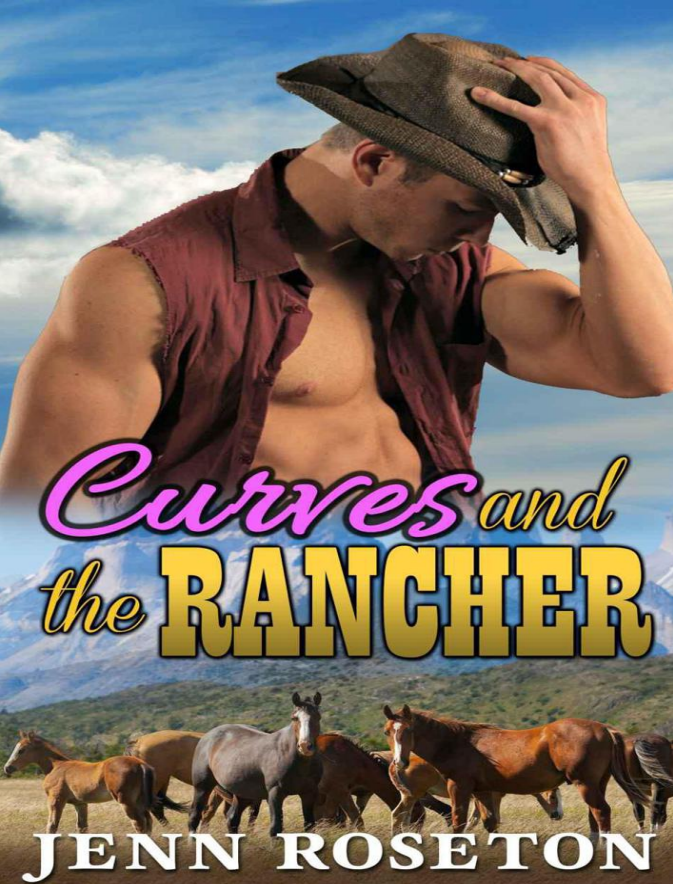




Curves and
the **RANCHER**

JENN ROSETON

Curves and the Rancher (BBW
Romance - Coldwater Springs 3)

by

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This is a sexy contemporary
romance novelette.

“Take this over to Luke, hon.” Betty, the gray haired and matronly waitress who ruled the diner, gestured to the plate sitting on the counter. “I’ve got to take my pie out of the oven.”

“Sure.” Cassie smiled at her new boss and picked up the plate of eggs over easy. She threaded her way to the man sitting alone in a leatherette booth. On the overhead speakers, a country singer crooned softly about love lost and found again. Pictures of mountainous landscapes adorned the faded blue walls.

She’d only been working at the diner in Coldwater Springs for two days.

Never realizing before what a tough job waitressing was, she was grateful Betty had taken her under her wing. In fact, she thought hopefully, she might even be able to get her confidence back. She'd already started to feel a little more like her old self--

“Ohh!” Cassie stumbled on the old vinyl flooring, the china plate flying through the air and landing upside down on the customer's lap. Gripping the Formica table to steady herself, she stared in shock at the bright yellow egg running down the customer's denim jeans.

Her gaze slowly traveled up from

his lap to his face. His light brown hair barely brushed the collar of his red checkered shirt. She bit her lip as his compelling, dark brown eyes met hers met hers for a split second before he looked down at the gooey food on his crotch. At any other time, she would probably have felt a little flutter at meeting a man in his early thirties with such clean-cut good looks, but she was too mortified to register much beyond the mess she'd made.

She shrank back, blinking away the tears that threatened, her hair swinging around her face. "I'm so sorry. So sorry." Drawing shallow breaths, she waited for his reaction.

He grimaced. “Can you grab me some napkins?” Looking up at her, his expression gentled. “It’ll wash off.”

Cassie grabbed a handful of napkins from the neighboring empty booth and handed them to him. “I’m so sorry,” she repeated, unable to take her eyes off the mess on the man’s jeans.

“You okay, Cassie?” Betty appeared, her concerned gaze switching between the two of them.

“I’m sorry, Betty.” She wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole. She couldn’t believe what a klutz she was. Maybe Phillip was right. Maybe she was fat and hopeless.

Betty put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Go take your break now, Cassie. I'll clean this up."

"But--"

"Go on now." Betty patted her back. "I can handle things here."

Her lip wobbled and then she nodded, turning away and hurrying to the tiny employee's room at the rear of the diner. She heard Betty behind her.

"Sorry about that, Luke. Cassie hasn't been waitressing long."

Before she slipped inside, she turned to look back. Betty handed Luke more

paper napkins.

She couldn't do anything right! Any minute now, Betty would tell her she was fired.

###

On Saturday, three days after what Cassie privately referred to as the egg incident, Luke came into the diner mid-morning. She blushed when she saw him stride inside, and she hid behind a booth, hoping he wouldn't see her, and that he wouldn't sit in her section.

To her surprise, she hadn't been

fired on Wednesday. Instead, Betty told her that kind of thing could happen to anyone and had given her a slice of freshly baked cherry pie.

Cassie's mouth watered as she remembered the taste of the pie and looked down at herself ruefully. Her plump figure didn't need any more pie, no matter how delicious it tasted.

"Cassie." Betty appeared, expertly juggling three breakfast specials in her hands. "There's a cup of coffee for Luke on the counter. He's sitting in your section."

Her heart sank. She didn't want to be responsible for pouring hot coffee over

the man. “But--”

“You’ll be fine, hon,” Betty said reassuringly. “Go on, now.”

Cassie nodded and walked over to the counter. In her five days of working at the diner, spilling the eggs on Luke had been her only incident. “One and only,” she muttered fiercely to herself. Picking up the coffee, she carefully made her way over to Luke’s booth and set the mug down on the Formica table.

“Coffee?” Embarrassed about spilling hot eggs on him the other day, she peeked up at him from beneath her lowered lashes.

“Thanks.” He gave her an easy smile and she found herself tentatively smiling back.

“I’m--” She drew in a breath and smoothed her hands nervously down the large apron which covered most of her curvaceous figure. “I’m sorry about the other day.”

He chuckled wryly. “Don’t worry about it.”

Relief made her smile a little more confident, and she noticed just how good looking he was.

“Betty said you haven’t worked here long.” He kept eye contact with her,

interested in her answer.

“That’s right.” She couldn’t think of anything else to say. She’d always been shy around guys, and now, thanks to Phillip, she was a little wary of them too. Besides, this man - Luke - wouldn’t be interested in her life story - or how she wound up in Coldwater Springs.

Two curvy girls around her own age walked in, stopping at the counter to place their order. The brunette laughed at something her blond companion said, then they threaded their way to an empty booth in Cassie’s section.

She turned her attention back to the man sitting in front of her. “May I get you

anything else?”

He smiled and shook his head. “No thanks.”

“Okay.” She didn’t understand why, but she was both relieved and sorry he didn’t want anything else. She offered him a little smile and walked to the counter.

Arnold, the grizzled middle-aged cook, gestured to the two steaming cups of coffee and plates of cherry pie. “For Sarah and Libby.” He nodded in the direction of the booth where the two girls talked animatedly.

Cassie loaded up a tray and walked

over to their booth. “Cherry pie and coffee?”

“Hi,” said the dark-haired girl. “I’m Sarah.”

“And I’m Libby, her cousin,” the blond chimed in. “You must be Cassie.”

“I’m not wearing a name badge. How did you--”

“News travels fast.” An impish grin lit up Libby's face. “How are you finding it here?”

“I like working here.” Cassie realized she was speaking the truth. “Coldwater Springs seems like a nice

place.”

“It is,” Sarah assured her, before she and Libby exchanged a satisfied smile.

“So what have you done to Luke Jackson?” Libby enquired.

“What...what do you mean?” Cassie frowned. Surely they hadn’t heard about the egg incident.

“This must be the third time he’s been in here this week. Usually he only comes in for breakfast about once a month when he’s getting supplies. He’s sitting over there.” Libby gestured to Luke’s booth on the opposite side of the diner.

“I haven’t seen him since I...since he came in three days ago.” Cassie wrinkled her brow. She’d worked the afternoon shift yesterday instead of her usual morning shift.

The blonde girl’s eyes sparkled. “I have it on very good authority he came in on Wednesday and Friday. And he’s here again today.”

