
Chapter 1

"Is there something you want—need—to talk to me about, Evvie?" he asked, putting a copy of the *Herald News* that had been folded to show the picture she'd dreaded him noticing on her perpetually empty breakfast plate. Her stomach had been just this side of upset from the moment she'd realized that it was going to show up there, so, yeah, he was right.

He was always freakin' right.

Evelyn sighed heavily. It had been much too much for her to hope that he wouldn't have seen it. Boyd kept up with the times—technology—only as much as he wanted to. He was still, at heart, a creature of habit, and he'd grown up reading newspapers, so they still took the paper, although she had commented loudly on occasion that they were probably the only family in town who did, not that it fazed him in the least. And Lord knew he got up at the crack of dawn and she barely opened an eye until seven at the earliest—despite the fact that he'd spent all of her life trying to wean her off that habit—and she still considered that the middle of the night—and he still knew it.

So she'd missed the opportunity to grab it and burn it before he had a chance to read it. Oh, he would have fussed about the

lack of it, threatening to withhold the generous tip he gave to Jimmy—their paper "boy" who was special needs and closer to forty, not that anyone cared—every week for having forgotten him, even though they both knew that wasn't going to happen. Boyd had always been one of Jimmy's biggest supporters. He was only a few years behind Boyd in school, and the older boy had always watched out for him, making certain he was never teased and always trying to include him in activities, showing everyone unabashedly that he considered Jimmy his friend, thus leading by example and ensuring that everyone would treat him that way.

And woe betide anyone who might try to pick on Jimmy, or anyone else for that matter, within his hearing range or sight while he was in school.

What Boyd wanted, in most cases, was whatever Boyd got, which, granted, was—in almost every case—a good thing.

Unfortunately for his little sister Evvie, with whom he owned and ran the Square B Ranch—although it was much more owned jointly than jointly run, since Boyd tended to like to have the final say about pretty much anything and he did all of the considerable physical labor the ranch required—the underlying subject of the picture and the article was something they had discussed previously and disagreed on.

But, in keeping with their family tradition, which had generally only applied to him, at least to this point, she felt strongly about it and went ahead with her idea without speaking to him about it any further.

Evvie had known full well that the chances were pretty good that she was going to regret that decision at some point in the future, but she felt that this would be a good test case as to whether or not they might be able to add something like this to the things the ranch offered. It would be another income stream, and if this situation was anything to go by, it stood to become a potentially substantial one at that.

She'd done her research before bringing it to him, of course.

Evvie was no fool, either, and she knew she'd better have all her ducks in a row if she was going to try to convince him to do this, or anything else, for that matter. But the fact that her brother was even more dedicatedly antisocial than he ever had been and had assumed that he had won their little discussion with an offhand dismissal while outright ignoring the figures she was touting had more saddened than discouraged her, although it hadn't surprised her in the least.

Boyd might try to appear all big and gruff and unemotional, and sometimes he was exactly that. But she knew he had a soft underbelly, although more for others than himself, as he'd shown her many times in ways both touchingly blatant and achingly subtle.

He was always big. He'd been thirteen pounds when he was born, for crying out loud. As their dad had liked to say, much to Mom's disgust, 'He came out with a full head of hair, a bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand, and a Cuban cigar in the other, which was extremely uncomfortable for his mother.'

And he just got bigger from there. In grade school, Boyd towered over everyone, including most of his teachers, and easily outweighed them, too, even though he'd never been actually overweight. It wasn't until high school that a few of the kids managed to catch up to him, height-wise, at least, but it wasn't really until he was halfway through college that he began to stand out less. It wasn't just his height, either, but his size overall. His parents could barely keep him in clothes, he grew so fast. He was into men's clothing sizes long before he was a man, and his feet were much more like the gunboats his father often compared them to. Hell, he was bigger than the man himself by the time he was twelve, not that it affected his behavior or the level of respect he showed toward his father in the least.

