

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Madison Hayes

Miss



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Miss May

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CALENDAR GIRLS:

MISS MAY

Madison Hayes

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Chapter One

"Good afternoon," Cord Hardin drawled into the phone, "you've reached Cocks Are Us, where you get more bang for your buck. Can I help you?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line, followed by a deep, familiar voice. "Cord? Have you been drinking?"

"That depends on who you ask," he answered, propping his booted feet on the desk in his home office.

"I'm asking *you*."

"In that case," Cord slurred as he tried to make his eyes focus on the toes of his brown leather cowboy boots, "it depends on who's asking."

There was an impatient snort on the other end of the line. "This is Bolt."

"Bolt?"

"Yeah. As in your *brother* Bolt. Are you...drunk?"

Cord considered his brother's question as he tugged on the worn brim of his straw cowboy hat. "Do I sound drunk?"

"Hell yeah!"

"Well then, I guess I must be drunk," Cord grunted, sweeping his beer bottle from the desk and emptying it with one long swallow.

"Can you tell me *why* you're drunk?" Bolt asked, as though he didn't hold out much hope for any sort of reasonable answer.

Cord returned the empty bottle to the desk. The amber glass hit the dense oak with a sharp crack. "I'll give you three guesses."

"Veronica. Lake. Powers."

"Right on all three counts."

"What did the High and Mighty Miss Powers do to you this time?"

"She called me a boor," he growled.

"Well, you *are* a bore."

"No," Cord gritted, feeling his patience slipping away. "She called me a boooooor."

"What the hell is a boor?"

"Damned if I know."

"Hang on a minute. I'll ask the wife what it means." A few muffled seconds of silence followed before Cord's older brother came back laughing. "Tavia says it means Veronica is a fucking snob who needs to drag that coat tree out of her ass."

Cord flicked an imaginary tear from the corner of his eye. "Good old Tavia," he said in a deep, rough voice.

"So what're you gonna do about it?"

"Hire a tutor," Cord announced, stabbing a finger at the air. "An English tutor."

"Hire a what? A tutor? Listen, Cord. You do *not* need to hire a tutor. What you need is to dump the Powers chick and get yourself a new girlfriend. Do you hear me, Cord?"

Cord started to rock back on the legs of his heavy oak chair then thought better of it when he almost lost his balance. "I'm sorry, Bolt. What's that? You're breaking up."

"Don't give me that shit, Cord."

"Sorry, big brother. Gotta run. I got another call coming in. Give my love to Tavia." With those words, he jabbed a button on the telephone keypad and took the incoming call. "Hello. You've reached Big Dick Enterprises where you get more fuck for your buck. Can I help you?"

Cord swayed as he tilted back in his chair again. There was a pause on the other line. Then there was a soft snort followed by a woman's husky purr. "It's *may*."

Cord frowned at the low, musical voice. "I'm sorry, ma'am, you must have the wrong number. I don't know anyone named May."

Again the melodic chuckle of amusement. "It's *may*. *May* I help you. Not *can* I help you."

Cord cursed under his breath. It was bad enough when Veronica corrected him. Now he had random telemarketers calling him up and trying to improve his language. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he drawled. "But you can take your *may* and stick it in your *can*."

"I'm not a ma'am," the speaker corrected him. "I'm a Miss."

"Whatever, Miss...May. Listen, I just *hate* to rush you off the phone but I've got an important phone call I'm waiting on. You see, I responded to an ad in the paper and I'm expecting a call—"

"From a tutor," she finished for him.

"Uh. Yeah..." he said slowly, his feet dropping to the floor as he leaned forward in his seat. His eyes narrowed in slow suspicion.

"That would be me," the female voice clipped out with more than a trace of vicious glee.

"You're the English tutor," he stated in a deadpan voice.

"Returning your call," she pointed out maliciously. "I teach high school English during the school year and tutor a bit in the summer."

Feeling as though he'd been ambushed, Cord searched his beer-soaked brain for some sort of reasonably intelligent comeback. "Well then, Miss May," he drawled. Miss May-I-Make-You-Feel-Like-A-Total-Ass. "Can you tell me what a boor is?"

"Mm-hmm," she came back with a typically female superior little murmur. "It means a rude, awkward, ill-mannered person."

"Rude!" he barked. "Awkward!" Veronica thought he was *rude*? And...and...and *awkward*? Okay. *Maybe* he was ill-mannered on occasion, but only when the situation called for it. Like when Veronica's obnoxious cousin had put the moves on his sister April. Or when one of her ex-boyfriends had asked him if he even *owned* a white shirt and tie.

"Awkward my ass," he hissed through his teeth.

"Sir?"

Cord pulled himself together. "Can you help make me the opposite of that? The opposite of...ill-mannered?"

"You want me to make a gentleman out of you?"

Cord gritted his teeth while Miss May chuckled at the other end of the line. Great! Even *she* thought the idea was ridiculous! And she hadn't even met him yet!

"Have you ever seen *My Fair Lady*?" she asked after she'd finished having her little laugh at his expense.

"Sounds like a chick flick," he told her.

"Have you seen it?"

Cord rocked onto the back legs of his chair again. "I dunno. Does it have fast cars?"

"No."

"Guns?"

"No."

"Explosions?"

"No."

"Then nope. I ain't seen it."

"I *haven't* seen it," she corrected him in a tickled voice. "It's based on a book called *Pygmalion*. I don't suppose you've read that either?"

"Not unless it was required reading in high school."

He heard an amused snort on the other end of the line. "Am I to assume that's the last time you read a book?"

Oh yeah. Direct hit. Score ten points to Little Miss Smart-Ass. The cheeky bitch was really getting on his nerves. "Listen, Miss I'm-Better-Than-You May. Do you want the job or not?"

There was a moment's silence. "Is this about a woman?" she asked.

There was a deep note of humor in her low, sensual voice—a voice wrapped in smoking tendrils of spine-tingling sex appeal. Despite his annoyance, Cord's body responded to the luscious sound as a shiver of interest traveled his spine and wrapped around the thick base of his cock. He sent a wry look at his button-down fly, watching as his shaft thickened behind it. "Sweetheart," he drawled, rubbing the heel of his palm over his fly, "it's *always* about a woman."

"Oh. Well," she answered perversely, "in that case, I'll take the job."

"Fine. When can you start?" he asked.

Cord heard what sounded like papers rustling in the background. "Well, Mr. erm...*Hardin*? In a case like yours, I think there's probably no time to lose. How does four o'clock tomorrow sound?"

Cord had to admit he was curious about Miss May. Miss-May-I-Make-You-Feel-Completely-Inadequate-While-Somehow-Come-Off-As-The-Sexiest-Woman-Alive. So as four o'clock approached on Monday afternoon, he found himself pacing his small living room with the curtains open, watching the road in front of his home. He'd pulled a long-sleeved shirt on over his white cotton T-shirt—one of his favorites from back in the days when he was still riding the circuit—and left his cowboy hat on the wooden hat rack hanging on the living room wall.

He wasn't sure his new tutor rated the black shirt with white piping on collar, cuff and pocket. Generally, he saved his favorite shirt for special occasions—or special women. And he had no reason to think Miss May would be anything special. She was probably a sour old withered-up stick. A typical schoolmarm with a few sprigs of gray hair sticking out from behind her ears. Wire-rimmed glasses. Brown flats. Long skirt. Socks. He nodded his head absently.

She hadn't sounded old though. Her voice had a low, sexy pitch that had crawled down his spine, wrapped around his groin and stroked his sex with every single word she'd purred into his ear.

The sound of a car pulling up outside drew him across the room to the window. Eyes narrowed in interest, he watched through the opening in the curtains as a classic red Mustang pulled in behind his old blue pickup. Well, at least she drove a smart car. Unconsciously, he lifted his foot and wrapped it around the back of his leg, polishing the top of his boot on the denim that cased his muscle-clad calf.

His new tutor pushed open the car door and stepped out.

Cord's nose touched the cool glass as he leaned forward to get a better look. She was a big gal! Somewhere between medium height and tall—and *all* of it solid-packed woman.

As Cord watched, she turned and leaned across the driver's seat to pull something from the passenger side of the car. Jesus. That was a lot of ass. A lot of wide, wonderful, unmistakably female derriere packed into a large pair of faded blue jeans.

Miss May was a bottomless pit in the ass department.

Cord's gaze was fixed on her as she turned. With a thick book hitched under her arm, she started up the concrete walk to his front door. She was built like a brick house...with three solid stories supporting a substantial overhanging balcony on the third level. Although she carried a lot of weight, she bore it well. She moved lightly, with a sexy bounce in her step. Most women built like that would have caved under the burden but she carried her full-figured curves with a jaunty optimism.

With a smile curling the hard edge of his mouth, Cord's gaze homed in on her face. She was one of those women who had impudence slapped all *over* her kisser and that was the *only* way you could describe her mouth.

It was a kisser.

Her upper lip was a full, generous bow over a pouting bottom lip. Pink—deliciously, moistly pink. A pert lift played at the edges of her mouth—a cheeky quirk

of amusement that looked pretty much like a permanent fixture. It looked like the sort of smart-ass smile that wouldn't be erased by anything less than the end of the world. It was a mouth that was just *made* for sex. A mouth that would still be tilting upward in a sassy smile while wrapped around several inches of hard cock.

The rest of her face was cute too. Her twinkling blue eyes just about matched the sapphire T-shirt she wore. Her straight brown hair hung to just below her ears and swept the round curve of her chin.

But he couldn't get over that mouth. What a kisser! Cord let a long breath whistle between his teeth. He'd like to give his new tutor a few lessons. And he'd like to start with her luscious full-lipped mouth and work his way down from there—behind her neck where her caramel hair tickled her nape, down her soft, well-padded spine, all the way to that wicked, doublewide ass.

Giving himself a mental shake, he licked his lips and swallowed when he realized he was on the point of drooling. Veronica Lake Powers was the goal, he reminded himself sternly. Veronica was the sort of woman a man wanted to wear on his arm. Tall, slender and sophisticated. Cord frowned painfully and rubbed a hand over his thickening erection. Unfortunately, Miss May was the sort of woman a man wanted to wear on his cock. Pure, plump sex appeal. And if it came down to a contest between his arm and his cock, he was pretty damn sure which one would win.

Slender and sophisticated with long swizzle-stick legs was all well and good. But if a woman was stiff in bed, if she didn't roll softly beneath you, wet and eager, moaning into your ear and wrapping those long legs around your hips, well...

Slender and sophisticated could only take a woman so far.

But *so far* Veronica was the only woman who'd piqued Cord's interest. He'd been chasing that nose-in-the-air brunette ever since high school, determined to win her devotion once and for all, if it was the last damn thing he did.

Winning was important to him. It always had been.

With those conflicting ideas in mind, Cord headed for the door.

Cindy glanced again at the numbers fixed to the wall beside the faded green door, rechecking the Denver address as she headed away from her car and up the concrete walk. Forty-three ninety-three Mountain View. This was the place. Somehow she'd expected more from the man she'd talked to on the phone. How could anyone so full of spit and fire live in a place like this?

His voice had been low and roughly male, full of slow-drawling conceit. But his home was a small frame structure on a street full of similarly rundown houses, complete with wheezing vehicles lining the crumbling curbs that separated the weedy gardens from the patched road out front. There was no garage and the house needed a coat of paint...at least five years ago. The blue truck parked out front hailed back to the forties or fifties. She wasn't sure which. She didn't know that much about classic vehicles despite the fact that she drove a sixty-nine Ford Mustang—her stepfather's old car and lifetime obsession. Cindy had inherited the car upon his death four years earlier.

The old short bed might have been cute if it were fixed up.

She made her way up the walk that led to her new client's front door, tripping twice on the cracked pavement before she got there.

The door swung open as she raised her fist to knock, startling her and throwing her off balance for a few seconds. She caught her breath as her eyes traveled up the long, lean frame of the man standing in the open doorway.

Oh. My. God.

Cindy swallowed hard.

The man who answered the door was *not* handsome. He *might* have been—at one time—before life had put such a rough edge on him...along with a slightly broken nose.

But he was hot.

Oh yes. He was hot.

There wasn't a woman on earth who would argue that point.

He had the sort of keen, teal green gaze that had you stripped down to your underwear before he even said hello. Then a slow sexy smile that told you he liked what he saw – there in the moist place where your breasts pressed together, there where your pussy dampened the cotton panel that lined your panties. She could almost feel his gaze licking around her hips, trying to curl around behind her and get to her rear end.

The lines on either side of his rough smile were scored deep into his weathered cheeks where a scatter of short, masculine stubble put a dark coppery shadow on his jaw. His straw-colored hair looked as though it might have been brown if he hadn't spent so much time in the sun—and his dark eyebrows and eyelashes seemed to support that idea. His hair was not soft or silky. Instead it was a hard brush that looked like it had managed to avoid the last scheduled haircut and maybe the one before that. Despite this victory on the part of his rowdy hair, his thick mane fell just short of reaching the black collar of his western shirt—a shirt that pulled tight across the very wide breadth of his shoulders. He looked like he could carry the weight of the world on those shoulders, as though it were nothing more than a speck of lint.

Overall he looked ruggedly hard and his lips looked as cut-from-stone as the rest of him, but not beaten. Far from beaten. He might be living in a rundown neighborhood. But there was no sense of defeat in the man. Which made her wonder what he was doing in a place like this. Hard luck? Cindy shook her head. A guy down on his luck didn't smile like that, with an on-top-of-the-world glint in his dark teal eyes.

Most likely, he was the sort of guy who just couldn't be bothered getting on in the world. Most likely, he leaned toward lazy but was so damn sexy that most women forgave him the character flaw.

Dropping her gaze, Cindy returned to her quick appraisal of the man standing before her.

A wide cowhide belt with a flashy silver buckle cinched his worn jeans around lean hips and his long, muscular legs stretched from there in a straight line to his brown leather cowboy boots. The pale blue denim cased his legs smartly, pulling tight across the large mound packed behind his button-down fly.

The man was carrying.

He looked like he had enough firepower behind that button-down fly to level a small country or at least the entire female population of a small country.

If she were smart—and Cindy Patterson considered herself very, very smart—she'd try to stir up trouble, see if she could get that wicked-looking erection out of his pants and get level with *him*. Get him on the ground and get his pants off, get a nice long look at that delicious shooter of his before painting its entire length with her hot, wet tongue. On the other hand, she wouldn't mind being on the receiving end of all that firepower, fought to the ground, nailed to the floor or pinned up against the wall. She wasn't picky. The way she had it figured, there'd be no losers after that big gun had fired, regardless of who ended up on top.

Cindy hadn't been the prettiest girl in her graduating class at Jefferson County Community College—she'd been the smartest. And while experience had taught her it was difficult to get *any* man to make any sort of commitment, regardless of how attractive you were, it had also taught her that it wasn't *too* hard to get most men into bed.

And the best part was that you didn't have to be a raving beauty.

Right now she was thinking she'd settle for *in bed*. There was a lot to be said for casual sex. It's not like she threw herself at every good-looking guy she stumbled across but when she tripped over something too good to resist, that was another matter. She wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. And lazy or not, Cord Hardin was a walking poster boy in support of the casual sex argument. God bless the difficult woman who had labeled him a boor and thrown him into her path!

She opened her mouth to introduce herself but he was way ahead of her.

"Miss May!" He grasped her hand, gave it a strong shake then a short, intimate squeeze.

"Mr. Hardin? I'm Cindy Patterson, your —"

"English tutor," he finished for her, drawing her through the front door. He closed the door behind him. "Thanks for coming."

"Is that your truck outside?" she asked.

"Yep."

"Yes," she corrected him.

His eyes snapped to hers, narrowing for a fight.

"You hired me to work on your English and make a gentleman out of you. We might as well get started."

"Yesss," he said, drawing the word out with clear-cut precision. "That's my Ford. I bought it to haul hay in. My brother's going to fix it up for me one day."

One day. Cindy shrugged off her cynicism. Guys like Cord Hardin always had a plan. They always had a list of things that were going to get done *one day*. Unless she missed her mark, he'd still have the same list thirty years from now. But that was irrelevant. She wasn't looking to marry the guy, she was just there to tutor him—though she wouldn't be adverse to some hot time between the sheets if she could manage it.

Chapter Two

"Nice place," Cord's new tutor told him with a perky smile.

Cord grimaced. That was a lie. The "place" was a rundown piece of crap but it was all he could afford at the moment, what with everything else he had going on. "It needs a coat of paint," he pointed out, "but it's a rental so there's not much sense doing anything to it other than keep it clean."

She flicked her gaze around his small living room. "Well," she told him with a wry lilt, "I'm glad you do that much."

He could hardly believe it when her gaze dipped south and slid over his fly. The cheeky broad was checking out his package! He pulled a finger down his blunted nose and pretended not to notice. And Veronica thought he didn't know how to be a gentleman!

Her teeth nipped lightly at the plump pad of her lower lip. From the smile that tweaked the edge of her mouth and the light in her eyes, he had to assume she liked what she saw just below his belt buckle. When she turned toward the window, he tried to keep his eyes off her delectable backside but there was so much of it. It seemed to be everywhere he looked.

"What do you do for a living?" she asked, turning back to face him.

He pulled his gaze back up to her face. "Right now, I'm just living and damn glad to be doing it."

"You don't have a job?"

"Nope."

"No," she corrected him.

He grimaced. "I have a few acres east of town and an offer in on some more land. If the deal goes through, I'm planning to raise some cattle."

A few acres and another plan. No job. At this point, Cindy just hoped he'd be able to write her a check before she left at the end of their tutoring session. Moving across the thin, wear-flattened carpet, she dropped her English textbook onto his low coffee table and leaned back on the overstuffed arm of his dark sofa. "Why don't you tell me exactly what you hope to achieve by hiring me as a tutor."

"I wanna get my girlfriend back into bed with me."

"*Want to*," she corrected him.

"You got that right," he drawled.

"You *have* that right," she corrected him again.

Cord rolled his shoulders, rumbling out an impatient growl. "D'you want to hear this story or not?"

Cindy snorted out a sharp sound of amusement. "You mean there's more to this story than a girl and a bed?"

A muscle ticked at the back of his jaw before he ground out, "Veronica seems to think I need some...polishing. She's given me an ultimatum. She told me if I couldn't behave like a gentleman, I could just go get myself another girlfriend."

Cindy hitched her butt a little higher on the sofa arm. That was good to know. If she ended up in bed with the long, lean hunk of manhood, she needn't feel guilty about stealing another woman's boyfriend. She wasn't a poacher. But Veronica had screwed up when she'd let this one out of her sights and suggested he find himself someone else. As far as Cindy was concerned, it was open season where this particular cowboy was concerned. "And what brought this on?"

Cord lifted his broad shoulders and spread his arms. "How the hell should I know?"

She gave him a smiling frown. "What were you doing when she gave you this...ultimatum?"

"Drying my hair."

"That would appear to be a fairly inoffensive activity."

"That's what I thought," he grumbled. "I don't know why she was so damn mad. Especially since I'd just fished her ex-boyfriend out of the pool."

"Ah. And how did he get in the pool in the first place?"

He lifted one darkly bronzed eyebrow in an arrogant gesture. "He tripped over my boot."

Cindy gave him an accusing look.

"I didn't know the damn fool couldn't swim," he admitted after a moment's silence but there was nothing contrite in his expression. Nothing at all.

