



Reluctant Press presents:

Tack Room Lover

Monica James



AN 'ADULT TV' E-BOOK

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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TACK ROOM LOVER

By **Monica James**

CHAPTER I Job Competition

"You wanted to see me?" Joni asked. She stood in the doorway. A slight breeze ruffled her cotton skirt.

"Ah, Joni. Yes. Before you get into your riding and work-out duds, we need to have a talk."

Joni stood at Patty Ensler's desk. She waited for the busy manager to finish reading a letter. When she raised her eyes and motioned to the chair, Joni sat down. She smiled. "If there is something wrong, I didn't do it. If something right, I'll take credit."

Patty smiled. As always, she admired the young girl's wit and charm. "Neither. I have some news that may interest you. We have an experienced equestrian, Nora Blanding, arriving. She will be on staff here in all phases of instruction."

Joni sat forward in the chair. "Wonderful. I'll look forward to meeting her." She touched the underside of her chin with her finger. "Blanding," she repeated. "Have I heard the name? Perhaps, I could be mistaken."

Patty laughed. "Ms. Blanding not only holds some impressive records, mostly in steeplechase, she is also a very prolific author with many articles to her credit in leading magazines. It's very likely you've come across the name."

"Oh, I haven't met the lady yet and already I'm intimidated." She smiled and, after hesitating, spoke up with an issue on her mind. "What is such an accomplished lady doing here? Not that ..."

Patty laughed again. "The question is, 'What is a nice girl like her doing in a dump like this?' I can explain that." She looked serious, glanced at the attractive bundle of energy sit-

ting in front of her and finally said, "First, she isn't as old as you've assumed. We knew each other in college which puts her about mid-twenties. She is training for Olympic trials and, when she heard I had this place, she called to see if she could bring her three horses here, do training and evaluation, like that."

Joni's voice went up a half-tone in excitement. "How wonderful to have a celebrity among us."

"I think she learned to ride a horse before she learned to walk. Anyhow, she is with us for the summer to start with. She has offered to take on a student as an apprentice to help her with the training and all the things that go with housing and caring for her horses. That is what I wanted to talk to you about. Do you think you would be interested? It would be a commitment."

"Who do I have to kill?" Joni gushed.

Patty smiled. "Shirley and Betty Lou. There is to be competition among the three of you to see who gets the position. Nora will select the one she feels most appropriate. Are you still in?"

Joni shook her head. "Sure, but the other girls are a year ahead of me. Seems unfair."

"That's one way to look at it. They have more experience than you have but, as I see how you've performed here, you can compete. You're very attractive for one thing."

"How do horses react when one girl is prettier than any other? I sure wouldn't want to compete with Shirley and Betty Lou on those terms."

Patty laughed again. "Agreed but it isn't the horses, dear girl. It's the cameras. When Nora shows, her assistant gets to do the grooming right up to post time. It helps the publicity to have a pretty girl holding the reins."

Joni looked at her with doubt written all over her face. "I'll try out, if you wish, but I don't have much confidence."

"You already have the confidence you need. The point is, Nora may return here next season if her situation merits. Shirley and Betty may not be available then but you will. That will have some weight."

"Oh, I didn't think of that."

"It's OK, Nora and I talked it over. She still wants to meet all three of you. Are you still in or have you talked yourself right out of it?"

Joni stood up. "I'm in. At least I'll get to meet a successful equestrian. Not many of those running wild these days."

Patty stood up. She walked to the door with Joni, one hand possessively around her waist. "Don't be frightened. Whichever way it goes, you have the opportunity to be selected now and also next year. But leave that up to Nora. I think she will like your looks as well as your ability."

"Thank you, Ms .Ensler. I do enjoy being here and don't mind the work at all." She let herself out. As she closed the door, she met Shirley and Betty Lou.

"We knew what was coming down so we listened," Shirley said. "Thank you for the compliments. No matter what happens, we still groove, right?" She touched Joni's arm above the elbow and pressed the smooth skin. Their eyes met. Shirley was inquiring. Joni was nervous.

