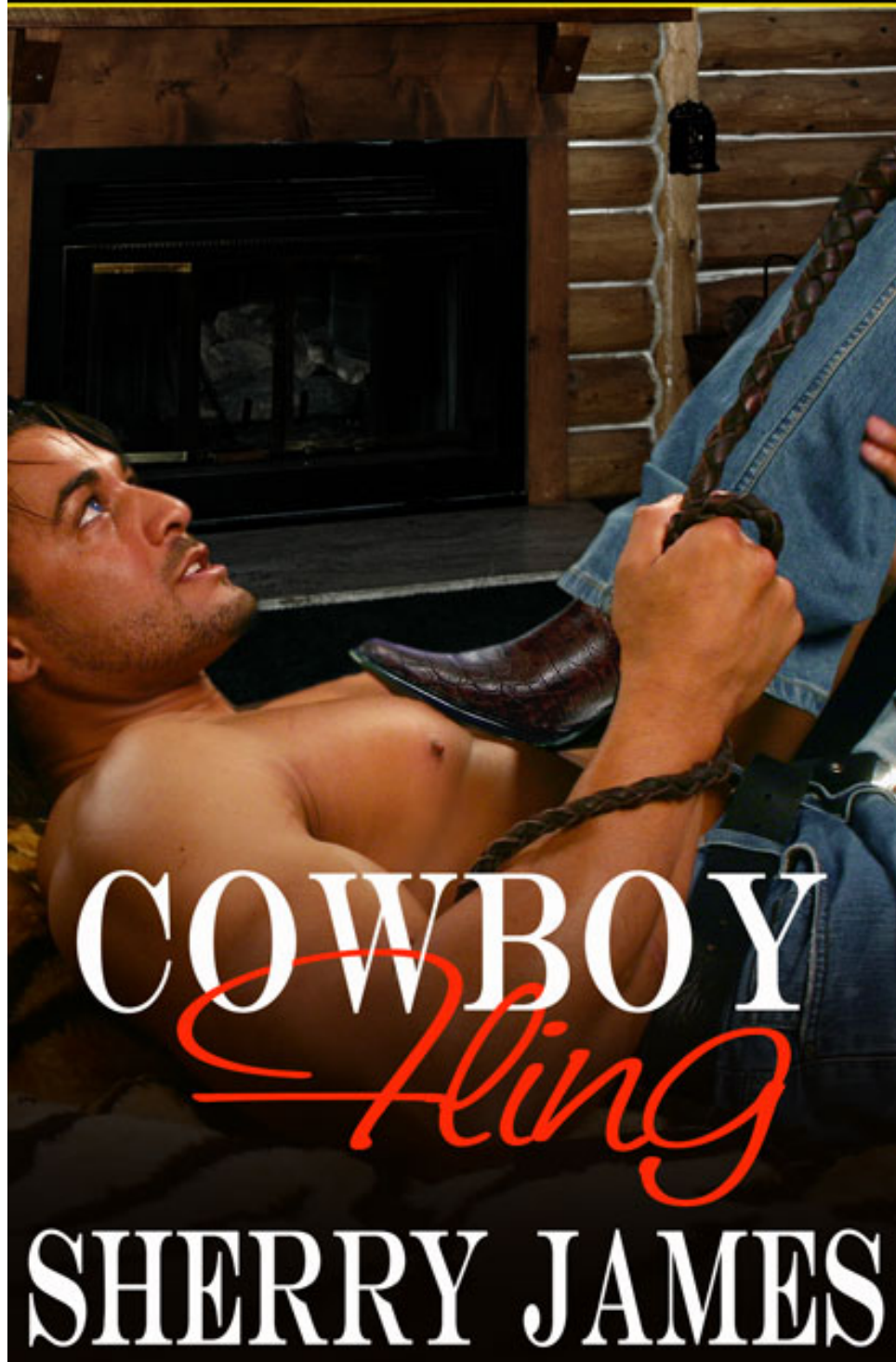


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



COWBOY

*Hing*

SHERRY JAMES

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Cowboy Fling

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# *COWBOY FLING*

**Sherry James**

## *Dedication*

*For all the women who have ever loved a cowboy.*

## *Acknowledgements*

My sincerest thanks to my two ace critique partners on this project, Noelle and Julie. You gals are the best.

And thanks to my editor, Jaynie Ritchie, for welcoming me into the EC family, and for being patient with my software glitches.

## *Trademark Acknowledgements*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Atlanta Falcons: Atlanta Falcons Football Club

Dodge Neon: Daimler Chrysler Corp.

Dodge Ram: Daimler Chrysler Corp.

Jacuzzi: Jacuzzi Inc. Corporation

Jell-O: Kraft Foods Holdings, Inc.

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Twinkies: Continental Baking Co. Corporation

## **Chapter One**

"So, today's the day," Paige Holister said with trepidation as she paced the floor of her twin sister Dorie's office.

"Thirty years old and still single," Dorie said as she grabbed a glass fishbowl off the shelf. "Time to let the fantasies begin." She wiggled her trim bottom clad in a hip-hugging, thong required, red satin dress. If looks could kill, Dorie would leave a trail of dead men in her wake this night.

As usual, Paige felt plain and unattractive compared to her beautiful, wildly impulsive sister. And the simple black dress Paige had chosen to wear to their birthday bash tonight didn't compare to the dazzling red number Dorie wore. She loved her sister dearly, but Paige had long ago given up trying to keep pace.

Paige snatched the bowl from her sister's hands and shook up the colored strips of paper stuffed inside. No way was she letting Dorie draw for her. Paige wanted to be in complete control of her own fantasies even if she had no intentions of going through with them.

"It's been five years since we made this insane pact. I can't believe you're still insisting we go through with it," Paige said stubbornly.

"Of course we're going through with it. It's a brilliant idea. We agreed if we weren't married by age thirty, we'd each draw three sexual fantasies out of the fishbowl and go for it. The time has come, dear sister. Hot pink for me. Neon green for you." Dorie pointed to the colored strips in the bowl. "You're just mad because I didn't forget like you hoped I would."

Paige groaned. Not only hadn't her sister not forgotten about their sexual fantasy dream bowl, Dorie had made sure every single fantasy that passed Paige's lips got

written down on a slip of neon green paper. And after a night out with the girls when the alcohol and fun had flowed freely, so had the fantasies.

"I figured we'd both be married by now and going to this extreme wouldn't be necessary. It's kind of depressing if you think about it."

"Depressing?" Dorie said with a mixture of shock and disbelief in her voice. "Honey, if having the chance to live out your sexual fantasies is depressing, then you're in a deeper rut than I thought. You need psychiatric help."

Rut? Could that be Paige's problem? She had a good life in spite of the fact she had a tough time keeping a member of the opposite sex in it. A man magnet she was not. That was Dorie's call in life. Dorie, the sexy travel agent who'd bounded around the world and experienced more things than Paige could ever imagine.

Paige was the sensible, plain twin sister who had a rooted, steady job, a nice apartment, a new car and a closet full of Dorie's shoes to borrow at any time. But then Paige didn't ever find the need to wear stilettos. As an ER nurse, tennis shoes were more her style. Even tonight for the party, she'd opted for a more sensible style of pump.

"I guess maybe fate had this route planned for us all along." Paige sighed. "Or was it really us? I mean, did we subconsciously avoid serious relationships so we could live out our wild sexual fantasies?"

"Me, yes. You? Never. You're just a timid mouse when it comes to men. You're curled up in your comfort zone and afraid to poke your head out and see what the rest of the world has to offer."

"I've seen what the rest of the world has to offer and it isn't pretty. I could tell you stories from the ER that would curl that straight blonde hair of yours."

"Save it. What I'm talking about is living. All you ever do is work, read, sleep and run. You need a new life. You need some serious excitement. And some serious sex. Speaking of which, when was the last time you had any?"

"I think Savannah provides me with all the excitement I need. The ER is seldom dull," Paige said, ignoring her prying sister's question about her sex life. She refused to talk about her lack of one, even with Dorie. Paige plunked down on the plush couch, hugging the fishbowl to her breast as if afraid Dorie would snatch it away.

"Savannah is an exciting city, but you were born and raised here. Paige, it's passé for you. So are the men. You need to get to know men besides wife-cheating doctors."

"Not all doctors cheat on their wives. And for those that do, they aren't doing it with me. I just haven't found the right guy yet, is all."

"Well, we can't wait forever for all the stars and planets to line up in perfect order before you do. Besides, we've got a party waiting for us. It's our big three-O. I'm not wasting the evening away on this debate."

Paige suppressed a moan, not really wanting to go to the party. The restaurant would be bursting with Dorie's usual rowdy crowd, and only a handful of Paige's more reserved, book-loving friends.

And turning thirty only made the whole affair worse. She'd thought that by this age she'd have her whole mess of a personal life straightened out. But she didn't. And she couldn't see any hope for improvement lurking around the corner.

Maybe Dorie was right. Maybe it was time to try something new, push aside the apprehensions and simply go for it. Paige had known for a long time she was tired of life passing her by. Secretly, she'd always longed to be a little bit more spontaneous like Dorie.

Here was her chance.

"Okay. Let's draw," she said with the first ounce of determination she'd felt all day.

"You were born first. You draw first. Age before beauty," Dorie teased.

"Thanks," Paige said sarcastically. She reached into the bowl, pulling out one of her slips of green paper.

"Who knew two women could have so many sexual fantasies," Dorie said, eyeing the overstuffed bowl. "Isn't this exciting? So what does it say? Come on, read it."

Paige took a deep breath. Here was her moment of truth. Her sexual fantasies were about to come true. That is, if she had enough nerve to see them through.

Unfolding the paper as though expecting it to explode, Paige held in a mixture of excitement and trepidation. She'd been stuffing fantasies in that bowl for five years. Who knew what insane things she'd written in all that time? What if she pulled out something really bizarre, like have sex with the President?

Paige peeked at her handwriting through the slit of one eye. Her breath caught and her cheeks warmed.

"Well, come on. I can't stand the suspense," Dorie prodded.

Paige took a deep breath. It could be worse. Much worse. "Have a fling with a cowboy."

"Woo-hoo! You lucky girl. Just make sure he takes his spurs off before —"

"I can't go through with this," Paige groaned as reality set in. She set the bowl on the desk with a thud.

"What? You have to. Now draw again. Two more to go."

"But I'd been drinking when I wrote this. See, you can tell by my handwriting I wasn't coherent at the time. Look. None of my letters are uniform," Paige said with mounting panic as she shoved the paper under her sister's nose.

"Tough. You know the rules. We draw three fantasies. We have three days to complete them and no backing out allowed. Now draw."

Paige scowled and stuck her hand in the bowl and pulled out another slip of paper. "Have sex in a public place? This isn't one of my fantasies. I never wrote this."

"Stop trying to chicken out, Paige. You wrote that after we saw that couple hot for each other at the last Atlanta Falcons game we went to. Remember you said you wondered what it would be like to have the nerve —"



"Never mind." Paige plunged her hand back into the bowl and yanked out her third and final fantasy. She opened the paper and rolled her eyes. "Damn. What the hell was I thinking?"

Dorie snatched away the paper. "Wow! Tie up your lover. Paige, how about you wear his spurs?"

"Yeah, right. This is ridiculous. I can't go through with this. In fact, I refuse to go through with this." Paige threw up her hands and resumed her pacing.

"No way. You're not backing out. We had a deal, remember? And may I remind you that if you back out now, you'll owe me a thousand dollars for every fantasy you fail to complete."

Paige wanted to scream. Leave it to Dorie to uphold every stinking rule of the game.

"All right. You win. So where am I going to find a real cowboy? They aren't exactly stampeding down Savannah's main street."

"You go to where the cowboys are, dear sister."

"And just where would that be?"

"West."

"West? Where west? How far west?"

"This is late July. I know the perfect place. You have vacation time coming, don't you?" Dorie walked over to the computer, clicked on the Internet and scanned through the various travel destination sites she checked daily for her clients.

"Yes. Four weeks. But I'm saving it. Besides, this could be dangerous. Every fantasy in that jar was preceded by one too many Jell-O shots. I never think straight after Jell-O shots."

"Paige. We're talking about your ultimate sexual fantasies here," Dorie said with obvious frustration. "If this isn't something to use your vacation for, I don't know what is. Besides, it sure as hell beats your idea of a vacation."

“What’s wrong with taking a Georgia ghost tour?”

“Nothing if you have a man to share it with and you turn it into a romantic getaway. Traveling with a bus full of senior citizens isn’t exactly romantic. You’re turning thirty, not eighty.”

“That bus tour is the cheapest way to go, yet see all I want to see. My book club got a special group rate—”

“Money isn’t the issue and you know it. You’re afraid to ask a man to go anywhere with you. You’re afraid to venture out alone. And you’re embarrassed by your loneliness.”

Paige wanted to tell her sister where to go, but deep down inside, she knew Dorie was right. All Paige’s life her twin had pushed and prodded her to live it up a little, and when Paige did, she ended up in trouble. Big trouble. Practical Paige eventually rebelled against her sister’s antics and stuck her nose in a book where she couldn’t get hurt. The only trouble now – she never took her nose out of that book.

“This is only for three days. You won’t come close to using your full four weeks,” Dorie said, interrupting Paige’s thoughts. “Then again, it might be a good idea to have some recovery time. It’s not every day a girl has a chance to get spur marks on her—”

“Enough. I can’t believe I was gullible enough to fall for another one of your absurd ideas.”

“It’s an amazing idea. You’re just scared.”

“I am not.”

“Comfort...zone.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not going to be traipsing across the frontier looking for a strange cowboy to have an affair with.”

“Relax. Where I’m sending you, you’ll be fine. People don’t even lock their doors. I’ll make all the travel arrangements for you. Keep your cell phone on and with you at

all times. Buy a new can of pepper spray and take the dog with you. You'll have a great time."

"Take the dog with me? Oh yeah, Nappy is one killer guard dog."

"The dog isn't for protection, sweetie. Cowboys have a soft spot in their hearts for animals. Nappy is an open invitation for a cowboy to say hi."

\* \* \* \* \*

Paige parked the rental car in the crowded parking lot near the rodeo arena. A billow of dust rushed through her open window and stung her eyes. So this was Cheyenne Frontier Days? She couldn't believe she was in Wyoming. Even more so, she couldn't believe why she was here in the first place.

To fulfill her sexual fantasies.

Yeah, right. She would've laughed out loud at the idea if she wasn't shaking in her tennis shoes. Going on the prowl for men wasn't something she made a habit of doing. And to be honest, she really didn't know where, or how, to start.

"Paige Holister, you're out of your league here," she said aloud with only her Dachshund, Nappy, to hear. The dog looked up at her with big, heart-melting brown eyes as if understanding her plight. Paige gave the dog a scratch behind his left ear, glad she'd brought her trusted friend along for a sense of security on this insane trip.

"Nappy, remind me to send Dorie a really nasty postcard while we're here."

The roar of the crowd filling the grandstands drifted on the dusty afternoon breeze, telling her to get it in gear. The clock had started ticking the moment her flight landed in Cheyenne.

She glanced at her watch. "Seventy hours and three minutes. Time to get busy, Nappy." She opened her purse and did one last check for important items. "Cell phone, Mace, wallet, lipstick, hairbrush and...condoms! I didn't put those in here."

Nappy barked and wagged his tail as if to tell her he knew who had put the gold foil packages in his mistress's purse.

"Dorie. I should have known. Of course she'd think I'd fail to be prepared for —"

*Thunk!* The car rocked on its tires.

*Thunk! Thunk!* The car rocked again. And again.

Paige's gaze flew to the rearview mirror. "What the heck?"

"Son of a bitch!" a voice hollered.

Paige caught sight of two men using each other for a punching bag, and jumped out of the Dodge Neon. Two cowboys scrambled for the upper hand in the fight and were now beating on each other while sprawled on the trunk lid of her rental car.

"Hey! Knock it off," she hollered as she tried to pull the grown men apart. A hard elbow in her stomach knocked her off balance and sent her flying backward. Pieces of gravel bit into the palms of her hands as she tried to brace her fall, but it didn't do any good. She landed squarely on her derriere with a painful thud.

The men slammed into the Neon again and Paige cringed. "If you dent this car, I'm the one who has to pay for it," she yelled. But the men continued to beat on each other and didn't seem to notice, or care that she was even there.

"Enough is enough," she grumbled under her breath as the scuffle continued. Paige bolted to her feet, determined to put a stop to the brawl. Dealing effectively with out of control situations was one thing working in the ER all these years had taught her how to do. Hopefully she could handle this one as well.

Paige grabbed the cowboy on top by the collar of his shirt and yanked with all her might. To her surprise he came easily. She shoved him aside and placed her shaking fists on her hips.

"Get off my car! Both of you!"

The cowboys looked at her, surprise and anger filling their eyes. The bigger of the two men backed away and wiped his bloody lip with the back of his hand. "I'll finish with you later, Hart," he growled before storming away without so much as a word of sorry.

The remaining cowboy still leaning against the car, removed his hat and wiped his brow with a red bandana. Settling his hat back in place, he looked up at her from beneath its vast brim before slowly pushing away from the car. A low groan escaped his throat as he moved.

The guy was hurt, but Paige didn't care. All she cared about was the huge dent that now covered the trunk lid. This was going to cost her big-time at the rental car company.

"I'm real sorry about this, ma'am," the cowboy drawled with a deep, smooth voice. "I'll pay for the damage."

Paige glanced in the direction the other cowboy had gone, but he was nowhere in sight. "What about your friend? He should foot half the bill. You weren't out here fighting by yourself."

"Don't worry about it, ma'am. I'll handle it."

Paige turned her attention back to the cowboy and her breath died in her throat. He was leaning against the car again, his pain evident. His shirt was torn open and revealed a muscular chest beneath that would make any woman drool. Paige averted her gaze to his eyes and what she thought was safe territory.

Wrong. In spite of the fight he'd been through, his blue eyes sparkled with mischief and not anger. Could it be the guy actually liked fighting in a parking lot on a 90°-plus day?

She scanned his face and saw the cuts and bruises marring his chiseled features. *Hmm. Devilishly handsome, and possibly the answer to her mission.* She swallowed hard at the prospect of getting intimate with a man she knew absolutely nothing about.

What was she doing? Paige was a good girl. She wasn't supposed to have wild, uninhibited sex with a man she didn't know, especially one who obviously made fighting a pastime. What was she thinking? Fantasizing about running her fingers over and down his strong chest, following the sculpted trail of muscles that led down to...

Paige glanced up and saw he was watching her. He smiled a killer smile that spoke volumes.

He knew exactly what she was thinking. Damn.

"You're bleeding," she said, hoping to cover her embarrassment of being so transparent. "That's a nasty cut above your eye. You need to have that taken care of right away."

"Ah, it's not the first time. I've had my share of cuts. I'll live."

"No. Really." She shortened the distance between them to examine his wound. "This is very close to your eye, and it's deep. If we don't tend it now, it'll get infected and swell up like a balloon. You won't be able to see." She couldn't help noticing several tiny scars dotted the skin near the corner of his injured eye and she wondered if fighting was his favorite pastime.

The warmth of his skin seeped into hers. The subtle scents of fresh air and horses mingled with his muskiness to create his own unique essence. The man exuded promises of potential sexual pleasures from every pore.

Paige couldn't believe herself. Yes, she found the man physically attractive, but she never thought she'd want to hop into bed with the first cowboy she met on this trip. She was certain it would take a while, like seventy-two hours, before she found the right cowboy, giving her time to either build her courage or give up the chase.

But she couldn't deny there was something about this guy that made her feel strangely comfortable with him. He had an easygoing manner, and was by all outward appearances, totally unpretentious.

Yes. She liked him. Liked him a lot.

"Cut's that bad, huh?" he drawled.

"Ah, yes. I'd be happy to...take care of it for you," she said, her shyness taking hold once more. She took a step back, afraid she was making a total fool of herself by being so close.

"You know something about tending scrapes?" He quirked an eyebrow and a lazy grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. Another blistering heat wave raged through Paige's body and this time landed squarely where it mattered most. She'd known the guy maybe a whole ten minutes and already he had her damp with desire.

This was so unlike her normal practical self that it was scary in a way. But it was a heady feeling knowing there was a man out there that affected her so.

She took a deep breath and struggled to step into her professional mode for at least a moment. "You might say that. I'm an ER nurse. I've seen a few scrapes in my time."

"ER nurse, huh? I admire you. No way could I handle a job like that."

"I guess you'd say it's a calling of sorts. Let me get my first-aid kit and we'll get you patched up. It's in the trunk."

The cowboy stood to his full height and Paige was pleasantly surprised to see he stood a good foot taller than her. His broad shoulders blocked the sun from her eyes and gave her the opportunity to study the hairs peppering his tanned chest.

Tanned chest. What was it about this guy's chest that had her libido zipping into overdrive all the time?

No doubt he spent many shirtless hours in the sun perfecting that tan. The image of him working with horses, beads of sweat glistening on his skin, filled her mind. Mercy. What would it be like to ride this man in every way possible?

Where did that come from? What was happening to her mind? Paige covered her face with her hands, embarrassed she was so turned on. All this talk of sexual fantasy stuff had her brain and body functioning in a totally different universe she didn't know how to handle.

"Ah, ma'am? Are you all right? You goin' to pass out?"

"What?" she stammered and dropped her hands by her sides. "Ah, yes. I mean no. I'm sorry. It must be the heat and jet lag." Paige hurried around to the driver side door before he figured out what she'd been fantasizing about this time. She grabbed her keys

and popped the trunk lid with the clicker while Nappy scrambled out of the car, racing straight to the cowboy. The dog jumped up and down like a child on a pogo stick.

"He likes you."

"Hey, boy." The cowboy picked up the dog and scratched him behind the ears. He held Nappy gently in his arms, a genuine fondness for animals in his manner.

Hmm. Nappy liked him. *Could this beat-up cowboy be her man?*

Paige pulled herself away from the quaint scene, shut the car door and walked around to open the trunk. Digging inside her bag, she didn't find what she wanted.