Cassie tried to fight the rising tide of pink creeping over her cheeks. Libby’s suggestion was laughable. Who on earth would want to come back to the diner after having hot eggs splashed on him by a clumsy waitress unless he really was hungry or thirsty? “I don’t know what

you mean.”

“I don’t see any other new waitresses.” Libby stifled a giggle. “Especially one with cute auburn hair and blue eyes.”

“Libby.” Sarah glanced at her cousin.

Libby sobered. “Sorry, Cassie. My boyfriend told me he’s a good guy, and he happens to be single.”

“He lives on a ranch outside town,” Sarah added. “Which is why he doesn’t come in toooften.”

“Oh.” Cassie hoped her blush had

faded. Even if Luke was a nice guy, that didn't mean he was interested in her. In her limited experience with men, not many seemed to like curvy women. Except Phillip - at first.

“So where are you staying?” Libby asked curiously.

“At the motel down the road.” Libby's enquiring gaze encouraged her to elaborate. “My car broke down a few days ago while I was passing through. Bob said it would take a couple of weeks to get the part.”

“Where were you headed to?” Sarah asked.

Cassie hesitated. “I hadn’t really made up my mind,” she finally said.

“And you wound up working here.” Libby smiled at her.

Cassie couldn’t help smiling back. “Betty offered me a job when I came here for lunch one day.”

“Betty’s great.” Sarah’s eyes sparkled. “And she makes the best cherry pie I’ve ever tasted.”

“I know,” Cassie and Libby said at the same time. All three girls laughed.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea.” Libby sipped her coffee. “Instead of staying at

the motel, why don't you stay with me until your car gets fixed? I've got a spare bedroom and I live four blocks away, so you could walk to the diner, or I can give you a ride in the mornings when I start work at the library."

"Oh no, I couldn't." Cassie felt flustered at the offer. "It's kind of you, but I couldn't impose on you like that."

"It'll be fun." Libby grinned at her.

"What if it doesn't work out?"

"Then we'll say no hard feelings--"

"And I could move back to the motel." Cassie slowly warmed to the

idea. Although clean, the one and only motel in Coldwater Springs was a little drab. Alone with her thoughts every night, she couldn't stop thinking about how long her money would last and if Phillip had tried to track her down.

“We could move you in after your shift finishes,” Sarah suggested.

“Are you sure, Libby? You don't even know me.”

“Betty hired you.” Libby smiled.
“That's good enough for me.”

####

Smiling, Cassie unpacked her clothes. Her new bedroom was a small, rectangular room decorated in soft peach colors and a twin bed. It would be great if she became friends with Libby and Sarah. But then she remembered that once her car was fixed, she needed to get back on the road. Her smile vanished. How long would she have to keep running? Surely Phillip wouldn't be able to track her to Coldwater Springs? A total urbanite, he hated even getting dirt on his shoes. Would he really travel all the way to Wyoming to find her?

“Cassie,” Sarah called. “Come and have some coffee with us.”

Cassie shook off her troubling thoughts and walked down the hall to the kitchen. As she reached the threshold, she overheard Libby. “I think Cassie and Luke would make a cute couple.”

She peeked around the doorjamb and watched Sarah stir cream into her coffee. “Maybe,” the brunette murmured.

Libby almost snorted. “More than maybe. I think they’d be perfect for each other.”

“Libby,” Sarah cautioned. “Cassie has barely been in town for a week. And

we don't even know what her plans are.”

“I bet if she got together with Luke she'd want to stay.”

Cassie's stomach fluttered as she unintentionally eavesdropped. After the fiasco with Phillip, she didn't know if she wanted another boyfriend - ever. Let alone a husband. Once she'd moved in with Phillip, he'd started to find fault with just about everything she did. Taking a deep breath, she deliberately pushed away the disturbing memory and entered the kitchen.

“Hi,” she said brightly.

“Hi.” Libby offered her a cup of steaming coffee, embarrassment crinkling her brow. Cassie decided to pretend she hadn’t overheard their conversation.

Sarah sat at the large kitchen table. “I thought I’d start planning the menu for my wedding.” She gestured to a large notepad in front of her

“When are you getting married?” Cassie glanced at Sarah’s hand.

Sarah smiled, displaying her large diamond solitaire engagement ring. “In just over two months. Saturday June twenty-nine.”

“She’s marrying Chase McCord.” Libby giggled. “The guy she had a crush on *forever*.”

“As if you can talk.” Sarah punched Libby lightly in the arm. “She was almost arrested by her boyfriend,” she explained to Cassie.

“That was *before* he was my boyfriend.” Noticing Cassie’s expression of silent enquiry, Libby elaborated. “My boyfriend’s the sheriff. Jake Morgan.”

“Oh.” Relief flickered through her. Staying with Libby would be a lot safer than at the motel. She sat at the table and sipped her coffee.

“Hey, I’ve got a great idea,” Libby said excitedly. “Why don’t you come to the wedding?”

“I couldn’t.” Cassie shook her head. “You hardly know me.”

“Luke’s invited.”

“Libby,” Sarah hissed.

“What?” Libby looked innocent.

“It’s kind of you, but I couldn’t.” Cassie gripped the coffee mug. She didn’t even know where she’d be in two months’ time. But it didn’t matter where, as long as Phillip couldn’t find her.

“You’re more than welcome, Cassie.” Sarah smiled at her. “I’m having an old-fashioned Wyoming wedding. The reception’s going to be at my parents’ house after the church ceremony.”

“I’m her maid of honor and Jake’s going to be the best man. It would be fun if you were part of it.”

Cassie wavered. It did sound fun. Although she’d just met them, she really liked Sarah and Libby. Would it be possible to stay here and work at the diner? She just didn’t know. “I’m..I’m not sure if I’ll still be here.”

Libby looked disappointed.

Sarah patted Cassie's hand. "I understand. But if you are still here, I expect to see you at my wedding."

###

A few days later, Cassie confidently navigated her way through the diner, carrying a tray loaded with coffee and pie. She was definitely getting the hang of waitressing. Although her feet hurt at the end of a shift, she realized she liked working at the diner. Betty, Arnold the cook, and most of the customers were patient and friendly with her. And there was Luke.

Don't think about him, she told herself, stopping at a corner booth and

setting down the order for two elderly ladies.

Thoughts of Luke had flitted through her mind since she'd been invited to Sarah's wedding. Last night she dreamt that she and Luke had attended the wedding together. He'd taken her breath away. Tall, broad-shouldered and leanly muscled, his gray suit fit him like a glove. And the way he looked at her sent delightful shivers through her. She had definitely remembered *that* when the alarm woke her.

The door jangled and she automatically looked up. Luke entered the diner, ordering at the counter and

then making a bee-line for a booth in her section. Butterflies danced in her stomach as she picked up her tray and headed back to the kitchen.

This was the fourth time in seven days that Luke had visited the diner. At first, she had brushed off Libby's suggestion that she was the reason. But now...

"Coffee and cherry pie for Luke." Arnold placed the order on the counter. "Don't know what he's doing here at this hour," he muttered, turning back to the grill.

Cassie looked at her small silver watch. Eleven am. Carefully loading her

tray, she walked over to Luke. “Coffee and cherry pie.” She repeated the order shyly, willing herself not to think about last night’s dream.

“Thanks, Cassie.” His deep, rich voice forced her to look at him - at his straight nose, firm, sensual lips... And then she found herself drowning in the dark pools of his eyes.

Get a grip, she scolded herself. Straightening, she picked up the tray. “Would you like anything else?” She forced the words past her suddenly parched throat.

“Are you busy?”

She looked around the diner. There weren't any orders waiting on the counter and nobody else had come in since Luke. "No."

He gestured to the opposite side of the booth. "Why don't you sit for a minute?"

"I don't--" she stuttered.

"I'm sure Betty won't mind." He grinned and her heart flip-flopped. "And if she does, I'll tell her it was all my fault."

Cassie paused. Her feet were starting to ache and her break was due in another ten minutes. Hesitantly sliding

into the booth, she clutched the tray in front of her. “If a customer comes in, I’ll have to go.”

“I understand.” Luke’s eyes crinkled at the corners and he gestured to the piece of pie in front of him. “Have you tried Betty’s cherry pie yet?”

“Mm-hm.” She smiled shyly. Why did he have to be so tall, so muscular, so...so...yummy? She just didn’t know what to say to him.

He’s just being nice, she warned herself. He couldn’t possibly be interested in her. After all, what did she have to offer him? A generous figure that she thought she’d accepted until she met

Phillip, a temporary waitress job and a broken-down car. And not even knowing if she would still be here two months from now.