"Sure; Shirley, Betty Lou. Friends," she stuttered and walked to the crib to change clothes. 'This is not going to end well,' she thought carefully, 'what are they up to?'"

CHAPTER II The Equestrian

Joni led Tempest out of the stable into the show ring. She brushed him down, all the while talking to him like he was a small child instead of a full-grown horse. She looked up to see a tall, slender, man watching her intently. She hadn't recalled seeing him there before and wondered. Assuming he might be a buyer or a visitor, she smiled and kept on grooming Tempest.

Every time she looked up, the man was staring at her. She decided it was not in a personal way but that he was interested in what she was doing. When she completed her chores and began to lead Tempest to the pasture gate, Patty Ensler walked up and began talking to him.

She noted warmth between the two of them by their gestures, smiles and body language. Trying to appear business-like, she smiled at them as she passed, leading the horse. When she returned from the pasture gate, they had both disappeared. 'There can't be a mystery,' she thought in deep concern, 'but something is going on around here.'

That evening, Shirley telephoned. Joni didn't know why, but she felt threatened in some way and spoke very guardedly.

"Betty Lou and I have decided one of us should get the job with the new horses. We want you to withdraw."

Joni was shocked. "So much for our budding friendship. Why on earth would I want to do that?" Her voice was serious.

"Any reason you can think of is good enough. Just do it. We'll talk tomorrow." Shirley hung up.

Joni stood looking at her telephone receiver. The dial tone wasn't telling her much. She decided not to be alarmed without cause.

Early next morning, she arrived at the stables and changed clothes for her hay barn chores. She looked at herself in the stainless steel 'mirror' and decided all she needed was a straw hat and wheat stem to chew on to look the image for "Miss Future Rancher." She was able to laugh at herself. There were excited calls and commotion outside so she went to the barn door.

A horse van had arrived and the field hands were busy dismantling the ramps, unhooking the doors and going inside with the halters. She was fascinated. Next she saw the

same man she had seen the prior day. He had on leather breeches and a wide-brimmed ten gallon hat that shaded his face. He was watching the unloading with great interest. She looked again and he was gone.

It was late, almost quitting time, when Patty approached her. "Joni, can you be early again tomorrow? Nora Blanding wants to put on the new racing saddles. She may need some help."

"Glad to. Uh, have we come to a decision about the, you know, competition? Shirley called me last night and wants me to drop out. She didn't give a reason but, you can understand, I'm a bit confused."

Patty pursed her lips in thought. "Nora Blanding has a reputation as a free spirit. She has been like that all the years I've known her. It's possible Shirley and Betty Lou are trying to protect you. It's also possible they want the colorful Ms Blanding all to themselves. In either case, it is not up to them to prejudice any decision."

Joni was doubtful. "What does 'free spirit' mean?"

"Just that she is unconventional in her outlook and attitudes. Nothing illegal, but the older girls probably find Nora Blanding an attractive alternative to what they think is a very boring life."

"Well, they shouldn't. It's wonderful here and there's so much that needs to be done."

Patty patted her on the back. "Their contrary attitude might be their undoing. I can't say. Nora did see you and asked me who you were. I told her, of course. I think she likes your looks and your methods. You do your job."

Next morning, Joni arrived early to see only two of the three new horses in their stalls. She looked for the third and heard the pounding hoofs on the track outside. She went to the door and was stunned.

The new horse, a black named Whistler, was being ridden by the smoothest handler she had ever seen. The sleek velvet riding habit, the small black and silver helmet and decorator boots, were postured, caught by the wind, in a speedy gallop. The jockey pulled the reins and the horse stopped next to Joni. It was Nora Blanding. Joni, standing with her mouth open in amazement, accepted the reins automatically and lowered her eyes, a shy response.

"Meet me in the dressing room," Nora said smiling. "We can get acquainted."

Joni nodded and quickly led the horse to the stall for a healthy rub down. When finished, she turned to see Nora Blanding standing near the stall, watching her. She was smiling and, raising her arm, swept the helmet off her head. The brown hair, shoulder-length with color streaks, tumbled out in a riot of cascades.