No, his disposition—and his intelligence, in no small part—were Boyd's saving graces. Someone that size, with a bad temperament or mayhem in his heart, could have caused a lot of

havoc—and thus a lot of grief for his parents—if he'd had that bent, but nothing could have been further from what Boyd was like, thankfully. He was quieter than his more boisterous sister and more thoughtful. Even though he'd never wanted the position, he was the undisputed leader of his small band of close friends, and everyone, even those he didn't know that well, seemed to naturally follow his rock steady lead. It helped that his parents had taught him early on that his size should only ever be used in defense of himself if absolutely necessary or—more likely—of someone else, and he'd taken that very much to heart.

He'd very rarely ever felt the need to resort to any kind of violence, thankfully. Standing and turning his full attention to whoever the miscreant was, was usually more than enough to quell any situation that warranted it, and Boyd had rarely even needed to resort to that.

Oh, he was far from a saint, as his sister would readily—and sometimes with distinct glee—attest to. He did have a tendency to think he was right about most things and, annoyingly, to those around him, that was usually true. But the fact that he had been at the time and was still heart sore proved he wasn't infallible. He didn't commit easily or casually, and he'd love that woman with everything in him, to the point that he couldn't see her faults objectively even when his beloved sister had reluctantly taken it upon herself to tell him of the ones she knew about.

And he was stubborn. Once he took the time to love someone, it was damned hard to get him to see why he shouldn't, even if—when—it was in his best interests not to. Evvie hadn't hesitated to tell him, though, once she had irrefutable evidence of her infidelities, knowing he was likely to set his jaw like he did and discount every word she said.

But she'd said it. That was it. She'd never lied to him before, and she wasn't shy about letting him know how awful it was for her to have to tell him those things. He'd been stoic throughout her little speech, and, when she finished, all he did was nod once,

face tight and pained looking. She'd taken a step toward him, wanting to comfort him, but he'd put up his hand and shaken his head.

It had been very hard for her to leave him like that, but she did, not in the least surprised to hear the glass of whiskey that had been on his desk crashing against the door she'd closed as she was walking away.

Lyssa was evil incarnate, as far as Evvie was concerned. When she'd left—finally—when he'd taken himself in hand not long after that discussion, packed her things himself and loaded them into her car, the expensive one he'd bought for her for her birthday, before "suggesting" to her, softly but firmly, that she should leave and stay gone this time, she'd taken a large part of the big man with her. Oh, he'd never cried on her shoulder about it, although just after she'd passed through the back door for that last time, he had grabbed onto his sister and hugged her fit to crack her ribs, but Evvie wouldn't have let go of him for love nor money. She'd hugged him back as hard as she could and hadn't stopped doing so until they'd both heard her peel angrily out of the yard, and he'd slowly let her go and stepped away from her.

She'd clung to him even then, wanting to offer him the same shoulder he'd so often given her—it was so rare for him to need it and she was honored to have the opportunity to do that for him—but he'd put her gently away from him to stomp to that same back door, grab his grubby hat from the rack above the boot rack, and disappear out onto the range to drown his sorrows in hard, physical labor.

Even then, there had been no tears on his face, and if he'd indeed shed any, it had not been within her line of sight. She'd reminded him a few times, especially early on, that she was there if he wanted to talk, knowing as she did there was pretty much zero chance that he was going to take her up on it.

But in true Boyd fashion, he'd given her what had become a ghost of his true, happy smile and said, "Thank you for that, Eb.

And you'll never know how much I appreciate you being there for me." When he was a little boy, he couldn't say 'Evvie,' so the entire family—nay town—had called her what he did, which was 'Ebby', to the point that she had insisted while learning how to write her name in kindergarten that she had to be Ebelyn, not Evelyn.

And he had been the only one who could convince her that her big brother—who she considered to be the be all and end all of her little world—was wrong.

She'd never let him forget that, either.

But now she was sitting at the breakfast table, staring at the evidence of what she knew he would consider to be her own perfidy.