Cindy covered her mouth with her fist, hiding her amusement. "And how do you expect the services of an English tutor to combat the fact that you have big feet?"

His lips kicked up into a smile of pure mischief. "I reckon you can help me keep my big feet out of my mouth."

"Oh?"

His smile turned down a bit at the edges. "I guess my speech and grammar could use some improving. It seems as though there are times when Veronica's ashamed of me."

"Really? If that's the case, why do you suppose she goes out with you?"

For several seconds he just looked at her, his smile turning slowly upward again. "I'm not sure I can answer that question without sounding like I'm bragging."

"Okay," Cindy chuckled. "More to the point, why do *you* go out with her?"

"That's easy. She's beautiful."

Cindy gave him a few seconds to add to that. "That's it?" she plied him after he failed to add anything more.

He gave her a blank look as if to say, *What else is there?*

"What about money? Sex?"

"Yep. She's got that going for her too."

"Yes," she corrected him. "So, to summarize, your girlfriend is beautiful, rich, good in bed...and has a stick up her ass."

Cord ignored the fact that that last statement sounded somewhat familiar. "A stick? Why do you say that?"

"Because, Mr. Hardin. In my educated opinion, there *ain't* too much wrong with either you *or* your language. And any woman who invites her ex-boyfriends to a party along with her current beau deserves a trip to the deep end herself."

Cord blinked at the feisty little baggage, moved by the idea that this woman would stick up for him, though having only just met him. She reminded him of Tavia, though she wasn't as big as his oldest brother's wife. He felt like he owed her something in return. The truth maybe. "She isn't that good in bed," he conceded gruffly.

That beautiful kisser of hers tweaked up into a sprite-like smile.

"Veronica," he muttered with a hitch of his shoulders. "She isn't that good."

"Verrrr-onica." Cindy rolled the name on her tongue. It sounded like a name that was spelled with a capital dollar sign. If the woman didn't do it for him in the sack, maybe that was the source of attraction right there. Her dollar signs. From all appearances, the unemployed cowboy had no other prospects other than a rich girlfriend. "How much time do you have to meet Veronica's ultimatum?"

"She's having a fancy luncheon at the end of the week. Saturday. She doesn't want to see me before then."

The end of the week. That didn't give Cindy much time to get the hunk of slab meat into bed. If he gave her an opening, she'd better be ready to jump at it. "And what steps have you taken since then to redeem yourself in her eyes?"

"Redeem myself? In her eyes?" Cord gave her a puzzled look. "I've hired *you*!"

"That's it?"

Cord searched the room as though he hoped to find some sort of answer hanging on a wall. "Was there something else I shoulda done?"

"*Should have* done," she corrected him. "Where's your telephone and directory?"

Cindy followed him through an arched opening that led from the living room to the kitchen. At the far end of a pine and paint table, a telephone was attached to the wall's outdated wallpaper. The green paint on the chair's narrow vertical slats looked as though it had been recently applied with the optimistic intention of hiding the chipped surface beneath. The resulting rough-pocked surface fell a bit short of that goal.

Reaching for the telephone directory on the end of the table, Cindy flipped through the pages, flattened the book open and slid it across the table toward him. "Call one of these flower shops and send Verrrr-onica some long-stemmed white roses. Tell the salesperson you want to spend about a hundred and fifty dollars."

"A hundred and fifty—fucking hell, I don't want to marry her, Miss May! I just want to get her back into bed!"

Cindy smiled to herself, pleased to think he didn't want to marry Veronica. She had to wonder why he seemed so determined to *get* the snob back in his bed, especially when he'd said she wasn't all that good in it. Did he care more about how a woman looked than her sexuality? Was Veronica's money the driving factor? Cindy didn't know, but then she didn't really need to. She was just there to tutor him and maybe—hopefully—have some fun in the process. "Come, come," she scolded playfully. "Faint heart never won fair maiden."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he grumbled as he moved around behind her and reached for the telephone hanging on the wall.

"It means if you want to impress your socialite girlfriend you're just going to have to screw up your courage and bust out your credit card – and don't use that word," she tacked onto the end of her statement.

"What word?"

"That f-word."

"Why not?"

"It's a crude adjective."

He lifted a dark eyebrow as though challenging her. "Fucking isn't an adjective. It's a verb."

"Not the way you use it," she muttered.

"You haven't seen the way I use it," he argued beneath his breath, rubbing his chin and daring her with an audacious glance.

Cindy rolled her eyes. "While you're ordering flowers, I'll check out your wardrobe."

"Check out my wardrobe?" he barked, almost dropping the phone. "I don't have a wardrobe!" With the phone clutched in his fist, he followed her through the kitchen arch until the telephone line pulled him up short.

Cindy swung her hips in a purposefully sexy saunter as she headed down the short hallway past the bathroom. An open door on her right led into a small room that had been converted to an office. The next two doors sat opposite each other at the end of the hall. The door on her left was closed but the one on the right was open. The room sported a double bed.

"The master's suite," she murmured, stalking into the room with a delicious sense of anticipation.

The room smelled of polished leather and crisp cotton and hard, honest, male work. There wasn't a hint of fragrance to be found in the satisfying atmosphere, not a bottle

on any surface to indicate that its owner had ever worn anything to detract from his own very potent, very masculine pheromones.

The bed was made, which was certainly a point in his favor. She couldn't remember the last time she'd met a man who actually took the time to make his bed. The bed, neatly dressed in the crisp gray sheets and charcoal quilt, looked inviting. She didn't know why but somehow she'd been expecting gaudy flannel sheets stamped with flying mallards and gun-toting hunters. Several plump pillows lay piled against the old-fashioned bookshelf-style headboard. A few paperbacks lay pushed toward the back of the shelf—no doubt of the explosion, gun and fast-car variety. Against the opposite wall sat a low dressing table that seemed to match the bed's veneered headboard fairly closely. The heavy tallboy chest of drawers, however, appeared to have come from a different family tree altogether.

Turning on her heel, Cindy slid open the mirrored door on the closet, then stepped back and frowned. She was still frowning when Cord blustered into the room, a line of color riding the ridges of his cheekbones. "You're right," she admitted, "you don't have a wardrobe."

"I have jeans," he argued almost defensively.

"Lots of jeans," she agreed. "And cowboy boots. I didn't know they came in that many colors or that many...animal skins. Is that...ostrich?"

"What's wrong with ostrich?" he demanded.

"Nothing," she murmured. "I bet they'd look good with a nice pair of charcoal gray slacks and a navy blue blazer."

He tilted his head quizzically.

"So let's go get you some slacks and a blazer. Just to test my theory."

* * * * *

Cord was all cool, sauntering male confidence as they wandered into the upscale men's store at the mall, though he seemed a bit alarmed when he saw the slacks Cindy

picked out for him. You'd have thought she was asking him to try on a kilt, for heaven's sake! Not that she'd mind seeing him in a kilt, she had to admit. Cindy frowned as she turned the hanger and reconsidered the slacks. The lightweight fabric was soft gray with two neat pleats tucked into the front waistband.

"I'm not wearing those!" he insisted as soon as he saw them.

Her frown deepened as she gazed at the smart, sharply pressed pants. "Why not?"

"I have a problem with those...those pleated tucks."

"What kind of problem?"

"A big problem!"

She lifted her puzzled gaze and shook her head. "Oh, now you're just being silly. Try them on."

"I don't think you have a grasp of just how big my problem is," he muttered, "but if you insist." He grabbed the hanger roughly from her hands and stomped off to the changing room.

Following behind him, Cindy waited in the upholstered chair just outside the dressing room entry, humming to herself and tapping the air with her foot. It was several moments before Cord's gruff voice sounded from inside one of the dressing rooms.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Are you alone?"

She giggled. "Yes."

He stepped out of the entrance to the men's dressing rooms and glanced around, a wash of hot crimson marking his high cheekbones. Cindy gasped as her gaze dropped. Cord's erection tented the loose front of the expensively tailored slacks!

"Oh!" She slapped a hand over her mouth. Several muffled giggles later, she tittered, "It's — it's not *always* a problem, is it?"

"Nah," he told her with a sharp glare. "It's only a problem when there are women around. True, fifty percent of the world's population is female but I'm good otherwise. Monasteries. Prisons. Rugby games. All of those venues work fine for me. Anywhere else and I'm screwed."

She exploded into laughter, apologizing as she knuckled the tears from the corners of her eyes. "I'm sorry," she chortled, "but this *is* a menswear store and there *aren't* any women around! So what's your excuse?"

His cheekbones turned a darker shade of crimson as he stared at her, grappling with his answer for several seconds. "Well, what the hell are you!"

She sent him a shocked look, though in truth she felt quite flattered. "Do you mean to say all that is for *me*?"

"Well, it ain't for the old guy manning the cash register."

"Isn't," she corrected him.

"No," he ground out, "it sure as hell *isn't*!" His gaze dropped below his waist again as he shook his head and a few strands of sun-streaked hair spilled over his brow. "Somehow, I don't think Veronica is going to appreciate this look."

"Somehow, I don't think Veronica is the right woman for you," she giggled.

He set his hands on his hips, scowling down at her. "Is that all you're going to do? Laugh?"

"No. No. Now that I have...a full grasp of the situation, I'll just go get you something else. Maybe something in a heavy wool with a flat front?" She felt his eyes on her as she pushed off from the chair and whipped away between tables of ties and racks of belts, cackling like a witch.

By the time Cindy was done with her new client, he'd had his credit card out three separate times, purchasing a new blazer, two white shirts and two ties, a pair of crystal cuff links and a very pricey pair of gray slacks. Fortunately, he didn't complain about

the expense and even more fortunately, his credit card wasn't refused at any of the shops where he used it.

With the garment bag slung over his arm, they strolled out of the mall together, deposited their purchases in the cab of the old blue truck and headed across the parking lot to the closest restaurant. Dressed once more in his faded jeans and straw cowboy hat, Cord was back in his element, exuding an air of quiet strength and confidence, moving quickly ahead of Cindy to open the restaurant door for her.

Cindy smiled to herself. Cowboys were so old-fashioned. And so damn polite. The world could definitely use more cowboys.

The restaurant was doing a bustling dinner business and the hostess ushered them into the bar while a table for two was prepared. Beneath the restaurant's dim interior lighting, it took a few moments for Cindy's eyes to adjust. When they did, she found herself blinking at a very familiar face, seated about twenty feet away at the end of the bar.

Stumbling backward, she felt Cord behind her as he reacted swiftly and caught her in his arms.

She turned quickly before Martin could see her.

Cord gripped her arms just above her elbows. "What's wrong?" he murmured with a curious smile. "You look like you stepped on a snake."

"I didn't step on it," she muttered. "Other than that, it's a pretty good analogy. Let's get out of here."

But Cord didn't budge. Lifting his gaze, he scanned the length of the bar. "What's wrong?"

"I don't want to talk about it. Let's just leave, okay?"

Cord's fingers only tightened on her arms.

Cindy sighed. "See that guy at the end of the bar?"

Cord tugged down on the brim of his hat, his teal gaze flickering upward for a second then burning down on her again.

"I went out with him about a month ago. It was a blind date set up by a friend of a friend. We met at a restaurant, chatted a bit and ordered drinks. After ten minutes, his phone rang and he excused himself. Said he had an emergency he had to deal with."

"So?"

"So he ran off and never came back."

Cord lifted one shoulder. "Maybe he had an emergency," he suggested.

"He never called me again! Cord, he blew me off!"

Cord shook his head. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he didn't like what he saw!"

Cord looked at her as though she was crazy—and for that look alone, she could have kissed him. The fact was that men *didn't* fall in love with her at first sight—she wasn't what most men would consider beautiful. But a lot of men warmed up to her once they got to know her. Martin hadn't even given her a chance. "Let's just go somewhere else."

Still Cord held her, pressing his lips into a grim line as his eyes narrowed into two evil lines of mischief. "I have a better idea," he finally growled.

Grabbing her hand, he pulled her into the room behind him, slowing as he approached the empty barstool beside Martin. Before Cindy realized what was happening, Cord had her by the waist and was lifting her to sit on the edge of the round barstool's green leather seat. Without allowing her time for a breath, let alone a thought, he pushed between her legs and, with his hands behind her, pulled her lower body up into his groin. He flashed her a brief, malicious smile as his hands moved to her face and his thumbs smoothed over her cheekbones. Tipping her face upward in his strong grip, he kissed her.

He kissed her. And kissed her. And after that, he continued to kiss her.

Shocked at first, Cindy's hands flew to his wrists, tugging briefly. And then her senses were suddenly swamped. Holy Mother of God, Cord Hardin could kiss!

He held her face in an iron grip as his long hard mouth settled against hers, rugged and hot and as sensually wicked as a bedroom full of sin. With sly undertones he fed his humid breath against her mouth and slid his tongue just inside her parted lips as his own lips brushed hers in a pass of rough silk. Teasingly, his mouth withdrew for a heartbeat and she found herself straining upward, eyes closed, questing breathlessly for him, lips parted. She heard his rough, whispered laugh then his mouth descended on hers again as he angled her face and kissed her hard this time. His lips and teeth crushed into her mouth, bruising her lips as his tongue thrust deep to claim the damp interior. She felt his tongue slide against hers, stroking it tenderly, loving it fiercely and she stretched her neck, trying to get more of him, lost and loving it and forgetting even to breathe under his mouth's wicked ministrations.

He broke away suddenly, pulling her face into his shoulder as she drew in several ragged breaths scented with his warm and potent masculinity. Again she felt his rough laughter breathed into her ear. "Oh baby," he moaned loudly. "You were so fucking hot last night. God, sweetheart. How many times did you come? Five? Six times? Fuck," he groaned, "you just about killed me. Then when you woke up this morning and put your pretty little lips around my —"

He stopped and lifted her face again, his eyes lit and laughing.

But all she could think about was his lips. She watched them hungrily, avidly, without any thought in the world other than his wickedly sensual mouth. She'd never before realized what a man might do with his mouth. The sort of devastation a man was capable of. Beseechingly, she lifted her eyes to connect with his. As she held his gaze, the smile on his face melted into pure male hunger. "Cindy," he whispered and gave her his mouth again.

She clung to that kiss, to that man, to Cord, her hands fisted in his cotton shirt as her neck arched and she fed him her lips, tangling her tongue inside the drawing recesses of his hot, demanding mouth.

His hands left her face and moved restlessly over her back. A small wanting moan escaped her lips and she felt his hands low on her body, spreading out to grip her bottom, drawing her closer, crushing the open line of her sex against his groin where a very tall, male ridge notched into the spread lips of her pussy as though he was made for her.

"Cindy," he mouthed in a panting breath, his lips still moving over hers. "We've got to get out of here."

Swallowing hard, she gave him a small series of agreeable nods and he pulled away, blinking into her eyes as though trying to collect himself. Then, taking her dimpled hand in his large rough fist, he pulled her off the barstool and back across the bar. The last thing Cindy saw was Martin's face, stunned and surprised, staring at her with his jaw hanging as the sexiest man alive led her back through the restaurant door.

Cord tossed her into the truck's cab as if she weighed nothing and slammed the passenger door closed. Stalking around to the driver's side door, he wrenched it open and slid beneath the steering wheel. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I shouldn't have done that."

"Well," she ventured after a careful moment's pause, "I'm glad you did."

He turned the key in the ignition as he cut a glance sideways and the corner of his mouth kicked up into a reluctant smile. "So am I," he admitted.

"Did you see Martin's face?" she asked with a giggle.

This time the smile he flashed her was genuine. "That'll give the rude bastard something to think about."

Chapter Three

Cord turned the truck toward home, more than a little distracted by what was turning into a damn inconvenient hard-on. Restlessly, he shifted on the black leather seat, trying to find a comfortable way to sit with his heavy denim jeans pulling tight across his hips and just about strangling his cock. He shouldn't have kissed Cindy in the restaurant. He'd known she was a hot little bundle right from the outset, with her saucy, provocative gazes and her suggestive body language—the way she threw her hips around with every step she took.

Already fighting an unusually strong attraction to her, he hadn't needed to go testing himself with a kiss. But the temptation had been too great. He'd been dying for a taste of that kisser from the very first moment he'd seen his new English tutor and that guy Martin had provided the perfect excuse to grab a quick sample.

The only problem was, now he wanted more.

Cindy sat beside him on the old truck's narrow bench seat, her wide hips mere inches from his own. And those mere inches could be even less, as far as he was concerned. Up ahead, there was a bend in the road and he stepped on the gas, spinning the wheel sharply. That was better. Damn better. Now all that firm, warm flesh was resting against his leg. He flexed his thigh muscle against hers, just to let her know *he* was the reason she was piled up next to him. She could have wiggled back across the seat but she didn't. Instead she turned her face and gave him a sassy smile. He snuffed out a groan. The girl was asking for a mouthful of cock.

"Would you like to have sex sometime?" he finally blurted, surprised at the raw note of need in his voice.

She gave him a long look before she opened her mouth. "Actually, Mr. Cord Hardin, this is going to surprise you—but I *do* have sex sometimes. It's not an *altogether* rare event in my life. Not *all* of my dates walk out on me."

He ground his teeth. He'd just bet she did, the cheeky little baggage. "With me," he growled. He flicked his gaze sideways. "Would you like to have sex with *me*? Sometime?"

"Do I look like an idiot to you?"

He cut her a sharp gaze. "What the hell does that mean?"

She gave him a slow smile of pure deviltry. "That I'd have to be an idiot to turn you down."

As though the force of gravity had suddenly ceased to exist, Cord felt the tightly drawn tension lift from his body. He returned his attention to the road. "You don't look like an idiot to me," he told her quietly.

"That's because I'm not," she said, sounding very pleased with herself.

He dropped his hand onto her knee and gave it a squeeze then rubbed his palm into her thigh before he had to remove his hand again to shift gears. He stepped on the gas pedal, anxious to get home and try out another kiss on her, eager to steal another taste and wondering how soon he could expect to collect on her offer of hot, steamy, wild, untamed sex. Because the way he was feeling right now, it was going to be all of those things. Veronica had a beautiful body but she was...awkward in bed. At times, she seemed uncomfortable about sex, as though she found it all a bit undignified. It would be nice to get into bed with a woman who knew what she wanted for a change.

He gasped when he felt Cindy's fingers brush over his fly.

"Do you still have a problem?" she murmured in a voice like wet sex.

He nodded, licking his lips, dropping his gaze into his lap where her fingers plucked at the metal buttons on his fly. "I have a hell of a problem," he rasped as his cock gave a huge, shuddering pulse of anticipation.

Shifting the car into fourth, he buried his hand between her thighs and pulled it back toward the apex of her legs. When the edge of his palm reached its goal, he sucked in a breath as Cindy shifted her legs apart, allowing him to turn his hand and cup her pussy. Her high, cushioned mound filled his palm with a delicious female heat. With curving fingers, he gathered the soft sweet package in his hold and rubbed his palm into her sex. He could feel her heat building beneath the thin denim that wrapped her plump pussy.

He flicked his eyes at her. "Jesus," he groaned. "You're a hot little package, aren't you? All sweet hot sex from your caramel curls all the way back to the crack of your ass."

Her giggle was husky as she tsked. "Who ever said you weren't a gentleman?"

His voice was deep with rasping, scraping lust as he returned his hand to the steering wheel. "Right now, I'm a gentleman with a big problem."

