since his father had given him carte blanche on the house, Jon had bought a new stove and refrigerator as well as a washer and dryer. If dear old dad said anything, he’d use the old gas stove’s obvious fire hazard status as a defense.

* * * *

“Happily Ever After!” Lynette sang into the phone. She still loved the name she’d given the bookstore

“Well, aren’t you just a bundle of cheer!”

“Bettina?! How’s that baby cooking?” Lynette grinned and settled on her stool.

“Oh I’m swellin’ on up there. Luckily, Ty don’t mind. How are you doing, honey? You buy a house, and I don’t hear a thing from you anymore, so I called to see if you were free for lunch tomorrow.”

“I’d love to, and I’m doing great. Actually better than great,” she lowered her voice, despite the lack of customers.

“Would ‘better than great’ have anything to do with the blonde we saw you with at the dance hall Saturday night?” Bettina teased. “Never mind, just gimme all the juicy details!”

Lynette did, not leaving much out—except the really, really personal stuff. Bettina nearly busted a gut over the brownie incident.

“So, you hooked up with old lady Lindsay’s grandson, huh? She was the biggest witch! You go girl!”

“I know he’s younger than me...”

“Oh hell, like I care!”

“I know *you* don’t, but I feel strange, sometimes, when we go places.” Like the dancehall. Jon might have missed the occasional stare, but she hadn’t.

“Why in the world?” Concern filled the younger woman’s voice.

“He’s very sweet and well, wonderful. Jon treats me like a queen ... at least, *I* think so. But, I can’t help wondering.”

“To hell with other people! And I hope he’s not too gentlemanly.”

“You are so bad, Bettina!” Lynette’s face heated up at the memory of their encounter in the beer gardens.

“So, how’s the sex?”

“Oh my gawd, it’s amazing,” she gushed. “I never in my life ... if I didn’t know better I’d think it was love, but I know it’s got to be because the sex is just *so* good! And besides no one falls in love in less than two weeks.”

“Girl, please! Jessa and Zack met and married in six weeks ... after they met on the Internet, no less.”

“You’re kidding.” She’d met the band’s lead singer and her multi-talented husband. Neither of them looked like the type to go looking for love on the information super-highway.

“Anything’s possible. Hell, Ty and I *had* to get married. Honestly, that man worships me, and believe you me, it’s mutual.”

“But he’s so much younger than me. I know it’s not like that with us.”

“For ya’ll or for you?”

“For him?” She frowned down at the romance review magazine open on the counter.

“You really got it bad?”

“Yeah, I suppose I do,” she admitted with a sigh.

“Well, if it’s meant to be, it’s meant to be. Just hang in there.”

“Jon’s almost done with the house. Then he goes back to Alpine. We agreed on no strings.” Falling in love had never been a part of their bargain.

“So what have you got to lose if you tell him how you feel?”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“Well... It’s up to you, but it’ll either be sweet or bittersweet. Don’t let it be bitter, okay.”

They arranged a time for tomorrow’s lunch and after they hung up, Lynette spent a lot of time thinking about what Betti said. She truly enjoyed Jon’s company, and not just in bed either. She’d come to treasure their evenings together and when they were together he always treated her like a queen, in private and in public. Despite the fact that she occasionally felt like something was bothering him.

Why he’d picked her, she still didn’t understand. There certainly wasn’t anything special or out of the ordinary about her, but deep down inside she knew that didn’t matter to him. They enjoyed each other in and out of bed, and she’d had more laughter and sunshine in her two weeks with Jon than in her seventeen years of marriage.

Maybe she could think of some way to feel him out—no puns intended—about his feelings. Try to find out if it was mutual. He’d definitely be worth the effort. Before she could climb off her stool and lock up for the day, the phone rang again.

“Happily Ever After!”

“Hey, you on your way out?” *Speak of the devil.*

“Hey yourself,” she purred softly. A grin nearly split her face as she circled the counter and locked the front door. “And yeah, I am.”

“I cooked.”

“And didn’t blow the house up?” she gently teased.

“Nope! Just come on over here, everything’s all ready.”

“Want me to bring anything?”

“Only your pretty self.”

Lynette set the alarm, then stopped at the bakery next door for chocolate chip cookies. Fifteen minutes later she pulled in her driveway and headed across the yard to Jon’s house. The smell of fresh-cut grass tickled her nose and the hedges that bordered the front of the house had been tamed. A half a dozen bags, as well as a pile of brush, sat at the curb. Apparently the lawn company Jon had hired had come today.

He met her at the front door with a glass of wine and a kiss. His lips sipped at hers while one hand buried itself in her curls.

