

# Larkin's Cowboy

By

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# Chapter One

After hours and hours of driving, Larkin Gregory was so far unimpressed with Texas. The whole state was one entire highway, as far as she was concerned. Highways and flatlands and lots of sky, and not much of anything else. From there, how far could she possibly be from New York, and could she make it back to the Big Apple in two days flat?

“Ah, forget it. Not happening,” she mumbled out loud and slammed her foot down on the accelerator.

The numbers on the speedometer inched upwards. Seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five. When it hit ninety, she eased her foot off the pedal. She’d already gotten one speeding ticket down there at the end of the world. With Christmas only a few weeks away and Thanksgiving right around the bend, she couldn’t afford to give another of those little one-stoplight towns money that would be better spent on gifts for her niece and nephew.

And then after the holidays? It was right back to the east coast, to her apartment in Chelsea. For however long it would take for her and Eric to patch up the mess they’d made of their relationship. Thankfully, her time in that big, dusty state, with all those itty bitty towns sprinkled across it, was limited. After the holidays it would be right back to civilization for her.

Over the rental car’s satellite radio flowed spa-style music, even though there was no soothing her that afternoon. All she desperately wanted was to be off that highway. Larkin heard the feminine but computerized voice of her GPS system.

“At point-eight miles, take Exit 4, then take ramp to Sutter Road. Take Exit 4, then take ramp...”

Her GPS couldn’t fool her. Even it was lost out here in the middle of nowhere!

When was the last time she’d had something to drink? By now all the bottled water and her Diet Cokes were gone, nothing in the disposable cooler she’d bought along the way but water and slushy ice.

Now wouldn’t it be her luck that all the flights to Houston had been booked? So there she’d been left with no other choice than to fly into Dallas. Ironically, her sister and her family lived closer to Houston. Closer being a relative term in this case. If a hundred and twenty miles away from Houston could be deemed closer.

“Drive twenty-point-five miles on Sutter Road—”

“Oh, you have to be kidding me!” Larkin exclaimed.

Besides feeling like she was coasting right into The Twilight Zone, Larkin knew she wasn’t going to make it another twenty-point-five miles without getting something to quench her thirst. At the first available stop, just a gas station along that stretch of road, she pulled the car into the lot.

Even though it felt good to stretch her legs, she felt like there was an entire layer of highway dust on her. The gas station was old but not totally ancient, with pumps that accepted plastic. Once inside the shop she made a beeline to the refrigerated area, barely waiting until after she’d paid for her bottled water before quenching her thirst with a satisfying swallow.

“Can you tell me if I’m anywhere near Santo Pueblo?” she asked the clerk behind the counter.

“Santo Pueblo, Santo Pueblo,” the woman repeated, as if giving herself a moment to think. She looked about fifty, then again she might have been a hundred, too. It wasn’t that she was old, but her skin was darkened and leathery from the sun, and she looked like she’d been

through some of life's harder times. "That's, oh, what do you think, Adam? Another twenty miles?"

"Prob'ly."

Larked turned at the waist, following the deep masculine voice to a man. Her jaw dropped open slightly before she stopped herself.

That's...a...cowboy.

A real one. Not that she'd ever seen one up close like that. In the movies, sure. He reminded her of some good-looking country western singer, minus the ubiquitous guitar and dressed in his own clothes, not some star-studded mess he'd wear onstage. Larkin wasn't particularly a fan of country western music.

But this "Adam" was—well—easy on the eyes, to put it mildly.

He tipped back his cowboy hat on his head and acknowledged her with a nod.

"Where you headed to in Santo Pueblo, miss?" he inquired. "I live there. Grew up there, so I know it like the back of my hand."

"I'm going to my sister's home."

"Oh...kay." Humor registered in those twinkly blue eyes. "What I meant is, whereabouts does your sister live?"

Those eyes were the culprits. They were distracting her. Gorgeous, blue, with some down-home style razzle dazzle. And if Larkin let her eyes travel down the expanse of his broad shoulders and chest, those faded black—and tight—jeans were pretty damn distracting, too.