"Shoot. It's not here. I must have forgotten to pack my first-aid kit." She threw up her hands before grabbing her purse. "This is terrible. I make it a habit to never travel without one. You never know when you might need first aid. I'm so sorry."

"You're all the first aid I want, sweetheart," the man drawled.

Paige froze. There was no need to turn around. She knew from the sudden rise in temperature that the cowboy stood directly behind her.

His hand skidded down the length of her arm, leaving a trail of blazing fire as he went. Paige opened her mouth, forcing herself to breathe, but it was damn hard when her heart was racing out of control.

He leaned into her. His body hard and solid.

Paige ceased breathing. Her eyelids fluttered shut. She was trapped. Blissfully trapped by this cowboy's arousal pressing into her backside. What a place to be. And talk about arousal. Her own body was aching, melting and burning all at the same time for more of what this guy had to offer.

He swept away the curls at her nape and Paige instinctively angled into his embrace. His lips brushed, hot, hungry kisses against her skin. Paige's center throbbed with an urgent desire she'd never experienced before.

"I've got one behind the seat in my pickup," he whispered against her feverish skin. "You can use it."



"Wha-what? Use what?" she asked, breathless. Her mind was a complete blank except for what the cowboy was doing to her at this very moment.

"First-aid kit. Remember?" His tongue found a sensitive spot behind her ear. Excruciating pleasure ripped down to her toes.

"Oh. Okay."

"This way, darlin'."

He slammed the trunk closed, scooped up Nappy and grabbed Paige's hand. She locked the car, heard its reassuring beep, and allowed the cowboy to lead her through a maze of pickups, trailers and cars.

What the hell just happened here? She was going off with a strange man. Dazed, a little bit curious, Paige followed behind anyway, giving her the perfect opportunity to study his well-shaped backside. Very nice. Since arriving in town, she'd seen several billboards advertising cowboy-cut jeans and how they drove women nuts. This cowboy was living proof the product lived up to the claim.

"You're not from around these parts," he said over his shoulder.

"What makes you say that?" Paige asked, afraid he'd caught her studying his slow, easy gait, and the way the denim conformed to his every move. She'd never seen a cowboy's backside up this close before. Boy, had she been missing out on one of the greatest wonders of the world. Dorie was right. Paige needed to get out more.

"Your accent."

"Oh," she muttered. She'd totally forgotten about the slight Georgia drawl that laced her words. "I'm from Savannah."

"Savannah? You're a ways from home. What brings you to Wyoming?"

*I'm searching for a cowboy to have wild sex with.* Paige held her tongue. Even though he was making her heart race wildly out of control, she wasn't ready to proposition the man. Things were moving pretty fast, and for safety reasons she needed to know more

about him first. He appeared to be a nice guy, but she wanted to be certain. Ending up on some missing person report wasn't her idea of a good time.

"I'm on a short vacation."

"Vacation? You picked a good spot. And a good time. That is, if you like to party. Cheyenne gets pretty wild during Frontier Days."

"So I've noticed. Do you always celebrate by brawling in parking lots?"

"Nah. I don't cotton much to fighting. But I will when the situation calls for it."

"Then I take it, the situation called for it."

"Yep. There's my truck." He pointed to a Dodge Ram Club Cab. The red paint glistened like a shiny apple in the hot July sun.

"Nice ride."

"It does the job." He put Nappy in the pickup box and unlocked the door. Digging behind the seat, he pulled out a dusty first-aid kit. "Here it is. Go to work, nurse," he said, handing her the kit.

Their fingers touched. Whoa. More electricity arced between them and Paige thought she might die from the jolt.

He had such strong hands.

Big hands. Big enough, and she suspected, gentle enough, to do all kinds of satisfying things to her. That is, if she had the courage to let him. And boy, was she ever close to letting him do whatever he wanted.

She glanced up, and for a mere second their gazes locked. He winked and that devilish smile tugged at the corner of his mouth once more. This cowboy was sexier than any man she'd ever met and not only had her libido dipping into cardiac arrest territory, but he had her mind dreaming up fantasies so fast she'd be hard pressed to fulfill them all if she lived to be one hundred.

What would it be like to be totally spontaneous, totally wild, and find out what those spurs felt like against her skin right here? Right now?

What would it be like to tear off his clothes, tear off her clothes, and have sex in the bed of his pickup under the blazing sun? Having sex in a public place was one of her fantasies, and a crowded parking lot definitely counted as a public place.

By the smoldering glint in his eye, she doubted he'd have any objections to fulfilling her fantasy at this very moment.

This was a good sign.

The cowboy was willing.

## **Chapter Two**

At least she hoped the cowboy was willing.

Paige wasn't very good at reading men when it came to sexual signals. Mainly because she hadn't had much practice in the, I want you, babe, department.

"Uh...it'd be a good idea if you sat down," she said to the cowboy, trying desperately to sound like she wasn't panting with want for the guy. Coming across as if she was starved for a man probably wasn't the best idea. Dorie claimed throwing in a few hard-to-get maneuvers drove some men crazy and made them all the more determined to get the woman they wanted. Paige just hoped she could pull off playing the part of the sexy siren without appearing too eager.

"The pickup will do," he said as he moved around to the back of the truck and let down the tailgate. He hopped up onto the gate with ease. Nappy didn't waste any time climbing onto the comfort of his lap.

"Nappy, don't be a bother," Paige scolded as she set the first-aid kit beside the cowboy and took a quick inventory of supplies.

"It's okay. I don't mind." He stroked Nappy's smooth black coat. "Nappy? Is that short for somethin'?"

"Napoleon."

"Napoleon, huh? Yeah, I can see why you'd name the little guy that. He does look like Napoleon." He laughed.

The deep timbre of his voice sent a tingle of excitement skittering through Paige's body. He looked so darned sexy sitting there petting her dog. A strong, handsome cowboy cradling a small, defenseless animal in his arms—what a turn-on. It was looking like this cowboy was the perfect fit for her fantasies. A shiver of anticipation rocketed down to her core. Oh...yeah. Another good sign.

Maybe she hadn't been that drunk when she'd written down her fantasies. In fact, maybe she was smarter than she gave herself credit for. Now if she could just convince him to play along.

"I thought he looked like Napoleon too," she said, a little breathless, and hoped her patient didn't notice. "So, no other name would do."

"Speakin' of names, mine's Lane Hart. I didn't catch yours." He held out his hand.

"I'm...Paige Holister." She debated whether to accept the hand he offered. If she was so hot with desire for the guy just from the sound of his voice and his looks, what the hell would happen if they touched?

Spontaneous combustion?

Jail time for indecent exposure in a public place?

Too curious not to find out, Paige let their fingers encircle each other's, his much larger ones covering her entire hand in a firm, but gentle grip. The simple pleasantries sent mind-numbing waves of desire, excitement and fear thrumming through Paige all at once. What was it about this guy that tempted her so easily? And quickly? She felt like a lovesick girl drooling over a movie star.

"Pleasure to meet you, Paige," he drawled. And winked.

She swallowed hard and struggled to get a grip on her racing needs, feeling as though she were losing control of the situation. And she liked being in control. But Lane was making her forget all reason and if she wasn't careful she'd come across as easy, winding up in serious trouble. Time to regroup.

Paige pulled her hand away, donned a latex glove and ripped open an antiseptic wipe. "This might sting a little." The cowboy pushed his hat up out of the way. Gently, she dabbed the wipe against the bloody cut. Lane took a sharp intake of breath, but didn't utter a word of complaint.

Paige had to touch him and accidentally let her fingertips brush over his forehead as she applied a dab of antibiotic cream. Lane didn't appear to notice her trickery, but her body did. In spite of the glove, her temperature shot up a good twenty degrees.

Standing this close she could see the shadow of a beard covering his once clean-shaven jaw, and she wondered how those whiskers would feel against the most delicate recesses of her skin. She shifted nervously on her feet and hoped to God her deodorant didn't fail to live up to its strong enough for a man claim.

So much for getting a grip.

Her gaze fell lower and the pulse at his neck caught her complete attention, mesmerizing her. She longed to trail her tongue along the length of his neck, absorbing the steady rhythm of his heart into her soul. While lingering in that delicious territory, his masculine scent would undoubtedly push her over the edge in to pure ecstasy.

Once again, she was reminded that before her was a virile cowboy who could more than deliver on her fantasies.

Ask him.

Mercy. She wanted to. Wanted to so badly.

But how did a good girl like Paige go about asking a guy—a complete stranger, no less—to have sex with her? And what if she asked and he turned her down? Then what? Would she be able to muster up the courage to ask another cowboy? Or would she take the safe route and turn tail and run?

Damn. She needed to snuff out the doubts that kept plaguing her mind and just go for it. The heavens had tossed a sexy cowboy at her feet and now here he sat, smelling all musky and male and driving her libido crazy. Who was she to question her good fortune?

"Is somethin' wrong?" Lane asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Paige's hand froze in midair. Her body stiffened. Oh God. He was reading her.

"Wrong? What...makes you ask that?"

"You're staring at my neck like it's a sizzlin' T-bone. Are you hungry?" His devilish smile returned, confirming he had, indeed, read her thoughts.

"I'm sure it's the heat," Paige fibbed, hoping to cover her apparent vulnerabilities. She stole a glance at his dark eyes and the intensity she saw smoldering in their depths told her in no uncertain terms that she hadn't fooled him.

"I could show you some heat, sweetheart," he drawled. Gently moving the dog to the bed of the pickup, he encircled her waist with his hands and pulled her up tight against him. "Do you like heat?"

"I..." Paige took a deep breath and struggled to keep from shaking her head in disbelief. He was as attracted to her as she was to him. Could she actually be that lucky?

The idea was overwhelming. And exciting as hell.

Dorie had assured her that any man who'd turn down an offer of no-commitment sex had to be either gay or dead. Lane didn't appear to fall into either category.

In fact, he was making this easier for her than she'd ever anticipated. Lane was playing right into her hands. Here was her chance. Time to go for it.

Paige yanked off the glove with a snap, took a deep breath and opened her mouth to speak, but before she could utter a single word, Lane's lips covered hers.

She didn't think it was possible, but he pulled her even closer against him. His tongue sought and found hers. Brilliant stars exploded inside her brain. Instinctively, she wrapped her arms around his neck and marveled at the strength she felt there.

Lane deepened the kiss and his hand cupped her breast. Paige breathed in sharply, shocked and pleased that the thin fabric of her crop top did nothing to block the fever of his touch. Before she could recover from the first wave, he kneaded the full of her breast and then circled her nipple in a smooth, titillating motion with the pad of his thumb. A low moan escaped her throat as she arched her back.

Her pleasure sparked a low growl from Lane. His hands cupped her bottom and squeezed. With one swift movement he lifted her onto his lap, her legs straddling him as if she were riding a horse.

Mercy. This was far more than she could have ever hoped for. Her sister would be proud.

The tips of Lane's fingers blazed a fiery trail as they snuck beneath her top and up under her bra, caressing her skin with velvety strokes as he went. The contact sent her mind and body into a tailspin, making her feel heady with hunger for more.

All her pent-up inhibitions flew out the window. For the first time she was getting to be the wild, bad girl she'd always secretly wanted to be. With the release of her doubts, a newfound freedom, a new Paige, burst to the surface.

Raw desire. That's what this was. Pure and simple. And she was going to take it to the max.

With thirty years of suppressed passion, she kissed Lane with every ounce of her being. He answered her call by pulling her down on top of him in the bed of the truck. Paige removed his hat, tossing it aside. She feathered her fingers through the softness of his dark hair, then over the strength of his jaw, then lower still, slowly working her way down to the open expanse of his shirt. In one swift motion, the remaining buttons popped open and she slid her hands over the rock-hard solidness of his stomach.

What a lucky girl she was, indeed.

Dorie would be green with envy.

Following his movements from earlier, she too, circled the tip of his nipple with her finger. He groaned, spurring her courage and desires all the more. She slid her leg along the length of his until her knee reached the apex of his thighs. There she discovered that even through two layers of denim, there was no hiding the extent of his arousal.

Yes. This cowboy was definitely turned on and ready to burst from the chute.



Boldly, she traced the length of him from the edge of his belt buckle down to the crux of his jeans and cupped him in the palm of her hand. With slow, purposeful strokes, she slid her hand up and down. Up and down.

“Ah, sweetheart,” he drawled.

Paige smiled, feeling decadently wicked and pleased with herself. The intensity of the sun bore down upon them, but Paige didn’t notice. The only heat she was conscious of was the inferno kind building between them. If Lane could make her feel this much pleasure while cotton and denim separated them, what would it be like once bare skin touched bare skin?

Tortured ecstasy.

A smile tugged at her lips as she realized she was well on her way to fulfilling fantasies number one and two in a single swoop.

\* \* \* \* \*

“This isn’t Lovers’ Leap,” a stern voice said from behind Paige and Lane, bringing their tryst to an abrupt halt.

Paige inhaled sharply, feeling as though someone had thrown an ice-cold bucket of water on her. She sat bolt upright and tried to scoot off Lane’s lap, but he held her fast with his arm locked firmly around her waist.

Her cheeks warmed to scorching when she saw a tubby woman dressed in a brown security uniform glaring disapprovingly at them. In the officer’s eyes, Lane and Paige might as well have been two teenagers caught parking on a deserted road.

Paige put on a smile, hoping to soothe the woman’s irritation. But by the officer’s unwavering stance, Paige knew she’d failed.

“We don’t need these kind of shenanigans going on around here,” the officer barked. Her fingers squeezed the handle of the billy club strapped to her ample waist, turning her already pale knuckles whiter. “If you can’t keep your hands off each other, take it somewhere else.”

Paige burned with embarrassment and she wished she could crawl under the pickup. She wiggled in Lane's lap, trying to slip to the ground, but he refused to let go. Her bottom pressed against his turgid member, revealing their discovery had done nothing to hinder his arousal.

"Sorry, ma'am," Lane said, sounding anything but as he put on his hat. "Guess we got a little carried away."

"A little?" the woman huffed. "Move it, or cool it. Or I'll be forced to ask you to leave."

"Yes, ma'am."

The woman sauntered away, but glanced over her shoulder a couple of times before disappearing amongst the cars in the crowded the parking lot.

"She was charming," Paige managed to say a few moments later. Her racing heart slowly returned to a normal beating rhythm.

"Jealous is more like it. We'd best move on. The vulture will circle back in a few minutes to make sure we're behavin'." Lane loosened his hold and helped Paige to the ground.

The woman's reprimand, mixed with the sudden loss of Lane's protection, left Paige feeling insecure and empty. She said an unladylike curse under her breath at the sudden change in her luck. Things had been going too good. She should have known Murphy's Law would intercede on her behalf. It was an inevitable fact of her life.

"I'd best be heading for home. Chores will be waiting by the time I get there," Lane continued. "Are you done with me, nurse?"

Panic lodged in Paige's throat. She couldn't let him go, not yet. Her fantasies hadn't been fulfilled. Tipping the iceberg didn't count.

Besides, after what they'd shared, he couldn't walk away. Could he? The idea that Lane might do just that, pinched at her heart a little more than she liked.

This was no time to be timid. She'd come this far. If she wanted to make this fantasy thing work, she needed to forge ahead, no holds barred.

"No. Your cut really should be stitched," she said, hoping to delay their parting. She needed time to rebuild the courage the security guard had dowsed so quickly.

"Stitched?" He grimaced.

"Yes. To heal properly. But since we don't have the supplies, super glue will work as well. Do you have any?"

"No, ma'am. Can't say that I do."

"That's okay. I have some in my purse. Let's head back to my car and we can finish up there."

Paige crossed her fingers. Hopefully the walk back would provide her with ample time to convince him they should continue where they'd left off before being so rudely interrupted.

Paige gathered up the first-aid kit while Lane locked his pickup and scooped Nappy up into his muscular arms. Already missing the feel of his embrace, she wished he'd wrap those arms around her again instead of her pet. Lucky dog.

"Super glue, huh?" he asked as they walked. "That stuff really works on cuts?"

"Actually, it's a type of medical super glue, and yes, it works great. It holds the edges of the cut together and doesn't hurt like stitches. Plus, you don't have any stitches to be taken out. After about five to seven days the glue washes off with water."

"Well, that's somethin'. You'd be handy for a cowboy to keep around in case of an emergency. My own personal nurse. Wouldn't that be dandy?" He winked and Paige's heart did a double take.

She breathed a sigh of relief. He was still interested. And, he'd just given her the perfect in to explain her fantasy quest. Heck, she'd offer to be his round-the-clock nurse for the next three days if that's what it took.

"By the scars on your face, I'd say you make it a habit of needing medical attention," she teased. "I'd be happy to oblige while I'm in town."

"Would you, now? Well, Paige. That offer is mighty temptin'. And by the care you've given me so far, I'd say you're one damn fine nurse. Do you give all your patients such rapt attention?"

His statement provoked a tinge of panic, afraid maybe he had formed the wrong impression about her, after all. Somehow she needed to make him understand she wasn't loose with her favors.

Time to pull out a little bit of the practical Paige.

"Of course, not. I only give such special care to sexy cowboys who get beat up on the trunk of my car. Which, by the way, has only happened once in my life. You, Mr. Hart, are my first hard-luck case."

"Is that so?" Lane stopped and deposited Nappy on the ground. The dog started barking and running in circles, creating miniature clouds of dust on the graveled parking lot, obviously glad to stretch his short little legs.

"Well, sweetheart." Lane pushed up his hat and placed his hands on his lean hips. A frown replaced the smile he'd sported only a moment before. "I hate to tell you this, but I think you've joined the hard-luck club."

Damn. He was going to dump her. Do something. Do something. So much for practicality coming to the rescue.

"Why? Is it because I let the honorary member of the club kiss me?" she said huskily, giving the flirting game her best shot. She sidled up close to him and ran the palms of her hands up the length of his broad chest. She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue, hoping to kindle a response.

She got her wish.

His blue eyes darkened to the same smoky hue she'd seen when they'd made out in the back of his truck. Her breath caught. This was a precarious game she played, but it

didn't matter. She'd managed to turn the tables back in her favor with the sexiest man alive. Quitting now wasn't an option. She wouldn't allow it.

Lane devoured the length of her with his hot gaze, and then pulled her tight against him. He kissed a path along her jaw until he reached the ultra-sensitive spot behind her ear.

"No, darlin'," he whispered softly. "I'd say by the look of things, you've just moved into the honorary spot."

Paige wanted to groan. He was going to dump her. Either she had been reading all his signals wrong, or he'd tired of her already.

"What makes you say that?" she asked as calmly as her nerves would allow.

"I think your car's been stolen."

## Chapter Three

"Stolen! What? You can't be serious?"

"As a heartbeat."

Paige pulled out of his arms and stared at the now-empty spot where she'd parked her car. "Oh," she moaned. "This can't be. I locked the car. You heard it beep, didn't you? Maybe we're mistaken. Maybe I parked farther over that way." She pointed to south of where they stood, a wave of hope and desperation filling her stomach.

"Sorry, darlin'. This is the spot. I know these grounds. Your car is definitely history."

"But why would anyone steal a rental car?"

"Easy pickin's? Are you sure you rolled up the windows?"

"The windows? Ugh." She threw up her hands and started to pace. "What am I going to do? I've been robbed. All my stuff was in that car. My clothes, my purse. My phone is even gone. So is the super glue," she said as she motioned to his cut. "And worst of all, I'm penniless." Not to mention the fact she was out the packages of condoms Dorie had stuffed in her purse. Paige groaned. So much for fulfilling her three fantasies. The thief who'd made off with her car had unknowingly brought her prospective sex life crashing down before it even had a chance to get very far off the ground.

"My cut is the least of our worries," Lane said. "Hey, look at it this way. You can blame the thief for the dent on the trunk lid."

"Thanks." Paige frowned. "You're now off the hook. But I'm stuck for the whole damn car. Ugh! What am I going to do?" Paige threw up her hands in defeat. "Why did I listen to Dorie? I could be in Savannah right now, packing for my safe, chaperoned, ghost tour," she muttered.

"We'd better call the police," Lane said as he grabbed the cell phone clipped at his waist. "I've got a good friend on the force. He'll see to it your case is given top priority."

Overwhelmed by the roller-coaster ride she'd been on for the last hour, Paige slumped against a nearby car as Lane made the call. The wide brim of his cowboy hat shaded his face from the waning afternoon sun, but Paige read concern etched on his features. The knowledge that he did care, and had friends in high places, gave some comfort.

Within minutes, Lane's police friend, Clint, arrived, a report was filed and she was assured everything possible would be done to try to recover the stolen Neon and its contents.

That didn't alleviate Paige's immediate problems, though. She was in a city where she didn't know a single soul other than this lone cowboy, was carless, and worst of all, didn't have a dime in her pocket.

Damn. Things were finally going her way, then bam! Fate decided to rip her good luck out from beneath her feet like a cheap rug. The way things looked now, she'd be going home worse off than when she'd arrived. And speaking of going home, she was now short one return airline ticket, and with no ID they'd never let her on the plane even with a new ticket. She was royally screwed.

A heavy sigh escaped her lips. "I could really use a drink." Paige kicked at the gravel beneath her feet.

"Me too. Come on," Lane said, holding out his hand to her. "Let's walk over to the Arrowhead Dance Hall. We can get a beer there. There should be a live band playing. Maybe the music will take your mind off things."

"I don't have any money." She shrugged, feeling more lost and defeated than ever before in her life.

"Don't worry about it. I'm buying."

Lane picked up Nappy and led Paige to the dance hall. A sign at the door said no pets allowed, but Lane assured her he knew the guy who ran the place. He'd explain bringing the dog in if necessary.

They found a table toward the back where they could hear each other over the rousing country music. In spite of the late afternoon hour and the heat, the floor overflowed with dancers.

Nappy settled down on Paige's lap, safely hidden beneath the table. A sexy waitress on the fresh side of twenty-something came around to take their order.

"Hi, Lane," she said sweetly. The smile on her pretty face exuded her pleasure at seeing him. And by the glint in her eyes, Paige knew the girl had her sights set on flirting.