"Uh, do you mean me having the initiative to get us into a new revenue stream?" she asked in a cartoonishly hopeful voice.

He sank into the chair at the head of the table, which was his rightful position, having inherited it from their father much sooner than he should have when their parents had died in a car crash when he was still in high school, since he was the one who really ran the business. She took care of all of the administrivia and the house, but Boyd was the brains and the backbone—and the heart, if it came to that—of the operation, and they both knew it. He'd never wanted to do anything else but follow in his father's footsteps, and when things had gotten rough—especially when "The Tramp", as Evvie had taken to thinking of her rather than by her actual name, however unkindly and never out loud in front of him, even now—he'd never once complained, but instead had buckled down and leaned in, doing everything short of selling his plasma and semen to make certain that they didn't lose their birthright.

Evvie frowned, momentarily distracted. She hoped he hadn't gone to those lengths. Plasma maybe, but she doubted he could have lived with the thought of having fathered children he would never meet, so... yeah. She was going to stop

thinking along those squeamish lines about her brother, anyway.

Those long, lean days had stretched into years, and things had slowly gotten better for them, but the both of them had long since sworn off ramen, peanut butter, and bologna for the rest of their lives.

Her brother didn't smile as fully or as often as he used to once Lyssa had left, but she caught the small one he couldn't seem to suppress as his eyes flitted to hers. "Correct me if I'm wrong, though, Eb, but I thought we'd decided not to go in that direction."

Leaning her elbow on the table, she returned quickly and pointedly, "No, you decided that in about five seconds flat, and, since you couldn't seem to be bothered to give it the consideration it warranted, I decided to ignore you."

Again, she saw the crinkly lines appear at the sides of his mouth, which meant he was trying not to smile, not that he was happy with her decision to press on without him. "I thought I had made it clear how I felt about this idea of yours."

"Didn't you leave out the word 'harebrained'?"

Boyd looked somewhat insulted. "No, I did not even so much as think that word about you, Evelyn, because you're not—in general."

"Thanks?" she returned doubtfully then frowned. "And don't use my full name, please. It has unpleasant connotations."

"Good. That's what I was going for when I used it before, during, or after tanning your hide, which is a chore that I am only too happy to leave to Richard from now on."

Evvie's face flamed. "Can we please not talk about things like that?"

"You would've preferred that I allow you to run amuck all over the county?"

She knew she should have defended herself better on the "running amuck" part, but his spankings were not something she

intended to discuss—ever—when they weren't actually happening. Instead, she stuck her fingers in her ears, closed her eyes, and began to chant loudly, to no particular tune, "La la la la la la."

All of that embarrassment she felt about the subject was almost worth it when her reaction brought an actual small smile to his face. "All right, all right. I don't really want to talk about that subject, either, and this is a much bigger matter of concern."

"Well, it shouldn't be. I've got it all neatly arranged, and if someone hadn't blabbed to the paper, it would have been a fait accompli, and you would have just met her on Friday, when she arrives along with the rest of us."

"Lemme guess. Anita Tremont."

"Well, if so, I didn't tell her. I didn't want you finding out, so I really didn't tell anyone but Richard, and that's like telling you. A firing squad couldn't get information out of that man if he didn't want you to know something, not unlike another man I know who regularly annoys the ever loving crap out of me."

A grin appeared on his face, and she was glad to see it, too, even if all of this was at her expense. "Glad to hear that Richard intends to uphold yet another of our family's time-honored traditions!"

Her *Grrrr* was somewhat lackluster.

"So, are you pissed at me because I'm bringing one of Hollywood's biggest stars to the ranch?"

"Well," he began, staring at her pointedly, "I have to admit that I would have preferred that you had discussed it with me first—"

"So you could say no again?" Evvie snorted. "Not likely." She crossed her arms over her chest and sat back in her chair.

He was half-smiling again. "But now that it's apparently going to happen whether or not I want it to, I'm just going to let you handle it." Boyd stood, gave the newspaper as well as his recalcitrant little sister a jaundiced eye, then headed toward his study.