When she dragged her palm over his fly, his dick strained beneath the metal buttons. Vaguely, he wondered what sort of imprint the round buttons were going to leave on his flesh and if they'd be permanent. When she started working the buttons open, he swallowed a groan and moved his legs apart, praying for the caress of her fingers on the denim stretching across his balls. His breath hissed between his tightly clenched teeth when she did exactly that, cupping his weight in her hand an instant before returning to pluck at his buttons. When she had that taken care of, she pushed her hand inside his soft cotton shorts, fishing his erection out with her plump fist. Her cool, damp palm felt like heaven on his burning skin and he glanced down at her pale fingers wrapped around his dark shaft before returning his attention to the road again.

"Ohhh," she said as she gazed at the thick rod spearing out of his groin. "Ohhh."

As he shifted his gaze to her face, he felt his heart go to butter. He'd never seen a woman look at his dick like that—with quite that expression.

"Ohhh," she breathed. "It's magnificent."

When she leaned over and buried her head in his lap, he felt her deliciously soft mouth close over his burning crown.

He jerked the steering wheel hard, hit the brakes and slid onto the shoulder of the road, staring down into her short curtain of caramel hair. Gently, he wrapped his fingers around her nape and pulled her face out of his groin. He shook his head when she complained.

Her gaze was slanted downward, still fixed on his cock. He made her look at him, then tilted his head slowly and kissed her. Her soft, full lips gave way beneath his as he twisted in the seat. Threading his fingers into her hair, he fisted the silken strands between his fingers and pulled her head back, drawing her spine into an arch and causing her breasts to thrust forward.

He felt her fingers wrap around his shaft again. He let her squeeze his cock a few times before he plucked her fingers open and removed her hand. He didn't even have her zipper down yet! She might as well know, right up front, who was calling the shots. They'd have sex when he said they would. She'd come when he said she would. And *he'd* come when he was good and damn well ready.

The bossy little heifer might as well know all of that right at the start.

"Let go of my cock." He dragged his mouth over to her ear, swirling his tongue around the delicate inner shell, feeding his roughened breath against her sensitive eardrum. "Pull your zipper down for me."

With his tongue laving the rim of her ear, he cast his gaze downward, watching her fingers as she popped the button on her waistband and dragged her zipper down over the gentle swell of her belly.

"Fuck," he murmured as the lacy edge of her black bikini underwear came into view. "Get those jeans down over your ass," he growled then helped her to get them down her legs and over her shoes. "Spread your legs," he told her in a lust-roughened whisper, helping her to get her foot up onto the dashboard. With his hand squeezing the tender flesh of her inner thigh, he pulled her other leg into his lap. Leaning over her,

he rubbed his hand over the black silk between her legs. His rough fingers caught on the delicate fabric stretched over her damp, hot pussy. "God," he muttered, "that feels good. I've never had such a hot handful of pussy before. You're sexy, you know that?"

He smoothed his hand up over her rise then slipped his fingers into her panties, working them slowly through the small puff of curls on her mound, plucking at her plump cleft, dipping between her thick lips into her moist heat.

The afternoon sun beat down on the old truck, heating the vehicle's interior despite the slight breeze that wafted through the open windows. It was the middle of the afternoon and there was a steady stream of traffic on the road. He couldn't tear off her panties and bare her sex, no matter how badly he wanted to see her spread open in all of her pink pussy splendor. That would have to wait until he had her in a more private place.

He threaded his finger through her folds, searching for the knot of her clitoris, letting out a rough sigh of pleasure when his finger scraped over the stiff flange of flesh. "You're wet," he murmured, glad that his rough fingers wouldn't chafe the fragile folds layered like delicate tissue between her labia. He rubbed her clit back and forth, gently at first then with more pressure. "I wish I could taste you right now. Bury my head between these luscious thighs and lick your clit, fill your tender little opening with my tongue."

She moaned in answer to his words, pushing her pussy into his hand, rocking her hips and rolling her clit beneath the fingers he had spreading her lips. For several minutes he watched her get off on his fingers, slowly moving herself toward orgasm as her sex grew fatter and softer and more slippery with every rocking thrust. When her sighs turned to broken bits of whispering sobs, he decided she was getting close.

With a deep rumbling sound of male satisfaction, he pulled his hand out of her panties and smoothed his palm down over her rise and between her legs. He held her pussy, warm and pulsing in his palm, rubbing his hand into the sodden silk covering her labia. "Does that feel good?" he asked her in a silky whisper.

She grunted in need, distracted by his question. He grasped her chin in his hand and made her look at him. "Does that feel good?"

Gradually, her blue eyes focused on his. Slowly, she nodded. He groaned when the pink tip of her tongue flicked over her wide bottom lip.

"Would you like to come?"

Again, she nodded.

"Now?"

She closed her eyes, opened them and nodded again.

"Tell me you want to come."

"I want to come," she murmured, her eyes wholly dark, consumed with lust.

"Ask me," he whispered against her ear. "Ask me to let you come."

She swallowed hard. Her voice was tentative, taut with need. "May...may I come. Please?"

He smiled into her eyes. "Well, since you asked so nicely..." Slowly he dragged his fingers up over the smooth silk of her black panties. Without warning, he shot his hand deep inside her bikini underwear, rubbing three fingers through her wet slot and spearing into her slippery cunt.

"Yes, you may," he murmured as she jumped into orgasm, her channel gulping and choking, her body convulsing as she creamed, hot and slippery around his fingers.

He clenched his fingers tightly along her slot and clamped her clit against her pubic bone as she writhed in his strong grasp, grunting with pleasure. Around his fingertips, he felt her contractions, one after another, continuing in a long endless stream. Jesus. She came forever. The woman was an orgasm factory, pushing cream out over his fingers with each tightening clench of her soft pussy walls.

When her sex finished its milking contractions, he pulled his fingers out of her pussy and touched one wet fingertip to her nose. "Miss May," he said, his voice raw with a mixture of tender emotion and gravelly lust. "You are the hottest little package

I've ever come across. If we weren't on the side of the road in the middle of the day, I'd put you on my cock right now and fuck you blind."

He was burning, tingling, aching for her. He prickled at the back of his balls where his release hung like a heavy weight, just waiting to sear a hot line of fire up through the long, thick length of his throbbing shaft. Having a woman half naked in his truck on the side of the road in broad daylight—making her come, *watching* her come—was a huge turn-on.

He eased her leg off his and shifted his hips out a bit from under the steering wheel. His cock head was purple with need as he gazed down at it.

"You still have a problem," she pointed out huskily.

"That I do," he admitted in a low rasp. He shifted his hips a bit more while she repositioned herself beside him. When she was upright in the seat again, he snagged a hand behind her neck and pulled her gently forward.

"Open your mouth," he told her hoarsely. "Put your tongue at the edge of my cock head and ride my rim." With his fingers wrapped around his ruddy flesh, he rubbed his cock head into the rough tip of her tongue. He closed his eyes, rubbed harder, then pulled his shaft back and smacked the back of his cock head against her tongue several times. Each wet slap was an agony of approaching pleasure. Release and paradise was in the next flaying caress of her tongue.

"Here I come," he warned her. His balls turned to rock, his skin stretched across his cock so tight it hurt and he was blinded by a few choking seconds of bright, searing pleasure before he came. His cum fired up his shaft with a blistering fury, nothing short of volcanic, and flashed into the air then spattered down to cover his tightly clenched fingers.

Afterward he laughed roughly, drawing her close with a hand cradling her nape, rubbing her face into his wet sex. As he gazed down into his lap, she brushed her lips against his cock. The sight of the little hussy with her head in his lap—kissing his

cock – was the most romantic thing he'd ever seen. It was a strange and foreign reaction that gripped his heart like an unseen fist.

Almost immediately, he shook the feeling off, ignoring the tight sensation expanding his heart. "That was great sex," he said almost callously, trying to bring himself back to reality with a few cool, practical words.

She lifted her head and smiled up at him. Straightening in the seat, she rubbed her dewy lips into his jaw, giving him that pert, confident smile that was her trademark. "Yes," she agreed. "It was."

He watched her as she wriggled back into her jeans, surprised at the empty feeling that descended on him following her words. Why had he expected more? Why had he *wanted* more? Exactly what had he expected or wanted? A desperate, heart-felt expression of devotion? I love you, Cord, and I want you to fuck me every day for the rest of my life? That was the problem with women. Either they crawled all over you and smothered you or they just didn't give a damn whether you lived or died.

After tucking his cock back inside his pants and rubbing his wet fingers into his soft gray shorts, he secured most of his buttons, turned the key in the ignition and eased back out onto the road, driving the rest of the way home in thoughtful silence. "Come on back inside and I'll write you a check," he told her as he strode up the paved walk. He fished his house key from its hiding place tucked beneath the bronze numbers on the wall beside the door.

As he unlocked the door, she gave him a curious look. "You don't have a house key on your key ring?"

"It's a bit bent," he explained with a grin as he returned the key to its hiding place. "That's what happens when you try to use your key as a screwdriver."

"Ah," she answered, smiling. "Maybe you should get a new copy made."

"Maybe," he allowed. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving. And I need to give you your assignment before I leave."

He gave her a sharp look as he pushed the door open and let her saunter into the house ahead of him. "Assignment?"

"That's right," she answered, turning to grin at him. "You didn't think this would be all fun and games, did you?" She crossed the living room and picked up the thick textbook she'd left on the coffee table. "I expect you to read chapter one by tomorrow."

Leaving his hat on the rack inside the door and his new clothes draped over the sofa's arm, Cord made a face as he stared at the thick volume.

"You *can* read, can't you?"

In answer, he pulled the book out of her hands and opened it. Flipping through the pages, he carried the book into the kitchen and plunked it down on the table while she followed him. With one finger following a line of text, he pretended to read. "She was really asking for it. One more smart word out of her and he was going to put her over his knee and paddle her ass." He arched an eyebrow at her. "Does that answer your question?"

Cindy laughed. "Not exactly," she told him, dropping her gaze over her shoulder and eyeing her bottom with a challenging lift of her eyebrow. "I'll tell you one thing, though. You're going to need a fair-sized paddle if you decide to go after *this* ass!"

In response, he held out one big hand.

She grimaced painfully as she inspected his large palm, wondering what it was he did all day that made his hand look so work-roughened. "That ought to do it," she admitted.

"Don't tempt me," he growled. He turned and washed his hands in the sink then opened the fridge, reaching inside and opening drawers, throwing sandwich fixings out onto the counter.

Together, they fixed sandwiches. Cindy spread the mayonnaise on the thick wheat bread while he layered on sliced turkey and cheese.

"Do you want lettuce?" she asked.

"Why do you think I got it out?" he responded.

She shrugged. "You might have gotten it out for me."

"I'm not that thoughtful," he warned her.

"You got it out for me before," she reminded him cheerfully, dropping her gaze to his button-down fly.

He stopped in mid-action, as though her words had taken him by surprise. "You've got mayo on your nose," he said, out of the blue. When she lifted a hand to swipe at her nose, he caught her wrist. Quickly, he leaned in to kiss the tip of her nose.

"Mayo, my ass," she snickered.

"Now there's an idea," he countered, lifting one eyebrow with a very male interest while letting his gaze drop to her behind.

She gave him a quirky grin. "So if I had mayonnaise on my butt, you'd kiss that too?"

"Kiss it. Paddle it. Only the best for you, Miss May."

They sat down, laughing, and dug into the sandwiches, making short work of them. When Cord asked her about her career, she described her work at the high school on the west side of town where she taught English and literature.

She corrected his grammar several times during the conversation, explaining to him exactly what he'd said wrong and how he should have phrased his comments and questions.

Then she posed several questions to him in such a way as to deliberately lead him into his own speech pitfalls. By that time he was getting wise to her and took a moment to think before he answered with the correct language. "Good," she told him approvingly. "So what have you learned so far?"

"That you'll jump on me every time I use ain't, gotta, yup, yep, shoulda and wanna."

"That's right. So you might as well delete those words from your vocabulary right now," she advised him.

He gazed at her from beneath the thick fringe of his eyelashes. "What if I wanted you to jump on me?"

She opened her mouth with a comeback on the tip of her tongue but swallowed it when she saw the heat in his expression.

"Are you still wet?" he asked softly. Leaning back in his chair, he pinned her with his smoldering, dark gaze.

She did an erotic little wiggle in her seat. "Mm-hmm."

"Do you want to show me?" he asked, his voice revealing an edgy male hunger he wasn't able to hide.

Cindy felt her cheeks warm as her gaze dropped to the table, taken aback by his bold question and uncertain how to respond.

He tilted his head and caught her eye. "Are you blushing?"

Throwing her chin up, she answered quickly. "No!"

"I'd settle for a look inside your T-shirt," he murmured with a quiet, encouraging smile. "Surely you're not shy about your breasts. Nothing *there* to be shy about."

"No," she agreed in a small voice. "It's just that..."

He laughed quietly. "What?"

"It's just that, because of my obvious size, I have to wear a bra and it's hard to find pretty ones that are this big. My bra is more along the lines of sturdy. It's more along the lines of industrial strength!"

"That's okay," he assured her. "I love a big sturdy bra with a wide band and lots of snaps."

"You're teasing me," she pouted, though her lips still curved upward.

He shook his head. "Not at all. I'll show you why in a minute."

"You'll show me why?"

"Push back your chair," he commanded.

Cord slid to his knees in front of her, working his way between her legs and leaning forward to press several damp and deliciously arousing kisses into her neck while his hands slid beneath her T-shirt and worked it up over her breasts. Then he went to work on the snaps on the back of her bra. While he fumbled, she let her head tip backward and her eyes close. She let her legs relax and fall open while he struggled with her brassiere, the feeling of anticipation fabulously dark and decadent as she waited for him to open her bra and free her heavy breasts.

"You need some help?" she asked him after a while.

He growled in answer. "Don't you dare ruin my fun."

"Wouldn't want to do that," she chuckled.

"I have two snaps taken care of. One more to go. It's giving me a little trouble."

After about another minute of fumbling, she started giggling. "Are you sure you've done this before?" she asked.

"I've done this before," he grunted.

"Because right now, I'm thinking you're the worst bra man I've ever met."

"Give me a chance," he grumbled. "I haven't done this in a while. Don't move," he ordered, finally getting off his knees and moving around behind her. She waited patiently while his fingers plucked at her bra through the chair's vertical slats. She breathed out a sigh of relief when her bra loosened. A second later it pulled tight again, almost uncomfortably tight. Against the flesh of her back pressed three cool wooden slats. And when she tried to move...she realized he'd used her bra to bind her to the kitchen chair.

Chapter Four

A squawk of surprise was on her lips as Cindy reached behind her and discovered that her hands wouldn't fit between the chair's wooden slats to undo her bra. Neither could she get her arms around the back of the chair to undo it that way—the flaring backrest was too wide. She was pinned to the chair!

Cord had bound her to the kitchen chair!

By this time, Cord was kneeling between her legs again, smiling like a large, golden and very predatory cat.

Cindy sighed. “You planned that, didn't you?”

“I love a big sturdy bra,” he sighed in a voice of pure male contentment.

“You're twisted, you know that?”

He nodded, the overhead light snaking down the uneven length of his nose. “Not nearly as twisted as some people.”

“You mean to tell me there are men who do worse things to a woman than use her bra to trap her on a chair?”

He gave her a crooked smile. “You haven't met my brother Bolt.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy,” she taunted him after a few seconds' consideration.

“I'm your kind of guy,” Cord growled, leaning in to paint her bottom lip with his wet tongue.

“You are,” she laughed. “But Bolt sounds a lot like you.”

“We're complete opposites,” he argued mildly. “Bolt has a bit of a shoe fetish. Me—I'm a bra man.”

“Lucky for me,” she murmured against his mouth. “So what are you going to do now that you have me pinned and helpless and at your mercy?”

"You'll see." Gliding smoothly to his feet, he strolled over to the kitchen counter and pulled open a drawer. "Reach inside your bra and cover your nipples with your hands."

"Why?"

He turned around with a pair of scissors in his hand. "Just do it."

She felt her eyes widen as her heart started up a heavy drumming cadence. What had she gotten herself into? What did she know about this man, really? Everything had moved so fast. She'd let it move fast because of her attraction to him and because he'd seemed so open and trustworthy. Had she made a mistake in getting so intimate with him so quickly? Now he had her trapped on his kitchen chair with a pair of scissors in his hand. "Cord. You're making me nervous."

He dropped to his knees in front of her, leaning forward to press a gentle kiss onto her lips. "I don't want to make you nervous but you need to cover your nipples because I need both hands for what I'm going to do next. Put your hand inside your bra, Cindy."

A tremor of apprehension shook her frame. She looked into his eyes, searching for reassurance. "Cord," she said in a small voice.

"I'm sorry," he apologized when he realized how frightened she was. "I'm doing this the wrong way. You take the scissors. I'll cover your nipples."

She let her breath out slowly as he put the scissors in her hand.

Reaching up, he worked his long fingers inside one of the tight cups, the rough touch of his fingers exciting her nipple as he covered her areola. "Okay," he murmured, moving quickly to pinch the tip of her bra with the fingers of his other hand. "Snip away the tip of your bra," he told her.

When she frowned at him, he nodded. Finally guessing at what he had in mind, she angled the scissors across her body and snipped away the tip of her tightly packed bra.

When he dragged his hand out of the cup, she felt cool air on her nipple. Looking down, she found her entire swollen areola jutting out of the hole she'd cut from her bra. After giving her a reassuring look, Cord dipped his head and curled his wet tongue around her distended nipple.

Ripples of need fluttered deep beneath her belly as he sucked on the hungry flesh captured in his hot mouth. "How does that feel?" he asked in a murmur, lifting his green gaze to her eyes.

In answer, she handed him the scissors and dug her hand into the other cup.

Cord rumbled out a low sound of humor as he snipped away the cup's satin tip, then he fell on her breast like a starved man, suckling and drawing her rosy flesh deep into his mouth.

Cindy's back arched as her sex quaked and shuddered and spilled enough moisture to dampen the crotch of her jeans. "I owe you an apology," she murmured as his hand cupped the swell of her breast and his tongue ran roughshod over her nipple. "You're the best bra man I've ever met."

Cord snorted out a soft sound of laughter. "If you think this is good, wait until you see what I can do with a pair of panties."

Her sex clenched just thinking about it.

"Let's work these jeans down your legs and I'll give you a little demonstration."

The shoes had to go first. He unlaced first one sneaker then the other. With a little shifting and wiggling on her part, he had her pants down her legs, over her feet and tossed aside. That left her panties.

"Now put your hand inside your panties and cover your pussy."

She complied without question, having a pretty good idea of what he was going to do, surprised by the heat pouring from her folds and the amount of liquid slipping from her opening to moisten her swollen labia.

With her hand inside her panties, she watched as he carefully snipped away the crotch, neatly removing the squares of layered silk and cotton, leaving only two thin ribbons of elastic to connect the front panel to the back. When she started to pull her hand out of her underpants, he stopped her, covering her hand with his and rubbing her fingers into her plump, wet sex. "Don't be in such a hurry," he murmured. "You look sexy with your hand in your pants."