“What’s for dinner?” she asked, breaking the kiss. Normally, she cooked, or they cooked together at her place, so having him cook for her was a nice change.

“Baked pork chops, twice baked potatoes, fresh green beans and apple crisp,” he whispered, stealing another kiss.

“Mmm. You’ve been busy!”

“Busier than you know. What’s in the bag?”

“Chocolate chip cookies.”

“You are so good to me.”

She smiled as her cheeks warmed, and followed him through the house to the spotless kitchen. The faint smell of refinished floors and fresh paint mingled with the aroma of dinner. How he’d managed to turn the sow’s ear that had been his grandmother’s house into a silk purse, still amazed her.

He pushed her into a chair at the little dinette tucked under the kitchen window and refused to let her help. Lynette sipped her wine, savoring the smooth, smoky flavor of the Zinfandel, and enjoyed being waited on for a change.

“I talked to Bettina today,” she said between bites a few minutes later.

“Who’s Bettina?”

“The woman I bought the house from, silly. The woman I was at the bar with ... who did the makeover. You owe her a big thank you.”

“For what? Making you my neighbor?” he asked with a grin.

“No, my makeover, silly.”

“She did nothing but enhance what was already there.” He gave her a stern frown as he finished off the last of his potatoes.

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t hold back a smile of pleasure.

With a smile of his own, Jon refilled her wineglass. “Sorry, and...?”

“We’re going to lunch tomorrow.”

“I’m jealous. Mom’s ordered me home to Austin for a parental lovefest.” He forked up a bite of his pork chop and chewed thoughtfully. From the hangdog expression on his face, he obviously wasn’t looking forward to it.

“You shouldn’t talk about your mother like that.”

“I know. I love her but...” He just grinned and shrugged. “I’ll be back in time for dinner, though. How about we hit the Scenic Loop Café, then a movie. Will that make up for my desertion?”

“I suppose,” she teased, lips twitching.

He pushed his half-eaten dinner away and gave her a mysterious smile. “Maybe I have something else that’ll make it up to you.”

“Such as?”

“You have one more fantasy I haven’t taken care of.”

She watched him with a frown on her face, unable to think of which fantasy he was referring to.

“Come find out.” Jon stood and held out his hand.

She took his hand and let him lead her upstairs to the bedroom he’d commandeered.

Lynette could feel her face heating, even as a tremor of excitement ran through her. The blinds had been drawn and a candle on the dresser filled the air with something spicy and sexy. Sheer scarves in different colors were tied to the wooden spindles of the old plantation bed.

They stopped beside the bed and Jon turned to face her. His blue eyes had turned a smoky gray, a sure sign that he was as excited as she was.

“Hold your arms up,” he ordered.

Wide eyed and with her heart caught somewhere in her throat, she did as he said and Jon yanked the T-shirt over her head.

“Red ... paisley. Today’s selection is red paisley. Very nice.” His voice was soft and husky, and appreciation gleamed in his eyes.

She was glad he always noticed, especially after years of buying sexy lingerie for only her own pleasure.

“We’re gonna have to do something about supplementing your lingerie wardrobe soon.”

Lynette smiled, not daring to spoil the mood by reminding him that at best, they had a week left together. At worst, days.

He quickly finished removing her clothes, his touch light but sure. Sensual, possessive, with the slightest hint of reverence, his touch was meant to excite and it did. By the time he pulled the sheets back and instructed her to lie down, she would have done anything he asked.

After all the time they'd spent getting to know one another intimately, Lynette wasn't nearly as bashful about being naked in front of Jon as she had been. She stretched out on the crisp, yellow Egyptian cotton they'd picked out together and unabashedly admired the view while he undressed. As a purr of admiration slipped from between her lips, he gave her a bashful smile and joined her on the bed.

"Lynie..." He gently grasped her right wrist, "—if at any time you want to stop, just say so. Loud and forceful. Understand?"

With a nod, she relaxed against the firm mattress and gave him a confident smile.

*

"Are you okay?" Jon had a few misgivings himself. He'd never tied a woman up before. Writing about it was one thing, but the reality—her vulnerability—excited him on some primal level, and that frightened him.

She nodded again, her relaxed expression and warm smile reassuring him he was on the right track.

"Lynie, baby, if you don't want to do this, say so now." His voice shook. He swallowed and took a deep breath to calm himself down.

"Do it." Her eyes shone with absolute trust and her voice was firm.