Her face fell at that. "B-but you can't leave it all up to me!"

That stopped him in his tracks before he'd gotten too far, and he turned in what shouldn't have been such a graceful movement considering his size, but it was. "And what, dare I ask, does that mean?"

Evvie managed a sheepish look, while staring diligently at her plate, and answered him in the softest voice she could manage, mumbling her answer as unintelligibly as possible, "Mumph."

Boyd leaned his hip against the kitchen counter, crossing his own arms over his own chest. And that look on him was much more impressive than it was on her, unfortunately.

"Evelyn."

She sighed and repeated, although not that much more loudly, "Because I told her that you would show her around the ranch."

"Tell me you didn't tell her that."

Any semblance of amusement had left his tone, and she knew better than to turn around and look back at him. Although Evvie had grown out of the mindless adoration she had felt for him as a child, she was still incredibly close to Boyd, and having him even slightly unhappy with her—much less actually angry, or, Heaven forbid, disappointed in her—was practically physically painful.

"Well, I could show her the basics of the place, but you know it so much better—and in so much more detail—than I do. I adored growing up here, and I love my job and this house and everything, but this place is your life's blood, just like it was Daddy's and I want her to get a sense of that that only you could impart."

"Do not try to butter me up. It won't work."

"I'm not trying to do that." Having had enough of playing the part of coward, she turned in her chair to meet his eyes, feeling her stomach hit the floor beneath her feet when she saw his downright stony expression. "She's accepted a part about a down on her luck rancher, and we've been there."

"So have lots of other ranchers."

"Yes, but those other ranchers didn't have genius sisters with the forethought to try to see if maybe they could branch out into another area where they could make money that isn't weather, cattle, or market dependent."

His silence told her that she'd hit her mark with him.

"And really, how hard is it going to be for you to shepherd around one of the most beautiful women on the planet for a couple months?"

"Months?" He looked downright apoplectic, like those cartoons with the bulging eyes. "If she's going to stay that long, she'd better damned well have come to work."

Well, at least he hadn't barred her from coming at all. That was something.

Her brother hadn't dated, shown any interest in, or so much as looked at a woman in a romantic way since The Tramp had left. And she didn't feel in the least concerned about "slut shaming" the woman with that name, since it was absolutely true.

Actually, it was probably an insult to tramps.

And Evvie had to admit, to herself, anyway, that she wouldn't mind it in the least if her brother even just had a fling with this woman. Something—anything—to get him out of his doldrums. Not that she'd put much money on it, but a girl could hope. She just wanted him to be as happy as she and Richard were.

"She won't be fit to work unless you teach her how, and I get the feeling she takes her own work very seriously. She wants to learn what it takes to run a ranch, but she doesn't even know how to ride at this point, except for the occasional pony at the fair, she said."

Boyd rolled his eyes as he levered away from the counter prior to heading to his study again. "If you'd left me out of it, I might have applauded your initiative, little sister. But I don't care who the hell she is. I don't have time to be holding a tenderfoot's pristinely manicured hand while she complains about the heat

and the smell and tries to sidestep the piles of shit in the pasture in five-inch, spiked heels."

"Even if she's going to pay us a butthead of money for the privilege of having you work her to the bone?"

She'd stopped him in his tracks for the second time in one conversation. That had to be some kind of record.

"Define butthead," came the terse order.

Evvie named the figure and even though his back was still to her, she knew she had won when she saw his shoulders drop and heard him heave a long, suffering sigh. "All right, I'll do it." He started to walk away again, then she heard him vow under his breath, "But I can promise you now that I'm not going to like it."

Then he whirled around and forced her to cut the victory dance she was doing behind his back abruptly short while he stood there glowering at her. "But I want to put this out there, just in case you've got some wild hair up your arse about it. I don't want you thinking or hoping or wanting or wishing or waiting for anything to come from this, either. I'll be polite to her and nice to her, like I am to everyone. But that's it. I've had enough of her kind to last a lifetime."