Seeing Joni was finished, Nora reached for her and took her hand. They walked toward the dressing crib. At that moment, Shirley and Betty Lou arrived to engage Nora Blanding in small talk. The lady of privilege, as Joni saw her, was polite but distant.

Joni was overwhelmed. "The other girls, they are interested in the apprenticeship being offered. They have more experience and feel they should be granted a chance to perform for you."

Nora raised one eyebrow in question. "Are you also interested in working with me this season?" she asked. Her stare, stark in the extreme, enervated Joni.

"Yes, Miss. I just want to mention them since there seemed to be some confusion."

Nora slowly undid the top button of her blouse. She was thoughtful. "You are too good to be true, Joni Dorinski. But since you feel some concern, I'll arrange a workout with the other two. Each of you three can do a stall, a rub down and a show ring jaunt. Does that satisfy you?"

Joni blinked, nervous. "Yes, that's fair. Count me in." She was talking like a puppet, saying what she thought was expected. Her mind was racing. Nora Blanding was suddenly impervious to her, a rock of strength and uncommon beauty. There seemed a caprice, beyond the bounds of propriety, awesome. Breathless, she felt the urge to genuflect.

Nora stepped closer. Their bodies almost touched. She reached one arm out and caught Joni's chin. She was pleased when the youngster raised her lovely face to meet her gaze. The touch was indelible, never to be forgotten, until the ultimate in Joni's young life occurred.

Nora kissed her gently, very briefly, on the lips. There was electricity. She next turned, grabbed her ditty overnight bag and headed for her apartment. Joni stood with wide eyes and open mouth, anchored to the very spot where a miracle had just happened.

"That beautiful girl kissed me. Is that what Patty meant by a free spirit? Maybe some day, I'll find out."

CHAPTER III **Infatuated**

Nora Blanding worked with each of the three girls to observe their work interests and experience. Joni did whatever she normally would do, confident that any task wanting improvement would be recognized. The other two girls giggled, took a cursory view of the things to be done and, except for extraordinary skill with a pitchfork, were happy believing they had performed well.

Without comment, Nora Blanding did not completely agree. She informed each of them she would decide after a conference with Patricia Ensler. Joni was happy to have had the opportunity but doubted she would win over the two older girls.

At home for the evening, Joni was pouring some herbal tea when her mom came into the kitchen. "There you are, young lady," her mom said with pride in her voice. "Patty Ensler called today to chat. She wants to be confident there would be no difficulty in you going with Nora Blanding this season. I replied, of course, that you are a mature girl and I can't imagine why you can't follow a dream, if that's possible."

Joni hugged her mother. "That means I'm being considered. It would not be well to give me the apprentice position if there is conflict at home. That's why she called."

"I made it clear I would not stand in your way of the experience. I also explained your grades in the sciences were kept up in hopes of getting into veterinary school when the

time comes. She said an endorsement from Nora Blanding would almost assure a favorable scholarship, given your excellent grade average. Looks good to me."

Joni hugged her mom. Before commenting, she had to put her thoughts in order. Finally, "Mom, what does 'free spirit' mean? Ms. Ensler described Nora Blanding that way."

She laughed. "I can see you are quite taken with the celebrity gal. You're at the right age to entertain an infatuation. Why not pick a winner? I would say, looking over her career, she has adjusted to being a woman in a man's profession by appearing whimsical. Since she cannot be a man herself, she flaunts her achievements in their faces. I'll just bet she has some amusing stories to tell."

Joni grinned. "Thanks. I thought something like that." Silently, she remembered the warm tender kiss.

Her mom put her arm around Joni and hugged her. "Relax, dear. You are young in an exciting world, doing what you love. It's OK to be infatuated with a pretty girl who might seem the person you'd like to be one day. It might even hurt a bit. Remember, I love you."

Joni let a tear escape from her sparkling eyes. It rolled down her cheek. "How do you know so much about it?"

Mom turned to put away the box of tea bags. "I believe the saying now is, 'been there, done that' and I'm so happy we can talk frankly. That's what moms are for."