Jon knelt between her legs, and paused to admire the view, giving over to the dark thrill of seeing her completely submissive beneath him. Her nipples puckered and darkened and she licked her lips. His sac tightened as he took in the sleepy, aroused expression on her face and the scent of her sex tickled his nose. "You shaved again?"

"This morning."

They'd spent a delightful evening a few nights back in the tub with razor and shaving cream. He hadn't totally denuded her, just enough to make things ... interesting.

"You like it?"

"It's ... extra slippery," she admitted, grinning despite her red face.

Jon slipped the pad of his thumb between her bare lips. It was indeed. He ran his fingertips down her legs then lifted one and sucked her ankle. Lynie's eyes drifted closed and she had just the hint of a smile on her face. She looked so good lying there and she was all his.

She squirmed when his tongue danced across the arch of her foot, then let her other leg fall open as Jon slowly licked and kissed his way up her calf. She was so pink and sweet he wanted to bury his face between her thighs, but controlled himself. His cock, however, had a mind of its own and twitched, begging for satisfaction.

Jon's lips blazed a path higher, his tongue gliding across the cheeks of her ass, dancing from one side to the other side. Lynette squirmed, silently coaxing him toward the swollen pearl peaking from between bare pink lips. Jon ignored her insistent wiggles and continued on to the other cheek where he repeated the whole process on her right leg.

Lynette pulled at the restraints, squirming and whimpering. Her belly quivered under his tongue and she hissed as if he'd scorched her when he circled her bellybutton. Slowly,

he made his way north and stretched out next to her. The worry was long gone from her eyes. He saw only lust and lots of it.

“You all right?” Jon asked, trailing a fingertip across her abdomen. His cock twitched, and his aching sac was a heavy, silent reminder that he’d better not linger too long.

“Better than all right,” she whispered as he leaned over and caught one taut nipple in his mouth.

“You have the longest nipples of any woman I’ve ever known.”

Her cheeks, already flushed with need, turned a deep pink. “Is that bad?”

“Not from where I’m sitting,” he laughed. His hand skimmed from her belly to the sensitive skin at the curve of her breast, and he watched her nipples pucker more. He let his fingers dance around the pale smooth skin, avoiding the rigid peaks that had taken on a cinnamon hue. She whimpered.

“Like that?”

“I want you, Jon,” she begged. Even after all the time they’d spent in bed together she couldn’t quite bring herself to boldly demand he satisfy her.

“I know. I want you, too.” He straddled her waist and massaged her breasts, being sure not to touch the nipples. She wiggled against him, causing his cock to jerk. He was so turned on he could feel himself leaking, and her soft warm skin against his sac didn’t help matters any. He pinched her nipples hard while his tongue savagely fed on her mouth. The kiss that had started out light and teasing quickly raged out of control.

Beneath him, Lynie bucked and writhed, moaning into his mouth, dueling frantically with his tongue until they were both breathless.

“You ready?” He lightly ran his fingertips over the rigid tips of her nipples.

She squirmed, her chocolate eyes begging him.

“You want me to stop?” Jon continued to roll her nipples between his fingers, pausing occasionally to pinch them.

“I feel like I’m gonna come,” she whimpered. “Jon, please!”

He kept on, excited at the thought that she might actually climax just from him teasing her breasts. She looked so beautiful with her head thrown back, hoarsely crying his name and thrashing around underneath him.

“Jon, please!”

With one last firm squeeze, he repositioned himself between her thighs and pushed her legs up and out as far as he could, so she was totally exposed and couldn’t move them. “You want loose?”

“No.” She had her head thrown back, exposing the arched column of her throat, and her arms strained against the silken ties.

She lay spread out before him like his own personal feast, completely exposed to him and subject to his every whim.

He wet his lips and let his tongue dance lightly across her swollen naked pussy lips while inhaling the sweet, musky scent of her arousal. Above him, she wailed and tried to buck, but he wouldn’t loosen his grip. He caught the sweetest part of her, that most sensitive piece of flesh, between his teeth and suckled at it. Under his lips and tongue, her body heaved and strained, but he never let up, just held her in place until she was pink and drenched, her juices dripping down his chin.

“You want me, Lynie?”

“Yes!” she screamed. “God, please yes!”

Jon repositioned himself between her legs and paused at her entrance. “Say it!”

Her eyes flew open. “Please, Jon.”

“Say ‘fuck me, Jon.’”

“Fuck me,” she whispered, then smiled. “Fuck me, Jon. Do it!”

“Look at me, Lynie.”

She nodded, and focused on him as he thrust inside her. Lip caught between her teeth and a smile of pure satisfaction on her face as he thrust inside her, filling her repeatedly, making her quiver and shake.