What was she thinking? She remembered reading an article in a magazine a while back about cowboys. The reality didn't quite stand up to the myth, as she recalled. Besides, she wasn't some giggly townie, ready to fall over her own feet over a man like that, built with leather and denim.

Larkin straightened up. "They live on Appleton Way. I think she said that's close to the historic part of town."

"Oh, all right. I know where that is. Come on outside, I'll show you."

Before following him through the door, she glanced back at the clerk, but the woman was preoccupied watching a college football game on the TV perched on the wall behind the counter. Turning back around, though she tried not to notice, she was treated to a rearview of the cowboy and his muscular male backside, in all its draped-in-faded-denim glory.

So, okay. He was rugged. Not anything at all like the metrosexuals she was accustomed to seeing in the City. His skin was bronzed by the sun, too. Larkin supposed he spent quite a bit of time out in the Texan sunshine. Blondish brown hair peeked out from under his hat, and his bone structure was striking, a young version of Clint Eastwood.

Unfortunately, he wasn't her type. She liked her men like Eric; intellectual, well-read, someone who could enjoy an indie film with her, then discuss it intelligently over lattes on a snowy New York day. What was the term? A beta male. Something told her that cowboy got straight A's in the looks department, but an indie film would, amusingly enough, go right over his head. He was also definitely an Alpha male.

Besides, she just needed directions from him. Then she'd be on her way and they wouldn't cross paths again during her stay.

"Keep on going down Sutter that way," he paused to wave a sinewy arm to his right. "You'll be driving a good twenty miles, maybe a little more..."

"Oh. That's what my GPS said. I was hoping it was wrong. It steered me wrong a couple of times on the way here from the airport."

“Those things are crazy. You can trust ’em to a point, right?”

The cowboy gave her a deep wink. In spite of herself she smiled, but then she felt a flush of heat in her cheeks. Larkin bit her lip before she could utter, Aww, shit!

He was flirting with her. Well, that probably worked with the little hillbillies he charmed at the local honky-tonk. It wasn’t working with her.

“For three hundred bucks, I think I should be able to trust it all the time,” she said, adjusting the strap of her Dooney & Bourke handbag on her shoulder. “Anyway, thanks for your time.”

“Well, wait. You want me to drive on ahead of you? I don’t live far from there myself. I don’t mind making sure a lady gets to where she’s going safely.”

Let me guess. That big gas guzzler’s yours, right? She glared in the direction of a huge, shiny black pickup, casually parked over by the side of the building.

“Thanks anyway, but I’ll be fine on my own.” With another swig of her water, she gave him her back and headed back to her own car.

“All right then, lady. You take care.”

Lady. She supposed she should’ve been grateful he didn’t call her honey or baby, pouring on more of that cowboy charm.

Larkin knew she shouldn’t have peeked back at him, but she did, promptly feeling the color rising even more in her face. The cowboy stood with those long legs of his, his head tilted slightly, one eye squinting from the sun, his gaze raking over the sight of her in her jeans, black leather heels and slinky red top.

What did he expect her to do? Swoon like a silly teenager and run back to him, hopping right into the rear of his truck and let him have his way with her? Hardly!

Instead, she refused to even look at him, starting up her car and swerving back onto the road in the direction of Santo Pueblo. She was there to visit with her sister, her brother-in-law and their kids for Thanksgiving. Besides, maybe she and Eric were temporarily on the outs right now, but she already had a man. Even they were cooling their relationship for a bit, they were still sharing an address. That had to count for something.

Even if it didn’t, she didn’t have time for cowboys. Not now, not ever.

\* \* \*

Though she’d fully expected to fall sound asleep right after dinner at her sister’s, Larkin found the meal had given her enough energy for a night out on the town.

If it could be called that. Santo Pueblo, for as far as the eye could see, was an average small town. It didn’t exactly boast a hopping nightlife like New York’s Greenwich Village or Times Square.

But when her sister Stefani and her husband Trey insisted on leaving the kids with his mother and taking Larkin out for a drink, she welcomed the chance to unwind. Larkin loved the kids—Abby was seven now and Ian was five. Still, a couple of hours of catching up with her sister and brother-in-law over drinks was too inviting to pass up.