Slowly, he massaged her hand over her pouting lips, watching with rapt attention while her pussy poured out more liquid and her fingers became coated with her own dewy essence. Finally, he removed her hand and drew her fingers to his mouth, kissing her wet fingertips and running the blade of his tongue over them to collect her flavor. "Tastes good," he whispered. "But I gotta go to the source."

Her puffy sex was contained on either side by the narrow elastic strips he'd left intact and the cool air on her exposed pussy was a delicious source of arousal. His gaze, resting hungrily between her legs, was another one. As she watched, he slipped her shoes back on her feet, pulling her legs to the outside of the chair and using her shoelaces to tie her feet to the chair's legs.

"Oh God," she breathed as a burst of carnal excitement flashed up her spine and her vagina fluttered with aching arousal. "What are you doing to me?"

"Opening you up," he breathed, his voice heavy with dark yearning. "Opening you wide so I can have my way with all this pretty pink sex. I want to watch you orgasm. I don't want you trying to close your legs right when things are getting good."

"Are you sure you have this planned right?" she panted on a rough breath. "What about you? How are you going to get inside me while I'm tied to the chair?"

"Don't you worry about me," he rasped without looking at her face, his attention completely captured by the flesh swelling hungry and hot between her legs.

"Wouldn't you like to —"

"Be inside you?" He chuckled. "What are you suggesting, Miss May?"

"I wasn't suggesting," she panted.

"No?"

"No. I was more like...imploring!"

"Don't rush me, you pushy little heifer. Now shut up and take it like a lady."

With his hands gripping the soft inner flesh of her thighs, he forced her legs open and settled his face between her legs. His tongue entered her low, prodded at her opening a few times before swiping up through her slot and flattening over her sensitive clit. She grabbed his head and knotted her hands in his thick brush of hair, holding on for dear life as he pushed his tongue at her sex. Her muscles tightened and she strained in the chair as sweat burned in the crease of her thighs, soaking the thin elastic buried between the top of her legs and her pouting sex. She felt her juices join his saliva, working its way down between the cheeks of her ass to pool on the chair's smooth wooden seat.

His mouth worked pure sweet mastery between her legs, his lips feathering across her center of need one moment, drawing her to a searing pinnacle of arousal, then dominating her clit with the press of his tongue before trailing lower to test her quaking opening as her eager cunt shuddered around the rough, hot flesh he sent inside with short savoring licks.

"Tell me when you're going to come," he told her, his voice scraping raw with his own potent need. "I want to pull back and watch."

"That's not fair," she whimpered. "Making me come with nothing inside."

"I'll make it feel good," he reassured her hoarsely. "Just tell me when."

He dove in again, with his lips rubbing into her sex and suckling at the little bundle of nerves that threatened to explode with every caressing touch he lavished between her open thighs.

"Oh," she moaned, tossing her head, twisting on the chair, fighting to hold back her climax, straining to experience every delicious moment of building arousal. "Oh Cord. Oh Cord," she chanted.

"Tell me when," he reminded her, his words vibrating inside her shivering sex.

"I'm close," she sobbed. "I'm close. Cord!"

She felt his thumbs sliding across her wet flesh, pulling her opening wide, stretching it until the sting of pleasure almost consumed her. She bucked on the chair, pressing her legs apart and waiting for the touch that would send her over the edge. With his thumbs holding her open, he lashed her clit once more with his tongue and she came. She came on a long ragged scream, her back arching, her bottom lifting from the wet wooden seat, her hands fisted in Cord's hair and trying to yank those beautiful hard lips onto her spilling sex as the orgasm ripped through her body and frayed her soul. But he pulled back, his eyes glued to her spasming cunt as she worked her way through a long series of shuddering contractions.

Finally, she fell back against the chair, spent and trembling, her eyes closing as the last quivering clench traveled the length of her sex. When she opened her eyes again, she saw Cord's fingers, about four inches from her face, plucking at the metal buttons on his thick denim fly. She licked her lips and swallowed the saliva that rushed into her mouth as he reached inside his pants and dug the heavy weight of his cock from his gray cotton shorts. The large blunt head was coated with a sexy smear of pre-cum and she watched as a new glistening pearl formed at the slit. With his hand wrapped around his root, he rubbed the moisture into her lips.

Cindy pulled her mouth into a pouting kiss, nibbling at the silken flesh stretched taut over his fat cock head, waiting for his command to take him inside her mouth, knowing the pleasure he would derive from that sense of domination—knowing the excitement she would feel at being made thrall to his urgent masculine need, at the sound of those strong, demanding words.

"Do you want my cock inside your mouth?" he rasped, prodding his cock head at her lips.

"Mm-hmmm," she hummed.

"Can I come inside your mouth or do you want me to pull out?"

She looked up at his face, waiting for him to meet her gaze. He had a hard time dragging his attention from the place where his cock nudged against her lips but her patience eventually paid off. "What are my choices?" she asked.

"In or out," he rasped.

"If you don't come in my mouth, where are you going to come?"

His lips parted as he dragged his hot velvety cock head over her lips again. "Wherever you'll let me," he breathed in a ragged bit of sound.

"That's a hard choice," she answered in a low musical murmur. "You're asking me to choose between the taste of your cum sliding down my throat or the feel of your heat shooting over my skin."

Cord stared at her, his expression one of fascinated admiration, bordering on devotion. "You'd like that?" he croaked, stroking his fist slowly down the length of his shaft as he waited for her answer. "You'd like that, Cindy?"

"I'd like to suck you off, Cord. And I'd like your hot flesh pressing against my face and spilling over my lips. It's your choice."

His hand moved back to cradle her nape and for several seconds he stood there, rubbing his blunt tip into the corner of her mouth. "God, woman. You're undoing me."

Cindy waited, holding his gaze with a sultry invitation to do his worst, spurring him to loose his inner beast and have his way with her.

"Open your mouth," he told her gruffly. "Then wrap your lips around my cock and hold on."

His big hand tightened on the back of her skull as he fed his shaft between her lips. Slowly, he began to thrust his hips at her face as she took him in her mouth, rubbing her tongue into his tight flesh each time he entered her and sucking hard on each backstroke.

His thrusts grew deeper and his hold tightened, his fingers fisting in her hair as he pumped his flesh into her mouth and down her throat. His broad, thick root stretched

her lips almost to the point of splitting. "Take me deeper," he rasped. "Swallow me, Cindy."

Guessing at his meaning, she tried swallowing as he drove between her lips and his thick flesh thrust deep inside her throat. She held her breath, waiting for him to withdraw, grabbing a quick breath when he finally did.

"One more time," he muttered. "Can you take me one more time?"

She nodded but he was already driving to the back of her throat. Again she swallowed, taking him deep, feeling his shaft flex then the rush of tickling heat pouring down her throat as he pumped his cum into her. He groaned and she felt his fingers between her chin and his sac, fingering his testicles as he emptied inside her. He pulled out abruptly, saving a last spurt for her lips. She watched his face as he reached down with one hand, cupping her chin in his palm gently but firmly, using his thumb to rub the last surge of cum into the corner of her mouth.

Then he was on his knees between her legs again, kissing her lips with a strange, edgy passion tangled up with rough masculine gratitude, going to her lips again and again, sipping away the taste of his own cum and pressing his damp forehead into hers as his breath washed out over her wet mouth.

Finally, he shook his head and sighed. "You're amazing," he said quietly.

"Think so?" Cindy asked, surprised by the emotion in his voice.

"Yep," he answered.

"Yes," she corrected him.

He tilted his head, snagging her gaze. "How come you never correct me when I'm making you come?"

"Are you serious?"

He gave her a stern look, telling her that he expected an answer.

She smiled slowly. "Because you don't make any mistakes when you're making me come."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she answered softly. "When it comes to sex, you don't need any improving, Cord Hardin."

Chapter Five

Cord moved behind the chair and released Cindy before pulling her to her feet and closing her bra behind her back. Turning her to face him, he couldn't resist the last-minute kiss he placed on her well-used flesh before pulling her T-shirt back down to cover her breasts. But his feeling of contentment bled away somewhat as he eyed the darkened windows. He wasn't keen on her heading across town at such a late hour. "It's so late," he started hesitantly, "maybe you should spend the night."

"I'm not spending the night!" she laughed.

"Why not?"

"Cord, I hardly know you!"

Cord stared at her. This from the woman who had sucked him dry, let him cut her panties and screamed senseless as he ate her out! He scraped a hand back through his hair. She was right, though. This was moving way too fast. She was supposed to be his tutor! The tutor who was going to help him get back in Veronica's good graces. "Yeah. You're right," he agreed.

"Besides, if I spent the night, you probably wouldn't get much homework done."

"Nope," he answered, dipping his head to nibble at the corner of her mouth, "I wouldn't get *any* homework done."

"No," she corrected him. "I'll head home after I use your bathroom."

"Down the hall on the left," he told her, finally pulling away from her.

She bounced away with her jeans clutched to her chest. As she stepped through the arch, she threw a saucy grin back in his direction. "Thanks for the crotchless panties. I'll never wear them again without thinking of you."

As she disappeared around the corner, Cord stared at the empty archway, trying to decide why he found those words so unsettling. It took him a while but eventually he realized he didn't like the idea of her wearing those panties...without him. And the idea of her wearing them while with another man...well, the idea just plain had him in knots.

He sighed as he leaned back against the kitchen counter and crossed his cowboy boots at the ankles, contemplating his unexplainable behavior. He'd asked Miss May to spend the night! How crazy was that? That sort of behavior could give a woman ideas. The wrong ideas! Permanent ideas! Permanent, as in long-term-relationship ideas! And Cord wasn't looking for a serious relationship with Cindy. Nope. He wasn't. Not at all. Alone in the kitchen, he shook his head just to confirm the matter once and for all.

It was Veronica he wanted.

Right?

He looked up a few minutes later when he heard the bathroom door open then sauntered across the linoleum floor and into the carpeted hallway when Cindy failed to return to the kitchen. The door at the left end of the hall was open.

He'd left it closed.

It took Cindy a few moments to realize what she was looking at after she'd stepped through the door into the small room at the end of the hall—and what it all meant. There were some plaques hanging on the deep green wall along with some wide belts with huge glitzy buckles. And there were quite a few framed photographs. Tiptoeing farther into the room and resting one knee on a daybed tucked against the wall, Cindy peered at the pictures hanging above the bed.

Most of the pictures featured a tall, slim, rangy cowboy—a slightly younger Cord—balanced on the back of various colored bulls, all of which appeared to be dancing on one hoof. Cindy leaned closer to the nearest photograph, narrowing her eyes and

assuring herself that the man on the bull was indeed her Cord. Beneath the battered cowboy hat, his hair was shorter but—

“This door was closed.”

Cindy jumped when she heard Cord’s quiet voice slip in through the open doorway. She turned to gaze at him. “You’re a professional bull rider?”

“*Was*,” he corrected her. “I *was* a professional bull rider. I quit. And this door was closed.”

“Why did you quit?”

Gliding into the room with the quiet grace of a mountain lion, he collected her in one arm and steered her out of the room. “Did anyone ever tell you that you’re a nosy little heifer?” he interrupted her gently but firmly. “I don’t talk much about my bull riding days anymore. That door is closed,” he said, pulling the door shut behind him.

With an arm around her waist, he guided her back toward the main part of the house. She gazed at him, perplexed, but his expression was shielded. It was hard to understand how the man could have gone from professional bull riding to...to...this. Unemployed. With no prospects. And no other goal in life than to sponge off a rich girlfriend.

“I’ll write you a check,” he said. “Will you call me when you get home? So I know you made it okay?”

She nodded. “I have both your phone numbers in my purse.”

“Better try my home number first. That’s generally the best way to reach me. I don’t use my cell phone that often. I’m always dropping it. And I can never remember to charge the damn thing.”

He slapped his back pocket as he guided her into the kitchen. “I seem to have misplaced my checkbook,” he explained before doubling back to the bedroom. A few minutes later he reappeared, a dark frown creasing his forehead. “I don’t suppose you take credit cards?”

She shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I'm sure my checkbook will turn up before you get here tomorrow."

Despite herself, Cindy felt a little disappointed with the man. Even if he was the sort of guy who couldn't be bothered getting ahead in the world, she hoped he was at least the sort who met his obligations and paid his bills. Glancing up at his face, all she saw was pure, open honesty.

Cindy gave herself a mental kick in the backside. If he said he'd misplaced his checkbook, then he'd misplaced his checkbook. "By then, you'll owe me interest," she challenged him with a friendly grin.

"Well, now that might be a problem," he drawled. "Because you already have my entire interest. But if I owe you, we'll tack it onto the bill. How does that sound?"

Cindy smiled at the faded linoleum floor. The guy could be so adorable. "I don't know," she answered, lifting her gaze and giving him a daring smile. "Maybe I'll just take it out in trade."

The corner of his mouth kicked up into a satyr's smile.

"Do you know how to country dance?"

Leaning back on the kitchen counter, he narrowed his eyes and sent her a sly look. "Does a bear piss in the woods?"

She gave him a schoolmarm frown.

"I'm sorry. Let me try that again." He cleared his throat. "Is the pope German?"

This time she gave him a nod of approval. "That's better."

"Tomorrow night is two-for-one Tuesday at the Grizzly Rose. Have you ever been there?"

She shook her head. "I've heard about it, though. Isn't it supposed to be...kind of a rough hangout?"

"Nah," he answered with a grin that told her that it probably *was* a bit on the rough side. "But if it would make you feel better, I could probably get my sister and her

husband to join us. Maybe even my brothers. Bolt is in town for the week with his wife. Dalton invited them up for one of his shows."

"Dalton?"

"My sister's husband. He's a pastel artist."

"Pastel artist?" Cindy searched her memory for the name Dalton. "The name sounds familiar," she admitted eventually.

"If you can get here at four, we can spend an hour getting some tutoring in before we head over to the Grizzly Rose for happy hour."

"Sounds good," she answered.

"Wear a skirt, if you have one. A skirt looks nice in the dance floor spins, not to mention the fact that it hides a multitude of sins."

"A multitude of sins?" Cindy lifted an eyebrow, targeting her hips with her gaze then giving him a pointed look. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Not what you're thinking," he was quick to assure her, his green eyes boyish with mischief. "It's just that a skirt is a damn convenient article of clothing when you think about it. With a woman on his lap, a man could just about have sex in public and nobody would be any the wiser. Yup," he concluded. "A skirt hides a multitude of sins...and I want to try all of them out with you."

She gave him a slow smile. "You make a good argument for skirts."

"So do you have a skirt that will work?"

"Well, if I don't," she told him with a grin, "I'll be sure to get one before tomorrow night."

He laughed, pulling her into his arms and locking his fingers behind her waist. "You're really something, you know that?"

Feeling as happy as she ever had in her lifetime, Cindy wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth down onto hers. When she finally loosened her hold on

him, she smiled into his lowered eyes, surprised when he angled his head and touched her lips two more times.

"Why don't you spend the night?" he asked again, his expression suddenly sober and somehow longing. His words, along with that tender look so at odds with his strong, chiseled features, tugged on her heartstrings.

She tilted her head, arching an eyebrow. "I have my reasons."

"What kind of reasons?" he asked quietly.

"Veronica is one of them," she stated just as quietly.

Cindy didn't feel as though Veronica had any rightful claim on Cord Hardin. As far as she was concerned, his careless girlfriend had abandoned him on a whim. What remained standing between Cindy and Cord, however, was the claim that Cord still had on Veronica. It was Veronica he wanted in his bed and in his life. Cindy wasn't about to let herself get in too deep with the cowboy, only to be tossed aside when he decided he was ready to go back to his rich girlfriend.

For several moments he just watched her. Finally, he nodded. With a hand warming the small of her back, he escorted her through the front door and closed her inside her car.

Leaning down, he snatched a quick kiss before she started rolling up her window.

"Cord?" she said hesitantly, her hand on the old window crank. "You shouldn't just...close that door."

She was glad when he didn't try to pretend he didn't know what she was talking about. He jammed his hands in his pockets and looked off down the quiet, darkened avenue. "I promised my family I'd never ride again."

She nodded, uncertain what to make of this confession but still feeling that something more needed to be said. "Maybe you should keep your promises. I don't know about that. I just know you shouldn't just close that door. Your rodeo career was obviously an important part of your life."

He nodded without looking at her.

“Aren’t there...other things you could do in the rodeo...besides bull riding?”

He squinted as he focused on something at the far end of the street. Finally he rolled his shoulders. “Maybe. It wouldn’t be the same, though.”

Chapter Six

When Cindy arrived at Cord's house the next afternoon, Cord was striding down the concrete walk toward her as she stepped out of her car. His long legs carried him with the feral grace of a man who hadn't quite shed his animal heritage. There was a lot to be said for civilized men. On the other hand, there was a lot to be said for men like Cord Hardin.

"I'm sorry," he announced as she closed her car door and smoothed her hands over her flaring coffee-colored skirt, "but you're going to have to give me my tutoring session on the run."

"On the run?" she asked as he grabbed her hand and pulled her toward his pickup.

Closing her inside, he rounded the truck's hood and jumped into the driver's seat. "I got busy today and didn't make it out to the ranch. I have to run out there at least every other day to make sure the pump's running and the horses have water."

Cindy pulled her calf-length skirt out flat beneath her. "Ranch?"

He shot her a look as he pulled out onto the road. "Yeah, the ranch. I told you I had some land east of here."

"You said you had a few acres!"

"That's right. A few acres."

Cindy stared at him, stunned. "Well, how many is a few?"

"About twelve hundred."

"That doesn't sound like a few to me!"

"No?" His lips kicked up into a boyish smile. "Does it sound more like a ranch?"

"Yes."

"Well, it *will* be a ranch—a small one—when I pick up the additional two thousand acres I'm trying to buy."

"You have a ranch," she stated in quiet awe. She looked him over from head to toe as if she expected to find money sticking out from beneath the brim of his cowboy hat.

"What?" he asked, his grin widening after he glanced at her.

"Nothing," she muttered. "It's just that I thought you were..."

"Broke? Lazy? A deadbeat no-account loser?"

"Unemployed," she corrected him, feeling her cheeks heat up as Cord laid before her all the incorrect assumptions she'd made. "Without current resources. A man with a great deal of potential but currently down on his luck."

"Oh God," he groaned, his smile reaching up to crinkle the corners of his eyes. "I'm the luckiest man alive. Back when I was riding the circuit, I don't think I ever *failed* to finish in the money." He shifted gears as the old truck climbed a ramp to the eastbound highway. "I made good money as a pro bull rider—all of which I used to buy land."

"The luckiest man alive," she murmured.

"And lucky to *be* alive," he added, somewhat more soberly.

She just stared at him, still trying to catch up with the idea that he wasn't broke *or* lazy. "What about our plans to go dancing?" she questioned him with a vague shake of her head.

He lifted one shoulder in an apologetic gesture. "We'll miss happy hour but my family isn't getting there until later, so I think we're good."

"We're good," she murmured, her gaze still glued to his roughly planed features.

"I see you found a skirt," he commented.

She nodded.

"You look nice," he offered.

"Thanks," she answered, continuing to stare at him.

"What?" he demanded, flashing her another grin.

"Nothing," she muttered, crossing her arms over her chest and turning her head to gaze out the side window as the city of Denver gradually turned into country. She should have known better than to underestimate the tall, rangy cowboy. He had a ranch. A ranch! As in lots of acres of land. He'd always finished in the money! She knew that a successful bull rider could make a hundred thousand dollars a year. And who knew *how* long he'd been competing before he'd quit riding!