"Hey, Alesa." He gave her an easy smile, but that was all.

"What can I get for ya?" She balanced her empty tray on her slim hip, providing an up-close view of her bare, tanned to perfection, midriff.

"Four draft beers."

"Comin' right up." She hurried away, her backside swaying in her skintight jeans. But Lane wasn't watching Alesa like Paige expected. Instead, he was watching her. Her heart skipped in her chest. The realization she'd captured his attention over the sexy young cowgirl gave Paige a rush.

"Four?" she asked, trying desperately to appear what she didn't feel—calm and collected.

"Things got kind of hot out there, sweetheart. Remember? I'm thirsty." He winked and Paige felt her cheeks flush at his innuendo.

Yeah, they'd been hot all right. Blessedly hot. Everything was perfect until that idiot had decided to make off with her car. Ohhh. If only she could get her hands on the son of a bitch.



“Sides, by the agitated look on your face, I’d say you could use more than one. No sense wastin’ time waiting for another round.”

Agitated? Try hot and bothered, confused and lustful all rolled into one. At the moment she felt like a bona fide mess.

Alesa returned and deposited the frosty mugs on the scarred wooden table and Paige wasted no time downing the golden liquid. Maybe the beer would ease the anger fuming inside her. Anger directed toward her sister for suggesting this crazy scheme in the first place, and anger toward the guy who’d robbed her blind.

But most of all, she was angry with herself for being so stupid, for being so awestruck by this cowboy that she’d failed to roll up the car windows. She lived in Savannah for Pete’s sake. Crime was not a foreign concept.

Lane watched with pleasure as Paige took a deep pull on her beer, nearly emptying the mug in one swallow. She had the prettiest neck he’d ever seen. Her soft skin sported a nice tan and smelled like new grass after a spring rain.

By the desire he’d felt brewing in her body, and now the anger turning her eyes a deeper shade of green, he’d say there was one spirited filly lying deep in her soul, dying for the chance to run.

And getting to ride this filly would be a definite pleasure.

His fingers burned from the memory of her silky skin beneath his touch. His manhood still ached with want. He shifted in his chair, hoping to ease the pressure his jeans kept confined.

Damn. Lane chastised himself for looking at her and thinking of nothing but his own personal needs. She was in trouble, and he was, in large part, responsible.

“Oh what am I going to do? I don’t even have a place to stay. Dorie and her harebrained ideas.” She downed another long pull and swayed slightly in her chair, proving she was well on her way to getting drunk off only two beers.

"Whoa, there. Not so fast." He placed a hand on her wrist in an effort to slow her down. "If you're not used to drinking, alcohol can kick you in the butt in a hurry."

"What makes you think I'm not used to drinking?" Paige asked, indignation in her voice. She lifted her chin and looked down her nose at him. She obviously didn't want him to think she couldn't handle a few drinks.

"Just a hunch." He shrugged his shoulders and relaxed back in his chair. Paige Holister was one interesting woman. In spite of the scene between them in the parking lot, he knew she was timid and shy on one side, yet full of fire on the other.

Yeah, she was one woman he'd like to get to know better—if only for a while. Lane had a personal rule about getting in too deep with a woman. He'd ridden that trail before and all it had brought him was heartache and grief. Besides, he had the day-to-day struggles of running a ranch to worry about. He didn't have time for a relationship that would only get complicated when the woman decided she wanted more than an occasional tumble in the hay.

"What do you mean you don't have a place to stay? Don't you have reservations somewhere?"

"No. My travel agent sister didn't make any. She had this stupid idea I wouldn't need reservations. And now, even if I could find a room, I have no way to pay for it. I could wring her neck."

Lane groaned. Now what? He did owe Paige some extra consideration. She'd saved his butt in that fight, patched up his cut and made him hard as a brick in eight seconds flat. Any woman who could do that deserved more. He might prefer his unattached status, but he was no lowlife. He always made good on his debts.

"Look, I feel responsible for this mess you're in," he said.

"Mess? You mean disaster. I knew I shouldn't have listened to my sister. Every time I do, I end up in some kind of trouble. Trouble that she's never around to bail me out of."

"I take it your sister's name is Dorie?"

"Yes."

"I've got a brother like that," he chuckled. "He's left me in more jams than I care to remember. Look." Lane sighed, not sure if what he was about to offer was the best thing to do, but he knew without a doubt it was the right thing. "Why don't you stay at my place tonight?"

"Your place?" The stunned look in her eyes reminded him of a stray heifer caught in headlights.

"Yeah. My ranch. I've got plenty of room. You can hole up there while we wait for word from Clint. 'Sides, you'll need time to cancel your credit cards and call your bank."

"Ohhh. I forgot all about that other stuff." Paige dropped her head into her hands. "The thief is probably maxing out my line of credit right now. I feel so stupid."

"Don't beat yourself up. We all make mistakes. Why don't you use my phone to call that no-good sister of yours," he joked. "You can put her to work helping you out of this fix."

"Thanks, Lane. I'm glad one of us is thinking. I promise I'll pay you back when I get some cash."

"Don't worry about it. It's the least I can do." He downed the last of his beer. "If you don't mind, let's blow this joint. I've got chores waitin' and you'd probably better get busy on the phone."

"I really appreciate your offer to help me. You're my hero." She placed a hand on top of his and Lane's body responded to the simple gesture like a spark of a wildfire to a dry prairie. Some hero he was. He'd like nothing more than to take her right here, right now, in the crowded dance hall.

And for that, he didn't deserve her hero worship.

\* \* \* \* \*

Even though Paige was feeling the mellowing aftereffects of her beer, Lane suggested they stop by a local discount store so she could stock up on a few personal items and a change of clothes. With a few borrowed dollars from Lane, Paige embarked on an emergency shopping spree.

Lane decided to wait with Nappy in the air-conditioned cool of his pickup, giving Paige time to marvel over the man she'd stumbled across. He was genuinely a nice guy. And by the delectable sample she'd tasted earlier, he promised to be one hell of a lover. Just thinking about their rendezvous made her insides melt and yearn for more.

Much more.

If given the chance, she was going to find out exactly what more meant. To heck with the rental car. She wasn't about to let that minor detail ruin her weekend. She was here in Wyoming, stranded in the arms of a sexy cowboy. Looking on the bright side of things, she couldn't have asked for a better scenario.

Maybe that thief had done her favor, after all, she thought as she spied a display of sexy, barely there lingerie. "I wonder." Paige thumbed through the array of styles and colors of satins designed to catch a man's eye, tempt him to death and foretell undeniable pleasure to come.

She was going to be spending the next couple of days in Lane's appetizing company. Why couldn't she see her fantasies through?

Dorie would if she were in this situation.

What better way to pass the time than by having mind-blowing sex with a man who exuded sex appeal from every pore?

Besides, she'd come this far. She'd be damned if she let a no-good thief ruin her chance to live out the fantasies of her life.

With renewed determination, Paige picked out the skimpiest, most tantalizing pieces she could find.

## **Chapter Four**

Paige stole a glance out of the corner of her eye at Lane sitting only a few intoxicating feet away. His strong right arm draped over the steering wheel with casual grace while the other lay on the sill of the open window. A breeze circled through the pickup as they drove, ruffling the dark hair that brushed the collar of his shirt.

He was one sexy guy. Just looking at him made her wet with desire. If she played her cards right with this cowboy, she was in for one wild ride.

"For a person who's had their car stolen, you look more like the cat who caught the mouse," he said.

"Oh? What makes you say that?" she asked, amazed he always had an idea of what she was thinking.

"That saucy grin on your face. Care to let me in on it?"

"Well... I was wondering—" Before Paige uttered another word, Lane stopped the pickup in front of a large two-story log home that took her breath away. The house faced a range of rolling hills to the south and Paige marveled at the large glass windows that reached to its vast peak, providing a spectacular view of a small lake surrounded by pine trees.

"This is absolutely beautiful."

"Yeah. I like it. There are a couple other spots on the ranch that are nice too. But this one is the prettiest."

"Other spots? How big is the ranch?"

"Thirty-four k."

"You mean thirty-four thousand acres? Wow. Your boss must be extremely wealthy."

A roar of laughter escaped his throat. "I wouldn't say I'm wealthy, but I do all right."

"You? You own this place?" Paige cringed at how she'd assumed he was down on his luck just because he'd been brawling in a parking lot. Boy, had she been wrong.

"Well, you might say that. This land has been in my family for generations. My father, brother and I ranch together."

"Is this house your folks'?" she asked, wondering if she was going to be spending the next few days in a full house. If so, she'd have to kiss her fantasies goodbye. The idea of never getting to finish what they'd started back in Cheyenne was too disappointing to comprehend.

"The land belongs to all of us equally. But this house...this house is mine."

Paige's shoulders relaxed with relief at the pride in his voice. Okay. Chances were still good.

With Nappy in her arms, she stepped out of the truck and inhaled the clean, fresh air that only wide-open spaces could produce. Lane joined her and together they admired the landscape.

A terrible thought struck her. So what if this was his house? That didn't mean he didn't share it with a wife and kids who just happened to be conveniently out of town for a few days. He'd never said he was married, but he never said he wasn't, either. She swallowed hard and pressed forward.

"And you live here all alone?" she asked, realizing she'd been holding her breath, hoping he'd say yes. Her whole quest rode on this one answer.

"All by my lonesome," he drawled. Was that a hint of invitation in his voice?

Time to be brave and go for it. She'd never have a better opportunity again in her life. "So, cowboy..." She turned to face him, took a deep breath and presented him with what she hoped was a sexy smile. "Are you up for a fling?"

Lane paused. Had he heard Paige right? Or did he need his hearing checked? The way she worked her lower lip between her teeth spoke volumes. She'd never done anything like this before, he was sure of it. She was as antsy as a raccoon in a cage, but that nervousness made her sexy as hell. "A fling?"

"Yes...with me," she clarified sweetly. She lifted her chin and looked him square in the eye, as if daring him to say no.

Lane's gaze dropped to her chest and he watched with blatant pleasure as her breasts rose and fell with each breath, straining against the fabric of her shirt. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. This skittish filly sure was full of surprises.

"Why, darlin', are you comin' onto me?" He winked.

"As a matter of fact, I am. I have a proposition for you, Lane Hart. How would you like to be the recipient of three days of no-strings-attached sex?"

Lane couldn't believe what she was offering. He might have lost the fight he was in earlier today, but he'd hit pay dirt with Paige.

"You're serious, aren't you?" he said with a light chuckle.

"Don't I look like I'm serious? I mean, I'm dead serious," she stammered. "So are you up for it?"

"Sweetheart, I've been up for it from the moment I saw you."

She took a huge sigh of what Lane would call relief. "Great. Let's get started." Paige set Nappy gently on the ground and wrapped her arms around Lane. She pursed her lips, intent upon laying one on him. Lane was more than happy to oblige, but the cautious, sensible side of him needed some answers first.

"Whoa. Hold on there a second." He gripped her forearms, holding her back. Confusion mixed with hurt covered her face. "Don't get me wrong. I'm up for sex with you. Way up for sex, if you get my meaning."

The apprehension melted on her face, turning into a smile laced with seduction. She glanced down at the front of his jeans. Her tongue skated across her bottom lip as she brazenly took in the view.

Lane took a deep breath. Damn. The woman was making him feel like a hormone-ravaged teenager who had absolutely no control over his body.

"I can see that." Her hand pressed over the length of him. "And I can feel it too," she said huskily. She brushed against him. He wanted to take her down, now, but shit, he'd learned the hard way how a woman could keep her razor-sharp fangs concealed until the prime moment. Paige might appear to be all sugar and innocence, but that sugar could be spiked with arsenic.

Lane struggled to hold his escalating yearnings in check. "What's...the catch?" he managed to ask between ragged breaths.

"There is no catch. There's no strings attached." Her eyes twinkled with a delightfully wicked glint. She snuggled closer and blew softly into his ear.

Lane gritted his teeth to stop himself from taking what she offered right there in his yard in front of God and anyone else who happened to drive up. He shook his head in amazement. Just what the hell was going on here? There had to be more to Paige's story.

"Yeah. But with women, there's always some kind of catch. Even if they say there isn't. I want to know what I'm gettin' myself into here. What do you want?"

"There's no catch with me. All I want is to fulfill three of my sexual fantasies, and I've only got sixty-nine hours left to do it in," she said, glancing at her watch. "I promise when our time is up, I'll board a plane and fly back to Savannah. Once I'm gone, I won't expect anything more from you. And you won't expect anything more from me. Deal?"

"What happens if you don't succeed?"

Paige's face paled. Lane narrowed his gaze and studied her closely. She really was serious.



"I go home and go back to work at the ER," she said softly. There was a tinge of something in her voice that made his heart clench. Defeat, maybe?

Lane brushed a hand over his jaw, searching for an answer. He'd be a fool not to jump at her proposition—three days of sex, no commitments, no expectations.

No strings attached, she'd said. Had he died and gone to heaven? Yet, Lane couldn't shake his gun-shy nature. He'd dated enough in his lifetime to know that champagne, roses and a ring were always underlying goals, even if the woman claimed they weren't. Hell, even after a one-night stand, most women expected phone calls and repeat dates. What would three days lead to?

Booking the church?

His gut tightened. He'd come too close to that reality on more than one occasion. And now that Paige had seen a sample of his family's ranch, how could he be sure she wasn't just another gold digger like the others? Finding a woman who actually didn't want a commitment was a rare commodity in these parts. Unless she was a hooker.

Lane's instincts told him to be wary—regardless of how sweet she appeared. It was tough accepting that she was here for sex and nothing more. She seemed too nice, too genuine, too much of a good girl to be crossing the country in pursuit of a sexual encounter.

Maybe some of the ranch hands had put her up to this charade. It'd been almost twelve months since the last time he'd had sex with his then-fiancée. And the guys knew it.

"Let's cut the BS. Tell me the truth, Paige. Why are you really doing this?"

"You sure talk a lot." She used the tip of her finger to trace the contours of his neck, sending tingles of anticipation racing down to his toes and back. "I told you. To fulfill my sexual fantasies. Nothing more. Nothing less."

"You swear you don't know anyone around here?"

Her eyebrows furrowed in question. "Not a soul."

God, she seemed so sincere. Ah, what the heck. He had nothing to lose. He'd take her up on her tempting offer. But he wasn't going into this without having a little fun himself. He'd make her work for her pleasure.

"All right. I'm game. But under two conditions, sweetheart."

"And those are?" Paige tried to concentrate on his words and not the lips where they came from. It wasn't an easy task. Especially since she'd already had a sample of the warm, rich, dangerous taste of him.

"Number one. We fulfill one of my fantasies along the way."

"That sounds fair." The prospect sent goose bumps racing along Paige's skin.

"And two, you tell me up front what your fantasies are."

Paige shook a finger at him. "Un-uh. No way. That takes all the fun out of it. I'll reveal them one at a time, after the prior one has been satisfactorily checked off my list."

"Satisfactorily checked off? Hmm. What if your fantasies aren't...let's say, to my liking?"

"That's the chance you'll have to take. But if you agree to this, there's no turning back. You have to go through with my fantasies. No compromises."

*And no backing out,* Paige thought silently.

"So do we have a deal?" she asked.

"We've got a deal."

Paige couldn't believe her luck. Her sexy cowboy had actually agreed to be her lover for the next three days. And to boot, he wanted to join the game by adding one of his own fantasies. She couldn't have asked for more.

Lifting a strand of hair off her shoulder, he rubbed the tresses between his fingers in a slow, deliberate mesmerizing motion.

"So you want it," he whispered seductively against her ear. Paige's nerve endings kicked into high gear.

"I..." Oh how she wanted it. And by damn, he was going to know how much. "Yes. I want it. I want you, cowboy."

"Well, darlin'. As you said, time's a wastin'." He leveled his smoldering gaze on hers, closing the hairsbreadth distance between them.

Inhaling deeply, the musky scent of him filled her nose, threatening to tease her senses to the breaking point.

With one swift tug, the button of her jeans popped open and the zipper gave way. Lane's hand skimmed down the feverish flat plane of her tummy, not stopping until he reached the band holding her black satin thong in place. He wrapped the thin strap around his fingers, slowly pushing it out of his path of intent.

There was no way to get his signals crossed this time. The man definitely had sex—sex with her—on the brain.

His finger dipped deeper, so deep that he parted the folds of her flesh, caressing and stroking all the way down until he reached the core of her femininity. Paige gasped at the scorching heat of his touch. His fingers worked magic, nuzzling, teasing. A cry of pleasurable pain escaped her throat.

Her body leaned into him on its own accord, wanting so much more from the man tormenting her under a Wyoming evening sky. He answered her request, giving more pleasure than she'd ever imagined possible. Paige swallowed hard as the rhythmic strokes of his fingers shifted her heart into overdrive.

Her head fell back as the orgasm hit her with hurricane magnitude. The stars above whirled in the twilight as her mind reeled with the awesome sensations tearing through her body.

"More," she heard herself whisper.

"Coming right up, sweetheart."

\* \* \* \* \*

Paige tore at the buttons on Lane's shirt with an urgency that bespoke her hunger. She was starving for this man she'd only known a few short hours—so unlike her—but she didn't care. The fact he wanted her as much as she him, made her head spin with desire.

For the first time ever she felt wonderfully wicked. And free.

Lane pulled her tight up against him and the length of his erection pressed firmly into her leg. His mouth captured hers in a heat-searing kiss. His tongue plunged into her mouth, seeking and finding hers. Together their tongues danced and mated in a wild frenzy that propelled Paige's desire into a new, intoxicating realm.

A groan rumbled deep in Lane's throat. He wrapped his arm around her waist even tighter, lifting her onto her tiptoes. Feeling as bold as the sunrise, she slid her hand down the length of the rock-hard solidness of his chest, intent upon one destination only. Wrapping her hands around his pulsing shaft obsessed her thoughts. She had to touch him, with her hands, her lips, her tongue. And she vowed she would. His belt provided an inconvenient barrier in her quest, but wasn't strong enough to stop her. It was one obstacle that wasn't going to stand in her way. No way. No how. Paige was going for the full Monty on this fantasy if it killed her.

She tugged at the tails of his shirt, freeing them at last from the confines of his jeans. Her hands gripped the large gold and silver buckle at his waist, determined to remove anything but the skin that stood between them.

"Patience, sweetheart," he groaned against her cheek. "Let's move this inside." Paige jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist, patience the farthest thing from her mind. The hard length of his shaft pressed against her core, igniting her beneath the denim that separated them.

She nipped at his neck, teasing, promising as he cradled her close. He smelled of fresh air, horses and hay. Never in Paige's wildest dreams had she imagined such scents could be so erotic. With long strides he carried her across the lawn and up the steps

leading to the deck. It was a good thing he carried her because her legs would never have made the short distance.

The next thing she knew, the door swung open and Lane was carrying her through the darkened house and up a flight of stairs. Excruciating minutes ticked by before he dropped her on a king-sized bed. A pile of pillows and a fluffy comforter surrounded her, sucking her down into its softness.

Lane knelt above her, his hands planted on either side of her head, effectively trapping her beneath him. He still wore his cowboy hat, but the waning light and the shadows clouding his face couldn't hide the smoldering glimmer in his eyes.

He was as famished as she.

Paige knew there was no better place for her to be at this moment. This was right. She was ready to find out how good a sexual fantasy could be.

"I've been patient enough, cowboy," she said, removing his hat and tossing it to the floor.

"Hey, be careful with that," he teased against the base of her throat as he laved hot kisses on her skin. "A cowboy ain't a cowboy without his hat."

"I'll buy you another one." She slipped his shirt off his broad shoulders and down his strong arms, then finally off altogether. At last, his torso was completely bare to her gaze. Since she'd met him, she couldn't wait to see him without a stitch of clothing.

Now for the jeans.

But it wasn't meant to be. At least not yet. Lane had other ideas and pushed her top up over her breasts. "Sweet," he murmured as he slipped the fabric up over her head. Her top landed somewhere beside his hat on the floor.

He cupped her breasts, pushing them together until they met. The fabric of her black lacy bra, dotted with roses, bunched beneath his hands as he massaged each mound with a slow aching motion.

"That's one sexy bra, sweetheart. But it's got to go." The deep command of his voice hitched her desire up another notch. In one simple move, he popped the front clasp apart, spilling her breasts out for his eyes and touch. Her nipples, pert and hard with arousal, begged him to touch her. Taste her.

"Ah," he growled, circling the tips with his thumbs. "Perfect." His mouth replaced his hands, eliciting a sigh of pleasure from her.

Paige couldn't take it anymore. She wanted more. Needed more. Now. She thought she might die from the ecstasy of his sweet torture. Arching her back, she silently begged him to end the delicious pain.

His featherlight kisses trailed down the side of one breast and to her midriff, his whiskers tormenting and teasing with each movement as he went.

"More," Paige pleaded. "Lane. Please." She grabbed his buckle, unhooked it and reached for the button on his jeans. He lifted slightly away from her and Paige seized the opportunity to unzip his jeans and pushed them and his briefs down his lean hips. His erection sprang free and pressed against her tummy with a feverish intensity.

She gasped for air. Unable to hold back any longer, Paige wrapped her fingers around him, sliding her thumb over the slick tip.

"Oh, sweetheart," he drawled. "Keep that up and you'll be the undoing of me."

The sound of his boots hitting the floor vaguely registered in the back of her mind. Together, hands bumping into each other, they slid his jeans the rest of the way down his legs, adding them to the growing pile on the floor.

The last rays of dusk glowed in the room, basking Lane in the muted light. She inhaled sharply as she saw for the first time the whole of him. His body was as magnificent as she'd imagined, and better. This-this cowboy was a visual delight.

Without waiting for an invitation, Lane undid her jeans and eased them over her hips and down her legs. Pulling off her shoes, he let them fall to the floor with the rest of her clothes. He slipped a finger beneath the strap of her thong and tugged.