His thumb stroked her clit, but the extra attention was unnecessary. Her hot, slick sheath started milking him on the third stroke. Long, low moans came from her throat as her body arched up from the bed, sucking him into the undertow as his climax ripped through him.

Once he caught his breath, he gently stretched out across her and nuzzled her neck. “Damn it!”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, God Lynette ... that was amazing.” He shivered and eased up enough to look at her in the gathering gloom. “Are you all right?”

“I came twice.” She grinned, her excitement almost child-like.

“You did?” He untied her and pulled her into his arms.

She nodded, eyes wide. For a second, he wished he could always please her like he had tonight. Forever. He could have sworn he saw something flash in her eyes as well.

He needed time to process the thoughts in his head, and tomorrow’s drive to Austin would be a perfect time.

Chapter Six

Something shook her from a sound sleep. There it was again. A knock at the door. Lynette scrubbed at her face and scrambled around, throwing on Jon's T-shirt and her pants before galloping downstairs, in a complete panic. She'd fallen back to sleep after Jon left.

"Hang on!" She raced down the hall and yanked open the door, only to come to a screeching halt at the sight of the UPS man, not Bettina!

"Well, hello, Lynette." Phil was also her UPS man from the bookstore.

"Morning," she mumbled, embarrassed at being caught half-dressed and half-awake.

"I have a delivery for ... Jon Lindsay..." he peered at her intently, "...can you sign for it?"

"Sure." She signed for the delivery and moved aside, still embarrassed at the thought that he knew it wasn't her house and she looked a wreck.

"Where do you want these?" he asked, indicating the three boxes in his arms.

"Right here." She indicated a spot just inside the door, hoping to get rid of him as fast as possible. The old grandfather clock in the hall chimed eleven, which meant that Betti would be here in thirty minutes.

After he set them down, she mumbled her thanks and closed the door, frowning down at the boxes. Why in the world would someone send Jon boxes of books? She knew they were books from the information stamped on the side: title (in this case *Peaches*), author, quantity, and ISBN number. As a bookstore owner, she knew the ISBN was nothing more than a UPC codes for books. Curious and now wide-awake, she looked closer. The shipping label on the top box said Balencourt Books.

She knew Jon was a writer but he'd never talked much about what he wrote, and she'd never bothered to ask. Surely ... surely not.

Still half-asleep and dazed at her recent discovery, she wandered through the downstairs, looking for evidence that she was wrong. She wasn't wrong and she hit pay dirt in the dining room where Jon had pushed the table against the wall and hooked up his laptop and a printer. In the printer tray sat a thick handful of pages. Tentatively, her fingers fanned the edges them as Lynette dared herself to pick them up.

With a grin, she picked up the sheaf of papers and sank into the rickety dining chair. If they stayed together, maybe she'd get to proofread his books. She skimmed, then slowed down and started over, horrified and sick to her stomach at what she'd found.

Eight chapters. About her.

She read, and read and read, and by the time another knock sounded at the door, she thought she might puke. Even though he hadn't used her name, Jon had written at least half a book about her and her sexual adventures. Granted, some of it was obviously fictional—she'd *never* sleep with a woman—but the similarities were too obvious to ignore. There was no disguising the brownie incident.

The knock sounded again. Or maybe that was her headache. She pushed back the chair, which scraped harshly against the newly varnished and waxed wood floor, and stamped impatiently to the front door, the papers clutched in her hand.

Betti stood on the other side, looking as bright and fresh as a purple penny with her long hair pulled up in a ponytail and a pair of designer sunglasses perched on her head. “I thought you’d be over here.”

“Oh, Bettina!” Lynette leaned against the door and let the tears she’d been holding back finally fall. She suddenly felt very tired and very old.

“What is it, honey?” Bettina frowned with concern and stepped inside, shutting the world out behind her. “Did something happen to Jon?”

“No! Not yet anyway!” She shook the papers at Bettina and wailed again, “He ... he’s a writer!”

“That doesn’t seem like such a bad thing. You own a bookstore; he’s a writer. No wonder you two have so much in common.”

“He wrote ... about ... *me!*” Lynette sniffled and wiped away her tears as indignation and anger gave way to good old-fashioned hurt.

“You?”

“Yes!” She pointed at the boxes of books. “He’s Lindsay Johns! He writes erotic romances, this is his work in progress and it’s about me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! He used me. I was ... research,” she spat, angrily.

“Are you sure those are books?” Betti asked softly.