Joni had a sad thought. "I think Dad would support me, too."

"Your father loved you dearly. When he died, he left enough for us to live the way we do. We're in no way affluent but there is enough to see you through the education you need. In that way, he is with us every day."

"You're a great mom," Joni answered and sipped her tea.

CHAPTER IV Attacked

Joni knocked on the door of Patty Ensler's office. Hearing nothing, she turned the knob and slowly opened to peek inside.

Patty was sitting at her desk. A tall man, with his back to the door, was leaning over, hands on her shoulders. Joni could tell they were embracing, kissing and physically involved. Perhaps, she reasoned, that was why nobody heard her knock.

She carefully closed the door and, as silently as she could, stepped away. 'It's that same man,' she considered, thinking with only silence for a companion. 'I knew something was going on. Sure happy it's nothing threatening.' She let herself out of the modest cottage that served as an administration office and residence.

Shirley and Betty Lou caught up with her as she entered the barn headed for the tack room.

"Hey, girl," Shirley said. "Wait up. We want to talk."

Joni faced the two of them. Their serious faces, like a mask, stared at her. "What is there to talk about?" Joni asked.

"Did you go to Patty Ensler about the apprentice job? I told you we want you out of this."

Joni was briefly shocked. "And I told you it wasn't up to me who gets selected. What's this all about?"

Shirley put hands on her hips and stepped closer. "Nora Blanding hasn't said yet who she wants but we think Patty has a lot of weight in the decision."

Joni relaxed. "She did telephone my mother to ask if it would be OK for me to enroll in the classes Ms Blanding plans to give." She was wary when she noticed Betty Lou circling around behind her. "Listen, we've known each other since grade school. You know I'm not going to quit just because you say so. It doesn't work that way. Don't hassle me."

"It's more important to either of us than it is to you. We're older and know more."

Joni started to walk toward the crib room where the supplies were kept. Ranch hands had lockers in a small room on one side. She knew the two girls were following so she tried to ignore them. Once in the doorway, she heard the door close. Betty Lou had thrown the bolt. "You better give me a better reason to quit than threatening me like this. I have future plans that include learning as much as I can from celebrity people like Nora Blanding." She heard nothing more because a rubber mallet came down on her skull with a sickening crunch. She was out cold.

She awoke with a throbbing headache. "Ow, what was that?" She looked at the two girls who sat on a bench facing her. She had been stretched out on a horse blanket on the floor. Her blouse was open to the waist and her skirt was wrapped around her hips; she knew she had been touched because her bra was beneath her chin and her panties pulled to one side. "I have your message," she said with an effort of will. "I'm not quitting just because you rough me up a bit."

"We know you're a virgin," Shirley said with a note of triumph. "You have a neat figure by being so active. Horse saddles seem to favor your nice hips and thighs. You either do as you're told or things will get serious."

"Things already are serious, bitch," Joni spat at them. "I'm nobody's fool, you know? If you want to play girl games, pick on someone else." At that, she broke down and started to cry. Her sobs wracked her body. She tried to pull on the horse blanket to cover her near-nakedness.

They all heard a call from inside the barn. "It's Blanding," Shirley said. Both girls were quickly out. They hunched down inside one of the horse stalls to hide.

Nora Blanding came into the room just as Joni was trying to sit up. "What in the world? Darling, what's this?"

"Seems I'm the victim of local politics," Joni answered, trying to be calm. She sniffed again and wiped her face on her skirt. She rubbed her head and moaned.

"Hey! Let me see that. You better tell me what happened. I agree you are very pretty but this is too extreme." She waved her hand in front of Joni's face. "See this OK? You might have a concussion. Who hit you with what?"

"Maybe I should say a stranger or one of the field hands or whatever. It was Shirley and Betty Lou. That mallet there looks likely as the weapon." She pointed at the black rubber hammer thrown into one corner. "They are trying to convince me to withdraw my enrollment in your classes. It's only made me more determined."