Even if the drinks happened to flow from the bar at the Heart of Town bar. Apparently, that was Santo Pueblo’s idea of a trendy nightspot. The locals sure seemed to like it, since the place was pleasantly crowded with folks everywhere from the bar to the dance floor, where couples danced along to the music of Tim McGraw, Alan Jackson, and Shania Twain, to name a few.

Larkin, having changed into her comfortable, flowing blue dress, decided she'd just go with the flow. Lounging out on her side of that booth, she sipped on her rum with Coke and chatted with Stef and Trey.

"So where's the nearest Starbucks?" she wanted to know.

"I'm guessing probably back in Houston?" Trey replied.

She blinked at him. "You're serious."

"Yeah, I'm serious!" Both he and her sister laughed. "I don't think there's a Starbucks anywhere near Santo Pueblo."

"There's a Dunkin' Donuts, though," her sister offered.

"Ah! Coming up in the world!"

Her sister took no offense, only said plainly, "We do things a little differently here in Santo Pueblo."

"Oh, yeah? How so?"

"Well, for one thing, we usually make our own coffee. Like at home."

Larkin cupped her chin in her hand. "You never miss New York?"

"Sure, I miss it. Enough to visit you, hopefully next year sometime, if we can get away from work. Not enough to move back there, though."

Trey swallowed a swig of his beer and asked, "You think you'd ever want to move down here, Larkin?"

"Here?"

"Well, I mean Texas. Not necessarily Santo Pueblo. I guess a little town like this isn't for everybody. But there's bigger towns." He shrugged. "Your sister misses you a lot."

"I miss her, too." For a moment she exchanged a glance with Stef. She felt the back of her throat constrict. "I miss you all more than you know."

"But you don't want to leave Eric," her sister suggested.

"Oh, yes. Eric." Pausing, Larkin cleared her throat. "There's something I haven't told you. Things are, um...not going well with Eric these days."

"They're not?" Stef looked surprised.

"Uh, well—oh, the hell with it. We're sort of not...together right now."

"You're not together?"

"Well, it's only, you know—it's temporary. We're taking a break from the relationship right now. We're still living together, though. Trying to figure out where we are, what direction we want the relationship to take." She hesitated, then decided just to plunge in headfirst with the truth. "We're seeing other people. Or rather...Eric's seeing other people. Women. I'm, oh, just taking a break in general..."

Larkin took another good, long gulp of her drink. At that rate, the rum would be going straight to her head, but she didn't care. This wasn't a conversation she'd planned on having until later on that week. Hopefully after she'd had some time to prepare her sister for it.

"Well, don't take this the wrong way, sis, but I'm glad Eric's gone. You're well rid of him."

Her eyes widened at her sister's remark. "But I thought you liked Eric?"

"I didn't. I was nice to him because I figured you loved him and he loved you, and he was the man you wanted. But I always thought he was..." Stef wrinkled her nose. "A know-it-all."

"And a pain in the ass," Trey offered matter-of-factly.

Larkin couldn't stop her giggle in time, though she came to her former lover's defense. "Oh, I don't know about him being a know-it-all. Eric has very strong opinions, sure—"

"He's a know-it-all," her sister said almost defiantly. "And he talks down to people, like he's instructing them, since we're all entitled to his opinion. It didn't matter what you were talking about at the time. Eric always thought he was an expert on everything under the sun. Sorry, but that makes him an annoying, snotty know-it-all."

"And a pain in the ass!" her husband said again, this time with a great big smile.

In place of a giggle, Larkin laughed even more heartily. That didn't stop her from trying again. She had to convince them, especially since, after all, she planned on getting back together with Eric Breakfield. "I think the thing is that Eric's just such a smart guy. He sometimes lacks social skills."

"You mean smart people are by nature annoying?" Trey shook his head. "Sorry, honey. I know a lot of smart folks. My brother happens to be one of them. And my brother's no Eric Breakfield. I've never known him to be anything but a gentleman with other folks."