“They’re from the publishing company.” But what if she were wrong? She yanked open a box with her free hand. “See! Ten copies of *Peaches*. I read that book. Oh my God. The first night we made ... had sex, he saw it in my room and made fun of it.” She threw the book down and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“Imagine that. Old lady Lindsay’s grandson’s a smut peddler.” Betti giggled then quickly sobered. “I’m sure he has a good explanation for all this.”

“There is no explanation for this!” Lynette shook the papers in her hand, then tried to rip up all eight chapters. They were too thick, so she was forced to rip them in sections.

“I’m getting...”

Rip.

“—my stuff...”

Rip.

“—and getting...”

Rip.

“—the hell out of here.”

As she stalked passed the living room door, Lynette tossed the whole wad in the air and smiled evilly while it all drifted down to settle on the floor. She didn’t give a damn how much work or time Jon had put into it. He was lucky she didn’t make a bonfire out of them—right in the middle of his living room!

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to leave his house unlocked?” Bettina asked, leading her across the yard to her own house a few minutes later.

“What the hell do I care!”

“Why don’t you get cleaned up and we’ll grab some lunch and go by the salon. You can get a pedicure,” she offered.

“I don’t feel like it; I don’t know what to do.” She could barely see through the tears that fell at an ever-increasing pace. “He’ll be home by three. I don’t care if I never eat again.”

“You need a massage and a pedicure—definitely a pedicure. I’m not letting you sit here and mope all afternoon. Now go shower and throw some clothes on. We’re going to the salon and we’ll have lunch brought in. Shoo!”

Looking at her friend, Lynette mumbled a sad little “thanks” and headed to the bathroom. The shower did nothing for her mood but at least she was clean. She threw on a lightweight sweatsuit and followed Betti out to her SUV.

Lynette barely spoke on the short ride into San Antonio. At The Blue Moon, Cassi and Tara were waiting with lunch, wine and commiseration on what hounds men truly were. With a watery smile of thanks, Lynette nibbled on grilled chicken and submitted to Bettina’s cure all, a massage and pedicure. She felt more relaxed but no better. Her brain was still so fogged she couldn’t process a thing.

“Not even my divorce hurt this bad.” She lay stretched out on the sofa in Betti’s office, her empty glass of wine sitting on the coffee table next to her almost dry toes.

“I know, sweetie. Any ideas on what to do?”

“None.”

Bettina punched a button on the phone and hollered for Tara and Cassi to join them. Shortly after, the two women entered and Betti laid out the whole scenario for them again, including the fact that they were neighbors. “Any ideas?”

“I say you confront his ass with a frying pan,” Cassi grumbled. As a single mother with four kids and an ex in prison, Cassi didn’t suffer fools lightly, especially if those fools happened to have penises.

“I agree.” The outrageous Tara sat perched on a chair beside Betti, her purple and blonde hair bristling with anger.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” Bettina asked. “You can’t run away. He’s right next door. You’ve got no choice but to confront him.”

“What time is it?” Lynette mumbled from the depths of the blue velvet sofa.

“Four-thirty,” Tara said.

“He’s waiting on me. We’re supposed to go to the Scenic Loop for dinner.” Lynette started sniffing again. Her favorite restaurant, and she’d never be able to eat there again without thinking of him. Gawd, how pathetic.

“Go have it out with him,” Betti suggested. “You’ll feel tons better, and when you’re done, just drive out to my house. I’m heading home now anyway; I’ll drop you off.”

* * * *

Jon managed to suffer through lunch and, after two and a half hours of Breanna and her parents, as well as his brother’s fiancée who could have been Brea’s clone, he was past ready to leave.

At his car, Jon’s dad patted him on the back. “You’re a good son, son.”

He snorted. “Yeah okay, Dad. You owe me, big. Are we good to go for a few months now?”

“I know and I appreciate all your hard work. How’s the house coming?”

“It’s nearly done. And I bought new appliances.” Jon gave his dad a cheeky grin.

“That’s fine.” His dad waved it off. The cost was nominal to the Honorable Judge Lindsay. “I’d hoped maybe you’d buy it and move closer to home.”

“I thought about it,” he said softly.

“But?”

“I’ll see you in a few months.” Jon laughed, sliding behind the wheel of the roadster.

“This is nice. I didn’t realize travel magazines paid so well,” Judge Lindsay noted.

“They don’t.” He briefly met his father’s eyes, then slipped his sunglasses on. With a book deal nearly in the bag, it wouldn’t be too much longer before he could come clean. He hated lying to his folks, but his mom would have an old-fashioned hissy fit if she found out the truth.

“Is it legal?”

