

Excerpt from:

TRY

By Lily Burana

I leaned on the railing to keep my sandals from falling off. J.W. was waiting for me at the bottom of the staircase. The band started in on Chris LeDoux's "Look at You, Girl."

J.W. held out his hand. "Well, come on, we got to dance to this."

The song floated down and sealed us off from the crowd. J.W. folded me into his arms. I pressed my face against his neck and inhaled. Someone should bottle the scent of fresh-scrubbed cowboy. They'd make a mint. I lifted my head from J.W.'s shoulder and looked at him. We danced a little slower, swaying in one spot, grinning at each other.

"That's better," J.W. said, tipping his chin down.

"What's better?"

"That's the first time you looked me in the eye all night."

*Cosmo* composure be damned, I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his lower lip, right on the spot where the tobacco mounded up. His pressed his cheek

against my temple. I could feel him smiling up there. He whispered in my ear, "You want to get out of here?"

We wrestled each other across the parking lot, elbowing and leaping over the pits and ditches. When we got to his truck, I sat on the back bumper. J.W. stood in front of me with his thumbs hooked in his belt loops, his knees locked. He was making that awkward face again. Fortified by beer and mindful of my mission, I leaned against the tailgate and crossed my ankles. "You want to kiss me, don't you?"

J.W. adjusted his hat and scratched the back of his neck. "Maybe I wouldn't mind it. But you're just a kid."

"I'm not a kid. I'm twenty-three."

"That's a kid to me."

"What if I kissed you first?"

"That'd be against cowboy law, I think."

I stood and put my hands on his shoulders. "You wouldn't press charges against a minor," I said as I leaned in. "I can tell."

A great kiss is a hosanna in your bloodstream, chords of exultant heat singing through your entire body. I was fully and blissfully engaged in our kissing, not distracted by anything—not people, not traffic, not the music that barged into the parking lot each time the door opened—until our legs touched.

The brush of denim on my bare skin made me go rubbery. I grabbed his belt loops to regain my bearings, which he took as a signal to kiss me more deeply. I stepped back from him and turned toward the truck door. "It's getting late. We should go."

J.W. draped his arm over the steering wheel and faced me. "Should I take you back to Lan's?"

Here was my turning point. Was I going to follow through or fold? I clasped my hands over my knee and looked at my skirt. "No."

The ride to his place was tense and almost unbearably quiet. His apartment was right across the street from the railroad tracks, in a row of two- and three-story red brick buildings that lapsed together and spaced apart like old teeth. He came around the front of the truck and opened my door. The moon hung tiny in the sky, shrouded still in pale blue mist. Our footfalls echoed along the sidewalk in incriminating staccato bursts as we made our way to his front door. We creaked up a flight of splinter-ridden stairs to his flat above King's Metal Shop. He turned the key in the top lock and we stepped inside. I could tell from his hesitation before crossing the threshold that he hated the way he lived.

J.W.'s living room was long and narrow and religiously organized, decorated in late twentieth-century bachelor—a leather couch that had seen better days, a recliner, and a television a good bit larger than it had to be. The

walls were tenant white. On the far wall leaned a grandfather clock and a mahogany stained pie safe with hammered tin doors. The distinguishing element was a corner dedicated to every type of rodeo trophy and citation a person could get—saddles, spurs, buckles, bits, framed photographs and newspaper clippings.

Instinctively, I walked toward the display—it threw off its own energy like a force field. Pride of place in the arrangement belonged to his World Champion saddle, magnificent as any sculpture, covered in elaborate hand-tooled scrollwork with the event and year on the stirrup straps. In the faint light of the desk lamp, the brown leather glowed.

I ran my hand along the smooth curve of the cantle. “Beautiful. It looks like a Severe.”

J.W. drew alongside me and joined his hands behind his back. “The girl knows her saddle makers, but no. They were from Oklahoma City Saddlery that year.”

I looked around the room. “I like that you’ve got all your trophies out where you can see them. I think that’s important.”

“Twenty-five years of rodeoing and that’s what I’ve got to show for it. A bunch of buckles, a little leather, and a mess of scars.” He removed his hat and placed it brim-up on the end table. The big old clock ticked murderously. I

crossed my legs at the knee and dangled my sandal off my left foot, waiting for J.W. to make the next move.

He offered me a drink but I declined. He rubbed his hands together. They made a dry, papery sound. His shyness was surprising. He cleared his throat and stood. "Why don't I give you the grand tour?"

It didn't take long—the pale yellow kitchenette with a table and three chairs that I recognized as being from Sam's Club, his son's small bedroom with a knotty pine bunk bed and toy chest, bathroom with old blue fixtures and a hexagonal tile floor. Then he opened a door at the end of the long living room and we walked inside. A white iron bed was angled in the corner, positioned so it looked like a crouched animal in the dark. A desk and ladderback chair stood next to a tall oak wardrobe. I was in his bedroom. This was what I came for, wasn't it? I hovered near the door, hesitating. J.W. lowered the wooden blind and looked my way, his expression small and serious.

"Show me." My voice was louder than I wanted. I covered up my wince with a smile.

"I'm sorry?"

"Show me your scars."