"Ah. A matching set," he said as he rubbed the bud of a pink satin rose between his fingers. "Nice." With as much sensuality as if she wore the finest silken scarf, he slowly worked the black satin over her hips, down her legs, over her knees and along the tops of her feet. The fabric mingled with his electric touch, tickling and bedeviling her with every brush against her fevered skin.

Now she lay naked before him. His gaze smoldered with appreciation for the view.

He lifted her left leg, bringing her foot to his mouth.

"How am I doin' so far?" he asked as he sprinkled the arch of her foot with tiny kisses. "Am I even close to fulfilling one of your fantasies?" His kisses moved to the tender flesh on the inside of her ankle and slowly to the back of her knee. The simple gesture sent her body to the verge of exploding. Mercy. If kissing her leg could bring her this close to climax, what would the act do?

"You're close," Paige teased as she brushed the tip of her finger along his bottom lip. "But we have a ways to go yet."

"We've got all night," he said huskily. He captured her finger between his teeth and sucked the tip deep into his mouth, promising she was going to get her fantasy and so much more.

His hands skated the length of her body, feeling every living, breathing inch of her and not stopping until he reached her hips. He kneaded her flesh and stroked the sensitive spots between her mound and her legs. Paige moaned. His sensual touch full of heat, full of promise, tormented and blew her mind.

"I want you, Paige. And I'm going to take you. All of you." He cupped her bottom, lifting her up off the bed. Opening her legs, he placed one knee over his shoulder and lowered his head to meet the core of her womanhood. His hot breath caressed the curls shielding her from his view, but didn't stop his tongue from seeking and finding a delicate spot. With soft, lingering motions, he tasted and teased her folds like no other man had done before.

On the brink of orgasm, she dug her fingers into his hair, pulling him tighter against her. She wanted faster, harder, more, but she couldn't find the words to ask it.

She didn't have to. Lane answered her silent call and gave exactly what she yearned for. His tongue plunged deeper, finding the nub of her clitoris, the ultimate sensitive spot. Up and down, up and down. With fast, lustful strokes his tongue pleased her to complete, wild oblivion.

An oblivion that she never knew existed.

Paige writhed on the bed, the intensity, the pleasure, almost too much to bear. Unable to hold back the sweet agony any longer, she reached for a pillow and cried out into its downy folds.

"Don't hide it, Paige," Lane said as he eased her body back down onto the bed. He took the pillow from her grasp and covered her with his own body, his erection taut and ready for the action about to follow. Paige bucked beneath him, her body still racked with the spasms detonated by his touch.

"It's only you and me. Your screams make me all the harder for you."

Paige's breasts rose and fell in rapid pace as she struggled to find her breath. Find her sanity.

Lane smiled with satisfaction and planted his lips on hers once more. He tasted of sex and spices.

"Now. For the rest of the fantasy." He reached over to the nightstand by the bed and withdrew a foil package.

"Always so prepared, cowboy?" she asked boldly as she watched him, the growing moonlight casting abstract shapes of dark and light across his body.

"Always. A man never knows when a good-looking redhead will come along and offer three days of hot sex."

Paige laughed as she drew circles on his chest. "Was it really that hot for you?"

"Hotter than hell."



"Good. I hope you've got a drawer full of those little packages because my stash was stolen by car thieves."

"Ah, a safety girl, uh?"

"Of course. This is the twenty-first century. A girl has to look out for herself."

"Of course."

"But I'm not quite ready for that step yet, cowboy," she said as she snatched the package from his hand and dropped it on the bed beside her. "After what you just did to me, I think a little reciprocation is in order."

"Is that so?"

"Uh-huh."

Without hesitation, she wrapped her fingers around the length of him and brought the tip to her lips. His flesh was slick and wet, proving he was more than ready to take her.

But that part of their liaison would have to wait a little while longer. First, she wanted to pleasure him as he'd done her.

She slid her tongue down one side, then the other, amazed at the velvety texture of skin that encased such strength, such power. Her fingers gently kneaded the soft skin next to his testicles as she pushed forward.

He groaned and his body jerked with a tremor as she worked her magic. Satisfied she'd whet his appetite, she brought him full into her mouth. She suckled and stroked with her tongue, nearly sending herself over the edge.

"Enough," Lane commanded, cutting her foray short. "Woman, I'll lose every ounce of seed I've got if you keep that up." He pulled away, but Paige wasn't disappointed. She'd done her job, and done it very well. And she had so much more to look forward to.

A shiver of anticipation raced through her as she grabbed the silver package and tore it open. She placed the condom on the tip of his shaft, slowly unrolling it. Unable to

resist, she slid her hand down the length of him one more time. By the dazed look in his eyes, she was doing more than placing protection on her fantasy man. She was making a few more mind-blowing moves herself.

He nudged her legs apart with his knee and Paige complied, arching her back and spreading herself wide with open greeting. Lane accepted her gesture and slid his erection deep into her body.

With hard, fast strokes, he rode her. Paige's mind exploded as the already sensitive folds of her labia burned with out of this world ecstasy. Her nails dug into his shoulders.

He plunged deeper until their two bodies were as close as could be. She matched him stride for stride. He rode her as if every second counted, as if this was a ride for the gold buckle. And Paige knew that in a matter of seconds, she'd be awarded her own prize.

For the third time that day, orgasm rocked her to the core. Only this time the sensation was so intense it sent her spiraling into an unknown universe that she yearned to visit again, and again.

## Chapter Five

Lane rolled over and stretched. A lazy grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. *Now that was sex*, he thought silently. And he hadn't had a night of sex like this since...

Well, hell. Never.

The sexual encounters he'd had in the past were all right. But sex with Paige... There was only one way to describe each time they'd done it so far. Explosive. Paige was so sensitive to his every touch, and so responsive to his every move. And to top it off, she was eager to please him to the breaking point.

Yeah. He could handle this kind of sex on a daily basis. An hourly basis even. That is, if his body could hold up under such sublime torture.

He glanced down at her, sleeping contentedly in a tangle of cotton sheets on his bed, no doubt exhausted after their wild rides. Lane himself was feeling a little tired, but after an hour or so of recoup time, he'd be up for another round.

The bedside clock's red numbers glowed bright in the darkness, proclaiming the hour of midnight.

Paige hadn't called her sister. Damn. He groaned and scrubbed a hand over his face. Her credit cards could be in serious overload by now. They'd gotten so sex-crazed for each other, they'd forgotten about taking care of Paige's financial business. Getting carried away wasn't a bad thing in his book, but would Paige's bank account survive?

"Paige." He gently shook her smooth shoulder. Just the feel of her skin was enough to start the launch sequence all over again and make him forget about any and all responsibility. Her soft vanilla scent teased his nose, and he longed to bury his face in her hair, in the curve of her neck and the valley between her full breasts.

Lane gave himself a mental shake. This woman was dangerous. It was a good thing she'd only be around for a few days. Otherwise, his ranch would fall into rack and ruin because he didn't want to do anything but make love to her.

She didn't stir from his nudging and he congratulated himself. She was totally wiped out from their torrid escapades under the sheets. As much as he hated to deny her, or himself, a little shuteye and further adventures, her finances were in possible dire straits. Their pleasure would have to wait, at least for a while.

Brushing her long silky leg with his own, he stroked, back and forth, back and forth. The simple motion made his body harden with need and all signs of his fatigue melted away. Using his big toe he teased the inside of her ankle, drawing slow, provocative circles.

She moaned and rolled onto her back. As she stretched, the curve of her breast brushed against his arm. His pulse quickened. This time it was Lane who moaned. He wanted to mount her right then and there—making slow, sweet love to her until the spasms of climax rocked them both.

God, what was it about this woman that he couldn't get enough of her? In a matter of hours she'd become an itch he couldn't scratch. He knew he needed to be careful. He'd been without a woman in his bed for almost a year and he was famished for the feel, the taste, the scent of one. But being famished was a surefire way of getting himself into another troublesome relationship. Sure, she'd promised no-commitment sex, but with women a lot could change in a couple of days.

For him too. He was already starting to dread her going back to Savannah.

Hell. He didn't want to think about her leaving. He had two days to effectively scratch that itch, and by damn he was going to do it. Then move on.

As for the next couple of days, she was his and he'd make sure her fantasies were fulfilled even if it meant he was too weak to stand for a month.

A soft moan escaped her lips and she snuggled close. Her warm fingers wrapped around his shaft. Lane took a sharp intake of breath. Even though she'd aroused him

into oblivion only a short time ago, this round of teasing and prodding felt as new and as exhilarating as the first.

Shit. As much as he wanted to satisfy this unrelenting hunger consuming him, for the moment they had to abstain. Once she'd called her sister, they could get back to where they'd left off – wearing out his mattress.

“Paige.” He shook her shoulder again. “Paige, sweetheart. Knock that off or I’ll be forced to do something drastic.”

“Mmm. And just what would that be?” she asked lazily, not bothering to open her eyes. Her hold on him tightened and her thumb grazed across his tip. Lane’s body throbbed in response, promising eruption if she didn’t stop, and stop soon. He gritted his teeth and pulled away, cursing himself for a fool for not jumping on her and her offer.

Her eyes flew open and she propped herself up on one elbow. A look of disappointment and confusion clouded her pretty face. His gut clenched.

“What is it? Is something wrong?” she asked, her voice full of worry.

“Hell no. Everything’s fine, sweetheart.” He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and raked his fingers through his hair.

“What’s the matter, cowboy? This filly too much for you to handle?” she asked as she massaged his back. Her soft hands worked magic, drawing soothing circles on his tired muscles and energizing his body.

He laughed. “Never.”

She wrapped her arms around him and caressed his torso with fingers as hot as flames. Her fingers brushed over his ribs and he winced.

“I’m sorry. You’re sore from the fight, aren’t you? We shouldn’t have been –”

“Don’t you worry. We’ve been doing exactly what this ol’ beat-up body of mine needs.”

"I noticed you have a lot of scars, Lane. Did you get all of them in fights?" she asked, concern evident in her tone. She traced a gentle circle on his shoulder and unknowingly sent a tingle of desire racing down his spine.

"Fights with broncs."

"Excuse me?"

"I rodeoed for a lot of years. Rode broncs. Didn't do too bad at it, either. But you can't ride as many rodeos as I did and not come out with a few physical trophies to show for it."

"Must have hurt." Her breasts pressed into his back, offering their own brand of comfort and fiery touch.

He turned to face her, breaking the embrace. He cupped her chin in his hand and feathered her jaw with the pad of his thumb. "God, Paige. What you do to me," he said, his voice a raspy whisper. He gazed into her eyes and in the silvery moonlight he could see her heart in their depths. The discovery gave him a sharp kick in the gut. Time for a little distance.

He got up and pulled on his jeans. "If I can ride with sore ribs on an ornery bronc, I sure as hell can ride you," he teased, not wanting her to get the impression they were through for the night. "It's late. You haven't called your sister yet. That thief could be havin' one hell of a party at your expense." He touched the tip of her nose with his finger.

"Thief! Oh my gosh. I got so...carried away. I forgot all about calling Dorie." Lane could tell by her voice that a becoming blush was probably tinting her cheeks all the way down to her perky breasts and to her toes. God, what he wouldn't give for sunlight right about now.

"There's a phone by the bed," he said, forcing himself to stay in check. "While you call your sister, I'll get us something to drink and see what I can rustle up in the kitchen to eat. We need to keep our strength up." He winked.

Paige's breath caught. "That sounds great. Thanks." She watched, mesmerized as Lane's form was silhouetted by the midnight moon streaming through the sheer curtains covering a set of sliding glass doors. Her heart's rhythm picked up its pace and she shuttered a sigh, not wanting him to suspect she was falling, and falling fast.

Normally Paige was Miss Cautious Sensible when it came to relationships. She preferred to take her time, get to know the guy, find out his quirks and his bad habits before she allowed herself to even think about getting involved. But by then, most men had grown tired of her assessment test and moved on.

So why was this time different? Why was she letting her resolve down and letting this man sweep into her heart, not caring about who or what he really was?

As Lane crossed the room, her gaze met his and Paige knew she'd found her answer. There was a genuineness about Lane that made her trust him completely and believe she could be her true self.

Her heart did a flip-flop in her chest. She was exhausted, but she'd love nothing more than for him to ravish her again. The last several hours had been more than she'd ever dreamed they could be. She'd never known a man could be so damn good at the art of lovemaking.

They'd had sex in the middle of his king-sized bed, on the edge of the bed, and with them practically half on and half off the bed. Why, she'd bet there wasn't a square inch of this mattress they hadn't tested for firmness.

It was safe to say they'd put a pretty good dent in the Kama Sutra list of sexual positions for couples too.

But Lane was right. Priority one was getting a hold of her sister. Then after business was taken care of, this cowboy was all hers. The night was young.

And come tomorrow... Tomorrow they'd move out of the privacy of the bedroom and onto the mission of conquering fantasy number two—having sex in a public place.

And Paige knew exactly which public place that was going to be.

\* \* \* \* \*

Paige awoke to sunlight beaming through the sliding glass doors, making Lane's bedroom bright and cozy. The room had a rustic, masculine feel, decorated in deep greens and navy blue, but she felt right at home in the log bed and its layers of soft sheets and blankets.

She stretched her legs, wiggling her toes, but something heavy lay on her feet. She glanced down at the foot of the bed and saw Nappy, snuggled in the folds, content and fast asleep.

She smiled. Chalk another mark up for her cowboy. He'd seen to the care of her dog. Not only was Lane a passionate lover, but truly a sweet guy.

Paige rolled over to thank him for taking care of Nappy but was greeted by a vast empty space on the bed. Disappointed he wasn't there, she ran her hand over the spot where he'd lain. The memories of their night of passion filled her mind and warmed her body. She moaned. What a night it had been. Paige couldn't believe her luck in finding a man who was not only an expert lover, but also considerate of her wants and needs.

She was glad she'd done this — taken Dorie's advice and gone for it. Letting her hair down wasn't so tough after all. And it felt wonderful.

She stretched and her hand brushed over a piece of paper placed on top of his rumpled pillow. A tinge of her old insecurities fought to take hold. Was he dissatisfied? Embarrassed? Angry? Did he want to tell her to get out and leaving a note on the pillow was the only way he could do it? Paige sat upright and raked her fingers through her ruffled hair. "No way. I won't go there." She might not know a whole lot about this cowboy she'd stumbled across, but she knew one thing for certain. Lane wasn't a coward. He wouldn't duck out on her.

Snatching up the paper, she took a deep breath. The note said Lane was out doing chores and he'd be back in a couple of hours. In the meantime, a fresh pot of coffee waited in the kitchen, and he'd placed fresh towels in the bathroom. In bold letters he'd written the words, enjoy, and get ready for day two.



Paige smiled. Lane no more wanted to get rid of her than she wanted to leave. Silently she scolded herself for allowing her insecurities with men to dig into her again. Well, banishing those insecurities permanently from her life might take a little longer than one night, but she'd do her best to at least shut them down temporarily.

She'd start by getting out of bed and preparing for that day two Lane was referring to. Throwing back the sheets, Paige crossed the room to the adjoining bathroom in nothing but her birthday suit. Normally, even though she lived alone, she covered up with at least a T-shirt or something. Paige never felt really confident about her body. Sure, she worked out occasionally, and ran a couple miles two to three times a week, but in spite of her efforts, that occasional slip of chocolate always went straight to her hips.

But in the short time she'd known Lane, he'd made her feel hot, sexy, and wild—bringing out a boldness she didn't know she possessed.

Paige scanned the bathroom, appreciating the natural hues of the room bathed in the morning sunlight beaming through the above skylight. Again, the decor was on the masculine side. She loved it, knowing it reflected Lane's Western lifestyle. But the tub and shower were pure modern heaven, just begging for an occupant. A Jacuzzi-style oval tub dominated one corner of the room and looked large enough to accommodate a pair of lovers. The edge was wide enough to hold a dozen candles, glasses of champagne and a bowl of strawberries.

"Yum. Fantasy number four added to the list," she said aloud and smiled. "I've got to try to get Lane in this tub at least once before I leave."

Before she left. The reality put an unexpected pinch on her heart. Come Monday morning, whether she wanted to or not, she was scheduled to board a plane.

And go back to her normal, predictable life.

Paige shook away her depressing thoughts. She had no right to let her hopes move in the direction of something permanent with Lane. She'd made him a promise of no-commitment sex and she needed to keep it. No matter how much it hurt.

She turned her attention to the shower which stood to the right of the tub. It was a wide u-shape, with no door and it, too, was big enough for two lovers to have one hell of a good time in. Soft creamy tiles covered the walls and brass showerheads hung from each end, promising a cascade of delight.

This room proved Lane wanted more from his home than ample space. This was a lover's paradise.

Paige couldn't help feeling a little jealous at the idea of him bringing other women here, but she quickly squelched her thoughts. These three days were about fulfilling her sexual fantasies, not forging a long-term relationship.

And she was going to continue to make the most of it by indulging in a warm shower. She gathered the towels Lane had set out for her, and the shampoo and lingerie she'd purchased yesterday.

Turning on the shower, a soft spray beat against the tile. Paige stepped under the warm water and sighed. Now this was divine, she thought, as the water sluiced over her skin—skin that had been caressed, kissed and stroked all night long by the hands and lips of one sexy cowboy.

Paige worked the soap on her body into a sudsy lather, wishing it was the feel of Lane's hands on her and not her own. *Of course, she could always pretend*, she thought wickedly. Lane's note said he'd be gone for a couple of hours. She might as well have some fun.

Lane entered the bedroom to the sound of the shower running. He smiled and crossed the room, eager for the sight he knew would greet him on the other side of the door.

He stepped quietly into the bathroom and leaned against the doorjamb. Crossing his arms, he settled in to watch his houseguest. And oh, what a beautiful sight she made. Paige lathered the soap over her breasts and into suds that kissed her taut nipples and trailed like strands of pearls down her satiny skin. She let her head fall back

as she cupped her breasts with her own hands, kneading the soft flesh. She lifted and pushed her breasts together, the water forming beguiling puddles before streaking down over her nipples, down her flat tummy, and disappearing into the soft curls concealing that one spot that packed as much punch as TNT.

Lane groaned. His jeans tightened. He loved the sight of her pleasuring herself. He wanted to see more. Much more. He wanted to see her go all the way, bring herself to one of those earth-shattering climaxes she'd experienced with him.

But the idea of this beautiful woman getting it on all by herself in his shower seemed almost sacrilegious somehow. He wanted to join her, feel her wet, slick skin rub against his own. Yet he was curious. Curious to see if she was bold enough to do as he silently begged and dip her fingers into her folds.

Paige didn't disappoint. She leaned back against the shower wall, letting her hand slowly fall to her center. Timidly, she cupped herself. A finger disappeared into that luscious crease. Her eyes fluttered closed, and a soft moan of delight escaped her lips.

Lane shifted his weight in an effort to relieve the pressure building between his thighs, but it was no use. He was as hard as a brick and that wasn't going to change until he had his way with Paige. But damn, what an amazing sight to see her face and body relax and contract with pleasure as she dipped, rubbed and teased.

Lane's mouth went dry. Before him stood the most erotic sight he'd ever seen. Shit, he was torn. He wanted to stand back and watch, but he wanted in on the action too. In the end, his pulsing body won out. Silently he stepped forward, standing within a couple feet from Paige as she cried out in ecstasy at the sweet pleasure she'd brought herself. When the sensation subsided, she relaxed against the wall and sighed.

"Does this mean you missed me?" he asked huskily.

Paige's eyes flew open and she attempted to cover herself with her hands. A blush the color of scarlet tinged her cheeks and Lane knew it wasn't from the warmth of the water.

"How... How long have you been standing there?"

Lane almost laughed at the guilt and embarrassment filling her face, but he held himself in check. He didn't want to make her feel any more uncomfortable than she already was. Instead, he wanted to bring the hellcat he'd just witnessed back to the surface. Only this time, he wanted to be an active part of the action.

"Long enough," he drawled. "Starting day two without me? Or are you just warming up?"

A timid smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I thought you were going to be gone for a while."

"I hurried back. Glad I did too." He winked and took in the full view of her standing there, the water glimmering on her delicious body. "I'd hate to have missed the show."

"I... I don't normally. I mean I've never—" She shrugged.

He placed a finger on her moist lips, silencing her explanation. "Sweetheart, you just fulfilled my fantasy."

Her eyes widened in shock. "Really?"

"Darn straight. I say we repeat your performance. Only this time I want a hand in it." Lane watched the tension in her face melt away. He quickly shed his clothes, donned protection and joined her under the warm spray.

He lifted her arms above her head, pinning her up against the tiled wall. Wasting no time, he pressed the hard length of him against her slick body. Paige gasped and arched her back, fueling his already raging desire all the more.

Her arms encircled his neck and their lips locked in a torrid kiss that bespoke their unrelenting craving for each other. His tongue plunged into her mouth, meeting and mating with hers in a wild dance. Paige entangled her fingers in his wet hair, pulling him closer, tighter. A hungry moan growled in her throat and she wrapped a leg around his, silently pleading with him for more.

Lane wanted to take his time, lave every inch of her with his lovemaking, but his traitorous body wouldn't allow it. And neither would Paige's. Her fingernails dug into his flesh, yet he felt no pain knowing he brought her such unrelenting pleasure.

"Oh, Lane," she breathed against his neck. "I want you. I want you so much."

He smiled to himself and rubbed a taut nipple between his fingers. Her breath hitched and she bucked against him. "Faster. Harder," she pleaded. "That's what I want. I can't take anything less."

"You got it, darlin'." Like a man possessed, he cupped her soft bottom in his hands, lifted her off the floor and pulled her up tight against him. Paige wrapped her legs around his hips and he drove his shaft into those sweet, evocative folds of hers. He moaned from the rapture of joining with her. She was wet and honeyed from the shower and from the playfulness of her own hand.

There was no way of denying her what both of them wanted so badly. He increased the pace with each stroke until they danced a frenzied rhythm. Her body tensed and he knew she was on the brink of orgasm. She nipped at his ear, his neck and his lips, revealing she couldn't get enough.