Jon roared with laughter. “Yeah, but not something Brea,” he spat her name, “would be proud to brag about to her Junior League friends.”

“And it obviously pays the bills.” Judge Lindsay sighed and his gray eyebrows drew together in a frown. “I won’t ask. Let’s just leave it at that I’m proud of you, but try to find a date for your mother’s Labor Day shindig, please! So she’ll stop this nonsense.”

“I’ve got someone in mind,” Jon replied, his mind wandering back to Lynie. “I need to go, Dad. I’ve got a dinner date.”

“We’ll see you in a few weeks then?”

With a nod, Jon started the roadster and took off, heading down the tree-lined drive and through the streets of Austin for I-35 ... and Lynie.

Next time, Jon would bring Lynie along for sure. He let out a huge sigh once he escaped the city limits and had the cruise control set, as if he’d held his breath the entire time he’d been with his family. At least his father seemed to understand. He pushed it and made the drive in just over an hour and a half.

He swung by the bookstore but her car wasn’t there. He shrugged it off. Her lunch with Betti must have run late, or maybe they’d gone shopping for new lingerie.

His complacency was quickly replaced with worry when he saw the house, the front door not even locked. He closed the door behind him and called Lynette’s name in the heavy silence. At first, he assumed a burglar had broke in until he spotted the boxes, the top one open, and an open book on the floor.

She must have signed for them, which meant that she must have figured out who he was. *Shit!* He should have told her. When he spotted the dining room, the bottom fell out of his stomach. Pieces of ripped paper were everywhere, scattered across the floor and the table top. His manuscript! His surge of anger was swallowed by worry when he realized she must have read it. His printer was now empty, but at least his laptop appeared to be okay, and he could print another copy.

He took the stairs two at a time and checked all the bedrooms. They were empty and her things were gone.

Jon cleaned up the mess and waited. And the longer he waited the more he worried. He had no idea where they had gone for lunch. Every time a car roared down the street, he checked out the window. When a black SUV pulled to the curb out front, he went out on the porch and anxiously watched as she stepped out of the truck, trying to gauge her mood. She glanced over at him, a frown marring her pretty features, then spoke into the SUV. The furious, hurt expression on her face as she marched up the walkway turned his stomach.

She stood at the bottom of the porch steps, her arms crossed and her cheeks tinged red with anger. “I never want to see you again, Jon Lindsay. I hate you. What you did was horrible and despicable and you make me sick!”

A stunned Jon watched her march across the yard and hop the low fence. The first thought that crossed his mind was that it was okay for her to read 'romantica' as she called it, but apparently, not for him to write it. "So ... what ... that's it?" he called after her.

"Go to hell! I hate you!" She raced up her own porch steps and dug for her keys while across the street, two little boys watched from the safety of their own yard.

"I can explain," he shouted, hurrying after her. "Lynie, can't we please talk about this?"

"Fuck you!"

The sound of her door slamming was probably heard all over the neighborhood. Jon hopped the fence, darted up her porch steps and tried her door. It was locked, so he started pounding. When she didn't answer, he sank into the rocker on her porch and waited. Ten minutes later, she reemerged with a tote bag in her hand.

"I'm leaving, and I hope for both our sakes, you're gone when I get back, Jon Lindsay," she growled.

"What exactly did I do?"

"You used me! For fucking research! And don't bother trying to deny it, Jon. I read the whole thing." She shoved past him and threw her bag in the car.

His heart nearly stopped, but he forced himself to move and followed her to the car. He never thought she'd fly off the handle like this. "Lynie! Please, baby. I can explain."

"No you can't, and if you did, I wouldn't believe you!" She climbed in the car and took off, tires squealing, and left him standing there.

* * * *

Lynette spent the next four days on the couch in the bookstore's office, doing inventory, crying and cursing. Bettina, Cassi and Tara brought wine and comfort food and commiserated with her again.

Finally, on the fourth night the telephone rang.

Alone in the dark silence of the store, she listened as Jon left the message, his voice hoarse. He sounded as miserable as she felt. "If, for any reason you need to reach me, here's my number in Alpine." He rattled it off and continued. "Lynie, for what it's worth, I'm sorry. I should have told you. I never meant to hurt you. I'm done here. And going home. I hope ... I hope some day you can forgive me enough to call and that we can talk."

Click.

She should feel happy over getting to sleep in her own bed again, but what fun was it without Jon?

The following morning Betti stopped by on her way to work to check up on her.

"He's gone." Lynette didn't even bother trying to fake a smile once she realized it was her friend and not a customer.

"Then you can go home," she said, crossing her arms over her swollen belly.