“Do you like working here?” His eyes never left her face as he waited for her answer.

A flush ran through her. She was so bad at reading signals. Libby’s remark about her and Luke making a cute couple flashed in her mind. “Yes,” she said softly. *Say something else!* “It’s different from my previous job, though.”

“And what was that?”

She appreciated Luke’s gentle effort

to part her curtain of shyness. As she debated whether to tell him what she had done in her previous life, she noticed that he'd barely touched his coffee and pie. Instead, all his focus seemed to be on her.

Cassie swallowed. "I used to be a CPA."

"That's impressive." He smiled. "I hate doing the ranch accounts."

"Do you--"

"Are you--"

They both spoke at once. Luke laughed easily. "You first."

“I was going to ask--”

“Cassie,” Arnold called. “Order up.”

She scrambled out of the booth. “Got to go.” Picking up the tray, she hurried over to the counter. Not knowing whether to be glad or sorry she and Luke had been interrupted, she picked up the blue plate special.

“End booth.” Arnold pointed his spatula. All she could see was the back of what looked like a man’s blond head.

Cassie walked down to the booth. As she got closer, the blond head seemed familiar. Her footsteps faltered

when she almost reached the booth. No. *It couldn't be!* There were plenty of men with blond hair, she told herself. She took another step. Her feet glued themselves to the floor.

I can't.

It's not him.

But what if it is?

Cassie's heart rate accelerated and tears pricked her eyelids. Her chest tightened, the iron band around her heart making it almost impossible to breathe. Swiveling around, her shaking hands dumped the tray on a vacant table.

Tearing out of the diner, she raced down the street, heading towards the relative safety of the motel - before realizing she didn't live there anymore.

“Cassie!”

No! She wasn't ready to see him. Didn't know if she ever wanted to see him again.

“Cassie!”

Puffing, she lessened her pace a little. It didn't sound like Phillip. But who else would it be?

“Cassie!”

Slowing down to a jog, she turned her head. Relief flooded through her. Luke. Halting, she placed a hand on her chest, trying to control her breathing. A couple of passersby glanced curiously her way.

“Are you okay?” He reached her and placed his hands on her shoulders, drawing her to him.

She looked up at him, swiping at the strands of hair in her face. “Is...is he still there?”

“Who?” His concerned gaze swept over her.

Although she barely knew Luke, she

felt safe and protected in his loose embrace. “Th-the man in the end booth.”

Luke frowned. “Did he do something?”

“No,” she admitted. “But...”

“But what?” he asked gently. “What’s going on, Cassie?”

“I thought he might be my...my ex.” She closed her eyes as the truth rushed out.

Luke’s hands tightened on her shoulders. “What did he do to you?”

She reluctantly opened her eyes.

“Nothing, really.” Her pale cheeks burned under his scrutiny. Maybe she’d made too much of the whole thing. That’s what Phillip would say. But in her heart, she knew she’d done the right thing by leaving him.

“Then why would you run from him?” Luke looked deep into her eyes. “Tell me, Cassie. Please.”

Her heart thudded. Could she tell him? Would he understand? “I thought he was going to hit me,” she whispered.

He swore under his breath and drew her to him. For a second, she allowed herself to snuggle in his embrace. Somehow, it felt so right to have Luke’s

arms around her. Cassie inhaled and forced herself to straighten up, taking a step back. “I have to see if he’s followed me here.”

“I’ll be with you the whole time,” Luke vowed. His face grim, he clasped her hand and matched his stride to hers as they walked back to the diner. Cassie couldn’t help thinking how wonderful it would be if they were holding hands because they were a couple and not just because Luke felt sorry for her.

Her steps lagged as they neared the diner. Luke turned to her. “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

She drew in a deep breath. “Yes, I

do.” She’d left Seattle two weeks ago and she was already tired of looking over her shoulder. She had to face her fears.

His large, calloused hand tightened briefly on hers and a warm glow radiated through her.

Luke pushed open the door of the diner. She peeked around his shoulder. A glimpse of blond hair at the back of the room taunted her. “He’s still there,” she murmured, hating the wobble in her voice.

“Are you sure you want to confront him?” He placed a reassuring hand on her arm

Cassie nodded. "Yes." Straightening her shoulders, she stepped ahead of Luke, never letting go of his hand. Nobody else in the diner existed except Luke and the man with the blond hair at the end of the room.

Is it him? The thought echoed in her mind, growing louder with each dragging step she took. She clutched Luke's hand tighter as she reached the end booth. Any second now, she would be able to see his face. Her heart hammered as she looked at the blond haired man.

Her knees sagged with relief. "It's not him," she whispered. Turning to

Luke she repeated, “It’s not him.”

###

Five minutes later, she sat at the wooden table in the small employees’ room, sipping a large mug of coffee. Luke had barked an order of coffee and cherry pie and then hustled her into the break room.

Cassie forked up a sliver of pie, aware of Luke watching her as he sat opposite. “I want you to tell me all about it, Cassie.”

The luscious cherry filling burst on her tongue. She took a moment to savor the delicious flavor of the pie, before

answering Luke. “There’s not much to tell, really.” She gripped the coffee mug, staring into its black depths as if it could divine her future.

“Then why is a CPA working as a waitress in Coldwater?”

She lifted her head to meet his gaze. His eyes gleamed with interest and she wondered if he was merely interested in her plight or if he was interested in her...as a woman.

She bit her lip. “I left him.”

“Why?” His gentle enquiry almost undid her.

“I thought he was going to hit me.”

“Had he hit you before?” His fists clenched as he waited for her answer.

“No. That’s why I packed up and left. I didn’t want to wait and see if there was going to be a next time.” She toyed with the pie, her fork making circles around the rim of the plate.

“Perhaps you should start at the beginning,” he suggested.

Cassie nodded and sighed. “I met Phillip five months ago. We dated, and then he suggested I move in with him.” She grimaced. “I thought it might have been too soon, but he persuaded me that

moving in with him was in both our best interests.”

She sipped her coffee. How could she have been such an idiot? “As soon as I moved in, he started to change. He criticized my clothes and...” she hesitated, “what I ate.”

A muscle twitched in Luke’s jaw.

“He used to employ a cleaning service, but once I moved in, he expected me to do all the cooking and cleaning. And if I didn’t do it the way he specified, he got cranky. It was the longest six weeks of my life.”

“And then?” Luke finally prompted

her.

Cassie raised her mug and took a sip. “And then one night Phillip almost hit me. He stopped in time,” she added, when she saw Luke’s face darken. “But I knew that the next time I might not be so lucky. Before I’d moved in with him I’d wanted to fall in love with him, but I realized in that moment I could never love a man who treated me like that. I told him that it was over but he wouldn’t accept it.” Cassie shook her head. “In fact, he said he would destroy my career if I left him. We both worked at the same accounting firm but in different departments. I didn’t think anyone would believe me if I told them about Phillip.

He's on the fast track to success. So the next morning I went to work with him, then snuck back, packed up as much as I could, and left Seattle."

"Didn't you have friends you could stay with?"

Cassie nodded. "Yes, I had some friends. But Phillip threatened to ruin their careers as well if they helped me. One of my friends worked at the same company, and I didn't want her to risk losing her job. I thought the best thing to do would be to leave town."

"Where were you headed?"

She shrugged. "I hadn't thought of

any particular place. I just got in my car and drove. And then my car broke down in the main street here.”

“What about your parents?”

She stared down at her hands. “They died three years ago in a car crash.” Her finger traced the handle of the coffee mug. “I don’t have any close family.”

“I’m sorry.” Luke’s hand covered hers, and a tingle of warmth fluttered through her.

Cassie pushed the cherry pie away. For once in her life, she’d lost her appetite.

“So what are you going to do now?” Luke’s voice cut into her thoughts.

“Wait for my car to be fixed.” She frowned. “Bob said it would take a while to get the part, but it’s been nine days so far. I’m just thankful Betty offered me this job.” Her hand flew to her mouth and she looked at him, her blue eyes huge. “I’ll be fired for sure. Freaking out in the middle of my shift and then hiding in here.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Luke’s thumb caressed her hand and she realized with a jolt that his hand still covered hers.

“I’ve got some savings, but I’ve

been too scared to use an ATM in case Phillip can track me that way.”

