

What a Texas Girl Needs – Excerpt

By Kristina Knight

A few hours later Vanessa stood at a gas pump, looking over the roof of her Porsche at Lockhardt, Texas. A few cars stopped at the single stoplight before continuing on their way. The Cattle Cafe was quiet at two in the afternoon, no stragglers finishing up a heart attack on a plate. She would bet her last twenty Mrs. Gillespie stood to the side of the front window, watching the gas station carefully as was her custom. She had a need to feed the gossip mill and was probably on the phone with Mr. Yoder at the drugstore across the street, wondering why Vanessa was in town so early this year.

For the first time in her life she had no urge to run for the bright lights of the city, and she wasn't quite sure why. Even before Paul swept her off her stilettos she'd longed for more than Lockhardt could offer. More than a single stoplight, barn dances and rodeos. Now, when the bright lights would drown out her loneliness why was she coming back here where the nightly cicada calls would only prove how alone she was? Her phone bleeped inside the car. Think of the devil. Paul's picture grinned at her from the screen, notifying her of a new text. Vanessa's fingers itched to paint red horns, an ugly goatee, and red pitchfork over his face. But that would be childish.

"We should talk. Dinner tomorrow?"

She sighed. Talk? She had nothing to say to him. He would keep texting until she answered, though.

"Busy. Maybe when hell freezes over?"

Vanessa clicked off the notifications for her phone—she didn't want to see his reply—

and topped off the tank.

Gillian was right. Paul hadn't loved her when they got married, she was just a way to his trust fund. No one in Lockhardt used her. Most considered her a nuisance, but at least she wouldn't get the pitying looks here. She wouldn't be alone, living in a hotel room because she couldn't face the house she'd shared with Paul.

Of course staying meant coming clean with Matias, and she needed to do it soon. Working on the ranch, he'd see the changes in her body before long.

Vern hustled around the car to check the total on the pump. He wrote the numbers down in his little book.

"I'll take the bill, Vern," she said, holding out her hand. It was about time she started paying her own way. One tank of gas wouldn't exactly repay the family, but it was a start. Added bonus, paying her own bills might help overhaul the character she'd found so seriously lacking in the last few months.

"It's easier for ol' Mitch to keep his records if I just add it to the ranch total."

"I'm not a ranch employee. This isn't a ranch vehicle. I'll take the bill." Vanessa couldn't remember ever paying for a tank of gas here. Come to think of it, unless she was trying to impress someone, she had rarely paid for anything to this point in her life.

Vern handed her the receipt. Fifty bucks? Holy crap, how much did gas cost? *Stupid question, Van, obviously it costs fifty dollars.* She reached into her bag for her credit card and then remembered that was part and parcel of the Witte upbringing. Paying with Grandfather's credit card? Not character building. She pawed through the baby blue Coach bag but only came up with two twenties and some loose change.

Damn.

"Just charge it to the ranch, Vern." Mat Barnes's voice echoed under the station's overhang, chilling Vanessa. "The Double Diamond will cover it." We always cover her bills, his tone implied.

Vanessa squeezed her eyes closed and swallowed. Her fingers closed over another bill. Please let it be a twenty. Or a ten. She opened her eyes.

Three twenties. Triumph!

"I've got it Mr. Barnes, thank you," she said, chilling her voice as she handed the cash to Vern. He looked from Mat to Vanessa, obviously confused over what was going on between them. Vanessa held his gaze for a moment. Vern took the cash and hurried inside.

"I think we're past the 'Mr. Barnes' stage, don't you?" Mat watched her from beneath the tipped-low brim on his cowboy hat, his coal-black eyes boring straight to her soul. Yes, they were past the Mr. or Miss stage, technically, but not calling him Mat helped her keep her distance.

The way her heart raced at the mere sight of him she desperately needed that space.

She looked away, crossing her arms over her chest. Her gaze caught on the frayed edge of his jeans—which were worn in all the right places, she noted—and today's tee, tight across his shoulders, read, 'Chicks Dig Scars' over his well-muscled chest.

Who was she kidding? Calling him Mr. Barnes didn't keep her from noticing just how delectable Mat was. Nothing could do that. Not in broad daylight. Certainly not the twinkling fairy lights during Kathleen's wedding reception.

"I don't think a night spent in my grandfather's hayloft makes us best buddies," she said, hoping against hope he would just leave her alone.

"Ahh, but what we did in that hayloft is another matter." He lounged against the side of

her Porsche as if he might stay there forever.

Her cheeks burned and her stomach clenched. Not from morning sickness this time, from the memory of Mat holding her. Touching her. Of kissing the ridge line of his shoulder and holding on as everything except Mat disappeared into the Texas night. Of falling asleep in his arms and feeling, for the first time in her life, completely safe.

Waking up alone, without so much as a note, showed her exactly what Mat Barnes thought of Mitchum Witte's granddaughter.

"We don't need to talk about that night." Except they did. Badly. Not here, though, she reasoned.

"What should we talk about then?" He cocked one eyebrow and crossed his feet at the ankle as if settling in for a long chat.

The baby. Vanessa opened her mouth to tell him she was pregnant but stopped. Dropping this kind of news in the middle of a gas station parking lot was so not happening.

"Why talk about anything? You can just go on about your day, I'm sure you have plenty to keep you busy."

"In fact, I do. What brings you back to town, Vanessa?"

Why wouldn't he just leave? It wasn't as if they were friends. Or even lovers, not counting that night.