"Yeah." She didn't miss the stern expression on her friend's face, and sniffled back the tears, refusing to give into them this time.

"Do you remember what I said about bitter and sweet?" Betti leaned on the counter and gave her a pointed look.

Lynette nodded. This definitely qualified as bitter.

“I have to get to work. If you need anything, you call us, okay?” Betti reached over the counter and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

The ball was in Lynette’s court now.

Chapter Seven

Labor Day weekend arrived on a hot sultry wind that promised summer wasn't over yet, no matter what the calendar said. Lynette celebrated on Friday night with a Clear Blue Easy pregnancy test and a quart of Cherry Limeade sherbet.

Jon went to his parent's annual barbecue—alone.

"Jon did you hear? Pete and Grace have set a date. It'll be a spring wedding. Won't that be nice? Why don't you be a dear and fill Brea's glass," his mother gushed.

Jon picked up the offending glass and headed inside the house, but instead of refilling it, he hid out in his father's office. He set Brea's glass down and filled a fresh one with a finger full of scotch from the decanter on the corner of his father's desk, then collapsed on the leather couch. He reveled in the silence and gloom of the study, in the faint scent of cigar smoke and leather.

When he heard the door open, all Jon could say was, "I can't take it, Dad."

"Hell, son, sometimes neither can I, but by damn, I love that woman." With a sigh of relief, the judge sank into a wingback chair beside the couch.

Jon laughed, but even to his own ears it sounded hollow. He swallowed the lump in his throat and wondered when the dull ache in his chest would go away. Father and son sat in companionable silence while sipping scotch.

"I thought you were bringing someone?" Judge Lindsay finally asked.

"It didn't work out." Unable to meet his father's eye, Jon focused on the intricately carved border of the coffee table instead.

"Want to talk about it?" his dad asked softly.

How the hell could he explain *this* mess? "She thinks I used her."

"Well, did you?"

"No! It was ... a coincidence. How the hell was I supposed to know she'd read it?"

"Maybe you should start at the beginning." The judge stood up and retrieved the decanter, then refilled both their glasses.

"I'm a writer."

"I know that. I think the better question is what do you write?"

Jon took a large sip of his scotch and slowly swallowed, letting it burn as it slid down his throat. "I just agreed to a two-book deal—dark sexy suspense under my own name, but for the last seven years, I've written steamy erotic romances as Lindsay Johns. Ten books. Four bestsellers," he finished, raising his glass to his father.

"You're not kidding, are you?" His words were quickly followed by a round of chuckles and a coughing fit. Then he stared at Jon, an expression somewhere between humor and awe on his face.

"Now you know why I said Brea couldn't brag to her Junior League friends." Jon laughed, but this time it was full of scorn. "Not that I care. That woman gives new meaning to the word shallow."

"And the woman you met thinks you used her for a story?"

"Yeah. I have to admit when I met her that did give me the idea, but it's hard to explain. Sometimes I pick up bits and pieces of real life, if it intrigues me, but what I

wrote wasn't about her. It was about a character and characters aren't real people. I did use the chocolate though," he added with a grin.

"Do I dare ask?" the judge asked with a chuckle of his own.

Jon told his father about the brownies. How Lynette had dumped them on him and how he'd made her give him more and teased her with them. The judge laughed until tears ran from his eyes and he couldn't catch his breath. "You baited that poor woman, Jonathan!"

"I know. Anything else that sounded like what we'd done was coincidental. Nothing more. I swear, Dad!"

"I'm not the one you have convince. So I gather she's divorced?"

"Yes, and older." He swirled the glass of amber liquid, watching the dim light play off of it before taking another sip.

"How much?"

"Eleven years."

Judge Lindsay whistled into his glass. "Your mother will have a conniption."

"I know, but I love her." He gave his dad a sad little grin. "I'd hoped she'd cool down and call me."

"How many years have you lived with your mother that you haven't figured out how things work. She won't call. You screwed up; you kiss up, son." The judge laughed.

"Lindsay Johns. I think your mom has some of those around here."

"Please don't tell her."

"I won't ... for now." His dad grinned. "Want my opinion? If you want her back, go get her. Now. Don't waste any more time."

Jon nodded, thankful for the push. "I'll leave in the morning."

"Go now, save yourself the agony of more time in Brea's company before she gets the title to your roadster away from you."

With a laugh, he stood up and hugged his father. He could make Bluebonnet by dark.