With that, he was gone, although Evvie wisely waited until she'd heard the door to his study close before she finished her dance while mentally sticking her tongue out at him, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing that those hopes and dreams were already there.

She was ecstatic that he'd agreed to have her here at all and with relatively little in the way of fussing and fuming. She'd known that the fee the actress—or rather, more than likely the company that was making the picture—was going to pay was her ace in the hole. Even after all this time, Boyd found it very hard to turn down any legal method of making money. In truth, when she was negotiating this deal, Evvie told them what she considered to be an astronomical sum—even after having researched

such things on the net as best she could—expecting that they would laugh in her face.

Instead, less than a week later, she'd gotten a call from a 212 area code, which she knew was New York City, and when she answered it, it was the woman herself—not the production company, not her assistant, but Callie Bowen, movie star extraordinaire, on the other end of the line.

Evvie, who considered herself to be relatively level headed, almost dropped the phone, screamed out loud, and fainted, not necessarily in that order. Then she reminded herself that she was a successful businesswoman—or at least, that was what she wanted to be—so she should damned well act like it, and she thought she'd pulled it off pretty well, managing to sound reasonably intelligent and polite through the whole, blessedly short, conversation.

Maybe she should try acting herself!

"Callie, Callie! Can I take a selfie?"

At least this one was asking. If she had a nickel for every time she'd appeared in a selfie she'd never actually agreed to, she'd be, well, even more filthy rich than she already was.

But this was a little girl, probably not much older than six or seven or so, and if there was one group of people she never turned down, it was kids. If pets had been able to ask for selfies, they would have gone to the head of the line, but since they couldn't, it was kids.

"Of course, you can!" She sunk down on one knee next to the little girl and smiled brightly into the camera.

"Oh, thank you! I love you so much!" The little imp threw her arms around Callie's neck and gave her a surprisingly strong hug.

"Thank you! I love you, too!" She could look past the little

girl, though, and see that there was a herd of people who were just beginning to realize that she was there, so she squeezed the little girl again, then rose and headed to her gate.

Granted, she could have used the studio's jet, or gone to the VIP lounge, or done any one of a zillion other things to avoid being descended upon by fans. And sometimes she did break down and avail herself of those conveniences.

But despite the fact that she was far from the most social person on the planet, and she could really do without ever having to talk to anyone she didn't want to, she also recognized that it came with the territory. And encounters like that one were some of the best interactions she'd ever had with her fellow humans, which, when she thought about it, was a very depressing concept.

She really still just tried to be as normal as possible. Frankly, that was one of the biggest goals she'd had for herself while she was growing up to be normal, even though in more ways than she wanted to admit, she was far from it.

One of the few consistent indulgences she allowed herself was getting a good seat on the plane. It wasn't at all that she thought she was in any way better than anyone in business or coach, but she wasn't the bravest flier. It wasn't even the actual act of flying that was the problem for her. It was having to be so close to all of the strangers around her when she didn't go first class. It made her incredibly uncomfortable, and as soon as she began to make any money at all—well, before she got rid of her crappy fifth floor walk-up that was more of a closet than an apartment, before she bought herself a car, or the latest iPhone or splurged on anything at all, not that she did much of that anyway—she began to fly first class. If she had to eat rice and beans for months, so be it. It was more than worth it to her to have a bit of mental breathing room when she was flying all over everywhere to film or go to auditions and later, awards shows.

She should have moved to California when things started to happen for her, but she loved the city, and she couldn't bring

herself to leave it. And more quickly than she expected, companies that wouldn't have given her the time of day early on in her career were suddenly fine with flying her places, rather than her having to pay for it herself.

Overall, it was a pretty harmless indulgence in exchange for a lot of peace of mind, especially considering some of the other indulgences she might have ended up with in her chosen profession.