"That's true. Your brother Mark's a pretty nice guy."

And you're right. He's no Eric Breakfield. How telling was that, that those same words were right on the tip of her tongue as well, ready to be said?

Courtesy of the bar's DJ, the song changed from a ballad to a more rousing tune. Larkin noticed the interaction between her sister and Trey, those smiles that conveyed without words, in the way that a man and woman who've been together for a long time have of communicating, that they were listening to a favorite song of theirs.

"Why don't you two show them how it's done on that dance floor?" Larkin urged.

Trey shook his head. "No, we came here to hang out with you."

"So? That doesn't mean you can't have some fun out there. Go on. The rum's going to my head anyway. I need some fresh air. You go on and dance with your honey!"

Even Larkin recognized that band by its lead singer's memorable voice. That was Brooks and Dunn, a country group that she did like; a fellow nurse at the hospital had introduced her to them via their CDs. She lingered only long enough at the table to smile and wave at Stef, who took her up on her offer and headed without delay to the dance floor with her husband and lover.

She felt an unexpected twinge of jealousy on her way out to the bar's wraparound porch. It was painfully obvious that what Stef had with Trey was deeper than what she'd had with Eric. Larkin didn't want to totally admit that. That would be like admitting that she'd thrown away over four years of her life with a man who'd walked away too easily from her, a man who'd been emotionally unavailable to her for an even longer time than that.

Shake it off, she told herself. You're here for the week. For the holiday. Relax. Forget New York. Forget Eric.

Closing her eyes, she luxuriated in a wisp of breeze that swept over that porch. That second wind wasn't going to last. In another half hour she'd be ready for bed and a long, restful sleep.

Then she heard it, the sound that came from the other end of the porch. It was a smacking sound, like a hard slap, and then came a sharp little yelp.

"No, Jeremy—stop! Somebody could come out and see us!"

"Well, honey, you should've thought about that before. Now stop wiggling!"

Larkin's eyes shot open. It was dark at the other end of the porch, but once her eyes adjusted she could make out what she was seeing. It startled her when she realized that yes, that



was exactly what she was watching. She clutched the porch railing with both hands, her lips parting in a silent “O”.

That was a couple down there at the end of the long porch. The man was seated; draped over his lap was a woman. She wore a short skirt that was hiked up even more, revealing a pair of panties. Larkin watched, stunned, as the man proceeded to spank the woman’s bottom, which was poorly if at all protected by the sheer undies.

He’s spanking her! Right there, in public, on the porch of a public place. Larkin guessed he was spanking her hard, too, since his hand landed on her flesh with resounding, hearty smacks. Each time the woman jiggled and cried out, indignant but held firmly in place by his arm wrapped around her waist.

What should she do? Her heart thundered inside her. Did she run back into the bar? Get Trey? The bartender? The bouncer? That big jerk couldn’t do that. He couldn’t strike the woman at all, least of all right there in front of any passerby.

Which, in this case, happened to be Larkin herself.

She had to get help. She had to go back inside the bar. But how? Her legs seemed bolted to the floor. How many times had that hand descended on the poor young woman’s bottomcheeks? By Larkin’s count, at least fifteen, maybe twenty times.

Damn, that had to burn like crazy! Almost of their own volition, her hands travelled back to her own bottom, resting there.

“All right, young lady. That’s enough for now.” She watched as the man tugged the skirt back down, not that there was much material to begin with. What there was, however, managed to provide some modesty, covering her entire shapely backside. He rested his hand there, even giving her a few pats. The gesture seemed strangely loving. “But when we get home, your bottom’s got a hot date with my paddle.”

Larkin gasped. Had she heard right? Had that brute just threatened the woman with another spanking?

More alarmingly, why was her heart pounding like that? Why couldn’t she tear her eyes away from the couple? It was, oddly enough, exciting. That alone was crazy, and she tried to tell herself she wasn’t thoroughly mesmerized by the unusual scene, but she most certainly was.