J.W. folded his shirt lengthwise and laid it on the bed. He turned on the small green bedside lamp. His torso was lashed with faint pink lines like

patching seams on a cloth doll. He named them all for me with the vocabulary of a Latin scholar—shoulder reconstruction, broken pelvis, wrist and ankle held together with plates and pins. “My legs are the real show. My knees, especially,” he said, trying to slide up his pant leg to show me the repair of his “anterior cruciate ligament.”

His explained the how and when of each scar, not with pornographic pride in the injury process, but a cataloger’s laconic attachment to the remains—*been there, got that*—his body a traveler’s trunk plastered with souvenirs from South Dakota and Texas, Idaho and Oregon. Arizona, Alberta, Nevada, too. “Compared to some guys, I got off pretty easy. I never been badly injured. I got a lot more adhesions than scars,” he said. “Most of the damage is on the inside.” I suspected he was telling me more than he realized.

When he turned away, I let my eyes roam all over him. I never imagined what a forty-one year-old man would look like half-naked, but if I had, I wouldn’t have pictured anything like this, sculpted through the lats and chest, hips and waist whittled flat, solid neck like a draft horse. Forearms veined and thick under a light dusting of red-blond hair. Every part of him was forcefully compact and exceptional, but what impressed me most were his hands. I’d been looking at them all night—stout-wristed, knot-knuckled, show no mercy hands. They weren’t big or scary-looking, just seasoned enough to stop my heart.

I took his left thumb, rotating it until his palm faced up, and began rubbing the innocent spaces between his fingers and the tendons ridging the back. "That's amazing," J.W. whispered. He leaned back against the headboard, closed his eyes and swallowed hard. As I massaged him, my eyes kept coming back to the angry pink scar on his shoulder. Less than six months old, it was neat and precise, almost ornamental. I wanted to touch it, follow the slender vertical curve with a fingertip, but it seemed too personal.

After several minutes J.W.'s lids fluttered open. He got up and backed out of the room. "Would you excuse me?"

I managed to get out of my dress and into bed before J.W. came back. I lay besieged with doubt, staring at the distressed flower and vine molding that ran the perimeter of the ceiling. Should I have worn black underwear instead? Was this too forward? I might have had an easier go of it if I'd drunk more beer after dinner. I would have been eager to proceed with the hit and run, but the conversation and his hands and that beautiful shoulder scar changed my view on things, and my attraction seemed bigger, scarier somehow. My seduction plan was shredding like rain-soaked paper.

J.W. came into the bedroom, still in his jeans but barefoot. He lifted the comforter, politely avoiding looking underneath, and edged over alongside me.

His breath was cold peppermint; he'd brushed his teeth. He came in for a full-frontal hug.

I shrieked.

He jerked back as if snakebit. "Jesus! What?"

"Your belt buckle...it's freezing!"

"Right! Sorry." He scurried up and stripped to blue plaid boxers, laying his jeans over the back of a chair with his belt draped on top. His leg muscles banded and flexed. *Percheron thighs*, I thought abstractly as he padded back to the bed.

"Better?"

I nodded.

J.W. reached over and snapped off the lamp. Orange streetlight glowed at the edge of the window blinds. We pressed together, kissing. My pulse thrummed in my temples. J.W. wasn't a card-trick kisser—no nibbling or tongue sucking; he didn't trace the outline of my lips with his tongue. He kissed like a man should, pure and straightforward. Every time we separated, the air in the room cooled my lips and I'd roll back toward him, seeking his mouth. My resistance was weakening. I had to throw the brakes on and soon. I forced myself to pull fully away and sat up.

His eyes opened, liquidy and loving. The look of a man happy to be

received. He stroked my upper arm. "Everything okay?"

I pulled the quilt up under my arms and tucked a lock of fallen hair behind my ear. "I hope you don't mind but I'm really not ready to—"

He smiled and lazily dragged two fingers down my back. "It's okay."

"You sure? I'm sorry, I—"

"Shhh, it's alright." He pulled me close so my head rested on his chest. I could hear his heart thudding, loud. Strong.

He kissed me deeply, our legs entwined, rubbing. He laced his fingers in mine and slid my hand to the fly of his shorts. When I didn't pull back, he placed his hand over mine, guiding me. We kissed again, still touching. His grip was faster now, a little harder. After several minutes, his breath became labored, teeth clenched. He tipped his head back, grabbed at the sheets and twisted.

J.W.'s neck and chest were gleaming, his eyes closed, peaceful. I wasn't sure what to do. After handing him the tissue box from the nightstand I rolled onto my side and presented my back to him for spooning.

J.W. kissed my shoulder and fiddled absently with my bra strap. He rested his chin against my shoulder blade. "I'm sorry, were we done?"

I turned halfway over. "Aren't you?"

"That wasn't my question."

I shrugged.

He slid out from between the covers and walked around to my side of the bed. As he drew close, light through the wooden blinds threw blurred slats of shadow across his chest. He patted the sheet, urging me to move over and lie flat on my back. He sat down and began rubbing the toes on my right foot.

“Cute foot you got here,” he smiled, running his thumbnail along the arch making my toes curl.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

“Sweet little tattoo.” He cupped my heel in his palm and kissed the inside of my ankle.

Then he kissed the inside of my knee. Then my inner thigh.

He reached up, hooked his fingers in the sides of my panties, and in one smooth motion, pulled them down and off.

There’s a joke in Wyoming: Why do cowgirls walk bow-legged?

Because cowboys eat with their hats on.

It’s not true.