Which meant that he probably wasn't after Veronica's money after all.

Maybe he was just in love with her.

Strangely enough, that didn't make Cindy feel any better.

With a sigh, she started the tutoring session she'd planned for him, lecturing him on contractions as they rolled eastward into the open plains.

* * * * *

When he finally pulled off the highway, Cord made a few more turns down empty rural roads before steering the truck through an open gate. The old Ford bounced over a rough dirt track leading straight into a whole lot of nowhere. After stopping twice to open two barbwire fences, he pulled up to a big round water tank set into the ground. Several horses stood around the aluminum tank as though waiting for him. They turned their heads and lifted their noses at the sight of the old blue pickup.

"Oh my god, Cord. It's fabulous out here," Cindy squealed, regaining some of the enthusiasm that had drained away while she was thinking about Veronica. Opening the truck door, she slid to the ground with an earthy thump. Little puffs of dirt lifted into the air around her plain black flats.

"You think so?"

Stepping away from the Ford, she turned out a three-sixty, spinning with enough energy to make her skirt flare away from her sides as she took in the wide expanse of rolling golden fields. "Uh-huh."

"Course there's not much here yet," he said, moving to her side.

"Of course," she corrected him.

"Of course there's not much here yet," he repeated, waving a hand to the north. "But I plan to build a house over on that little rise beyond the creek bottom. What do you think?"

"What do I think about what?"

The corners of his eyes crinkled handsomely as he squinted to the north and lifted his strong chin. "Do you think that would be a good place for the house?"

Why was he asking her? Cindy was just his tutor for the week. Here today and gone, gone, gone tomorrow. Why not ask the woman who was destined to see the house built and possibly be invited to live there with him? The words slipped out of her mouth before she could stop them. "What does Veronica think?"

The question seemed to bring him back to earth with a bump. He looked around at the empty land, the endlessly open vista, the long, rough grass and the gnarled cottonwoods in the winding creek bottom. He shook his head and laughed solemnly. "Veronica would hate it out here."

That was just about what Cindy had expected. But taking in Cord's crestfallen expression, she felt suddenly ashamed of herself for stirring up trouble between him and his girlfriend, however undeserving Veronica might be. She was just in this for the sex, she reminded herself. *Casual* sex. Seemed like she was having a hard time remembering that.

"What do you do with all these horses?" she asked, strolling back toward his stock tank.

"Two of them are broke for riding," he explained as he sauntered along beside her. "The rest of them are just old rodeo has-beens." He shot her a grin that was somehow both shy and sexy at the same time. "Like me."

She stopped a few yards short of the stomping, snorting animals, sending him a stern smile. "What are you running here, Hardin? A retirement haven for homeless hacks?"

"For now," he answered with a deep rumble of laughter. "Eventually I'd like to raise cattle."

A playful breeze lifted her hair and tumbled it across her face, causing a few loose strands to snag on her lips. Cord reached for them at the same time she did. She pulled them away from her moist lips while he tucked them behind her ear. "We make a good team," he said softly. His fingers trailed down her jawline and cupped her face as he rubbed his thumb into the corner of her mouth, his gaze deepening as he leaned in for a kiss.

Before he could plant his parted lips against hers, however, a large palomino plodded heavily toward them. Cord moved away quickly to intercept the huge golden beast. "Watch out for this one. He'll take a bite out of your ass."

Cindy swallowed a nervous squeak, dancing away a few steps when the horse dropped his head and nosed her behind.

"Hey. Hey. Leave something for me," Cord admonished the horse with a chuckle, getting between her and the palomino and rubbing the beast's broad velvety nose as he smiled back at her. "Do you ride much?"

She shook her head, lifting her chin and giving him an impudent smile. "Not horses."

He tilted his head toward the sky and groaned. Then, with a threatening look building in his eyes, he started toward her, lifting his hands away from his sides and herding her back toward the truck. "You're asking for it, you know that?"

"I know that." She giggled as she backed away from him.

"You're gonna get it too," he promised her, doffing his hat and throwing it like a Frisbee into the truck bed.

"Oh," she breathed as her rear end came up against the round metal fender behind her. "I hope so. That is why I wore the skirt."

He caught her against the truck's rounded fender and kissed her, long, hard and devouringly, dominating her mouth with his tongue, branding her lips with the sliding press of his hot, hard lips. When he pulled away, he reached for the bottom hem of his tight white T-shirt. With a building sense of anticipation, Cindy watched him work it up over his washboard abs, stretching the fabric thin as he pulled it over his head. She caught a glimpse of tawny male hair curled in the cup of his armpits—so masculine and sexy—before he lowered his arms again.

"Showoff," she muttered as her gaze skimmed his finely honed upper body. The sun glinted off the broad crest of his shoulders. A network of veins fanned from his shoulder muscles into his chest as well as snaking down his arms, wrapping his biceps in twisting lines of strength.

Pinning her to the truck with his lower body, he smiled down on her, his T-shirt fisted in one hand, the heat of the sunny summer day carrying his warm, masculine scent to her nose. It was exquisitely male, screaming of testosterone and sex and other things too dark and provocative to name. "Put this behind you," he told her, "and lay it out over the fender so you don't burn your hands."

"My hands!"

"That's right. After you turn around and bend over, your hands are going to be on the fender. And the fender," he informed her as though she was a naughty girl for asking, "is hot."

She smiled at him from beneath the fringe of her eyelashes. "You're a thoughtful guy, aren't you?"

"Right down to the bone," he answered in a feral growl.

"I hope you were thoughtful enough to bring a condom," she told him.

"Turn around," he told her, "and I'll show you exactly how thoughtful I am."

Turning in his arms, she leaned forward, planting her palms on the blue fender and snuggling her bottom into his button-down fly.

He grabbed her rear end, rubbing his hands into the silky patterned fabric covering her hips. "Make yourself comfortable," he warned her as he worked her skirt up over her ass. He let out a long hiss when he saw what she was wearing—the black panties she'd worn the day before—hand washed and line dried—with the open crotch framing her deep pink sex.

"Oh darlin'. This is just too beautiful," he rasped, shoving her skirt up to her waist and looking his fill for several moments before brushing his thumbs over the puffy flesh trapped and framed by the missing cotton panel. She settled down onto the fender on her forearms, her breath feeling heavy inside her lungs as the sensitive flesh between her legs welcomed his touch and his thumbs settled on either side of her slit, pulling her open.

Lowering himself to one knee, he pressed a long liquid kiss into her opening then spread his slippery wet tongue over her slit, licking her several times, coating her flesh with his saliva, preparing her for his entry, right there where he was going to mount her. When he got back to his feet, she turned her head to watch him tease open his metal buttons and push his shorts out of the way. His shaft rose hard and strong, thick and dark from the tawny curls that sprang around its wide base. With his teeth, he ripped open the small white plastic package he'd dug from his pocket and spilled the condom into his open palm. When he caught her watching, he reached down and pumped himself a few times, smiling when her eyes widened on his streaming cock head.

"Spread your legs," he commanded as he rolled the thin latex down his shaft and fitted his plum-shaped tip against her wet opening. "Have you ever been fucked like this before?"

The explicit word and provocative question made her breath come in short, hard bursts as she leaned on the fender and watched him from over her shoulder.

"Have you ever been fucked from behind?"

"Yes," she panted.

"Do you like it?" he asked, dropping his gaze to his cock head where he prodded her juice-soaked slit.

She nodded her head in answer, watching him as he ran his fist down the length of his shaft.

"I like it too," he rasped, leaning forward and locking his lips on hers as he shafted her. His broad stalk drove deep, stretching her inner walls and filling her so full that she gasped beneath his hungry kiss. "Oh God, I like it," he muttered against her lips, pulling his hips back then plowing into her again as his hands smoothed over the black silk stretched across her ass. "Oh fuck," he groaned as he pulled his hips again and slammed home once more, pounding her into the truck's fender and falling into a steady driving rhythm, riding her hard, delivering stroke after savage stroke as he thrust his cock to the back of her cunt and ground his groin into her cushioned backside.

With a dark masculine groan, he tore his lips from hers and threw his head back. Cindy watched in fascination as his jaw worked and his Adam's apple rode the strong column of his throat. His muscles rippled across his wide chest, his nipples dark ovals, his veins standing out in his arms and shoulders as he clutched her ass and drove into her again and again.

Through it all, she watched his face—hard-lined, stark with male hunger, burning with an elemental animal intensity, a sheen of hard-earned sweat dampening his cheeks and glistening on the afternoon stubble that shone like wet fire on his chin. God, he was beautiful, like some golden palomino male, his muscles straining like a stallion, his veins writhing across his thick biceps, his balls swinging against her sodden lips, heavy and full as he rode her.

He was coming.

Any minute now.

She was a touch away herself but she'd need that touch if she wanted to be with him when he came. Reaching down between her thighs, she brushed her fingers over

her clit, once, twice. Then she was writhing and shouting and coming as he filled her up and stretched her inner walls with cock, fucking her with a brutal vitality that she'd never before known in her lifetime, taking her to the most fulfilling orgasm she'd ever experienced.

He crushed into her a final time then held, his chin falling forward as his lanky frame jerked and his eyes locked on hers. At that intense moment of shared intimacy, Cindy began to realize she was in trouble. Because what she was feeling for the man standing behind her had somehow transcended the category of casual, reshaping itself into something that looked disturbingly like love.

Chapter Seven

Cindy quizzed Cord on the drive back to the city, asking him enough questions to confirm that he'd read the first chapter of the English text she'd left with him the night before. "Good job," she told him as they pulled into the parking lot of the Grizzly Rose.

Once inside the dance hall's wide double doors, Cord grasped Cindy's hand, pulling her across the crowded room toward the bar. The pretty blonde bartender gave him a smile of recognition and shouted at him as she drew off a beer for another customer then headed toward him, wiping her hands on her maroon apron.

After ordering a couple of draft beers, he left a big tip for the attractive bartender who flashed him a smile then gave Cindy a friendly wink.

The man behind them, evidently waiting his turn to be served, got impatient when they didn't clear away from the bar quickly enough. He huffed out a growl as he flicked his gaze at Cindy and addressed Cord. "Hey, cowboy. If you'll just move your doublewide out of my way, maybe I can get up to the bar and order myself a drink."

Cord's teal gaze darkened as he turned it on the rude urbanite. "I got one right here you can have," he drawled threateningly as he pulled back his arm. Cindy snatched at his thick biceps, stopping him from dumping his beer all over the man's leather jacket. But that's all she stopped. With Cindy's fingers wrapped around his biceps, Cord jerked his elbow back. It crunched into the guy's nose and sent him backward a step or two.

"That's *pretty little doublewide* to you," Cord snarled while the man's hands flew to his nose and his dark eyes squinted in pain. "It ain't smart to pick a fight with a man who's bigger than you," Cord added in a deep growl.

"*Isn't,*" Cindy corrected him uneasily. "It *isn't* smart."

"Let me try that again." He cleared his throat. "It isn't smart to commence an altercation with a man whose elbow resides at the same elevation as your fucking nose."

Cindy gaped at him for a moment before recovering herself. "By George," she announced brightly, "I think you've got it."

Cord tugged down on the brim of his hat to acknowledge her praise then, pulling her into his side, he steered Cindy through the crowd to the opposite edge of the dance floor. They got lucky in their search for a table, sliding into a couple of chairs just as a party of four was leaving. Cord left Cindy guarding the table while he rounded up a few more chairs. By the time he returned to her side with a chair in each fist, there was a small gang of men waiting for him.

The guy Cord had elbowed had come looking for him, with four of his friends in tow. Cindy was on her feet, between her chair and the table, regarding the men warily. The one Cord had hit gave him a nasty, sneering smile. "Hey, cowboy. It ain't smart to pick a fight with a man who has more friends than you."

Cord dropped the padded aluminum chair to the floor, turning to face Cindy and lifting his eyebrows as if he was waiting for something from her.

"What?" she asked, creeping behind him with a nervous smile.

"Aren't you going to correct *his* grammar?"

"Not unless he starts paying me," she muttered from behind the broad shield of his back.

Obviously disgusted, Cord snorted before returning his attention to his would-be assailants. "Who needs friends when you have brothers like that?" he asked just as a huge man pushed through the small threatening mob.

The man who stopped beside Cord was obviously his brother, with hair very much like Cord's though slightly darker, thicker and wilder. In addition, his eyes glowed gold instead of green. The gang of five, so recently looking for a fight, wilted a bit, gathering

a little closer together as they leaned away from the monstrous newcomer who looked like a cross between a pro wrestler and a man-eating lion.

When the nervous group took a collective step backward, they found two more tall men at their backs. The first was a lethal-looking individual with black hair and gleaming, stalking jungle eyes. Within his narrowed gaze, thick flecks of gold floated on a background of dark sage. The second newcomer looked like a young god who'd just stepped down from Mt. Olympus. As the Adonis brushed a few loose strands of sandy-colored hair off his forehead, Cindy caught a glimpse of his arresting eyes. They were the color of pale sea foam on a moonlit night.

"Hey, Bolt," Cord greeted the monster beside him. "Colt. Dalton. Good timing."

Bolt snorted as he dropped into a chair, the aluminum legs creaking as they took his weight. He eyed the men standing between the table and the dance floor while they shifted their feet uneasily. "What do you mean by good timing?"

Cord reddened a bit at his brother's suggestion that he shouldn't have needed help handling the five urban bumblers. "You saved me having to scuff up my knuckles," he mumbled.

Bolt gave his brother a look of surprise then turned his scathing gaze on the five troublemakers. "On these guys? You're kidding, right? My wife is bigger than all of them put together."

"And a whole lot more dangerous," Cord muttered beneath his breath.

"Get lost," Bolt told the men as though they were a bit dim. "I make it a point never to fight with anyone who weighs less than my IQ."

Two women joined them as the men settled into their seats—Bolt's wife Tavia and April, who was Cord's redheaded sister and wife to the Adonis, Dalton Cristofer. The final member of their party was the lethally silent and darkly glowering Colt Hardin.

Almost immediately, Cindy found her gaze drawn to the enigmatic dark-haired man. "Colt and Bolt?" She smiled at the two brothers, so different in appearance and

size—one big and sun-bronzed, the other built more like Cord and as dark as a starless night. “Are you guys twins?”

“Do we look like twins?” Colt challenged her, his jungle eyes burning from beneath the dark ridge of his brow.

“No,” she answered truthfully.

“Colt is the black sheep of the family,” Cord told her.

Tavia snorted. “More like the black bull.”

Bolt grinned at his black-maned brother. “He’s been called worse in his lifetime.”

“Probably with good reason,” Colt murmured in a voice that slid across the table like the sound of a sharp knife sliding against steel.

“Well, there are certainly worse things to be called,” Cindy contributed gamely.

“Don’t bother being nice to him,” Tavia teased, leaning over the table to deliver her message in a loud conspiratorial whisper. “He hates women. All of them.”

“*Definitely* with good reason,” Colt muttered darkly, pushing back his chair with an ugly scrape of metal on wood and stalking away toward the bar.

Tavia’s lips turned downward. “I’m sorry,” she apologized to the table. Her expression was troubled as she watched Colt’s back.

“It’s not your fault,” Bolt insisted, wrapping an arm around his wife’s shoulders, his eyes filling with a strange masculine sympathy as his gaze followed his brother across the dance hall.

When Cindy questioned Cord with a small worried frown, he leaned toward her and put his lips close to her ear. “He doesn’t have much of a sense of humor,” he explained in a solemn tone. Moments later, he pulled her out onto the dance floor.

Cindy had always wanted to have a go at country dancing but had never hooked up with a guy who could dance, let alone a full-fledged cowboy like Cord Hardin. Just watching the couples out on the floor, you could tell it was fun but she’d never have guessed it would be *so much* fun. From her seat, watching the dance floor, she’d

marveled at the complicated moves and fancy twirls being performed out on the smooth wooden floor, certain she'd trip over her own feet as well as Cord's when he finally pulled her out there for a dance.

But she didn't!

She couldn't explain how he managed it but somehow Cord led her through the intricate steps and kept her on track every step of the way. With his palm in the middle of her back or sliding over her hip, he guided her through every turn, spin and twirl. She was out there dancing, loving it and looking like she'd been doing it all her life.

"You're a good dancer," Cord murmured at the end of the first song, pulling her close and nuzzling his face into her hair while waiting for the music to start up again.

Cindy felt her heart grow tight with a proud sense of happiness. "I was just following you!"

He cocked his head and gave her the sort of hard sexy smile that had her wanting to climb onto him, wrap her legs around his waist and lock her ankles behind his back. "Well then," he allowed, "you're a good follower."

* * * * *

Toward the end of the evening, April and Tavia dragged Cindy off to the ladies room with them. While Tavia freshened up her lipstick and April searched her purse for her brush, Cindy made small talk. "Your husband is a good dancer," she told Tavia.

Smiling at Cindy from her reflection in the mirror, Tavia sent her a wink. "You know what they say. Master on the dance floor, master in bed."

April grimaced as she dug through her large canvas bag. "That's too much information for me, Octavia. I don't want to hear about my brother's sex life."

Tavia sent Cindy a sly look as she flipped her curly brown hair over her shoulder. "Cord's a good dancer too."

Covering her ears, April gave Cindy a pleading look.

Cindy laughed, hedging considerably. "You can take your fingers out of your ears, April. I'm just your brother's English tutor."

Cautiously, April uncovered her ears. She fished a brush from her purse and dragged it through her long fiery mane. "Yeah? Well, you might not be sleeping with him *yet*. But I've seen the way he looks at you."

Again Cindy laughed. "How does he look at me?"

"Like he'd like to nail your shoes to the floor," Tavia suggested, lifting one eyebrow.

"Nail my *what*?"

"Like you're going to be sleeping with him soon," April translated with a sly smile.

Cindy threw up her hands in a comic gesture of lost patience. "I thought you didn't want to hear about this!"

April pursed her lips primly. "I just want to know that he's happy."

Cindy gazed at her own reflection in the mirror, her expression turning sober as she thought about the closed door in Cord's house, about the closed door in his life. "The fact is," she started slowly, "I'm not sure he *is* happy."

Tavia rolled her eyes and looked at her flame-haired sister-in-law. "Veronica Lake Powers," the two women said together.

Cindy smiled. That wasn't what she'd meant but she wasn't about to close her ears to some gossip about the woman she was beginning to consider her rival. "Veronica doesn't make Cord happy?"

"She's a nasty little witch," Tavia announced.

"A nasty, selfish little witch," April stated.

"With a coat tree up her ass," Tavia added. "She collects men like dolls—Ken dolls."

"Cord's been in love with her forever," April said with a sigh, plunging her brush back into her bag. "Since high school. She's led him on for years in an on-again, off-again relationship."

"Mostly off," Tavia chipped in.

April nodded. "He's been trying for so long to make her his girlfriend, I'm not sure he knows how to do anything else."

Tavia turned around and leaned back on the powder-pink bathroom counter. "So we were surprised when he invited us out tonight and told us he was bringing someone who *wasn't* Veronica."

"Surprised and pleased," April put in with enthusiasm.

"Veronica doesn't make Cord happy," Tavia grumbled.

"Veronica doesn't make anyone happy," April followed up with an evil snicker.