Nora was thoughtful. "What possible gain could they find by purposely getting themselves thrown out? And, while we're at it, why take advantage of an unconscious girl's body? Do you want to file formal charges?"

Joni allowed Nora to help her up. She was still in pain, feeling dizzy, so was grateful when Nora straightened her skirt and hooked her brassiere. "No, no complaint but I do want you and Ms Ensler to know those two are double-trouble. If they will do something like this because they don't get their way, where will it end?"

"Don't decide now. Let me help you to my apartment. Some pain pills and a hot bath should put you on the way to recovery. I'm going to talk to Patty Ensler about this."

"Oh, please, Ms Blanding. I just looked in on Ms Ensler a while ago and she was, uh, with a guy. I've seen him around a few times. Best not to interrupt them. We can discuss this later when I'm feeling better."

"As you wish," Nora said, smiling. "You say you saw her with a guy? What were they doing?"

"He was standing, she was at her desk. They were kissing. Nothing wrong in that, is there?"

"Time will reveal all mysteries. Come along; can you walk?"

"You are really nice to help me."

"On the horse riding circuit, I've seen many a jockey bounced around. Broken bones and a sound rap on the head are not uncommon. This may be your first but, I fear, not your last."

Joni stumbled and Nora supported her. "I'm not going to quit. You mean too much to me," she said.

"I love you, too," Nora said lightly, joking. She helped Joni into the small apartment. "Come along, now. I'll draw your bath."

Once inside the apartment, Nora handed Joni a bathrobe and led her, with light support under one arm, next to the bathtub. She excused herself to go find some medicine.

Joni sat on the edge watching the water steaming as the tub filled. She smiled weakly and accepted two pain pills Nora handed her. She gulped the water. She looked up at the famous lady with whom fate had thrown her. She thanked her and kicked off her flip-flops.

Nora very carefully removed the robe, checked the water temperature and kept a strong hold of the fragile girl to be sure she was safely in the water. "Be right back, love. Just relax. The pain medicine should take hold fairly soon." She left the room.

Nora clicked the intercom. Patty Ensler answered. "We have to talk. Can you come over?"

In a few minutes, Patty was at the doorway. "What's up? I could hear a note of panic in your voice. One of the horses?"

"No, thank goodness. Our little apprentice, Joni Dorinski, was attacked by, she claims, two wicked girls. They knocked her out, messed up her clothing and took what the lawyers call carnal advantage. I'm not clear on the details yet."

"You don't have to name the two wicked girls. I've suspected those two for some time but I never thought anything like this. Where is Joni now?"

"In the bath soaking up some steam. I gave her a couple pain pills. And, while we're at it, this extra complication, if that's what it is. Joni told me she stopped in to see you earlier and saw you in an embrace with a man." She smirked. "You should be more careful who wanders in when you are, uh, doing whatever."

"OK, my bad," Patty answered. "I better tell the guy not to be so impulsive."

Nora grinned. "Yes, do that. Now, what do you think about the two misfits?"

"Did Joni call them by name? Suppose they deny everything? With no witnesses, we'd have a difficult time bringing charges. If we don't and just dismiss them, we're open for some criticism. Let me handle it. Maybe, if I can identify a motive, they will confess." She gave Nora a cursory hug across the shoulders and left to find Shirley and Betty Lou.

When Nora returned to the bathroom, Joni had raised herself out of the tub, wrapped a towel around her damp body and started out. "Can I just stop a moment? I feel a little dizzy. Then I'll get on home."

"Nonsense," Nora said quickly and led the young girl to the sofa. "Sit here; I'll get your clothes for when you feel up to going. There's no rush. Now, do you want me to call your mom?"

"Oh, please, no. She will overreact and pull me out. Maybe that's how my two attackers planned to get rid of me. I don't know." She sat on the sofa and, seeing the lower flap of her robe open, covered her naked legs.

Nora smiled at the gesture. "Don't tell anyone," she said playfully. "I already saw you in the bath. You don't have to be modest with me. You have the neat figure I would expect of a girl."

Joni smiled and relaxed back. "This is all so unfortunate. The last thing I want is to impose on you but, really, thanks. You are super cool to help me."