“Once Betty knows what happened, I’m sure she’ll understand. But I’ve got a better idea,” Luke said gently. “Even before you came to town I’ve been thinking about hiring someone to do my ranch accounts. Why don’t you do them for me? I’ll pay you whatever you think is fair.”

“Oh, I couldn’t.” She looked into his mahogany eyes. He was a good man. She knew this instinctively even without the praises from Libby and Sarah. And a darn fine looking man, too.

“Why not?”

The question echoed in her mind. Why not? Phillip had taken everything away from her, or she had let him do so. Half an hour ago, she'd been ready to confront him, no matter how her courage had wobbled. Was she also going to let him take away her chance to start a new life in Coldwater Springs?

She had a nice place to live, courtesy of Libby, a blossoming friendship with her roommate and her cousin and shifts at the diner - unless Betty fired her. And now Luke was offering her a job doing what she did best - accounts.

She looked at him. Was she ready to

take a chance on life? “Okay. I accept.” A shy smile tilted up the corners of her mouth.

“Great.” He grinned and her heart flip-flopped. “And I know some other ranchers who would be grateful for some accountancy help. I can introduce you to them.”

She smiled back, certain she'd made the right decision. She was going to stay in Coldwater Springs.

###

Cassie drove up to the rambling ranch house. Her car had finally been fixed, and she was ready to get started

on Luke's accounts. To her surprise, Betty hadn't fired her, but instead had given her a motherly hug and to let her know if that "low down rat" ever came to town, so she could give him a piece of her mind.

Cassie also found the courage to tell Libby and Sarah why she had wound up in Coldwater Springs. Their reactions had been similar to Betty's, Libby urging her to give her boyfriend, Sheriff Jake Morgan, a description of Phillip as well as the make and model of his car. "And I'll make sure he stops him," Libby said. She giggled, a battle-ready glint in her eyes. "Which shouldn't be a problem, because he likes stopping strangers

coming into Coldwater Springs.”

Cassie remembered Sarah’s lips curving in amusement at her cousin’s private joke and told herself she’d have to ask Libby one day exactly what she’d meant.

She parked the car in front of the house, butterflies dancing in her stomach at the thought of being alone with Luke. Now that she’d opened up about her past, maybe she could finally move on. Unfortunately, she’d never been the kind of curvy girl who’d attracted a flock of men. Was Luke interested in her or was he merely being nice?

Hoping for the former, Cassie

stepped onto the porch and rang the doorbell. Luke had suggested afternoon as a good time, so she'd finished an early shift at the diner, ate lunch, and then drove out to his ranch. Although it was only twenty minutes away from Main Street, the homestead seemed to be in another world. In the far distance she could see mountains with a faint dusting of snow, although it was late April. Cows and horses dotted the lush green pasture surrounding the house, munching grass or ambling around the fields.

The door opened and she drank in her first sight of Luke in three days. Wearing faded jeans and a blue shirt, the ranch clothes emphasized his powerful,

muscular frame.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” She cleared her throat as awareness rippled through her. His gaze swept over her, as if he was taking in every detail of her beige pants and jade-green blouse.

“Come in.” He ushered her inside and led the way to a small study.

An old wooden desk covered in papers caught her eye. Drawing closer, she saw that there were two main piles.

“I sorted them into income and expenses,” Luke explained, his voice

close to her ear. He stood next to her, and she closed her eyes for a split second to savor his closeness before focusing on the papers in front of her.

“Do you have an accounts program?”

“Right here. I’ve already wrestled with my tax return and turned it in.” He reached around her and pressed a couple of keys on the computer keyboard. An accounts program flashed up on the screen. “The last time I did the accounts was two months ago.”

Cassie rested her hand on one of the piles of paper, her fingers almost brushing his. “I’ll get started then.”

“Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No, thanks. I’m good.” In fact, she was itching to make sense of the piles in front of her. She might not be confident with men, but she loved dealing with numbers.

“I’ll leave you to it then.” He pulled out a comfortable looking chair for her. “If you need me, I’ll be in the barn.”

“Okay.” Cassie sat down, then noticed him hovering in the doorway. Her brow wrinkled. “Was there anything else you wanted me to do?”

“No.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ll be in the barn,” he repeated.

Cassie turned her attention to the receipts in front of her as Luke's footsteps echoed down the hall. It wouldn't take her long to whip these accounts into shape, she thought with satisfaction, as she sorted each invoice into date order.

Stretching in the chair, she looked at her watch. Three o'clock. It had taken her just over an hour to get the accounts in order and entered into the program.

Cassie walked down the hall, guessing the barn was behind the house. Turning a corner, she entered a large, homey kitchen. She twisted the knob on the backdoor and it opened easily.

Stepping out onto the back porch, she spied the barn.

“Luke,” she called out as she reached the wooden barn. She squinted, the dim interior of the barn making it hard to see inside. A second later he appeared in the doorway and she smiled. “I’ve finished the accounts.”

“Already?” His brow raised in surprise.

She shrugged. “You already did some of the work by sorting them into income and expenses.”

“How about a cup of coffee?” He led the way to the kitchen, matching his

stride to hers.

Once inside, Luke gestured to the kitchen table. Cassie sat down on a cushioned chair, and watched him make a pot of coffee. His movements were efficient and economical, and she couldn't help comparing his expertise with Phillip's. Her ex had to have the latest kitchen gadgets and made a big production out of using them, unless he delegated that particular task to her.

Resolving not to think about her ex, Cassie relaxed in the comfortable wooden chair.

“How do you take it?” Luke enquired.

“Just cream, please.”

He placed a charming, old-fashioned pottery mug in front of her. “Thank you,” she murmured, wrapping her hands around it. Taking a sip, she savored the taste of the mellow brew. So Luke could make coffee, as well as help her face her fears. She peeped up under her eyelashes at him. And give her work, she reminded herself.

They drank their coffee in silence. Cassie let the charm of the old house envelop her, as well as the company. This rambling old house seemed too big for Luke, but he seemed comfortable living there. And why not with the

house's wooden floors, comfortable furniture, and thick throw rugs. The home was warm and cozy.

“I thought I'd introduce you to some of my friends next week.” At her puzzled frown, Luke elaborated, “Ranchers looking for someone to do their accounts.”

She smiled, warmth curling through her at his thoughtfulness. “That would be great. Thank you.”

“How's the diner?” He quirked an eyebrow.

“Good. Betty said she'll be able to cut down my shifts so I can fit in any

accountancy work. And she's asked me to take a look at the diner accounts for her." In fact, Betty hadn't batted an eye when she'd found out Cassie was an accountant.

Aware of Luke's eyes on her, Cassie wondered if she had a smudge of coffee on her lips and he was too polite to say. She swallowed the last of the brew and set the mug on the table. "I've left the accounts program open on the computer so you can see what I've done. Would you like me to go over it with you before I leave?"

"Sure." He rose from the table, and led the way to the study. Cassie checked

out the impressive way his butt fit his jeans. Grateful that her experience with Phillip hadn't put her off *all* men, she wondered if Luke had ever checked her out in the same way. She silently sighed. Probably not.

Cassie showed Luke the accounts program and her entries. He seemed to ask her a few more questions than were strictly necessary, but she put it down to the fact that he hadn't used the program in two months.

He finally turned off the computer. "How much do I owe you?"

She named a figure that she was comfortable with.

Luke raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? I don’t want you to charge less than you should.”

Cassie smiled, appreciating his sense of fairness. “I asked around, and this is the going rate for the area.”

“And you’re happy with that?”

“Yes. It’s more than I make at the diner.”

Luke opened the desk drawer and brought out a checkbook. He wrote her a check and handed it to her. A shiver raced through her when his fingertips touched hers.

“Thank you.” She tried to look businesslike when she put the check in her purse.

“I’ll walk you out.” He gestured for her to precede him, and she walked down the hall, conscious of him walking closely behind her.

Luke opened the front door. “Thanks,” she said again, turning to face him. Tilting her head a little, she smiled up at him.

“I should be the one thanking you.” His voice was low.

She couldn’t break free from his molten brown gaze.

“Cassie,” he murmured, catching a strand of her auburn hair in his fingers.

She caught her breath, her insides melting into a pool of warm chocolate. Was he going to kiss her? She waited for a long second, not daring to say or do anything that would break the sensual moment.

His mouth slowly descended, brushing hers. She returned the light pressure of his lips. His strong arm wrapped around her waist, drawing her closer as he caressed her lips once more. She breathed in his scent of honeyed hay, wishing the kiss would never end.