Well, neither could Lane. He plunged deeper and harder with each thrust, determined to push her into a new realm of ecstasy. Not wanting to miss the intensity of emotion about to explode in the green depths of her eyes, he focused his gaze on hers.

Water flowed down her face, dotting her lashes with shimmering beads, but her gaze never left his.

Her breasts pressed against him as their chests rose and fell in rapid succession. She labored to catch her breath, and Lane knew she was on the verge. He wanted to prolong the pleasure, make her beg for more, but this round of sex was too fast and furious for such delectable torture.

Paige's eyes widened with wonder and awe as Lane's erection delivered the final wave of their lovemaking. She cried out. His body tensed and quivered as his seed filled the condom separating them.

Slowly they came down from their high and Lane set her feet gently back on the warm tiles. He brushed a wet strand of hair away from her beautiful face.

"Doesn't this beat the hell out of a ghost tour?" he asked playfully, remembering her comment from yesterday.

"That it does, cowboy," she said lazily, a satisfied smile on her lips. "That it does."

"Good." After a few moments he shut off the shower. "Now, darlin'. I'm going to show you the rest of Wyoming's splendor."

## Chapter Six

"Do you ride?"

"Why, cowboy, I'd think you'd know the answer to that question by now," Paige teased. She smiled and winked at the sexy man standing before her.

Lane laughed, a deep baritone sound that made her insides flutter and took her breath away. She'd just spent the night, and most of the morning, in his arms getting to know every intimate inch of him, yet there was so much she didn't know about Lane Hart.

The reality that she'd never have the chance to get to know all there was to know about Lane cast a shadow over her heart. In two days, all that they'd shared would be history.

"I meant the horses, Paige," Lane quipped, sidetracking her thoughts. He pointed toward the corral.

Paige settled her gaze on the group of horses lazily soaking up the early afternoon sun, their tails swishing at an occasional pesky fly.

"Well, sort of."

"Sort of? I thought all Southern belles knew how to ride."

"Times have changed a little since the Civil War." She planted her fists on her hips. "I've ridden, it's just been a while."

"A while?" He quirked a brow.

"Okay. Years. I rode every chance I got at summer Girl Scout camp. I loved it. But I'm afraid I'm no cowgirl." She shrugged.

"I reckon a person has to have at least one fault."

"Oh? Just what would your one fault be?" Paige crossed her arms and tapped her toe on the graveled drive.

He started to say something, then stopped himself. He turned away. "I need to ride out and check one of the herds," he said instead. "You can hang around the house if you want, lounge on the deck. I shouldn't be gone more than a couple of hours or so."

He strode toward the corral, leaving Paige standing in the middle of the drive. She had the uneasy feeling she'd hit a nerve when she pressed about his faults. And by his sudden avoidance of the topic, it was obvious he had no intentions of sharing any deep dark secrets with her. The idea he wasn't willing to confide in her hurt more than it should. They'd shared far more physically in the last twenty-four hours than most couples did after weeks of dating. Leastwise the way she dated. Heck, only once, after months of dating she'd conceded and spent the night with her boyfriend. That one encounter, in comparison to her night with Lane, would be considered chaste by today's standards. After sharing their bodies so freely with each other, one would think a little intellectual release would be forthcoming between Lane and Paige.

But this weekend wasn't about forging a relationship, she reminded herself. This weekend was about sex, sex and nothing but sex. End of story.

Yet, she couldn't shake the need to get to know this man on more of a psychological plane. By damn, she wasn't going to let him escape so easily.

"Hey, you promised to show me the splendor of Wyoming. Remember?" she said, matching him stride for stride. She didn't have much time left to be in his company, and she wanted to make the most of it.

"Yeah, that I did."

"So let me go with you."

Lane stopped and looked at her as if she'd lost her marbles. He removed his hat and raked his fingers through his dark hair before putting the hat firmly back in place. It was as though he meant the simple gesture as a silent scolding. Seconds ticked by and



Paige could hear her heartbeat pounding in her ears. She wanted to beg him not to turn her away, to let her in. But did she have the right to ask him to bare his soul?

"I don't know, Paige," he said at last. "I forgot you're a city girl. The terrain where I'm headed isn't exactly flat. It can be a rough ride for an inexperienced rider or if you're not in shape for it."

"I'm an ER nurse, I'm tough. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine," she said with more confidence than she felt. "Besides I'm in pretty good shape."

"I won't argue that point, sweetheart," he drawled. He traced the curve of her waist with his fingertip, not stopping until he reached the waistband of her jeans. He grabbed a belt loop and tugged her close.

Even through her clothes, his touch made her skin flame. Their gazes locked and held for what seemed like minutes. He lowered his head until she felt the warmth of his breath against her lips. She swallowed hard, anticipating the pleasure to come. But anguish clouded his eyes as quickly as a spring storm forming on the horizon. He backed away.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," he said with a gruff tone she'd never heard before.

"Warn me?"

"A pretty little thing like you, who hasn't ridden in years, is bound to be sore afterwards in that sweet duff of yours."

"I told you I can handle it."

"Yeah. Every city slicker who set a foot on this ranch thought they could handle it. And didn't. Life out here isn't easy." He stared at her point-blank, his stance telling her he'd put his defenses firmly in place.

It was as though he was deliberately trying to shut her out. But why? Could it be her tough, sexy cowboy was saddled with a few insecurities of his own?

Paige could relate. Whenever Dorie, or a coworker, pressed on issues she didn't care to talk about, her wall went up and that was it. End of conversation. Leastwise until the time came Paige was ready to talk.

Maybe that's all Lane needed—time. She squared her shoulders, determined to hang in there and be a friend if he wanted her to be.

"I'm not every city slicker. No pain. No gain. Besides, I'm sure you can take care of a few aching muscles, cowboy." She grinned and slowly ran her fingers down the row of buttons on the front of his shirt. "You've got two hands, and a Jacuzzi. What more could I need?"

"Bubble bath." The hardness in his eyes softened. He smiled and together they shared a laugh. "But I'll tell you straight out." He tilted up her chin and placed a tender but heat-searing kiss on her lips. "I'm not partial to bellyachin'."

"Bellyaching? After a kiss promising me more than one kind of dipping in your tub, I'd be crazy to even think about complaining."

"True. All right, you can ride Buck."

A wave of relief washed over Paige. She was back on track.

Lane turned and led the rest of the way to the corrals. He whistled and the horses lifted their heads and perked their ears forward. A few whinnied in welcome. He disappeared into the barn then returned with a couple of halters.

"They're a friendly bunch," Paige said as the horses nuzzled her over the fence, their peach fuzz noses tickling her fingers.

Within minutes Lane haltered two horses and led them to a hitching rail outside the large barn door. With cowboy efficiency, he went to work saddling the bay horse he called Jack. Paige watched with appreciation and studied Lane's movements carefully, noting where to place the blanket, then the saddle, and what strap went where. All her Girl Scout training came rushing back.

"Can I saddle Buck?" she asked, genuinely interested in Lane's way of life.

"I reckon. I'd better help you though, or you might find yourself landin' in the dust."

With patience he walked her through the task, helping her to place the saddle in the correct position on the horse's back, how to cinch what he called a girth, and secure the breast collar in place. The whole while their bodies were so close Paige could feel his electrifying warmth encircle her. Their fingers touched as he helped her tighten the cinch and Paige thought she'd explode with want. Never in her life had she felt such longing, such desire to be with a man.

"Let's ride," she said with excitement, eager to see Lane in the land that made him a true cowboy. "I'm ready to see all the splendor Wyoming has to offer."

\* \* \* \* \*

Yeah. Lane would love nothing more than to show Paige the splendor of the Wyoming landscape all right—by laying her on her back so she could see the azure blue of the massive sky above. But he doubted she'd find jagged rocks and a prickly pear cactus patch a very splendid bed. Hell, if they were some place even halfway civilized, he'd take her right here. Right now. But sometimes sex just had to wait. No matter how badly a man wanted it.

Lane couldn't help but smile as he noticed Paige struggled not to wince as the horse she rode broke into a trot. They'd ridden about five miles and not once had she uttered a single gripe. Although, he suspected one wasn't too far from leaving her lips a time or two. Especially when they'd descended the side of a steep hill about a mile back. Her eyes had grown as large as silver dollars when he said they'd ride down the narrow, winding path and through a small, spring-fed creek. But she did it, and without a word of protest.

He had to give her credit. Paige had a ton of gumption and seemed genuinely interested in the workings of the ranch. She'd talked almost nonstop since leaving the barn, asking a barrellful of questions about life out here and what made a ranch

successful. During the last day, he'd taken great pleasure in satisfying her sexual urges. Now he was taking pleasure in satisfying her curiosity as well.

And for a greenhorn, she didn't sit the back of a horse too bad, either. That tight little derriere of hers fit nicely in the saddle, and she kept her back straight and heels down like a pro.

Yeah. She was downright sexy sitting there on his favorite horse. Her profile provided him with a nice view of a perky breast, a flat tummy and a long sensual leg that had been wrapped around him only a few short hours ago. Just the thought of her beneath him, her legs folded tightly around his hips instead of the horse's belly, had him hardening with need.

Lane gave himself a mental shake. What the heck was the matter with him? If anyone knew how many times he'd had sex in the last twenty-four hours—and could read his mind at this moment—would they think he was some kind of sex fiend?

Since sowing his oats for the first time at age sixteen, he'd never gone as long as he had this past year without sex. A year was a helluva long time to do without. Some days, it felt like a lifetime.

All thanks to his ex-fiancée, Becca, he'd endured one damn long, unwanted dry spell. He glanced at Paige. She was nothing like Becca.

His mouth watered as the prospect of bedding her corralled his mind again. Shit. Could unplanned, unwanted abstinence turn a man into a sex lunatic? And once he tasted the honey nectar of a woman again, did he lose all common sense and start letting his urges, his emotions, rule mind and body?

And once she was gone, then what? The idea of Paige leaving Monday morning and going back to her life in Savannah didn't sit well. She'd be out of his sight. Out of his reach. Out of his bed.

Out of his life.

Damn. He hadn't allowed himself to think about making anything permanent with a woman since before Becca had done her best to dig her claws into his wallet, and his

back. Paige, however, was having a profound effect on the barbed wire fence he'd erected around his heart months ago. She was carefully sneaking between the barbs of that fence and slipping under his skin in a sweet, endearing kind of way.

A very dangerous way. Dangerous to his heart.

He suppressed a disgusted groan and slowed his horse to a walk. A swift kick in the ass was what he needed to knock some sense back into him. He didn't need—no, make that didn't want—a woman in his life on an eternally yours basis. His life was complicated enough with livestock market shifts and cattle disease concerns without being hitched to a money-grubbing, cheatin' female. No, sir. He'd been down that road once. And once in a lifetime was plenty for this ol' cowboy.

"You're awfully quiet, Lane. Something wrong?" Paige asked, her voice as smooth to his ears as aged whiskey to his throat.

"Nah. Just thinkin'." He kept his gaze focused on the horizon, afraid she'd read more into his expression than he wanted to reveal just now.

"Care to share?"

No, Lane thought stubbornly to himself. He stiffened his shoulders, and his resolve.

"I'm a good listener," she prodded.

Lane stole a glance at her pretty face. She smiled and there was no way in hell he could miss the sincerity filling her eyes. Damn. His gut told him he'd be a doomed man if he didn't proceed with caution. And his gut was never wrong.

True. On one hand he'd love to tell all, cluing Paige in on how close he'd come to being roped and tied to a money-hungry woman who had a wandering eye. But the fact he'd been so easily duped still stung. Stung deep. Becca had hurt his pride more than he cared to admit, even to himself, and he didn't feel like ruining what he and Paige had going this weekend by dumping his emotional baggage.

"It's water under the bridge," he said at last.

"Must be about a woman?"

Lane heard an air of confidence in her voice. "What makes you say that?" he asked, miffed with himself for allowing his troubles to be so obvious.

"If you'd put it behind you, it wouldn't be bothering you now. Scorned hearts have a way of sticking with a person for a long time."

Lane slid her a glance that he hoped conveyed he didn't want to go there, but the glint in Paige's eyes told him she had other ideas.

"Besides, it's simply a process of elimination."

"Oh?" He was intrigued by her thought process. Hell, he was intrigued by everything about her.

"Well, by all outward appearances, money doesn't seem to be an immediate problem for you. And your love for this ranch seeps from every pore on your body. You have family, so the only thing missing in your life is a woman."

"Who says I don't have a woman?"

"Come on, Lane. Would you take a chance at spending three days with me, to fulfill my sexual fantasies no less, if you had a girlfriend? One night maybe. But not an entire weekend." She shook her head and a few strands of hair escaped her ponytail, framing her face.

"Especially on your own ranch where we could be discovered by any one of your family members or employees," she continued. "I might not be a dating guru, but I've been around enough to know how fast gossip of sexual affairs can spread."

"Like wildfire," he said dryly, remembering all too well the rumors that had flourished after he'd broken his engagement with Becca.

"Speaking from experience, cowboy?"

"Guess you might say that."

"Me, too."

He quirked a brow, silently questioning her answer.

"Well, not me personally," she muttered. "I'm a nurse, remember? Gossip in a hospital is as common as bedpans and disinfectants."

"A lot of bedside manner does go on, huh?"

"I guess you could say that."

The conversation ended there as they reached a herd of cow-calf pairs gathered around a large stock tank. Water overflowed the rim as the windmill turned slowly in the soft breeze, squeaking with every revolution of its wheel as it pumped cool water from beneath the ground. Rolling hills dotted with sagebrush, yucca plants and a cloudless sky completed the picture perfect landscape.

Lane watched as Paige gazed at the site with obvious appreciation. She took a deep breath as if trying to absorb every detail, every nuance of their surroundings.

A hawk soared above, his shadow darting here and there on the ground as he searched for his dinner. The primitive image of survival served as one more reminder of the wildness of this territory in spite of the modern world encroaching on its borders.

Lane loved this land for that very reason, but for years now he'd felt as though there was some element missing in his life. An element that Mother Nature couldn't fill.

Now watching Paige with awe and wonder shining in her eyes, he knew what it was. He'd never known the joy of sharing his passion, and having that passion returned, with someone he really cared about.

Someone he loved.

Loved? Where had the word love come from? After knowing Paige for only twenty-four hours, could he say he loved her?

*When bulls fly*, he thought disgustedly. He didn't go for that love at first sight BS. Any man who bought into that romantic stuff was only asking for heart and wallet trouble. Lane preferred to steer clear of both kinds.

"I've never seen anything like this before," Paige said. "Georgia is pretty, but this is so vast, so wide-open."

“Amazing isn’t it? I’ve lived here all my life, yet I’m constantly astounded by Wyoming’s magnificence.”

“I can understand why. It’s so pure. So natural. And so untouched. There’s nothing here to suggest this is the twenty-first century. A person could have stepped back in time and wouldn’t even know it. I love it.”

Lane couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Paige was thinking and talking like him.

Maybe he’d better rethink the love at first sight concept.



## **Chapter Seven**

Thunderheads built on the western horizon as Lane finished giving Paige a tour of the rodeo grounds the common rodeo-goers never got to see. The scent of animals, hay and leather intermingled with the promise of rain on the air to create a world unlike any Paige had ever experienced.

Her world was full of the sights and smells of a city steeped in history and ghosts, and where magnolia blossoms and Southern home cooking teased her nose and her palate.

But this, this was a part of Lane's world. A world where wide-open spaces ruled and the freshness of a wild and untouched land exhilarated the senses. She loved it.

Lane had introduced her to many of his rodeo buddies simply as a friend from Georgia, but Paige didn't miss the winks or slight nod of their heads when they thought she wasn't looking. Lane said they were only expressing their approval of her, but Paige felt otherwise. To her, the underlying communication between the men was crystal clear. They saw her as nothing more than a weekend fling. Admittedly, she felt embarrassed and hurt by the notion even though it was true. She was a fling. This time it was what she'd wanted. Why she'd come to Wyoming. This time she'd made the conscious decision to have a fling, not be the means to one for someone else.

The fact that Lane's friends saw her in such a light brought back the hurt she'd felt upon realizing her latest Prince Charming wanted nothing more from her than s-e-x.

None of the men she'd dated wanted her for who she was inside, and because of their manipulative and conniving tactics to get her into their beds, she'd resolved to take charge of her relationships. Of her prospective relationships, that is.

Why then was she here, doing exactly the one thing she despised?

Because she was tired of living her life through her job. Although she thrived on helping people in need, she was the one in need this time. She needed more than the fast-paced trauma of the ER, or the pages of a good book, to fulfill her life.

And whether she wanted to admit it or not, she'd agreed to the crazy scheme because she knew this time Dorie was right. Paige was dying to experience life.

Music burst through the arena speakers, knocking Paige out of her inner tirade. The rodeo announcer came on and proclaimed the start of the Cheyenne Frontier Days rodeo, the daddy of 'em all. The arena quickly filled with cowboys and cowgirls on horseback carrying flags of all colors in what Lane explained was the grand entry.

"I suspect you'll be wanting to watch the rodeo," Lane stated as he led the way past a pen full of massive, ferocious-looking bulls used for the bull riding.

"What kind of traveler would I be if I came to Wyoming and didn't see at least one rodeo?"

"A lousy one." He laughed. "Let's find a place over here where the contestants' families sit. They're the best seats in the house."

He led the way through a network of corrals filled with livestock and Paige couldn't help but notice a stocky cowboy leaning against a fence, watching them. She looked in the man's direction. In spite of the shadow cast over his eyes by his hat, she could see a hatred filling their depths. Heck, the bulls in the next pen appeared friendlier. Then it hit her. She knew who he was.

"Lane, isn't that the cowboy I saved your neck from yesterday?"

"Yep," he answered without taking his focus off the path in front of them.

"What were you two fighting about anyway?"

"Nothin' important."

"Really? If I were a betting woman, I'd bet differently."

"Is that so?" He looked at her and quirked a brow, but didn't miss a beat in his step.

“Well, yeah. The guy looks like he’d love nothing more than to pound your hide into hamburger. You must have really ticked him off.”

Lane’s shoulders stiffened and he stopped short. Paige bumped into his backside. She didn’t bother moving, choosing instead to savor the contact. Lane turned and they faced each other nose to nose. “What did you do, cowboy? Steal his horse?” she said huskily.

Lane’s blue eyes turned icy, obviously unmoved by her play at seduction.

She took a deep swallow and forged ahead, curious to know what made two grown men hate each other so.

“Well, isn’t horse theft one of the most serious crimes a man can commit in the West? Punishable by hanging?” she teased, this time running her fingers up his chest hoping to evoke a sexual response. She got one all right. In her.

“I suppose you city slickers think we’re still fighting Indians out here too,” he said gruffly.

Surprised by his terse response, Paige knew she’d hit another sore spot. She held up her hands and backed away.

“Of course not. I was just trying to be funny.”

Lane shot her a look that said he didn’t find her the comedic type. He resumed walking, leaving her to face his back and catch up or be left behind.

Paige growled under her breath, perturbed the appearance of Lane’s buddy had soured his mood so easily. Whatever wedge there was between the two men, it ran deep. And if Lane didn’t want to allow her entrance into his problems, helping him in thirty-nine hours was going to be tough.

But she was willing to try. Somehow she needed to get Lane to forget about his anger toward the other cowboy and turn it into positive energy. Positive sexual energy.

“Let’s forget about the rodeo,” she said softly, circling her arms around his waist, stopping him in his tracks. She reached down to the front of his jeans and cupped the bulge that wasn’t wasting any time in expanding.

Paige’s body reacted with a heat of its own that rocketed to her core. Her mouth watered in anticipation, loving the enticing position she’d put them in.

Speaking of enticing positions—fantasy number two, having sex in a public place—was on her agenda for the evening. And a person couldn’t get much more public than the packed Cheyenne rodeo grounds. All they needed was a nice secluded spot where they could have some privacy, not worry about being caught, and not be too far from the rodeo action so she could make it count.

The idea of having sex in such a public atmosphere, with security and rodeo staff swarming the place, sent another bolt of excitement racing up her spine, zapping her nerves into blazing mode. She snuggled her breasts against Lane’s back, absorbing the rock-hard solidness of him through her nipples.

The intoxicating scent of his maleness teased her nose, tempting her like a freshly uncorked bottle of champagne.

Would Lane take his time and undress her? Or would he rip her clothes off in a wild frenzy? Would he yank her jeans down over her thrusting hips and take his pleasure, not worried about the rest of her clothes?

She pictured him pinning her up against a wall, bucking against her fast and hard like a bronco bucked against the man who rode his back. The sensation of tiny licks of fire from his tongue seemed almost real on her fevered skin. She longed for the hard length of his erection pressing into her, pushing, pounding into her core as if he couldn’t get enough of her wrapped tightly around him.

Paige took a deep breath, feeling on the threshold of climax just from dreaming about it. She’d become such a wild and nasty girl in such a short time. Only a couple of days ago she couldn’t have envisioned doing what she’d done with Lane, with any

man. And here she was, about to have another round of smokin'-hot sex with her cowboy.

That is, if she could get his mind shifted back in the right direction.

"Squeeze any tighter and you'll render me impotent for the rest of my life," she heard a distant voice say.

Paige gave herself a mental shake and opened her eyes. The corrals came into view and the roar of the crowd thundered in her ears. She backed away as if burned, mortified by her lack of self-control. What was happening to her? How could a couple days of outrageous sex be powerful enough to change a person stuck in a thirty-year-old rut? It was almost as if she was suddenly an addict and Lane was her drug of choice.

"Sorry," she managed to say, hoping she didn't have some goofy expression plastered on her face.

"No need to say you're sorry. I'm flattered you find me so irresistible, sweetheart. It does a lot for a man's ego when a good-lookin' woman can't keep her hands off him."

"Is that so? I just hoped I didn't embarrass you in front of your sparring partner. I forgot we had an audience." She nodded her head in the direction where the seething cowboy still stood.