Callie tucked her bag beneath the seat in front of her after having stepped into the handles with her right foot, as was her somewhat paranoid habit. She'd not done that once—putting her bag in the overhead instead—and ended up in Europe with no ID and no money, which was no fun at all.

So now she completed all of her rituals, putting in her air buds, putting on her seat belt, then closing her eyes and clearing her mind. While the rest of the world piled into the plane, she listened to episodes of British dramas—costume and otherwise—that she'd seen zillions of times before. For some reason, upper class British accents calmed her when nothing else could.

If she was very lucky, she'd be able to get to sleep, and wake up in... where was she supposed to end up again? Montana? Texas? New Mexico? It was in Google Calendar, but she didn't want to be bothered to look. It was one of those cow-filled states where Ben and Jerry's didn't originate and where people didn't wear pieces of cheese on their heads when they watched sporting events. Instead, they threw the cow on the barbie. No, that was Australia.

Whatever. If it involved being around animals—even those that didn't purr or bark—she was all in.

She was very excited about finally learning how to ride! She'd always wanted to, but that kind of thing certainly wasn't going to happen during her childhood, and now that she was an adult, she didn't have time to do things like that, so she'd been only too happy to take a project that would require her to learn. Her

agent—who was also her best friend and had been so since they were both about five years old—teased her unmercifully, of course, that it was the only reason she'd taken this part. And she wasn't necessarily wrong, either. Not that she wanted it pointed out to her at every opportunity.

But Diza had known her much too long to let her get away with anything, and they made a phenomenal team, so she'd forgive her—she supposed.

It wasn't too long a flight, and although she hadn't managed to sleep—surprise, surprise—she had rested nicely, with her phone unable to receive calls. She wasn't sure whether it was the flight attendants' work or not, but no one had disturbed her, not even her seatmate who turned out to be a little old lady who probably had no idea who she was.

But she thought too soon. The moment she "woke up", said little old lady patted her arm, as little old ladies do, and asked her for her autograph for her granddaughter, Lizzie.

Callie asked her how old the girl was then asked the woman if she had a smartphone.

She gave her a very genuine, self-deprecating smile and confessed, "Smart phone, dumb owner, but yes."

Then she proceeded to hand the phone over to her—to a woman she only knew, because Lizzie was "crazy about her".

Callie shook her head at how trusting some folks were—while being slightly envious of them at the same time—and brought the camera up to take a selfie with the woman, whose name was Carol Brady.

Callie had to look at her for a moment. Really. She was sitting next to Carol freakin' Brady.

And she didn't seem to get the joke, even though that sitcom was from her generation, not Callie's.

Anyway, she'd put a smile on the woman's face and probably her granddaughter's, too, and received many overly grateful thanks for the "selfie."

She didn't bother to correct the woman, knowing her granddaughter would probably take care of that for her.

The moment she was off the plane, Callie moved to the side, closed her eyes, and took a big, slow, calming breath before rejoining the crowd as it moved, as if with a mind of its own, to the baggage claim area, and for the first time since she'd begun traveling by air at the ripe old age of twenty-three, her bag was the first one to be disgorged onto the belt! She felt as if she'd won some kind of secret lottery or something. Usually, she and someone who looked much the worse for wear ended up hanging around until every passenger at the airport had collected their luggage but them.

Callie reached for the big case—that was practically bigger than she was and almost weighed as much, too—but then someone's very male, very enormous hand reached past her as if she wasn't there and plucked it off the belt as easily as if he was grabbing a Krispy Kreme donut.

"Hey, wait a minute! That's mine!" she said, not hesitating in the least to confront the behemoth that was now in possession of eighty percent of the clothes she owned, among other things. Not that she was having any luck at the actual confrontation part, since he was still striding away from her, having already put quite a distance between them without much effort.

He did stop when she'd shouted at him, though. "You're the actress?" he drawled, half turning back toward her but not looking at her.

Why did she feel that he was insulting her, when all he did was state her career? "Yes."

"Follow me."