Her spine tingled as he reluctantly released her. “Can you come over next week? I’ll have more accounts work for you. And I’ll make lunch.”

“Okay.” Cassie tried to control her whirling emotions. She thought she’d agree to just about anything right now, if it promised the possibility of Luke kissing her again.

###

Six weeks later, Cassie sang along to an old country song as she drove to Luke’s house. Although the gray clouds in the sky looked ominous, they couldn’t affect her mood. Visiting Luke at his ranch was her favorite part of the week.

Since Luke had kissed her for the first time, she'd never been happier. He'd introduced her to his rancher friends, most of whom had hired her, and he'd been coming into the diner two or three times per week, sitting in her section each time, and chatting with her when she wasn't rushed off her feet.

Every time she visited Luke, he'd prepared lunch for them. After lunch, Luke would leave her to the accounts while he did chores outside. When she finished entering the numbers into the computer program, he *always* kissed her goodbye. Just like their first kiss.

Cassie wrinkled her brow. That was

the only problem. Luke's kisses made her toes curl, but they remained exactly the same as the first time he kissed her. Contrary to the romance novels she liked to read sometimes, his tongue *did not* demand entry to her mouth, nor did his mouth cover hers hungrily. They were perfectly delicious, shivery kisses, but he seemed content for them to remain so.

Maybe what he felt for her was more platonic than romantic. After all, it wasn't as if there were hordes of guys vying to date her. She sighed. Just when she thought she was ready for another relationship, it appeared that Luke wasn't really that interested in her.

She swung into the long driveway and parked outside the house. Should she tell Luke that he really didn't need her to come over every week to take care of his accounts? Disappointment flickered through her. She enjoyed visiting him at his ranch, sharing a meal, his company, and his kisses. But how long could she keep doing it without getting her heart bruised if he didn't return her feelings? And, she admitted to herself, she did have feelings for him. They had gradually crept up on her over the weeks. She knew without a doubt that she was half way in love with him and it wouldn't take much to tip her over the edge.

The door opened before she had a chance to knock. Wearing his usual ranch outfit of jeans and a long-sleeved cotton shirt, Luke gave her an easy smile. Well, she wasn't going to tell him today that he didn't need her to come over every week. Not when her pulse pounded by just being around him.

“Come in.” He held the door open for her and ushered her inside. She followed him to the kitchen. Why did he have to be so attractive?

“I made Cobb salad and picked up some fresh bread from the bakery.”

“It looks delicious,” Cassie said, aware of a faint rumble in her stomach.

She'd finished an early shift at the diner, and breakfast was a distant memory.

Luke moved efficiently around the kitchen, placing salt and pepper shakers on the table before joining her at the table. She enjoyed the tasty meal, as well as his quiet, reassuring presence and light conversation.

"I've got a little more work for you today," Luke said when he'd cleared away their plates and set down a steaming cup of coffee in front of her. "Do you have any other appointments this afternoon?"

"No." She chided herself for thinking he'd already been creating

accounting work for her. If he had, then how could he come up with extra-extra work for her?

He smiled. "I thought you might like to stay for dinner tonight."

Cassie smiled back. Dinner. With Luke. "I'd like that," she murmured. Picking up her coffee mug, she hoped he couldn't see her hands trembling slightly.

She couldn't remember what else they talked about while they sipped their coffee. All she could think about was what might happen tonight...after dinner. Would he kiss her at the end of the night? *Really* kiss her? Or - and she almost blushed just thinking about it - would he

ask her to stay the night? What would her answer be?

The afternoon drew on and Cassie's thoughts continually drifted to the evening ahead.

She was surprised to find that for once, it was hard to focus on the numbers in front of her. Even taking into consideration the extra work he had asked her to do, it still took her an hour longer than it should have, thanks to Luke starring in her fantasies. And she definitely wasn't going to charge Luke for the time she'd spent day-dreaming about him.

She clicked save on the accounts

program for the final time and went in search of Luke. It was four o'clock. Too early for dinner, but maybe she could give him a hand getting it started.

“Luke?” She called out in the direction of the barn. With a few flowers growing here and there, and maybe a little herb garden, the grassy area outside the back door could look very pretty.

Cassie walked toward the barn, drinking in the open space and peacefulness she always found here. “Luke?”

He appeared in the doorway of the barn, dusting his hands on his faded

jeans. “Finished already?” he asked with a grin.

She nodded. “I thought I could help you with dinner.”

His eyes crinkled as he looked at her. “That would be great.”

They walked back to the house, Luke shortening his stride to match hers. “How does chicken cacciatore sound?”

Her arm almost brushed his and she had to swallow before she could answer. “It’s one of my favorites,” she admitted shyly.

“Mine too.” He smiled down at her.

Once in the kitchen, Luke offered her some iced tea. “I thought we could eat at 6.30. That way, you won’t get home too late. You’ve got an early shift tomorrow, haven’t you?”

“Yes.” Her hope that Luke had feelings for her deflated. It seemed as if he didn’t want her to linger after dinner. Then why ask her to stay in the first place? Was it because he was a nice guy? Or maybe he just preferred slender women.

“I’ve got about an hour’s work left to do outside.”

She watched him take a long swallow of iced tea and sighed

inwardly. Just her luck that the gorgeous guy she had feelings for didn't return them.

“Why don't you relax in the living room and then we can make dinner together?”

“Sure.” She summoned up a smile. It wasn't Luke's fault that she might have gotten the wrong idea about tonight. If he kissed her - *really* kissed her tonight, then she might have some hope. But if he kissed her the same way he always did, even if those kisses did make her toes curl, then she might as well face it. He probably wasn't interested in her romantically - not really.

Cassie entered the living room. Solid, masculine furniture dominated the navy and cream room, as well as a big screen TV. She browsed the large bookcase, selecting a popular mystery novel she hadn't had a chance to read. Settling down on the comfortable sofa, she became absorbed in the story, returning to the real world with a start when Luke entered the room.

"Hi," she murmured, setting the book down on the coffee table. It wasn't fair that he looked so good. Freshly showered and shaved, he once again wore denim jeans and a red long-sleeved button-down shirt, but his jeans were new and crisp. Her stomach

fluttered at the thought that maybe he had changed clothes for dinner - with her.

He held out a hand to her as she rose from the sofa. "I thought we could start dinner," he said, his fingers clasping hers. She looked down at their joined hands and her heartbeat quickened.

Luke led her into the kitchen, not letting go of her hand. She tried to tell herself it mightn't mean anything. But she couldn't help the spark of hope in her heart.

Cassie couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed cooking so much. Somehow, she and Luke just seemed to work well together in the kitchen. They

didn't get in each other's way, but instead worked in harmony. They joked and chatted while they prepared the Italian dish, then sat down at the large wooden table while it simmered on the stovetop.

“Would you like some wine?” Luke held out a bottle of red wine.

“I guess a small glass won't hurt.” She took a small sip of wine, wanting to make it last. She should be fine to drive home after a small glass of red and chicken cacciatore.

Rattle, rattle, BANG! Cassie had been so caught up in making dinner that she hadn't noticed the sky darkening

outside. Now hail the size of golf balls pelted past the window, almost making her jump.

Luke frowned. "I was hoping the storm would pass us by. Maybe it'll be over by the time we've finished dinner."

The hailstorm raged. But it wasn't the storm that made it hard to focus on the appetizing meal. Just sitting across from Luke made her pulse race. In the back of her mind, a thought niggled. Would she be able to drive home if the storm didn't let up?

Once the dishes were done, she followed Luke to the living room. He gestured to the comfy sofa and sat down

beside her. His denim-clad thigh almost touched hers and she felt his body heat through her cotton capris in the quarter inch of space that separated them.

“So now you’ve been here awhile, what do you think of Coldwater?” he enquired.

Quivers of excitement danced down her spine. Luke made her feel as if she were the only person in the world. “I like it here,” she murmured.

His lips curved in a slow smile. “Good.”

Bang! Bang! The hail had slowed down for a few minutes, but now it

returned in full force. Luke reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “You’d better stay here tonight. There’s no knowing how long this storm will go on for.”

Relief coursed through her. Although she’d been trying not to show it, she’d been worried about driving home in the storm. “Okay,” she agreed, leaning into him as his fingers caressed her hair.

His eyes snared hers and his mouth slowly descended. She held her breath, waiting for the moment when their lips would touch. He slanted his mouth over hers, his tongue coaxing her lips to open. Cassie parted her lips in surrender, her

pulse beating erratically. Luke gathered her to him as if he was never going to let her go.