While this information wasn't exactly bad news from Cindy's point of view, it led back to the fact that Cord wasn't happy. Which reminded her of that closed door again. "Why did Cord quit bull riding?" she asked the women.

Tavia lifted her eyebrows and looked at April, obviously handing the question off to her sister-in-law.

April was quiet a moment, her expression melancholy. "You wouldn't ask that question if you could see his scars."

"Scars!"

"He wears his hair longer now, to cover them."

Cindy's hand flew to her mouth as she stared at Cord's sister. "Scars!" she squeaked, staggered by the thready sound that issued from her mouth.

April nodded. "He was working a small rodeo in Montana a little over a year ago. One of the rodeo clowns failed to turn up for work, which didn't help. And when eighteen hundred pounds of beef steps on your head and cracks your skull, it takes a lot of work to put you back together again. Cord's lucky he's alive." April shook her head,

her long straight hair shifting over her shoulders like a sheet of fire. "He was in intensive care for a week, the hospital for two months! We made him *swear* he wouldn't ride again – my brothers and me. It wasn't fair to Mom!"

Cindy nodded slowly, feeling breathless, fighting the tears that gathered at the back of her eyes. The idea of Cord so badly injured chilled her right to the core of her soul. No wonder his family had asked him to quit riding.

Surely, it was the right thing to do.

Yet—right or wrong—it seemed as though Cord was having trouble closing the door on that part of his life.

* * * * *

"You're quiet," Cord pointed out on the drive home. "Is something wrong?"

Cindy shook her head, gazing at her hands curled in her lap.

"Did the girls say something that upset you?"

She shook her head again, casting about for a new topic of conversation, finally asking Cord about his surly brother Colt.

It turned out that the darkly handsome man had married a centerfold model. Having recently quit his job, he was trying to get his own advertising business up and running, which meant he traveled a lot and was often away from home. One night earlier that year he'd caught an early flight home and found his wife in bed with two men. That was bad enough.

But the story got worse.

The men were his two closest friends. According to Cord, it had almost killed him. He'd lost his wife *and* his friends!

"You know what's the saddest part?" Cord asked her after he'd finished his story. "The silly little twat is still in love with him. She calls him up all the time, trying to get back together with him."

Cindy shook her head, feeling thoroughly depressed. "Poor Colt."

"It isn't going to happen," Cord gritted, the strong line of his jaw jutting fiercely. "He'll never forgive her. He's mad at the world in general and women in particular. I don't blame him."

"I can't believe his friends would trade his friendship for a woman. What kind of men would do that?"

"You never saw Eloise. She'd drive a saint to sin."

"Good thing you're no saint," Cindy told him with a halfhearted smile, digging her elbow into his side.

"Nope," he answered, rubbing a hand over his ribs. "I'm no saint. And I don't like women who cheat on their husbands, especially when their husband happens to be my brother."

"Do you want to come in?" he asked her after he parked in front of his house and followed her over to her car.

She shook her head. "It's late. And I have to be at my mom's early in the morning. She wants my help hanging some new curtains."

"If you're sure," he said, cocking his head to check her eyes. "Are you sure there isn't something wrong? You look kinda sad."

"Kind of," she corrected him without thinking, shaking her head and meeting his gaze. "I feel sorry for Colt," she confessed.

He pulled her into a hard, warm hug, drawing her close with one hand on the small of her back and threading the fingers of his other hand through her hair. "He'll be okay," he said gruffly.

Together, they stood for several moments, rocking slightly while Cord hummed the last slow tune played at the Grizzly Rose. Finally, he pulled away and gave her a long, sweet kiss then opened her car door for her while she slid onto the seat. "See you tomorrow, Miss May."

Chapter Eight

"I'm here at my client's house, Mom. I have to run."

Putting the Mustang into park on the curb outside Cord's house at four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, Cindy hadn't snapped her cell phone shut before it rang again. It was Cord. He'd been trying to reach her for the past hour, while she'd been on the phone with her mother. He'd been hoping to cancel their session before she drove across town to his place.

He was on his way to Cheyenne.

"No big deal," she told him, wondering what business had dragged him off to Wyoming.

"Listen. As long as you're there, would you mind taking my mail in for me? You know where the key is."

"No problem," she answered, getting out of the car and heading up his uneven walk. "When will you be back?"

"In a couple of days," he told her. "I'll get in touch with you when I get back into town and we'll pick up where we left off, okay?"

She took a moment answering, feeling as though she wasn't getting the whole story. For some reason, it troubled her. But she was hardly in a position to ply him for details. She was just his English tutor, after all. It was hard to keep that in mind, however, considering the sort of intimacy they'd shared in the short time they'd known each other. "Okay, Cord."

"Thanks, darlin'. I'll see you in a few."

"Do you need someone to go out and check on the horses?"

"Got that covered. Colt's going out there for me."

After signing off, Cindy folded the phone and dropped it into her purse as she climbed the steps to his front door. Fishing a few envelopes out of his mailbox and unlocking the door, she let herself in. After depositing his mail on the kitchen table, she turned and wandered down the hall, not quite certain where she was headed. At the end of the hall, she had a choice to make between the door on the left, which led to his shrine of rodeo memorabilia, and the door on the right, which opened into his bedroom.

She chose the door on the right and threw herself into the middle of Cord Hardin's plush, snugly bed, wriggling as she burrowed into the charcoal gray quilt. This was heaven—where Cord slept, where his warm masculine scent lingered on the sheets and pillows and dark gray quilt. She'd found that heaven in Cord's arms. Drawing a deep cowboy-scented breath into her lungs, Cindy closed her eyes and smiled. For several long, luxurious moments she pretended that nothing existed outside of herself, Cord and his wonderfully cozy bed.

Only the sound of Cord's phone ringing pulled her out of that comfortable reverie.

She jolted into a sitting position as the phone rang for the second time, trying to decide if she should answer it or not. What if it was Veronica? What would Veronica think if a woman answered Cord's phone? With lightning judgment, Cindy decided that Veronica wouldn't like it one bit. And that decision moved her quickly to the edge of the bed. Seconds later she was dashing down the hall toward the phone on the kitchen wall. She answered the phone with a breathless, "Hello?"

"Hello," returned a woman's voice. "Is Cord Hardin there?"

"No," she drawled in a provoking lilt. "May I take a message?"

"Yes," the voice came back. "This is Marjorie Lincoln, his realtor. I was just checking to see if Cord got my earlier message that his counter offer had been rejected. He's still short ten thousand if he wants to pick up that land. He needs to act before Sunday."

"Oh," Cindy sighed, disappointed that it wasn't Veronica. "Okay."

"He has my number if he'd like to contact me."

"I'll let him know," Cindy told the realtor before hanging up.

She called Cord on her cell phone, punching the numbers in as she sashayed down the hall toward his bedroom, throwing herself on his bed again and waiting for his voice. She wriggled in his sheets as he answered.

It was delicious lying in his bed and listening to his rough masculine voice. With her eyes closed, she could almost imagine he was there with her, snuggling the afternoon away. As she talked to him, holding the phone to her ear with one hand, she used her other hand to slowly rub her mons, delivering the realtor's message that he'd evidently already received.

"Yep. Got it," he told her. "I'm working on the ten thousand. I should know in the next few days if I have it or not."

Cindy stopped rubbing her mound, her mind sharpening into focus as several pieces of information fell into place all at once. The date was July twenty-eighth and Cord was on his way to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Cheyenne hosted a big rodeo at the end of July and Cord needed ten thousand dollars. A professional bull rider could make ten thousand dollars at a big event like the Cheyenne rodeo, if he was lucky.

And Cord believed he was the luckiest man alive.

Cindy sat up, tucking one leg beneath her and lifting her other knee. "Why are you going to Cheyenne?" she demanded.

There was a bit of a silence at the other end of the line. It lasted about the length of time it took to make up a lie. "I...ah...have some business up there."

"What kind of business?" she pressed him.

"Well. I got a chance to make a little money –"

"At the rodeo?" she cut in, her voice sounding a little shrill even to her own ears. She could almost hear him groping for another lie. "You're not going to ride, are you?"

"No," Cord insisted. "No. I –"

Cindy groaned as Cord's phone cut out. Evidently his batteries had run down. Either that or he'd lost reception. Probably the batteries. He'd said he wasn't very good about making sure his cell phone was charged.

* * * * *

Cindy made the two-hour drive to Cheyenne with her heart in her mouth. She'd as much as told Cord to ignore his family's wishes and return to the rodeo circuit. True, that was before she'd known *why* he'd stopped riding but it would still be her fault if anything happened to the wonderful stud. In her mind's eye, she could see April's accusatory look, Bolt's dark glare of anger and Colt's incendiary stare.

She hadn't been to Cheyenne since she was a teenager but she had a fair idea of where the fairgrounds were. After crossing the Wyoming border, she turned right off the highway, then north through town, following the signs to the stadium arena. A parking lot attendant directed her to a grassy spot in a field east of the fairgrounds. After pulling her car to a stop, she leapt from the Mustang and hurried through the parked cars toward the stadium. She bought a ticket and a program then started climbing the stairs, stopping at the first stadium opening, flipping through the booklet and scanning the earthen arena below at the same time.

There was no sign of Cord, either in the program or—to her huge relief—on the back of a gyrating bull. Making her way upward, Cindy found her assigned seat and sank down into it, feeling a little foolish for her panicked assumption that Cord had returned to the professional bull riding circuit.

As in her past visits to rodeos, she didn't enjoy it. Every time a rider was thrown from the back of a bull, she swallowed a squeak of alarm and covered her eyes. That's probably why it took her so long to locate her cowboy.

Peeking from between the fingers barring her eyes, she froze when she caught sight of a very attractive and somewhat familiar male butt packed into a pair of worn blue jeans. She spread her fingers a little wider and narrowed her gaze on the rodeo clown

who'd just jumped down from the sideboards. A rider had been thrown from the back of a spinning bull. As the young man rolled in the dust, the daring clown jumped between him and the huge beast, throwing up his arms and dancing away a step when the bull turned his shaggy head toward him.

It was Cord! *Her* Cord! She'd know that fine, perfectly molded ass anywhere! He was wearing a colorful tattered shirt and red suspenders, along with a cowboy hat and a *big* painted-on smile. But it was Cord, no doubt about it! Her Cord was distracting the bull while the rider scrambled away to safety! Cindy felt her heart expand with fierce emotion. Rolling her lips inward, she blinked away a few proud tears as she pressed her fist beneath her nose and sniffed.

Her Cord was helping to protect the rodeo performers.

* * * * *

She made the two-hour drive back home in the dark, shaking her head most of the way there. Every time she thought about Cord working the rodeo, it made her smile. It wasn't until she was on the outskirts of Denver that a few practical questions made their way through that glow of pleasure that had accompanied her all the way south on the road from Wyoming.

Why had Cord been so reluctant to tell her why he was going to Cheyenne? How did he plan to make ten thousand dollars in the next few days? Rodeo clowns didn't make that kind of money. Where did he plan to get the ten thousand he needed to close his land deal?

The first answer that came to mind was Veronica.

Cindy didn't know that much about Cord's family or if he could expect any help from them. The music had been too loud at the Grizzly Rose for any kind of real conversation but apparently Bolt worked on cars. Thinking back, it seemed like April had been employed at a convenience store when she met her artist husband—and how much money could you make as an artist? Colt was trying to get his new advertising

business up and running so it didn't sound like he'd be able to help his older brother out.

It wasn't like ten thousand dollars was a *huge* amount of money. But as a schoolteacher scraping the barrel to make her monthly mortgage payments, *she* certainly didn't have that much money lying around. If she did, she'd loan it to Cord herself.

Even though she *had* only known him for three days.

Pulling into her driveway, Cindy parked in front of the closed garage door. Where was Cord going to get the ten thousand dollars he needed to close his land deal?

Again, Veronica's name popped into her head. Ugh. She hoped Cord didn't have to ask Verrrr-onica for help.

Her home phone was ringing as she stepped through the front door. With her purse swinging from her shoulder, she raced to answer it. "Hello?"

"Cindy Patterson?"

"Yes," she answered slowly, disappointed that it wasn't Cord. The male voice sounded vaguely familiar and she searched her memory in an attempt to place it.

"This is Martin. Martin Goodrich. How are you?"

"Martin," she said in a flat voice.

"Yeah. Sorry I'm so long getting back to you but I was wondering if you were doing anything tomorrow tonight."

She couldn't help the wry smile that crept onto her lips. Cord's little charade in the restaurant bar had evidently piqued good old Martin's interest.

"I thought maybe we could get together for dinner or something."

"I don't think so," she answered, snorting softly as she shook her head. "Did you finally get your little emergency taken care of?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Took you awhile," she pointed out.

"I'm sorry about that," he answered, "but if you'll give me another chance, I can promise you it won't happen again."

"I'll just bet it won't," she muttered.

"I'm sorry?"

"I'll have to turn you down for now, Martin."

"Any particular reason?" he asked, his tone chilly.

"That guy you saw me with in the restaurant is one of them."

A bit of a silence ensued. "Okay. That's one," he said. "Do you have any other reasons? Because the way I see it, he doesn't have to know about me."

Cindy suddenly lost her sense of humor. "I'm not that kind of girl, Martin."

"Well, you have my number if you change your mind."

"You're right. I certainly *do* have your number. But with a guy like him, why on earth would I ever bother with someone like you?"

"Because with a guy like him," he answered with a savage parting snort, "it isn't going to last."

Cindy slammed the receiver into the cradle, staring at it for several angry moments. Impatiently, she palmed her cheeks, wiping away the tears burning at the edges of her eyes.

The sad thing was, Martin was right. It wasn't going to last.

With a sharp sniff, she squeezed her eyes together. Right. No tears. She was a big girl. She'd known exactly what she was getting into when she'd decided to seduce Cord Hardin. He had a girlfriend. She'd known that! And despite the fact that Veronica didn't deserve the wonderful cowboy, she was beautiful and rich and could probably help Cord out with that ten thousand dollars he needed. Cindy was just along for the ride for as long as it lasted. She took a deep shuddery breath. *Damn*, she wished it would last a long time!

Somewhere close to forever.

At the end of the week, when their tutoring sessions were over, Cord would still have Veronica. And he'd go *back* to Veronica. And when he did, Cindy would have nothing. And, to make things worse, he *knew* it. He *knew* there wasn't anyone waiting in the wings for Cindy! She'd as much as told him! She'd *told* him that men walked out on her after taking one look at her. She probably had Cord convinced that she was the least desirable person on the face of the earth.

* * * * *

The gloom that settled over her accompanied Cindy to her next day's tutoring sessions—a couple of kids who were hoping to improve their college test scores. That sense of gloom intensified as the afternoon hours slipped away without any word from Cord. She kept checking her cell phone between clients and errands, hoping to find a message from him, sulking when there was still nothing at the end of the day.

He could have called her! She'd had sex with him. Three times! He could have at least called to check in and say hello or ask her how the hell she was doing! Evidently, she wasn't going to hear from Cord until he got back into town, when he'd want to continue his tutoring so he'd be ready for Veronica's party on Saturday.

She stopped at the grocery store on the way home, picking up a few essentials and a movie, planning on an evening alone. When her cell phone rang at five o'clock, she jumped for it, her heart dancing despite herself. But the first call was from her mother and the second one an hour later was from her sister.

When it rang for the third time, it was almost eight o'clock. The movie credits were running and she was walking into the kitchen with her dinner plate. She dug the phone from her pocket and punched the answer button without looking at the caller ID. "Hello," she answered dully.

"Cindy?"

It was Cord! Cindy wanted to hug him and strangle him all at the same time! "Cord?"

"It *is* you! For a minute I thought I'd punched in the wrong number. You sound...strange."

"It's me," she said, forcing her voice to be bright.

"Listen. I was planning to spend the night here in Cheyenne but I thought if you weren't doing anything, I could run back down to Denver real quick and drive back up here early in the morning."

"Oh."

"Is that an *oh* as in *oh*-kay?"

Cindy was just about as torn as a woman could get. Cord was offering to drive down from Cheyenne to spend the night with her! It seemed like a no-brainer. But while the word yes hovered on her lips, her mind had reservations. This was her chance to let Cord know that she didn't live for him. This was her chance to let him know that she could have casual sex with the best of them. This was her chance to make herself appear desirable and try to salvage some of her self-esteem. She opened a cupboard door and rattled some dishes. "Sorry, Cord. You caught me at a bad time. I'm busy tonight."

"Busy?"

"Yes," she lied. "I have a date. A dinner date." Again she rattled the dishes.

"A dinner date?" There were a few seconds of astounded silence. "With who?"

"Martin called me," she prevaricated neatly, feeling annoyed with him for acting so surprised. "Is that so hard to believe? That I have a date?"

"Yes. No! But what the hell? Martin?"

"I'm sorry, Cord, but I *do* have other men in my life. Just like you have Veronica."

"I have Veronica? Cindy, I haven't seen Veronica since I met you! What the hell are you doing going out with Martin?"

"Well, he called and —"

Cord's deep masculine voice cut her off. "Don't you dare sleep with him!"

Cindy stopped rattling dishes, stunned at the sharp, possessive tone in his voice.
“Why not?”

“Because I’ll kill him if you do.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Really?”

“And don’t you kiss him either. And don’t...do anything else with him.”

Cindy started to smile. “Would it be all right if I held his hand?”

But Cord didn’t see anything funny in the situation. “I’m not kidding, Cindy. Don’t you do anything with him.”

“Okay, Cord,” she answered with a meek smile. “I won’t.”

“You promise?”

“I promise,” she told him softly.

“What time are you going to be finished with...dinner?”

“Oh. We’re just finishing up,” she answered, grabbing a wineglass from the top shelf of her cupboard and clinking it against a drinking glass on the counter.

There was an anxious silence on the other end of the phone.

“How long would it take you to drive down from Cheyenne?” she asked, knowing full well it would take about two hours.

“I’m already halfway to Denver,” he confessed in a reluctant mutter.

He was already halfway to Denver. Cindy couldn’t help the warm feeling of exhilaration that filled her. He was driving down to Denver so he could spend the night with her! “Shall I meet you at your house?” she asked, thinking about his big soft bed and how much she wanted to snuggle up in it with Cord.

“That would save me some driving time,” Cord admitted.

“I’ll be there,” she said. “Here’s something to keep you going until then.” Pulling up her shirt, she snapped a picture of her cleavage and sent the photo to him.

A few seconds later, he was laughing. “What the hell? I thought you were in a restaurant?”

“Stepped away to the ladies’ room,” she fibbed without a qualm.

His voice was low and sexy and sounded very happy when he answered. “You’re really something, you know that?”

“Hurry home,” she told him. “But don’t drive too fast.”

Chapter Nine

Cord chuckled as he gazed at the picture Cindy had sent to his cell phone. Beneath the hood of his old Ford hummed the ancient engine Bolt had rebuilt for him, carrying him down the highway toward home and Cindy. He was looking forward to the day when his brother refinished the body, paint and interior. He'd offered to fix it up no-charge in between his current projects—he was rebuilding a vintage Cobra for a rock star while perfecting a new paint job on an actor's old Rolls Royce—but Cord was holding off until he had the cash to pay his brother for the work.

And right now, he didn't have the cash. Right now he was still trying to raise the ten thousand dollars he needed to close on that two thousand acres adjoining his property. He hoped to hear something about that soon.