"Don't worry about it. I can handle him." Lane's gaze narrowed and he pulled her back into his arms, wrapping a lean hand around her waist, securing her tightly against him. "I can guarantee he'd never be able to give you what I already have. And will," he said huskily.

The promise of what was to come made the juncture between Paige's legs dampen even more. Oh to feel his hands fondling her breasts, his tongue teasing her nipples and other secret places, took her breath away.

"Will? Is that a promise?"

"You know it."

They needed to find someplace private, and fast, before she jumped him right here and made all her wishes come true regardless of who was watching.

"By the look in your eyes, I'd say you're ready for fantasy number two."

"Oh yeah," she breathed heavily, feeling as though she needed a good dose of oxygen.

"Care to clue me in on what exactly I'm in for?"

"I've given you clues. Can't you guess by now?" She tugged at the buckle of his belt and smiled. "You're a cowboy and we're at a rodeo. Are you ready to ride?"

Lane's eyes lit up with a wicked glint that spoke volumes. "Ah. So that's it. Sex here at the rodeo. A public place. You are one wild filly."

"Actually, I'm a starving filly. It's way past my feeding time."

"I can remedy that." Lane covered her lips with his own, his tongue plunging into the depths of her mouth. His hand sought and found her breast, cupping and squeezing like he meant serious business, yet with a gentleness that promised her complete satisfaction.

Paige's pulse kicked up to the danger zone, but she managed to retain some sense about her swirling mind. This weekend was all about wild, go-for-it sex, but she did still have some limits she couldn't quite shake. And having sex in front of a bunch of ogling cowboys went way past her limits.

She placed a hand against Lane's firm chest and felt his heart beating rapidly beneath her fingers. The realization that he still wanted her as much as she him, gave her confidence another boost in the right direction.

"Hold on there, cowboy. This is a little too public. Even for a fantasy."

"They're only animals, Paige," he whispered, then nibbled her earlobe.

"I'm not talking about the bulls, Lane," she said between breaths. "I'm referring to the audience gathered by the fence over there."

A low growl escaped his throat. He loosened his hold, but didn't let go completely. He glanced over her shoulder, then slowly broke their embrace and took a step back. He splayed his hands on his hips, his feet wide in an age-old show of male dominance. Paige wanted to smile at his actions, but the loss of his touch suddenly left her feeling unprotected and vulnerable under the other men's gazes.

The cowboy Lane had fought with scowled at them now with pure hatred in his eyes. He pushed away from the fence he'd been leaning against and Paige guessed his intentions. He was bucking for another fight. And by the way Lane's body tensed in reaction to the silent threat, Paige knew he'd be more than happy to oblige.

"What do you say we find a place a little less public and work on that fantasy?" Paige drawled, hoping to distract Lane. She tugged on his shirtfront, pulling him in the opposite direction. "The clock is ticking, you know. I leave day after tomorrow."

Huge raindrops broke free of the tumultuous sky above and started to fall haphazardly around them, pelting the dusty ground. They'd be soaked to the bone if they didn't find shelter in a hurry.

"Sure thing, sweetheart. I know just the place."

## **Chapter Eight**

Lane tugged on Paige's hand, pulling her through a gray steel door and into a musty storage room under the grandstands. Once inside he flicked on the single, bare light bulb, throwing the room into a muted yellow glow. He turned the lock on the door with a soft click, safely securing them inside, and the rest of the world outside.

A collection of dusty signs stacked against a concrete block wall filled a fourth of the room and a dozen or so folding chairs lined the opposite side.

"Sorry it's not the most romantic place," Lane said as he took off his hat and shook the rain from the brim before replacing it on his head. "But it's private. We should be safe from prying eyes."

The cheering of the crowd and the stomping of feet thundered above them, proving that the short-lived shower wasn't about to deter the enthusiastic rodeo fans.

"Well, it's sort of private." Lane glanced up at the rust-colored steel beams lining the ceiling. "Hope you don't mind the noise."

"It's perfect," Paige said, excitement in her voice. "We can't be seen, but the crowd isn't far away either. It's exhilarating knowing all those people are up there, and we're down here about to..." She tilted her head and nibbled on her bottom lip. The sultry look in her eyes promised him a heap of pleasure.

"Yeah. I guess you could say that." He stepped forward, shortening the distance between them. With purpose, he slipped his fingers through the belt loops on her jeans and pulled her tight against him. "I hope you aren't too sore after your horseback ride today. I'd hate to cause you pain."

"Don't you worry about me, cowboy. I'm doing just fine."

"All right. Shall we get down to business then, sweetheart?"



“What kind of business did you have in mind?”

Lane couldn't help smiling at her feigned innocence. But her smoldering gaze told him she knew exactly what he had in mind. If she wanted to play and have him spell it out step-by-step, he'd be happy to oblige.

“This kind.” He backed her up against the wall and lifted her hands high above her head. With one hand he pinned both of her wrists in his grasp and traced the contours of her breast through her soaked shirt with his other. Her nipple, taut and firm beneath the cool, wet fabric, hardened even more from his touch. He circled the nub with his thumb and forefinger in a rhythmic motion. She inhaled sharply, arching toward him.

“Like that, do ya?”

“Yes,” she said, not much above a whisper. Small drops of rain on her hair glistened under the low glow of the light like a net of diamonds, making him desire this Southern belle like he'd desired no other.

Inhaling deeply, the scent of her rain-soaked skin impaled his senses, driving him crazy with want. His gaze dropped to the vee of her tank top and treated him to the pleasing sight of more beads of moisture, this time pooled in the deep, inviting crevice of her cleavage.

The perfect quencher for a parched man, he thought silently. “What else do you like?” he asked. Wanting to know all there was to know about Paige Holister.

She took a deep breath, forcing her breast further into the palm of his hand. “Fast and hard.”

A low rumble of laughter escaped Lane's throat. Damn. Even though he was pretty sure that at the core she was a nice girl seeking a onetime adventure this weekend, she was the sexiest thing he'd ever laid eyes on. He wanted to satisfy her in every way, not just because it was what he wanted, but because she wanted it too.

And if he was honest with himself, he hadn't felt that way about a woman in a helluva long time — if ever.

"I'll ride you fast and hard, darlin'. That I promise."

He released her wrists and cupped both her breasts in his hands. Unable to resist the temptations she offered any longer, he dipped his head and licked the raindrops from the succulent valley before him. Her skin, salty and sweet from the rain and her own concoction of femininity, was smooth as silk against his tongue.

A soft growl escaped her throat. She removed his hat and dove her fingers into his hair, silently begging him for more. That was all the invitation he needed to give her exactly what she wanted. He yanked her shirt from her jeans and stripped the garment up over her head.

The muted noise of the crowd roared above them as if urging him on. His fingers sought and found the front clasp on her bra, spilling her breasts out to his gaze, his touch.

With his foot, he scooted a low bench between them and knelt before her. He took those delectable breasts into his hands once more and massaged the flawless mounds with his fingers, with his tongue.

Paige arched against him, offering taut pearls of pleasure for his taking. Lane didn't refuse. He took a nipple into his mouth, sucking and teasing as he laved her into breathlessness. As Paige struggled to breathe, her breasts rose and fell beneath his touch in a rhythmic motion, fueling his hunger, his desire all the more.

She tugged and pulled at his shirt as if she, too, were crazed by their latest round of fiery sex.

Successful in her quest, his shirt joined hers in a heap on the dusty floor. Her fingers dug into his back, pulling him tight against her, silently pleading with him to give her more.

The contact of his skin against her skin electrified Lane to new heights. He had to have her. Now.

Like a man possessed, he unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans in one swift motion. He slid his hands down between the satiny fabric of her lingerie and her smooth,

slender hips. He yanked and the denim and lace pooled at her feet. She kicked off her shoes and he tossed aside the last of her clothes.

There she stood, naked and glorious before him, as elegant and rare as Venus herself. Lane wanted to shout from the mountaintops that she was his. All his. And by damn, he was going to give, and take, like he'd never done before.

He shoved the bench away and his knees hit the unforgiving concrete, placing him at her core. She flattened her shoulders against the wall and lifted her hands high above her head, effectively tilting her hips forward, offering her slick folds for his own private feast.

Lane accepted her generous offer and his tongue plunged into the depths of her center. He pressed into her, striving to go as deep and as far as humanly possible. Her sweet bud full of secret pleasures tickled his tongue. He tickled in return.

Her breath hitched. The crowd cheered and stomped, providing them with a music that spurred them into wild recklessness.

Paige slid one long leg over his shoulder, opening herself to him like a cup, offering, begging him to take a drink. Lane captured her bottom in his hands, kneading, bucking her against his mouth.

She groaned and writhed from the erotic pleasure he instilled upon her, and beneath his hands he felt small beads of moisture pepper her skin in response. She was about to climax.

Lane could feel his own pulsing needs dying to break free of the confines of his jeans, but he wouldn't allow himself that satisfaction yet. First he wanted to take Paige to the moon and back. Then he'd do it again with his shaft firmly inside her.

He pumped her harder against him and within seconds she cried out with a sweet mixture of joy and pain. She arched even higher, rising up to her tiptoes, begging for more. Lane indulged her wishes and sent her over the edge a second time. She reached her peak with a bold cry, but the noise of the crowd above masked her exclamations. He

knew she was weak from the orgasms that had racked her body, but Lane wasn't about to stop. He'd strike while the iron was hot and send her over the edge yet a third time.

Rising to his feet, he undid his belt and pulled down his jeans enough to allow his member to spring free. He took a condom from his pocket and quickly sheathed himself.

Lane lifted Paige by her bottom, placing her over his tight, pulsing erection. She wrapped her legs around his middle, bringing them closer together. As she did so, he realized how perfect the fit was between them. Shit. The sensation of his penis buried deep inside her felt so damn good, it hurt.

They tumbled back against the unforgiving wall and Lane gave Paige exactly what she'd asked for. Fast and hard. He pumped and rocked against her, consumed by burning need to explore every inch of her, inside and out.

Paige dug her fingernails into his flesh and cried out once more.

Lane silenced her by devouring her lips with his own and plunging his tongue into the warm depths of her mouth. On his tongue he delivered to her the taste of her own sweet nectar.

The slick valley of her labia reached out and hugged him, coating him with more of that nectar that was uniquely her own. They moaned in unison—clinging to each other as if they'd never be sated. Their bodies pummeled together in a primitive dance as old as mankind, and Lane knew he was lost.

Pressure built within him to the explosion point before he could stop it. With one, two, three thrusts, he spilled his seed into the one thing that stood between them.

The spasms subsided and Lane leaned against Paige, his body spent from the impact of their torrid lovemaking.

For what seemed like an eternity, they stood there, the cool, rough wall supporting their thoroughly pleased bodies.

"Was that fast and hard enough, sweetheart?" he asked as he found the strength to brush away a tendril of hair from her cheek.

Paige smiled and simply nodded her head.

The roar of the crowd increased tenfold, rumbling like ominous thunder, and interrupted their brief moment of respite. Lane knew the bull riding was now under way.

"We'd better dress and get out of here, sweetheart. The rodeo will be over soon. If we dally, we might get caught." He started to push away, but Paige stopped him.

"Would that be so bad?" She traced a path from the center of his chest down to his belly button with the tip of her fingernail.

Lane took a sharp intake of breath, tempted to give in to his rebuilding need, but forced himself to stay in check. Once the rodeo was over, custodians might find their way to this room. They didn't need to land their butts in jail for indecent exposure.

"Depends on who's doing the catchin'," he said as he slipped off the condom and righted his jeans.

"Meaning your sparring partner?" she asked teasingly.

Lane's shoulders stiffened. The mention of Jake Owens was like a cold shower, effectively wiping out his lust. He didn't want to think about the damn Owens family and he sure as hell didn't want Paige probing that wound. Becca and her brother Jake had interfered enough in his life and he resented their continued intrusions. Lane just wanted to put the whole broken engagement behind him. For good.

"You don't give up, do you?" Lane said a little harsher than he'd intended. He took a deep breath, locked down his feelings and tried to take some of the hurt from Paige's eyes. "There's some bad blood between Jake and me."

She studied him. Although she didn't say a word, the expression on her face revealed she was waiting for him to say more. At least she had the sense to avoid a "duh" or "obviously".

He hooked the buckle at his waist then tossed her her shirt and jeans. "It has to do with a woman."

Paige's green eyes softened in concern. Damn. She was gonna care about this. She hugged her clothes, effectively covering herself from his view. "A woman?"

"Jake's sister."

"What happened?"

*Un-huh. No way.* "I'm done talkin'." He went in search of his hat and Paige followed.

"I'm curious is all."

Yeah, Lane knew Paige was curious all right. He, however, wasn't in the mood to share. Sharing meant getting in too deep. And getting in too deep led to a relationship. And a relationship equaled permanency.

A permanent relationship wasn't supposed to be a part of Paige's proposition, or a part of Lane's long-term plans. This weekend—three little days—was about sex, and nothing more. Why did he have to keep reminding himself of that fact?

Because having Paige in his bed every night, and his shower every morning, actually appealed to him, that's why. It felt right.

She felt right.

So, what was he thinking? That maybe after all this time he was willing to take a chance again? Work toward some of that taboo permanency with Paige? Hell. He'd be safer riding the rankest bulls on the rodeo circuit rather than committing to a woman again. A woman that he knew very little about.

He'd known Becca most of his life, gone to school with her even, and look where that got him. A broken heart, a bitter disposition and an archenemy in her brother who believed the whole breakup was Lane's fault.

After accepting the hard truth that Becca had loved only his money, and screwed his best friend to boot, Lane had roped off his emotions as a necessary means of self-

preservation. He'd concluded that no woman could really be trusted – that commitment only led to cocksure pain.

Lane had carried one helluva bruise on his pride for the last twelve months, and he wouldn't allow his resolve to soften just because the sex with Paige was so great. No way was he falling into that same ol' trap.

"Lane?" He felt a soft hand on his arm and forced himself to pull away from its tempting warmth.

"Leave your curiosity at the door, sweetheart," he said as he put his hat, and his defenses, firmly back into place. "I'm not partial to sharing my business."

## Chapter Nine

Paige sat at the kitchen table, a cup of extra strong coffee locked firmly in her grasp. Nothing like a heavy dose of caffeine to get the brain shifting into over-analysis mode, she thought, downing a long swallow.

Glancing at the clock, she cursed the early six o'clock hour. Twenty-eight hours and ticking. Time was running out. It was looking like her third fantasy and her heart were going to take a hit.

The ride home from the rodeo had become an excruciatingly long one when Lane failed to offer any more of an explanation – no matter how lame – for his abrupt silence. He'd hinted at what she could only assume was a big hurt inside him, but if he didn't want to talk about it, as nothing more than his fling *du jour*, she didn't have the right to push for details.

They'd acted like stubborn children, keeping their distance and their thoughts to themselves. But after finally going to bed and tossing and turning for what seemed like hours, they could no longer deny the passion each offered, and reached out, making love as if for the last time.

No words were spoken, but in Paige's heart she knew Lane was saying goodbye in his own way. She'd fought back tears and finally drifted to sleep out of pure exhaustion only to wake up this morning to cold, empty sheets on Lane's side of the bed.

It was no surprise she'd found herself alone. After all, she'd overstepped the silent bounds of their agreement by getting too personal and asking questions he didn't want to answer.

And as a result Lane pulled away.

Paige set down her coffee cup, silently chastising herself for being such an idiot. All she'd wanted was to help him, find a way to heal his hurt. But Lane had made it clear



he didn't want her help. His underlying actions last night proved he was ready for this to be over. Unfortunately, she was realizing too late she cared far more than she should for this to remain a simple fling between them. And this was a fling. They both knew they had no future together.

As painful as it was, Paige needed to think about saying goodbye and making that clean break too. It was what she'd promised. What they'd agreed to. What he expected.

The minutes ticked away and she found it increasingly difficult to accept that there were no more tomorrows for them.

Paige groaned and emptied her coffee cup in one last swallow.

A few short weeks ago she'd never dreamed of actually fulfilling her sexual fantasies. They were just that – fantasies.

Now look at her. She'd not only indulged, but discovered a few things about herself along the way. Realizing she could cut loose and leave the shyness, the practicality behind, was liberating. And learning she could care about a man who was far outside her normalcy zone had boosted her self-confidence.

But what happened when she stepped off that plane in Savannah tomorrow afternoon? Could she return to the same old routine? The same old life where she worked the graveyard shift seven to seven? A life where the most non-hospital excitement she experienced was meeting with her Tuesday night book club?

All that represented her life before Lane. Could she be satisfied with it after Lane?

Oh God. The idea of returning to that dull, nothing existence where Lane was thousands of miles away was too depressing to comprehend. She wasn't the same person she was a little over forty hours ago, and settling for her previous life was just that, settling.

Paige crossed the room to the coffeepot. Refilling her cup, she leaned against the counter and gazed out the long row of windows that allowed the majestic landscape to enter the house. The sun peeked over the horizon, bringing with it a vibrant array of

colors that streaked across the sky. The rich hues reflected on the lake's glasslike surface, doubling the tranquil beauty.

"I could get used to this," she sighed. "Too used to it." She'd better enjoy the moment, because after tomorrow she was back in reality. And that reality didn't include Wyoming sunrises and the sexier-than-sin cowboy she was falling in love with.

\* \* \* \* \*

Feeling bored and restless while waiting for Lane to return, Paige headed for the kitchen. Fretting always made her hungry and caused her to consume far too many calories, a huge detriment to the size-eight waistline she struggled to keep.

She'd hoped raiding Lane's closet and slipping on one of his well-worn shirts would prove a strong distraction from the solace that cakes, cookies and ice cream offered. It wasn't working. The only thing that would save her now was the man himself.

Why couldn't a celery stalk hold as much magnetism as that unopened box of Twinkies sitting on the counter did?

Paige cursed under her breath, forcing herself to scout the veggie bin of the fridge. Nothing appealed to her taste buds. Closing the refrigerator, she raked her fingers through her hair in despair. Either Lane was still upset with her for prying, or distancing himself to make things easier later.

"Doesn't he care at all about how I'm feeling?" she said with frustration. Nappy looked up at her with his head quirked to one side and his big brown eyes full of what looked like censure.

"Ugh. You're right, Nappy. I can't go there. I can't let my heart have a say in this. Heartache wasn't a part of the fantasy."

But whether she liked it or not, as the day dragged on and Lane failed to return she realized heartache was inevitable.

Whatever Lane's reasons might be for disappearing, Paige wasn't leaving Wyoming without fulfilling her final fantasy. She'd come this far. He'd agreed to the proposition. And by damn, he was going to deliver. She, Paige Holister, was going to fulfill this crazy, ridiculous, fabulous quest. No way was Dorie coming out the winner here.

Paige wanted no regrets. By letting the last fantasy slip through her fingers, she'd have plenty of regrets to commiserate about. But the sex had only a fraction to do with it. Even though she'd promised no commitments, her heart told her she needed to find out for sure there could never be anything more than this one weekend between her and Lane.

There were no second chances for Paige. Her love life didn't work that way. It was now or never.

Paige sauntered into the living room with its large stone fireplace and tall windows reaching to the peak of the cathedral-style ceiling. She loved this room. The rustic decor reflected exactly who Lane was and what his life represented. To her it felt like home.

The carpet was soft and inviting to her bare feet as she crossed the room. She noticed several ropes coiled neatly on the hearth. They looked as though they'd been tended to with as much care as fine china.

She knelt down and ran a finger over the twisted length. Not knowing a thing about ropes, she had no idea what it was made of, but the material seemed tough and strong—like the man who owned it.

An idea took shape in her mind. Maybe, just maybe, she could make up her blunder to Lane by pulling off that final fantasy just for him. Her heart did a triple flip in her chest. The image of the two of them engaged in that final foray with the help of Lane's rope made her tingle all over.

First, she needed to find a pair of his boots and one of his cowboy hats. After a few minutes searching, she was successful in her quest. Paige picked up the rope and headed for the deck.

"Now all I need is my cowboy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lane stopped short just inside the back kitchen door. His breath hitched. Out on the deck stood Paige, clad only in one of his denim shirts and wearing a pair of his boots and one of his old tried-and-true cowboy hats. She swung his best rope over her head.

She'd raided his closet and his pickup, the sassy wench. He hardened with need.

Lane could only think of one word to describe Paige.

S-e-x-y.

Was she wearing anything underneath? He hoped so. The pleasure of ripping off her panties and plunging his swelling cock into her over and over again would be the perfect way to spend a hot and lazy late afternoon.

Her red hair tousled about her face as she moved, adding to the provocative appearance that would make any centerfold envious.

Gripping the rope, she licked her lips in deep concentration as she studied a deck post as a possible target. His imagination took hold. What he wouldn't give to have that delicate, yet saucy, tongue of hers bedeviling his flesh. He swallowed hard. She was turning him on big-time.

Paige could be so brave and naughty when she thought no one was looking. And oh, such excruciatingly sweet stirrings she ignited between his legs when she had no idea he was watching.

The urge to grab her and take her in the fast and hard rhythm she loved was mighty powerful. He, however, wanted some foreplay. Taking his time and playing until they both reached the explosion point and couldn't stand it any longer was what he craved. Watching her body move and sway under his shirt as she worked the rope was definitely a helluva start to the ride.

Leaning against the doorjamb, he settled in to savor the mouth-watering view before him. Ingraining every inch, every detail of Paige in his mind before he let her know of his presence was paramount. If he couldn't have her in his bed forever, he wanted to at least have the memories.

Memories. Hell. He wanted more than memories to cling to every night. He wanted the flesh and blood Paige.

*Dangerous thought, Hart. Get over it.*

Lane forced aside the hints his heart was dropping and focused instead on the physical demands of other parts of his anatomy. Paige lifted the rope above her head again. The hem of the shirt brushed against the back of her thighs as it hiked up to reveal a tight, squeezable derriere covered only by a small piece of black satin.

Son of a bitch. If she wanted to tempt him, the major tightness of his jeans proved she'd succeeded. He was tempted all right. Tempted to lift her out of his boots and set that sweet tush of hers on the railing surrounding the deck.