Finally! was her last coherent thought before she gave herself up to his sensual kiss. His strong, capable hands roved over her back, and she wound her arms around his neck. When they at last broke apart, they both breathed heavily. She buried her face in his neck, inhaling his sexy scent of honeyed hay.

“Cassie,” he murmured in her ear. His soft breath stirred her delicate nerve endings.

She raised her eyes, his heated gaze sending ripples of excitement straight

down to her core.

“Do you know how long I’ve waited to kiss you like that?”

She searched his face. “Why did you wait?”

He made a sound that was half laughter and half groan. “Because I didn’t want to scare you off.”

“I wasn’t sure if you were interested in me,” she admitted shyly, hope soaring in her heart.

“Oh, I was interested in you all right,” he confirmed, tilting up her chin and brushing a kiss on her lips. “Ever

since you spilled those eggs on me.”

Heat stole across her cheeks at the memory. “I can’t believe I did that.”

“It was worth it.” His lips swooped on hers as he kissed her thoroughly.

She stroked the nape of his neck, hardly able to believe that this was actually happening.

The kiss grew more heated and Luke’s hands roamed over her body, toying with the buttons of her green floral blouse.

He unfastened her top button and slipped his fingers inside, stroking the

skin above her bra. Cassie pressed closer to him, wanting more - so much more.

Disappointment flitted through her when he reluctantly withdrew his hand, his voice husky. “You can sleep in the guest room tonight.” He crushed her to him, almost growling, “If we do much more of this, I won’t be able to stop.”

Now was the moment to be courageous. “I don’t want you to stop.” At first she wasn’t sure if Luke had heard her or not, until he drew back and looked at her searchingly.

“Are you sure?”

Faint doubt flickered in her mind. Would Luke feel the same way about her when she was naked? Would her voluptuous figure be a turn off for him - or a turn on?

This was Luke, she reminded herself. She'd never felt this way about any other man, not even Phillip - before she realized what kind of man he really was. Deep down, she knew that she could trust Luke, and that he wouldn't abuse that trust.

"Yes," she breathed, her arms stealing around his neck once more. She tugged his head down, fitting her mouth to his, revealing the force of her desire

for him.

“Hell,” he muttered thickly against her lips, molding her body to his. The cotton of his shirt rustled against the silky fabric of her blouse, her ample breasts pressed against his torso.

Their lips still joined, Luke maneuvered them to a standing position. She gasped against his mouth as he swung her into his arms and carried her down the hall.

“Luke--” his firm, sensual lips muffled her protest as he continued to kiss her hungrily. His confident gait demonstrated he could carry her easily and she relaxed in his arms, kissing him

back with all the fervor she possessed.

He entered a bedroom and gently laid her down in the center of a large, neatly made bed. The décor consisted of cream and brown hues which matched the solid wooden furniture. Cassie spied a few knickknacks on the dresser before her attention turned back to Luke. She was in his bedroom. In his bed.

Cassie felt a rush of dampness between her thighs as he joined her on the bed. “Sweetheart,” he rasped, brushing the hair back from her face. “I want you to set the pace. I want our first time to be everything you want it to be.”

His tenderness melted her heart. The

thought of being in charge excited her, although for a few seconds she wasn't sure what to do next. "I want to be on top," she whispered.

He brushed his lips against hers. "You've got it." Luke lay down next to her.

Cassie hovered above him on her knees, kissing him slowly and sweetly. He groaned, and she flushed with pride that she made him feel that way.

Her fingers fumbled with his shirt buttons until at last she parted the cotton fabric. Her eyes feasted on his bare chest. Crisp hair, dark and curly, smattered his muscular torso.

She trailed kisses down his chest to the waistband of his jeans, causing Luke to inhale sharply. She raised her head, a sensual thrill racing down her spine at the banked heat in his eyes.

“Cassie, do you want me to see you, sweetheart?”

Although it had been exciting to partially undress Luke, her body ached for his touch. Nodding, she slowly unfastened the rest of the buttons on her blouse, hesitating for a second before shrugging it off.

Luke's eyes flared at the sight of her ample breasts encased in the silky fabric of her bra. His finger traced a circle

around her nipple, and Cassie quivered as arousal spiked through her.

She involuntarily moved against him, her mound brushing against his hard manhood straining against the denim of his jeans.

“Do you like that?” he asked gently, repeating the movement with his finger.

“Yes,” she breathed, wishing he was touching her bare breasts.

He cupped her breasts through the silk, and she closed her eyes. She had never felt this way before - so filled with desire that her self-consciousness about her body retreated to a dim, distant

corner of her mind.

Cassie held her breath as she unfastened her bra, letting it drop to the bed. Luke groaned and her eyes fluttered open to see him gazing at her with passionate intensity.

“You’re beautiful, Cassie.” His hands worshipped her breasts, his fingertips brushing the satin flesh, moving closer and closer to her nipples. When his fingers finally trailed over each sensitive bud, she sucked in a breath, tendrils of need swirling through her body.

Luke’s finger circled the tip of one rosy peak and then the other. She

squirmed, feeling his stiff shaft jutting against her mound.

He gently tugged each nipple and she gasped with pleasure. “Luke!”

She bent to kiss him, hoping he could sense how close to the brink she was, although he’d done nothing but caress her breasts. “I want you,” she murmured against his lips.

“Then undress me the rest of the way.” His voice was strained.

Luke’s hands remained on her breasts as she carefully unzipped his jeans, freeing his hard length. Sliding down his jeans and boxer-briefs, her

eyes widened slightly at the size of him. She tentatively stroked him, his shaft silky smooth to the touch.

“Night stand drawer,” he rasped, gently placing his hand over hers and taking a deep, shuddering breath. “If you do any more of that, I’m going to explode.”

Excitement surged through her at the thought that *she* could make Luke lose control. Angling her body to the right, she leaned forward and opened the drawer, grasping an unopened box of condoms.

“Let me.” Luke ripped open the box and deftly sheathed himself.

Cassie used the interruption to wriggle off him and remove the rest of her garments. She'd been so caught up in their lovemaking that she hadn't even realized that she still wore clothes.

Only once she'd undressed did she realize her naked body was on display. She looked shyly at Luke, catching her bottom lip with her teeth.

“You're gorgeous, sweetheart.” He held out a hand to her and she clasped her fingers in his, joining him back on the bed. Kneeling above him, she'd never felt so aroused or sexy before.

“Are you sure about this, Cassie?” Heated shivers stole through her at

Luke's gentle voice. "You have no idea how much I want you, but I don't want to rush you."

The raw need in his eyes told her in no uncertain terms how he hungered for her.

"I'm sure." Emboldened by his desire for her, she kissed him softly, then started to lower herself upon him. Her slick folds teased the tip of him and his hands clasped her hips, helping her fit herself to him.

Cassie gasped once he was fully inside. She felt so full, so complete. Luke started to move slowly and she adjusted to his rhythm, loving this

position. She gazed into his eyes as they moved together, each thrust becoming faster and harder.

Her secret nub throbbed with need as the friction of each stroke made her want more - and more. Luke grasped her hips more firmly as he surged into her, over and over. Finally, she cried out, her whole body quaking with ecstasy.

He thrust into her three more times, spasming inside her with a muffled shout.

Cassie collapsed onto his chest, unable to speak. She'd never experienced love-making like that before. Luke's arms tightened around her

as they lay there, catching their breath.

She finally stirred, attempting to wriggle off him. “Hey, where are you going?” He caressed her hips.

Cassie couldn’t believe that after what they had just shared, she could feel heat creeping along her cheeks. “I don’t want to be too heavy,” she mumbled, trying to hide her face in his neck.

“You’re beautiful, Cassie.” He lifted up her chin, gazing into her eyes. “I love your figure just the way it is.” He pressed a firm kiss across her lips.

Cassie smiled, all her feelings for him wrapped up in a slow, seductive

kiss that she hoped would make *his* toes curl.

She giggled against his lips as a few seconds later, he flipped her over, taking control of the kiss as if he were never going to let her go. Ever.

Cassie sighed and wrapped her arms around his back. If she hadn't already been in love with Luke before tonight, she knew for a fact that she was now.