Maybe the woman hadn’t seen her but she knew for a fact that the man was aware of her presence. He must have heard her gasp, yet he’d only cast a brief glance in her direction. He seemed more intent on helping the woman who’d been over his knee to her feet. Larkin watched her, too, noting that as soon as she was steadied on those high heels, her small hands had flown behind her, immediately trying to rub the sting out of her spanked bottom.

Larkin swallowed hard. If she had any common sense at all, she would march right back into the bar and tell someone. The bouncer, an off-duty cop, anybody. But she turned too quickly and bumped hard into what felt like an unyielding brick wall.

No, not a wall—a man’s chest. A ripply chest, easy to see even through the fabric of that cotton shirt with the sleeves partially rolled up. She tossed back her head and looked up at the man who had to be a good six inches or so taller than her. If her heart had thundered before, it was rattling like gale-force winds now inside her.

Looking back down at her—actually, smiling mischievously—was that easygoing but utterly sexy cowboy from earlier that day. The same one who’d offered to escort her, driving ahead in his studly set of wheels, that black pickup, to her sister’s home. Larkin knew she should have known better, and still she blurted out, trying to keep her voice down.

“Did—did you see that?” she demanded.

He wasn't wearing his cowboy hat now. He was roughly the same age as her, perhaps a few years older, in his late thirties. "See what?"

She pursed her lips. He was playing innocent with her. "What was happening down there. At the other end of the porch."

"Oh, you mean the young lady who was getting her naughty little tail soundly spanked?"

What was that Trey had said? Or was it her sister? Damn, if she could remember. Her head was all mixed up now.

We do things a little differently here in Santo Pueblo.

Well, no shit, Sherlock!

Larkin tried to maintain her composure. It was probably best to get off the subject anyway. "How strange to see you again, Mr.—uh—"

"McLeod. Adam McLeod. And what do they call you?"

"Larkin Gregory." She scowled up at him, anything to keep this from getting too friendly. "Like I said, it's kinda strange to see you again."

"Yeah. Maybe it's fate."

"Or maybe you're following me?"

"Following you? That's kinda presumptuous, don't you think?" Presumptuous was a word that surprised her, coming from the mouth of a man who was supposed to be a good-looking-but-not-too-bright cowboy. "Did you ever stop to think that maybe this is just a small town? Sooner or later, you're going to run into somebody you know?"

She regarded him with distrust but chose not to pursue the matter. "Never mind. Shouldn't we do something?"

"Like what?"

"Like what? He was spanking her!"

"Maybe the lady needed spankin'. The gentleman she was with seemed to think so."

"She—oh!" Larkin shook her head, eyeing him in confusion. "Maybe I should mind my own business."

"Well, I was gonna suggest that, ma'am. I was just trying to find a way to say it so it wouldn't sound rude."

"You're serious, aren't you? If you were any kind of gentleman, you would've stopped him."

Suddenly those blue eyes narrowed at her. "I don't appreciate that, Miss Gregory. If he'd been a monster and beat her, rest assured, I would've knocked him into next Tuesday. But he was spanking her. Now I don't suppose you've ever been spanked."

"What, me? Of course not. Who the hell do you think you are?"

Adam McLeod's voice dipped, that no-nonsense tone of his sending a shiver through her. "I think I'm the kind of man who knows a spoiled city girl when he sees one. And you're the kind of woman who, if you were with me, I'd be sitting on that same bench right now and you'd be across my knee with your skirt pulled up, just like she was, getting one hell of a spanking."

Without touching her, just with his words, that cowboy managed to knock the wind right out of her. Larkin sputtered, temporarily speechless. She also felt a wave of trepidation coming out of nowhere.

He's going to do it, she thought, getting panicky. He's going to make good on that threat unless I run like hell!

Yet she couldn't run. She refused to show him fear. Rather, she squared her shoulders and tilted her chin up, mustering every ounce of her pride.

“I have to be getting back to my sister,” she announced stiffly. “Good night, cowboy.”

“Yeah. Good night to you, spoiled city girl.”

There was no malice in his voice. If anything, Larkin thought she detected a hint of disappointment.

For her part, she made it through the door, hoping he hadn't noticed how hard she was trembling. More than that—it was he who'd made her tremble.