He'd spread her legs and take her right out here in the wide open. It was a good thing he lived in the boondocks, with no neighbors around.

Lane was no stranger to the alluring powers of a woman, but never had he known a woman quite like Paige. She was sweet. She was sassy. She was fresh. She was hot. She was simple. She was sexy.

Paige was everything he'd ever wanted.

Not only had she affected his physical senses, but his common sense as well. Somehow, in a mystical kind of way, she was making the past hurts, the past wrongs, settle in the dust of yesterday.

For the first time in over a year, he actually wanted to look toward the future. A future that included Paige.

Damn. There he went again. He hardly knew Paige. She was, for all practical purposes, a stranger. Yet she was bewitching him into taking a chance on something permanent.

Commitment. Why was he having such a tough time remembering his vow to steer clear of the dreaded c word? He was drifting into serious trouble.

Time for some distance. He needed to get out of the house, do some hard, physical work to rid his body of these throbbing yearnings. And worse yet, the mounting desire for something more than just a sexual relationship.

Before Lane could force his feet to move, Paige swung a loop and managed to rope her target, revealing a very lovely tush in the process. With one simple move, she'd effectively shifted his libido from fourth to fifth gear.

Drifting into trouble? Hell, he was in trouble.

Every rational thought he possessed left him high-and-dry. His ravenous gaze traveled down the length of her body and up again, not stopping until he reached her breasts. Even through the fabric, he could see her nipples bead and press against the soft cotton. The sight ignited a fresh batch of heat that zipped straight down to his already aching arousal.

Images of their lovemaking under the grandstands came back in a fervent rush. He wanted that again. He wanted her to feel that brazen, that hot, that fulfilled once more.

But yet...he wanted something more.

Paige turned and caught sight of him. A soft moan escaped her throat, telling him of the immediate pleasures that were his for the taking if he wanted them. Tilting her chin, a challenging glint filled her eyes and dared him to refuse the silent invitation she presented.

He acknowledged his acceptance by letting his gaze travel the length of her smooth, kissable throat and down to the hint of breast exposed by the open expanse of the shirt. Mercy. He had it bad for this woman.

"Howdy, cowboy," she said with that sexy Southern drawl of hers. "I thought I'd try my hand at ropin'. Am I doin' it right?" She slowly, sensually played with the rope, working it back and forth in her hands.

Holy shit. What he wouldn't give to be that rope. And by the blissful look melting over her face, he'd say he wasn't the only one getting hot over the deliberate massage.

He shoved away from the doorjamb. Pushing open the screen door, he stepped out into the waning sunlight. Only inches of sexually charged Wyoming atmosphere separated them.

"Interested in ropin'?" he asked.

Paige lifted the rope and looped it over his shoulders and down to his torso. She yanked it tight, pulling him closer. "Ropin' you."

There was no mistaking her actions, or her words. She was out to seduce him all right. By damn, he was going to let her.

He glanced down at the rope, then back up at Paige. "Bondage? You sure are full of surprises."

"Just wait, cowboy. You ain't seen nothin' yet." She tugged on the rope.

Their gazes locked and held. The want, the hunger, the need he saw in the depths of her green eyes mirrored his desires exactly.

They were a perfect match. He knew that now. There was no point in denying it to himself any longer.

A new, all-consuming surge of desire filled his soul.

This was right.

She was right.

Gently, Lane wrapped his fingers around her slim wrist and brought it to his lips. Slowly, he placed tiny kisses on her soft skin, working his way up inch by inch until he reached her palm. He teased her sensitive skin for a torturous moment before capturing and pulling her index finger full into his mouth. Her skin was cool and silky, pleasantly soothing to his tongue. And erotic as hell.

With his tongue, he worked his own brand of magic. Paige inhaled sharply. A shiver of what he took for anticipation made her body tremble. His own body reacted like a stick of dynamite held to a flaring match.

He savored the outward pleasure, but the magnitude of what he truly wanted from her, with her, hit him full-force. Without a doubt he knew not only had his body been roped, but his heart too.



## **Chapter Ten**

Holy cow. The feel of Lane's tongue wrapped tightly around Paige's finger pushed her to the edge of faintville. She was in for one wild ride with her cowboy.

Lane sucked and licked, teasing mercilessly. His playfulness pushed her pulse into a territory where she'd be hard-pressed to recover unscathed. She was one lucky girl. Her cowboy had granted her wish by coming to her with an I want you gleam in his eyes, and a hard-on in his jeans. Perfect.

Lane let her finger slip from his mouth and wasted no time in capturing her lips with his own. Their tongues tangled and danced. They nipped and tortured. But it wasn't enough.

God. It would never be enough.

He broke the kiss and cupped her face between his strong hands.

Slowly he traced the line of her jaw with the pad of his thumb. The intimate touch made her breath catch more than any sexual act ever could.

His blue eyes darkened, caressing her. Savoring her. It was as though he searched for something. Hoped for something.

Emotion—emotion in its purest form filled the depths of his dark blue eyes.

"Sweet surrender," he whispered.

The world shifted beneath Paige's feet.

Drawing a deep breath, her insides quivered with an emotional ecstasy she'd never experienced before in her life. *What was happening here?*

Slowly, his lips came down to capture hers. He possessed her completely with tender, deep kisses that melted and exhilarated her heart at the same time.

This wasn't about fulfilling fantasies anymore. This wasn't about just sex.

This was about resignation. Their resignation—to their pasts, to each other.

Paige let go of the rope.

Stepping out of his boots, she pushed them aside. Lifting her arms, she wrapped them around him, leaning into his strength. Into his heart.

They'd made love many times over the last few days, but this time they were embarking on a whole new journey. Raw desire was one thing, but this...this was something else. This ran as deep as the human soul.

Lane brushed the back of his fingers along the length of her jaw and down to her shoulder with a tender trail of fire. He didn't stop until he doubled back and reached the swell of her neck where his fingers fanned out and lightly massaged her feverish skin.

Heaven help her. She didn't want this to end. She didn't want to go back—go back to a life without Lane.

His hand dipped lower. Slowly, one by one the buttons on her shirt gave way to his silent command. He brushed the garment from her shoulders. With a soft hush the denim fell, pooling around her bare feet, hiding the rope and the fantasy.

The rustle of a twilight breeze tried to cool her inflamed skin, but failed. Lane placed a soft, sensual kiss on her shoulder. Then another. And another. His kisses did what the wind couldn't, leave a trail of goose bumps. Only these goose bumps were created by expectation, not a chill.

A low moan escaped from deep within the back of her throat. And Paige knew she was about to fall. Her intellect warned her to be careful. She shoved it away.

Lane wanted her. She wanted him. Nothing else mattered—not a plane ticket, not her job, not her old life. Lane wanted her, and that was the only thing that mattered.

The realization empowered her more than she thought possible. She didn't have to get on that plane tomorrow. When coming to Wyoming, she'd embarked on an

adventure that was hers for the taking. Who said it had to end, that she had to go back to the way it was?

No one.

For the first time Paige felt free to be who she'd always secretly wanted to be. A new desire—one for a life with Lane—consumed her. Her head fell back in invitation to take all she had to offer him.

Lane accepted. He pulled her tight against his hard body. His clothes were cool next to her heated skin, but she clung to him as if she'd die without his touch.

The fresh scent of the outdoors clung to his skin—one powerful aphrodisiac for her senses.

He tunneled his fingers beneath the thin strap that held her panties in place, creating tiny shock waves of aching need. Cupping her hip, he caressed and squeezed. Ever so slowly he slid the satin over her hips. She wanted to cry out, beg him to hurry, but oh, it felt so good to be cherished.

At last he let go and the satin slipped down and landed at her ankles. She flicked the garment away to join the other abandoned items on the deck.

Completely naked, she stood before him, proud of who she was and the effect she had on his desires.

Lifting her into his arms, Lane gently laid her down onto the chaise lounge. He stood, towering over her, studying her, his gaze carnal, yet true.

Paige barely noticed the stars brighten above them in the azure sky as Lane removed his shirt. She had a much more interesting view before her. Allowing her gaze to drop to his torso, she savored the last few rays of the fading sun as they highlighted his tan skin and his smooth ripple of muscles. She'd come to know them so well in such a short time. Her fingers ached to touch.

As if knowing her exact thoughts, he knelt down beside her, shortening the distance between them. He lifted tendrils of her hair off her shoulder and slowly played the strands between his fingers. His gaze darkened – intensified with passion.

“Every inch of you,” he drawled. “I want to know every inch of you. Outside...and in.” He placed his hand over her racing heart. Her chest rose and fell in a rapid rhythm that revealed her exhilaration.

Something profound was happening between them. It went against what they’d agreed to for this weekend, but she was powerless to stop it.

“Lane,” she breathed.

“Sssh.” He silenced her with his lips. The kiss was deep, intense and full of a need for something beyond what the act of sex could offer.

Splaying her hands over his chest, his muscles hard and rigid beneath her fingertips, she silently pleaded for release, and begged for tomorrow to never come.

“Slow and easy,” he said between kisses. “This time slow and easy.”

Using two fingers as his brush, and her body as his canvas, he traced slow, deliberate strokes over her body until her breasts, her tummy, her toes had all been ignited by his touch.

Settling his hands on the curve of her waist, he bent down and licked the rim of her belly button with slow lazy circles. Her breath hitched. She was on fire.

He moved lower, and lower still, drawing out each and every touch. Paige groaned with delight. This. This was sweet torture.

Lane took a deep breath. She smelled tantalizingly sweet—a heady concoction of spices and a scent that was uniquely Paige.

He groaned with pleasure. The building euphoria between them created an almost out-of-body experience, overshadowing everything that existed outside this moment.

Lane felt the sweet sting of Paige’s nails pressing into his flesh, the sensation demanding he take her fast and hard. “Not this time, sweetheart.” Taking command of

his body, he banished the lust and focused on the woman before him. Paige deserved to be made love to. Paige deserved to be loved.

Removing the remaining physical barriers between them, Lane joined with Paige. Together they rode a gentle wave that delivered a high greater than one induced by any kind of drug.

They were one. In unison they mated, in tune with each other's heart. And soul.

Later, as they lay tightly spooned together on the narrow chaise, the vast Wyoming night sky their theater, Lane reflected on all that had transpired over the last three days.

He was a different man now. Unknowingly, Paige had righted his tilted, screwed-up life. For the first time in over a year, he wanted more than a one-night stand to sate his lust.

Deep inside he wanted, as corny as it might sound, the picket fence life. Before Paige, he thought he'd never feel that way again. *Surprise.*

Damn. He thought all she was giving him was a fast and hard affair, but boy, was he ever wrong. Now he only had one problem. What the hell to do about it.

The sound of the phone ringing echoed through the screen door. Lane refused to let modern technology force him to leave Paige's side. The answering machine clicked on with his simple greeting before a voice full of authority came on the line.

"This is the Cheyenne Police Department calling for Paige Holister..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Paige slowly walked through the corridor of the Cheyenne Police Department with her recovered suitcase in one hand, and her purse in the other. Amazingly enough, the only things missing were the cash in her wallet and the condoms Dorie had placed in her purse. The thief was either inept at his chosen occupation, or out to fulfill his own set of fantasies.

As for the car, it showed no further damage, and after filling out the appropriate paperwork to cover the dent made by Lane and his buddy, the police assured Paige the rental company would pick it up the next morning.

A long string of expletives exploded from an office on Paige's left and a brief struggle followed before a couple of officers subdued their charge and forced him back into a vinyl-covered chair. For a Sunday evening the place was hopping with activity – not at all what she'd expected for this Western town. But then this whole weekend had been nothing close to what she'd expected.

The officer who'd assisted her with the paperwork in regards to her stolen car had simply said it was Frontier Days. Apparently, that said it all. She supposed Frontier Days was to Cheyenne like Mardi Gras was to New Orleans—one big excuse to drink too much and party too hard. Drunken, disorderly conduct was the norm.

Stepping through the glass doors, the sweltering evening air wrapped its grasp around Paige and took her breath away. The scent of rain hung heavy and the spectacular sight of lightning streaking along the western horizon made her stop at the top of the concrete steps.

In sharp contrast to the commotion taking place inside the police department, the outside was quiet except for the few crickets brave enough to face the heat. The hot July temperatures weren't predicted to cool anytime soon. She wished she could say the same for her relationship with Lane.

Oh the weekend had been amazing. The sex, mind-numbing. She should be happy. Ecstatic even. But because it was all coming to an end, she couldn't help feeling blue.

Lane was a great guy. She'd had her fling. Or most of it. They'd failed to complete fantasy number three, but that wasn't exactly Paige's fault. And whether Dorie liked it or not, she was going to have to cut Paige some slack on that count.

Yes, she, Paige Holister, was a sexually fulfilled woman. At least for now. But how long could the fulfillment last when thousands of miles stretched between her and the one man responsible? The one man who'd tied her heart up in knots?

Paige sighed. What was she going to do? Any future relationships she might have were doomed from this moment forward. For her, no other man could fill Lane's boots.

"Damn it." Tears stung her eyes. This wasn't supposed to happen. She wasn't supposed to fall in love. If only there was some way she could convince Lane to give them more time. Give them a chance to test their hearts. She'd been searching her whole life for the right man, and now that she was sure she'd found him, she couldn't walk away.

"Look, asshole," a deep, angry voice assaulted the quiet evening. "I've had enough of your bullshit. This vendetta you have against me ends here, right now."

Paige turned toward the direction of the voice and scanned the mercury-vapor-lighted parking lot. In spite of the harsh tone, she recognized the voice as Lane's. Her gaze landed on him in time to witness a man thump him on the chest. She didn't move.

"My bullshit?" the other cowboy said. "You son of a bitch. You're the one who's full of bullshit. You screwed my sister and dumped her like a cheap whore."

Paige inhaled sharply, stunned by the crude accusation from the man she recognized as Lane's buddy.

"I never treated Becca like a whore. I asked her to marry me, remember? She was the one screwin' my best friend. The way I figured it, she deserved to get her ass dumped."

"You lying sack of shit. Becca wouldn't do that. She'd had her heart set on you since she was ten."

"Set on my money," Lane grumbled. "And when she figured out I wasn't goin' to give her free rein with my checkbook, she decided to get her kicks elsewhere. At my expense. Hell, even when she was ten, the only thing she ever really wanted from me was my money. I was just too blind to see it."

"I'm not buyin' it, Hart."

“Yeah. Well, why don’t you ask her? And ask Royce Miller while you’re at it. See what kind of look he gets on his face when you ask him about screwin’ my future wife.”

Paige started. No wonder Lane was suspicious and skittish of women. What man wouldn’t be after discovering his bride-to-be was having an affair with his best friend?

Paige’s heart ached for Lane.

And for herself. Hoping they could work toward something a bit more permanent was out of the question now. After his disastrous engagement, it’d be a long time before he’d be ready to give his heart again. If ever. Once burned, trust could be a hard commodity to come by for a person.

It was clear to her now why the offer of a no-commitment weekend had appealed to Lane. For him, this weekend was about having sex with a woman he could walk away from. A woman he could have fun with and forget without guilt attached.

The roar of an engine broke the silence and Paige watched as the other cowboy drove away. Her gaze shifted to Lane in time to see him pound his fist once on the hood of the truck. Without any further display of anger, he simply hitched his thumbs in his jeans pockets and leaned back against the truck.

He was waiting for her right where he said he would be. As a result, he had endured another round with the man Paige owed a great deal of bittersweet thanks to. If it hadn’t been for Lane’s rival, they would never have met.

And she wouldn’t have fallen in love.

The ache in her heart intensified. Lane was a good man—capable of caring, of loving a woman like she’d never been loved before. He didn’t deserve to be treated and dumped as if he were nothing more than a used-up calling card.

The urge to wrap her arms around him hit her tenfold, but after facing such scathing memories, the last thing he’d want was a woman offering solace.

She recognized his pain ran deep. Now she knew why. It was a pain, due to his intense pride perhaps, he preferred to keep to himself.



Taking a deep breath, Paige set out across the parking lot, the wheels of her suitcase grinding on the asphalt behind her. She watched Lane as she walked. He studied the ground and his hat hid his face from view. Although she didn't know for sure what he was thinking or feeling, she did have a pretty good idea. She stopped a few feet from where he stood and at last he looked up, his troubled gaze squarely meeting hers. His eyes held myriad emotions and her heart ached even more.

"I'm sorry about your fiancée." The words tumbled out before Paige could stop herself.

Lane's body stiffened. Nappy's head popped up in the window at the sound of her voice and she could tell by the way his little body swayed from side to side, he was excited to see her. Too bad her cowboy didn't feel the same way.

Lane shrugged. "You heard."

"Yes. I didn't mean to. It's just that I was —"

"Ah, hell." He pushed away from the truck.

"Really, I'm sorry. I understand now why you didn't want to talk about it. Please accept my apologies for prying last night."

Lane took off his hat and raked his fingers through his dark hair. "It's no big deal." He replaced his hat and rested his hands on his hips.

"No big deal? I'd call your fiancée having an affair with your best friend a very big deal."

"I'm over it," he said with iciness.

"Are you?"

His gaze hardened, ordering her not to press the issue. He turned away and rested his arms on the box of the pickup. A harsh silence hung in the air between them as he stared out into the night. It was obvious he still didn't want to talk about his woes. But he needed to.

Paige mentally kicked herself for what she was about to do, but she cared too much for Lane to watch him suffer in silence. The man needed to open up and let all the pain, all the suffering go, once and for all.

"How long has it been?" she asked.

His broad shoulders stiffened at her question.

"Look, Lane. I understand you not wanting to rip open old wounds, but sometimes that's the only way they can heal."

"Becca Owens is a wound that healed a long time ago."

"So she does have a name. I was beginning to wonder who this mystery woman was that has caused you so much grief."

"Bitch is more like it."

"I know what she did was terrible, inexcusable. But you have to let it go. Move on."

"I have moved on," he bit out. "Do me a favor and tell her brother Jake to let it go. I'm tired of gettin' my lip busted."

Paige knew better. Lane hadn't moved on and put the past behind him. Denial was a common solution for a battered and bruised heart.

"I take it Jake didn't know the truth."

"No. And neither did half of Cheyenne. Becca had everyone believing she'd called off the wedding because I was the one foolin' around."

Paige shook her head. No way. Lane was not the cheatin' kind. "When you give your heart to a woman, you give it all, don't you, Lane Hart?"

He leveled a rock-steady gaze on her. "There's no halfway."

Paige swallowed hard, reading loud and clear the underlying message of Lane's words. He wasn't just relating his story to her. He was letting her know in no uncertain terms that there could never be anything more than this weekend between them. That if he couldn't give himself to her completely, then he wouldn't give himself at all. And

she knew at this point, Lane wasn't capable of moving their relationship to the next level.

*Maybe down the road?* A sad smile touched Paige's lips. She knew better. She'd go back to her world and leave Lane in his, and that would be the end. Absence didn't always make the heart grow fonder.

Placing a hand on his arm, she gave a comforting squeeze. The tantalizing warmth of his body seeped through the fabric and her fingertips tingled with longing for more than what she could ever have with this man.

"Becca didn't know what a lucky girl she was." Her voice died in her throat. Paige had to take her own advice and let go of this weekend—let go of Lane. And she had to do it now.

His gaze locked with hers. Paige couldn't breathe, afraid he was reading the emotions that she knew were clouding her eyes. If she stayed any longer, she'd never be able to end this. She forced her hand to move and took a step back.

"Well," she said, clearing her throat, breaking the aching silence between them. "I suppose we should go. I'd hate to get a ticket for loitering in the police department's parking lot." Paige tried to laugh, but failed miserably.

"Yeah. I reckon that wouldn't be good. So." Lane took off his hat and studied the brim, working his fingers slowly over the finely shaped smooth straw. "Can I take you to a hotel?"

"A hotel?" she repeated the words, stunned by the finality of his question. So, this was it. *No come back to the ranch. No stay with me one more night.* The weekend was over. "I'd...appreciate that." She struggled like hell to keep tears from welling in her eyes and falling down her cheeks. He'd delivered on his end of the deal, now she needed to on hers—no strings, no commitments.

She climbed into the truck, Nappy instantly snuggling in her lap, and Paige was thankful for the comfort of her old friend.

Lane shut the door, his strong hands resting on the ledge of the open window. She studied them, memorizing every tiny detail, not wanting to forget how they'd caressed her with such passion, such care.

"You have reservations someplace?" he asked.

"Ah...no. I guess with everything I didn't think about it."

"No problem. Since it's Sunday, I'm sure we can find you somethin'."

They drove in silence and raindrops hit the windshield here and there as Lane pulled into an upscale hotel. He cut the engine. Paige tried to force herself to move. She couldn't.

"Do you want me to check and see if they have a room available?" he asked.

"No. That's okay." Embarrassed by her weakness, she hurried into the hotel and silently prayed they were booked. But luck wasn't on her side this time.

"Got one?" he asked upon her return.

"Yes."

"Let me help you with your suitcase." He grabbed it out of the back of the pickup. "Which way?"

"Ah...that's okay. I can get it." She reached for her bag.

"I'll take it up for you."

"No. I'd rather... I'd rather we..." Her voice died in her throat. She couldn't say goodbye. Her heart wouldn't let her. The word was too final.

A man came out of the lobby and Paige waited for him to pass. They stood there in silence, under the hotel awning not saying a word. Nappy barked at Paige's feet. She picked him up and cradled him in her arms.

The clouds cut loose and the haphazard collection of sprinkles turned into a steady downpour. The rhythm of the drops matched that of her pounding heart.

"Thank you, Lane. For everything," she said at last. "It was a great weekend."

"I hope I fulfilled your fantasies like you wanted."

Even after all they'd shared, Paige felt her cheeks warm. He'd fulfilled her fantasies all right, and then some. The memories of their torrid rounds of lovemaking burned in her mind. And in her heart. She'd never forget them.

She'd never forget her cowboy.

"This weekend was more than I ever imagined. Or hoped for." Unable to resist, she placed her hand on his chest, over his heart. The touch was warm, comforting, right. And said it all.