Nora sat on the sofa and took Joni's hand. "What do you think they could possibly gain by conking you on the head and then feeling you up like that? Have they come on to you in the past? Are you in a sexually sensitive situation here?"

"No clue. They fool around a lot. Mostly I just laugh them off and go about seeing to my own concerns. I don't have a sensational figure, well, uh, like yours. I see no reason for them to act like that."

Nora grinned. "That was a backhanded compliment, I think. I'll take it. Are they lovers, do you think?"

"No idea. I've heard that but I've never seen any evidence. If I did, I probably wouldn't know it. Other people's sexual interests are not mine."

Nora was thoughtful. "You are very pretty and your charm could be a challenge. Maybe they only wanted to intimidate you into leaving and things got out of hand."

"I prefer to think that. It would make a repeat unlikely."

She pressed Joni's hand. "All in all, I hope there is no harm. If the headache doesn't pass in a few hours, we should have you checked by a doctor. In either event, you have won the competition for the apprentice post."

Joni looked at the floor. She closed her eyes, shy for the moment. "Eliminating the players like has happened isn't much of a win, is it?"

"Perhaps, but it is done. Can you rest for awhile? Wait, I'll get you some pillows."

Joni gladly accepted Nora's fussing over her. She stretched out on the sofa and smiled when Nora covered her with a light blanket. "You are a neat lady," she said.

"Lady? Puh-lease!" Nora answered in good spirit. "I'm only a few years ahead of you. Mid-twenties is not so aged that I need to get a wig and blue hair." They both laughed. Nora leaned over and kissed Joni on the forehead. "Get some rest, pretty damsel in distress. We'll talk later."

Joni smiled and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER V Social Call

At home and on rest leave from her job, Joni snuggled up to a book on horse training. After that, she pulled out her laptop and made an outline of her science texts for the next school year. Her mom came in.

"Feeling better, dear?" she asked and sat on the edge of the bed. Like most moms, her first impulse was to feel for a fever even when none was expected.

"Yes, thanks. I'm eager to get back to work. With Shirley and Betty Lou gone, they are running short-handed. The field hands are willing but nobody speaks Mexican well enough to direct them."

"Maybe you should study Spanish next year instead of German."

"Mom," she answered with impatience. "Text references are in German in lots of cases."

Her mom stood up. "I'll call you when dinner is ready." She was gone. Joni's cell phone ring tone demanded attention.

"Joni, how are you? It's Nora Blanding checking up on you."

"How nice of you to call. I'm feeling much better. If they will let me, I'll be back to work tomorrow."

"Follow doctor's orders, that's a command. I'll take away your spurs if you don't behave."

They both laughed.

"Well, ten days in bed is not my idea of a summer vacation. You have been swell; Mom thinks you are a hero."

Nora chuckled. "Well, I'm the one who caused the trouble by offering instruction. How heroic is that?"

"I won't tell. I'd like to see you; I miss our 'horse talks'."

"Thus the reason for this call. I have your paycheck in my warm hand and thought I'd drop it off."

"Wonderful, can you come for dinner?"

She hesitated. "Thank you so much but I promised Patty and she went out and bought some fresh seafood. Tell your mom I'll take a rain check."

"Tonight is mom's bridge night. It's really lonesome here. Maybe you can drop by later?"

"Yes, fine; I'll do that. Can't have you destitute and receiving threatening calls from the bank."

Joni laughed. "Good, I'll watch for you. My credit is so bad, I get past due collection letters on a zero balance." Later, as evening settled the last light over the eastern hills, Nora tapped on the front door window. Joni, anxious to greet the svelte woman, hurried to the door.

"Nice to see you," Nora said and hugged the young girl. She held the embrace longer than Joni expected..

"Thanks. Mom left some herbal tea and homemade oatmeal cookies."

"That's very English. Thanks."

They sat at the kitchen table chatting about their mutual interests like school chums.

"Have you heard from your two wicked girls?" Nora asked.

Joni shook her head 'no.' "I think we've seen the last of them."