###

Cassie hummed under her breath as she transferred the last remaining money from her old bank account in Seattle to the new one she'd opened in Coldwater

Springs. The last two weeks had been the most incredible of her life. Ever since they had made love for the first time, she and Luke were seeing each other whenever they could. Cassie spent a few nights each week at his place, as well as on weekends. She'd also gotten more accounts work, which meant she'd had to cut down on her shifts at the diner. Although she missed Betty and the customers at the diner a little, it was wonderful not to have aching, tired feet every day.

When she had bashfully told Sarah and Libby about Luke, Libby hadn't been able to wipe the grin off her face. "Told you!" she'd crowed. "Maybe I should

become the town matchmaker.”

“There’s a frightening thought,” Sarah teased, before the discussion eventually turned back to her wedding that was taking place in a week’s time.

These days, Cassie didn’t often think about her old life in Seattle. When she did, it was to wonder how she could have been taken in by Phillip in the first place. In hindsight, she saw the signs that he was a controlling and potentially abusive man. But at the time, she’d been so flattered by his attentions she hadn’t wanted to look past his surface charm - charm that vanished once she’d moved in with him.

But Luke was totally different. A dreamy smile played on her lips. They'd only been together officially for two weeks, but what she really wanted to do was tell him that she loved him. But was it too soon? And what did he really feel for her?

Their sex life was amazing, and she knew he desired her. He told her repeatedly, through actions and words. And she always felt so safe and protected in his presence as well. With Luke, she felt a sense of completeness that she'd never experienced before.

Cassie turned off her laptop and got ready for a morning shift at the diner.

She had some accounts work to do after lunch, and then she was going to have dinner with Luke at the ranch and stay overnight. Her body tingled at the thought of seeing him tonight, of his lips on hers, his hands roaming over her body, his husky whispers telling her just how much he wanted her...

She smiled to herself, running a brush through her shoulder-length hair. “Yep, I’ve got it bad,” she murmured to her reflection in the mirror.

###

“Cassie, coffee for the blond stranger.” Betty gestured to the end booth.

As she approached the man, Cassie flashed back to the day she thought Phillip had posed as a customer, and the freak-out she'd experienced. But if that hadn't happened, she mused, then maybe she and Luke wouldn't have gotten together.

Cassie set down the tray, half her mind on Luke, and half on delivering the coffee. "Here you..." her words trailed off as she got a good look at the stranger in the booth.

Phillip.

"Hello, Cassie."

She stared at her ex-boyfriend, her

hands frozen on the tray. His patrician features looked exactly the same - aquiline nose, cold green eyes and thin-lipped mouth.

“I never thought you’d end up in a dump like this, but then again, I didn’t think you’d be so stupid as to leave me.”

Her first thought was to flee. Her second thought was to pour the hot coffee on his lap. “H-how - how did you find me?” Her mouth felt like sandpaper.

His barbs came flooding back to her. *Are you sure you should be eating that? Your hips don't need any extra flesh. Why are you so clumsy? How simple can it be to make me a cup of coffee?*

Phillip smirked. “I asked my friend at the bank to tell me when there was any activity in your account. So when you transferred money from your old bank account to your new one, I knew exactly where you were.”

Cassie closed her eyes. She’d been so sure that it was safe to use her old bank account again. When Phillip hadn’t appeared in Coldwater Springs in the first two months she’d been here, she’d assumed he had no interest in tracking her down.

“So pack your bags and we can get back to Seattle tonight,” he said smoothly. “Oh, and you’ll be pleased to

know that I've spoken to Sanderson and you can have your old job back at the firm. I was even able to get him to sweeten the deal. Once old man Smythe retires in six months, his job is yours. You'll be head of your department."

She shook her head. Once, the thought of being head of her department at twenty-seven would have delighted her. But since she'd gotten away from the large accounting firm and the city streets, she realized she'd never been comfortable with the backstabbing and bitchy gossip that was an everyday occurrence in that workplace.

She'd rather work full-time here, at

the diner, than back at Sanderson's. Even if she hadn't met Luke, she liked working at the diner a lot more than at an accounting firm where people climbed up the corporate ladder with steel-capped shoes.

“No, Phillip.” She was pleased with how firm her voice sounded.

He spoke as if he hadn't heard her. “And I've booked an appointment with the top diet coach in Seattle for next week. There's just no excuse for you not being as slim as all the other women out there.” He waved a well-tended hand toward the window, as if there were hordes of sylph-like women walking

past the diner.

“No.” She put the cup of coffee on the table and picked up the tray. “Goodbye, Phillip.”

She turned to leave. Phillip’s arm shot out, his fingers clamping around her wrist. “Did you hear me, Cassie? I’ve decided to forgive you and you can move back in with me.”

“Cassie?” Betty hurried over to the booth. “Is this man bothering you?”

“Not anymore.” She shook off Phillip’s grasp. “This is Phillip, my ex-boyfriend.” She took a deep breath. “And he was just leaving.” Cassie stared

unflinchingly at Phillip. What had she ever seen in him?

“Come on, Cassie.”

Phillip reached for her again and she stepped back. She didn't want him to touch her ever again. “No, Phillip.” Her heart hammered, but her voice remained steady. Standing up to Phillip wasn't quite as hard as she thought it would be.

“What do you mean, no?” he demanded. “Have you met someone else? I wouldn't have thought that the two-bit cowboys around here would be your style. Or have you decided to go slumming?”

“Now, you look here--” Betty started to say.

“It’s over, Phillip.” Cassie’s cheeks burned with indignation. How dare he insult Luke! She straightened her shoulders. “Find someone else to manipulate.”

“You’re making a big mistake, Cassie.” Ferocity etched his face.

“You heard her.” Betty waved her hands in the air as if he were a troublesome dog. “Now shoo!”

“Cassie!” Luke entered the diner, hastening his stride as he took in the scene at the end booth. “Are you okay?”

She smiled up at him, delighting in the warmth and concern in his eyes. “I’m fine. Phillip was just leaving.”

“Your ex?” Luke scowled and turned to the man sitting in the booth. “Why are you still here? You’ve been dismissed.”

Phillip started to speak, then thought better of it. He surged out of the booth, almost jostling Luke’s shoulder as he stormed out of the diner.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Luke clasped her shoulders and searched her expression.

“I’m fine. In fact, I feel great. I stood up to Phillip on my own.” She smiled in

satisfaction, her face flushed. She'd come a long way since her car had broken down in Coldwater Springs two months ago.

“My beautiful Cassie,” Luke murmured, drawing her to him for a long, lingering kiss. The few customers in the diner cheered and they broke apart. “Come on, let’s get out of here for a minute.”

He clasped her hand and led her into the break room. Relief had smoothed the creases in his face. “I wanted to take care of that smug jerk myself, but I’m proud of the way you stood up to him, Cassie. You’re safe, and that’s all that

matters.”

He shut the door and drew her to him. Cassie sighed as he kissed her thoroughly, her hands clasping his shoulders.

Luke finally lifted his lips and looked down into her eyes, his expression grave. “Sweetheart, we need to talk.”

Her heart twisted. She’d never seen that expression on Luke’s face before. “What is it?” she managed to whisper. His large hands still clasped her waist. If he was going to break up with her, would he still be holding her?

“Cassie, if you want to be free, I understand.” His dark brown eyes were unfathomable. “If you want to travel or need some space, after what you’ve been through with your ex, you’ve got it.”

She blinked up at him, her breath skipping. “What are you saying, Luke?”

“I...just want you to be happy.”

Cassie frowned. “But I am happy,” she murmured. “Or I was, until three seconds ago.”

Luke’s only reaction was to tighten his hands on her waist, his expression unreadable.

She took a deep breath. Now seemed like the perfect opportunity to tell Luke what her feelings were - if she had the courage. "I'm in love with you, Luke. Coldwater Springs is my home now. Even if we weren't together, I'd still feel the same way. I love living here."

"Thank God," he muttered, crushing her to him. He drew back, looking deeply into her eyes. "You're the woman of my dreams, Cassie. I was trying to be noble." His mouth twisted wryly. "I didn't want you to think you were trapped here. I wanted you to love me of your own free will, just as I love you."

Joy lit her heart. "You love me?" His

molten brown eyes gave her the confirmation she searched for.

“I think I fell in love with you the day you spilled those eggs on my lap.” His finger traced a path along her cheek. “I don’t know what I would have done if you said you wanted to spread your wings.” He grimaced. “I would have coped somehow, but I’d be counting down the days until you came back.”

Her smile blazed with happiness. “I’m not going anywhere.”