She pushed up onto her tiptoes and placed a simple kiss on his cheek. Oh God, she'd never forget the sting of his whiskers against her lips, or the masculine, musky scent of his skin.

"It was my pleasure, darlin'," he whispered in her ear.

Paige's insides always melted at the way he said darlin', and this time was no exception. She was going to miss him so very much. She blinked back tears.

"What time is your flight in the morning?"

"Ten."

Lane nodded.

She picked up her suitcase and took a few steps back, preparing to walk away.

"Paige?"

She stopped. A flicker of hope made her breath catch. Was he going to ask to stay the night? Or ask her to stay in Cheyenne? She wanted to hear his words, but was terrified of being disappointed. Her pulse racing, she took a deep breath and faced him with a lump lodged firmly in her throat.

"I'll always remember what we shared," he said softly. Sincerity filled his eyes. "And I'll always remember you. Thanks."

*Thanks?* Paige's heart clenched. That wasn't the word she was hoping for, but she understood Lane couldn't give her any more. She forced a smile onto her face.

“Sure. See ya, cowboy.” She hurried away, forcing her legs to move and put distance between them before she did something foolish—like spill her heart.

The faster she walked, the faster the tears fell. And with each step, pieces of her died.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Paige stared blankly at the pages of the latest bestseller she'd picked up at the airport bookstore. It was impossible to focus on some heroine's journey to love when her own had come to such an abrupt end. In real life, there was no happily-ever-after. Not for her.

She groaned as she noticed her plane approach the gate. This was it. In minutes she'd be flying home, leaving behind Cheyenne. And Lane Hart.

Paige's own measly little heart was in complete, utter misery. She just hoped she could pull her act together before meeting Dorie at the Savannah airport. Her sister would never let it rest if she suspected something was awry. And Paige didn't feel up to a round of twenty questions when she got home. All she wanted was a steaming-hot bubble bath, a glass of wine and to be left alone.

She glanced at the other passengers waiting for the same plane as she. A young couple totally in awe of each other held hands, made eyes and stole kisses when they thought no one was looking. Only a few hours ago she'd been sharing such a powerful intimacy with Lane. That was over. And now it all felt like a dream.

Her insides ached—ached for Lane. What was she going to do? Would time and distance lessen the pain she was feeling? Paige didn't know if she could survive finding out.

She closed her eyes, blocking out the view of the young lovers, but the act only heightened the memories of her cowboy. Lane was so vivid in her mind's eye she swore she could feel his warmth. Even the familiar scent of him she'd come to desire and love so much seemed to surround her.

"Hey, sweetheart?" a deep voice said from behind her.

Paige's heart caught in her throat. Her eyelids flew open. Okay, now her mind was playing tricks on her, making her believe that knee-melting voice she'd just heard was real.

"Mind if I sit down?" he asked.

"I have a proposition for you."

Her pulse bolted into a run. It was Lane. She hadn't imagined his voice.

Slowly she turned and allowed her gaze to travel up the length of one long, denim-clad leg. She paused at the silver buckle at his waist before venturing up to the broad width of his shoulders and finally stopping at the chiseled features of his handsome face.

Paige swallowed hard at the sight. Lane standing there, more handsome than ever, took her breath away. Words escaped her. Butterflies danced in her stomach. Did she dare hope he was here because he didn't want this weekend to end any more than she did?

No. She couldn't let her heart go there. Her rational side said she'd probably forgotten something.

"Lane, what are you doing here? How did you get past security?"

He held up an airline ticket and smiled.

"You bought a ticket? I don't get it. Are you going somewhere?" Her heart lurched in her chest.

"Well, if I have to." He chuckled. "But the real reason I bought it was so they'd let me in to talk to you."

"Talk to me? You spent hundreds of dollars on a ticket just so you could talk to me?"

"Yeah. Actually, I have a proposition for you."

"A proposition?" Paige's cheeks warmed. God, she felt like the shy teenage girl who got all tongue-tied when the most popular boy in the class said hello.



Lane took the seat beside her. His knee brushed hers and a shot of awareness rushed through her body in spite of the layers of denim separating their skin.

"Looks like your plane's here," he said casually, as though he were simply making polite conversation with a stranger.

"I didn't expect to see you again," she said in a rush. As soon as the words escaped her mouth, Paige wanted to kick herself.

"Oh? Why not?" He gave her a devilish smile.

"I thought we'd reached the end of the trail. Isn't that what you cowboys call it? The end of the trail?" She winked, attempting humor to cover her nervousness.

Lane saw her bottom lip quiver slightly, belying her bravado. What he wouldn't give to kiss those lips again, and again.

Forever.

She'd made it clear that she wanted nothing more than a fling. How could he convince her to change her mind? Did he even have the right? He'd spent the better part of the night considering all the reasons why he shouldn't hitch himself to a woman, and why he should. But Paige wasn't just any woman. And after hours of debate, he'd come to one conclusion.

He wanted Paige. He wanted her for all she was, and who they could be together.

In spite of his resolve to take only what she'd offered, a weekend fling with no conditions, no attachments, his emotions had other ideas and had gotten the better of him. A bond had formed. It was too late to change that now, and he wanted no regrets that would follow if he let her go back to Georgia.

"Now boarding, flight twelve thirty-three for Savannah," the gate agent announced over a loudspeaker. "All first-class passengers please board at this time."

Lane silently cursed the woman's timing.

"That's me," Paige said. Her gaze dropped to her lap and as though not sure what to do, she fiddled with her purse. Seconds ticked by before she rose to her feet.

Lane, suddenly at a loss for words, followed suit and stood. Not normally one for bouts of nervousness, he felt like someone had lassoed his stomach and tossed it under the hooves of a herd of stampeding horses.

*Don't let her walk away. Ask her to stay. Don't let her walk away,* his heart thundered. *You can't let her walk away.*

"This doesn't have to be," he said, not realizing he'd been holding his breath.

"Excuse me?"

"The end of the trail. This doesn't have to be the end."

"What are you saying?"

"This doesn't have to be the end of us."

Her face paled. "But...we both agreed nothing permanent. And I figured with what happened...Becca?"

"To hell with all that." He searched her eyes trying to read her thoughts—hoping to find some clue that she wanted to stay as much as he wanted her to, but he came up dry.

Desperation kicked him in the gut. He took a deep breath. This was his last shot. It was now or never.

"Don't get on that airplane, Paige."

She stood stone still. Lane swallowed hard, not knowing if he'd shocked the hell out of her, or scared her to death.

"What about no commitments?" she asked softly. "It's what you wanted. What I...wanted."

"Do you still?"

"I...well—"

"Now boarding rows Z through N," the gate agent announced.

Lane searched his soul for strength and courage. Time was running out. If he didn't convince her now, he might not get a second chance.

Paige's gaze danced back and forth between him and the airplane. Hell. He was losing. She was going to leave. Time to pull out all the stops and keep her from boarding that plane and walking out of his life.

He cupped her face in his hands, brushing the pad of his thumb along her cheek. "Don't go, Paige. Stay. Stay in Wyoming. With me."

Her eyes glistened. The tension in her body began to melt away. "Is this your proposition?"

"Yes."

"What about Nappy? He's on the plane..."

"Call your sister. Tell her the dog is the only passenger she'll be picking up today. We can fly to Savannah later and get him."

"Oh, Lane. I..."

"Don't say no. I need you, Paige. I need you more than I've ever needed anyone."

Paige couldn't believe what she was hearing. Lane Hart, her sexier-than-sin cowboy said he needed her. He wanted her to stay. Her mind raced in a million directions. She had only seconds to make a decision that would change her life forever. She longed to say yes, but could she really do it? Was she brave enough to step out of her comfort zone?

Yes. She was brave enough. But she needed to know for sure he believed there was more to their relationship than carnal lust.

"I need you too, Lane. So much. But can it be as simple as that? We have our own lives. How long will the sex —"

"I'm not just talking about sex, Paige. There's more between us and you know it. I feel it. I know you feel it, too."

"Rows M through A may now board." The gate agent's announcement made Paige's heart beat out of control. "Give us a chance to sort this out between us. We both know we belong together."

Heat thrummed through Paige's body at what Lane was proposing. Her mind screamed to follow Dorie's advice and go for it. But Paige's mind still harbored an ounce of caution. What if it didn't work?

She looked at the airplane, then back at Lane.

"I think you know I'm falling in love with you."

Love? Paige was lost. Joy filled her body and soul. A lonely apartment and a job couldn't compare to what Lane offered. The monetary could be replaced. He couldn't.

"I do have four weeks of vacation left," she said mischievously.

"Take it. There's so much more of the Lazy Hart I want to share with you."

Paige smiled. Wrapping her arms around him, she gazed up into his eyes. "Hmm. I have been dying to take a dip in your Jacuzzi. You make a mighty temptin' offer, cowboy."

"Only for you, darlin'," he drawled. "Only for you."

## **Epilogue**

"Howdy, cowboy," Paige drawled.

Lane turned from feeding Buck and saw she stood in the doorway of the barn wearing nothing but one of his shirts, a hat and her new cowboy boots. In her hands she held one of his favorite ropes, and a sense of déjà vu hit him.

Country music played on the radio. The setting Wyoming sun glowed between her legs and outlined her curvaceous form. His jeans tightened. Damn, if she wasn't the hottest filly he'd ever come across.

"Evenin', beautiful," he said. A smile tugged at his lips.

"Evenin'."

"What are you up to now?" He let his gaze drift over her appreciatively.

"I'm here to see if you're ready to ante up on your end of our deal, cowboy?" She sauntered down the alleyway and stopped a few feet from him. The collar of the chambray shirt she wore lay open, revealing a nice glimpse of smooth, tan skin. Lane set down the bucket of oats and fought the urge to grab her and devour every inch of her right there on the spot.

"Well, darlin', that all depends on what it is you think I owe you." Leaning against the stall, he crossed his arms in an effort to keep himself in check. Paige had a way of making him feel like a randy young buck, but he didn't always want to act like one. The woman a man loved deserved to be caressed and romanced at least part of the time.

"Why, my third fantasy, of course." She smiled and brushed the coil of the rope lightly over his chest. If she was fishing for a response, she sure as hell was going to get one. But not before he had some fun by making her work for it a little bit.

"Third fantasy? Sweetheart, we've explored enough fantasies during the last month to write a book on 'em."

"Are you saying you're tired of trying out our fantasies?" She pursed her lips together in a sexy pout. Lane's breath hitched. Making her wait wasn't going to be easy on him that was for damn sure. In the long run, though, the sex that would follow was bound to be hotter than a blazing prairie fire.

"Nope. Just wonderin' how many there could be left to try yet." Lane teased, knowing he could always make her blush a warm rosy hue from the tips of her ears down to the top of her breasts. And blush she did – like strawberry ice cream.

"We just have to use our imaginations," she said, her every word laced with a hint of seduction. Slowly she traced the line of his jaw with her fingertip, not stopping until she reached his bottom lip. Her sweet mouth curved in a sassy smile as she worked her finger back and forth.

Lane sucked in a sharp breath at the tingling sensations she sent whipping through his body. "Imaginations, huh? And what is your imagination tellin' you?"

"That there're at least a couple fantasies left we haven't tried." She pulled her hand away and he groaned at the loss. Gazing up at him from beneath the brim of her hat, her eyelids heavy with desire, she inched close enough that the heat of her body mingled with his own.

"Only a couple?" The soft honeysuckle scent clinging to her skin wafted around him on the light evening breeze sneaking through the barn. He hardened with undeniable need. "What couple would those be, darlin'?"

"Well, for one..." She stroked the tail end of the lariat between her fingers. A new wave of heat bit at his skin at the provocative action. "My third fantasy from our first weekend together. Remember? I'm supposed to tie you up and have my way with you, cowboy."

"That's right," he drawled. His heart revved in his chest. She'd get no arguments from him. So much for romancing and caressing. Hard and kinky is what she had on her mind. And he was more than ready to oblige her desires. "The second?"

"We do it right here, in the barn."

*Oh yeah.* "Here? Hmm." Man, Paige never failed to surprise the heck out of him. His cock strained against the denim of his jeans, begging for release. They better get down to it before he exploded.

"Yes, here. You cool with that?" She winked.

"More than cool. But are you sure you don't mind an audience?" Lane nodded toward the row of stalls filled with horses.

"Nah. They're busy munching on their supper. They aren't going to care what we're doing."

Lane chuckled. "You are a sassy wench. And I'm one lucky man." He grabbed her around the waist and hauled her tight up against him. The soft curves of her body melded into his. Perfect. From day one he'd known she was perfect.

"Let me show you just how lucky," she whispered, her lips brushing his as she spoke. She tore open his shirt, baring his chest, and then followed suit with her own shirt. Pressing her exquisite bare breasts against him, she bestowed a bounty of temptation and promises ripe for his pleasure.

A low moan escaped his throat. He plucked the hat from her head and tossed it onto a nearby bale of hay. Cupping her firm derriere in his hands, he massaged and squeezed, lifting her onto her toes. Her head fell back. Dipping his head, he buried his face in the crook of her neck and nipped and licked until a low moan of her own vibrated against his lips. His cock hardened even more and throbbed with mind-blowing demands for release.

"Ah, sweet Paige. What...you...do to me," he said on a ragged breath.

“And ah, what I’m *going* to do to you.” Her fingers slipped under his shirt and shoved the fabric off his shoulders and down his arms. The garment fell to the ground unnoticed.

Paige snuck from his grasp and stepped back toward the other side of the barn. Lane blinked. The night breeze swept across his heated body and goose bumps peppered his skin.

Perturbed and excited she’d managed to escape from him so easily, he pursued, not about to let her get away. But he had to admit the loss of her touch was worth the price. The view she presented him was nothing short of erotic. Her silky hair tumbled in sassy waves about her flushed face, and her shirt lay open, framing the swell of her breasts, the flat expanse of her tummy, and a small triangle-shaped piece of red satin. Long, bare legs disappeared into the shanks of the handcrafted black leather cowboy boots he’d surprised her with the week before. He made a mental note to buy her all the boots she wanted.

“You’re driving me crazy, sweetheart,” he growled. “I’m not sure how much more of this I can take.”

“Let’s find out.” She worked the rope in her hands, twirled a loop above her head and threw it. With the precision of a pro, Paige’s loop hit her target. She yanked on the rope, jerking it tight.

Lane was now her prisoner. Pulling on the length of rope, she brought him to her. “You’re all mine now, cowboy.”

“Looks like I’ve done a damn fine job of teaching you how to rope.”

“Ah-huh. And by the time I’m done with you, you’re going to be glad you did.” She backed him up against a support pole near a stack of hay bales and sauntered around him like a stripper working her dancing pole. As she did, she wrapped him up tight. Tying off the rope, she wasted no time in unhooking his belt buckle and pulling his jeans down around his legs.



*Holy shit.* Was he dreaming? Lane's heart beat like a machine gun firing off in his chest. He didn't know what all she planned to do to him, but he couldn't wait to find out. He just hoped to hell his heart could take it.

"Ah, darlin'. Aren't you going to take my jeans off?" he asked, his breath short.

"Nope." She smiled, and slipped her hands under the waistband of his briefs. His jaw tightened. "You might have taught me how to rope, cowboy—" Her hands explored, caressing and teasing. "But I'm not the best with knots yet." Her fingers wrapped around his shaft. "If the rope doesn't hold you," she stroked down, "your jeans will." She stroked up.

Lane's body quivered. Pangs of pleasure raced along his nerves. "I don't think you have to worry about me runnin' off on you."

"I bet not." She pressed her mouth full against his and he savored the silent demands she issued. He returned her kiss hard, and with demands of his own. In tune as only true lovers can be, their lips parted in unison and their tongues danced and mated wildly.

Lane ached to wrap his arms around her, take her down and return the pleasures she bestowed upon him this night. Tugging at the rope he discovered she'd done her job well. He couldn't move. He couldn't act upon the carnal desires pulsating through his body. And the fact he was powerless fueled his desire all the more.

Abruptly she broke the kiss. Her lips, swollen with her own brand of lust, traced a fiery trail along his collarbone, to his shoulder, down his torso and to his belly button. Her tongue swirled around the perimeter and dipped into the center.

Her hands worked their own brand of magic, teasing and touching before she yanked down his briefs. His swollen member sprang free. The cooling night air felt good against his searing skin, but did nothing to hinder the fire pulsing through his blood.

As she rose to her feet she brushed her breasts against his erection, against his stomach and his chest. She kissed him full on the mouth, and then took two steps back, eyeing him up and down.

"Hang tight there, cowboy."

"What?" Lane struggled for his breath, for his sanity. His body throbbed, threatening to burst.

Paige walked away and he wanted to reach out and grab her, pull her back, but he couldn't. He stood, forced to watch as she dragged a hay bale around in front of him. As she worked he caught glimpses of her sweet derriere, and fantasies of his own tripped in his brain.

Apparently satisfied she had the bale where she wanted it, she snatched his hat and placed it on her head. She hopped up onto the bale just as an upbeat country tune came on the radio.

"Ready for a show?" she asked as her body swayed suggestively with the music.

"You know it, darlin'."

With a lazy smile on her lips, she caressed her own body through her shirt, rubbing her splayed hands up and down her sides and around her breasts. She pushed the mounds together, working and kneading her flesh for his visual delight. "Do you like?" she asked over shoulder as she wiggled her butt for him.

"Damn straight." Lane swallowed hard, parched for the nectar of her and starved for the flesh of her.

Paige swiped her tongue over her bottom lip, teasing and tormenting him. He squirmed under the rope, but it held fast. Turning around, she swept her fingertips over the end of his shaft. He groaned and her eyes flared with a sexual hunger so intense he thought she'd take him right then and there.

But she didn't. Instead she continued to sway her bottom in time with the music. Lifting the shirt off her shoulders, she let it slip slowly down her arms. The garment

fluttered down and pooled around her boots. With a quick flick of her foot, she sent the shirt sailing into the air.

Lane inhaled sharply. She danced before him, giving him the full view he'd wished for their very first night together. He'd wanted to see her in all her glory that night, but she'd been too shy to grant him that wish. Since then he'd explored every inch of her, but seeing her like this...uninhibited, bold and proud of who she was, made him love her all the more.

"Not so shy anymore, are you?" He quirked a brow.

"Complaining?" she asked as she hooked her thumbs under the slim elastic of the red thong.

"You'll hear none from me."

"Good." She slid the satin down her legs until she reached the top of her boots. With a firm yank, she ripped the material from her body. Lane pulled at the rope, dying to get to her, but they still held him captive. A deep husky laugh escaped Paige's throat as she watched him struggle.

"Can't take any more, cowboy?"

He growled.

Clad now only in her boots, she wiggled and rubbed her body against his in one more round of torture.

"Paige," he begged. Lane could feel sweat trickle down his back.

"I guess not. Time to mount up." She grabbed the post above his head, did a little hop up and wrapped her legs around him.

"Damn, Paige..." Lane's member slid into her folds and she squeezed her legs tight. His body weakened and contracted at the same time. She was in control, pumping, riding him to the edge of oblivion.

Paige cried out in joy as she slid her body down onto the hard length of Lane. He was big, strong, and filled her to the core. Oh he felt so good. So right. There was nothing better than this.

Her breasts pressed into his heaving chest, and he groaned beneath her, urging her on, to ride him faster, harder. She granted his request, working her legs and buttocks to the point her muscles burned from the exertion. But the pain was worth the ecstasy screaming along her nerve endings and fueling her blood with fire. She couldn't stop, wouldn't stop, until they lay spent and content in each other's arms.

Lane's body jerked, on the verge of release. Inhaling sharply, she struggled to catch her breath and the first wave of orgasm rocked her. Her head fell back and the scents of hay, horses and sex filled her nostrils, flaming her desire even more. She increased her pace. Lane bucked against her. Their bodies, slick with sweat, rubbed and pounded as they made wild, primitive love.

Lane groaned. His body stiffened. Another cry escaped Paige's throat as orgasms rocked them in unison. She felt the pulse of his seed flowing into her. Their hearts pounded in time.

She clung to him, buried her face in his neck and smiled, loving his outdoorsy scent. The sex had always been hot and fantastic between them, but this time it had blown her heart away. And she knew why. What they shared was no longer just sex for pleasure, to live out just a fantasy. Now every time they came together they made love, because they'd fallen in love. Lane was her cowboy. Her man. Her best friend.

"Wow. That fantasy was worth waiting for," she said softly against his skin.

"You ain't a kiddin'." He mussed her hair and laughed. "Now take this rope off me so I can show you a fantasy of mine."

"I thought you didn't have any more fantasies," she said while running her fingers through the hairs peppering his chest.

"Sweetheart, all I have to do is spend a few seconds with you and I've got so many fantasies stampeding through my brain, I don't know what to do with 'em all."

"Is that so? Hmm." She untied the rope and let him loose. He wasted no time in wrapping his arms around her.

"That's so," he said huskily. "Besides, it's pretty damn hard not to fantasize about the woman who saved this cowboy's heart."

## About the Author

A native Nebraskan, Sherry James spent her youth riding and writing, and all of those hours spent in the saddle gave her plenty of time to think up a slew of stories. The first book she wrote (at the tender age of 9) was three chapters long, with each chapter only being one page long, and was written from the point of view of a horse.

A romantic at heart, Sherry was thrilled to discover the fictional world of historical romance novels during her high school years. One day she decided to get serious about her writing and pursue it as a career. And guess what! She grew up to not only become a rodeo queen, but a published author as well. All that riding and writing sure paid off!

With a deep love and appreciation of books, Sherry enjoyed many years as an assistant manager for a Waldenbooks store, giving her valuable insight into the book world. These days she's a wife to an amazing husband, and the mother of two equally amazing kids. She rides when she gets the chance and can't imagine her life without horses. She is a founding member and past president of the Prairieland Romance Writers, [www.prwne.com](http://www.prwne.com), and is a longtime member of Romance Writers of America. Currently she has published more than 80 magazine and newspaper articles and several romance novels.

Sherry welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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