With one hand, he carefully propped his phone open against the straw cowboy hat on the seat beside him. He'd picked it up for Cindy after the show. It was just a cheap ten-dollar job but she'd get a kick out of it. His forehead creased as his gaze snagged on the box lying beside the hat. The bracelet had cost substantially more but he hadn't been able to resist the colorful piece of jewelry once he'd seen it. The heavy silver band inset with polished plates of turquoise reminded him of Cindy—strong and wide, smooth and sleek, with a simple beauty lying just beneath the surface—a beauty that didn't jump out at you like a diamond solitaire. Instead, it had the sort of elegant, understated appeal that became more evident the deeper you looked, the longer you looked, the more you polished it.

His smile softened as he steered the old truck down the four-lane. Knowing Cindy, she probably wouldn't mind the idea that he'd taken the three-day job as a rodeo clown. He shuddered to think what Veronica's reaction would be. Veronica *would not* want to

be dating a rodeo clown who leapt into the middle of an arena wearing a ragged shirt and white face makeup.

Nobody looked good in clown makeup. They just looked like a clown.

But Cord didn't plan to tell Cindy or anybody else about his work in Cheyenne. It was just a three-day job anyhow. They'd called him at the last minute when Rusty McNabb had called in with the flu. They were short a rodeo clown. And Cord knew firsthand what could happen when a rodeo clown failed to turn up for work.

It had felt good, being back in the arena. The smell of the animals. The deep booming thump of the chute door swinging open. The silent, collective gasp of the crowd. The color and the action—wild and hectic—eight seconds of fierce, exhilarating unpredictability. He'd missed it. He'd missed it more than he'd realized.

Cord pushed out a sigh, wondering what *Martin* did for a living. Probably something that paid better than what *he'd* been doing in Cheyenne. On the other hand, Martin probably didn't have twelve hundred acres. That didn't mean that he didn't have a big house with a swimming pool out back, though. A knot of anxiety tightened in Cord's gut every time he thought about that jerk with *his* Miss May. He gripped the steering wheel so hard it was a wonder the old black plastic didn't snap. Taking a deep breath, he loosened his fingers, his palms itching with a sudden violent desire to turn Cindy over his knee and spank her perfect, doublewide ass for putting him through his current misery.

It was a long drive from Cheyenne to Denver, he discovered, when you were looking forward to a warm woman waiting for you in your bed. His cock stiffened every time he thought about Cindy. And he couldn't stop thinking about her. Digging a hand inside his stretchy cotton shorts, he straightened his dick out, frowning when the dark head poked out over the top of his low-rise jeans. He popped a few metal buttons just to make himself comfortable. He didn't want to choke the damn thing to death. Not before he'd used it on Cindy, anyhow.

Finally, he was turning onto Mountain View Drive. He pulled up behind Cindy's red Mustang, slipped his cell phone into his back pocket and gathered up the cowboy hat along with the plain white box that held the big silver bracelet.

A gleam of light caught his eye just before he closed the door on his pickup, the yellow glow from the overhead streetlight reflecting along the plastic cover of his checkbook lying on the truck's floor. Because his checkbook was black, it was hard to distinguish from the truck's vintage rubber mats. Only that narrow strip of light, running along its spine, gave it away. "There you are," he said to himself, sweeping the checkbook from the floor and shoving it into his back pocket along with his phone.

His long stride carried him to the front door where he retrieved his key, suddenly hit with the idea that someone might have broken in on Cindy while she was sleeping. It was a chilling notion that ran down his spine like a bolt of ice. He wished she'd taken the key in with her. As long as she hadn't, he let himself in and moved quietly down the hall.

He palmed the light switch on in the hall just outside his bedroom. The warm wash of light spilled into the room and over the bed where she lay. "Hey," he said softly, throwing the straw cowboy hat on the bed. "I brought you something."

She murmured a few sleepy words of thanks as he slid the white box onto the nightstand then emptied his pockets and rucked his pants down his legs.

After tugging his T-shirt over his head and tossing it into the clothes hamper inside his closet, he lifted the quilt and slipped beneath the crisp gray sheets. With a deep sigh of anticipation, he pulled Cindy's naked bottom into his groin, gathering her into his arms, holding her for several moments and absorbing her warmth against his chest while his cock pulsed in hungry, demanding surges.

She felt so good!

She was a lot of woman but it was all solid—sleek and smooth and so incredibly sexy it made his balls ache. He shifted his hips, rubbing his cock into her skin, wrapping

one hand loosely around her throat while his other found one of her breasts, pulling her weight into his cupped palm.

"Hey," she whispered in a sexy murmur, pushing her ass at him and wiggling until she had his cock positioned between her cheeks. She covered both his hands with hers, silently approving their presence.

"You should have brought the key in with you," he scolded her gently, taking her fingers to his mouth and brushing his lips across her knuckles.

"Mmm?"

"Are you awake?" he murmured, returning her hand to her breast and curling her fingers over her nipple.

"Mmm."

"Cindy?" Lifting himself on one elbow, he smiled down on her as he rubbed his big rough palm into her ass. "Wake up," he commanded softly.

She sighed and pushed her bottom into his groin.

"Wake up," he rumbled, giving her a light smack then rubbing his hand into the warm pink mark he'd made on her skin. When she shifted, the fingers of his other hand curled a little more tightly around her neck.

"I'm awake," she protested in a sleepy slur of words.

Again, he brought his hand against her ass.

"I'm awake!" she said more sharply, sounding like maybe she *was* awake this time. "What was that for?"

He lowered his mouth to her ear and nipped at the fragile outer shell. "That was for Martin," he told her.

"Martin?" she asked, sounding bewildered.

He lifted his hand threateningly as she stiffened beneath him. "Did you have sex with him?"

"No!" she hurried to reply.

"Did you kiss him?"

"No!" she insisted.

"Did you get wet with him?" he questioned her in a whispery rasp.

"Ugh," she answered. "Martin?"

"Good girl," he growled, dropping his hand and rubbing his palm into her ass again.

"Don't I get a reward for being so good?" she prodded him with a feminine giggle.

His wet tongue slid into her ear. "Sure you do, darlin'."

"What do I get?"

He rolled over her and used his hard, muscular thighs to spread her legs. Lifting up onto stiff arms, he rubbed his cock into the small cloud of hair on her mound. "You get as many inches as you can take."

She smiled up at him, lifting her hips and rolling her body into his. Her soft curls cushioned the ridge of his shaft and he hung his head, closing his eyes. When she widened her legs, he felt her moist pussy lips kissing his cock as she planted her feet on the mattress and continued to rock against him, sliding her hot lips along his erection.

A sigh of intense pleasure hissed between his lips as he started rocking with her. Together they moved like he was fucking her gently, while he let anticipation build in his balls and burn along his shaft. He pulled away when he felt his own moisture dampening his cock head. With his knees spread wide, he knelt between her legs, reaching for the nightstand and pulling a condom from the narrow drawer. His cock rose in a fierce stretch of steel-hard flesh curving inward to nudge his bellybutton as he ripped the package open and took his time rolling the latex down over his hard-on, relishing Cindy's warm gaze following his every action. When he was done, he swept his hand low and cupped his balls for a moment, groaning when her tongue swept coyly across her upper lip.

Everything she did was so damn provocative.

Repositioning himself lower on the bed, he slipped his hands beneath her thighs and went down on her, wrapping his arms around her legs and pinning her lower body to the mattress as he spread her sex open and gave her a long wet lick right from her sweetly dripping slit up to the button of her clitoris. He could *feel* it when her hungry open cunt fluttered with excitement. He could *feel* her pussy shudder around the gentle probe of his tongue. He'd only just woken her, only just opened her up and she was already quaking on the edge of climax.

Miss May was a sex machine...and he had more loose change than he knew what to do with.

He pressed his lips over her clit, making love to the little tag of flesh, suckling it gently, then pulling her folds wide so he could trail his tongue across her sensitive ruby flesh. So he could watch her feminine moisture slip from her opening and trail down between the globes of her ass. So he could watch her slit tremble when he sent a wash of warm breath over her skin.

Cindy moaned. "Oh Cord..."

"Mmmph?" His breath came hard and ragged, excitement building in his balls at every soft murmur and whispered sob she uttered. Her fingers were twisted in the sheets at her sides and her head tossed feverishly on the pillow as he took a long lingering taste, swiping his tongue across her opening and prodding gently at her folds as he dragged it back up over her clitoris.

She gasped as he took her over the edge, stiffening beneath him, her legs moving together by instinct. But he held them wide, using both hands to press them open while he suckled her clit and pressed his tongue into the rumpled folds that stretched from there to her spilling vagina.

When her greedy little slit had finished its shuddering spasms, he rose on her and mounted her with one hard drive.

Cindy cried out. "Cord!"

He had about five inches buried inside her and two more wrapped up in her thick outer pussy lips. Jesus, she was a delicious deep fuck. "Open up," he demanded as he ground his way into her. "Take me deeper, Cindy, darlin'. Take me all the way in."

"Y-yes..." she breathed.

He reached beneath her and, with one hand at the top of her buttocks, pulled her upward, canting her hips while she bent her knees and opened her legs for him. A damp sheen of sweat shimmered on his skin as he powered his way into her, his balls cushioned by the curve of her heavy cheeks. Fuck. She was pure pleasure. Pure hot, wet pleasure wrapped around his dick, cushioning his sac, creaming slick and wet as he slammed his cock head all the way to the back of her shivering cunt.

Cindy gazed up at the fabulous male beast rising above her, his sun-faded hair spilling across his damp forehead, an intense, almost feral desire flashing in his eyes as he watched his thick root stretching her entrance impossibly wide. Mother of God, it felt good. So incredibly good.

His mouth was slightly open, his lips pulled back enough to show a flash of straight white teeth as he worked his jaw. His muscles rippled beneath his burnished skin and his hand clutched her strongly at the top of her buttocks, pulling her lower body up to meet each punching thrust of his hips.

She moaned with growing ecstasy as he crushed to the back of her womb, arching within his arms as a second orgasm built inside her. "That feels good," she murmured. "You feel good inside me."

He grunted something in answer, nodding once.

"Let me see it," she told him.

He shook his head, a few damp strands of hair skittering across his brow. "See what?"

"Let me see your cock."

"Now?"

"Mmm-hmm. Let me see it now. It feels huge inside me. I want to see if it's as big as it feels."

His gaze was hazy with feral heat as he stared down at her. Carefully, he pulled his cock from the soft, clinging grasp of her vagina, kneeling back on his heels. His wet, latex-wrapped cock rose from the damp curls in his groin, huge and dark, filling the condom molded around his mushrooming cock head and long, thick stalk.

"Mmm-hmm," she said. "That's what it felt like. Huge."

One corner of his mouth turned up into a very male grin. As if to reward her, he fisted his cock and pumped himself a few times as she watched. Her pussy lips ached with an urgent scraping need, a need to be plowed and plundered, an unbearable heat building at the back of her sex as she watched him between her legs—his beautiful stone-cut body, his thick, muscular legs spread wide, his heavy sac hanging below his cock and his fingers wrapped around his thickly veined shaft, pumping himself for her pleasure.

His fist drew to a slow halt as he watched her hungrily. "Are you ready?" he rasped, the strain of desire roughening his words.

She gave him a languorous nod and he was on her in a heartbeat, this time riding her with a potent male urgency, unreined, wild, driven by a deep elemental hunger that hadn't been present earlier. Cindy's eyes widened with shock as he took her like an animal, no holds barred. He growled as he lowered his head and clamped her fat nipple between his teeth, rubbing his tongue into the pebbled crest caught between his blunt incisors.

It was so incredibly sexy.

She screamed as she came, shouting his name as he fucked her with powering intensity right through her orgasm. Only when she was enjoying the last pulling contractions did he thicken a final time, stretching her wide as he emptied inside her.

Feeling bone-soft and entirely sated, she snuggled into him when he fell beside her and pulled her over his chest. She nuzzled her face into the strong hollow above his collarbone, listening to the heavy beat of his heart, wishing she could lasso that wild, cowboy heart and keep it. Keep it safe from Veronica and safe from the lonely ghosts of a past life he hadn't been able to put behind him.

"Cord," she murmured tentatively after several quiet moments, "aren't there other things you could do at the rodeo? Isn't there a roping competition or something like that?"

"It wouldn't be the same," he answered in a sleep-roughened murmur. "It wouldn't be the same as the bulls. The excitement wouldn't be there. The thrill."

She drew in a long breath, taking his scent deep into her lungs, wondering why he didn't just tell her about what he'd been doing in Wyoming, wondering if, for some strange male reason a woman could never possibly understand, he needed her permission to be a rodeo clown. "What about one of those guys that distracts the bull when the rider falls off. Couldn't you do something like that?"

"You mean a rodeo clown."

She placed a soft line of kisses along his collarbone. "That's right."

Cord hesitated. "I'd have to wear makeup and a costume," he finally ventured.

"What's wrong with that?" she questioned him.

"Nothing," Cord murmured, reaching up and pulling a hand back through his stiff mane as Cindy gazed at the handsome male hair tufted in the strong hollow beneath his arm, loving his masculinity, his lean wiry sex appeal. He tucked his chin into his chest and gave her a warm smile. "It's just that..."

He didn't finish the sentence, not out loud. It was just that Veronica would never have suggested the idea—or approved of it. If Veronica wanted anything from him, she

wanted a pro bull rider with lots of money, lots of sponsorships and lots of sex appeal—not a rodeo clown who wore red suspenders and white grease paint.

“You’d be helping to protect other riders,” Cindy suggested in a sweet lilting purr.

He gazed down at her, tightening his hold on her, overwhelmed by the pure simple generosity of her love. “Well, when you put it that way,” he rasped gruffly, “it doesn’t sound like such a bad idea. I wouldn’t be able to do the whole circuit—not after my stock is delivered to the ranch—but I guess I could do the Cheyenne Rodeo in the summer and the Denver Stock Show in January.” With a feeling of overpowering tenderness washing over him, he collected her into his arms and pressed a long lingering kiss into her mouth.

Then he rolled her over onto her back again, burrowing his face into the soft hollow at the base of her throat.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked.

“I’m putting a hickey on your neck,” he mumbled against her tender skin.

“What?” she squealed softly, twisting beneath his taut frame. “I don’t want a hickey!”

“It’s not for you,” he murmured. “It’s for Martin.”

She stilled beneath him, smiling into the darkness. “Martin doesn’t need a hickey,” she told him softly.

He lifted his head and gazed down at her from half-closed eyes. “Are you sure?” he asked in a rough, possessive burr.

She nodded up at him, returning his questioning gaze. “I’m sure,” she told him quietly.

He dipped his head again. “In that case, this one’s for you,” he told her, using his teeth and lips on her soft skin, stamping her pale flesh with his mark of ownership as she squealed and giggled beneath him.

Chapter Ten

When Cindy woke the next morning, a warm pale light was sifting into the room through the blinds hanging at the window. Cord was gone, evidently having left early to get back up north to Cheyenne. She pushed herself into a sitting position and yawned, stretching her arms over her head as she checked the clock on the bedside table.

The cowboy hat he'd brought her was blocking her view of the clock and she reached for it with a smile, throwing it across the bed. But when she tried to check the time again, she couldn't see past the box sitting in front of the red digital readout. The plain white box was angled over a small pile of change tossed together with a few crumpled receipts, the house key and an old battered cell phone that looked like it had probably been retired several years earlier.

Curious, Cindy reached for the box and opened it.

Her mouth turned down when she saw what was inside. Cord needed ten thousand dollars and he was spending his money like this? On a bracelet for Veronica? Cindy shook her head. How foolish was that?

She eyed the small wrinkled pile of receipts. She knew it was none of her business how much the bracelet cost but...

She searched through them anyway.

But all of the receipts appeared to be for either gas or meals. Feeling guilty and snoopy, she crumpled them up again and carefully arranged them on the top of the bedside table so as to look...unsnooped-with.

Whatever. The bracelet must have cost at least six hundred dollars.

She folded her arms over her chest, glowering at the open box. The thick, rich silver fairly glowed around the colorful turquoise inlay. There was something strong and

binding about a thick flow of polished silver designed to wrap your wrist. Something permanent. Something deeply personal. A bracelet like that would last a lifetime to be passed lovingly on to the next generation. A cowboy hat...well, it was a completely impersonal gift and that's all there was to it.

Cindy pushed out a wry sigh, closing the box again and returning it to the bedside table. Veronica got a beautiful bracelet and *she* got a cowboy hat! That pretty much defined her relationship with Cord Hardin.

She shrugged one shoulder as she slid out of the tangled sheets, trying to locate the clothing she'd shed the night before. Maybe it was an investment. Maybe Cord was buttering Veronica up so he could hit her up for the money he needed.

Unfortunately, that didn't make Cindy feel a whole lot better.

* * * * *

Cord didn't even try to call her until the end of the day. By that time, Cindy was good and truly pissed. Okay, so the guy didn't use his cell phone much but he could have used it *once—to call her!* She was, after all, wearing his damn hickey on her neck! To Cindy, that indicated a level of intimacy that required a daily phone call! In fact, she'd had to wear a turtleneck to cover up the damn thing—despite the fact that it was July and despite the fact that the eighteen-year-old she was tutoring probably knew *exactly* why she was wearing a turtleneck in July.

When her cell phone finally started ringing in the late evening, she checked the incoming ID. With a feeling of savage vengeance, she ignored Cord's calls, leaving her cell phone bleating at the bottom of her purse when she went to bed later that night.

It was the same ringing cell phone that woke her up the next morning. Evidently Cord was looking for some more tutoring before his visit with Veronica. Either that or another quick no-strings-attached fuck. She let the phone ring a good long time before she finally got slowly out of bed, donned her pale blue robe, slipped her feet into her

slippers and sashayed down the hall toward her purse and the insistent cry of her cell phone.

"Hey," Cord said, his deep voice edged with concern. "I've been trying to reach you."

"Really," she answered archly. "Because if you called me anytime before nine o'clock last night, that would be news to me."

"I'm sorry. I worked most of the afternoon," he explained. "I didn't get home until nine."

"And your cell phone was broken all morning?"

Cord groaned. "I left the damn thing on the nightstand beside the bed."

Cindy pursed her lips, trying to decide what she thought about that. There *had been* an old cell phone lying beside the pile of receipts on his bedside table. At the time, she'd thought it was a discarded phone no longer in use. Maybe she was being unreasonable.

"I see you left your present here. Didn't you like it?"

The hat? She'd left the cheap cowboy hat sitting on his bed, a few inches away from Veronica's expensive bracelet. Cindy watched the toe of her foot, tapping angrily against the hardwood floor in her dining room. Veronica got a silver bracelet and she got a cowboy hat.

Maybe she wasn't being that unreasonable, after all.

"It was great," she drawled back at him, an impatient bite in her voice. "Thanks for thinking of me."

"It reminded me of you."

Yeah, well, that figured. "Thanks," she answered flatly, blinking back the angry wash of tears piling up at the back of her eyes.

"Cindy, is something wrong?"

"No. No, Cord. I just think... I just think you don't need me anymore. Not very much."

"Not very much!"

She lifted her chin proudly. "I mean, I think you're ready to fly. I think you're ready to take the world by storm. I think you're ready for Veronica's party today!"