"Patty told me that, when she dismissed them, they confessed to hitting you. Shirley admitted also that both girls, found you very attractive and were jealous of your getting so far ahead of them though they are older. What do you think of that?"

Joni chuckled. "I think it's silly."

"But they did take advantage of you when you were unconscious. That was far from silly. Have other girls shown that kind of interest in you?"

Joni was thoughtful. "No, if anyone did, I missed it. It would be flattering, I suppose but I'm certainly no sexual magnet. At least I don't think of myself that way."

Nora laughed. "Sexual magnet, that's a good description. I can see you are aware that many girls, also young women, form attachments through friendship. Once trust is their bond, it's easy to experiment with the many things that excite their bodies."

Joni hesitated before speaking. "Since you mentioned it, I have a girlfriend, Bella. We've been close since about the fifth grade. She is at Girl's Adventure Camp this summer. She's a counselor in the nature cabin. She and I share an interest in wildlife."

"Is she pretty? Do you have a photo of her or the two of you together? I'd like to see it."

Joni, with her usual enthusiasm, stood up. She replaced the chair next to the kitchen table. "Sure, several. They're in my room. Come on, I'll show you." She led Nora Blanding to her bedroom at the top of the stairs. It was large but seemed small with all the memorabilia, mostly horse pictures, on the walls. "Sit here," she said, clearing some books off her desk chair. She picked up her small photo album and handed it to Nora.

As Nora turned the pages, Joni leaned over next to her and provided a running commentary on each photo.

"I can see she is very pretty, though no competition for you. There is something else I see now that these photos are out. It is very likely Shirley and Betty Lou have an inferiority complex. They see how happy you two are together, how good looking, and feel they are missing out somehow. That make sense?"

Joni smiled. She indulged in the thought. "Maybe. I've only been kissed by one woman in my whole life."

Nora swung around in the chair and looked up at Joni. "I know, your mother."

They both shrieked with laughter. Nora touched Joni's arm and ran her fingers along the smooth skin to the elbow.

Joni blushed, crimson. "You know who it was? It was you. I'll not forget that."

"Did you like it? Or, maybe you were offended? I remember that well. You were so beautiful, so ready, vivacious actually, and vulnerable, a simple adoring kiss was the most natural reaction at the time."

Joni looked at the floor, shy. "I wasn't offended, not shocked either. Flattered, for sure. I liked it. It was a gesture of affection and we'd hardly met."

"True. I do recall watching you doing your chores from time to time prior to you taking the reins that day."

Joni looked askance. "Strange I didn't see you and you saw me."

Nora stood up to go. "I consider it a gift getting to know you."

"Oh, do you have to go? Please stay. I have some other photos, some in diapers."

Nora laughed. "There is another bit of news I want to bring up if you aren't overtired."

Joni was jolted alert. Her eyes went wide and her brow creased. "News? What is it?"

"It was what Patty and I discussed at dinner tonight. But, first, are you feeling OK? Would you rather lie down? We can still talk a while."

"I'm fine. It's exciting having you here." She scrambled onto the bed and waited for Nora to sit on the edge of the mattress.

"Patty has entered Tempest, your favorite horse I believe, in the district quarter race. We discussed having you ride him. For instruction and to get your name in the records,

you can manage the entire adventure. That means practice, grooming, transport in my van, signing up, paying the entrance fee and all the details. Patty and I agree you are ready for this as part of your instruction. You can close your mouth now."

Joni fought to control her excitement. "What a dream, magnificent. When does this happen? How much is the fee? I may have to pawn my tennis rackets. Wow!"

Nora laughed. "You deserve it, every bit. The ranch is paying for everything and, after deducting expenses, you get any balance left in the purse."

"I shall start first thing when I get back to work. Do I owe you for this?" She touched Nora's arm with her finger straight and firm.

Nora smiled. "No, you earned this as well. You and your mom could have brought legal action against the ranch for the trouble those girls, as employees, caused you. You've asked for nothing but we did agree to pay you while you recuperated. Paying for your first race and all the trimmings is much better than a lawyer, you no doubt agree."