No, "Hi, my name is "blank", and I'll be taking you to my dungeon now," or anything! "You're the actress" was not an introduction, and most people knew that. She wasn't going to blindly follow anyone, anywhere.

"Absolutely not," she said quietly, aware that there were

cameras everywhere, but she still stood her ground, hands on her hips and foot tapping away in a way that could have been anger but was really just nerves—not that he'd know that.

He turned fully around at her declaration, giving her a slightly amused look that nonetheless didn't move his lips and didn't reach his eyes, either, and it didn't endear him to her in the least.

"I don't know who the hell you are, and I'm not going anywhere with you. And I'll thank you to put my suitcase down," she ordered imperiously.

It was the biggest one she could find that still had rollers on it—knowing she was going to need them—but he hadn't even bothered with them. Instead, it was tucked up under his arm, and for some reason, she pictured herself there in an unsettling flash of daydream—nightmare, more like it—until she shook her head.

Callie hated how he was looking at her, still smugly amused, as if she was performing some cute trick for him. She wanted to kick him in the shins but figured she'd end up breaking her foot on him, and then she'd lose the part.

"Callie Bowen?" he asked, in a deep, soft voice that she had to admit put patrician British accents to shame.

She cocked her head and gave him a look out of the side of her eye that was rife with suspicion, answering with severe reluctance, "Yeeeessss..."

"Follow me." He was still holding that bag under his arm as if it didn't weigh a thing.

"Hey! Wait! I still don't know you, and I did not give you permission to take my bag," she hissed at him, trotting after him and trying to stop him from robbing her, all while trying desperately not to attract any unwanted attention.

She was wearing sneakers, so she supposed if she had to, she could break into a jog in order to keep up with him, but she didn't want to.

Since she didn't seem to have any choice in the matter, she decided she needed to follow not him, but her wardrobe.

"Hey, it's Callie! Hi, Callie Bowen!"

Several people recognized her as she continued to trot after him, and she was as friendly as she could be under the circumstances, but she wasn't about to stop to chit chat—she didn't want to lose him.

Despite the fact that she hurled the occasional "Wait!" at his back—not that he acknowledged her attempts in the least—she wondered if he was so big that he swallowed up sound, like a black hole.

They ended up in short term parking—she knew only because she read the signs—and just when she'd caught up with him, he stopped abruptly, and she found herself suddenly plastered against his unforgiving backside.

Callie couldn't move away fast enough, putting several feet between them before he turned around to give her a quizzical look.

It was the hint of fear he saw around the edges of her eyes that tweaked his conscience about how he was treating her. He didn't have to marry her. He didn't even have to like her, but he did have to treat her as what she would be—a guest, and a paying one at that, not that it mattered.

With that, his demeanor changed completely, and he even looked a bit sheepish. A big paw was extended to her. "I'm Boyd Miller—Evvie's brother. I'm sorry to have been so, well, such a dick. I don't have an excuse." One that he was willing to admit to her, anyway. "But it was wrong of me and I'm sorry."

Callie blinked eyes that were owlishly large, as she stood there, frankly stunned. A man who seemed genuinely apologetic and said he was sorry without anyone having to twist his arm? That was the behavior of a unicorn, if ever there was one.

She put her hand in his but only for a second and just barely,

as if she thought he would deliberately crush it, then reclaimed it, saying, "That's okay."

He deposited her suitcase into the back of what was an extremely old truck that looked as if it hadn't been washed since it was bought and had spent every day of its long life being dragged through the mud, among other more fragrant things.

It made her wonder just how prosperous his ranch was, but then, struggling was what she was going to be portraying, so that was probably a good thing.

Still, its cab—except for the floor—was absolutely immaculate, much more so than her own car, she was ashamed to admit.

But it was old, so it was also rather small—and he was decidedly not—so much so that if he moved too much, there was no way he wasn't going to touch her inadvertently.

She was so busy trying to cram herself into her corner of the seat to avoid that, that she didn't notice they weren't going anywhere until she heard him clear his throat.