"The bull sale."

"For someone who claims to hate Lockhardt and Texas in general, you're back awfully early. The sale isn't for another two months."

"Needed more time to recover did you?"

A conceited grin spread over his face. "I'm doing just fine, thanks."

"Good. And I'd prefer to keep things businesslike between us leading up to the bull sale." Vanessa used her most prim and proper voice; the voice lessons from her childhood coming back immediately. "I'm pretty sure I wasn't your first midnight hayride, and you definitely weren't mine. So, businesslike?"

The grin widened. "Girls who've been around a lot don't blush like you do at the thought of what we did that night."

Damn her fair complexion anyway. Vanessa drew herself up to her full height - all five feet seven inches in Alexander McQueen stilettos.

"Blushing is an involuntary response that can be attributed to anger as much as embarrassment. It doesn't mean anything."

"You're certain of that?"

Vanessa's mouth went dry. Any sound she made now would betray her, so she only nodded. He shrugged and straightened from his position on her bumper. Mat reached out a hand and traced the line of her jaw. "You know, not acknowledging that night doesn't mean it won't happen again."

"You're pretty sure of yourself for a guy who didn't stick around until morning."

"Is that what this is about? You came home early because your pride was bruised about the morning after?"

Yes. No. Crap, what was this about? And why wasn't Vern back with her change yet?

"Being a city girl you probably don't realize we have actual work that starts at dawn on the ranch. Cattle don't feed themselves."

"Last I heard you were foreman, not a regular hand."

"Foreman doesn't mean nine to five. Or eleven to three for your circle." His gaze bored

into hers for a long moment and this time Vanessa couldn't look away. She was caught, like a moth to the proverbial flame. "Since you're out of cash, feel free to use the ranch accounts for anything else you need. We'll cover it for you." He turned and swung up into the big truck, tipped his cowboy hat, and started the motor. "You have a nice day now, *Miss Witte*. Don't be a stranger."

This character building thing was going to be harder than she thought.

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Mat handed the feed order over the worn, brown counter at The Feed Lot still distracted by a little blue Porsche and a sexy woman he hadn't been ready to see. Again.

Damn her for being right. He did still need time to prepare for her. Damn the bull sale for being held in February. Damn the fact that Vanessa's college degree was marketing so she'd been tasked two years before to come up with a website design and press releases. Neither changed much year to year, but the ball following the sale did.

And Vanessa planned that, too.

Why he'd never really understood.

Check that, he'd never contemplated it because until that night after Jackson and Kathleen got married, he had never given Vanessa Witte a second thought.

She was the kind of girl he'd left behind in California. The kind of girl he'd sworn to never get involved with again.

Until that night.

"Couple more minutes, Mat. We're bringing a couple of sacks up from the back."

He waved a hand at Jonathan, the store manager. "No hurry today." They could take all day and half the night loading the truck and Mat wouldn't care. He blew out a breath. A few more minutes spent in town, a few less spent at the ranch. Mat occupied the foreman's house, but took most of his meals at the main house.

Until this morning he'd been content to talk cattle with Mitch and Nathaniel over coffee. Most days he managed not to think of Vanessa, not to picture her gliding down that wide staircase on her way to wherever she spent her time when she was actually in residence. The days he failed were the days he concentrated on getting his own piece of Texas.

The McIntyre spread, one thousand acres of prime Texas land, went on the market early last summer, but it was land no foreman could ever afford.

He'd gone to see it, twice now, with a local agent. Made a few noises about saving money for a down payment. He could buy it outright, but then everyone would know his secret. They'd know he was *that* Mat Barnes, the trouble-making son of one of the wealthiest men in Silicon Valley. They wouldn't shoot the breeze with him over beef prices or the weather. They'd want to know about life in California. The hot women. The accident. So he made noises about saving. Another year or so and he could make the move without outing himself, but what he wouldn't give for that place now with Vanessa was back in town.

Jonathan whistled, drawing Mat's attention to the street outside. "Saw Vanessa pull in a few minutes ago. Damn, she looked good behind the wheel of that Porsche from a distance. From across the street ..."

"Anyone would look good behind that wheel," Mat cut in, not really wanting to talk about Vanessa. But he always shot the breeze with the guys at The Feed Lot. Until today, that was one of the draws to living in Texas— talking about absolutely nothing with people who didn't

care who he was or how much money he had.

Jonathan snorted. "Anyone, hell. Vanessa Witte looks better behind that wheel than half the women in this town."

Mat had to agree. Vanessa belonged to that car. She swiveled her long legs onto the pavement, the hem of her silk dress riding up her thigh a bit. He watched the play of muscle beneath her skin as she stood, how the silk pulled across her butt as she leaned into the car to grab her bag. He swallowed. Hard.

Vanessa glided into the Sack 'n Save, a colorful bird in a sea of gray concrete and dull brick buildings. And what the hell was wrong with him? He was not going to fall back under Vanessa Witte's spell. Jonathan elbowed him.

"You might want to pick your eyeballs up off the floor and put 'em back in your head, partner." He shuffled back behind the counter, whistling. "Like any other woman my ass," he said under his breath.

Well, the man had a point, Mat thought as Vanessa exited the grocery store with a filled bag and a bouquet of wildflowers. She leaned over the put the sack on the passenger seat, giving him another view of her derrière.

No, Vanessa Witte was most definitely not like any other woman in Lockhardt, Texas.