Joni sank back into her pillows. "I'm overwhelmed. Everyone has been so wonderful to me."

Nora stood up and stepped closer. She touched Joni's lips with her finger and smiled. We can discuss details when you're back at the ranch. And, don't forget, not everybody has been wonderful to you. Shirley and Betty Lou hardly qualify." She leaned over and kissed Joni on the forehead. "I must go now; early day tomorrow. I'll let myself out. You get your rest and come back where we can keep an eye on you."

She listened until she heard the front door squeak and close. "What a great gal," she said aloud. "And, I think she likes me."

CHAPTER VI

Mystery Man

"Come in, Mr. Blanding," Patty said as Nora stood in the doorway. "You are looking particularly dapper today. Tell me, are you going to the race like that, dressed as a guy?"

Nora came in and sat down. "I'm more comfortable in this sports outfit, do you mind? For one thing, when I pass the paddock, nobody pays any attention to me as a guy. Just let me go on the grounds, assuming I get through security, dressed as a college coed and see how far I get."

Patty smiled. "I can tell you how far you'll get dressed as a college girl but that has nothing to do with horse racing."

"Joni is excited about handling Tempest in the quarter race. I will be surprised if she does not gladly sign the legal release holding no liability on our part for the trouble she encountered here. It was worth the effort."

Patty's eyes sparkled. "Well, Mr. Blanding. I'm of the opinion you cannot wait to get your hands inside that pretty girl's blouse. I expect a thorough course in horsemanship this season to go along with repeated bouts of cunnilingus."

Nora winced. "Cool it, Patty. That's never a sure thing and you know it."

"The horsemanship or the cunnilingus?"

Nora grinned. "Anybody ever tell you about having naughty thoughts? I agree she is lovely; great legs and full bodice. When we talked about the recovery and the race, she was enthusiastic. I could have crawled right into bed with her, no question."

Patty reached for the jangling telephone. "You wish! Hello? Yes, this is Patty Ensler ..."

Nora stood up to go, waved and threw a facetious kiss off her fingertips as she went out the door. She pulled her cap down to her ears to hide the escaping strands of brown hair and walked out into the sunshine. She went directly to her GMC Truck and was soon on the road to town.

It was late afternoon so she parked in front of the 'Town Pump' and went inside. It was too early for the Happy Hour advertised in the window. She took a seat at the end of the bar and fixed her boots firmly on the bar rail.

"Somethin' fer ya?" the barmaid asked. "We don't see many young guys around at this time of day. Hope ya didn't get canned."

Nora smiled. "No, not this time," she answered in her practiced tone. "Draft beer will be fine. OK if I sit over there? My feet hurt."

The barmaid set the beer in front of her on a cocktail pad. "Sure, go ahead. Just don't start a riot with all the peaceable folks in here."

Nora sipped from the tall glass and relaxed. Out of the corner of her eyes, she sensed more than saw someone approaching.

"Hey guy," a pretty girl said as she approached Nora. "Would you like some company? Buy me a drink?"

Nora was shocked; it was Shirley without her Betty Lou. "Sure, anything. I have a little time, just some shopping to do later." She hunched her shoulders forward to be sure her breasts did not give her away.

Shirley sat down with a Scotch Manhattan which she stirred as if there was special meaning there. "Haven't seen you here before. Come in often?"

"My first time but I'm usually lucky with girls, especially if the name is Shirley."

Shirley squinted in the darkness. Having just come in from the outside sunshine, her eyes hadn't yet adjusted fully. She leaned closer. "Omigawd! Nora Blanding."

"Did you bring your rubber mallet? Guys get a little familiar with you? Bet you don't go for that, only the girls."

"What's with the guy-getup? You cruisin'?"

"That's the general idea. You should try it some time. Much better than hit or miss with some young chick."

Shirley looked away. "I don't believe this. You're a famous celebrity. You're not gay."

Nora laughed. "Dressed like this, nobody hassles me. I'm just fooling with you."

"You sure had me going there for a minute. How are the horses?"