"Cindy, I—"

"Cord! You don't need me! You never needed me. You're charming and thoughtful and as well-spoken as you need to be! You're not a boor and you're not ill-mannered. You're the closest thing to a gentleman I've ever met and I...and I can't do this anymore," she insisted, her voice cracking. "Please, Cord. I don't want to see you again. If you're the gentleman I think you are, you'll release me from my tutoring obligation."

He sounded stunned when he said, "You don't want to see me? Why?"

"You're...just not my type," she answered, grasping at straws.

"I seemed to be your type Thursday night," he argued breathlessly.

"That's because...that's because I was faking it!"

There was a long insulted silence on the other end of the line then a very certain growl. "No, you weren't."

Cindy stalked across her dining room and into the kitchen. Her hand was shaking as she reached for the glass coffee pot and carried it to the sink. "Goodbye, Cord. Please don't call me again."

"Cindy! I still owe you for —"

The last thing Cindy heard as she disconnected the call was Cord demanding her address. She finished making coffee then left it steaming on the counter as she took herself back to bed for a good long cry.

After Cindy hung up on him, Cord stared at the phone for several angry seconds. "Faking it, my ass," he snarled.

It had been a long restless night with very little sleep. He'd kept waking up wondering where the hell Cindy was – worrying about her one minute, wondering who the fuck she was spending the night with the next.

Veronica was the last thing on his mind as he'd tried Cindy's phone again the minute he'd dragged himself, bleary-eyed, from his bed. He was so relieved to hear her voice he could hardly think straight. But he damn sure hadn't been thinking about Veronica *or* her noon luncheon. All he could think about was getting his arms around Cindy, getting his lips against Cindy's, getting his cock inside Cindy.

But Cindy didn't want to see him anymore! Cindy had been...faking it! Now there didn't seem to be any reason *not* to go to Veronica's party.

Angrily, he tore open his closet door, pulled out his new blazer and slacks and slung them on the bed. Growling all the way to the bathroom, he showered and shaved and dressed. He was still breathing fire as he stood in front of his mirrored closet doors, fumbling with the awkward fucking cufflinks Cindy had made him buy.

"Faking it," he muttered. "Faking it!" he shouted at his reflection in the mirror, throwing his hands in the air and turning on his heel to glare at the rumpled sheets on his bed, still sex-wrecked from all the "faking it" that had gone on there one night earlier.

Well, Veronica had her faults but she'd never, *never* lowered herself to anything like *faking it*. A woman couldn't insult a man more than that. It was bad enough for a man to learn that he hadn't been able to satisfy his partner. But at least, if the woman were honest, he could work on it and try to fix it. Faking it was the ultimate betrayal. Maybe not as bad as screwing your two closest friends, but it was pretty high up there.

Faking it.

He checked his watch. Veronica's party started at noon.

He stomped into the kitchen and snagged a cup of coffee, welcoming the burn traveling his throat as he glared around the kitchen, his gaze falling on the glossy white cover of Cindy's English textbook.

Slowly he approached the table, his coffee cup in one hand, reaching out with his other, smoothing his fingertips across the volume's cover before opening the book. There, stuck to the inside of the hard cover, he found a small label complete with Cindy Patterson's address and a handwritten line above it that read in blue ink, *if found please return to...*

Sweeping the book from the table, Cord returned to his bedroom and collected the straw cowboy hat and the box with the bracelet, stuffing all of it into the empty plastic bag his new shirts had come in. Marching back down the hall, he grabbed his best black felt hat from the hat rack and crushed it on his head. The front door banged behind him as he strode down the paved walk toward his truck. After climbing inside, he drove west across town to Cindy's house.

He was still angry when he found her little split-level home. In fact, he was so steamed it was a wonder he could see out through his windshield. The garage door was closed and her red Mustang was parked on the driveway, confirming that he had the right address.

Stalking up to her white-paneled front door, he tossed the plastic bag at her woven welcome mat and pulled out his checkbook, writing a check for three hundred dollars against the smooth stucco wall. After signing it, he tore the check out and threw it into the bag slumped against the door. Then he stabbed the doorbell three times and walked away.

Heading back across town, Cord probably got halfway to Veronica's before he calmed down enough to start thinking rationally. When he did, he got to wondering where he was going and perhaps more importantly, why. In many ways, he was driven, focused. And for years now he'd been focused on one thing—Veronica Lake Powers. What had started out as a teenage infatuation had turned into an obsession.

Cord liked to win.

He'd spent his life winning.

Veronica stood out there like the ultimate challenge—the last bastion to be overcome, the one thing in life that he’d always wanted but had never been able to attain.

Cord liked a challenge. But at this point, he had to entertain the idea that perhaps Veronica had become a goal...and not much more. She wasn’t so much someone he loved as something he wanted, just so he could claim some sort of personal victory. He might not ever have even realized that he didn’t love Veronica, except for Cindy. Because after Cindy had walked into his life, he realized that what he felt for his English tutor was far, far stronger than anything he’d ever felt for Veronica.

Now Cord had to wonder what the hell he’d do if he were to ever actually *get* Veronica. He had a feeling that, if he were to finally win her, he’d be losing a whole lot more than he’d gained.

Starting with Cindy.

Stepping hard on the Ford’s old metal brake, Cord spun the steering wheel and turned the truck around, making a U-turn in the middle of the street and heading back into the center of the city to April’s house, where Bolt and Tavia were staying.

Cord needed someone to talk to. And when it came to talking and listening and cut-to-the-chase advice, there wasn’t anyone who could do it better than Bolt.

* * * * *

After April let him in, Cord stalked across the marble-tiled foyer and into the long, open living room. Bolt and Tavia were snuggled together on the curved cream-colored sofa, Bolt’s arm around Tavia’s shoulders, his feet propped on the coffee table in front of the leather couch. Dalton was on the other side of the kitchen counter, a pot of coffee in his fist. Cord stopped in the middle of the gray rug’s deep pile, lifting his arms away from his sides, turning out a circle in the middle of the strangely silent living room. “What do you think?” he finally asked.

Bolt squinted at him. “I dunno. What were you going for?”

Cord dropped his arms to his sides. "Sophisticated!" he yelled at his brother.

"No need to shout," Bolt answered in a drawl. "Nothing wrong with my hearing."

Cord stared at him. "Do I look *sophisticated*?" he shouted.

Bolt nodded. "Very fucking sophisticated."

Cord grunted, nodding his head.

Bolt waved a hand at him. "So where are you going, looking all sophisticated like that?"

"Veronica's."

Bolt let the silence build between them for several seconds. "Why?" he finally asked.

Cord fell into the wide-armed chair flanking the couch, accepting the mug of coffee that Dalton put in his hand. "Damned if I know."

"Do you know what I think?" Bolt said, his eyes gleaming with a shrewd golden light. "I think that if Veronica Lake Powers were to pull that coat tree out of her ass and finally decide she was in love with you, it would take about ten minutes for you to realize you didn't want her. That you'd never really wanted her. And five minutes after that, you'd walk."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And I think you'd be doing the right thing. So why don't you save yourself the trouble and walk now? The question then becomes, where would you go after you walked away from Miss Powers?"

"Miss May," he murmured, gazing into the swirl of light reflecting on the black surface of his coffee. He lifted his troubled gaze and searched the faces of his family. "I'd go to Cindy, if I could. But she said she didn't want to see me again."

"Why?" April demanded, the astonished question bursting from her lips like an explosion of disbelief.

Cord grimaced, shaking his head at the floor. Like he could ever tell anyone why.

His cell phone rang and he slid his mug onto the coffee table then fumbled his phone out of his pocket, pushing several buttons before he hit the right one. "Hello?"

Cindy's voice on the other end of the line was one of the most welcome sounds he'd ever heard in his lifetime. "Cord?" she started in a small voice.

"Cindy!"

"Cord? I found the things you left outside my door. I just wanted to thank you...for returning my book...and for the gift."

His voice turned stiff with impatience. "Yeah. You did that already."

"No, I thanked you for the hat. I...I didn't know about the bracelet."

"You're welcome," he said gruffly. "I left it beside the bed Friday morning. Didn't you find it?"

"Oh I found it but I didn't know... I didn't think it was for me."

"Well, who on earth did you think it was for?"

"Veronica," she answered a little unevenly. "I thought it was for Veronica."

"Oh," he said, the gears turning slowly in his head. She'd woken up in his bed and found what she assumed was an expensive and thoughtful gift for another woman. That could put a girl off a bit. Maybe make her feel she didn't want to see him again. "I'm sorry. It never occurred to me that you'd think— Hell, Cindy. I bought it for you. When I saw it, the first thing I thought of was you."

He squinted and turned his head, listening hard. Was that a sob? "Don't cry," he said softly. "You should have known. Hell, Veronica wouldn't be caught dead wearing silver and turquoise. With Veronica it would have to be platinum and diamonds or nothing at all."

That bought him a few chuckling sobs.

"Don't say that," she said, pulling in a deep sniff. "Veronica might hear you."

"Veronica isn't here," he told her. "I'm at my sister's house. But I'm on my way back there right now to collect an apology from you."

There was a short sniffing silence before he said, "Cindy?"

"I owe you an apology," she admitted in a tiny, contrite voice.

"And what do you owe me an apology for?" he asked her sternly.

"I...I wasn't faking it," she mumbled.

Cord closed the phone and leapt to his feet.

"What! Where are you going?" Bolt called out, laughing as Cord strode toward Dalton's front door.

"I'm walking," Cord told his brother. "So don't anybody get in my way."

He turned around again before he made the door, backing across the foyer. "She wasn't faking it!" he shouted as he pulled open the door and raced outside.

* * * * *

Cord cursed his old pickup all the way back to Cindy's house. As soon as he could afford it, he was going to retire the Ford to the ranch and get himself something faster.

He rolled to a stop in front of her split-level and had the truck door open before the engine quit running. A few long strides had him standing on her welcome mat. He stabbed the doorbell three impatient times then tried the door. It was open. When he stepped inside, he found Cindy moving across her living room to meet him. That pert smile of hers was still there despite the tears she hurried to wipe from beneath her puffy eyes.

Brave.

She was so brave—determined to act as though she could take it. Determined to pretend that he didn't matter to her. That she could do casual sex with the best of them. But he *did* matter to her and he knew it. He was as important to her as she was to him.

"Hey," he said softly.

"Hey," she squeaked back.

She was wearing his bracelet and it looked so perfectly right on her. He couldn't help reaching for her wrist and rubbing his thumb over the turquoise inlay then lifting her hand to his lips and pressing a kiss to the inside of her wrist.

He ran his other hand back through his hair, looking for the right words. It took him a few seconds to come up with something he thought might do. "I was just thinking about that night when Veronica kicked me out. She told me if I couldn't behave like a gentleman, I could just go get myself another girlfriend."

She nodded several times without speaking, her eyes fixed on his chest.

"And...right now, I'm thinking that second alternative is sounding pretty good."

She let loose with a sound that was half sob, half brave chuckle.

His shoulders slumped, his reaction one of relief combined with frustration as he rubbed his thumb over the silver bracelet and asked, "How could you think the bracelet was for Veronica? I left it on the table beside the bed, underneath that hat I bought for you."

"I thought...I assumed...you were still in love with her or...or that you were hoping she could loan you..."

Cord put a finger against her lips. "You think too much. And you assume way too much more. Did you ever *think* that I might have lost interest in Veronica after I met you? Did you ever *assume* that you might be sexier than Veronica, nicer, more fun to be with? Did it ever *occur to you* that maybe I was falling in love with *you*, right from the very first moment I saw you?"

Cindy bit her bottom lip, gazing up at him as she shook her head.

Cord snorted softly, dropping her wrist so he could hold her face in both hands as he gazed down at her. His voice was soft with gentle chiding as he said, "And you think you're so smart."

A chuckling sob broke from her chest as he pulled her into his hard frame.

"I'm sorry it took me so long," he explained, "but I've spent most of my adult life thinking I wanted Veronica, so I guess it isn't too surprising that I needed a whole week with you to figure out that I...didn't. I don't want to go to Veronica's party. I don't want to go anywhere. I just want to stay here with you. Can I just stay here with you, Cindy?"

"*May*," she corrected him in a wobbly whisper. "It's *may* I just stay here with you."

"Let me try that again," he murmured. He cleared his throat with a deep rumble. "May I stay here with you, Miss May?" He lowered his head and nibbled at the delicate rim of her ear. "Please say yes and make me the happiest man in the world."

Epilogue

"It's on!" Bolt shouted at his brother-in-law.

With a beer clutched in his long fingers, Dalton strode from the kitchen, across the hardwood dining room floor and into Tavia's carpeted living room, where he dropped onto the couch, his arm around April and his attention fixed on the television.

Cindy and Cord had driven down to Santa Fe with April and Dalton to spend the long Labor Day weekend with Bolt and Tavia. Colt had made the trip on his own, timing his arrival to coincide with the first airing of Cord's new Rustler commercial.

Tavia's home was huge, with a sprawling new addition Bolt had helped build for the successful author. Several beautiful pastels hung on the living room and dining room walls, the work of her brother-in-law Dalton Cristofer, an even more successful artist. Cord's family was full of surprises.

Everyone cheered when Cord's ass came into view on the high definition television screen. His big hand swept over his back pocket, dusting off his butt as he strode toward a split rail fence. As he turned, he tugged on the brim of his hat while the camera swung upward and focused on his face. His hat shadowed his eyes, leaving his finely sculpted mouth cast in light.

"Cord," Tavia squealed from her place on the wide arm of Bolt's chair. "You're so handsome! And you're on TV!"

He sent her a grin from the loveseat where he sat cuddling Cindy into his side. "All the credit goes to Colt," he said, raising his beer bottle in a toast of thanks.

Colt grimaced. "All I did was send Rustler Jeans a short of you dusting off your ass after a fall. The clip sold itself."

They watched as the Rustler trademark popped up on the television screen and the voice-over announced in a deep western drawl, "Rustler Stone Washed Jeans. They look good even when they're washed up."

Cord's rugged smile melted into a slow frown as he angled his head to glare at his younger brother. "Washed up!"

Colt turned his grimace into an evil grin. "Did I forget to mention that part? Renny and I built the entire series of Rustler ads around the 'washed up' theme. Each of the ads features one of the better-looking has-beens from football, hockey, rodeo..."

Cord sent him a pained look. "What do you mean, *has-beens*?"

"Some of the *better-looking* has-beens," Colt corrected him with a mollifying air.

Cord glowered at his younger brother for several seconds.

"Don't you snarl at Colt," Cindy scolded him. "The advance he got you helped you to close on your land deal!"

Colt jerked his chin at his brother. "And the rest of your fee should build you a very nice little home out on your ranch."

The tight line of Cord's mouth softened a bit as though he was considering an apology but, if he was, he was interrupted before he got around to it.

"How is Renny?" Bolt interjected quietly.

Colt lifted one shoulder in a dismissive gesture. "She's...there."

"Well, I'm glad to know there's one woman you still tolerate."

"I can't very well fire her," Colt muttered gracelessly.

"No you can't." Bolt lifted a finger and tilted it at his youngest brother. "And if you do anything to hurt that little assistant of yours, I'm coming after you with both fists. You hear me, Colt? Don't think you can punish Renny just because you're mad at the world."

But Bolt's lecture was cut short by the ring of Cord's battered cell phone. After punching two or three buttons, he lifted the phone to his ear. "Veronica!"

Both April and Tavia caught Cindy's eye. April frowned while Tavia made a sour face.

"You saw the commercial!" Cord was saying in a deep drawl. "Yeah? I'm glad you loved it. Yeah. Yeah. It *was* pretty hot, wasn't it?" He chuckled, turning and winking at Cindy while she crossed her arms over her chest and rolled her eyes.

"You'd like to see me? How soon?"

When Cindy slumped lower into the couch's deep cushions, sticking out her bottom lip in an exaggerated pout, Cord leaned closer, pressing a penitent kiss into the corner of her mouth.

"When am I available? Well, if you want to see me, it might have to wait until I'm back from my honeymoon."

Cindy froze, her eyes going wide as she straightened in her seat.

"Yeah. I'm getting married." Cord pulled the phone from his ear. Time stood still as Cindy stared into Cord's teasing green gaze. His voice was quiet and full of deep warmth when he asked, "Will you marry me, Cindy?"

Cindy stared at him, so shocked and stunned she couldn't even find the words with which to answer—even knowing the word she was looking for was *yes*!

Yes! Yes! Yes!

"You might have to sell your house," Cord continued, "and look for a new job. But there are schools out in Morgan Coun—"

She threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and knocking the cell phone from his hand. It fell to the floor, closing on a final shrill note from Veronica as Cindy finally found that one little word she was looking for and whispered it against his ear.

Filled up to the brim with bubbling joy, she palmed the happy tears from her cheeks as she accepted congratulations from Cord's family, jumping to her feet and bouncing on her toes as she received a healthy hug from April.

Dalton leaned down to kiss her on the cheek and Colt shook her hand. When she turned to look for Bolt and Tavia, they were just reentering the living room, evidently having slipped away for a few minutes without her noticing. Tavia was hiding a grin behind her hand, pushing Bolt along as he approached Cindy with a square shoebox in his large, work-roughened hand.

“Early wedding present,” he muttered, ducking his head in a guilty gesture—the action at odds with the pure mischief that glittered in his golden eyes and curved his wickedly male mouth.

Cindy opened the box with a questioning look aimed at Cord. Slowly she pulled from the box a pair of scarlet patent leather pumps with ankle straps, along with a hammer and two long nails. Laughing uncertainly, she looked at Bolt then transferred her gaze to her husband-to-be. She tipped the box, showing him the hammer and nails tucked in beside the lipstick-red high heels. “Cord,” she questioned him, “do you have any idea what these are for?”

Cord narrowed his eyes in thought before a slow smile spread across his features. “Let me think on it a bit, Miss May. I’m sure I’ll come up with something.”

About the Author

I slung the heavy battery pack around my hips and cinched it tight – or tried to.

“Damn.” Brian grabbed an awl. Leaning over me, he forged a new hole in the loose belt looped around my waist.

“Any advice?” I asked him as I pulled the belt tight.

“Yeah. Don’t reach for the ore cart until it starts moving, then jump on the back and immediately duck your head. The voltage in the overhead cable won’t just kill you. It’ll blow you apart.”

That was my first day on my first job. Employed as an engineer, I’ve worked in an underground mine that went up—inside a mountain. I’ve swung over the Ohio River in a tiny cage suspended from a crane in the middle of an electrical storm. I’ve hung 30 feet in the air over the Hudson River at midnight in an aluminum boat—suspended from a floating barge at the height of a blizzard, while snowplows on the bridge overhead rained slush and salt down on my shoulders. You can’t do this sort of work without developing a sense of humor, and a sense of adventure.

New to publishing, both my reading and writing habits are subject to mood and I usually have several stories going at once. When I need a really good idea for a story, I clean toilets. Now *there’s* an activity that engenders escapism.

I was surveying when I met my husband. He was my ‘rod man’. While I was trying to get my crosshairs on his stadia rod, he dropped his pants and mooned me. Next thing I know, I’ve got the backside of paradise in my viewfinder. So I grabbed the walkie-talkie. “That’s real nice,” I told him, “but would you please turn around? I’d rather see the other side.”

...it was love at first sight.

Madison welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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