His lips seared hers, promising love, desire and tenderness as he molded her body to his. Cassie wanted to remain in his embrace forever.

####

“Toss the bouquet!” A wedding guest called out, as Sarah and Chase stood on the porch of the Grant farmhouse. Smiling, Sarah complied, turning around and throwing the bouquet over her shoulder.

Libby jockeyed for position, jumping in the air, but barely grazing a petal with her fingertips.

Cassie instinctively put her hands out in front of her face as the bouquet seemed to head straight towards her.

Cheers rang out as she caught the

bouquet. Startled, Cassie looked down at the pink and white roses in her hands and inhaled their heady scent, before looking across the garden at Luke. His heated gaze held a promise of future and forever, and her heart melted with love.

“Why couldn’t I catch the bouquet?”

Cassie was barely aware of Libby beside her, mock-pouting. She bent her blond head over the flowers and breathed deeply, before lightly punching Cassie in the arm. “Your turn next.” She smiled.

Sheriff Jake Morgan strode toward them, and Libby whispered, “Hurry up and marry Luke. And make sure I catch

the bouquet when you do so it will be my--”

“Excuse me, Cassie.” Jake effortlessly lifted Libby into his arms and carried her off, Libby giggling against his broad chest as they headed toward a secluded part of the garden.

The last words Cassie heard were a muffled, “Don’t forget, Cassie,” before Libby and her boyfriend vanished out of sight.

###

EPILOGUE

One year later - Aruba

Luke carried her over the threshold into the honeymoon suite. Cassie gasped at the gauzy canopy bed amid the opulent décor. “It’s beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you.” Heat stirred within him at the faint blush on his bride’s face. This beautiful woman was his - and he was never going to let her go.

The tropical breeze stirred the curtains at the open window. “Put me down, Luke.” She smiled up at him. “I want to see the view.”

He reluctantly released her and followed her to the balcony. People sunbathed on the white sand, while the

frothy ocean waves lapped at the shore.

“Mmm.” Cassie closed her eyes and basked in the warmth of the sun. He slipped his arms around her, cradling her against his chest. Drawing her hair back, he placed a kiss on her neck, his body tightening with anticipation.

“I think you should book all our honeymoons.” She moved her head slightly, allowing him greater access to the sensitive spot on her neck.

“You mean we’re going to have more than one?” he teased, his breath fanning her ear.

She shivered and placed her hands

on top of his. “I think we should have a honeymoon every year.”

His body ached at the promise in her words. He turned her around and ravished her lips, need sizzling his nerve-endings. The honeymoon was going to start right now.

“What a great idea,” he murmured thickly. Luke picked her up and carried her to the large bed, knowing he was going to spend the rest of his life demonstrating just how much he loved her.

THE END

About the Author:

Jenn Roseton believes that romance and happy endings go together. When she's not writing, she indulges in delicious gourmet chocolate.

I hope you enjoyed reading this sexy contemporary romance. If you believe this story is worth sharing, please consider leaving a review and/or telling your friends about it so they can enjoy it, too. On the last page of this book is a Tweet/Share link. By clicking on this link, you can tell your friends immediately that you've just finished reading *Curves and the Rancher*, and I will be very appreciative if you do so.

Sign up to my Hot New Release Alerts

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www.JennRoseTon.com/hot-new-release-alerts/ to be among the first to discover my new releases.

A special free short story featuring Chase and Sarah from Curves and the Cowboy is now available through my website at www.jennroseton.com/free-reads/

I hope you enjoy it! (Note: it's a little spicier than Curves and the Cowboy, Curves and the Sheriff, and Curves and the Rancher)

The next book in the Coldwater Springs series should be available in December

2013.

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Other Titles by Jenn Roseton on Amazon:

[Curves and the Cowboy \(BBW Romance - Coldwater Springs 1\)](#)

Curves and the Sheriff (BBW Romance - Coldwater Springs 2)

Hot and Sexy 1: Seductive Persuasion

- should be free on Amazon. If it isn't, please visit www.JennRoseton.com to find out where you can download it for free

Hot and Sexy 2: Bridal Jitters

BBW Needs Hot Sex (BBW Erotic Romance)

Seduced by the Boss 1: Pent-Up Passion

Seduced by the Boss 2: Spanking Miss

Jones

Seduced by the Boss 3: For Her Pleasure

Seduced by the Boss 4: Loving Miss Jones

Curves and the Cowboy (BBW Romance - Coldwater Springs 1)

When curvy Sarah Grant comes home to Coldwater Springs after spending six years in the city, the last person she expects to bump into is sexy Chase McCord. After having a teenage crush on him for years, she thought she was finally over him. After all, why keep

fantasizing about someone you can never have? But when Chase makes it clear he's ready to claim her for his own, Sarah finds it hard to believe him. Can he convince her they were made for each other?

[Curves and the Sheriff \(BBW Romance - Coldwater Springs 2\)](#)

When Libby Grant breezes into Coldwater Springs, Wyoming, the last thing she expects is to be pulled over on the highway by Sheriff Jake Morgan. Sparks fly when Jake suspects her of being a con-artist and is tempted to arrest her!

But when he discovers the real reason she's in town, he finds he can't get curvy Libby out of his mind - or his heart. Can he convince her that his feelings for her are real?

Hot and Sexy 1: Seductive Persuasion

- free download! (Visit www.JennRoseton.com to find out where you can download it for free if it's not free on Amazon.

From mild-mannered architect to hot and sexy ex-commando!

Running away to an isolated cabin for a

few days, Christy is shocked when Jared turns up at her door. She wanted time alone to mull over Jared's proposition that she move in with him. Since they haven't been dating long, she wants to make sure she makes the right decision.

But when Jared follows her, hoping to persuade her with his own special brand of seduction, she realizes there's more to him than meets the eye.

Can Jared use seductive persuasion to his advantage?

Hot and Sexy 2: Bridal Jitters

Stressed out from wedding planning, Christy packs her bags, needing to escape for a few days. When Jared discovers her in mid-flight, he finds he needs to use his own special brand of seductive persuasion once more to calm Christy's wedding jitters before the big day. But will a ghost from Jared's past come back to haunt him before he can claim Christy as his bride?

[BBW Needs Hot Sex \(BBW Erotic Romance\)](#)

**A Top 40 Hot New Release in Erotica
- March 2013**

Amy Hart is embarrassed when her sister places an ad in the personals column on her behalf, advertising her need for some hot sex. But when hunky customer Nick Logan walks into her bookshop, Amy starts to wonder if it really has been too long since she's been with a man. Used to being overlooked by the opposite sex, she wonders if Nick is truly interested in her or if he's just looking for a one night stand.

What can Nick do to convince her that he's the real deal?

[Seduced by the Boss 1: Pent-Up Passion](#)

Can a sexy boss seduce his girl-next-door secretary?

Jemma Jones has been secretly in love with her boss, Adam Sinclair, for the last eighteen months, ever since she started working for him. When he invites her to lunch one day, she's worried she's going to be fired. However, Adam has a different proposition in mind. When he seduces her in the office that afternoon, their pent-up passion overtakes them both!

[Seduced by the Boss 2: Spanking Miss Jones](#)

A romantic lunch followed by a sexy spanking session...

Adam Sinclair (the sexy alpha male CEO of Sinclair Consulting) and Jemma Jones (his girl-next-door secretary) plan to celebrate their two week anniversary by having lunch at the Italian restaurant where their romance first started. Afterwards, Adam has a surprise for her: a sensual spanking session in his office.

However, Jemma doesn't know what to think when her ex-boyfriend walks into the office before lunch...

Seduced by the Boss 3: For Her Pleasure

After a hectic week at work, Adam makes it up to Jemma with a night of pleasure...

Adam and Jemma are busy preparing their pitch for the Walker account. They haven't had much time for romance all week, so Adam is determined to give Jemma a night of ecstasy in the bedroom.

However, when Jemma's ex turns up again and asks her to give him sensitive business information, she's not quite sure what to do!

Seduced by the Boss 4: Loving Miss Jones

Adam has well and truly seduced Jemma...but will their office romance last?

After a wonderful, sensual weekend with Adam (her boss and CEO of Sinclair Consulting), Jemma returns to the office on Monday morning to find it ransacked!

Shocked by the identity of the culprit, Adam and Jemma confront the guilty party with an ultimatum.

However, Adam is still waiting to find out if he's won the all-important Walker

account, and Jemma wonders if she'll ever find the courage to tell Adam she's in love with him.