* * * *

Lynette dozed on the couch, still a bit sick to her stomach from the previous night's binge. The source of her illness was a toss up. Regardless, she wanted to die. She was forty-one and pregnant. After a sleepless night and a lot of soul searching she'd swallowed her pride and left a message on Jon's answering machine. No matter what, he did have a right to know, and they were going to have to come to some sort of amicable arrangement.

That sounded so damned cold.

When the knock sounded at her door, somehow she knew it was him. With one last deep breath, she pushed herself off the couch and headed for the door, mentally girding herself for the upcoming confrontation. "Well, you didn't waste any time..."

"Lynie, please just give me..."

She paused and motioned for him to speak first. "Lynie, please, just hear me out—waste any time about what?"

"You didn't waste any time getting here," she quipped, keeping the screen door closed firmly between them. Just the sight of him made her shake. If anything, he looked better than she remembered, though his blonde hair was a bit longer, a bit shaggier. He needed a trim.

If he touched her, she was doomed.

"I came from Austin as fast as I could."

"So, you got my message?" She tightened her grip on the doorframe for support.

"No." He frowned through the screen door at her. "Did you call? You called. I'm glad. I wanna explain, Lynie." His voice was almost breathless and his blue eyes pleaded.

What else could she do? She caved, opened the door and headed for the dining room. Sitting at the head of the table, she knew she looked less than imposing in her robe with mascara smudges under her eyes, but she forced her sternest frown and crossed her arms. "Talk."

"A lot of things get changed from first draft to final revision. I'll even take out the part about the brownies, if you want. If it'll make you feel better."

She held firm. Amicable was one thing, but that didn't mean she'd crawl back into his bed. "What are you saying?"

"I wanna marry you, Lynie. I want you to be my wife."

"You're only saying that because I'm pregnant."

"You're what?"

She watched all the blood drain from his face, and suddenly felt a little lightheaded herself. "I'm ... you know ... pregnant. You *didn't* know?" Lynette shook her head, her words ending on a squeak.

"No!" Jon laughed and rubbed a hand across his face, then gave her a wide-eyed once over. "I had no clue."

"Then you didn't check your messages?"

"No! When did you find out?"

"I took a home test last night, then I called your house and left a message this afternoon."

"And you thought I was here because..." Jon nodded slowly as understanding dawned and the haggard look on his face was replaced with some of his old spark.

"I-I'll ... try and get it confirmed on Tuesday. You really didn't know?" she added in a soft voice.

"No, Lynie, I came here to talk. To finally hash things out. I've missed you so much, and Dad said that since I screwed up I had to kiss up." He smiled sheepishly and Lynette did likewise.

"I'm sorry, Jon." Her smile disappeared and her throat closed up.

"Please honey, give me a chance." He leaned over the table and took her hand in his. "I'll be a great dad to our baby. Oh my God, a baby." He shook his head with a nervous chuckle and got down on his knees so his elbows were resting in her lap. "Do you remember that afternoon at the bookstore, when we made love?" At her nod, he pushed on. "I had an offer on my mainstream book. I couldn't tell you because it wasn't official and, well, I'm superstitious, but I wanted to so bad. When my agent called me Thursday and said I officially had a two-book deal, I had no one to celebrate with."

"Aw, honey! I'm so proud of you." She leaned over and gave his hand a squeeze.

"So no more smut?" she asked with a soft laugh.

"It's a really sexy mystery. Will that appease you, my little muse?" he asked, pulling her into his lap.

With a nod, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "You really want to marry me?"

"More than anything else in the whole wide world."

Between laughter, kisses and tears, they spent what remained of the weekend in bed making up for lost time.

Epilogue

The Lindsays elected to spend the rest of the fall in Bluebonnet. By October, they were married with Bettina and Ty in attendance. The bride wore maternity. And right after Thanksgiving they were safely ensconced in Jon's place in Alpine, closing the bookstore for the winter. Lynette's regulars were most understanding. Jon assured them (and his parents) the milder winters would be better for "his Lynie" and the baby, and they'd return in the spring. In reality, he just wanted her all to himself for a while. And away from his mother, who hadn't stopped her shocked ramblings over his hasty marriage and older wife.

By spring, they did return to Bluebonnet, only traveling as far as Austin for Pete's wedding. And on a balmy day in early April, Sean Carrick Lindsay graced his parents with his presence and a lusty wail.

The End

About the Author:

Growing up, Celia Stuart wanted to be a lawyer and a psychologist. Obviously, she's seen the error of her ways, though she's never settled down in any profession until she took up writing two years ago. She considers all those other jobs research for the writing gig.

She's the last of a dying breed, a native Texan, and still makes her home there, where cowboys and music (her other two loves) abound.

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