Her eyes shot to his, and he simply looked down at where her seatbelt should have been hitched, then it was two seconds later, just before she went back to trying to imprint the edge of her seat and some of the door into her back.

"Is your door locked?" he asked.

"What?"

She looked as if she thought he'd asked her to tell him about when she'd lost her virginity. "Is your door locked?"

Callie checked. "Uh, yes."

"Good." If he knew her better—if she didn't appear to be terrified of him—he might have teased her about how she was plastered against the door as she had been against his backside, but he didn't want to make her even more uncomfortable than she already was.

He didn't know if her reaction was because of how surly he'd been when they'd first met, or his size, or because she was an undoubtedly rich, entitled actress who thought her shit didn't stink and she didn't want to get any of his middle-class cooties on her person.

His spectacularly failed romantic history was leading him to lean toward the latter explanation, but at least he was trying to be cognizant of that prejudice. Boyd knew he wouldn't always be able to be quite that self-aware, but, intellectually, at least, he knew that not all women were like Lyssa. But this was the closest he'd been to any woman since he'd all but tossed her cheating ass out, and he could feel himself tensing up just remembering.

But she was sitting there quietly, obviously trying to make herself small enough that he wouldn't notice her, like a field mouse trying to evade a mountain lion.

No, a T-Rex, he corrected the picture in his mind. That was a much closer comparison for him in that simile.

If she had been as he'd assumed she would be—arriving in furs and gold and heels and expecting that he would wait on her—he wouldn't have felt so bad about how he'd treated her. But instead, she was sitting there in a worn pair of jeans, sneakers with no swish on them, a cotton t-shirt, and a nondescript, button up sweater with a hummingbird on it. She wasn't even carrying a purse, as far as he could see, and that, frankly, intrigued him. His sister was the least girly girl he knew, and even she carried one. His mom had one that he was sure—when he was growing up—held one of everything in the world, it was that big.

She wasn't wearing any makeup that he could detect, either, which was a point in her favor, as far as he was concerned, and beyond that—possibly because of that—he couldn't miss how tired she looked. Downright exhausted, frankly, which made him feel even more protective toward her than he was predisposed to feel. She wore no rings—no jewelry at all that he could see—

until he spotted what looked like small gold hummingbirds in her ears. He could detect no other piercings, but she was too well covered—another pleasant surprise—to see if she might have tattoos, not that he cared about either of those things.

And he realized that his line of thinking just betrayed how prejudiced he was about some things—well, women—and he didn't like to think of himself being that way. But he was only human, although he vowed to do his best not to make assumptions about her.

Overall, he liked what he saw more than he wanted to, and he would guard himself even more zealously against that.

But it was the haunted look in her eyes, the tight, whiteness around her lips, and the way her knee was bouncing up and down that pushed right past any of the roadblocks he might have thrown up.

He could be a big, dumb galoot sometimes, but he wasn't cruel.

So, as they headed out of the city—since no airlines flew into their neck of the woods, and he'd flat out refused to fly in and pick her up—he realized just how devoid the area was of places of any interest to anyone but the locals. He didn't need to point out the dive where he'd gotten drunk for the first time, or the hotel in which he'd lost his virginity, or Evvie's best friend's house.

And he could feel her flinch every time his elbow brushed her arm, purely by accident.

So he figured repeating his apology couldn't hurt. Lyssa certainly had enjoyed hearing him grovel.

"I don't mean to belabor the point, Ms. Bowen, but I really am sorry about how I acted at the luggage carousel."

"That's okay."

She'd said that before. "And I'm sorry the truck's so small that I keep elbowing you in the ribs every time I move."

She didn't smile at that, as he'd intended, and he didn't think she was so quiet because she was stuck up, either.

"That's okay, too." He wasn't sure, but he thought she might have relaxed, even just a bit. He hoped so, anyway.

Could an internationally famous actress be shy? The idea seemed contradictory to him. How could you stand up in front of tons of people and yet be shy?

Apparently so.